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# Who Are You Calling Old? Negotiating Old Age Identity in the Elderly Consumption Ensemble

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As the elderly population increases, more family, friends, and paid service providers assist them with consumption activities in a group that the authors conceptualize as the elderly consumption ensemble (ECE). Interviews with members of eight ECEs demonstrate consumption in advanced age as a group phenomenon rather than an individual one, provide an account of how the practices and discourses of the ECE's division of consumption serve as a means of knowing someone is old and positioning him/her as an old subject, and detail strategies through which older consumers negotiate their age identity when it conflicts with this positioning. This research (1) illuminates ways in which consumer agency in identity construction is constrained in interpersonal interactions, (2) demonstrates old identity as implicated in consumption in relation to and distinction from physiological ability and old subject position, and (3) updates the final stages of the Family Life Cycle model.

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I had offered several times to just help her with her bills, just to make sure she was keeping up with her bills. . . . Well that just makes her so mad. I said Mom, why? I don't understand why this is making you mad. I'm helping you. (Sandy, age 58)

I didn't like that feeling, that you know, I'm slipping a little. And I don't feel old, and so I didn't like that feeling that I'm slipping on

these things that I've always been able to do with no problem. (Bonnie, age 86)

While modern medical advances have led to increased life expectancies and thus greater numbers of older people, these advances have yet to eliminate the many age-related physical and mental limitations that impair one's ability to perform everyday consumption activities. In 2009, over 20% of Americans over age 75—more than 3 million older people—required assistance with basic consumption activities such as using the telephone, traveling outside the home, shopping, preparing meals, doing housework, taking medications, and managing money (Adams, Martinez, and Vickerie 2010). This number is likely to increase as those 85 and older are now the fastest growing segment of the US population (US Bureau of the Census 2011).

Previous research on older consumers has focused on the challenges individuals face as they age, such as cognitive decline (John and Cole 1986; Law, Hawkins, and Craik 1998; Yoon 1997), vulnerability (Lee and Geistfeld 1999), and isolation (Kang and Ridgway 1996). We take a different approach by examining how older people continue to consume when they can no longer consume independently. For many, family members provide assistance when they perceive an older relative as needing help with daily activities (Matthews and Rosner 1988). Such assistance is typically

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referred to as caregiving or eldercare (Horowitz and Silverstone 1991; Whitlatch, Feinberg, and Tucke 2005), and the number of family members providing eldercare is dramatically increasing. Since 1994, the number of American adults over 50 who are providing care to their parents has tripled and now exceeds 10 million (National Institute on Aging 2008).

At the same time, paid eldercare has become big business. Total annual revenues have been estimated at \$264 billion (Freedonia Group 2008), of which 54% went to in-home care services and assisted living in 2006 (Reuters 2008). While much in-home care is medical care, nonmedical assistance is also common. In 2000, over 378,000 Americans over age 75 were receiving paid, in-home assistance with daily activities such as shopping, transportation, and grooming that fall outside of the category of medical care (National Center for Health Statistics 2004). Some older adults hire paid care providers because they have no family or friends available to provide assistance, but most paid caregivers join an existing group of family members or friends who are already helping the older person. The composition of this group and the types of assistance members provide has been shown to change over time as the older person's needs and members' circumstances change (Peek and Zsembik 1997; Waldrop 2006).

The group of people that helps an older person to consume has yet to be considered by marketing scholars. Previous studies of group consumption have focused on the nuclear family (Davis 1976; Palan and Wilkes 1997; Price and Epp 2008), consumption of a shared experience by groups of friends (Ward and Reingen 1990), and group decision making in the firm (Webster and Wind 1972). We assert that an elderly person and those who assist him or her with consumption activities constitute a consuming group unique from all of these. Unlike children in a nuclear family, adult children are no longer dependent on their parents. In fact, their parents may be increasingly dependent on them. This group consumes together on behalf of an individual rather than a firm, at times doing so out of choice, as with groups of friends, and at times out of necessity and obligation when an older family member is less able to consume alone. This consuming group often includes a market provider who engages in consumption with the older consumer. Conceptualizing paid service providers as members of consuming groups traverses marketing's traditional division between consumers and producers, as encouraged in consumer (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) and marketing (Vargo and Lusch 2004) research.

We conceptualize this unique consuming group, which we call the elderly consumption ensemble (ECE), as an elderly consumer and at least one other person who together engage in the consumption activities of that elderly consumer. We use the term *ensemble* to convey the improvisational nature of the group's composition and activities, which is somewhat analogous to that of a jazz ensemble. That is, the ECE improvises ways to continue the older person's consumption as members participate consistently

or intermittently and in various combinations, just as members of a jazz ensemble improvise the continuation of a tune. Because large variations exist in the type, frequency, and degree of assistance ECE members provide to an elderly person, in this study we bound membership to those whom informants identify as "regularly" involved in consumption activities with or for the elderly consumer with informants determining what qualified as "regularly."

Recognizing and contending with age-related consumption challenges can be an uncomfortable process for the elderly and those who assist them. For the elderly, the need for help may be interpreted as a threat to their independence and an indicator that they are no longer the capable, empowered consumers they once were. This threat may be particularly acute in US culture, where individualism, self-reliance, and independence are highly valued (Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011). Family members who try to provide support while simultaneously respecting the older person's autonomy may become frustrated and confused when their assistance is resisted or rejected, as does Sandy in the opening quote.

In carrying out this work, we draw from literature on constructing identity in consumption and on old age as a social position and an identity in contemporary American society. In contrast to previous work on elderly consumers that focuses on how old age affects the ways in which people consume, we consider how consumption fosters understanding of what it means to be old and who is old. Based on depth interviews with older consumers, family members, and paid caregivers in eight ECEs, our findings explain how consumption activities are the means through which older people negotiate their age identity with ECE members who position them as old or not old and in relation to cultural understandings of what it means to be old in contemporary American society. Finally, discussion elaborates theoretical contributions and implications of this work for consumer researchers, marketers, and policy makers.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Identity Construction in Consumption

Scholars have argued that identity, an individual's sense of self, is constructed in consumption discourse and practice (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) as people express their tastes (Bourdieu 1984) and position themselves in relation to social categories (Foucault 1983). Identity construction has been the focus of consumer culture research across a realm of such categories including gender (Holt and Thompson 2004), ethnicity and nationality (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Peñaloza 2007), and life stage for young adults (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006) and retired persons (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009). In exploring the construction of identity during old age, we add to this expanding body of work that highlights the active, contingent, and contested nature of identity construction in consumption.

In their examination of masculinity, Holt and Thompson (2004) elaborate identity as a discursive articulation that

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people fashion in relation to cultural ideals. Drawing from an impressive eclectic survey of popular cultural representations of masculinity, the authors glean two predominant models, the breadwinner and the rebel, and proceed to explain how men reproduce pleasurable dramatic tensions in synthesizing aspects of both ideals. Consistent with their discursive approach, identity does not exist before consumption as an influence on the latter. Rather, consumers construct their sense of themselves in consumption discourse and activity that is mutually structured and understood in terms of the very distinctions and categories that such identity production depends on and reproduces.

To say that people are active agents in creatively producing identity in consumption does not mean they are autonomous in doing so. Askegaard et al. (2005) describe ethnic identity as a choice for Greenlandic immigrants in Denmark—but not a free one—as they situate such identity construction within the macrofield of Greenlander-Dane social relations and the global market proliferation of artifacts, images, and associated aspirations. Thus, consumption patterns that enact identity are marked by consumers' "conciliation of existential desires for distinctive roots with concerns of deracination" (165).

Further, the social groups and geographic domains within which consumers enact identity are sociohistorically emergent and dynamic. Thus, rather than seek to specify a class-, gender-, ethnic-, or age-specific consumption pattern, researchers emphasize that identity is contingent as consumers manifest it in consumption within evolving macrocultural fields of geo-socio-market distinctions and relations. For example, Holt and Thompson (2004) detail the class habitus as a "malleable interpretive framework that men creatively draw upon to pursue identity projects" (438). That is, people produce identities such as man or immigrant in consumption discourse and practice as they navigate and internalize the categorical distinctions and relations that support and render intelligible the diverse, multifaceted, sociomarket fields we recognize as the "cultures" of masculinity (Holt and Thompson 2004), the nation-state (Peñaloza 1994), and the global mediascape (Askegaard et al. 2005) and brandscape (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Yet, unlike constructions of gender and race (Dobscha 2003; Williams and Qualls 1989), the construction of old age as a social category and identity has not been examined by consumer researchers.

Market agents and their strategic activities play an active role as well in shaping consumers' identities, as summarized by Arnould and Thompson (2005): "Consumer culture theorists have turned attention to the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structuring influence of the marketplace, arguing that the market produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit. While individuals can and do pursue personally edifying goals through these consumer positions, they are enacting and personalizing cultural scripts" (871). This assertion may overstate consumers' degree of choice in the positions they inhabit, as marketers' manner of addressing and portraying consumers actively places consumers in these normative,

scripted positions. Regarding older consumers specifically, one can see the market's role in positioning them in commercials for products like Viagra or senior vacation services. In such representations marketers continually redefine what older people should want and what their behaviors should be (Ekerdt 2005). Such market positionings draw heavily from social conventions, in producing what Pollay (1986) termed a distorted mirror that selectively features appealing characteristics to motivate consumption.

The contestation of market positioning and even its rejection have been noted in consumers' identity construction. Thompson (2004) showed that alternative health care consumers contested their positioning as victims by mainstream health care providers. Further, because consumers' positions are reproduced in consumption as well as in market practices and structures, people's attempts to change their consumption can change these structures and produce alternative positions. Thompson and Arsel (2004) detailed the ways consumers opposed Starbucks by frequenting independently owned cafés and by constructing and mobilizing a counter, anticorporate consumer position with which they identified.

