

“WE’RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER”

“WE’RE ALL IN IT TOGETHER”:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN AGING IN PLACE: THE CASE OF SEARCHMONT,  
ONTARIO

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## **ABSTRACT**

This ethnographic case study of the experiences of older women aging in place in Searchmont, a community with a population of 293 people in northeastern Ontario, has three objectives: 1) to discover the experiences of older women in Searchmont, 2) to explore the connection between women and their community, and 3) to draw conclusions about the structural context of aging in a rural community in northern Ontario. With a growing number of older adults moving into rural communities, or remaining in rural communities into older age, it is a timely exploration. Current policy trends and service restructuring are especially harmful toward vulnerable groups, including older women living outside of the urban context. Cuts to rural services, the privatization of services, and an increased reliance on informal support networks to meet the demands of an aging population create barriers to aging in place. Current trends result in patchwork transit solutions, limited access to information and services, and housing concerns. These factors impact the health and wellbeing of rural-dwelling older women. In addition to large-scale trends, geographic context plays an important role in determining the level of support for older women in rural areas. Aging in place, critical feminist gerontology, and ecological systems theories were used to conduct this case study. The subject of the study includes a history of Searchmont and findings from interviews with five older women living in the community, highlighting the intersection of age, gender, and rural identity. The participants revealed the importance of community fluctuations and meso-level concern for community cohesion into the future. The role of gender in family and community, and level of activity as determined by health were cited as contributors to community sustainability.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This MSW thesis research is a contextualized case study of the experiences of women aging in Searchmont, a small rural community in northern Ontario; the focus of which is placed on understanding the aging experiences of older women in this rural context, the ways in which they connect with the community, and the social, economic, and political conditions underpinning these experiences.

Aging in rural communities is an issue that is rarely touched upon when discussing the aging process and the effects that policy making has on the autonomy of older adults. Being able to stay in one's home while growing old is important for many older adults. This idea is represented by 'aging in place' which means to stay in one's home and community for as long as possible, and it also implies that the appropriate measures are secured to be able to do so (Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2011). According to the Federal/Provincial/Territorial (F/P/T) Ministers Responsible for Seniors (n.d.), older adults aging in place in rural communities face barriers such as transportation and housing concerns, limited in-home support options, communication barriers, and distance from necessary health and social services.

Living at home is important in terms of aging comfortably as it means autonomy for the individual. This contributes to a feeling of independence and a more positive outlook which can have an impact on physical health as well. According to Wiles and colleagues (2011), the concept of aging in place is widely accepted in research and policy circles, yet very few researchers have asked older adults what it means to them. They report that older adults want to be able to make their own decisions about where and how they age, and also that they value the ability to remain connected to the neighbours, neighbourhoods, and outdoor spaces available in their communities.

The fraction of the population over the age of 65 is rising in Canada, many of whom inhabit rural areas. According to *Ontario's Action Plan for Seniors*, there will be more adults over the age of 65 than young people under 15 years old by 2017. By 2036, the population of older adults aged 75 and older will be 140% what it is today (Ontario, 2013). Of the overall population of Canadian seniors, 23% live in small towns and rural communities (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2013). With nearly a quarter of Canadian seniors living in rural areas, it is necessary to consider the unique circumstances of rural life for an aging population.

Women have a higher life expectancy, which results in many older women living independently. Women over the age of 65 make up approximately 16% of the female population in Canada (Milan & Vézina, 2011). In 2006, nearly 40% of women over the age of 65 were living alone and this figure is higher for women over 80 years of age at 54% (Milan & Vézina, 2011). Women living alone face many challenges such as isolation, poverty, and major health concerns (Randall, Crooks, & Goldsmith, 2012). In rural communities in northern Ontario, many of these trends are intensified. From here on out, I will be using 'north' when referring to northern Ontario, recognizing that there are different conceptions of north that extend far beyond the setting described in this research.

For the duration of my undergraduate education I resided in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. This led me to discover that my family history was rooted in both the city and surrounding communities as well, Searchmont in particular. This sparked a curiosity in me about how northern Ontario life works in respect to its vast and agrarian nature. Having lived in the region for a period of time allowed for observation of the unique contexts interplay to create an atmosphere so different to the bustle of 'big city' life. The experiences and challenges of northern

life as well as the process of aging there began to coalesce in my mind. The inspiration this caused resulted in this project coming into fruition.

My late grandmother is also a great inspiration for this project. In the last few years of her life, she was living alone in a northern context. She continued to provide support to her family and to her husband who was living in palliative care. Despite the many challenges she encountered during these years, she was determined to remain in her home for as long as possible.

For a population that is already living on the margins of society, it is important that there be a strong foundation of support and assistance to address this current and growing need. Social policies are generally created for the benefit of the majority and when the populace is thinner among the outskirts of the community the outliers become the overlooked. Recent policy trends tend to emphasize the informal and voluntary sector which is not sustainable and is often lacking due to geographic location and the unique challenges it enforces.

Through this case study, I aim to address the following three questions:

1. What is the aging experience like for women living in Searchmont, Ontario?
2. What is the relationship between individuals and their community as revealed by these experiences?
3. How can these experiences be understood in the context of the current policies concerning aging in a northern rural community?

This study aims to understand how women in Searchmont conceptualize the aging process, how they relate to community, and how meso (community) and macro (policy and political processes) level issues are reflected in their lives. In this process, I looked to understand the unique and diverse experiences of women in this geographic location. Although this research

project is context specific, many northern rural communities have experienced similar trends such as boom and bust cycles, service cuts, and other major social and economic shifts.

Providing a deeper understanding of the aging experiences of women in Searchmont, Ontario through this ethnographic case study can provide a snapshot of what life may be like in other northern rural communities. It has been my hope and intent that this research will contribute to the existing literature in aging and social policy.

In the next chapter, I have provided an overview of the literature about women aging in place in rural communities. This chapter includes macro and meso level trends, and highlights the position of my research within existing literature. Drawing upon aging in place, critical feminist gerontology and ecological systems theory in chapter three, I have presented the theoretical framework that has influenced both my research design and data analysis. Chapter four covers details about my methodological position and the methods I used to conduct a case study of aging in Searchmont, Ontario. Using elements of ethnography and in-depth interviews in a case study of the region allowed me to deeply examine the impact of community fluctuations and geographic location on the individual lives of older women in the region. Chapter five provides the case study, which includes a history of the region, photographs marking community changes, and interview results. Finally, in chapter six, I have provided my interpretation of the results considering both my theoretical position and what we can learn from the literature and new knowledge from this study. I therefore conclude with limitations of this study and implications for future research, and for social work and social policy.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter I will review the themes that have emerged in the existing scholarly literature. Primarily, I will focus on concepts of rurality and rural identity, the structural context that shapes the aging experiences of women in rural communities, and the barriers to aging in place that exist in rural communities themselves. Understanding national and provincial trends, as well as relevant aging policy, provides a foundation for understanding the unique circumstances that exist for older women in rural areas. Although there are many trends consistent across rural areas, there are also differences based on geographic location. The limited amount of research specific to northern Ontario, which is unique due to its relative distance and history of resource dependency, have informed the development of my research questions.

### **Rurality and Rural Identity**

Defining ‘rurality’ and the characteristics that depict rural life is extremely challenging given the diverse nature of rural communities and the multiple purposes for which rural is defined. An even greater challenge is attempting to understand the notion of rural identity and the connections that people have with their communities. Understanding the range of definitions and trends behind these terms provides background information about rural life and the factors that shape these unique community contexts.

Rural communities are often understood in terms of population size and demographics within a particular geographic region (Martin-Matthews, 1988). Rural is defined by Statistics Canada (2015) as a geographic area with a population that does not exceed 1,000 residents; however, the scope has been broadened by some researchers to consider a community ‘rural’ up to a population of 5,000 (Joseph & Cloutier, 1991; Joseph & Martin-Matthews, 1994). Rural

communities in Ontario are often comprised of a larger proportion of older adults and a smaller proportion of younger adults when compared to urban centres. A study by Joseph and Cloutier (1991) revealed this to be true about towns and villages in Grey County, Ontario – a rural area seeing a high in-migration of older adults and a high out-migration of the younger generation. Martin-Matthews (1988) identified that factors unique to aging in a rural context include: larger proportions of older adults in these communities, a greater number of women relative to men compared to urban centres, a generally less educated population, and an over represented population of the “elderly widowed” (p. 143). These demographic characteristics shape rural life.

Rural life provides experiences that are quite different from life in urban centres. Martin-Matthews (1988) states that “scholarly interest in rural aging is based on the assumption that the rural environment produces a set of circumstances which are socially, psychologically, economically and geographically unique, important and somehow measurable” (p. 141). She discusses the challenges of conceptualizing rural, stating that despite the differences between urban and rural life that can be clearly distinguished by researchers in aging and older adults in these communities themselves, the uniqueness and culture associated with rural living is difficult to pin down in the Canadian context (Martin-Matthews, 1988). Despite this challenge, acknowledging what is available about rural identity in the literature can provide valuable insights into the factors that make rural life unique.

In this study, I will be looking at the relationships that older women share with their community. Community ties are an important aspect of creating a community identity and shaping how older women understand the process of their own aging in a rural context. In describing rural identities, older women who were interviewed by Shenk (1991) revealed that the benefits of the rural lifestyle meant living more simply, having more opportunity to enjoy the

outdoors, living in a vast and quiet area, and experiencing greater community ties and close relationships. The downside they identified was generally being less educated and having fewer choices (Shenk, 1991). Martin-Matthews (1988) states that self-reported characteristics of rural compared to urban citizens include less financial stability, greater health concerns, and a greater likelihood to rely on friends and neighbours than family for support.

In terms of identity, from the perspective of others, rural-dwelling older adults are thought to be friendly, honest, and patriotic (Martin-Matthews, 1988). Ties to a place have been seen as important to how older adults understand themselves and the aging process. Community participation and developing a sense of solidarity between community members have been revealed as important aspects of rural life. This is played out through involvement in community organizations, churches, and through informal support of fellow community members (Dorfman, Murty, Evans, Ingram, & Power, 2004). Dorfman and colleagues (2004) posit that while these connections are important, a sense of independence and autonomy have also been identified as central to a sense of wellbeing throughout the aging process. This autonomy can be challenging to maintain in the current context of rural aging.

### **Structural Context of Aging in Place in Rural Communities**

A number of economic, political, and social trends affect the aging process of women living in rural areas. These factors interact to create the conditions that older women find themselves living in. Overall, older adults in rural communities are more likely to experience poverty, inadequate living conditions, greater health needs, and less access to services than their urban counterparts (Bascu, Jeffery, Johnson, Martz, Novik, & Abonyi, 2012). This makes the exploration of aging processes in rural communities a gratifying and important area of study.

## **Resource Dependency in Northern Ontario**

In Northern Ontario, “Economic development continues to be linked to the growth of the primary resource sectors of forestry and mining, and the associated industries of manufacturing wood, paper, and allied and primary metal products” (Woodrow, 2002, p. 6). The impacts of boom and bust cycles resulting from loss of industry in rural towns have been intensified with global competition (Bull, Krout, Rathbone-McCuan, & Shreffler, 2001). These trends have created major shifts in the fabric of community life in rural areas (Wiersma & Koster, 2011). “From 1987 to 2001, employment in the region’s primary industries (categorized as forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, oil and gas) declined by 56%, from 28,000 jobs to 12,300 jobs” (Cuddy, 2015, p. 15) and the manufacturing sector has seen a similar decline with a 41% drop from “12% of total employment (30,300 jobs) to seven percent (17,800 jobs)” (Cuddy, 2015, p. 15). The development of communities around resource rich lands and the subsequent loss of local industry result in community decline and associated challenges.

Woodrow (2002) argues that greater diversification of the employment landscape in northern Ontario would improve circumstances in these regions. In single-industry towns, events such as plant closures, layoffs, and change of ownership have had major impacts on employment and development in northern areas – during the 1990s, major shifts to this sector have seen a rise in the unemployment rate in the Algoma District (Woodrow, 2002). Searchmont, a community that relied on the veneer mill as one of the primary employment sectors until its closure in the early 1990s, is no exception to these northern trends.

Looking at communities that have faced similar trends in local economies can provide insights into the ways that events impacting industry affect community life and the aging process in these contexts. In northwestern Ontario, Wiersma and Koster (2011) conducted 84 semi-



structured interviews with older adults, caregivers, service providers, and other community members in a rural community to determine the challenges of remaining in a rural area in the midst of an economic downturn. Birchdale Grove (pseudonym), a town dependent on forestry and mining, saw the population drop by over half with the closing of a mine in the region. This resulted in a loss of local businesses and services that could not be sustained with a decreasing consumer base. Many older adults in their study reported that it was important for them to remain in their communities for as long as possible. Recognizing that they may have to leave in the face of major health challenges or further community deterioration was a difficult truth to accept (Wiersma & Koster, 2011). Given that community life is an important aspect of rural aging, older adults often report that remaining in their home community for as long as possible is central to a comfortable aging experience (Wiles et al., 2011). Individual economic factors may result from community economic events or larger structural barriers. Aging in poverty creates another set of challenges in rural settings.

### **Social Welfare Provision**

Federal pension and retirement plans are beneficial on the surface; however, the income gathered from these sources is often not sufficient given the high cost of living. There are three components to Canada's income security system: Old Age Security (OAS) and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP), and individual pensions and investments. Combined federal pension programs, CPP and OAS, provide 76 billion dollars annually (Canada, 2014). Under the OAS system, there are also 'the Allowance' and 'the Allowance for the Survivor' benefits, which provide income supplements to low-income "spouses, common-law partners, or widows of GIS recipients" (Canada, 2014, p. 6). While this

appears to be an adequate system to meet the needs of seniors, it is clear that many older adults still struggle financially.

