

**Men's Attitudes to Aging: Threatened, Performed
and Negotiated Masculinity**

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Abstract

Like feminist research, which for a long time neglected the situation of older women, most of the research on masculinity has ignored the experiences of older men. The research in this area is scant, especially in the francophone world, as several researchers have pointed

out. We were interested in gaining a comprehensive understanding of what aging means for men aged 65 and over, and how they experience aging in their day-to-day lives. Since we wanted to allow the older men to express themselves on their experience of aging, we opted for a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews. In this article, we propose to show that aging affects how men relate to masculinity, compelling them to redefine its contours.

This article describes the challenges aging represents for men over 65 in relation to what they consider their “masculinity,” paying particular attention to their experiences of retirement and deteriorating physical appearance and strength. We show that their experience and interpretation of aging is one of jeopardized masculinity, which causes them to perform and negotiate masculinity as a way of adapting to getting old.

Keyword: masculinity, aging, older man, performance, negotiation

1. Introduction

Like feminist research, which for a long time neglected the situation of older women, most of the research on masculinity has ignored the experiences of older men. The research in this area is scant, especially in the francophone world, as several researchers have pointed out. As Russel observed ten years ago, older men constitute the unquestioned norm, the standard for aging research, consequently, “the experiences of elderly men as men, as gendered beings . . . continue to go under-examined” (Russel 2001:352-353). While this observation remains true today, things have begun to change. Several researchers have focussed on retired men (Davidson et al. 2003; Davidson 2004; Thompson and Wearthly 2004; Van Tilburg 2003; Sixsmith and Boneham 2003), noting individual variations with respect to the size, diversity, and significance of their social and personal networks, especially in relation to their marital trajectories (Davidson 2004). Others have analyzed the role of elderly men who are caregivers, notably, for a sick wife (Raschick and Ingersoll-Dayton 2004; Milne and Hatzidimitriadou 2003; Brewer 2001), demonstrating how they

were required to develop aptitudes traditionally ascribed to women (Calasanti and Bowen 2006). And a few researchers have examined the daily practices of elderly men, focussing on a specific dimension of their life, such as widowerhood (Bennett 2007) and grandfatherhood (Sorensen and Cooper 2010; Bates 2009; Bullock et al. 2005). We were not interested in isolating a particular stage or dimension of aging, but rather, in gaining a comprehensive understanding of what aging means for men aged 65 and over, and how they experience aging in their day-to-day lives. More specifically, in this article we propose to show that aging affects how men relate to masculinity, compelling them to redefine its contours.

As the first component of a broader exploratory study of how older men in Québec relate to aging, this article considers the experience of aging from the perspective of their relationship to retirement and their aging bodies, both of which challenge their definitions of masculinity. This article is also concerned with the negotiation and adaptation strategies these men adopt in a context in which their “masculinity” is being challenged by the act of retirement and deteriorating physical appearance and ability. In this respect, the goal of analysis, rather than to compare older men's experience of aging according to age group, is to explore the complex and vast experience of aging based on their response to retirement and their bodies.¹

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Because we wanted to understand how older men cope with aging on a daily basis, we chose, as our theoretical framework, the angle of *experience*. As Dubet states, experience is a complex notion that should be understood in its subjective and reflexive dimension (relationship to self, one's body, other people), and in terms of the actions and conduct of the old in their everyday lives, both private and public (Dubet 1994). Experience refers to

¹ Other important aging themes such as the modes of socialization among peers, recreational activities, sexuality, and end of life legacies could not be addressed in this article, but will be discussed in future publications.

the manner by which men perceive their own aging: how they think about it and react to it as manifested in their conduct. It varies from one man to another based on their life history, situation, current environment, and the constraints they face. Also, a single person's experience may be characterized by its heterogeneity: the fact that they live in various social contexts; the diversity of the references, identities, and cultural models that shape the person's actions; and their aspirations, goals, and interests, with the tensions these may generate (Dubet 1994). Experience is never uniform and stable, which forces the individual to reflect. A consideration of older men's relationship to masculinity from the angle of experience would, we thought, be particularly informative. In this respect, we emphasized the notion of "hegemonic masculinity", a patriarchal vision of what it is to be male that defines what a man is, or should be. For men, it is a powerful and pervasive cultural reference by which they measure themselves and are measured by others throughout their lives (Thompson and Wearthy 2004). How do elderly men deal with the norms attributed to their gender, and, more specifically, with the norms of hegemonic masculinity? How do they define themselves in the moment of losing their principal social status and vector of masculine identity—the worker/breadwinner role? Will we observe in these older men an attenuation of differences linked to gender? These questions were the genesis of this article.