Our interest lies in elaborating the processes by which elderly persons craft age identity in consumption in relation to their positioning by others as more or less old. In contrast to previous work focused on identity constructions in relation to macrosocial fields such as gender (Holt and Thompson 2004), class (Holt 1998), ethnicity/nationality (Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011), transnational consumer culture (Askegaard et al. 2005), and global youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), we are concerned with identity construction in consumers' relations to those closest to them. As we detail below, at times family members, friends, and service providers impose a position on the elderly consumer that he or she does not choose to claim or inhabit as his or her identity. By exploring how elderly consumers negotiate their identity in relation to the culturally scripted positions constructed by these social and market others, we build on this previous work in detailing the productive yet constrained workings of individual agency in consumption.

### Old Age as a Socially Constructed Subject Position

Social groups are constituted and reproduced in discourse and practice in a hierarchical structure, such that some groups are cast as superior in serving as the normative standard against which other groups are shown to be inferior (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1990). Age groups display a similar structure resulting from particular historical and social conditions. In the early 1900s the Western medical community began to frame old age as pathology—a loss of the physical and mental functioning attributed to normal younger adults (Fennel, Phillipson, and Evers 1988). Social gerontologists of the 1940s and 1950s objectified and marginalized the elderly by focusing on the "elderly problem" and what society should do with old people (Pollak 1948). In the 1960s, the popularization of Cumming and Henry's

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(1961) theory that the elderly isolate themselves in preparation for death cast old age as a time of loneliness, and the rhetoric justifying passage of the 1965 Medicare Act solidified two other negative associations with old age, financial need and vulnerability to illness (Binstock 2005).

Such marginalization has continued into the present. Cultural narratives of decline, evident in common expressions such as “over the hill,” portray older people as physically and cognitively deficient (Gullette 1997), as do practices valuing formal learning over life experience since older people are less likely than the young to engage in such learning (Haim 1994). Other negative stereotypes include inflexibility, lack of productivity, senility, frailty, lethargy, incompetence, and helplessness (Cardinali and Gordon 2002; Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske 2005). The entertainment industry has marginalized the elderly largely through omission. In 2003, fewer than 3% of fictional characters depicted on television were over age 65 (Vesperi 2004). It will be interesting to see whether the strong, charismatic characters played by Betty White in *Hot in Cleveland* and Clint Eastwood in the movie *Gran Torino* become more common as more baby boomers become senior citizens.

Gergen and Gergen (2000) have argued that the “dark ages” of aging are coming to an end and that America is now entering a new era of “positive aging,” in which older people are empowered by their growing economic and demographic power and proficiency at using new technologies. While we acknowledge that Americans’ image of aging is changing as baby boomers age, we question whether constructions of old people as a social group have changed. Perhaps Americans now view the process of getting older more positively than they did in previous eras, even as they continue to associate negative characteristics with “old people,” those who have outlived such positive aging or who have not aged well.

Drawing from Foucault (1994), Hall (1997) detailed how people position others in relation to certain classes of subjects in discourse and practice, including those of consumption. In a similar vein, Acuña (2004) elaborated the reality effects of being positioned and treated as a member of a devalued ethnic minority group. We use Hall’s term *subject position*, to refer to a socially constructed class, and the term *subject positioning*, to refer to individuals’ assignment to that class by themselves and others. Notably, individuals produce social categories and impose certain capabilities and characteristics associated with them in positioning others. For instance, “old person” is a socially constructed subject position that others may impose in discourse by using infantilizing talk when conversing with someone who has white hair and a cane and in practices such as holding his arm when walking or performing tasks for him. As Lipsitz (1998) shows with white people, individuals act from their subject position even when they do not claim it as their identity. Continuing with our example, even if the white-haired person does not identify as an old person, when subjected to infantilizing talk or treatment, he constitutes his

identity in relation to the subject positioning imposed on him by others.

Marketing scholars have contributed to the construction of the elderly as a marginalized and devalued subject position as well. In conceptualizing the later stages of life as the “Empty Nest” and “Solitary Survivor” in their Family Life Cycle model (FLC), Wells and Gubar (1966) reproduce the negative stereotypes of old age, isolation, and loneliness previously advanced by Cumming and Henry (1961). Later updates to the model by Gilly and Enis (1982) and Murphy and Staples (1979) continued to portray older consumers as singles or couples rather than group members, perhaps due to the emerging focus on household consumption at the time (Roberts and Wortzel 1984). Even so, most studies of elderly consumption through the 1990s were conducted at an individual level, and in highlighting vulnerability (Lee and Geistfeld 1999), isolation and need for support (Kang and Ridgway 1996), and cognitive deficiencies (Cole and Bal-subramanian 1993; Law et al. 1998; Yoon 1997), the studies perpetuated a devalued old consumer subject position (see Tepper [1994] for an exception).

Consistent with this previous work, more recent scholarship on older consumers’ cognition and decision making (Cole et al. 2008; Nasco and Hale 2009; Williams and Drolet 2005), needs and wants when shopping (Myers and Lumbers 2008; Pettigrew, Mizerski, and Donovan 2005), and brand choices and loyalty (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010) is based on the tacit assumption that old age affects how people consume. In making this assumption, researchers have neglected to ask the reverse—how the ways in which people consume affect their understanding of old age. In exploring how consumption practices and discourses are carried out in relation to socially constructed subject positions regarding who is old and what it means to be old, we show old age to be the result of consumption behavior in addition to its antecedent.

## Old Age Identity

Like other identities, age identity is claimed and expressed throughout the life span in discourse (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991) and practice (Gullette 2004). Investigations of old age identity have found it to be particularly inconsistent and unpredictable. Gatz and Cotton (1994) detailed how age identities vary culturally and personally, yielding little consensus regarding who should be considered aged. Similarly, Coupland et al. (1991, 56) noted elderly identity as a “highly unstable phenomenon, reflecting the local circumstances in which it is produced.” We extend this work by considering multiple consumption contexts for the construction of age identity and including a variety of activities that vary in the presence or absence of important others.

Survey data have produced one reliable result regarding old age identity—people tend not to characterize themselves as old for many years after others consider and treat them as such (Blau 1956; Bultena and Powers 1978). In the terms of the current study, people are reluctant to identify as old even after being positioned as an old person by others. How-

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ever, there is some indication that being positioned as old by others may induce a shift over time in feelings and behavior related to one's age identity. Arluke and Levin (1984) found that when others talk patronizingly to older people, the older adults' sense of self-efficacy declines and their feelings of personal deterioration increase. Nussbaum et al. (2005) noted that patronizing talk and infantilizing treatment by others lead to the exhibition of more dependent behaviors by elderly persons. Our interest in interpersonal relations stems from these disturbing findings.

Reluctance to identify with a negative subject position has been previously noted in ethnic research (Acuña 2004), and there is some evidence that a similar phenomenon may occur for old age identity in consumption. Tepper's (1994) study of older consumers' responses to senior citizen discounts found that consumers tended to reject the discounts to avoid self-devaluation and stigmatization. Those who accepted the discounts were only able to do so by assigning positive meanings to "senior" status. Participants were age 50 and over, with 65 and over as the oldest group and the group most likely to accept the discount, indicating that people may be more likely to claim an old identity as their chronological age increases. However, other studies have shown that as people get older, they are less likely to identify with their chronological age (Goldsmith and Heiens 1992). That is, a 50-year-old is more likely to "feel his age" than is an 80-year-old, who is more likely to feel younger than his chronological age.

Surprisingly, marketing researchers have not examined the construction of old age identity in consumption, although Schau et al. (2009) documented retirees' construction of other identities such as Mexican American and artist. The current research addresses this gap. We note that withdrawal from the workforce was once a principal indicator of who is old (Cockerham 1991), yet we suggest that with the growth of consumer culture in US society, consumption may be a more fertile domain than labor for the construction of old age identity. In investigating the nature of consumption for elderly people no longer able to consume independently and their processes of identity construction in relation to others, we ask the following research questions: What does it mean to older consumers and ECE members to be old, and how are these meanings reproduced in the ECE? How do ECE members position someone as an old subject in their consumption discourse and practice? In what ways do older consumers exercise agency to identify with or reject this positioning? And, how might their agency to successfully enact identity be limited in their interactions with market agents and other ECE members?

## METHOD

### Data Collection

The lead author's interest in this topic emerged from her 8 years of professional experience selling personal emergency response services targeted primarily to the elderly, combined with her personal experiences with elderly family

members. These experiences provided a common language with participants in building rapport, while witnessing older consumers' interactions with family members and service providers helped shape the inquiry.

Data collection consisted of depth interviews with two to three individuals from each of eight different ECEs for a total of 20 informants living in California, Colorado, Texas, New York, and Connecticut. ECEs were selected for variation in the older person's gender, living situation, and marital status; types and degrees of assistance provided; and, for those with paid providers, length of employment. Informants were recruited through craigslist and personal contacts and screened via telephone. Postings and requests specified that informants be "older people who receive regular assistance with everyday activities" or "someone who regularly assists an elderly person." Older consumers with cognitive illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia were screened out since such illnesses may preclude a person's ability to understand and respond to interview questions. However, because ECEs centered around cognitively impaired older people are common, two were included in the study, with family members and paid providers serving as informants.

Initial informants included five daughters, one son, one elderly consumer, and one paid caregiver in eight ECEs. Additional informants from each ECE were then recruited through snowballing, for a total of five older consumers, six paid service providers, and nine family members. Fifteen informants were interviewed once. Five others, representing four of the eight ECEs, were interviewed twice, with the second interview conducted 6–15 months after the first. All interviews were conducted by the lead author during 2007 and 2008. Sixteen of the initial interviews were conducted by phone, and four were conducted in person. Duration ranged from 1 hour and 15 minutes to 2.5 hours. All follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone and ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

Moving from general questions to those more specific (McCracken 1988), interviews with older consumers began with a discussion of their living situation and home environment. Topics then moved to activities s/he receives assistance with, who provides assistance, how assistance began, changes in the level and types of assistance over time, the impact that provision of assistance had on relationships, and activities the older person does alone. Questions about the elderly informant's physical and cognitive condition were asked at opportune times throughout the interview. Interviews were concluded with informants' reflections on what it means to be old and their own aging. Interviews with paid caregivers and family members differed slightly in that initial questions established their relationship to the older person, the age of the older person, and their understanding of the older person's physical and cognitive condition. At the end of the interview, informants were asked for their reflections on being a caregiver. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 434 pages of data.

