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Introduction

Ever since COVID-19 burst into public consciousness, we have known that older adults are more vulnerable to the disease. Each morning, we wake to fresh news of the toll the novel coronavirus pandemic is exerting upon 'vulnerable older people' – from the likelihood of developing a more severe form of COVID-19, to the risks of isolation and mental health problems as older people give up social contacts in order to stay safe. We come across essays like the New York Times opinion piece by professor of medicine Louise Aronson (2020), telling us not only about the menace of death, but also about another "rapidly growing phenomenon among older Americans as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: lives stripped of human contact, meaningful activity, purpose, and hope."

We are also confronted with disturbing pandemic narratives of old people as expendable in a time of crisis. We cringed when a UK journalist suggested that COVID-19 might even "prove mildly beneficial" to the UK economy, by killing off, or "disproportionately culling," dependent elderly retirees (Roberts 2020). At the same time, we witnessed a surge of public proclamations of the value and belovedness of vulnerable older people in need of civic care, and we could not ignore the call for intergenerational solidarity: if not to protect oneself, we should each be wearing masks and practicing social distancing to safeguard vulnerable others, namely the cherished elderly among us. So, the college youth who was criticized for partying nonchalantly over spring break on the beaches of Florida ("If I get corona, I get corona") later performed over Instagram and CNN a dramatized public apology, pronouncing that he has in his life "elderly people who I adore more than anything in the world" (Ortiz 2020).

In all this shifting and divergent public dialogue about aging and COVID-19, a very uniform image of the older person has emerged, as suffering and vulnerable. A Gerontological Society of America editorial, "Aging in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic," aptly identifies this homogenization: "What we are seeing in public discourse is an increasing portrayal of those over the age of 70 as being all alike with regard to being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society" (Ayalon *et al.* 2020, 1). Paired with such images of vulnerability is a highly disease-centered view of aging, with old age relentlessly presented vis a vis COVID-19 as a risk factor akin to a comorbidity – that is, a disease or medical condition simultaneously present with another disease in a patient – so that aging or old age itself becomes one of a pair of risky diseases.

Yet, anthropologists know that (older) people lead highly diverse lives that are situated by bodily-health conditions, class, race, gender, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and personal aspirations. It hence

did not come as a surprise to me that in my early pandemic research with a group of 25 older Americans (from March through September, 2020), I found that not all older people are languishing in the era of COVID-19. It is significant that among this group of 25 participants – whose ages range from 69 to 93 – all are economically secure (although one lives in state-subsidized housing, and several were raised poor), and each has access to a computer and the internet. In terms of health, some in this group are highly fit, while others contend with conditions like diabetes, chronic cancer, and difficulty walking. None are in the "fourth age" of "deep" old age characterized by acute frailty, loss of agency, and dependence (Gilleard and Higgs 2010, 2011; Twigg 2006, 50-51). This is not to say, though, that anthropologists should not also work hard to conduct fine-grained pandemic research with frail older people, rather than leaving their voices during this crisis muted and out of reach (Verbruggen, Howell, and Simmons, this issue). At the same time, I did not find to be unusual my study population of relatively fit older persons able to engage in socially-distanced research conversations through the use of virtual technologies. We all know countless older people in private and public life – including leaders like Dr. Anthony Fauci and both the 2020 US presidential candidates – who are enjoying vigorous third-age lives and are adept at using virtual technologies.

In this preliminary piece, I wish to share and explore my older interlocutors' diverse and often upbeat stories of resilience, sociality, and innovation. My aim is help recast the overgeneralized narrative of the 'vulnerable older person,' which risks being reified through the prevailing pandemic discourses on aging.

Pandemic stories

As the pandemic took hold, my university's Institutional Review Board announced that "effective immediately and until further notice, the IRB has determined that all face-to-face interactions with human subject participants must cease."[1] So, I quickly transitioned to online and phone research, turning my attention to older interlocutors' experiences of the pandemic. As I had been conducting ethnographic fieldwork already with older Americans, focusing on their engagement with healthy-successful-aging discourse (Lamb 2014, 2018), it made the most sense for me to draw mainly from the same group of participants for the new pandemic-focused project. In the virtual interview conversations, I was sometimes accompanied by undergraduate student research assistants, and many older interlocutors expressed their pleasure in engaging with the students, especially as other cross-generational interactions were curtailed.[2] My 25 interlocutors live mostly in Massachusetts (also New York and California) and are of a range of race-ethnicities, including mostly white, one Asian American, and four Black participants, with religious identities that vary from Jewish to Christian to Buddhist to "spiritual but not religious" to atheist. Most are living in independent houses or apartments, both with and without a spouse, while three live in retirement communities, and one had moved into a multi-generational home with two daughters and a grandson.