3. Methodological Process

3.1 Criteria Used to Select Respondents

The individuals in the sample group were chosen in the province of Québec, Canada, and all of them were French-speaking. The only criterion used to select men in the first phase of the study was that they be 65 or older. As the interviews proceeded, however, we began to tighten our recruitment criteria to obtain as diversified a sample as possible. Thus, when we reached a certain point of data saturation for the younger group of elderly men (65 to 79), we prioritized the recruitment of men over 80. Similarly, noticing that our sample comprised few men with health problems, we steered our recruiting efforts in this direction. We sent recruitment announcements to various associations and also made use of our

personal contact networks². Despite efforts made during the recruitment phase to achieve the most diverse sample possible, particularly with respect to sexual orientation, only one non-heterosexual respondent answered our advertisements.³ Consequently, this article does not attempt to address the process of marginalization and stigmatization that can substantially change non-heterosexual men's experience of aging.

3.2 Interview Procedure and Analysis

Since we wanted to allow the older men to express themselves on their experience of aging, we opted for a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews. An interview guide ensured that particular topics would be addressed systematically by all the respondents to allow for comparison. The guide was divided into five sections: 1) Self-introduction; 2) Multiple identities and representations of aging; 3) Experiences of aging in relationship to oneself and one's body; 4) Experiences of aging in everyday relationships to others and the family (marital, father, and grandfather relationships); 5) End of life and final legacy. It was important that the older men feel comfortable talking about intimate subjects, especially with respect to their aging bodies and relationships with women, so we recruited experienced male research assistants to conduct the interviews. This methodological choice turned out to be a judicious one.

Lasting 60 minutes on average, the interviews were then transcribed and analyzed according to the principles of grounded theory data analysis described by Paillé and Muchielli (2003), the main stages of which were: 1) interview coding; 2) thematic analysis of each interview; 3) comparative analysis of all interviews based on a variety of relevant variables (age, marital status, etc.); 4) theoretical analysis, in other words, the creation of conceptual categories for the purpose of sociologically interpreting the collected discourses and relating them to various relevant theories.

² Maison des Grand-Parents de Rosemont et de Villeray, Centre de jour Triest, Association des retraités de Villeray and Les Petits-frères.

³ The difficulty of recruiting LGBT seniors (men and women) has been noted by several researchers, among them Line Chamberland, Research Chair on Homophobia, who is a pioneer in this field.

3.3 Profile of the Men Interviewed

We met with 22 men aged 65 and older, all of whom answered an advertisement that we had sent to a variety of academic and community organizations. As illustrated in the chart below the interviewees were men aged from 65 to 92 with an average age of 77.5.

Respondents	Age	Marital status	Children	Grandchildren	Previous employment	Retired since	Source of income	Health problem
First group								
E1	67 years	Divorced (in a relationship)	2	yes	Psychologist	2008	Federal and provincial pensions, private practice	none
E2	72 years	Married	1	yes	Lawyer	2004	Federal and provincial pensions, RRGOP, private practice	none
E3	69 years	Common-law partner	2	yes	Clinical psychologist	2009	Federal and provincial pensions, REER, private practice, CARA, income from shares	none
E4	65 years	Single	1	aucun	Successive jobs	2013	Federal and provincial pensions	Kidney cancer remission
E5	70 years	Divorced two time (in a relationship)	5	yes	CEGEP Professor	2004	Federal and provincial pensionse, fond de pension	Angioplasty
E6	74 years	Married	1	aucun	Technologist	1998	Federal and provincial pensions, REER, pension fund	Kidney problem
E7	66 years	Single	aucun	aucun	Coordinator community association	2013	Federal and provincial pensions, REER,	none
E8	73 years	Divorced (in a relationship)	2	yes	Executive Director	2011	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund	Muscular dystrophy
E13	80 years	Married	4	yes	Teacher, school commission general manager	1996	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund	2 AVC, heart attack
E14	79 years	Married	1	yes	Clinical social worker	1998	Federal and provincial pensions, placements, pension fund	Prostate cancer, hypertension
E15	78 years	Married	3	yes	Life insurance broker	1998	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund, CELI	Diabetes, osteoarthritis
E16	74 years	Widower	3	yes	Lumberjack, miner, framer	2006	Federal and provincial pensions	Angioplasty
E22	77 years	Single (not officially divorced)	3	yes	Truck's driver	1997	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund	Diabetes
Second group								
E9	85 years	Second wedding (since 35 years)	3	yes	Promotion and distribution agent	1986	Federal and provincial pensionse, spouse salary	Deafness, , cataracts, heart and prostate problem
E10	84 years	Widower	2	yes	Teacher, mayor	2001	Federal and provincial pensions, REER	Arthritis
E11	82 years	Married	2	yes	Lineman	1988	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund	Heart problem, phlebitis
E12	84 years	Married	5	yes		1990		
E17	83 years	Divorced	1	yes	Construction contractor	1997	Federal and provincial pensions	Arthritis
E18	89 years	Divorced	3	yes	Public service executive	1996	Federal and provincial pensions, pension fund, FERR	none
E19	92 years	Divorced	3	aucun	Salesman	1988	Federal and provincial pensions	Polymialgia, prostate cancer, macular degeneration, respiratory failure
E20	79 years	Divorced	2	yes	Owner e-commerce	1991	Federal and provincial pensions	Knee problem
E21	84 years	Divorced (5 time)	3	yes	Auctioneer, shop owner	1990	Federal and provincial pensions	Diabetes, Angioplasty, anemia, ba;ance problems