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## ECE and Informant Characteristics

Because the unit of analysis in this study is the ECE, it is important to consider ECE characteristics in addition to informant characteristics. As shown in table 1, five of the eight ECEs centered around older women, two around older men, and one around a married couple. ECE size ranged from three to nine members. Informants' pseudonyms appear in bold type, while ECE members identified by informants but who were not interviewed are listed in regular type by their relationship to the older consumer. One ECE, Bonnie's, included no family members, as her two sons living out of state were not providing her with regular assistance.

Two of the five older informants were men. At the time of the interview (the second interview for those interviewed twice), older informants ranged in age from 84 to 89. Their living situations included assisted living, senior independent living, single-family home with live-in care, and single-family home alone or with a spouse. Seven of the eight family members and all six of the paid caregivers are women, consistent with the findings that 75% of family caregivers are women (Brody 2004) and that a lower percentage of men work in home care professions (Schindel et al. 2006). Family members were all in their 50s and 60s.

Four paid service providers were in their 50s, one was in her 60s, and one was 70. All elderly informants and family members are white, middle-class Americans, a demographic most likely to have the financial means to hire paid caregivers. Four paid caregivers are white Americans, one is Mexican American, and one is a naturalized US citizen originally from the Philippines.

Seven ECEs included paid service providers, and the number of service providers included in ECEs ranged from zero to three. The frequency of care by paid providers ranged from 1 hour, two to three times a week, to 24-hour care, while the length of employment for paid provider informants ranged from 3 months to 12 years. We acknowledge that many elderly consumers in the United States receive assistance only from family and friends, either by choice or because they do not have the funds to hire service providers. However, we purposely oversampled ECEs with paid providers due to our interest in how they position their elderly clients.

## Analysis

Early in the analysis we derived key categories (Lofland and Lofland 1995) of consumption activities that elderly

**TABLE 1**  
INFORMANT AND ELDERLY CONSUMPTION ENSEMBLE (ECE) CHARACTERISTICS

Older person	ECE member		Living situation	Activities with which help is regularly provided
	Family	Paid provider(s)		
<b>Richard</b> (89), single	<b>Veronica</b> (63, daughter), daughter, and son-in-law	<b>Maria</b> (55, live in, 12 years, Filipino)	With paid provider	Driving, meals, home and yard, housekeeping, shopping, meds, personal business, travel
<b>Jane</b> (84), single	<b>Kevin</b> (60, son)	<b>Cathy</b> (58, live in, 3 months)	With paid provider	Personal care, doctor visits, meals, home and yard, shopping, meds, personal business, driving, housekeeping
<b>Abbie</b> (89), single	<b>Patricia</b> (65, daughter) and daughter	<b>Fran</b> (70, 1 hour every other day, 3 years)	Alone	Driving, home and yard, doctor visits, personal care
Lily (88), married	<b>Brenda</b> (60, daughter) and daughter	<b>Dahlia</b> (50s, 5 days/week, 9 years)	Assisted living <sup>a</sup>	Personal care, driving, doctor visits, shopping, meds, meals, personal business, home and yard, housekeeping
Bea (82), single	<b>Sandy</b> (58, daughter) and <b>Mark</b> (59, son-in-law)		Alone	Doctor visits, personal business, home and yard
Arthur (90), single	<b>Candice</b> (59, daughter), <b>Stacey</b> (52, daughter), daughter, daughter, and three sons-in-law	Housekeeper (twice/week)	Senior apartment	Driving, doctor visits, meds, housekeeping, home and yard, personal business
<b>Bonnie</b> (86), single		<b>Mona</b> (66, twice/week, 6 months), gardener (once/week), and housekeeper (once/week)	Alone	Home and yard, housekeeping, personal business
<b>Gabe</b> (86) and <b>Norma</b> (84), married	<b>Rita</b> (56, daughter)	<b>Selena</b> (58, 5 days/week, 3 years, Mexican), caregiver (5 evenings/week), and caregiver (2 days/week)	Together	Driving, doctor visits, meals, housekeeping, home and yard, personal business; Norma: meds, personal care

NOTE.—Informants are in bold type. Age and relationship to older consumer are in parentheses for family ECE members. Age, frequency of assistance, and duration of employment are in parentheses for paid providers. Ethnicities of Maria and Selena are indicated; all other informants are white.

<sup>a</sup>Spouse lives in separate nursing home.

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consumers regularly received help with and that informants anticipated the older person would need help with in the future. These categories emerged after the first eight interviews and were added as a checklist for future interviews. Table 1 includes a list of all consumption activities for which assistance was provided in the ECEs. Categories include (1) personal care such as bathing, toileting, and dressing; (2) driving; (3) doctor visits; (4) shopping; (5) managing medications including organizing pills, taking medications as prescribed, and determining appropriate dosages of medications taken as needed; (6) preparing meals; (7) housekeeping; (8) home and yard maintenance; (9) personal business such as responding to mail, paying bills, and managing subscriptions; and (10) travel.

We continued the analysis by deriving meanings constitutive of old age from the interview data. To do so, we first identified characteristics and behaviors that informants attributed to or associated with old people, the elderly, or what happens when you get old, as well as their descriptions of how they could tell that someone is old. Similarly, we identified characteristics and behaviors that informants associated with not being old from their descriptions of what people are like before they become old and traits that make someone seem not old. We then clustered similar characteristics and behaviors, and where possible, we used informants' wording to code each cluster as a meaning. For instance, from Fran's explanation of why Abbie (89) seems younger than others her age, "Most old people forget things, you know, get confused sometimes . . . but [Abbie's] sharp as a tack, and still very independent," we derived the meanings *confused* as constitutive of old age and *sharp* and *independent* as constitutive of not being old. For other meanings, we supplied the terms. For instance, we assigned the term *dirty* the meaning that includes the behavior described by Lily's paid caregiver, Dahlia, when she said, "You know how old people are, always spilling things on the carpet." We derived 30 meanings from the data.

In analyzing the meanings, we noted that they aligned somewhat as binary opposites along continua, with each meaning indicating someone was old countered by a contrasting meaning indicating a person was not old, and vice versa, such that the meanings aligned as 15 distinct continua. Fran's description above, countering sharp with confused, illustrates this binary opposition. We then traced informants' meaning making as it related specifically to the consumption practice and discourse of the older consumer(s) in each ECE, noting that these meanings served as key mechanisms in positioning subjects. We then compared meanings produced by older consumers to those produced by other ECE members and traced how elderly persons construct their age identity in relation to their positioning by themselves and others and how conflicts in meaning were negotiated in and through consumption in the ECE.

We next present our findings using the following terms: *ECE members* refers to family, paid providers, and older consumers. *Younger ECE members* refers only to family members and paid providers, as all those included in this

study are younger than the older consumers they assist. We use the term *inscribe* for informants' production and reproduction of meanings in their consumption practice and discourse, with some reference to the passage of time in distinguishing between the two. Further, in an effort to avoid gender specificity while retaining parsimony, we alternate the use of gendered pronouns. Although this is not a quantitative study, we at times include numerical counts to provide readers with a sense of the range and depth of the data.

## FINDINGS

### Meaningful Distinctions between Aging and Getting Old

As we analyzed informants' answers to questions about "what it means to be old" and their descriptions of their experiences with aging or helping an aging person, we noted that they made a distinction between aging and getting old. This distinction was at times revealed in a single comment, such as, "the youngest old person I know" (Fran). We explain this seeming contradiction in terms of the different meanings informants associate with chronological aging versus becoming a member of the old age group. That is, informants associated some meaning continua with chronological aging and others with being old or not old, as each category is socially constructed in contemporary American society. We use the label *not old* for the category to which informants assign people who are no longer young but also not yet deserving of the old subject position. Although informants tended to use the terms *young* and *younger* when distinguishing these people from "old people," we felt that the moniker *not old* more accurately represents informants' categorization of this group relative to society as a whole. While each of the meanings extend beyond the realm of consumption, in the scope of this study we focus specifically on how they are manifest in consumption activities.

In parsing out distinctions between agedness and oldness, we categorize the 15 meaning continua into three dimensions—physiological, individual, and social. Meanings in the physiological dimension are closely related to biology and are described by informants as the essence of aging. Informants expressed that the meaning continua in this dimension, *physically able to unable* and *cognitively able to unable*, are driven by inevitable changes in the aging brain and body. Physical and cognitive inability constitute one as aged, while ability constitutes one as less so. Richard, a widow and father of five who lives with his paid caregiver, Maria, explains that aging will eventually lead to cognitive inability, which he describes as the brain "not working so well," with not much "chance for wisdom." "What does it mean to be old? Well, it means that you've been here for a long time, and you should have some wisdom . . . [but] the lines cross somewhere along the line . . . to where you start to lose it, and your brain isn't working so well, and so at that point, you don't have much chance for wisdom, whether that shows up in just senility or Alzheimer's" (Richard, 89).