The CPP relies on level of investment to the program throughout the years of work that individuals have contributed. Both employees and their employers are required to make contributions. There is a Post Retirement Benefit (PRB) that encourages longer participation in the workforce by allowing individuals to continue contributing if they remain in the workforce past the retirement age of 65 (Canada, 2014). People may retire early for multiple reasons including major health concerns, caregiving roles, and other obligations and commitments to families and the community – under the current system, retiring early results in lower monthly payments than those who retire after the age of 65 (Canada, 2014). In this system, it can be difficult to earn enough to live comfortably if people have experienced precarious employment during their working lives. Given that it is common to see work instability in rural communities and many women take on caregiving and domestic responsibilities, it is no wonder that women aging in rural areas face economic hardship.

A recent push has been toward encouraging older workers to remain in the workforce into later years. According to Zhou (2014), this is a trend in many OECD nations. In Canada, the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TIOW) was introduced to encourage longer participation in the labour market by helping older adults develop skills and match those skills with employment possibilities (Canada, 2014). The New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP) similarly promotes involvement in the workforce by focusing on “volunteering, mentoring, expanding awareness of elder abuse, social participation and capital assistance” (Canada, 2014, p. 11). Under the Conservative government, there was a push for seniors to remain in the workforce and to participate in the community, particularly in the voluntary sector. This

initiative supports a neoliberal agenda by taking the onus off the government to care for people. This takes away from collective burdens by encouraging individualistic family responsibility in caring for loved ones.

Women have traditionally been viewed as the caregivers in their families and communities. For many people, this has resulted in a situation where the time spent working during their early and middle life was inconsistent due to other responsibilities within their social circles (Freixas, Luque, & Reina, 2012). According to Ryser and Halseth (2011), many older women fall into poverty as a result of precarious work. Women in rural communities often work in service sector jobs for low pay, even when local economies are booming. Women are particularly susceptible to poverty if they are single and relying on only their pensions without the shared income of a spouse (National Advisory Council on Aging, 2005). LaRochelle-Côté, Myles, and Picot (2012) indicate that income replacement rates, the proportion of working income earned in retirement, tend to be lower for women than for men, particularly after separation or the death of their partner. Older women living alone are hit the hardest – 17% of senior women living alone in Canada were living in poverty in 2008 (Milan & Vézina, 2011). This facet of the populace is ten times more likely to live in poverty than senior-led households with two or more people (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). At micro, meso, and macro levels, economic patterns create barriers to aging well in rural communities. Recent political factors contribute to the economic situation and the challenges that exist for older women.

### **Access to information and Political Power**

Political factors play a major role in shaping the experiences of aging in northern rural communities. The nature of citizenship and the access to information and services required to

engage with this citizenship are often constrained by geography and the neoliberal trends that perpetuate the marginality of rural-dwelling older adults.

Political involvement and decision making are important aspects of citizenship. According to Bull and colleagues (2001), “The rural elderly, due to their geographic, racial and low socioeconomic backgrounds, are often overlooked and have little, if any, organized political advocacy” (Bull et al., 1991 as cited in Bull et al., 2001, p. 356). People living in northern rural communities are often removed from the process of decision making and ideals are thus imposed upon them. This lack of control in addition to higher incidences of poverty can negatively impact the wellbeing of rural-dwelling people (Wainer & Chesters, 2000; OACSC, 1980 as cited in Martin-Matthews, 1988). There are a number of factors in rural communities that make it difficult to become involved in the political realm.

Access to information is one barrier that makes it challenging for older women in rural communities to be involved on a political front. In this age of technology, with communication largely moving into the digital mediums, the tendency to either have limited or no access to the Internet presents challenges to accessing information about available supports and issues occurring outside of their communities (F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). This gap between rural communication patterns and those of urban centres acts to alienate people from the political sphere. This trend extends into multiple realms. That being said, communication alone does not result in service gaps. A neoliberal political agenda has been largely responsible for most service cuts in rural areas.

Program cuts and restructuring to social and health services are connected to geographic location. The impact of these shifts in the provision of social and health services can be observed in rural and remote communities, which face issues of access and financial constraints (Wanless,

Mitchell, & Wister, 2010). This can create compounding concerns for residents in these regions. People living in rural areas in Ontario have limited access to doctors and other health professionals compared to urban-dwelling people. This is especially challenging for people transitioning out of care after using services to address serious health concerns (Randall, Crooks, & Goldsmith, 2012). In the case of Searchmont, for example, the nearest hospital is about 42 kilometers outside the community.

### **Care Restructuring and Challenges**

The restructuring of both home and health care services in the mid-1990s has also created many challenges for older adults living in rural communities. Forbes and Edge (2009) state that in recent years Community Care Access Centres (CCAC) became responsible for contracting to other home care agencies. This market-driven competition between home care agencies resulted in many nurses leaving their positions to seek opportunities with better pay and benefits in long-term care. At the same time, there were cuts in hospital spending and the responsibility for hospital services was offloaded to the municipalities. This overall restructuring of health and home care was particularly harmful toward the most vulnerable populations (Forbes & Edge, 2009). Additionally, the lack of supportive long-term care facilities and supported independent living options can make it difficult for older adults to remain in their home communities (Bascu et al., 2012). Finally, in rural communities there are barriers to accessing preventative health services including a shortage of home care workers, long traveling distances, poor weather, low wages for health care providers, and barriers to communication with other professionals (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011; Forbes & Edge, 2009). Some of these changes have

resulted in people seeking options outside their communities or relying on family and neighbours to remain at home.

With the erosion of formal community support networks, older women in rural communities will use informal supports to fill the gaps in their communities (Shenk, 1991). This pattern of seeing an increased reliance on the voluntary sector, informal support networks, and private organizations has resulted from these trends due to a shift of responsibility from government and publically funded services to privatization (Bull et al., 2001). The inconsistent nature of informal support systems raises questions about the sustainability of aging in place in rural areas as a way of life for future generations.

Tenets of a neoliberal agenda, including individualism, service cuts and restructuring, privatisation, and a culture of 'self-help', disadvantage populations living in the margins. This includes older women living in rural communities who may experience multiple challenges associated with aging as a woman and rural life. Additionally, the keystone of neoliberalism is the idea that the markets will take care of people, and those who fall through the cracks will be cared for by their families and communities (Mahon, 2008). This results in an over-reliance on informal networks and the voluntary sector to fill service gaps.

### **Informal Support Networks**

Shenk (1991) reveals the complex relationships that older rural women share with other community members. Often they act as both the recipients and providers of care in their communities. For example, they may provide intensive care to a spouse, but perhaps rely on friends and neighbours to assist with yard work or transportation (Shenk, 1991; F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors., n.d.). Older women often rely on family when they need support to

overcome health concerns (Shenk, 1991); however, studies reveal that they are more likely to rely on friends and neighbours for other forms of support such as transportation, assistance with household tasks, or for social support to overcome loneliness (Shenk, 1991; F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). For people moving into the community, informal support networks have likely not been established in the same way as they would be for long-term residents of the community (Joseph & Cloutier, 1991). As a result, the nature of community support is inconsistent and dependent on individual circumstances.

The identities of older women, based on their respective generational context and their geographic location, play a role in the kind of support women seek from other members of their community. There are often unspoken rules about when and what to ask of other community members (Shenk, 1991). Some older women may be open and expressive about their ideas and concerns with a close-knit group of friends and family; however, some others prefer to keep personal matters to themselves (Shenk, 1991). It is important for many older women in rural regions to make contributions to their community, or to provide money or favours in exchange for assistance rather than asking for support without a mutual exchange (Shenk, 1991). For some women, the act of relying on formal supports can be a factor that contributes to feelings of shame or embarrassment (Shenk, 1991). This creates a complex situation with respect to navigating the formal versus informal provision of support in rural communities.

Relying on community networks in the care of older adults has its advantages in building strong community ties. It also has its disadvantages, as reliance on the informal and voluntary sectors is not a sustainable solution, and not all older women have a stable support network. Joseph and Skinner (2012) explore the notion of voluntarism in rural communities using a media discourse analysis. They draw attention to the contradictions that the emphasis on the voluntary

sector creates in ‘rural spaces’. On the one hand, volunteering is a meaningful and transformative act of community. It provides older adults the opportunity to engage in sharing networks and support fellow community members. On the other hand, voluntarism is often romanticized through media and public discourse (Joseph & Skinner, 2012). The neoliberal agenda exploits the philanthropic nature of volunteers.

A shift from publically funded to private and informal supports has been observed in Canadian rural communities – this is especially apparent with “devolution, divestment and downloading whereby the state has distanced itself from the needs of people aging in place” (Joseph & Skinner, 2012, p. 381). With an increasing number of older adults in rural communities, informal supports are likely to cease being able to meet the demands of the aging population in these areas. It is clear that economic, political, and social factors create a complex mosaic of aging in the rural context.

### **Barriers to Women’s Aging in Place in Rural Communities**

The factors discussed above are structural trends that have major implications in the lives of older women in rural communities. Previous research highlights the ways in which the experiences of older women in rural communities reflect these structural trends. In much of the research, limited access to transportation and mediums of communication, as well as housing challenges, are identified as barriers to aging in place. These trends also impact the health and wellbeing of older women in rural communities.



### **Access to Viable Transportation**

Transportation is one of the biggest challenges for older adults living in rural communities. Women, in particular, often rely on a spouse or loved one to meet their transportation needs and can therefore lose their autonomy when they no longer have access to the means. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) suggests that transportation must be reliable, affordable, accessible, and adequate to meet the needs of older adults. Not having access to transportation can result in less community participation, barriers to accessing services, and an overall feeling of powerlessness and loss of autonomy.

Public transportation is often not available in small towns and rural areas. When it is available, often through volunteer and government-subsidized transportation initiatives, it is commonly only running during peak times which can be difficult for older adults who may wish to commute during other times of the day (The F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). Additionally, older adults with mobility issues and disabilities may have difficulty accessing the transportation options available in their communities (The F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). Bascu and colleagues (2012) indicate that “inadequate formal transportation services to urban centres may be an important barrier to rural seniors’ use of medical services, preventative care, health screenings, and specialist appointments” (p. 82). Older adults discussed some of the challenges in using these services, describing “family members (in particular, daughters), friends and neighbours” as the most frequent provider of transportation in some communities (The F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, p. 15). The instability of alternative methods of transportation can result in a fear of losing a license or no longer having access to regular transportation through a spouse or loved one, which is more often true in the case of older women.

Independence is often reliant on the ability to drive in older age, particularly in rural areas (Bascu et al., 2012). Even for people who do drive, the high cost of insurance and rising gas prices makes it very difficult to afford. Older women living alone and in poverty are particularly impacted by the high cost of commuting (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). Many women lack the informal supports, which may require that they pay the high cost for other modes of transportation. Unfortunately, despite the challenges, it is becoming necessary to leave the community to access services due to public service cuts and restructuring.

### **Communication and Information**

When reviewing the connection between social policy and the lives of people impacted by policy, one trend that continues to appear in the literature is limited access to information. It is difficult to determine what policies, and associated programs and services are available to rural-dwelling older adults. It is also very difficult to find information about entitlements, grants, and benefits that may assist people over 65. With communication barriers, such as limited internet access, many seniors likely do not know what programs, if any, cater to their needs. In order to address this issue, it is necessary to consider how older adults in rural communities communicate most often and where they go to access information.

Older adults in rural and remote communities tend to frequently communicate through word of mouth and over the phone. Newspapers and bulletin boards in local spaces are also important sources of information about community events and issues in the broader community (F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). Limited access to information also impacts the ability of older women in rural communities to connect with local services. For example, even when transportation options are available to older rural people the “lack of information about

transportation options” and the subsequent “underutilization of services (e.g., public buses, dial-a-ride, handi-vans)” can result in cancellation or lack of funding for rural transportation (The F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d., p. 16).

A participant in one focus group hosted by the F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors (n. d.) stated “the government seems to really be relying more and more on technology and those phone services and the internet. A lot of times they’ll just give [www.addresses](#) – go look over there. And for most seniors, that’s just not accessible” (p. 28). For many people, this results in separation from events occurring outside of their rural communities, even if the events are directly impacting their lives. It can also result in limited information about potential services and benefits that could be helpful to them. For example, many older adults in caregiving roles of a spouse or loved one are unaware of any formal support services (Bascu et al., 2012) and most often it is women in these caregiving roles. Even if a person were to have access to the internet, policy documents or websites can be extremely difficult to read and navigate.

This shift toward the internet as the sole provider of information and the realm in which one is expected to conduct business pushes seniors to the margins. The choices that older adults have in this respect have become limited. To provide an example, Joanne Davis (personal communication, December 10, 2015), a retired employee of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), stated that the CRA used to print and send tax return documents, including simplified large-print documents and information packages for seniors. They no longer send printed copies. This requires that older adults living in rural communities commute to the nearest post office, which may be quite far from their home, to pick up a generic form. Searchmont, for example, does not have a local post office. Seniors without access to the internet are particularly impacted. It is easy to imagine that this process is discouraging and may provide challenges to accessing information

about available benefits. So for the women who do not have access to transportation, for example, getting to a post office or place of business may prove difficult.

## **Housing**

The WHO (2007) suggests that housing is age-friendly in a community if the home itself and design and maintenance are affordable, if there is access to necessary services from the place of residence, and if older adults are informed about services available to help them age in place. In rural communities, it is often costly and difficult to make repairs, homes are often far from necessary services, and there are few formal supports to help people age ‘successfully’ in their homes. Additionally, the WHO (2007) suggests that housing options should be available, which is rarely the case in rural settings.

The lack of supportive long-term care facilities and supported independent living options can make it difficult for older adults to remain in their home communities (Basu et al., 2012). This can result in people having to make the decision to either stay in their own homes or leave their communities for larger urban centers, which may mean leaving the places they enjoy, the neighbours they trust, and possibly their families.