Table 1. Interviewees information

With respect to marital status, seven men were married, one in a common-law relationship; 10 were divorced, four of whom were in a new relationship (only one remarried); two men were single; and two men were widowers. Except for one man, all were fathers and 19 were grandfathers. They were all living in their house or apartment, except two men who were living in a residential facility: one by himself, the other, with his wife. With respect to schooling, 10 men had university degrees. The others had pursued either a “classical” program (9) or a vocational or technical diploma (2). The principal source of revenue for five men was federal (Old Age Pension) and provincial (Quebec Pension Plan) government benefits. The other men were also receiving, in addition to these benefits, employment/activity earnings (4) and/or investment funds (7) and/or an employer pension fund (10). One man also benefited from his wife’s salary. In terms of health problems, only five men stated they had none, while the others said they suffered from various problems or illnesses (cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, etc.).

3. Masculinity Threatened: The Relationship to Retirement

Many of these men introduced themselves by referring to their job title and describing their professional responsibilities and duties during their working life. This was particularly true of the respondents who had recently retired or had held a prestigious job requiring extensive academic credentials. Our data confirms the commonly held view that work occupies an enormous place in the lives and social identity of men, and that it represents a space for the performance and renewal of standards associated with masculinity (Collinson and Hearn 2005; Kilmartin 2007; and Galasinskis 2008).

Many respondents developed a narrative in which the working world was the only source of social interactions outside the family, and central to achieving a sense of social recognition and self-worth.

I defined myself firstly in terms of my profession. It's, um, in hindsight . . . sometimes I think the fact that I wasn't interested in much else in my personal life and career. . . In hindsight, I say to myself, "maybe I should have had other interests too" (E2, R.3).

I'd say work, because that was the centre of my life. I mean, very important, work is what drives us. In the morning you get up, etc., you've got to do it, you have responsibilities, you have to account for yourself, you've got to be there, you have to do certain things . . . you have a role to play on the job, so, yes, work is what drives me (E8, R.21).

When they enter retirement, the social sphere upon which this identity-building depends is no longer available; the identity conferred by work can no longer be mobilized in the same way when one's working life has ended. Deprived of their routine, the interactions inherent to their jobs, and a source of self-worth that appears to be very significant to them, many respondents described the first phase of retirement as a painful time. While the working world relays and confirms the male breadwinner identity who is socially "active" and "useful," the beginning of retirement is experienced as a time of forced adaptation, distress, even depression. The men's comments evoke the notion of retirement lived and experienced as a "social death," a notion introduced in 1974 by the sociologist of aging Anne-Marie Guillemard. Our respondents used words like guilt, boredom, uselessness to describe it:

In terms of my concrete experience, it's a hardship that I was absolutely not expecting: packing my bags and leaving. When I retired, I can clearly remember times of . . . turmoil, not knowing what to do with myself (E1, R.26).

Obviously, you're a man; you invest a lot in your work. It's very important, your job. You move up, you get promoted. For sure, getting old, retiring, you have to get used to it . . . it took me at least three or four years to stop feeling guilty. I mean, you're at home and you're getting paid, but you could be doing something (E5, R.20).

I defined myself as a lawyer. I defined myself as a law professor, a jurist, and naturally, it has an impact on how you feel when you're not a lawyer anymore (laughter) . . . For you, it's your work that defines you, it's terrible: it's a loss, it's a death of sorts. Frankly, it's terrifying to realize that you're no longer the professional you once were; that you'll never have the same opportunities you used to have to practise in a certain field. Realizing that, well it's really hard, and I found it very difficult. Um, I'd describe it as a feeling of uselessness, a bit depressed. But it's hard, it's really hard to define yourself any other way (E2, R.20).

Retiring is a kind of loss (R.94) . . . Retiring, it's depriving myself of the things I used to do, like being close to people. Working with them, helping them, it's those things I had to give up (E13, R.95).

This period of adaptation can be a particularly painful experience for elderly men who strain to define themselves after experiencing masculinity as strongly tied to their work. As demonstrated by Reitzes and Mutran (2006), some men persist, long after their retirement, in defining themselves through their jobs. This continuity, as Oliffe and others observe (2013), reveals a negative relationship to the conclusion of working life; most of the men we interviewed do not view retirement as an opportunity, but rather, as a challenge, a kind of non-completion, or loss.