A few striking themes stand out from the many rich interviews and conversations held by Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp, email, and phone. One is a common feeling among the interviewees that the pandemic is less hard on older people than on many younger folk. Many also indexed a resilience that comes with age. I was also struck by my older interlocutors' inventive ability to pivot routines, as they persisted in maintaining vibrant social connections and a sense of some control over their own health, even amidst the pandemic and quarantine. Finally, I noticed new and rather positive ways people identified with being 'old,' an identity previously shunned. I turn now to explore these themes in my interlocutors' pandemic stories and reflections.

Life (less) disrupted

Everyone I spoke with felt shocked by the pandemic and quarantine during the early days, and many described periods of feeling overwhelmed and deeply saddened by the magnitude of what the society and world was going through, facing so much disruption and loss. But when I asked, "Is the pandemic harder on the older or younger generations?" I was struck that most replied that it's harder on younger people. Sure, in terms of physical health, older people are at higher risk of developing serious complications from the disease. But because they had already retired and fashioned the large contours of their lives (marriages, careers, education…), many imagined that, compared to the young, the quarantine is less disruptive to their daily routines, incomes, and aspirations. Doug, age 71, remarked:

> I'd say unquestionably the quarantine is harder for the younger people. Because a lot of the older people are kind of, I won't say isolated, but they already have a home routine. … It's almost easier for them to do the distancing. And even though everybody's social at every age, I find that the older people have it a little easier, because they don't have to worry about stopping school; they don't worry about going out on dates. You know, my son's 33 – he's still dating, and I said, 'Well, how's it going?' And he said, 'Well, I haven't been able to go out.'

When I asked how her days were going, Susan, age 78, remarked, "Basically fine! We're fine. I really think it's easier for the older people." Ken, 75, remarked, "We feel lucky that we're [retired and] not working – we didn't lose our jobs like a lot of younger people did, so nothing changes with the income stream." Ruth, age 87, told a few students and me on a Zoom chat: "It's harder for younger people! I'm 80-something years old. I've *had* a good life. You should have a chance."

Expressing a minority perspective, Cynthia disagreed with others in my study that the pandemic is even harder for younger than older generations, because missing one or two years of regular life will only be a fraction of remaining time for a 25-year-old. She and her husband had just turned 70. "Say we have ten more years to live," she mused. "If we spend two of them locked down, that's 20 percent of our remaining lifespan." Yet many conversations expressed a deep concern for younger people, who – although much less likely to endure severe medical complications from COVID-19 – are uniquely vulnerable to the potential of having their social lives upended, careers derailed, and finances shattered (Mull 2020). Public representations of intergenerational solidarity have focused on the need for younger people to protect the older, vulnerable ones, while leaving largely invisible older people's expressions of care for younger generations. Elders in my multi-generational fieldwork conversations, however, frequently articulated expressions of care, understanding, and solidarity flowing from older to younger generations.

Resilience that comes with aging

Many of my older interlocutors also described a vital resilience that comes with increased age and life experience, giving them a resourcefulness to brave the pandemic. Other commentaries in gerontology and geriatrics have also stressed the importance of resilience – the capacity to cope with difficult situations – in many older people's responses to the pandemic (Chen 2020; Colenda *et al*. 2020).[3] Doug in my study commented:

> I think the tension is much worse for younger people because, you know, it's unprecedented for everybody; but when you haven't had any [difficult life challenges before] – I mean, the older people, we've coped with, you know, not pandemics, but crises before.

Shirley, age 69, had survived two cancers with enduring health impacts, a divorce, and the death of her younger brother. She related, "People tell me now, during the pandemic, 'Don't do this! Don't do that! It's not safe!' I want to tell them, '*Life* is not safe!'" Directing her comments especially to the two young students on our Zoom chat, she observed as we were weathering the pandemic's early days:

> Older people tend to be a lot more flexible and creative. I think the more experiences you have, the more ways—the more ways you have to look at life. … As one ages, you have great experiences, good experiences, horrible experiences, and everything. So, you learn to kind of surrender and do what you have to do to make the best of it. … I know that at my age, part of life is just to feel joy … – to be as happy as you can given the circumstances, and sometimes they [the circumstances] suck!