Heating, house repairs, and maintenance tasks often make it difficult for rural-dwelling older adults to remain in their homes. In rural communities, it is common to see much older homes that may not provide adequate shelter. In rural Canada, 29% of houses were built before 1941. As a result, it is often costly to make repairs (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2003). Limitations to home design are a concern, particularly for people with mobility issues, disabilities, and other health problems (The F/P/Tministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d.). Heating the home is another major concern identified by older adults. One focus group

participant stated that “quite often they (older adults) keep their heat so cold that they only turn the heat up when they know someone’s coming” (The F/P/T Ministers Responsible for Seniors, n. d., p. 18). Although there are subsidies for home renovations and other supports for daily costs such as heating, people are often unsure of how to access these supports, and eligibility criteria makes it difficult to qualify. These barriers to adequate housing fall most on senior women, who often outlive their spouses.

In Ontario, seniors may qualify for *Ontario Renovates*, a program available to eligible home owners, including seniors, to assist in making adjustments, adding space, or making the home more inhabitable in the case of accessibility concerns (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2015). It should be noted, however, that this program provides “forgivable loans”, which means that certain criteria must be met in order to have the loan forgiven, and in some cases, a portion of the loan may need to be repaid. It is unpredictable what responsibility will remain with the recipient of the loan, making this a precarious pursuit.

For help covering the costs of heat and hydro, the Ontario Energy Board may provide assistance through *Low Income Energy Assistance Program* (211 Ontario, n. d.). This program, however, appears to be more of an emergency response program than a consistent or reliable benefit. For women living alone in their homes, it is often difficult to afford basic necessities (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). More long term and sustainable supports should be made available.

For many older adults, remaining in the home may mean making sacrifices due to the high cost of maintaining safe and secure housing. It is easy to imagine, that the challenges presented would force some people to seek alternate arrangements, likely outside of their home communities. This is a fear of many older adults in rural areas (Basu et al., 2012). The limited nature of income support programs and the limited availability of services for people living in

poverty in rural communities create barriers to aging in place, and since women are more likely to live in poverty, they are most vulnerable.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

Many health concerns arise from the rural trends identified in this chapter. According to a Statistics Canada Health Survey (2009), nearly 85% of senior women live with a chronic health concern (as cited in Milan & Vézina, 2011). In rural communities, health concerns such as diabetes and other chronic illnesses are more prevalent than in larger centres (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011). Despite these findings, contradictions emerge in the literature regarding the ways that older adults in rural communities understand their health. On the one hand, people in rural areas often identified their health concerns as being more serious than those identified by their urban counterparts (Wanless, Mitchell, & Wister, 2010). On the other hand, over 75% of women over the age of 65 describe their health in positive terms (Milan & Vézina, 2011). This is consistent with other rural studies, which reveal that despite the health disadvantages that exist, older adults living in rural communities often express that they are satisfied with their health (Wanless, Mitchell, & Wister, 2010) – some even rate their health as good or excellent (Hinck, 2004). It seems like there is a tendency for older adults in rural communities to understate their health concerns.

Older adults living in rural communities often do not access preventative services (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011), which is not surprising given that these services are often inaccessible. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to receive home care services in rural communities. Given the expected rise of the population over the age of 65 in these areas, it is becoming a pressing issue in need of attention.

In a study comparing social determinants of health indicators between urban and rural residency, Wanless, Mitchell, and Wister (2010) indicated that the health of older women in rural communities is comprised of different characteristics than that of women in urban centres. The *Social Determinants of Health Framework* was not seen as an adequate model to understanding the complex context of rural health. They discovered that lower levels of education negatively impacted people's self-reported health concerns in rural communities, whereas there was a negative relationship between sense of social connection/belonging and reports of health concerns including diabetes and heart disease (Wanless, Mitchell, Wister, 2010). This study highlights another important aspect of community engagement in rural areas.

Mental health and a sense of wellbeing among older women in rural communities are also impacted by trends in economic, political, and social realms. Panazzola and Leipert (2013) illustrate that a lack of resources, diminishing of community, and the devaluing of identity (for example, ethnicity, rurality, and gender) are factors that can have negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of older women in rural areas. In small communities, the loss of people, businesses, services, and faith groups/organizations cause hardship and stress among community members (Panazzola & Leipert, 2013). Rural identity is a significant aspect of wellbeing in rural areas. Many older women indicate that they face discrimination within the community by having their voices silenced or through their opinions being undervalued. Outside the community, they also report experiencing discrimination through labels such as "hick, redneck, hillbillies" (Panazzola & Leipert, 2013, para. 39). These factors work to create layers of oppression that intersect with age to affect the everyday lives of these women.

### **Summary**

This literature review presents ideas about what the process of aging in rural communities looks like for women, concepts of rural identity, as well as the structural forces that create the context of aging in rural areas. It also addresses some of the barriers that older women face in their local communities. This provides a solid foundation of understanding which can be used as a basis for further research into the subject. To date, few studies have explored aging in rural northern Ontario, women even less so. Most studies to date have included a larger sample group and many have occurred across communities rather than exploring one community context in depth. It is my hope that this case study provides an in-depth, multi-dimensional example of aging within a specific northern rural setting.



### **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For the purpose of my research study, I will be using aging in place, critical feminist gerontology as well as ecological systems theory to understand the experiences of participants within the community and within broader society. Combining these perspectives allows for an analysis that moves from individual conceptions of social issues to broader influences and factors that shape social reality.

#### **Aging in Place**

Concepts of aging in place are central to the development of this project. For many people, the process of deciding where and how to live can be an isolating experience. Bookman (2008) suggests that older adults should be seen “as players in a dynamic group process that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed to meet the needs of its members and their changing life and health circumstances.” (p. 433). She argues that this more community-focused view of aging in place “allows a shift away from a paradigm that sees old age as a problem – particularly a medical problem – and towards a paradigm in which elders are seen as assets in a community” (p. 433). This contribution to the notion of aging in place allows for an exploration of the active roles that women play in their communities. Because of the sample group selected, age and gender are important dynamics that can be examined through critical feminist gerontology theory. Zapf (2010) provides a view of place as an interactive and ever-changing context in which to understand human behaviour, identity, and connection to physical spaces – the people shape and adapt place, and the place shapes the people within it. The focus on community and the interactions of people within their family and neighbourhood systems are

best highlighted through ecological systems theory, which allows for a thorough understanding of the interplay between the sample group and their local context.

### **Critical Feminist Gerontology**

The theory of critical feminist gerontology incorporates elements of critical social sciences, feminism, and gerontology theories. It considers the complex economic, political, and social context that shape the process of aging. The purpose of employing this theory is to question dimensions of power that exist in our society and to consider the complex intersecting facets of identity, particularly gender, in shaping the aging experience. Hooyman, Browne, Ray, and Richardson (2002) argue that it is our individual and collective responsibility to use knowledge to identify the factors that maintain unequal relationships in society and to deconstruct the dominant discourse. This requires that we advocate for change in policy, research, and education.

From a critical feminist perspective, there is no one objective truth, rather what is considered true is subjective and lays in the experience of women within the settings they inhabit (Landman, 2006). What is commonly valued as true in our society, Landman (2006) argues, is shaped by the knowledge that has been produced and circulated within patriarchal systems. Most often this truth is defined by positivistic approaches to research. Within critical feminist theories, women's accounts of their experience reveal 'truth' defined by them and positioned within their unique social and political contexts (Landman, 2006). Through interviews with women in Searchmont, I intend to discover what individual experiences can reveal about aging in place in the region.

Critical feminist gerontology adheres to tenets of the critical social sciences, particularly in the search for hidden structures and relationships of power that exist beyond the surface of social reality (Neuman, 1997; Landman, 2006). Feminist methodology posits that the experiences of women and the meaning shared by women become a window into these hidden structures (Landman, 2006). Through discovering the connections between individual experiences and wider social structures, it then becomes the task of the researcher to share their acquired knowledge and find meaningful ways to engage in critical social action.

Combining aspects of gerontology, critical social sciences, and feminist theories allows for a more complete picture of how different life trajectories create a context through which ideas of what it means to get older as women are shaped and internalized (Freixas, Luque, & Reina, 2012). From this understanding, researchers are asked to position themselves within the public discourse of aging and to engage in a process of self-reflection with respect to internalized notions of the process of ‘getting older’. Freixas, Luque, and Reina (2012) discuss the stigma of aging in our society. They argue that aging is viewed as an inevitable state of deterioration, illness, and isolation due to the medicalization of aging in our society. This theory requires a keen awareness of how these stereotypes play out in our interactions with older adults.

Critical feminist gerontology seeks to develop a well-rounded depiction of aging that explores culture over time and its influence on the aging process. In the data, this theory would urge the researcher to explore the intersection of facets of identity and the position of older women within patriarchal systems. In the context of an interview, words and phrases depict the dominant discourse that would be called into question. The participant’s observations of cultural and structural forces that reflect power dynamics in our society can provide insights into how

different positions in society are created and maintained, and how the life course shapes how we interact with one another.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Systems theories, including ecological systems, were developed as an integral part of social work practice in the late 1960s. This theory was appealing to social workers looking to move beyond psychoanalytic approaches to their work – it considered the series of networks within which people develop and live (Ungar, 2002). After this time, ecological theory, which initially focused primarily on family, branched off to consider multiple dynamics and exchanges between social systems and the individual. It was not until the late 1980s, however, that ecological theories began to address more critical approaches that considered race, gender, and class inequalities (Unger, 2002). In the 1990s, further development of the theory began to focus on dynamics of power and oppression, life course perspectives, environmental degradation, and technological advancement (Unger, 2002). Systems theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to observe the aging experiences of women in Searchmont.

Ecological theories incorporate a number of facets that make up a person's environment. As Greenfield (2011) illustrates, physical and social environments are both essential to understanding the context in which people live. Environmental systems in one's context include the home, public places, outdoor spaces, and the physical objects existing within their environment. Social systems in one's environment include family, community and groups, as well as broader social structures and institutions. The latter would also account for sources of income, tax systems, labour trends, and so forth (Greenfield, 2011). Cultural systems and the complex relationships between one's identity and their social system are also essential to how we

understand the role of ecological systems (Unger, 2002). Changes in an individual's environment will shape their experience as well as the decisions they make.

According to Bronfenbrennor (1994), a well-known ecological theorist, the environments that people inhabit can be broken down into subsystems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. Microsystems are comprised of the people and places with whom or which we have the most interactions. The interactions within this system involve a strong degree of influence between parties. The mesosystem refers to interplay and the series of interactions between different microsystems – these interactions can indirectly impact an individual in negative or positive ways. The exosystem is a setting that does not require a person's involvement, yet still impacts them. For example, the closing of the veneer mill in Searchmont would be event occurring in the exosystem and the associated impact in the lives of community members would be the effect. The macrosystem includes culture, socioeconomic status, and events occurring globally that trickle down to the microsystem. Finally, the chronosystem is cross-cutting and signifies changes occurring throughout the lifespan that impact the other levels (Bronfenbrennor, 1994).

Overall, ecological systems theory considers both the impact of systems on an individual and their influence on these systems. In the process of data analysis, an ecological systems theorist would examine issues of power in interactional processes. They would explore the interactions that lead to adaptations of either the person within their environment or the environment as the subjects within them behave (Ungar, 2002). This theory supports the notion that knowledge can be gained through the observation of people within their natural environments. The emphasis on community systems is particularly useful to this study of aging

in Searchmont due to the unique geographic context and the circumstances facing a region in post-industrial northern Ontario.

### **Summary**

In summation, both critical feminist gerontology and ecological systems theory require that the researcher consider the complexities of external structures in shaping the internal realities of older women. My view is consistent with that of critical feminist gerontology in that I hold a more structural view of the aging process and I believe it is our collective responsibility in society to care for one another. Furthermore, I also believe that the values and perspectives of older women who are impacted by structural trends are vital to the process of making valuable contributions to social policy. Relying on individual “choice” is problematic in a society that does not always provide choices. Critical feminism views choice as an elusive concept, arguing that choice is a construct of social, economic, and political systems (Holstein & Minkler, 2003) and ecological systems theory explores the impact of networks that shape social realities, which includes both the systems that older women are consciously a part of as well as the processes they may not be aware of occurring in larger structures (Greenfield, 2011). It is my hope that combining elements of critical feminist gerontology and ecological systems theory in the collection and interpretation of data will provide insight into the aging experiences of women within Searchmont, Ontario who are aging in place. My chosen theories provide a framework through which the individual experiences of women aging in Searchmont may be observed. The reach of the research goes beyond women aging in place; it is also a study of place. The setting itself then becomes an object to observe. It is my intention that combining these theories will

provide insight into the impact of place on older women and the impact of the older women on Searchmont as a community.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology used to conduct this study. This is an ethnographic case study of the aging experiences of women in Searchmont, Ontario. Data were collected through review of community history, use current and historic photographs, and in-depth interviews. I then discuss participant recruitment methods, the sample group, and ethical considerations. The data analysis was informed by the concept of aging in place, critical feminist gerontology theory, and ecological systems theory.

### **Ethnographic Case Study**

Ethnography comprises of an array of different methods and approaches and it seeks a thick description of people's lives in order to better understand the complexities of experience. Observation and participation in social and cultural contexts are the most recognized techniques of this methodology. Data sources include, but are not limited to, conversations and interviews with participants, texts, spoken word, and visual materials (Mason, 2002). Ethnography relies on the belief that the influence of culture can be observed in various social settings. The researcher positions themselves within these settings in order to observe how meaning is exchanged and what this exchange reveals about cultural practices and influences. The researcher takes on the role of a participant or a non-intrusive observer. In some situations, the researcher may become completely immersed in a social or cultural setting (Mason, 2002). Being closely connected to a data set and flexible to changes in their environments allows researchers to adapt their behaviour and approach a setting with sensitivity to their role in the context they are working within (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Informed by ethnography, the data of this study were collected by using multiple methods, including individual in-depth face-to-face interviews, observation of



public spaces in the community, and use of photographic images that reflect changes in the community. Themes were identified following interviews with participants and the supporting data, including texts and photographs, were used to support a thick description of community context.