We determined that underlying informants' testimony was

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**TABLE 2**  
DEFINITIONS OF MEANING CONTINUA

	Definition
Physiological meaning continua: <sup>a</sup>	
Cognitively able to unable	Brain's ability to reason and remember as needed to successfully perform consumption activities
Physically able to unable	Body's ability to see, hear, speak, manipulate objects, and ambulate as needed to successfully perform consumption activities
Individual meaning continua: <sup>b</sup>	
Flexible to rigid	Adaptability to new situations, willingness to try new products and services, and flexibility in one's daily routine
Joyful to joyless	Finding joy in consumption, eagerly and happily engaging in consumption
Sharp to confused	Understanding, remembering, and synthesizing information; may also include having consistent preferences
Aware to unaware	Awareness of one's surroundings and condition of one's clothing; also, self-awareness of abilities and needs
Clean to dirty	Cleanliness of the body, clothing, and home
Productive to unproductive	Degree of productivity and creativity expressed in consumption
Active to inactive	Frequency and degree of physical movement; often associated with going outside the home
Engaged to disengaged	Level of engagement in consumption events; also, how well one keeps up with market innovations
Safe to at risk	How physically and financially safe one is when s/he consumes
Social meaning continua: <sup>b</sup>	
Control to deference	Degree to which authority in a consumption event is exercised by the older person or yielded to others
Integration to isolation	Degree of social contact one experiences in consumption
Independence to dependence	Degree of assistance one receives from others in a consumption activity
Reciprocation to unilateralism	Degree to which provision of assistance is reciprocated

<sup>a</sup>First meaning associated with being less aged; second meaning, with being more aged.

<sup>b</sup>First meaning constitutes "not-old" subject position/identity; second meaning constitutes "old" subject position/identity.

the presumption that with increased chronological age, change in the physiological dimension is unidirectional in moving along the continuum from able to unable. Richard alludes to the path from ability to inability as a linear progression when he says, "somewhere along the line." His conclusion that one eventually becomes senile or develops Alzheimer's disease suggests that one moves along "the line" in one direction—toward cognitive inability. This is not to say that people of younger chronological age are always able, as illness and injury impair the physical and cognitive ability of many young people. However, as chronological age increases, inability is more likely to be attributed to aging than to injury or illness. Furthermore, while informants were clear that the chronological age at which one becomes unable varies from person to person, they were equally clear that with greater longevity, inability is inevitable.

While meanings we categorize in the physiological dimension indicate that a person's body and brain are more or less aged, meanings in the individual and social dimensions constitute one's subject positioning as old or not old. We include nine meaning continua in the individual dimension and four in the social dimension, with the first meaning in each continuum constituting a person as not old and the second constituting her as old. Individual meaning continua include *flexible to rigid*, *joyful to joyless*, *sharp to confused*, *aware to unaware*, *clean to dirty*, *productive to unproductive*, *active to inactive*, *engaged to disengaged*, and *safe to at risk*. Social meanings are inscribed and conveyed in the relationships of the elderly person with others in consumption experiences. Social meaning continua include *control*

*to deference*, *independence to dependence*, *integration to isolation*, and *reciprocation to unilateralism*. Definitions of all meaning continua are provided in table 2.

Informants described old people in ways that reflected the dominant narratives and discourses in US culture and that incorporated their personal experiences. For instance, Arthur's (90) daughter Stacey said that unlike people who are not old, old people will "just sit there. Old people will just sit there by the hour, no TV on. Mom would do that, no TV on or anything, they'll just sit there. . . . I would say somebody's old when they do that." Like the dominant rhetoric stemming from political and social institutions such as government programs, the media, and the health care industry intimated in the literature review, Stacey and other informants constructed old as a devalued and marginalized position in counterdistinction from their understandings of what it means to be not old. Her comments reflect a social categorization of old people as inactive and unproductive that incorporates her own observations of her mother.

In contrast to informants' descriptions of older consumers becoming more unable in the physiological dimension such that they do not subsequently become able again, informants' accounts of older consumers inscribing individual and social meanings included instances of inscription of a meaning constituting the person as old followed by inscription of the countermeaning constituting him as not old. The latter tended to occur as older consumers changed their consumption activities to adapt to physiological changes. For instance, Kevin recounted how his mother, Jane, had become *dirty*, a meaning associated with the devalued construction of old by over half of the informants, when she was phys-

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iologically unable to control her bladder. Later, by changing her consumption practices to include the use of protective undergarments and the help of an attentive caregiver in toileting and maintaining good hygiene, Jane again inscribed the meaning *clean*, a meaning associated with the not-old subject position. Such consumption adaptations allow for the seeming contradiction of aging without getting old.

**Positioning the Older Consumer and Identity Construction in the ECE**

Through the consumption discourses and practices of the ECE, informants continually reproduce their understandings of the older consumer as more or less aged and old or not old. Our analysis thus necessarily addresses chronological age, or agedness, although it focuses on the older consumer’s subject positioning and identity as old or not old. In figure 1, we represent the processes of positioning the older person as an old or not-old subject and the construction of the older person’s identity in relation to this positioning through meaning making in the ECE.

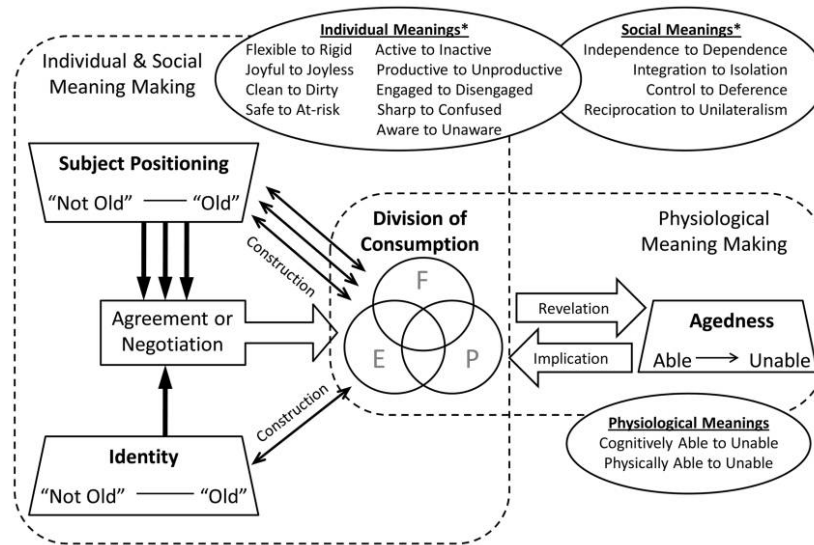
In the Venn diagram at the center of figure 1, we represent the older person’s consumption activities as accomplished collectively in the ECE through a dynamic and ongoing division of consumption. Although the diagram allows for the wide variation we noted in the data in the number of family members, friends, and paid caregivers included in the ECE, for illustrative purposes we represent a simple case

of an ECE consisting of the elderly consumer, one family member, and one paid care provider (labeled E, F, and P, respectively). The elderly consumer performs some activities by herself, some activities with one other member of her ECE, and some activities with multiple members of her ECE. In addition, younger ECE members may perform some activities by themselves or with one another for the older consumer, even without the older consumer’s participation. For instance, Kevin manages all personal business for his mother, Jane (84). As ECE members engage in consumption activities, the older consumer inscribes meanings about herself, and the younger members inscribe meanings about the older consumer. In any consumption practice or discourse, ECE members inscribe one or more of the 30 possible meanings in various combinations. Further, such meaning making can feature all or some subset of the physiological, individual, and social dimensions detailed earlier, either simultaneously or over time.

*Consumption Activities Reveal Agedness.* The right side of figure 1 depicts the inscription of physiological meanings in consumption, which both reveal the older consumer’s agedness and implicate the current division of consumption as appropriate or inappropriate. For instance, each time the older person successfully performs a consumption activity, she reveals her relative lack of age to herself and others by inscribing the meanings *physically* and *cognitively able*. Alternatively, if she tries to perform an activity but fails, she

**FIGURE 1**

CONSTRUCTION OF OLD AGE SUBJECT POSITIONING AND IDENTITY IN THE ELDERLY CONSUMPTION ENSEMBLE



NOTE.—E = elderly consumer; F = family member; P = paid provider; \* = for each continuum, the first meaning constitutes not old and the second constitutes old.

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inscribes the meanings *physically* or *cognitively unable*, revealing her agedness. Importantly, the quality of performance equating to success varies from person to person such that one ECE member may deem a performance successful while another deems the same performance unsuccessful. Revelations are at times gradual, such as when Kevin noticed his mother Jane's house becoming increasingly dirty each time he visited, and at times abrupt, such as when Lily (88) suddenly became disoriented and frightened while driving and that day decided that she was no longer able to drive. This process of revelation of the older person's agedness in consumption through physiological meaning making in the ECE is depicted in figure 1 by the arrow from the Venn diagram to agedness.

Importantly, the older consumer's revealed agedness—his degree of ability to perform consumption activities—implicates the current division of consumption as more or less appropriate. For instance, if he has been managing his medications on his own and reveals himself to be able to do so, the current division of consumption is reinforced. However, if he reveals himself as unable to manage his medications, the current division of consumption is implicated as inappropriate, and assistance with this activity may be offered or sought. Furthermore, because two or more consumption activities may require the same cognitive or physical abilities, ability or inability revealed in one activity may implicate one's ability in other activities. For example, doctor visits require the ability to hear and speak to the doctor just as going out to eat involves the ability to hear and speak to a waiter or waitress. If an older consumer exhibits difficulty effectively hearing or speaking to a waitress, it may call into question her ability to effectively communicate at the doctor's office. The implication of the propriety of the division of consumption is represented in figure 1 by the arrow from agedness to the Venn diagram.

While the examples above present physiological meaning making as a simple process, in actuality informants often struggled to interpret the meaning of their consumption experiences. For instance, when Abbie's daughter Patricia noticed that her mother did not recall important instructions from her doctor, Patricia was unsure whether this meant that her mother was physically unable to hear or whether she was just being stubborn. "She'll mention something and I'll say, well Mother, the doctor said that you're not supposed to do that. [Mom will say,] 'Well I didn't hear that.' So I don't know whether she really didn't hear it or she just doesn't want to" (Patricia, 65). Determining the specific nature of inability and thus which other activities may be implicated was also often difficult. At times informants were only able to do so by comparing the older consumers' performance on multiple consumption activities that require similar abilities. For example, when Veronica noticed that her father, Richard, was having difficulty managing his personal business, she determined that it was his sight rather than memory that was failing because he was still able to remember his doctor appointments and medication regimen. In doing so, she inscribed the meanings *physically unable*

but *cognitively able*. Likewise, older consumers at times compared their own performance on multiple activities to determine the nature of ability or inability. A majority of family members and paid providers described times when they had performed this kind of comparative analysis, as did two of the five elderly informants.