Further, as Thompson and Langendoerfer (2015) have described, these elderly men continue to refer to an "ordinary" masculinity (Edley 2001), anchored in the 1950s and 1960s (when they were young), and conform with the traditional and heteronormative model of masculinity (Thompson and Langendoerfer 2015:3). Thus, even though the "ideal" masculine model has been transformed in recent decades, and the manner in which elderly men embody their masculinity tends to be influenced by their age, gender, and aging bodies (Laz 2003), the main characteristics of the hegemonic masculinity model remain remarkably stable (Oliffe et al. 2013). It is important to these men to have a successful career, and to continue being productive and competitive. This obligatory

reference to the masculine standard remains fundamental and may “raise problems,” notably upon retirement, when it may pose a threat of sorts to their identity and self-esteem (Olliffe et al., 2013:1634).

4. Diminished Masculinity: The Relationship to the Aging Body

While the respondents did identify positive aspects of aging, such as the acquisition of wisdom and increased freedom, especially, time to engage in leisure activities, their relationship to aging is essentially negative when it comes to their bodies, and constitutes the main disadvantage linked to aging. Associated with—to use their terms—“physical wear and tear” and “degeneration,” the relationship to the aging body is felt in terms of decline, loss, and obsolescence. This imagined image of decline, also observed by Wearing (1995), is internalized and relayed in the older men’s discourses on aging:

When I said that, professionally, there was pleasure attached to aging, on the physical level, there is absolutely nothing positive (E2, R.7).

Declining capacities, decline, the whole physical picture. That's it. Essentially, that's it (E14, R.4).

The fact that you no longer can spontaneously have an idea and just do it. The fact that you say, "whoops, my body can't do that anymore" (E10, R.102).

Getting old? Well, getting old is . . . it's no fun. And it's a drag. Because, you know, your body is aging but your mind is still young. Then, at a certain moment, your body can't do what your head wants it to do, and it's a little frustrating (E19, R.22).

Many respondents viewed physical limitations and illness as key indicators of aging that render the process concrete and tangible. In this respect, while the body is socially constructed and socially inscribed within the subjects (Birke 1999; Grosz 1994), as people

get older: “something in the body goes beyond the perceived shape of the body” (Norris 2006:71). As noted by Wiersma and Chesser (2011), “getting old” is a reality made objectively tangible through the medium of the body.

Life was good and you didn't notice it. I started realizing that I was getting old, even though it took a while, it took me five years . . . I accepted it, but then come the pains, different problems (E11, R.61).

I think, for me, getting old is when you notice that, physically, your illnesses are the kinds of problems that lead to death. The machine is breaking down and it won't get better. (E10, R.65).

The experience of “getting old” manifests itself and becomes tangible through the body. Participation in activities where the experience is mediated by a body in decline, and interactions related to such activities tend to consolidate the “old man” identity (Wiersma and Chesser 2011:250). Even when our respondents were not forced to discontinue a sport due to physical limitations linked to “getting old,” and were doing the same activities as before, they had to acknowledge that their physical capacity had diminished, and they were not considered by their opponents as potential adversaries or team members:

Golf, well it's been two years now since I stopped playing. That's an example of something that was painful to me. When I stopped, I had injured myself and could no longer make the proper movements (E10, R.100).

I went to see a game in the summer, softball. I got there and had my glove and my ball and the young guys, they don't talk to you. You have to be good to be accepted by them. If you're not good, they don't talk to you. If you're old, it's even worse. That's one of the negative sides to it (E22, R.46).

In this respect, the certitude of “becoming old” is based partly on the concrete experience of a body whose capacities are qualified as in decline, and on the fact that this

physical decline exposes them to differential treatment. This certitude is similarly substantiated in the men's relationship to romance or sexual attraction. When appearance is identified as a negative aspect of aging, the difficulty, or—as they express it—impossibility of attracting young women reinforces the feeling they are getting old:

When I was 20 or 21 and had nice hair, things like that, girls loved me. Now, I go somewhere and what do they see? They see an old man coming through the door (laughter) (E9, R.23).

I think that when you're a healthy man, women are always attractive to you. There are always more and younger women, pretty and everything. What's different? You know that you are no longer a young man (E2, R.17).

That's the bad part of it. And I feel, not rejected, no I understand them. A 20-year-old girl, she's not interested in an old guy who's 77. A 40-year-old woman, she doesn't want a 77-year-old guy, so she's gonna pass (E22, R.46).

Last, the certitude they are getting old is also confirmed by everyday social interactions that assign them to the category of seniors:

You realize it when you look at other people, and you look at yourself, the fact you're older, it's not so obvious inside, if you know what I mean (E12, R.63).