Often, the objective of ethnographic methods is to make sense of a specific context through firsthand experience within the settings in question (Mason, 2002). In data analysis, the researcher's personal beliefs and experiences are central to their understanding of the data and the inherent messages within them. As a result, it is essential that the researcher engage in reflexive practices throughout data collection and the process of analysis in order to explain how they arrive at a set of interpretations/conclusions (Mason, 2002). Reflexivity is necessary due to the fact that we, as researchers, are inextricably linked to the social world that we are attempting to study. It is essential to remain mindful of the biases, perspectives, and conditioning that we bring to our work (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

In ethnography, data are used to "build case, rather than simply illuminate it" (Fine, 2003, p. 45). Collecting meaningful data requires that a personal relationship be developed between the observer and the observed (Fine, 2003). Recognizing how meaning is created through cultural relations within local contexts allows the researcher to examine the interplay between person and person, and between person and the environment (Fine, 2003). In order to understand individuals' experiences in a contextualized way, the researcher must consider the role of culture, as well as economic, political, and social relations.

I will be using tenets of ethnography in a case study of the experience of women aging in Searchmont, Ontario. Case study research is defined by the study of a single example or concept (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In discussion of how to make meaning of data collected for the purpose of a

case study, Mason (2002) begs the question, “what constitutes the case, the context, or the ‘whole’, and according to what principles?” (p. 167). My own interpretation of the data, the unique experience of each individual participant, and the limited scope of this study make it impossible to present a full picture. At best, I hope to convey a snapshot of what the aging process looks like for these women and I do so by considering the mosaic of perspectives and circumstances that make up the whole.

Case study as a method is often criticized in social science research as being context-dependent and therefore non-generalizable (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that they provide the depth that is often lacking in studies with larger samples and develop a “nuanced view of reality” (p. 223). I see engaging in case study research as a way to seek the meaning of experience within a specific context. Although this does present challenges in the generalizability of results, it can be argued that it is through a contextual understanding that the impact of meso and macro level trends can be observed in the day to day experience. Using ethnography in a case study of Searchmont, Ontario allowed for an understanding of multiple dimensions impacting the aging process of women in the region. This methodology accounted for individual experiences, while also providing a framework through which the multi-dimensional context that shapes these experiences could be understood.

Beginning with critical feminist gerontology theory and ecological systems theory, what I sought from the data was twofold. Using critical feminist gerontology, I explored relations of gender and age within the community from the perspective of the participants themselves. This understanding was used to identify how participants view their roles as older women within the context of family, community and wider society. From this perspective, ecological systems theory provided the framework to understand the complex and intersecting networks within

which these women exist. Using tenets of each highlighted both the unique circumstances and perspectives of the women in this study, while also identifying a partial understanding of factors influencing aging in a rural community.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

### **Recruitment**

Consistent with the purpose of this study, I recruited women aged 55 and over living in, or having recently lived in, Searchmont, Ontario. In order to recruit participants, I left flyers (Appendix A) in the local store as well as additional information about the study. I also used snowball sampling by providing additional flyers to participants to circulate to their networks. Participants were welcomed to contact me for information before agreeing to participate. I sent them an email or provided a hardcopy containing all of the information pertaining to the study (please see Appendix B for the letter of information and consent form). Any contact information that they provided was stored in a private locked filing cabinet. All electronic materials, such as transcripts, were stored on a hard-drive and password protected.

### **Sample**

The sample for my study consisted of five women between the ages of 60 and 80. Three of the five women were married and the other two were single or widowed. The participants had lived in the community between 10 and 60 years. The range of experience in the community led to different observations of community changes. It is important to note that all participants who reached out to be involved in the study were reasonably healthy and had access to a vehicle (that either they or their spouse was able to drive). Additionally, most participants reported being

financially stable. This sample then reflects only a fragment of the experience of aging in Searchmont, Ontario. The limitations of this sample are discussed further in the limitations section in chapter six.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed, eliminating personal details that would compromise a persons' identity. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. Entering with a substantial theoretical framework resulted in a deductive approach to data analysis. As suggested by Kreuger and Neuman (2006), "In a *deductive approach* you begin with an abstract, logical relationship among concepts, then move toward concrete empirical evidence" (p. 53). In particular, I sought themes pertaining to the relationship that the women shared with their community and with broader social, political, and economic structures. Trends that emerged in the literature highlighting these relationships formed the basis of my analysis. Unexpected findings also emerged. I observed the data, first as a narrative, before isolating emerging themes. After several reviews, paralleled themes between the participants and disparate themes unique to each individual were observed. I did approach the data set expecting certain trends to become apparent based on personal assumptions as well as the influences of previous literature; however, I was also cautious to avoid ignoring pertinent themes based on these expectations. In using transcriptions and photographs, I did not reveal the identity of community members or provide pseudonyms in order to ensure privacy and anonymity of participants given the small population and close-knit community ties.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This research study has been approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). For additional details see appendices A through G. The recruitment process entailed the distribution of a ‘call for participants’ flyer in the community (*Appendix A*). Once contacted by a potential participant, further details of the expectation of the research process were made transparent, and people were given at least a day to consider whether or not they would like to be involved (See *Appendix B* letter of information and consent). After signing the consent form, the interviews took place in a location of their choosing. All transcriptions have been stored electronically and password protected. Consent forms were stored in a personal locked cabinet that only the researcher has access to. One of my major concerns embarking on this project was the privacy and anonymity of participants given the small community populace and the likelihood of participants being identifiable by their responses. As a result, I have elected to keep the findings completely anonymous in the dissemination of results. Through a reflexive practice, I was able to identify biases so as to be truer to emerging themes as revealed by participants.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CASE STUDY**

This purpose of this chapter is twofold. In presenting the findings of this study, I will begin by presenting the context of the study as well as photographs to illustrate community changes. For the latter section, I will be using original photographs to capture the modern day architecture and natural spaces. Older photos have been graciously offered by the community. I will then highlight key concepts identified by the participants who were interviewed to reveal the impact of place on the experiences of women in Searchmont.

### **Context of the Case Study**

#### **Northern Ontario**

Approximately 80% of Ontario's landmass is considered 'northern Ontario', yet only eight percent of Ontario's total population inhabit these northern regions, most of whom live in North Bay, Sudbury, Timmons, Sault Ste. Marie, and Thunder Bay (Woodrow, 2002). Northern Ontario is divided into two regions: northeastern and northwestern. Searchmont, a community in northeastern Ontario's Algoma District, will be the focus of this study.

Rural and remote communities make up a large portion of the northern landscape. Due to the relatively small population of northern Ontario, the interests of these communities are often valued less than those of Ontario's southern regions, which tend to be more densely populated. Rural residents in the north exist in the periphery and lack political autonomy due to the "absence of a large metropolitan area (population >500,000), low population densities, and resource dependency" (Hall & Donald, 2009, p. 4). Rural communities are even further removed from the processes that impact their circumstances.

Ontario's northern region has developed around its trade routes during the fur trade and has since developed populated areas around land rich in natural resources (Woodrow, 2002). Many northern communities rely on southern and global markets. As a result, many communities have seen boom and bust cycles linked to resource extraction as companies develop and then leave northern regions (Woodrow, 2002). According to Cuddy (2015) employment in north-eastern Ontario is closely linked to fluctuations in the Canadian Gross Domestic Product (GDP). He states that "employment in the northeast is much more vulnerable to the adverse employment effects induced by periods of economic decline" (p. 9), which results in unstable employment conditions, more precarious work arrangements, and fewer full time opportunities (Cuddy, 2015).

Often, with many companies in the north being led by external profit makers, there is little consideration of the sustainability of the community after resources are extracted or when companies become defunct (Woodrow, 2002). "Unstable economic conditions, especially for communities tied to natural resources, and limited employment opportunities often leads to youth out-migration, higher proportions of seniors, and a relatively homogenous population" (Hall & Donald, 2009, p. 15). During a 'bust', when people migrate out of the community, the integrity of local businesses and services are compromised. For the population that remains, this can create many complex challenges.

Ontario's northern regions are seeing a rapid growth in the population of older adults (Dandy & Bollman, 2008). Regions in northeastern Ontario including "Blind River, Elliot Lake, North Shore, and Sheddun" (p. 25) are seeing some of the most rapidly aging populations in Canada with senior populace at approximately 21% (Dandy & Bollman, 2008). My research focuses specifically on Searchmont, Ontario.

### **The Community of Searchmont, Ontario**

Searchmont is a community in northeastern Ontario. It belongs to the Algoma District and is located approximately 40 kilometers from Sault Ste. Marie. In 2011, the population of Searchmont was 293, a 2.3% drop from 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2012). The population of adults over the age of 60 was 32.4%, which is a greater proportion than Ontario as a whole at 20.5% of residents over 60 years of age. The average age in Searchmont is 51, compared to an average age of 40 in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2012). A high population of older adults in the region is consistent with rural communities facing similar political and economic trends.

Searchmont has seen many fluctuations in its history with periods of economic growth and decline. The peak of Searchmont's development occurred during the building of the train station in 1902. At that time Francis H. Clergue and his company, the Lake Superior Corporation, were focused on the economic development of Sault Ste. Marie surrounding areas. "Clergue viewed railway transportation as the key to initiating economic growth" (Heritage Research Associates Inc., n.d., p. 48) and as a result he focused on industry and tourism initiatives in Ontario's hinterland. With the building of the Searchmont (Goulais) Station, the village of Searchmont was formed. A "saw and shingle mill" was built to "process timber resources from the Goulais River" (Heritage Research Associates Inc., n.d., p. 50) and charcoal kilns were built in Searchmont to support the steel industry developing in Sault Ste. Marie. Houses were erected to support the new workers coming into the area. The glory days were short lived. During the depression, according to a report by Heritage Research Associates Inc. (n.d.), the lumber mill ceased operation and the remaining families faced a period of hardship with the loss of "any source of income" (p. 51). It was not until after World War II that "Searchmont's



lumber mill reopened, and the ACR [Algoma Central Railway] began to promote new tourism” (P. 51).

A road was built in 1955 connecting Sault Ste. Marie and Searchmont (Algoma District Chamber of Commerce, 1961). This opened up new possibilities for the community. It’s reported that Hay and Company opened the veneer mill in 1957 (Timo explorer, 2014). By 1978, the population of Searchmont was 488 (Heritage Research Associates Inc., n.d.) and many others would commute to work in the village from Sault Ste. Marie and surrounding areas. The veneer mill changed owners many times before its eventual closure in around 1990. The loss of this industry has resulted in major changes to the fabric of community life. Today, Searchmont relies on tourism in the area, primarily through the Searchmont Ski Resort.

In addition to the challenges experienced by other northern rural communities, Searchmont’s loss of its major industry has created difficulties for remaining community members. This once thriving community had a hotel, a convenience store, a post office, a gas station, churches, an operating train station, a ski lodge, a school, and a volunteer fire department. The ski lodge is still a tourist attraction in the area, but otherwise, only the community centre, the fire department and first responders unit, and one local store remain. Due to school and business closures in the area, many people have left the community – those who remain, access services and information in Sault Ste. Marie, the largest city in the Algoma District.

### Searchmont Community Photographs



*Figure 1:* Searchmont community sign along winding highway 532.

## Searchmont Mill



Hay's Company – Searchmont - undated

*Figure 2:* Searchmont Veneer Mill (Hay's Company ownership). Date unknown – likely taken in the late 1950s (Hay's Company - Searchmont, n.d.).



*Figure 3:* Searchmont Veneer Mill (Weldwood ownership) in 1961 (Weldwood Mill, 1961).



*Figure 4:* Searchmont Veneer Mill (G.W. Martin ownership) in 1986. (Trumble, 1986).



*Figure 5:* Searchmont Veneer Mill (G.W. Martin ownership) in 1986. View of the ski hill and church in the background (Trumble, 1986).





*Figure 6: A photo of what remains of Searchmont Mill Today.*



*Figure 7: A photo of what remains of Searchmont Mill today.*

## Searchmont Ski Resort



*Figure 8:* The Searchmont Ski Resort is the largest employer in Searchmont today.



*Figure 9:* The Searchmont Ski Resort. These slopes are visible throughout the community.



## St. Hubert Church



*Figure 10: St. Hubert Church in 2004 (Randell, 2004).*



*Figure 11: St. Hubert Church Today.*

### Searchmont Centre Public School



*Figure 12:* A photo of the building that was once Searchmont Centre Public School. At one point there were approximately 110 students attending the school. By the time of its closure in 2003, there were only 12 students (People for Education, 2005). It has now been converted into the Sportsman Store.



## The Train Station



*Figure 13: The Searchmont Train Station in 1946 (Searchmont Train Station, 1946).*



*Figure 14: The Searchmont Train Station in 1972 (Ellis, 1972).*



*Figure 15:* A photo of the Searchmont Train Station today. This station was built in 1902 to as part of a development strategy in northern Ontario.



## Community Centre and Fire Department



*Figure 16: Searchmont Community Centre.*



*Figure 17: Searchmont Community Volunteer Fire Department.*

## **Interview Findings**

I will begin this section by presenting the participants' perspectives of community changes with the loss of industry and local services. I will then discuss the varied financial situations of participants. Next, I will describe how participants see their gender roles and the social relations in the community from the perspective of women who are highly active in Searchmont. Finally, I will provide differential concepts of aging identified by participants and I will outline their suggestions for the future of community.

### **Industry as Central to Community Life**

The responses given by participants highlight the major changes that have been observed in Searchmont following the loss of their major industry, the vaneer Mill, which went by several names during its time in operation. "It started as Weldwood, and then it went to Martin and Lajamb". One participant stated: "that was the community". Not only did it provide employment to many community members, participants reported that it also contributed to community in other ways. See *figure 2 to figure 7* for the progress of mill changes.

The loss of the Mill resulted in the closure of the only school, loss of business, and a change in the population base of the community. One participant describes the role of the Mill in shaping how they understand their community:

The year we moved up, there were 108 children in the school, the mill was running 3 shifts. And 42 years later, there is no mill, no school... There's not really the community there was 42 years ago, because you don't have a workplace and you don't have a school. To me that makes community.