*Positioning the Older Consumer.* In any consumption activity, ECE members as individuals or together inscribe one or more individual and social meanings. All individual and social meanings inscribed in consumption practice and discourse by ECE members, including those inscribed by the older consumer, place the older person in relation to the old subject position. The construction of the older consumer's subject positioning is depicted at the left of figure 1. The three arrows pointing from the division of consumption to subject positioning indicate that each of the three agents inscribe meanings either by themselves or with other members who position the older consumer. The cumulative mix of meanings position the older person, such that the inscription of more not-old meanings (those at the left of the continua in fig. 1) places the older consumer closer to the not-old position, and conversely, the production of more old meanings (those at the right of the continua) places him closer to the old subject position.

We note that some social meanings were more powerful than others in positioning someone as old; specifically, *dependence* and *deference* (lack of control) each more powerfully cast a consumer as old than did the other two social meanings assigning persons to the old subject position, *isolation* and *unilateralism*. Furthermore, we noted that the combination of *dependence* and *deference* was the most powerful in constituting the old subject position. Consistent with the high value that American culture places on individual autonomy (Hofstede 2001), informants of all ages expressed a strong desire for the older person in their ECE to enact *independence* and *control* for as long as possible, meanings that constitute the not-old position. In contrast to social meanings, individual meanings were all relatively equal in their power to cast someone as old.

In the following example, Sandy shares her plans to hire someone to clean her mother Bea's (82) house without Bea's knowledge, an action that positions Bea as an old subject.

*Sandy:* What I plan on doing, she's gonna be going to one of her sister's in Kansas this month actually. . . . I plan on getting someone in to clean her house from top to bottom. Um, 'cause it just hasn't been done in so long.

*Interviewer:* Are you going to talk to her about that?

*Sandy:* No. [*chuckles*]

*Interviewer:* OK, what do you expect her to do when she gets back?

*Sandy:* Um, to be quite honest, I don't know that Mom would notice. She might, but I don't think so.

We ascribe to Sandy's comments the individual meaning *dirty*, which positions her mother as old. Should Bea fail to

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notice Sandy's covert action, Sandy will attribute to Bea another meaning, *unaware*, thus positioning Bea more definitively in the old position. Alternatively, if Bea notices, she may reject the positioning and assert her not-old identity by enacting not-old meanings. For instance, she may refuse future service and counter that she has been keeping the house clean enough on her own. Either way, Bea acts from the old position in which Sandy has placed her.

In figure 1, we use arrows pointing from the subject positioning to the division of consumption to symbolize the influence that the older consumer's subject positioning has on the division of consumption. The three arrowheads indicate that any of the three agents may by themselves or jointly instigate a change in the division of consumption. For example, after her father, Gabe (86), enacted the meaning *confused*, which constituted him as old—in this case too old to manage his personal business independently—Rita altered the division of consumption in her parents' ECE by taking over balancing their bank statements. She explains, "I've had to take over reconciling the bank statements. He would get confused and say this doesn't work out, so I have taken over that."

*Older Consumers' Construction of Age Identity.* Notably, only those individual and social meanings that are claimed and intentionally performed by the older person constitute her identity. To illuminate the process of age identity construction by the older consumer, we present the example of Bonnie (86), who constructs a not-old identity despite initially positioning herself as old. Bonnie was managing her personal business on her own when she went to her annual appointment with her tax accountant. She recalls, "After my taxes last time, I kind of let a couple of things go . . . and it wasn't anything really bad, but I just felt like I am slipping. I'm not doing this as well as I could." We refer again to figure 1 to show that Bonnie's personal business, a consumption activity that she performs by herself, lies within the area labeled E that does not overlap with F and P at the bottom left of the Venn diagram. The mistakes Bonnie made in performing this activity reveal to her that she is becoming less able cognitively than she has been in years past. Upon inscribing this meaning, Bonnie acknowledges the need to change her personal business management practices, and she asks her accountant for advice. "I said to my accountant, what are we going to do with me? And he said that he thought it would be good if I could just get somebody to be there with me and . . . keep watch over the things that I have to do."

Although Bonnie had noticed that she was less able than she had been before, she had not yet inscribed the physiological meaning *unable*, and she continued to independently manage her personal business. The revelation of her inability would occur gradually over the next few months during which she continued to make mistakes, such as misplacing and neglecting to pay a bill. "One time not too long ago, one of [my bills] kind of got lost, so it was a few days late, and when I got my next statement I realized what they charge when you are a few days late, and I couldn't believe

it!" Over time, her inability became increasingly apparent to her until she eventually "tipped the scale" to the unable side of the continuum. She relates, "I got where I couldn't keep my desk cleaned off . . . and that's what I think was the thing that really tipped the scale for me. I thought, you know, I can't do this. I'm a nervous wreck. I can't do this."

Concurrently, Bonnie inscribed individual and social meanings that positioned her as old. In identifying her errors to her accountant, she inscribed the meaning *confused*. In facing the finance charge that resulted from her unpaid bill, she inscribed the meaning financially *at risk*. As she struggled with keeping her desk cleared, she inscribed the meaning *dirty*. Even so, Bonnie is uncomfortable with positioning herself as an old subject and does not identify with this positioning, saying, "I don't feel old, and so I didn't like that feeling that I'm slipping on these things that I've always been able to do with no problem." She actively negotiates her old positioning by hiring Mona to manage her personal business for her. In terms of our analytical constructs, she alters her division of consumption by adding a paid provider to her ECE, a market-provided, social prosthesis who compensates for her inability. Bonnie describes what Mona does for her as follows: "She keeps [my bills] organized so that they don't get lost, and you know, missing them and being late. . . . She keeps [my desk] organized and all of that. And it looks so good once she's gone! I mean she just has it clean and she's really gone through things and forced me to say, OK, now is this important? Do we keep this or not? And then what are we going to do with this? . . . She's watching over me in things like that that I just didn't seem able to do anymore" (Bonnie, 86).

In her revised division of consumption, Bonnie claims and performs individual meanings that constitute her as not old: *clean* because her desk is now organized, *safe* because Mona is now making sure Bonnie will not be charged late fees by service providers, and *aware* because she has recognized that she needs help. Hiring service providers like Mona further constitutes Bonnie as not old as she claims two social meanings. Like several other informants in this study, Bonnie views paying for services with her own funds as a form of *independence*, such that she is able to inscribe this meaning even though she is no longer performing this consumption activity on her own. She also exercises control in hiring service providers on her own. She says, "I'm not depending on anyone. . . . I'm gonna do what I want to do or need to do, and I think that in a way has kept me young, because I have not been um, I have not been waiting for someone else to take over, and to help me to do things. And now, I am getting help now, but it's um, you know, paying people to do the things I need them to do" (Bonnie).

By changing her division of consumption, Bonnie constructs her identity as not old, a culturally valued position, even as she acknowledges some physiological inability. In figure 1, we use the double-headed arrow at the bottom left to depict the ways identity construction informs and is the result of individual and social meanings claimed and performed in consumption practices in the division of con-

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sumption of the ECE. By accepting and responding to her compromised consumption abilities in ways that allow her to compellingly position herself as the not-old subject with which she identifies, Bonnie ages without getting old.

### Conflicts between Subject Positioning and Identity

In the previous example, Bonnie's positioning of herself conflicted with her identity. In this section we focus on conflicts between ECE members that arise when younger members inscribe meanings that position the older person in ways that are at odds with her identity. The most common source of conflicts was when older consumers attempted to construct not-old identities while their children and paid providers positioned them as old subjects. These types of conflicts occurred in all ECEs and in all consumption activities. Conflicts around driving were the most common, reported by informants in seven of the eight ECEs. The frequency and intensity of these conflicts likely is due to the sheer number of meanings informants inscribed in driving: *cognitively and physically able to unable, sharp to confused, aware to unaware, active to inactive, safe to at risk, control to deference, integration to isolation*, and perhaps most important, *independence to dependence*. For informants, changing driving practices produced a host of meaning changes designating substantial shifts in subject positioning and, for some older informants, in identity.

Other conflicts related to older consumers' favorite activities and those central to the enactment of other identities. For instance, home and yard maintenance had long been central to Richard's masculine identity as father and husband. When his toilet began to leak, he tried unsuccessfully for several weeks to repair it himself. To be *unproductive* by calling a plumber was a meaning inconsistent with his identity as not old, and he rejected that meaning and its corresponding subject positioning even as others positioned him as such. However, no conflicts arose around his getting assistance with meal preparation because cooking had never been something he enjoyed or considered one of his fatherly duties.

The frequency of conflicts varied widely between ECEs. In some ECEs, such as Bea's, conflict was prevalent in many activities and situations. In others, such as Lily's, conflicts were relatively rare. In two ECEs, conflict arose occasionally when older consumers claimed an old identity while others position them as not old. For example, in the quote below, Rita describes how Gabe at times identifies as old while she positions him as less old. In talking about falling and using the shopping cart for extra stability, Gabe inscribes the meaning *at risk*, identifying as old. Rita is so uncomfortable with his claiming an "ancient" identity that she encourages him to change his talk and thinking to identify with a less old position.