She (his daughter) said, "when do you feel old?" Ahhh, that sparked something in me, "hey, if she's asking me that, it means that now she feels I'm no longer the father or grandfather who was active like someone who was 50." . . . Why did she ask that question? What am I doing differently now that I didn't do before? My health is good . . . And I asked her "do you have the impression I'm not active anymore? I'm not old!" (E10, R.63).

For the older men we interviewed, objective physical aging is measured subjectively in terms of decline, gradual loss in terms of physical capacity and control, reduced mobility, autonomy, and sexual attractiveness. The diminished capacity to perform in terms of sports activities and being attractive to younger women, together with the experience of illness and physical limitations, are for them, the concrete manifestations of their aging. Observing the objective aging of their bodies, and their interactions with others, they are reminded every day that they now embody a position situated on the margins of the masculine norm. In fact, the “old man” stereotypes represent older men as genderless individuals within a young/old, robust/weak, independent/dependent binary dynamic that defines older men as the reverse image of the young man who continues to embody the masculine ideal (Spector-Mersel 2006:74), or, as a diminished version of this ideal (Thompson 2006:646). In this respect, the certitude they have of no longer being “young,” experienced through their bodies and other people, constitutes a challenge to some part of their masculinity. These men must cope with a stereotyped image of the “old man” that is imposed on them, an image understood as the opposite of the masculine ideal, a stereotype they believe to some extent, but with which they do not identify.

5. Performed Masculinity

The respondents spoke of their masculinity as being in question since retirement, as they confronted the aging of their bodies, and were gradually assigned the social identity of "old man." Masculinity is performed in very diverse ways, varying in accordance with the men's biographical trajectories and the masculinity scripts they embodied throughout their lives (Thompson and Langendoerfer 2015; Spector-Mersel 2006). What these performed masculinity scripts have in common, however, is that they allow older men to avoid being assigned the "old man" identity by presenting another manifestation of masculinity (e.g., athletic performance, proof of physical strength, sexual activity). More specifically, they present a performed masculinity that allows them to continue embodying a “positive”

masculine identity, or at least one they deem less distant from the dominant masculinity scripts in terms of the body, gender differences, and work.

For most of them, this performed masculinity is generally expressed through a demonstration of their current physical and sexual capacities:

Do you engage in physical activity? (Q.47) Well, apart from taking care of the yard, and a dozen birch trees last weekend, it's a lot of work . . . (E2, R.47).

And then he asked me how old I am, my weight, and a while later the red light turned on (laughter). He told me to slow down because, given my age and weight, I shouldn't work so hard, but, I mean, so I cheated and marked that I was 15 years younger (E3, R.36).

Signs that bother me? I wouldn't say there were any (laughter) . . . I mean, sexual capacity, you maintain that as long as you're active, at least that's what I think. It would bother me, if I felt like I couldn't get an erection or something like that (E1, R28).

I go to see my girl at the massage parlour and . . . well I saw her there and I accepted her and she accepted me, and everything was OK. It seems to be going well. I wouldn't marry her, but at least my equipment works (E22, R.9).

The older men interviewees whose narratives emphasized their bodies, situated their aging in a continuum going back to their youth, representing the body as vigorous, sexual, and gendered, proving they are still “masculine” men in the sense of the dominant norm. Other respondents perform their masculinity by evoking a feminine otherness. In this case, the masculine social identity is defined in opposition to a feminine social identity, by ascribing specific tasks to each gender. The first is based on the attribution of so-called masculine tasks such as those performed outside the home (both paid work and outdoor domestic chores), while the second is based on so-called feminine tasks such as housework

or other tasks performed inside the home. These men define themselves according to the main examples of otherness constituted by the young-old and man-woman dichotomies. Whether they seek to identify more with the “young” otherness or distance themselves from the “feminine” otherness, the same process is in play: construction of the self through the act of distinction/identification (Dubar 2010):

I haven't really done that, household tasks, like cleaning. I don't do much of that. But, when I had a bungalow, I took care of the outside jobs: the lawn, and the trees. But I don't have it anymore (E15, R.39).

Well, some things are harder . . . like cooking: a woman is always better at cooking than a man (E17, R.30).

My wife is a great cook. I'd never come close to her, and she likes doing it, so that's her job. Me, I do the dishes, take out the garbage, shovel snow, cut the lawn, the pool . . . um, she likes taking care of the flowers. But, trimming the hedge at the cottage . . . and there are trees to chop, branches to cut (E14, R.43).

The comments also illustrate Thompson and Langendoerfer's observation (2015), that older men tend to renegotiate their identity after retirement, and define their experience of retirement according to the classic model of masculinity they embodied when they were younger. Upon retirement, at a time when the part of masculinity associated with their job-related identity was being challenged, many of the men we interviewed continued—and still continue—to engage in work and volunteer activities.