Lulu, age 81, remarked: "Every year that goes by, I feel stronger. … I guess I'm resourceful enough now [during the pandemic] not to feel upset by missing all the things I would ordinarily wish to do." Dianne, age 77, articulated a similar advantage of being older during the pandemic:

> We've learned to have more patience. When we were younger, like you girls [addressing the students on our Zoom chat], we didn't have the patience that we have now. Some people may not, but I think most people, from all the things you go through in life, you learn patience.

Harry, age 73, told of how this pandemic brings to mind his Vietnam War experiences, where he first developed resiliency. To the students on our group Zoom chat, he recalled:

> I was dealing with something really scary when I was your age, 19 years old in Vietnam, and there was no guarantee I was going to come back. … I wasn't the fastest. I wasn't the strongest. I was scared! You know, I was a kid from the Southside of Chicago and suddenly at 19, I'm confronting this craziness and confronting my mortality. So, now *you* may be confronting your mortality. … But what you learn from this experience … can help prepare you for your future.

Pointing to his six other older friends on the group chat, he said, "We all, you know, we've overcome a lot. … I guess the message about aging is that resiliency is really important." Ruth, age 87, told of growing up poor as a Black girl in the segregated south; her parents were live-in domestic servants for a white family, and her schooling in the 1930s took place in a one-room schoolhouse for Black children, hand built by local Black farmers. Since that time, while forging a meaningful career as an educator, Ruth had persisted through other life challenges, including the deaths of beloved family members, her own breast cancer and, most recently, her son being hospitalized for six weeks on a ventilator from COVID-19. Through several Zoom conversations, she exuded a sense of resilience and optimism, some of which she attributed to her being "an 87-year-old person" who had learned from so many life experiences. About the pandemic, Ruth remarked, "We need to look for the good in this opportunity. It didn't just happen for nothing." Some of the lessons this crisis could teach us, she thought, were learning to become more attentive to the needs of others, doing with a little less and sharing, and taking time for reflection, to stop and think. She told us that each day, she tries to find and notice some "beautiful things of the pandemic," such as how her grandson set up two gardens in the backyard, and what a joy it is to see how all the green beans, cucumbers, and tomatoes are coming along.

We glean in such narratives a sense of the multiple ways that past life experiences can shape older adults' current experiences of the pandemic. Their narratives suggest that the transformative life

experiences many older people have accrued over long lives gives them a resilience, insight, and emotional protection that helps them traverse this challenging time.

Vibrant socialities and distant proximities

Most of my interlocutors also report being able to pivot their routines to maintain vibrant social connections, even while carefully observing all the social-distancing rules. Aside from standard phone calls, many have quickly adopted virtual platforms like Zoom, FaceTime, Houseparty, and Bridge Base Online as avenues for social interaction. When he logged on to our Zoom meeting, Walt at 93 had just come in from his daily walk outside with his wife and sister-in-law, six feet apart. In mid-March, he had also quickly adapted to holding over Zoom the music appreciation class he teaches through his synagogue, while signing up for the synagogue's many other virtual classes and services. Ken and June, ages 75 and 74, described the quarantine as feeling almost party-like at first, as friends were getting together for socially-distanced walks outside, learning to use Zoom, and participating in virtual Seders. "Zoom has become even more popular than toilet paper!" Ken laughed.

A few weeks into the Massachusetts lockdown, Lloyd, age 71, commented, "The last 72 hours, people I haven't been in touch with for years – those who are still alive – are all checking in. … So, I absolutely have more contacts now with some people than before!" He held up his calendar for me to see over Zoom; in each white square, he had entered one or more people he planned to contact by phone, email, or video conferencing. "On a day where there's a vacancy, I insert a reason to call a person – and now I have a full week!" He copied me on a cheerful message he emailed to a group of old friends:

> Two days ago, Jerry and I had the wonderful pleasure of Zooming with a long-lost friend of 49 years. How wonderful we all concluded that was. The world is a mess, but Zoom has transformed our existence in it. Recommendation: Reach out and 'Zoom' someone.