It bothers me sometimes that he, I think he can do more than he's acting like he can, you know. He just keeps saying, I'm going to fall, gonna fall. He talks about it. Like today at the grocery store, he said, I need the grocery cart 'cause I feel

better. . . . I get a little irritated with him, but I never yell at him. I say, you know, if you wouldn't talk about falling all the time maybe you wouldn't have that problem. Why don't you think positively? . . . I mean, he accepts the fact that yes I'm old, but like I said, sometimes he just goes overboard the other way, acting like he's ancient and can't do anything. (Rita, daughter)

To further illustrate how conflicts between old subject positioning and identity are triggered and navigated, we provide a detailed example from Abbie's ECE regarding a conflict in driving. We note that this example is illustrative rather than representative, as the nature of conflict in each ECE varied considerably in the consumption activities in which conflict arose, the meanings inscribed, and the agents involved. Abbie (89) lives alone in a rural town in Texas. Her ECE includes two of her four children, Patricia and Louise, and her paid service provider, Fran, who visits Abbie 3 days a week to help her put on support hose prescribed by her doctor. Abbie does her own housekeeping, meal preparation, personal business, and medication management, and she continues to drive in her small town and to some small neighboring towns. During our first interview, she was occasionally driving to a nearby large metropolitan area but had stopped driving there by the time of our second interview 14 months later. Once a week, Abbie's daughter Patricia drives Abbie to a larger neighboring town where they shop for groceries and "make a half day of it" (Abbie) by having lunch and running errands. Patricia also occasionally helps Abbie with home and yard maintenance tasks such as filling the bird feeder and changing the furnace filter. Patricia and her sister Louise jointly accompany Abbie to doctors' appointments.

Abbie explains that she curtailed her driving over the past few years primarily because "it worried my daughters so." She goes on to say that she does not understand why her daughters worry about her driving, "because my mind's perfectly alright. I'm a darn good driver. But I guess because of my age." She describes the first time her daughters expressed concern: "I used to travel a lot. I had two sisters, and the one I used to travel with died, but we used to every fall and the spring we'd go on about a 5,000 mile trip up to North and South Dakota and over to Montana . . . and back. . . . And on my 80th birthday, I don't know what happened, [my daughters] just decided I was too old to do that anymore, and so I had my wings clipped. I don't travel any more by myself" (Abbie, 89).

Abbie now usually restricts her driving to a few small towns nearby, but Patricia worries that even this may put Abbie at risk. Patricia explains, "She does pretty well around town. I just think she drives too fast and I don't think her reflexes are all that well if she had to stop suddenly." Patricia now drives whenever she and Abbie are together, including their weekly shopping trips. Patricia believes that Abbie lets her drive to the neighboring town to shop because Abbie "is not comfortable driving there." Patricia goes on to explain, "but she will not say that. . . . She won't say that she can't do it, she just uh, makes excuses."

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In terms of our analysis, in the discourses and practices of Abbie's driving, Patricia positions Abbie in the old subject position by inscribing at least two constitutive meanings. First, Patricia attributes risk to the slowed reflexes of her mother's aging body, simultaneously inscribing the physiological meaning *physically unable*. Second, each time Abbie lets Patricia drive, Patricia interprets Abbie's behavior as deference, an acceptance of her limitations and of Patricia's concern.

Abbie's view is quite different. She explains in our first interview, "I let her drive because she *thinks* she's a better driver," an assessment that Abbie says she does not believe to be true. Later in the same interview she describes herself as a "darn good driver" and recounts her recent trek to take her sister home: "My other sister, the one that's 91, stayed with me last week, and I took her home, and it's just about 150 miles from here, but it's through [a large metropolitan area], and I did that very well. But [my daughters] didn't know I was gonna do it. But I know they love me and they worry about me. I wish they wouldn't, but they do, so I try to make it as easy on them as I can" (Abbie).

Thus, Abbie asserts a not-old identity by claiming and performing several not-old meanings in her driving discourse and practice. In describing herself as a "darn good driver," she claims the meaning *safe* and proves it in detailing her last trip. By letting Patricia drive, she makes it "as easy on them as I can," a reciprocation for their love and concern. In addition, by driving her sister home without telling her daughters, she exercises *independence* and *control*, the two meanings that most powerfully constitute her not-old identity.

### Strategies for Negotiating Conflicts between Identity and Positioning

So far we have explained that through discourse and practice in the division of consumption, all ECE members position the older person relative to the old or not-old subject position. In turn, the older consumer constructs his identity in relation to this positioning. When the positioning and identity are in agreement, members continue current practices and discourses that reproduce this positioning. When the older person's identity conflicts with the positioning imposed on him by himself or other members, he negotiates his identity at the level of meanings in ways that may alter the division of consumption. We depict the influence of agreement or negotiation on the division of consumption as a large arrow at the middle-left side of figure 1. In this section we detail the negotiation strategies of ECE members.

*Older Consumers Reassert Identity against Unacceptable Positioning.* We noted four strategies older consumers use to reassert their identity when they disagreed with their positioning by others. The first is to attempt to convince younger ECE members of the validity of their identity through discourse, employing what one hopes will be a compelling verbal argument. For example, when Kevin first mentioned to his mother, Jane, that she was at risk when she drove at

night because her driving skills were declining, "she of course didn't think so, and kept telling me that she could drive just fine, that she could see OK" (Kevin).

A second strategy is to try to prove a not-old identity through practice. In the following example, Mark positions his mother-in-law, Bea (82), in the old subject position through his discourse. She asserts her identity against this positioning by relating her successful performance of the practice of climbing on the ladder as proof that she is not old:

I often told her to stay off of the ladder. Don't get on the ladder. Now she and I did have a lot of arguments about that because she insisted on being able to get up on the ladder. And I told her, now look, if you *knew* you were gonna fall, you wouldn't get on a ladder. She'd say, "I'm not gonna fall. I'm not gonna fall." Well, yeah, you will. You know, you do it enough, you're gonna fall. . . . If you break your hip, then you're gonna be in a hospital bed. Then you're gonna develop pneumonia and that'll probably kill you! (Mark)

And later in the interview, he continues: "She did not recognize any changes in her own self and would not have accepted them, and she was quite proud of herself for getting up on a ladder and changing the time on the clock or something like that, and would casually mention it both for the attention that it got her, which that prompted me to say, don't ever do that, and to be able to claim that she did it—that I was wrong. She didn't fall" (Mark, son-in-law).

Mark positions Bea as an old subject by explaining to her that she is at risk each time she climbs on the ladder and is unaware that she is putting herself in danger. In turn, Bea asserts a not-old identity by claiming the meaning *safe* when she retorts that she won't fall, by performing the meanings *control*, *independence*, and *productive* when she climbs successfully, and by telling Mark that she has done so to prove her not-old identity in her practice.

A third strategy used by older consumers to assert their identity is to force other ECE members to continue or change a practice. For example, Abbie barred her daughters from accompanying her in the doctor's examination room because when they were present, her daughters and the doctor talked around her, as if she were not even there:

When I would go to the cardiologist he would . . . three of us, both my daughters . . . both of them go, and at first he would look at them and do all the talking, and I thought, now this is bologna! So now they stay in the waiting room and I go by myself, because I am perfectly able to understand everything he says. . . . If younger people bring you in, they think it's because you're not, I guess, lucid enough to understand what they're saying. But that irked me so bad that I wanted to grab him by the collar and say, "Look, talk to me! I'm the patient!" But that was easily corrected. They don't go in with me anymore. I go in by myself. (Abbie)

By talking around Abbie, the doctor and her daughters inscribe the meanings *disengaged*, *unaware*, and *confused*, placing Abbie in an old subject position. Abbie rejects this

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positioning by exercising her personal and legal authority to force a change in the practice, overtly excluding her daughters such that she inscribes meanings more consistent with her identity.

The fourth and final strategy is for older consumers to covertly exclude others from a practice. Abbie used this strategy when she drove her sister home without telling her daughters.

*Younger Members Urge Older Consumers to Identify with Positioning.* At times older consumers' efforts to assert their identities against objectionable positioning met substantial resistance from younger ECE members. Younger members urged the older consumer to identify with the positioning using strategies of convincing, proving, and forcing. For instance, each time Bea mentioned to Mark that she had successfully climbed on the ladder, he attempted to convince her to accept the old subject positioning, telling her "don't ever do that" and providing an explanation of why she should not. Younger ECE members from all eight ECEs recalled using this strategy at one time or another. Younger members used a second strategy of trying to prove the legitimacy of the older person's positioning as an old subject by pointing out what they considered unsuccessful attempts by the older consumer to perform certain consumption practices. For instance, Veronica pointed out to Richard that he had failed several times to fix the toilet, offering his unproductive activity as proof of the validity of his old subject positioning.

A third strategy used by younger ECE members was to try to forcefully change practice. This was quite difficult for younger ECE members, whose legal authority and socio-cultural legitimacy is limited because the consumption activities of the ECE are those of the older consumer. At the time of the interviews, family members from two ECEs had obtained a legal power of attorney, and family members from a third ECE were considering doing so. In the absence of such legal authority, ECE members invoked other forms of authority in an attempt to force a change. For instance, Bea's children insisted that she stop driving by reminding her that the department of motor vehicles had revoked her license.

We note that family members were more likely to engage in attempts to convince, prove, or force a change in practice—strategies that are relatively confrontational—than were paid providers, who were more likely to avoid the conflict and let family members negotiate it on their own. Instances of conflict avoidance by paid providers occurred in three of the six ECEs that included both a paid provider and family members. For instance, Richard's (89) daughter Veronica explains how live-in caregiver Maria "stays out of the way" when she and Veronica disagree with Richard about consumption behaviors related to his health and safety: "I think one of the ways that [Maria] gets along with my dad is that she does exactly what he wants. And if she thinks it's a matter of health and safety, or something big . . . she just stays out of the way. . . . She's the one that's gotta live with him. . . . You make concessions for the people

that you're gonna have to actually live with, and I don't have to live with him, so I'm in a little bit of a freer position to push on him" (Veronica, daughter).

*Younger Members Initiate Changes in Practice While Preserving Identity.* At one time or another, younger members of all ECEs attempted to change a practice without urging the older consumer to change her identity, often after attempts to convince the older consumer to identify with an old subject position had failed. In these cases, younger ECE members endeavored to change the ways in which consumption activities were performed such that these members inscribed meanings desirable to them, even if the older consumer claimed different meanings in the same activity.