As Thompson and Langendoerfer (2015) stated, we observed that the part of masculine identity associated with work shifted from “paid work” to the idea of “being active” (Gunnarsson 2009: 4041), or “doing something useful” (Davidson et al., 2003:84). This phenomenon reflects what Ekerdt (1986) interpreted as older men's transfer from the work ethic to a “busy ethic.” When the working world on which part of their identity is based is no longer available to them, the normative imperatives of masculinity do not suddenly

subside. Rather, they push older men whose identities are strongly invested in their jobs to find new spaces where they can register and affirm their masculinity (Thompson and Langendoerfer, 2015:12).

As shown by Barnes and Parry (2004), the older male respondents whose identities are strongly invested in their jobs tended to negotiate this identity by taking up volunteer work and striving to maintain a social network. Like Guichard-Claudic et al. (2001), we noted that the reorganization of their lives after retirement [Translation] “can be understood in light of their previous biographical trajectory and is conducted in continuity with . . . their earlier spheres of identification” (p.2). When the participants take on jobs or volunteer work, the desire for social interaction is a prime motivator, and they tend to do jobs or perform duties similar to those they did when they were employed.

My job was a tremendous source of self-worth, and all of a sudden it was gone, so I tried volunteer work as a way to gain a sense of self-worth (E8, R.24).

I offered to do the evaluation form, it’s a self-evaluation that people can do. You list your skills, it’s like I said all the time, I’m not going to volunteer to peel carrots for meals-on-wheels (E7, R.31).

I volunteer 25 hours a week: director in a credit union. I worked for 12 or 13 years in a church. I’ve always done volunteer work, and I’m still doing lots of those activities (E18, R.56).

What makes you want to do volunteer work? (Q.70) To have something to do, to feel . . . to feel alive and meet people and to . . . (E6, R.70).

By approaching the first years of retirement in a way that is consistent with their earlier spaces of identification these older men can continue, at least to some degree, to perform and embody a social identity of worker/employee and remain “active,” “useful,” and “productive.” The practical tasks they take on, the possibility of interacting with other people, and the sense of achievement and self-worth they obtain through work and

volunteering reinforce and confirm their identification with the “positive” masculine identities they are still seeking to embody in the early years of retirement.

The attempt to maintain continuity clearly reflects the resonance of the hegemonic model of masculinity: even while it is gradually becoming more difficult to perform, it remains a fundamental reference point in their experience of aging. The imperative to perform masculinity, and the manner in which the notions of gender, age, and the body are mobilized in the respondents’ discourse, indicate the extent to which these elements are central to understanding how older men experience their own aging (Thompson 2006; Spector-Mersel 2006). Performing masculinity may be interpreted as a means of distancing oneself from the margins in terms of the “old man” image, and of embodying a “positive” masculinity that is more in keeping with the image they have of themselves and their personal aspirations.

6. Negotiated Masculinity

The realization that one is “getting old” gradually and inevitably distances the individual from the norm prescribed by hegemonic masculinity; in the respondents’ discourse, this is manifested by the desire to negotiate their masculinity. The use of negotiation strategies underlines the fact that hegemonic masculinity is a powerful ideological construction, because the men must refer to it. They nonetheless have manoeuvring room, in the sense that they do not necessarily have to conform to the “ideal” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Thus, depending on the availability of different masculinity scripts (Spector-Mersel 2006:71), masculinity takes varying forms, always with the common denominator of allowing the individual to conform to the basic traits of “manliness.” More precisely, it is possible for older men to promote a mitigating discourse that nuances the criteria associated with hegemonic masculinity. In other words, they propose a reinterpretation of these criteria, enabling them to embody a “sufficient” masculinity. For instance, it may be a question of enjoying risk-taking and physical activity, but in a “moderate” dose, or being

very athletic without being "competitive," or being forced to slow down to respect one's limits, even though one is "still capable":

Like the doctor told me: no heavy work, don't strain yourself, especially, don't lift really heavy objects. I can do it, but you know, I'll wreck my back (E3, R.47).

We do a little bike riding, a little golf, some cross-country skiing, but really relaxed, like tourists (E5, R.47).

Because, yes, I'm active, but like I said before: If I work too hard or strain myself, it takes longer to recuperate afterward (laughter). That's it, but I'm still capable, I can still do it (E7, R.31).

I've stopped jogging now, but I keep in shape, I'm physically active. I always have little jobs that are physically demanding (E4, R.68).

I started putting on sunscreen a few years ago, 30 SPF. Why? Because of the risks of ultraviolet radiation and skin cancer. As a teenager, even as an adult full, sunlight didn't bother me, and recently, I took a trip and I told myself I'm going to toughen myself up, no problem, I don't need the sunscreen lotion. Then I thought about it. It's for protection, it's just protection (E1, R.30).