Most participants described the Mill favourably, describing the valuable role they played in keeping the community connected. One participant states, "They were community...they took

pride in community” and another said “now people help one another, but not to the extent that it was”. Participants indicated that lumber and labour was provided by the mill to assist people with house repairs and to invest in community projects. One participant indicated that

It was a community. It’s not quite as much now. There was a little bridge over a crick, the old stuff was pretty bad, so they built a new one with wood from the mill. That was donated to help that. The wood for the old fire hall, which was the old store down there, that got stolen, but that was donated...and the workers from the mill built the old fire hall. I mean that was the community.

The fire hall became an important service in the community and it started through the mill.

Another important service in the community, the First Alert volunteer first response service, also started through the mill. One participant discussed its initiation:

If anything happened in the community, the mill would blow the whistle and everything stopped. Down here a ways, there was a house on the banks of the river and a little fellow went missing. They blew the whistle and everyone went to look. That’s the kind of community it was when we moved in.

Participants spoke very highly of the mill and the role that it played in assisting the community and providing employment to community members. One woman said

They made sure when they hired somebody, that they always hired somebody from the community first and when they built the fire department, they helped giving lumber and stuff like that. Then after that, it was hard to keep the fire hall heated, to raise enough money. Weldwood of Canada was paying for that.

Losing their local industry was a huge loss for the community. One participant stated “When your community loses its source of employment, a lot of other things go with it. You learn to deal, but...” It is clear that the mill was central to how the participants understood community.

Currently, the biggest employer in Searchmont is the Searchmont Ski Resort (*Figure 8 and Figure 9*). Although some locals are employed there during the winter months, the woman in this study seemed to agree that there is disconnect between the resort and the community. One

participant stated that “people would go to the ski hill, only didn’t really realize there was a community there” She went on to say “we used to actually, in the springtime do a garbage pick-up and skiers are just terrible...they just throw everything out their window”. Another participant indicated that “they [the ski hill] never were a big supporter of the community. They are trying now because they need to”. The ski hill has also had some challenges in recent years due to mild winters. One participant stated that “the ski hill...last winter they didn’t hire, they went right down in hiring, because they couldn’t afford it”. It was also reported that the “resort is dated and a lot of its facilities are not wonderful”. The ski hill is now the primary source of employment in the community. The fact that business has declined in the past few years is concerning for the community as it would result in yet another loss.

### **Inconsistent Service Availability**

Many of the services available in Searchmont are run by volunteers. The participants discussed their involvement in the community club, and the volunteer fire department and first response unit (*Figure 16 and Figure 17*). One participant said “We have the community centre, if it wasn’t for that, we’d really be in bad shape. So that helps, we’re involved in that”. This reflects that volunteering holds meaning for some participants; however, the comment of another indicates that the services provided by volunteers are not always consistent:

There are no doctors. There’s a First Response and the Fire Department...very well trained individuals...so there’s that, but it’s run by volunteers and generally someone will come, but during the day often a lot of volunteers are working in the city or elsewhere...

Even with this service, which many people seem to appreciate, there is the concern that information does not always get out to community members about what is available. One participant said that when accessing emergency services in Searchmont “If you don’t know the

number...you'd be in trouble, because there is no 911, you would have to call a different number and not everybody knows that, probably even now". The lack of consistency and the limited information that community members may have would present challenges to accessing the services that are available locally.

Many services and amenities are not available in town and require that community members commute to the city. For example, one participant said "You can't even get gas in Searchmont". Another said, "We had stores and we had gas off and on, but we always had to go to the Sault for a doctor or dentist". Some services had never been available in the area and some were lost with the closing of the mill, such as the school:

The school closing was a huge thing, but that's because the Mill closed and the population dropped, like the activities that the community centre used to support...dances in the gym and that kind of thing. It all stopped because there was no people. The population, the school...there was 110 kids there, when it closed there was only 11.

Since the school's closure, participants indicated that community members get together less often. The school was a way to connect participants and their families in the community.

As for services offered in the Sault, Participants discuss varying degrees of availability. For example, after surgery or in the case of outpatient status, people report that sometimes nurses or physiotherapists are able to come out for follow-up appointments, whereas in other cases, they are required to commute to the city for appointments. One participant said "...and the other thing that's hard here. Some of them because they've had surgery have asked for service out here but were told it is too far out". Other participants indicate that they have had no issue having someone sent out. The nature of these services is inconsistent.

Another service that requires people to commute to the city is those accessing social services such as Ontario Works. One participant discussed the barriers to accessing services:

I don't know what my financial situation is going to be. I might end up having to be on social services or something like that. I have a friend out there who is on social services and they're not able to get to town for appointments because they don't drive and they don't have a vehicle and they can't always guarantee when they're going to get a ride and sometimes there's different people that you don't want to take rides with or put yourself out there....their assistance was suspended because they didn't have a ride to come to an appointment. A lot of people live on limited, you know, they're on fixed incomes – they're either on ODSB or they're on social services...There is no understanding on the side of social services that this person doesn't have a vehicle, doesn't have money for a cab.

This quote emphasizes a number of problematic trends impacting older women in rural areas.

The lack of transportation, the poor communication about services, and the enforcement of strict criteria by service providers makes it difficult to continue accessing essential services.

### **Varied Financial Situations**

Participants indicated that their primary sources of income were employment income, the Canadian Pension Plan, Old Age Security, and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. Some participants rely solely on their individual income and pensions, whereas others described sharing combined income with a spouse. Each participant offered a unique perspective on whether or not their income provided enough to live comfortably. They were either concerned and/or recognized why some people would be, or they were not at all concerned. Those who felt they made sufficient income to live comfortably discussed the choices that allowed them to live within their means.

Although most participants indicated that they were satisfied with their income and they felt that they made enough to live comfortably, that was not the case for everybody. One participant in her early sixties indicated that finances were a major concern when aging. When asked whether she made enough to live comfortably, she said:



Nope, not at all. My job changed in the last year, so I work part time now and I'm really at a kind of crossroads and refinancing my house, so it's kind of scary...I mean it's very scary, but I'm trying to downplay it and roll with it.

Another participant did indicate that she felt that her and her husband made enough, but she went on to say that "not everybody is in that situation. Cause some of my friends they just get the bare minimum they get from the pension but with us my husband had a pension plus". The interviews revealed that one's satisfaction with their finances is dependent on personal circumstances and whether or not they are sharing an income with a spouse.

The women in this study shared perspectives on how they manage their finances and what they believe about spending habits. They claimed that lifestyle decisions can determine whether or not one 'lives comfortably' and within their means. One woman shared the following when asked about whether she made enough to live well:

...we are very comfortable; the government takes very good care of us. But you know what? We don't drink, we don't smoke, we don't gamble, and we do a little bit of travelling, not a lot, but we have a very good lifestyle and they take good care of us...I think, I really do. And I think that these people who are always crying that they don't have anything. I think if they lived a different lifestyle, they would probably be alright...because the thing is, if you haven't got it and you're borrowing to live this lifestyle, then you know, that's what a lot of the problems are.

Another woman shared this perspective. She stated:

Anybody could do it. Like anybody. You can't claim to be poor, especially living here. You can grow anything you want in the area we live and pretty well anything will grow here. So you can grow whatever you want. I live very cheaply. Like I said, I could live off wild mushrooms and my garden...Ya. The only thing you really need money for is to get a roof over your head, and then if you want electricity, you do have to pay your hydro bill. Umm...your phone. But really, it's not that...you don't have to have 2 cars, you don't need to have a cottage, you don't have to go to the gym and that. There are so many ways to live without spending money.

These comments indicate that it is possible for some people to live well on a limited income; however, it is clear from the concerns of other participants that it can also be challenging

depending on circumstances. It is possible that these comments reflect an acceptance of circumstances and a tendency to manage what is available.

### **Gender Roles and Changes**

The participants shared reflections of how they understand gender roles. They also provided their observations about how they perceive who they are in relation to gender. In discussion of the current situation as an older woman in Searchmont, the participants contemplated their current roles as women, changes to their family and community systems, and the difference between the experiences of older women and older men. They also discussed their concerns about losing a partner or experiencing change in the dynamics of family and other relationships.

Some of the women discussed how gender roles have evolved over the course of their lifetime. They expressed how traditionally, it was common to see one parent working (usually the father/husband) and the women would often have responsibilities in the home. One woman stated that with the cost of living in the 1950s, “the mother was home. If by chance she was a nurse and she had a good pay...not too often he’d stay at home and look after the kids”. From her observation, the nature of women’s work was limited if, by chance, they did work outside the home. She further illustrates her point by saying: “my kids never went to school hungry; my husband was the one who worked”. Another participant highlighted similar trends by observing how women’s roles have changed. She said the following:

I know like some women, they have a different attitude...a younger woman and an older woman, because we lived in a different lifetime eh? Cause they want to do their own thing, whereas a women that’s been older, she is, she’s not so much like that.

This point is further highlighted in her discussion of how children are raised differently today. She stated that today “children go to daycare” because mothers “don’t raise their children the way we did”. There were many responses indicative of women taking on traditional caregiving roles and seeing them as vital to the family system.

To reflect the cultural norm of female caregiver, one woman described her role in her relationship by saying “I keep my home, I have a husband, and I keep...cook, clean. Like any housewife eh?”. Another woman who has children who have grown, and had experienced the loss of her husband described the challenges of losing family:

...loss of family because they grow...or they die. And if that was, for myself, I really really notice that because that was my focus. And actually, when my children started going out on their own and my husband had his own business, so he was often not at home...he was self-employed, so I would rush home after work to make supper for nobody...The loss, the family loss, having to redefine who I am..ya, I found that challenging...It was very rough, I mean my husband died suddenly, so that was an added part of the empty nest thing...it was REALLY empty then. It wasn’t even a nest, you know?

The story told by this participant highlights the identity that is formed around family roles.

Without having a family to tend to, this woman emphasizes the challenge of having to redefine who she is. Another woman similarly indicated this challenge by saying “...and you hear of...a husband has retired, 6 months later he’s dead. That man didn’t have a hobby. And then 6 or so months after that the wife dies, because her hobby was the husband”. Despite the bleak picture painted by these women, it does speak volumes about the place of traditional roles for older women and men.

When comparing women and men, participants had very different perspectives on how their experiences as women are unique. Some women shared concerns about what they would do should anything happen to their husbands. One woman explained that it would be difficult to get

wood for the house. She described the “brute strength” of men as central to their roles in the home. Another participant explained that she would lose her transportation to and from the city if her husband were to lose his license. One participant provided the following insight when discussing the unique circumstances of aging as a woman:

Ya, probably society’s expectation. Like what they expect from me and what they expect from a man my age...umm...I think men have to prove themselves more. Women don’t even feel like they have to prove themselves other than as a mother, but as a person, I don’t think they feel they have to prove themselves.

This supports what participants indicated in earlier comments. From what participants revealed, men tend to be defined by their work, whereas women are defined by their caregiving and nurturing roles within their families and communities. One woman said that “...as a woman, I think we’re kind of community oriented more”. Many of the responses provided by the women in this study reveal this trend of wanting to “engage with the community”.

### **Social Relations in the Community**

Participants discussed their involvement in community and the connections that they share with other community members. This was mostly reported in positive terms; however, some conflicts between community members were identified.

Many of the women in this study reported being involved in a number of community events and activities as volunteers. They mostly describe these experiences in positive terms. One participant indicated that in her time with the volunteer fire department, she recalls feeling like a part of a community within the broader community. She said:

That (the volunteer fire department) provided another kind of niche of a community because you would bond with these people because you stood up all night in 40 below with a fire hose, putting out another neighbour’s fire and then that kind of, you know, I would sometimes see people and they would remember and go “oh ya, I remember, you

came to my house, you saved my life!”. It’s like “no. I didn’t really, but I was there, you know”.

Other participants also discussed involvement through the community club, a group that holds events at the community centre and in the community at large. They discussed the challenges of keeping events going with a dwindling population of people showing up. One participant said “and now you have to fight for volunteers and people don't show up anymore to things, you know. So, yeah there’s been big changes”. This was supported by another participant who said “...it was easy to see, and I know it’s kind of a universal problem, is the aging of the core volunteers and not so much new folks coming in”. From the responses of participants, it appears that there is disconnect between generations of community members, making it difficult to continue running community events and get-togethers.

One thing participants seemed to appreciate about their community, despite recent changes, is a spirit of helping and sharing between community members. It seemed that most participants felt supported by their neighbours and friends. One participant stated that this assistance came in the form of an exchange. When asked if she felt supported in the community, she responded:

Oh yes, because we have supported, I have supported other ones that, you know, were sick and needed extra help and we took our turn doing it...we support each other, we look after each other – at least the older ones...we used to bring food or go stay with them or bring them to town if they needed.

The support from community members seems to be available; however, one participant discussed the fact that not everyone is able to ask for help when they need it and often times people who want to help are not able to. She said, “I know we rely on neighbours, but there are a lot of older people who may not be able to even walk to help their neighbour”. Reflecting on the

challenges of asking for or providing support is an indication that assistance is not always readily available.

There is a general sense that community members share a common ‘Searchmont identity’. Participants revealed that there is an unspoken connection between community members. For example, one participant stated that “we’re all in it together, so we check in on each other to a certain degree”. She explained that community members are connected by context such as “different services and lack of services and feeling isolated and separate I guess from the town community [Sault Ste. Marie]...and feeling probably misunderstood”. There is a sense that when push comes to shove, someone will be there.

The shared identity of the community members was also revealed in the connection that each participant had to the history of the community. One woman highlighted how the historical context of Searchmont and the close-knit nature of the community create a communication pattern with respect to places in the area. She said:

Ya. Someone will say “I moved into the community and I live so far down and the house is on the right”...but you go back, maybe two owners. “Oh, you live in so-and-so’s house?” and they say “No, it’s mine, I bought it”, but that’s how we identify things here.

Although this may not be unique to Searchmont, there is a sense that the history is still intact and vital to how participants understand their community.

Overall, the participants revealed a strong connection between community members; however, they also discussed the fact that there are conflicts within the community that impact how they understand and communicate with one another. One participant highlighted this point by saying the following:

There’s a bulletin board on the community center, but we have 3 cliques...A, B, and C. Now sometimes A and B play together, sometimes B and C play together, but they don’t

all play together. So depending on who's holding power, whether they go look at the bulletin board or not.