We noted three different strategies: covert exclusion, requesting acquiescence, and leveraging meaning making. An example of covertly excluding the older person is Sandy's plan to secretly hire someone to clean her mother's house. If Sandy follows through with her plan, and as she predicts, Bea indeed does not notice, then Sandy will have changed the ECE's housekeeping practices without challenging Bea's identity as not old.

Second, younger members at times requested acquiescence from the older consumer. This strategy entails asking the older consumer to change a practice without changing his discourse or his identity as constituted in that discourse. For instance, when she first began to believe her mother, Abbie, was at risk when driving, Patricia asked Abbie to drive less for Patricia's peace of mind, even though Abbie continued to reject the meaning *at risk* and did not identify with the old age positioning that the meaning constituted. Older consumers may acquiesce to younger members as a favor or simply because a practice does not seem worthy of argument, as when Abbie lets Patricia drive even though Abbie feels it is unnecessary and continues to claim that she is a safe driver.

Finally, we documented instances of younger members strategically leveraging an older consumer's meaning making such that the older consumer would voluntarily change a practice in accordance with the younger member's wishes. For example, Mark and Sandy would at times prompt Bea to change a practice by telling her that it had been her idea all along. Mark recalls, "If you wanted something, all you'd have to do is say, remember when you said such and such? Well, she's not gonna say, 'I don't remember saying that,' and she would have to respond positively with, 'yeah, yeah, that's what I meant.'" Mark and Sandy leveraged Bea's determination to inscribe the meaning *sharp*, a meaning that constituted her as not old, in persuading her to act in ways more acceptable to them.

*Older Consumers Form Alliances with Younger Members.* Younger ECE members did not always agree in their positioning of the older consumer. Sometimes one younger ECE member positioned the older consumer in a way that conflicted with the older consumer's identity, while another younger member positioned her in a way that supported her identity. In several of these cases, the older consumer formed

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an alliance with the supporting ECE member to assert her identity against the unacceptable positioning.

We noted instances of older consumers using convincing and proving strategies in alliance with family members and covert exclusion in alliance with paid providers. We illustrate with two examples from Jane's ECE. When Jane became uncomfortable with her paid caregiver, Cathy, treating her like she was too old to stay at home by herself, Jane formed an alliance with her son Kevin to convince Cathy that Jane was safe at home alone for short periods. Kevin recounts, "Mom wanted me to talk to [Cathy] because she was just always around, you know, kind of hovering over mom too much." Forming an alliance with Kevin worked for Jane. After Kevin helped to convince Cathy that Jane was safe at home by herself, Cathy did occasionally leave Jane home alone, as Cathy explains below. We noted instances of this type of alliance in Gabe and Norma's ECE and Arthur's ECE as well.

*Interviewer:* Do you feel comfortable leaving the house?

*Cathy:* I do now, which I didn't at first. She told me I could leave, but I just couldn't believe, that as weak as she was and in as much pain as she had and everything, that it would be okay to be gone. But then he told me. You know, he says, once she goes in and goes to bed, she's fine.

In our second example, Jane allies herself with Cathy in the strategy of covert exclusion in the ECE's meal preparation practices. Kevin was adamant that Jane should eat the same foods for breakfast each day in order to avoid problems with her "finely tuned system," thus inscribing the old meaning *rigid*. Even so, Jane occasionally conspires with Cathy to change her breakfast foods without telling Kevin. We noted similar instances of covert exclusion in alliances of older consumers and paid providers in Gabe and Norma's ECE and in Lily's ECE.

As ECE members negotiate conflicts between identity and subject positioning in ways that change the consumption practices and discourses of the ECE over time, the division of consumption evolves. As the discourses and practices of the division of consumption change, ECE members inscribe new meanings, repositioning the older consumer. In turn, the elderly person claims and performs his identity in relation to the changing subject positioning that members individually or jointly construct. Thus, through these negotiations of meaning in changing consumption practices and discourses, old age identity and subject positioning evolve over time.

## DISCUSSION

In addressing our initial question of how older people continue to consume when they can no longer do so independently, our findings explain how continued consumption is made possible by the ECE. Informants within the ECEs demonstrated clear understandings of group boundaries and agreed about who was currently providing "regular" assistance and who was not. Consistent with previous studies of

caregiving (Peek and Zsembik 1997; Waldrop 2006), our findings note that ECE membership changes over time. Our work extends beyond these previous studies in its focus on consumption. Specifically, family members and paid service providers moved in and out of the ECE, becoming more or less involved in the older person's consumption as the older person's and their own circumstances changed. In empirically detailing consumption in advanced age as a group phenomenon rather than an individual one, we outline the contours of consumption for a large and rapidly growing number of elderly consumers, their family members, and service providers.

We extend previous work on caregiving and elderly consumers by detailing the division of consumption in which ECE members perform various consumption activities independently and jointly. The dynamics of the division of consumption parallel those of our initial analogy of a jazz ensemble, with ECE members performing as soloists, duets, or trios, in bringing together their particular competencies to continue the older consumer's consumption, just as members of a jazz ensemble bring their talents together to perform a tune. The ECE improvises new ways to assist the older person in consumption activities at any given moment as members actively interpret new revelations of inability and then become more or less engaged. Improvisations are guided by the construction of the old age subject position in US culture, as well as ECE members' understandings and experiences of successful and unsuccessful aging.

To elaborate, ECE members continually rearrange the division of consumption as they interpret changes in the older consumer's abilities; contend with changes in younger ECE members' availability, competency, and desire; and negotiate the older consumer's subject positioning and identity over time. This division is comparable to the division of labor (Smith 1937; Townsend 1986) yet shifts the focus from the skills and knowledge required to generate economic wealth to that required in everyday consumption. Informants positioned someone as not old when that person participated in effortful consumption in ways that inscribe individual and social meanings at the left of the continua. Conversely, informants positioned a person as an old subject when that person inscribed in consumption meanings at the right of these continua, such as *disengaged*, *unproductive*, *inactive*, *joyless*, *dependent*, or *deferent*. Thus, these informants' evaluations of the quality and significance of consumption were more constitutive of old age than was withdrawal from the workforce, which occurred many years ago for most of these elderly consumers.

We note additional differences between the division of labor and the division of consumption as we emphasize the importance of meaning making in the latter in casting someone as old or not old. The division of labor was brought about by modern technological developments in material production and is firm-centric in categorizing people as working or retired on the basis of their individual effort in the paid economy. In contrast, the division of consumption is emerging from postmodern technical developments in ser-

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vices and information and is consumer-centric in categorizing people on the basis of the meanings they produce as they consume individually or jointly with family members and paid service providers. This is evident, for example, in the case of Bonnie hiring Mona to assist her with paying bills and managing other personal business, thus producing the meanings *aware*, *safe*, and *clean*. Notably, the joint efforts of service providers and older consumers or family members traverse the conventional bifurcation between consumers and producers that has eclipsed their similar activities (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Vargo and Lusch 2004), in this case, in reproducing social categories and in positioning consuming subjects in these categories.

Our investigation of the ECE contributes to previous literature in three ways. First, this research sheds further light on the limits of consumer agency in identity construction. Previous research has elaborated how consumers cleverly and creatively use market-generated symbols to construct identity in relation to sociocultural models carefully extracted from an eclectic array of popular cultural products, such as film, literature, and music, as well as cultural memory, history, and scholarship (Askegaard et al. 2005; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Peñaloza 1994; Thompson and Arsel 2004). We extend this work by elaborating the way interpersonal relations carry out and construct the social categories so important to identity. While social relations were intimated in previous work, in mentioning family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, the focus was on individual consumers constructing identities such as man, immigrant, and youth in consumption in relation to sociocultural models situated at the macrolevel of the sociocultural field. In contrast, the data in this study at the mesolevel reveal that successful identity construction for elderly persons requires negotiation when it diverges from how they are positioned by others in the ECE. Older consumers' negotiation of identity by attempting to convince, prove to, covertly exclude, and force others was evident in Bea's attempts to discuss and then prove her independence to Mark by climbing on a ladder to perform home maintenance and in Abbie's secretive driving and barring her daughters from the doctor's exam room. Thus, construction of identity in consumption discourse and practice fundamentally and paradoxically entails individual agency within a collective endeavor. The intertwining of individual agency with collective construction in the ECE is evident in Bonnie's desperate question to her accountant, "What are we going to do with *me*?" (emphasis added).

In detailing the ways in which elderly consumers negotiate their identity in relation to the subject positioning imposed on them by family members and service providers, this work documents the persistent strength of the subject position as a supportive and contentious force in the construction of identity. When the older consumer was positioned in a way that was consistent with her identity, her identity was strengthened by the inscription of constitutive meanings. However, when others positioned her in a way that was at odds with the identity she sought to construct,

they contested the latter, often urging her to identify with their positioning of her and, at times, imposing that positioning emphatically. Even when younger ECE members attempt to preserve an older consumer's not-old identity through the strategies of covert exclusion, requesting acquiescence, and leveraging the older consumer's meanings, the impact of the old subject positioning they construct may be substantial. While it may seem relatively benign when younger members attempt in the near term to change only a practice rather than the older consumer's identity, as when Patricia drives for Abbie, their efforts nevertheless inscribe meanings that forcefully position the person as an old subject. Conversely, the older consumer must assert countervailing meanings, and without a compelling performance, he may eventually yield to identify with the position they constitute. These findings thus add identity capitulation to previous work by Nussbaum et al. (2005) that shows that older people subjected to patronizing talk and other infantilizing treatment exhibit dependent behaviors.

The current work also shows consumers' agency in identity construction to be supported and constrained by service providers as they place consumers in a subject position through the service interaction. In demonstrating that marketers act at times in conjunction with, and at others in distinction from, ECE members to actively support identity construction or position a consumer in ways that limit the consumer's agency to construct his own identity, our work adds nuance to more general statements that marketers provide consumers with various positions that they may or may not choose to inhabit (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The enabling of consumer agency is demonstrated in Cathy's clandestine provision of Jane's varied breakfast foods, while the limiting of such agency by service providers and the frustration it can cause are evident in Abbie's experience with her doctor.