Among the negotiating strategies we identified were three practices in particular: 1) comparing themselves favourably—not to young men—but to men their age; 2) distinguishing between chronological and psychological age; 3) distancing themselves from the stigmatizing image of the "old man." Common to these strategies is the fact that they allow the individual to minimize the dissonance between their perception of their body (capacities and aged appearance) and their "internal" impression of being young (Biggs 1997):

Personally, oh well (laughter) . . . when I look in the mirror, it's brilliant, I mean, you can see what's on the outside and the feeling inside. I don't feel like someone who is 67: I'd say I feel like a man of 40 in terms of energy (E1, R.21).

Such negotiating strategies are "identity strategies" (Biggs 1997:558) older men use to negotiate the traits of masculinity that are both objectively and subjectively harder to perform, thereby mitigating the experience of dissonance. Using these strategies, they are able to cope with the stereotypes concerning old people, particularly the genderless old person stereotype (Spector-Mersel 2006).

First, the respondents no longer tended to assess their masculinity by referring to young men, in comparison with whom they felt less masculine (Thompson 2006:640), less overtly masculine; rather, they assessed themselves in relation to men of their own age. This allowed them to consider themselves in good condition, active, attractive, and healthy "for their age":

I have a neighbour who is younger than me, but I'd say he's older than me. He stays on his balcony and does nothing. But, I mean, he's younger than I am (laughter) (R.28).

For sure, I'd rather have a "six pack" (well-defined abdominal muscles) than a little pot belly, but I think that at my age, it's perfectly OK; if I were 40 I'd be concerned (E5, R.29). . . I think I'm in good shape, but I don't compare myself with a young man of 50 (E5, R.40).

Well, you know there are two ways of seeing it. When I take a shower and look at myself in the mirror, it's not a pretty sight. What do you want, the skin and everything . . . For sure, when people look at me and say, "you're 85! You're kidding!" It makes me feel good. You say to yourself, you're not as decrepit as some people you know, the same age, or something like that (E9, R.20).

As Laz (2003) has stated, older men consider themselves to be less energetic than young men, but more energetic than men in their cohort, and even more so in terms of the expectations for someone of their age. This favourable comparison may be interpreted as a

shift toward the margins of certain normative elements of the masculinity script. In the process of renegotiating their identity, referring to men their own age rather than to young men enables them to negotiate and embody a form of masculinity that, while not identical to the masculinity script of the young, nonetheless remains within the normative framework of hegemonic masculinity.

The second strategy frequently employed by the respondents consists of making a distinction between “chronological” and “psychological” age. This distinction, similar to that proposed by Krekula (2007) between the physical body and the body as an embodied identity, may be analyzed as a strategy to negotiate their advancing age in which they can continue to perceive themselves as “young,” despite the physical signs of aging. In other words, they distinguish between the body they have, the “off-stage-body” and the body they are, the “on-stage-body.” Certain respondents seek to dissociate themselves from the body they have that shows the signs of aging by emphasizing, in their discourse, the bodies they are. One respondent’s statement that: “there is no age for getting old. It’s in your heart” (E17, R.9) illustrates the distinction well:

Mentally, I’m not there yet, the state of being old (E10, R.54) . . . But I know that my body has aged, my body is old (E10, R.55).

A person is old, it’s . . . well, you know what I mean, there are two important part of getting old: the physical and the mental aspect. For me, you can be old as soon as you’re born. So, on the other hand, physically, there are some things you can’t avoid . . . (E9, R.8).

Well, about . . . like he said, “about 15 to 20 per cent of my body is functioning.” In his mind, it was so funny, he wasn’t too wrinkled. You’d never say he was 90, maybe 60 or 65 ??(E11, R.93).

It's because, you know, your body gets old, but your mind stays young, it's how you think that keeps you young (E19, R.22) . . . Me, I'm not 92, it's my body that's 92 (E19, R.28).

I said to myself, I've gotten old (laughter). No, it's not true, I'm not old. I'm just older in years. I'm not old. Me, I'm not old. I'm not older than you are in my mind (pointing to the 31-year-old interviewer) (E13, R.25).

Up to a point, they all consider themselves psychologically "young" to the extent that they are "mentally alert," "autonomous," intellectually and socially "active," and "energized" or "vigorous."

Last, most of the respondents were less apt to criticize ageism than to point out the error of assigning them the label of "old man." As Minichiello (2000) mentioned, and as we have also shown in our research on older women (Author), the dominant negative representations of aging incite them to reject the label of old person and distance themselves from this social category:

There are a number of ways whereby the older person can dissociate the self from the 'old' group. These include describing oneself as having a positive attitude, not looking old, not acting old; portraying the self as intellectually developing, while those who are 'old' are no longer trying to be mentally challenged; being and active compared to 'old' people who are sedentary; and not acting in ways that are perceived as 'old' (Minichiello 2000:8).