Another participant shared similar reflections when discussing her involvement in the community. She said that she was careful not to "push back" because she "understood there was a hierarchy in place". In some way, most participants hinted at community conflicts. One participant also said that she felt her voice was not heard in the community – she stated that her suggestions were not taken up by other community members. Being able to communicate needs and having people respond is an important aspect of community life.

### **Concepts of Aging**

Initially, I set out to discover how the participants define and understand the concept of aging. When thinking about aging, participants seemed less concerned about age as a number as they were about health and sustained engagement in an active lifestyle. Participants mostly described their health and the process of aging in positive terms. They identified having more knowledge, more time, and greater acceptance of self and circumstances as benefits to aging. Their concerns were primarily health, finances, and a loss of community or connection to community.

The responses of participants indicated a strong connection between health and aging. As most of the participants in this study were in good health, they reported not feeling 'old'. Feeling well physically was seen as vital to continuing to live the kind of life participants choose to live. One participant discussed the reality of slowing down with age, but argued you can age well if you "can afford to eat reasonably healthy and you're in good health". Another participant said:

...we all know what we have to do to be healthy and age gracefully. We all know...like don't eat this and exercise and stay out of the sun...all these different things. It's just a

matter of everything in moderation I guess...Hahaha, but it takes you till you're 60 to say "aha, that's what they meant"... Really, that's how you feel and I hope all young people realize that when they get older and they look back and say "that's what aging is". It's not getting old, not really. I don't feel old.

The responses shared by participants highlight the ways in which the choices we make today can impact how we experience life at various stages. One participant, who had experienced medical concerns, shared the importance of learning to manage your own health with age. This was also linked to ability to live an active lifestyle.

Most participants seemed to agree that living actively and being able to care for themselves are important aspects of the aging process. Most participants indicated that "keeping busy" is important and many connected this ability to their health. One participant indicated the following:

When I think of aging...I don't know, I'm a real busy person – I garden, and I do a lot so, ah...I don't really worry about it. No. I just went to the doctors and I'm in excellent health so gardening...he said that's the best thing for ya, so yeah.

She went on to say "that's the best way to be when you get older is to be really busy". Another woman stated that "...you don't say "oh I'm 74, I can't get up and do this". Every day, you just get up and keep doing your everyday things". All participants in this study were highly physically active and involved in various projects at home and in their community. They highlight the importance of remaining motivated and involved. One participant described how these factors can impact one's ability to remain in the home. She said:

...as far as we're concerned, both my husband and I, for our age, we're in good health, We're going to stay as long as we can take care of ourselves here and then we'll have to make another decision then.

Participants revealed the importance of remaining in the home for as long as possible. Although they did not outright share their concerns about having to leave, they did indicate that it was a



possibility in the future should they no longer be able to care for themselves in the home. Given that participants generally described their home, community, and lifestyle in positive terms, it is important to consider the impact that leaving home would have on their overall wellbeing.

The women in this study also discussed the sense of having a deadline to do the things they would like to do in the future. One participant described aging as a change in your position on the lifeline, describing how as time passes there is a feeling that things need to be done now as there may not be time in the future. She stated:

Umm, now in my life, aging, it's different. When you turn sixty, umm, the line of life is shorter...what's left. You know what I mean? But when you're 20 and 30 the line is still pretty long...you've got a long...a lot of time to get to 80 and 90, but when you're 60 it's like "I better get busy doing the things I said I was going to do in my life". Other than that I don't feel any different than I did when I was like...When I hit 22 I was like "jeez you know, 21 is gone, now what?"...no big deal until I'm 30 and then 40. I still feel 22 and my brain is still, my mind is still the same...I just know more.

Another participant stated that "life...it goes by fast". They described the realization that much time has passed. They shared their fears that they may not be able to do everything they had planned as they contemplate their own mortality.

In discussing aging, it is clear that despite the numbers, feeling 'old' is subjective. One participant told a story to illustrate this point

I have a story for ya. When my grandmother was about 85-87, my sister and I pooled our money and bought her a really good wool sweater...this sweater in those days was 110 dollars. It was a lot of money. She put it away for her old age. So old age is, you know, if you ask that 85 year old lady, she wouldn't consider herself old.

From what participants describe, aging can be understood in a number of different ways depending on how you see yourself and the circumstances you find yourself living in. For many participants in this study, focusing on maintaining good health and an active lifestyle are ways to give meaning to their lives and maintain a positive outlook on the experience of getting older.

The benefits of aging identified by most participants included a feeling of having more time and more choices. Additionally, individual participants acknowledged feeling more confident, feeling less stressed, and having more knowledge with age.

One benefit of aging identified by most participants was the sense that they had more time in their day or “More choices about [their] time”. One participant stated that she had “the freedom to be able to do more”. She went on to say “there's a lot of seniors that don't get involved. I still like to do as much as I can do as long as I can do it”. In discussing travelling to the city, another woman said “when I had kids, I'd be home at 4 o'clock when they got out of school. Now, if I want to go at 2 in the afternoon, I can go at 2 in the afternoon”. Another participant said “I'm not in a position where I have a lot more time”; however, they indicated that the nature of how she spends her time has changed:

I know now to choose when I'm going to be really engaged in something or just say “you know what? I'm just going to sit here and read a book.”... You know, nobody needs anything from me and, you know, that's kind of always the central theme as, you know, I'm a mother and a wife at my core I guess. It's like, “oh, nobody needs me. What am I supposed to do with my life?” But, benefits to aging... ya, just taking the time, having the experience to share with other people and to be able to, especially with my children, you know, to be able to be there for them and, yeah.

Another woman also highlighted a change in how her time was spent:

You know, when you have kids, you have things to do with your kids and there is a great deal of stress on your time. I mean, my children are independent and on their own and we get together reasonably regular, but this is ‘me’ time. If I want to sit and sew, I can sit and sew.

She also indicated that she could travel at her convenience to visit family out of town. These reflections indicate that the women in this study believe they have more control over how their time is spent. They no longer feel the same pressures that they might have experienced as younger person.

Greater confidence and less stress were also identified as benefits. One woman identified accepting who she is as a benefit to aging. She stated:

I feel a lot more comfortable in my skin...I feel a lot less worried about what I look like. I kind of have accepted the fact that, yup, there's wrinkles; yup, there's white hair. I have people that are trying to talk me into colouring my hair, but feeling more comfortable in my own skin and being able to have more patience because I know the process of things.

Another participant said that she experiences less stress as she gets older, attributing this to not having the same "angst of keeping up with the 'Jones'". This acceptance of how things are with age was linked by participants to the idea of having more knowledge and experience.

Most participants indicated that they have gained wisdom through experience. This was attributed to life experience, interactions with others, and a desire to learn new things. One participant described these benefits:

The benefits...hmm...the benefits of aging...it's just the knowledge that you absorb, the people you meet...cuz aging, like what is aging? It's not really getting old. It's hard to say. It's just what you absorb and how you deal with it. Is it positive? To me, that's one of the benefits...is my experiences.

Another participant explained a benefit of aging as being more compassionate. She attributed knowledge to experience by saying:

Being more compassionate to people. I think compassion is something you only kind of get from getting hurt. You know, you just kind of wake up one morning and feel compassionate for the world. It's like, "oh, this is what it feels like".

One participant stated "...one thing about getting older: you're wiser and you got more knowledge". She attributed this to her love of reading. Overall, the knowledge and experiences that people collect during their lifetime are seen as benefits to the aging process.

Participants also discussed some of their concerns about aging. They identified a loss of community, limited time left, health concerns, and inadequate income as primary issues. Despite

this, most participants did not explicitly discuss their concerns and actually described aging in fairly positive terms.

Many participants described the challenge of losing family and community members as time passes. They also discussed the aging of core volunteers and individuals who are active in the community. One concern that participants described was the concept of community loss as the older generation are no longer able to be involved. This is best highlighted through the concern shared by one participant, who has been involved in community events for many years. She said that her “concern is that the community club, the only thing that will be used is the exercise room upstairs...there won't be anything else going on soon, because the changes is getting real fast now”. She said that most of the volunteers are in their 70s and she is concerned about what will happen “when us girls are gone out”. She went on to discuss the importance of involving the younger generation to ensure the continued investment of community members in local events and support networks.

As discussed, participants indicated that in one sense, they have more time, but in the grand scheme of things, there is a sense that time is running out. This was expressed explicitly by one woman when she said:

Hmm...the challenges of getting older...umm....I think it's, again, not realizing how fast time does go by...and if you're ambitious in your life like I am...like I want to do everything...I want to live forever. I don't want to die, cuz there is always something more I want to do, I want to learn, so the challenges are...just realize that you don't have forever. I mean you say you want to do something, do it. That's the challenge for me, I'm wishing I had of done more sooner. I'm doing it now, but it's like there's a deadline.

This quote emphasizes a change in perspective in life. With age comes more time to reflect on past experiences and evaluate future priorities.

As mentioned previously, participants connected health and positive aging experiences. As such, one of the concerns identified by the women was the possibility of poor health in the future. For example, one woman expressed:

Okay, well I understand that I'm in charge of my health as I age. That's something that has really come to light in the last couple of years with some health problems – kind of a wake-up call. Umm, as long as I can stay active I feel okay about it. It's a natural progression of life. Uhh, I do fear what will happen to me as I age and I'm not able to take care of myself.

Another Woman described a similar contemplation. She said that when she “did have health scares” she thought “well, I'll just put myself in a home and get it over with. I don't want to burden my kids”. She went on to say that “Searchmont would still be right here if I needed to come and get my country fix”. On the one hand, participants reflect that they have accepted that health concerns may exist with age; however, they also reflect some fear about how these health concerns may get in the way of their ability to care for themselves.

### **Ideas for Change and Expressed Needs**

Participants identified a number of changes they would like to see in their community. One major change indicated by the women would be access to transportation options in the community. They also stated that having a post office, restaurant, stores, and gas station would bring life to Searchmont. One participant indicated that it would be helpful to have someone in the community to share information about services and social support. With respect to community involvement; they also indicated that they would like to be more involved and/or see more young people participating in volunteer efforts and community events.

Transportation was viewed as vital in the community. Participants suggested that a van, bus, or some other form of transportation would assist older adults in the community by giving

them the option to go to town to access services, spend a day out, or get involved in events in the city. One woman stated that “In an ideal world” there would be “a bus!”. Although most of the participants do drive and have access to a vehicle, that was not always the case. One woman expressed her concerns:

I have to go to the Sault and that’s one of the things that I really think we need here is some kind of transportation, cuz I don’t drive, my husband drives. If anything happens to him, I don’t have access to a vehicle.

Most participants acknowledged that even though they drive or have a spouse who does, it may not always be the case and not all community members are as fortunate. They also addressed challenges to driving with age, such as poor eyesight, difficult winter conditions, and reliance on others.

One participant discussed the fact that they used to appreciate having a train in the community. The train station was a primary means of transportation years ago. Community members tell stories about the train station being central to the community that once was. Shortly after the closure of the mill, the train stopped running and the station is now run down and is not being utilized. One participant said “Well right now they are talking about bringing the station back. They want to redo it and have a gift shop and things like that. So that I would like to see, because that would be nice...” It was recently purchased, and a couple of participants indicated that they would like to see it restored.

There are a number of businesses community members said they would like to see. A gas station was one thing that a number of the women said they would like in the community. Other community members identified that they would like to see a “post office”, a “coffee shop”, and a “small restaurant”. They stated that it would be nice to have easier access to everyday amenities.

They would also like to see more opportunities to get involved in activities such as yoga and Zumba.

All participants reflected on the value of community involvement in some way. Most people indicated that they would like to see the younger generation get involved through volunteer networks and community events. A few people also indicated that they would like to be more involved themselves in supporting the younger generation. One participant stated:

I would like to try and engage and use my experience as an older woman to help younger women in the community...and I don't mean babysit, I mean my experience of raising my family, or going to town to work every day, or, you know, cooking on a really small budget.

It's clear from what participants reported that the older generation are more likely to attend community events and get involved. A couple participants expressed concern about the future of community as older community members are no longer able to be as involved.

One participant indicated that it would be helpful to have a liaison person working part time in the community to share information about relevant services and benefits with community members. She said:

I think because now there is a new system that's taken over social services...well, it was part of the city, but now it's its own entity. It's called DSAB and I think that if they could have information services (in Searchmont) for people.

Access to information about potential services is vital in ensuring that the service is used and that the potential recipients are aware of their responsibilities. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, people have been cut-off from necessary services due to the fact that adequate information was not provided to the recipient.

## **CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In order to conclude this study, I will present a summary of the themes discovered in this research project including health and active aging, identity, access to services in Searchmont, and the future of community. I will then discuss implications for social work at micro, meso, and macro levels. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and provide possible considerations for future research about women aging in place in rural areas.

Throughout the process of data collection and data analysis, I have experienced the challenge of generalizing the aging experiences of women in Searchmont due to the differential reality, set of circumstances, and ideas about how to live presented by each woman who contributed to this study. Despite the diversity of their experiences, there were clear parallels in their responses about community life and active living.

### **Health and Active Aging**

Freixas, Luque, and Reina (2012) state that aging is commonly viewed in our society as a state of deterioration; this elicits fear about the realities of getting older and presents the experience of aging as a state of medical quandary. The participants revealed that good health is a vital aspect of aging in place and continuing to live the life they want to live. Most of the participants in this study described their health in positive terms. Given the disproportionate level of health concerns in rural areas (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011; Milan & Vézina, 2011), this sample may not be representative of all older women in the community. Although self-reports are likely to be true, it is important to note that older women in rural communities tend to understate their health concerns and instead express satisfaction with their health (Hinck, 2004; Milan & Vézina, 2011; Wanless, Mitchell, & Wister, 2010). All women interviewed exhibited a



palpable stoicism that may lead the researcher to believe that the women understated any possible health concerns.