Furthermore, family members at times interacted with market providers in ways that denied older consumers the agency to perform their identities. For instance, Rita and Veronica both made a habit of talking with their parents' paid caregivers in private so that they could get what they considered to be accurate information about their parents' condition. In excluding their elders from the discourse, these family members and market providers deny their elders agency while reinforcing their positioning as old consuming subjects by jointly inscribing such meanings as *disengaged*, *unaware*, and possibly others.

A second contribution of this research is that it elaborates how physiological ability, old subject positioning, and old identity are negotiated in consumption. As these data show, ECE members may inscribe or claim individual and social meanings at odds with physiological ability such that it was not only possible but common for older consumers to experience physiological inability but still claim and express a not-old identity. Likewise, younger ECE members at times positioned someone as not old even while acknowledging their physical inability. For instance, Fran acknowledged Abbie's inability to walk quickly or bend over to do house-

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hold chores just before describing her as “the youngest old person I know.”

Interestingly, informants’ distinctions between physiological agedness and being an old subject facilitate the positive approach to aging encouraged by Gergen and Gergen (2000). While we concur somewhat with these scholars’ assertion that America is moving into an era of more positive aging, we note that informants regularly positioned older consumers as old subjects via devalued and subordinate meanings.

In illuminating the multitude of meanings constitutive of an old subject position and identity, and the variety of consumption activities in which these meanings may be inscribed, we highlight the rich variability in ECE members’ positioning of a consumer as old and of older informants’ identification as such. In inscribing constitutive meanings in some situations but not others, ECE members contextually position the older consumer as old. Even Kevin and Cathy, who view and treat Jane as old most of the time, describe moments when she engaged in joyful media consumption, cracking jokes with them such that she seemed “younger” than she is. Likewise, older consumers identify with select meanings constitutive of the old subject position in some contexts but not others. For instance, Gabe identified with the meaning *confused* and the old subject position in which it placed him in the context of his personal business management, and he was glad for Rita’s assistance. However, he did not identify as old in his personal care, and he continued to take pride in his appearance, grooming and dressing himself independently.

Our demonstration of the construction of old age subject positioning and identity in consumption contributes to understandings of the relative place of discourse and practice in relation to identity transitions throughout the life span. More specifically, our account presents consumption practice as a trigger both for discursive recognition of agedness and for reidentification, as with Richard’s reluctant, gradual acceptance of his unproductive efforts to fix the toilet and his need to call a plumber. Further, consumption practice serves as the performative means through which people discursively claim, reject, and negotiate a devalued identity and as the basis for which their identity enactment is evaluated by others.

As a final contribution, this research updates the final stages of the FLC model. The current model’s focus on the nuclear family and the first 40–60 years of life is dramatically out of sync with contemporary life expectancy. Our work presents compelling evidence contrary to previous depictions of the final stages of family consumption as “Empty Nest” and “Solitary Survivor” (Wells and Gubar 1966), in which elderly consumers purchase products and services primarily with a spouse or individually. The current research shows that this characterization is inappropriate for the many consumers who live long enough to require regular assistance with consumption. To date, the FLC model has neglected the phenomenon of elderly consumers becoming more socially embedded at the end of life.

With the ECE, the current research begins to outline a

stage of family consumption beyond the Empty Nest or Solitary Survivor in which older persons consume with family members, friends, or paid service providers. This final stage of consumption in late life defines a new group unit of analysis for consumer researchers that better accounts for elderly consumers’ movement from relative autonomy to greater dependence on others as a normal part of life in advanced age.

Regarding implications of this work for elderly consumers, our findings foster some optimism that while loss of physiological abilities is inevitable in advanced age, loss of identity and social position are not. We point to consumption as a key arena in which elderly people come to recognize physiological inabilities, and we posit that consumers’ mentality and set of practices in contending with these inabilities in their interactions with others are crucial mechanisms in effectively asserting identity from a valued subject position. Recognizing the importance of meaning making in identity construction and effectively consuming with others who compensate for physiological inability in ways that produce valued meanings facilitates the construction of a valued position and identity, allowing one to “age without getting old.”

Turning to family members and service providers in ECEs, we offer some recommendations to help achieve a balance in compensating for the inabilities of elderly persons while supporting them in acknowledging their abilities. We suggest that, where feasible, they spend time with elderly people across multiple consumption activities to better appreciate their abilities and how they identify themselves. In addition, we suggest that family members and service providers strive for greater awareness of the meanings they produce when helping an older person to consume and how these meanings position elderly persons in both positive and negative ways.

Regarding implications for consumer researchers, we have highlighted the importance of collective meaning making both in positioning someone as an old subject and in constituting an old or not-old identity. Important in this work is specifying how and by whom consumers are classified and elaborating how such classification occurs through and affects consumption. We have featured prominently the perspectives of elderly persons, as their identity construction in consumption was our main focus, and we have included the perspectives of family members and service providers in enabling and impinging on such collective consumption and identity processes. Yet, there is much further work to be done in consumer research to more explicitly acknowledge and sift through the perspectives, interests, and activities of multiple persons in enacting and enforcing social categories and to map the processes in which identity and subject positioning converge and diverge. In addition, given the variation in consumption ability and competence that does not map directly to chronological age, we suggest that future research on elderly consumers could benefit from using the meanings featured in this work in addition to or in place of chronological age in developing more efficacious

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categorizations for elderly consumption and in the selection of research participants.

In addition, we encourage further work on consumption discourses and practices as a complement to work on decision making, which has been the focus of much research on family consumption (Davis 1976; Palan and Wilkes 1997; Su, Fern, and Ye 2003). While some older consumers required assistance with decision making due to cognitive decline, many of the impairments described by informants were impairments to performance, such as Abbie's slower reflexes when driving. Further investigation of how consumption in the ECE enables, confronts, and even alters the decisions of older consumers offers promising research opportunities.

Second, extending from our findings, we offer marketers some insights to better understand the ECE as a collective consuming group quite different from the industrial buying center. While empathizing with elderly consumers is a useful first step, marketers must go further in research designs and strategic formulations to include family members with elderly clients and to consider how both interact with service providers. Also important is making more explicit the ways in which marketing discourse and practice position elderly consumers and enable or inhibit their identity production as ECE members inscribe meanings individually and jointly and often differently from one another.

Regarding implications for policy makers, enhanced understanding of the ways elderly consumers negotiate their identity in relation to their subject positioning by family members and service providers, including government program agents and administrators, is critical for the development and improvement of public policy. Important considerations include how policy positions elder consumers, toward the eventual goal of working collaboratively with elderly persons and other ECE members to help them deal with the inevitable loss of ability that comes with aging. Studies carried out in ECEs of older consumers receiving government benefits for eldercare, such as Medicaid, would be particularly important in advancing policy insights.

This research has several limitations. First, all ECEs included in this study centered around middle-class and upper-middle-class, white Americans, and thus these findings may require modification for ECEs in other cultural, sociodemographic, and geographic domains. Because family structure and dynamics differ for various gender, ethnic, national, and class groupings, the ECEs within these different domains may include more family members, friends, government-funded service providers, or representatives of charity organizations. Each of the variations in the ECE presents valuable future research avenues.

A second limitation of this study is its treatment of older people with cognitive illness. Although the study featured two such persons, Bea and Lily, its design prohibited interviewing them. Therefore, any insight into the age identity of older consumers is necessarily limited to the accounts of cognitively able older consumers and other ECE members. Older people with age-related cognitive illnesses such as

dementia or Alzheimer's disease may experience old age very differently, and investigation of their perspectives is another valuable, albeit challenging, area for future research. We encourage investigations of the discourses and practices of the consumption ensembles of disabled persons, whose experience of impairment may be similar to or different from that of older people.

The third limitation of this study is its omission of ECEs in which a spouse is a primary caregiver and in its limited treatment of gender. More concerted investigations of gender dynamics within the ECE are additional potentially fruitful research avenues. This is especially important given the marked gender differences in life expectancy and the predominance of women among both family and paid caregivers.

Extrapolating from this work, we suggest further research documenting the negotiation of other subject positions and identities, such as those constituting and reproducing gender (Holt and Thompson 2004), ethnic or national (Askegaard et al. 2005), and family (Price and Epp 2008) distinctions. Our findings that the older consumers in this study identified as old at some times in their consumption but not at others, and in particular activities with some ECE members but not with others, add some insight to previous work noting that the construction of old age identity is inconsistent and unstable (Coupland et al. 1991; Gatz and Cotton 1994), and they open avenues into such inconsistencies in the construction of other subject positions and identities.

Another especially fruitful avenue for further research might explore the dynamics of power when persons consume for or with others. While this research with the elderly has provided many instances when persons depend on others to engage in consumption vital to their identity production, such reliance on others might prove to be much more widespread, as we take into account the inherent relational nature of identity construction in consumption. Researchers could investigate how interpersonal interactions constrain and enable identity production and how macro-socio-cultural understandings (Holt and Thompson 2004) and global market forces (Askegaard et al. 2005) are played out at the interpersonal level in interactions with friends, family, and service providers to illuminate processes across social and market domains. Veblen (1959) anticipated something similar in the vicarious consumption by servants for their employers, and yet the intricacies of intimacy and individuation may result in distinct processes for family members. Further research is called for to build on previous work on commercial friendships (Price and Arnould 1999) in distinguishing differences as well as similarities between family members and service providers in consuming with the elderly in the ECE.

Finally, we call for further research documenting the long-term effects of the division of consumption on household structure and composition and on identity in ways that possibly alter, or even reverse, the dramatic changes brought about by the division of labor that culminated in the nuclear family (Poster 1978). We envision more symbiotic, social-

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market configurations enabling people to live alone, as noted in this research, but also to form multifamily, communal living arrangements and innovative extended family households. Future studies documenting how persons negotiate identity in consumption in relation to various subject positionings would further our understanding of consumption as a trigger, means, obstacle to, and result of identity formations and would further our understanding of how we come to know ourselves and each other through consumption.

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