When we asked them when a person may be deemed "old," the older men frequently referred to the notions of "uselessness," loss of mobility and self-control, "bodily decline," "loss of independence," "passivity," and "having no activities or projects." They said these things did not apply to them, to the extent that they were intellectually and socially active, autonomous, and in charge, and that they are in better physical condition and look better than men who were younger or their own "chronological" age:

You know that you are no longer a young man, but you're not an inactive old man (E1, R.17).

When it comes down to it, you don't think you're old because you're so active, so involved in all kinds of things, you don't have time to be old (E5, R.10).

It's subjective, too, in that if the person sees themselves as old, and says "oh well, I don't do this or that anymore," no more activities, no more . . . well then, I'd say they're putting themselves out to pasture, they're retiring intellectually, even if you're only 60, you can live like an old person (E14, R.13).

In this way, remaining, or at least, affirming that one is still "useful" to society and "active," by comparing oneself favourably to people who are "genuinely" old, is one way that certain older men dissociate themselves from the stigmatizing image of the "old man," perceived as a negative otherness with which they do not identify.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our research data show that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a useful reference point in that it both establishes the criteria for masculinity and provides a lens for understanding the experience of men who, through their life path, are gradually forced to distance themselves from it and explore new variations of the traditional model. In this respect, it would be appropriate to conclude by nuancing what we have said. The older respondents and/or those suffering from illness or major physical limitations were less likely to perform their masculinity, and did so in terms other than those exhibited by the less elderly men (closer to retirement age and less encumbered with health problems). In representing their masculinity, the men in this particular group spoke rarely of the present, referring instead to a somewhat "mythical" past. The past constitutes an inventory of resources they can mobilize to construct a "positive" identity in the present (Biggs

2004:50). By mobilizing these resources, they are able to construct a self-image in which they embody, even if at a distance, a vigorous body and an identity they deem corresponds with the masculine norm:

No, I'm not someone who is scared easily. Not at all. To do what I did, you couldn't be a fearful person. (E11, R.73) . . . Yes, that's something that got me . . . and when the strike ended, "hey you, you threw a rock at me," but I'm a kind of mad about that: If I could do it over, you would have gotten it in the face. Yes, I'm a bit irate about that (E11, R.126).

I chopped wood and stored it in the basement, and the shed, and for the stove. And for the cabin. At the cabin, we used from 85 to 90 cords of wood. Not wood like that [indicating small pieces]. Real logs (E12, R.56).

We worked on the ceiling, the ceilings. I worked high off the ground, things like that. I was good at it. . . There were signs saying "no entry." Of course, I went in. I have a pile of photos where you can see the "no entry" signs. "Use of this vehicle is forbidden." There's a photo of me there. (E18, R.84).

The same goes for physical appearance: they would say "I took advantage of it," or "I had my time of glory.":

Well, you had your share of good times. The young, well it's their turn now. Later on, they'll be like you and me: they'll sit there and say, "I can't do that anymore, but I can't complain, I had my turn."

I went out with pretty young things when I was younger, showed them off like they were trophies: she's beautiful and everyone was jealous. They were like a possession, a way to prove yourself. The girl's beautiful, and you want to show everyone she's your girlfriend (E4, R.53).

While the relationship to the body is a fundamental aspect of masculinity, for this subgroup of our respondents, the body's advanced state of aging restricts the possibility of negotiating this masculinity. Where the possibility does exist, it exists to a lesser degree than for the younger men or those with no physical limitations. This observation confirms that aging is not simply a social construct that may be rejected; it is also an objective reality that poses a concrete obstacle to the negotiation of their masculinity. There would thus appear to be objective limits to the capacity of aging men to negotiate their masculinity. The pretence of control and power over the body cannot be maintained indefinitely in the social interactions and concrete experience these older men have of the bodies they have, despite their desire to focus on the bodies they are (Krekula 2007).

Although the aging body imposes certain objective limits to the performance and negotiation of a hegemonic model of masculinity, gender distinctions can always be mobilized by the more elderly, ill, or severely physically disabled men to reaffirm particular traits. Thus, for some, retirement does not automatically lead to the redistribution of work within the couple:

I want to talk about retirement again: I just gave you an example, a woman, my wife, she's not here right now, she left just before you arrived. She's gone to do the grocery shopping. For her, there's more continuity. There's no retirement for them. Her roles, tasks, and duties carry on. She's doing more babysitting for our grandson now than . . . when our daughter grew up, well, of course, but . . . She does the groceries, and her tasks haven't changed much compared to mine (E14, R.26).

I haven't really done that, household tasks, like cleaning. I don't do much of that. (E15, R.39).

In this respect, while the relationship to the body limits the negotiation of masculinity, the male/female distinction is more impermeable to aging, reinforcing the hypothesis that gender distinctions do not fade with aging; for older men, on the contrary, gender is very important.

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