The concern identified by most participants with respect to aging was the idea that they were running out of time. They identified three areas of concern regarding deterioration of health: losing the ability to do general activities, being unable to take care of themselves in the home, and diminishing ability to play an active role in the community. A few participants discussed the possibility of having to leave Searchmont in the future should health concerns arise; one participant had already moved by the time our interview occurred in order to be closer to health services. In observing participants, it is noted that their anticipation of having to leave their home was not a priority in the present. Additionally, being fairly pragmatic seemed to lead to participants reporting that they will do what they need to do should the need for relocation arise.

The participants in this study highlighted the importance of ‘active aging’. Overall, they reported that positive aging experiences hinge on the ability to remain involved in activities in the home and in the community. All participants shared their experiences of being involved, in some capacity, in Searchmont – volunteering for the volunteer fire department, the first response unit, or for the community club (*Figure 16* and *Figure 17*). In the home, participants revealed that they often take on multiple roles. Some act as caregiver for their spouse or loved one; many spend time in their gardens growing plants and food, or foraging in the woods; and some take care of household tasks, maintenance, and yard work.

Participants also highlighted the vital role that older adults play in their community. The knowledge and experiences that this can provide are essential to how we understand the value of collective participation and the importance of community. In essence, rather than applying a lens

of deterioration to their aging process, the participants view their active engagement as key to aging well in their home and community. It becomes apparent to the onlooker that participants are intrinsic to community cohesion. The belief that aging is a negative process is limiting because it does not consider the value of meaningful aging experiences.

Gerontology today often focuses on the notion of ‘successful aging’ which primarily concerns itself with individualistic ideas of health and active living (Holstein and Minkler, 2003). It is through public discourse that we begin to internalize notions of aging. This first step in the process is to deconstruct the dominant narratives with respect to aging. Holstein and Minkler (2003) discuss ‘new gerontology’, which has recently received a great deal of attention in the aging literature. This theoretical position sees successful aging as the individual’s responsibility to actively engage in good health practices and community participation throughout their lives in order to sustain healthy habits into old age. This is consistent with a Victorian view of aging which sees healthy aging as an individual choice (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). The Searchmont participants frame ‘aging well’ in the same terms as the new gerontology, revealing the possibility that the participants may have internalized this individualistic discourse. Another possibility is that the participants, and others like them, may have created this discourse.

Holstein and Minkler (2003) criticize new gerontology in favour of critical gerontology by arguing that the approach commonly recognized today (new gerontology) is a normative vision of aging that assumes that older adults are a homogenous group, which is harmful toward older women and rural residents, both of which apply to the women in this study. Adopting a ‘new gerontology’ approach sustains the youth obsession and negative depictions of aging that are common in the dominant discourse. Additionally, it implies that it is the responsibility of

older adults to care for themselves, which promotes an individualistic stance towards the problems that arise with age (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Skinner and Joseph (2011) posit that these individualistic caring burdens heavily impact systems of support in rural communities. With care restructuring, and the subsequent neglect of adequate health and social services, community members will create units of care in the home and community to support older adults; however, this tends to fall on women who are most often those who are actively involved in volunteer roles and informal family caring responsibilities (Skinner & Joseph, 2011). Well there is a strong sense of individuality among participants in this study; there is also a sense of interconnectedness among older women in Searchmont based on the rural context. Individuality and collective attitudes do not have to be contradictory concepts. In fact, participants highlight the value of maintaining autonomy, while also recognizing the importance of sharing and accepting support from others.

### **Identity**

With age comes wisdom and valuable life experiences. The participants in this study reveal that the individual and collective concepts of aging co-exist to form concepts of identity throughout the aging process. I have learned from participants that accepting change throughout the aging process can be challenging, but it is seen as a natural process. It was important to participants to have agency so long as they are willing and able. When they are no longer willing and able, the social aspect becomes essential. Participants have great deal of pride in their agency; however they also appreciate knowing the security that community brings in times of need.

The identity of the participants in this study seemed to be shaped, at least in part by their geographic location. They highlighted the importance of place in their lives with respect to other community members, community spaces, and the rich history of Searchmont. Intersectionality is a key component to learning how older women understand who they are within the context of community (Pannazola & Leipert, 2013; Gilleard & Higgs, 2007). One's physical location and connection with community are important factors in the lives of rural-dwelling older adults and contribute to the formation of rural identity (Dorfman et al., 2004). In forming identities as rural citizens, older women tend to focus on personal histories, their connections to and understanding of events occurring on a larger scale (e.g. World War II), their ties to place, their cultural and religious affiliations, and their connections with friends, neighbours, and family members (Shenk, 1991; Dorfman et al., 2004). These trends were paralleled in Searchmont. Participants similarly seem to understand themselves in relation to the history of community. In communication, buildings, people, and events in the community were tied to a place in the community's timeline.

As essential to critical feminist gerontology, the experiences of women as told by women provide insight into the ways that patriarchal systems have, and continue to impact the lives of women over the course of their lifetime. The participants in this study highlight the experiences of taking on gender roles. These roles become a central aspect of identity. As discussed by the participants in this study, they understand themselves as mothers, wives, and active women in the community. They also discuss how women today have a different experience than women did years ago. Today, it is normal to see women in the paid workforce, whereas, the nature of women's paid work 50 plus years ago was limited to "nursing", for example. In connecting this

finding to community identities, it appears that in much the same way as women held their family systems together, they are also the glue that hold community together.

### **Access to Services in Searchmont, Ontario**

Formal Services are dwindling in rural communities. Since the 1990s major cuts to necessary services and the centralization of services to urban areas has been especially difficult for older women living in rural areas (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). Across the board, there seems to be an increased reliance on the voluntary sector and informal supports. There is an assumption that older women will have well developed informal support networks in rural areas that will fill the gaps created by recent policy restructuring and associated claw backs. This assumption is particularly challenging for older women living in rural areas, who may be isolated or segregated in the community. It also creates difficulties for women without extensive family or those who have families living outside the community (Ryser & Halseth, 2011). Reliance on personal informal supports places strains on relationships and often churches, non-profit organizations, and charities cannot provide the scope of services required by older adults. This will become increasingly more difficult due to the rising number of seniors in rural areas.

This study reveals that similar trends exist in Searchmont. Older women play a key role in community cohesion because of their active participation and involvement in voluntary services and community events. Vital services in the community rely primarily on volunteers such as the community club, the volunteer fire department, the volunteer first response, and the local service board. Many participants said that they would like to see the younger generation involved in the community. Participants in this study revealed that the core volunteers in the community are aging, and the younger generation are not as much involved. Working to develop

cross-generational ties in Searchmont is vital to creating a succession plan for the future interconnected culture of the community and maintaining the services that remain. Beyond ensuring the survival of essential services, bringing generations together would revitalize the community through the development of mutually beneficial projects. It is also necessary that government assurances are available to ensure the survival of essential services.

With the centralization of services and an increasing need to commute to urban centres to access them, transportation becomes essential in rural communities. It is also necessary to build on existing transit strategies in order to ensure that older adults who are unable to drive can still get around the community when they choose. Currently, the responsibility for transit is in the hands of municipal governments, with a primary reliance on volunteers, not-for-profit organizations, and local charities (Transport Canada, 2009). This results in patchwork transit options in most rural communities. In Searchmont, participants shared a similar concern about the limited transportation options available to them. They expressed that they would like to see some form of formal transportation for women who are not able to drive or do not have access to consistent means of commuting. Given that participants are required to access almost all services and amenities in Sault Ste. Marie, this becomes a pressing issue.

### **The Future of Community**

Initially, I was especially interested in what the women in the study had to say about access to services, involvement in the decision making processes impacting their lives, and the formal and informal supports that exist in their day to day life. The biggest thread throughout the interviews was the notion of community that they once knew being lost. All of the women, in some way or another, reflected a change in the fabric of their community, greater fragmentation

between generations or between community members and the businesses/industry in the community, and the aging populace of community members who are involved in volunteer work, community engagement, and informal support networks. The idea of ‘passing the torch’ became a central theme. When the older adults in Searchmont, who seem to be the most involved, are no longer able to hold community together, what will become of it? Will it become revitalised with a new crowd of younger folk or will it cease to be a thriving community and become a rural suburb of Sault Ste. Marie, the largest city nearby?

It is well documented that communities that lose their primary industry deal with economic ramifications (Woodrow, 2002; Cuddy, 2015). Less discussed are the social impacts that also exist. In Searchmont, the loss of the veneer mill, and the subsequent loss of local services and businesses meant that community members had to redefine their understanding of community. The participants in this study reported that the mill was central to how they understood Searchmont. The veneer mill assisted people in the community in building their homes, setting up local services, and providing materials and labour for community projects – beyond being a corporate entity, there was a sense that the mill was central to the social fabric of community. The train station was another important pillar of the community that closed. For a community established around its train station, this was a huge loss. Finally, the school closure also changed the community as discussed by the women. The school was a place to gather and celebrate the accomplishments of fellow Searchmont residents, through graduation for example. It acted as a medium through which community gathered in social exchange. Many participants expressed, in some way or another, that the mill was community - since its closure, participants report witnessing a degradation of other community ties. They discussed how the community has become increasingly fragmented as many people simply reside in Searchmont, but conduct

business or access employment out of town. Because they are no longer connected, there is not the same sense today that community members know each other, whereas at one point participants indicate that they knew almost everyone in the area. The community's autonomy has thus been lost – this creates the sense of 'isolation' in that they are, in some respects, a suburb of Sault Ste. Marie rather than an independent self-sustaining entity.

A common thread in the responses provided by participants is the idea that the fabric of 'community' has changed over the years. Woodrow (2002) discusses the idea of sustainable communities with respect to northern areas that face the challenges of resource dependency, and boom and bust cycles. She discusses some of the strategies that have been used by communities in northern Ontario to protect their lands, communities, and northern interests. One example is the Northwatch coalition, which serves to protect northeastern Ontario from being used for its natural resources without community control, or used as grounds for disposal of waste from larger centres (Woodrow, 2002). Tourism groups such as the Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters and the Northern Ontario Native Tourism Association also work to protect northern interests through diversification of the employment sector, protection of the culture and heritage of various northern populations, and the sustainability of natural economies through the tourism industry (Woodrow, 2002). According to Nozick (1992), there are five key factors that communities often breakdown: "economic de-industrialization, environmental degradation, loss of control over local communities, social degradation and neglect of basic human needs, erosion of local identity and cultural diversity" (as cited in Woodrow, 2002, p. 11). In coming to understand the community of Searchmont through interviews and immersion in the community, it occurred to me that initiatives to 'recue the town' are often reactive rather than based on sustainable long-term solutions. With the great potential to develop the tourism industry, there is



possibility in the area. Participant's also discussed the framing of community today as a place for young people to live off the grid and learn to live off the land. There is the potential to develop the area; however community members should be consulted in this process to ensure that they are a part of the decision making process impacting the future of Searchmont.

As reflected in ecological systems theory, understanding place and position within social structures can depict a more complete version of individual experiences. The discussions that I have had with participants over the course of this study highlight the impact of history, geography, and systemic factors that shape how the women presented aging experiences and their connection to community. Searchmont has faced a great deal of loss over the years, and the women I met with are all actively engaged in trying to hold on to a semblance of the community that once was. The systems shape how women then view their roles - by trying to re-establish what has been lost, for example.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy**

While reviewing the current landscape of policies impacting older women aging in place in rural communities, a number of trends emerge. Most notably, there has been a shift away from the public service realm into the privatization and marketization of services. There has also been a trend of offloading responsibility from the federal level to the provincial and municipal levels. These factors create an increased reliance on the voluntary sector and charity organizations to fill the gaps in services, particularly in rural communities. The centralization of services has further compounded the problem. In the long run, the current service delivery methods in rural communities will not be sustainable, particularly with the influx of older adults moving into these areas. Keeping services in the public realm ensures that they will be available, as opposed

to the private and voluntary sectors which require volunteers and/or the generation of profit through donations and fundraising efforts – none of which can be relied upon consistently. Currently, rural communities are often overlooked with respect to policy decisions, despite the unique circumstances that exist for rural residents. The landscape of northern Ontario also provides challenges due to its distance from large centres in southern Ontario, its relatively small population base, and its history of natural resource dependency. What many people see as Ontario's northern hinterland is geographic space made up of communities with rich histories, creative potential and unique needs. It is imperative that the decisions made about rural spaces in northern Ontario, be made with consideration of the community voices in these areas in order to account for their unique circumstances.

Overall, the themes that emerged in this exploration were that health and active living are central to wellbeing, that community connection and cohesion contributes to positive aging experiences, that transportation and information should be available to assist older women in rural communities in accessing vital services, and that sustainability is essential to community autonomy over time. As industry leaves the community, such is the case in Searchmont, the residents who remain end up holding the community together. Often these efforts are through voluntary programs, which do little to ensure the future of the community.

The lack of service availability and accessibility in rural communities restricts people from aging with dignity in their homes and home communities, which is central to being able to live well while aging in place. Not having basic amenities available forces people to leave areas that are difficult, and often costly, to service. This is especially true of many communities in northern Ontario that face the additional challenges of distance between communities and isolation. The further erosion of services, and subsequent loss of options in the future, may result

in limitations for upcoming generations of older adults and other vulnerable groups who wish to live in rural areas. To prevent rural living from becoming a ‘dying way of life’, more funding and policy direction should be provided to develop publicly funded service initiatives in rural regions.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of considering the community context when working with older women. As stated by Zapf (2010), “central to rural and remote practice is an understanding of context, of locality, of place and its powerful implications for human identity, activity, and problem-solving” (p. 35). Community and the identity that forms around the physical and social spaces they inhabit are central to how older women understand themselves and their multiple roles. When working individually with older women in Searchmont, Ontario, issues of access to services and community loss should be accounted for. With respect to community, developing a strong community foundation, such as through a sustainable community initiative would ensure a brighter future for the region and others like it. It’s also imperative to provide reliable transportation and investment in local services. On a policy front, a stronger system of support would be beneficial in rural areas. Limited information about potential benefits, and policy trends such as service centralization are harmful toward vulnerable populations living in the periphery.