To socialize, Dianne, age 77, has shared virtually every pandemic meal by speaker phone with a close friend who, like her, is widowed and living alone. She looks forward to carrying her breakfast, lunch, and dinner out to her balcony, propping up the phone, and enjoying her meals and conversation with a dear friend. When I asked Gayle, 84, how she was doing with the pandemic, she replied, "I'm fine! I have a deck. I can have one or two people over for lunch seven days a week." She had always enjoyed cooking, and now even more so. She and her friends are all sure to sit six feet apart. "If it's cold, we either drink more wine or bundle up!" Gayle laughed.

Senior residential communities are getting an especially bad rap in media and public discourse, and of course many nursing homes have experienced tragic, shocking losses of residents to COVID-19. Here, too, however, we encounter an overgeneralized narrative of nursing home horrors. My few interlocutors living in three different retirement communities in Massachusetts and California each describe feeling very safe in their homes, which to date (as of September 2020) had experienced almost no COVID-19 cases. While missing their institutions' in-person group activities, each interlocutor had adapted to socially distant connections. Elizabeth, a white woman in her late seventies, participates in Zoom meetings throughout the day and evening, including as a member of her residence's diversity and hospitality committees. Then, when the Black Lives Matter movement resurged across the nation in response to the police killing of George Floyd, Elizabeth's local church began a Zoom anti-racism group which she joined, reading and virtually discussing books like Ibram Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility.* Carol described how her retirement community began to organize a mobile bar to come to residents' doors for pandemic Friday happy hours, as she and her

hallway neighbors would choose their cocktails and pull their chairs into their open doorways, conversing with each other at a distance. "It almost feels like normal again!" she exclaimed with a smile.

We can see that the prevailing narrative about older people languishing in isolation during pandemic times is, for many, simply untrue. At the same time, it would be equally overgeneralizing to suggest that all my interlocutors found social distancing easy and joyful. The most common regret expressed was missing physical time together with grandchildren. Marjorie further declared, "I'd dump the alone time in a second! The thought of living an isolated life like this, just electronically connected, is unbearable."

On being ("Yes, I am") old

Finally, I have been struck by new ways my interlocutors are claiming the identity of being 'old,' as an unexpectedly motivating identity. Anyone familiar with US cultures of aging will know that Americans have long eschewed identifying as old, an identity widely perceived as negative, pejorative, ageist, and something "other" than one's "ageless" self (Gillick 2006; Kaufman 1985; Lamb 2018). This is a phenomenon I had been critically scrutinizing in my US research for some years (Lamb 2014, 2018). Suddenly, when the pandemic struck, I began noticing the very same interlocutors who had resisted calling themselves old, now claiming the identity:

> "You know, I'm old! I'm in a high-risk group."
> "I'm old! I qualify for the senior grocery-store hours—I'm going to use them!"
> "I'm old! I have to be very careful!"
> "Now, friends just as old as you, are calling to tell you, 'Now, don't go out!'"

One certainly could consider such acts of embracing an 'old' identity to be evidence of internalizing the kinds of ageist ideologies that have flourished during the pandemic, such as that all people over a certain age (say, 65 or 70) are 'on the way out' and doomed to die (Gullette 2020). Yet in my interlocutors' old-embracing dialogue, to my surprise, I began to see the new claim to the identity of 'old' as being often not defeatist or self-deprecatory, but rather in some ways affirmative and motivating. For some, donning the identity of 'old' served to heighten their motivation to take agency over their own health – practicing self-care and hygiene, "following all the rules," eating well, and exercising more. Marjorie, age 77, had never been able to get herself to exercise, but now, during the pandemic, she made a point to walk each day. Walt at 93 described walking and exercising as "almost an addiction," especially during the pandemic, saying with a smile, "If I miss a day, I'm almost afraid!" Lloyd described his meticulous safety practices, including scrubbing down everything to enter the home, and (after seeing "COVID-19 is present" signs in his building's lobby) keeping as far as possible from the crack under his apartment's front door. "I'm trying to keep going! Now I have a threat at my door, if you know what I mean! But I'm trying to keep going."

Doug, age 71, and his wife had both been infected by the virus during the early days when New York City, their home, was at the pandemic's US epicenter. "And you know, when you're old and you realize that you're in the cohort that is [at higher risk], it's tough. And so, you know, it was a sobering thing." But now that they have both recovered, Doug remarked:

> I'm maniacal about trying to get my 30 to 45 minutes of a workout in every other day. … My point on this is that you got to be, you got to remain active, you got to keep moving. That's critical … You know, I want to live forever or die trying! That's my mantra.