### **Limitations**

Over the course of this study, several limitations were observed. Due to the limited number of participants, it is fairly difficult to draw conclusions about rural life for women aging in Searchmont as a whole. More pressing than numbers alone is the nature of participants who volunteered. The women I spoke with are all under the age of 80, most of them are currently

healthy, and most of them indicated that they felt financially secure. Additionally, most participants drive and have access to a vehicle and share a dwelling with other people. All of the participants who contributed to this research are engaged in community and were willing to share their experiences. There were other community members whose voices were not heard and their perspectives would be equally as pertinent. The information provided by each of these women was valuable in its own right; however, it does not reflect the full array of difficulties and challenges one may experience while aging as a rural-dwelling woman. Additionally, the homogeneity of the sample did not allow for an exploration of issues of race, disability, and other facets of social identity that create different experiences of aging.

With more time and further opportunities to spend time in the community building rapport with community members, it may be possible to connect with women who are further marginalized. In addition to the challenges of the sample, time constraints also presented limitations, as I was not able to fully immerse myself in the community for any extended period. Further research is needed to learn what should be available to better support women aging in place in rural northern Ontario. Studies with a larger sample size would depict a more thorough and generalizable data set. More studies exploring the unique situation of women in these regions would further highlight the role of gender in the aging experience and the unique factors of gender identity in rural communities. Looking at other communities that are more isolated and remote, or further from a metropolitan centre, would provide better insight into the reality of living in an isolated community and finding ways to manage on limited resources.

## Conclusion

In this ethnographic case study of Searchmont, Ontario, I was interested in the experiences of aging in the region, what these experiences reveal about how older women connect to community, and what their experiences and the setting they inhabit reveal about social policies impacting older women in rural areas. The participants in this study brought to light the circumstances that create a unique experience of aging in Searchmont, Ontario. They discussed the importance of health, active aging, and local identity as central to how they understand themselves and their future in the community. Through conversations with community members, the role of women in community also became an important topic of discussion, as older women reflected issues of gender identity such as identification with caregiving roles in the home and in Searchmont.

Through discussion of their experiences, the participants revealed a trend in how they understand and interact within their community setting. There have been major changes to the economic, political, and social circumstances in Searchmont, Ontario, which have been highlighted in both the interviews with older women in the community as well as through photographs of how community places have changed over time (*Figures 1 through 17*). The findings of this study reveal the hardship of losing community cohesion, through the loss of local industry, and the subsequent loss of other central services. The women interviewed in this study all reported being involved, or having been involved, in community efforts and the emphasized the value of finding new ways to connect with one another across generations and length of time spent in the community.

Throughout this research process, I discovered the importance of maintaining close ties with ‘community’ in all of life’s stages. The participants in this study emphasized the value of

community connection to wellbeing throughout the aging process. The loss of industry, and associated businesses and services has had major impacts on the residents who remain to pick up the pieces. Considering community cohesion and sustainability in the future is vital in Searchmont and many rural communities facing similar trends.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer for Snowball Sampling**

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ABOUT AGING IN  
SEARCHMONT, ONTARIO

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of women aging in rural northern Ontario

You would be asked to participate in an interview focused on your experiences of aging in Searchmont, Ontario. I want to understand how you experience and understand the aging process and how you connect with your community.

Your participation would involve one session of 1-1.5 hours in a place of your choosing. Strict privacy and confidentiality will be maintained as per ethical guidelines.

Your consideration is greatly appreciated!

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,  
please contact:

Kayla Tessier, MSW (Candidate), RSW  
Critical Analysis of Social Work Program  
McMaster University

705-279-3204 or

Email: [tessierk@mcmaster.ca](mailto:tessierk@mcmaster.ca)

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance  
by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.**

**Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent****A Study of/about Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario**

Student Investigator:  
Kayla Tessier  
School of Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(705) 279-3204  
E-mail: [tessierk@mcmaster.ca](mailto:tessierk@mcmaster.ca)

Faculty Supervisor:  
Dr. Y. Rachel Zhou  
School of Social Work  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23787  
E-mail: [zhoura@mcmaster.ca](mailto:zhoura@mcmaster.ca)

**What is this study about?** You are invited to take part in this study on the experiences of aging in Searchmont, Ontario. I want to explore how you think about and experience the aging process and how you connect with your community. I am hoping to learn about your valuable experiences of aging in a rural community that has undergone significant changes, such as the closing of local businesses and the veneer mill. I want to find out about your concerns as well as your ideas for change that could also help older adults like you who in rural areas. Finally, I am interested in how you spend your time and where you go to access services.

With a growing population of older adults in Ontario, your participation in this study can contribute to the knowledge about what it means to age in a rural community, particularly in a northern region. I am doing this research for a thesis toward the completion of a Masters of Social Work at McMaster University. Additionally, I may use this research to write academic papers and may possibly add to this information by conducting additional data collection.

**What will happen during the study?** If you choose to be in this study, I will ask you to take part in an interview lasting about 1 to 1.5 hours. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. I will ask you about how the community has changed, what has stayed the same, and about your personal experiences of growing older. I am also interested in how policies and access to services and supports have affected you and what would improve the quality of your life. I will ask you help me develop a community map that identifies important places for you in your community. I will also ask you for some background information like your age and how long you have lived in the community and your sources of income.

**Are there any risks to doing this study?** It is not likely that there will be any serious harms or discomforts from/associated with the interview process; however, you may be asked questions that may be difficult to answer or that may bring up memories that have the potential to elicit an emotional response.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.



**Are there any benefits to doing this study?** This research will likely not benefit you directly. Participating in this study will benefit you by giving you the opportunity to share your concerns and ideas. I hope to learn more about your life as a woman living in a rural community. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help me to better understand the benefits and challenges that you and other women aging in a rural context experience in day to day life. This could contribute to how we understand the process of aging and what can be done to improve the lives of older women in rural areas.

**Who will know what I said or did in the study?** Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. With your permission, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in the written component of this study. Please note that we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Living in a small community, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Additionally, should the interview be conducted in a public place, other community members may be able to identify that you are being interviewed. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password.

**What if I change my mind about being in the study?** Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw), from the interview for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. If you decide to stop being in the study, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

**How do I find out what was learned in this study?** I expect to have this study completed by approximately September, 2016. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it to be sent to you. Please see the Consent portion at the end of this letter for where you can provide that information.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

|  |
|--|
| Kayla Tessier<br>Phone Number: (705) 279-3204<br>Email Address: <a href="mailto:tessierk@mcmaster.ca">tessierk@mcmaster.ca</a> |
|--|

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

---

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Y. Rachel Zhou and Kayla Tessier of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. ...Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to me at this email address \_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

3. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.

... Yes. Please contact me at: \_\_\_\_\_

... No.

4. I agree to have the results collected during my participation in this used in future academic papers.

...Yes.

...No.

## **Appendix C: Oral Consent Script**

### ***A Study of/about Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario*** **Researcher: Kayla Tessier**

### ***Oral Consent Script***

#### **Introduction:**

Hello. I'm Kayla Tessier. I am conducting interviews about the experiences of older women in Searchmont, Ontario. I'm conducting this as part of research toward a Master's thesis project at McMaster University's School of Social Work in Hamilton, Ontario. I'm working under the supervision of Dr. Y. Rachel Zhou of McMaster's School of Social Work.

I located/found your name through you directly OR through (*insert name of community member*) who though you may be interested in being a part of this study.

#### **What will happen during the study?**

If you choose to be in this study, I will ask you to take part in an interview lasting about 1 to 1.5 hours. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. I will ask you about how the community has changed, what has stayed the same, and about your personal experiences of growing older. I am also interested in how policies and access to services and supports have affected you and what would improve the quality of your life. I will ask you help me develop a community map that identifies important places for you in your community. I will also ask you for some background information like your age and how long you have lived in the community and your sources of income.

#### **Are there any risks to doing this study?**

It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts from/associated with the interview process; however, you may be asked questions that may be difficult to answer or that may bring up memories that have the potential to elicit an emotional response.

You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable.

#### **Benefits:**

This research will likely not benefit you directly. Participating in this study will benefit you by giving you the opportunity to share your concerns and ideas. I hope to learn more about your life as a woman living in a rural community. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help me to better understand the benefits and challenges that you and other women aging in a rural context experience in day to day life. This could contribute to how we understand the process of aging and what can be done to improve the lives of older women in rural areas.

**Who will know what I said or did in the study?**

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. With your permission, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in the written component of this study. Please note that we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Living in a small community, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Additionally, should the interview be conducted in a public place, other community members may be able to identify that you are being interviewed. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password.

I will keep the information you tell me during the interview confidential. Information I put in my report that could identify you will not be published or shared beyond the research team unless we have your permission. Any data from this research which will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants. That means it will be reported for the whole group not for individual persons.

**Voluntary participation:**

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason, or up until July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.
- If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.
- If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.
- This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can contact Kayla Tessier via email at [tessierk@mcmaster.ca](mailto:tessierk@mcmaster.ca) or over the phone at (705) 279-3204.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administration, Development & Support (ROADS)  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

I would be pleased to send you a short summary of the study results when I finish going over our results. Please let me know if you would like a summary and what would be the best way to get this to you.

**Consent questions:**

1. Do you agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results?

... Yes.

Please send them to me at this email address \_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

3. Do you agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that you can always decline the request.

... Yes. Please contact me at: \_\_\_\_\_

... No.

4. Do you agree to have the results collected during my participation in this used in future academic papers?

... Yes.

... No.

- Do you have any questions or would like any additional details? *[Answer questions.]*
- Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?  
*[If yes, begin the interview.]*  
*[If no, thank the participant for his/her time.]*

# A Case Study of Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario: Policy Implications

Kayla Tessier

[illegible]

## Appendix E: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide (Questions) Study of/about Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario

The following questions are intended to provide a guideline that will be used during the interview process. The general essence of the questions will remain the same; however, questions may be added or removed during the interview process.

#### Background/ Questions:

1. If you don't mind me asking, what is your age? [*You can give me a range such as "between 50-55".*]
2. What is your relationship status? (*e.g., married, widowed, single, prefer not to answer etc.*)
3. How long have you lived in Searchmont, Ontario?

#### The Aging Process in Searchmont, Ontario:

1. What comes to mind when you think about aging?
2. What are benefits to getting older?
3. Do you have any concerns as you get older? If so, what are they?
4. What do you see as unique about aging as a woman?
5. What is it like getting older in Searchmont?
6. What are your primary sources of income? (*e.g. employment income, pension income, etc.*)
7. Does this cover your basic costs and provide enough for other activities or things that you enjoy?  
[*Probe: If yes, how do you manage? If no, how do you manage?* ]
8. How would you describe life in Searchmont for an older woman?
9. What changes have you observed in the community in the time that you have been living here?
10. How do you think life might be different if you were living in an urban area? [*Probe: How might it be the same?*]
11. In what ways do you feel connected to the community? [*Probe: Do you feel disconnected?*]
12. What do you do to socialize? [*Probe: How often do you socialize outside of your home each week?*]
13. What services and programs are available to you in the community (*e.g., health and social services, local events/groups, other*)? [*Probe: What is not available in the community?*]

14. Where do you go to access services?
15. How do you get around throughout the seasons within Searchmont and beyond? [*Probe: Do you have help?*]
16. Do you have any family nearby? If yes, how often do you see them?
17. What services and programs work well for you? [*Probe: What effect would that have on you if you lost them?*]
18. What would you like to see change in the community to better support you as you age?
19. Is there anything important I have not asked you that you think would help me understand what it is like to be an older woman in Searchmont and would like to share with me today?

**End of Interview**

Thank you so much for taking time to talk to me today.



## **Appendix F: Counselling Services Sheet**

**Researcher: Kayla Tessier**

**A Case Study of Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario: Policy Implications**

### **Counselling Services Information Sheet**

- *Here is a list of services where you can find someone to talk to, if you have something on your mind.*
- *If, at this time, you aren't ready to use one of these services, you might want to talk to a trusted family member or friend that you would normally go to when you have something on your mind.*

#### **SAULT STE. MARIE:**

##### **Mental Health Helpline**

1-866-531-2600

Free Health Services Information.

<http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/Home/Call>

##### **Crisis Services**

705-759-3398

OR 1-800-721-0077

Crisis Services through the Sault Area Hospital.

<http://www.sah.on.ca/programs-services/mental-health-and-addictions/community-programs>

##### **Canadian Mental Health Association**

705-759-0458

General counselling, mental health counselling, access point for information about other relevant services.

<https://ssm-algoma.cmha.ca/>


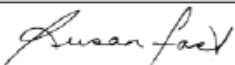
##### **Algoma Public Health**

705-942-4646

Health and mental health services.

<http://www.algomapublichealth.com/>

### Appendix G: MREB Certificate of Ethics Clearance to Involve Human Participants in Research

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|--|----------------------|---|----------------------|
|  <p><b>McMaster University</b><br/>Inspiring Innovation and Discovery</p>   |                      | <p><b>McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)</b><br/>c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support, MREB<br/>Secretariat, GH-305, e-mail: <a href="mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca">ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca</a></p> <p><b>CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH</b></p> |                      |
| <p>Application Status: New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number: 2016 043</p>  |                      |   |                      |
| <p><b>TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:</b></p> <p>A Case Study of Women Aging in Rural Northern Ontario: Policy Implications</p>   |                      |   |                      |
| <b>Faculty Investigator(s)/ Supervisor(s)</b>  | <b>Dept./Address</b> | <b>Phone</b>  | <b>E-Mail</b>        |
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| <p>The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as presented without questions or requests for modification.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is cleared subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:</p> |                      |   |                      |
| <p><b>COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS:</b> Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and cleared before any alterations are made to the research.</p>   |                      |   |                      |
| <p>Reporting Frequency: Annual: Apr-29-2017 Other:</p>   |                      |   |                      |
| <p>Date: Apr-29-2016</p>   |                      | <p>Chair, Dr. S. Fast </p>  |                      |