Some also described how a new awareness of their own aging and mortality during the pandemic inspired a heightened sense of making the most of life and understanding or even embracing the existential limits of the human condition. In a group Zoom conversation with me, five students, and seven longtime friends in their seventies, Jack shared: "I used to think I was invincible and invulnerable. Like nothing could hurt me. And now I'm using hand sanitizer when I open the door! I'm afraid of this virus!" He urged the students on our chat to not take their health for granted. "I didn't really realize before that health really is evanescent. It's fragile. … So, my message is that this event has awoken me to my vulnerability. I think this should be a lesson to all people." Bill concurred, adding, "It's good not to lose sight of that objective truth." Harry observed, "Whenever you're confronted with death, like we are right now, and you overcome that, then you have resiliency. And the more you learn from that, the better quality of your life."

Doug, the one who had survived the virus, mused:

> I think this illness just potentiated our ability to battle it out every day. … In terms of my sense of mortality, I think, man, I'm surprised I got to this age to begin with! So, you know, I look at every day like it's a gift. You know, live every day like you're gonna die tomorrow, because one day you're going to be right!

Doug feels that his newfound awareness of mortality serves to heighten, rather than curtail, his positive drive to make the most out of life. In a different conversation, George, age 85, reflected:

> I'm gonna tell you right now what it's like in the coronavirus crisis. I'm old, and old people are supposed to be especially vulnerable. … But, you know, I feel lucky to be as old as I am. I will feel lucky to be older still if that works out. … You know, I'm alive. I've been alive for a long, long time. I look forward to whatever I look forward to, but I know it will end. . . . I had this very kind of weird email exchange the other day with somebody who said, because we're going to die, life has no meaning. And I said, 'No, just the opposite! Because we're going to die, we have 60 or 80 or 100 years to give it meaning.' We humans have that right – it's part of what agency is. It's that I create the meaning of my life.

On the eve of the pandemic Rosh Hashanah of 2020, Lloyd – who is African American and Christian – sent to a group of mixed-ethnic old college friends an email greeting: "Ya'll are getting' old!! We've been doing this for a l-o-n-g time now! And, no matter our conditions, how blessed we are to still be able to celebrate another year's passing in whoever's tradition. Happy Rosh Hashanah and Peace, Lloyd."

Humor about being old during the pandemic has also cropped up a lot in my pandemic conversations, possibly for reasons suggested by Tom McTague in his *Atlantic* essay, "Yes, Make Coronavirus Jokes": "Humor helps us take back control *and* connect – two things we have lost in our fight against the pandemic" (McTague 2020). Lloyd joked about his grocery shopping experiences while utilizing the pandemic senior citizen hours: "They only give us an hour to walk around, and half of us can't walk!" While I was chatting with Nick, a text message came in from his niece. He texted back, reading aloud to me and laughing: "They say old people are more in danger from the virus, so it's a good thing I'm only 91! Ha ha." Here, we see examples of older adults claiming value and agency with, rather than merely against, vulnerability (Verbruggen, Howell, and Simmons, this issue).

Concluding thoughts

We are witnessing such profound human suffering amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that it may seem strange or unbefitting to bring to light some older Americans' pandemic narratives of optimism, humor, and resilience. Anthropologists are well positioned to strive to expose the suffering of vulnerable populations facing COVID-19, illuminating the myriad intertwined biological and social complexities of the virus in a world riddled with intensified social, economic, and health inequalities (Ennis-McMillan and Hedges 2020; Higgins, Martin and Vesperi 2020; Sadruddin and Inhorn 2020). As part of understanding pandemic suffering, we absolutely need to recognize the global toll the COVID-19 pandemic is exerting upon vulnerable older people, and to pay attention to the diverse origins of this vulnerability.

However, the dominant narrative of the 'vulnerable older person' in the time of COVID-19 is misleading and even damaging in its uniformity. Older people in the pandemic are not only vulnerable, isolated, and dying. Many are also experiencing resilience, vibrant social connections, agency, and pleasure. If discourse on aging in the time of COVID-19 focuses only on vulnerability, we risk perpetuating implicit ageist assumptions, which are already so rampant in our society in ways often hard for North Americans to recognize (Applewhite 2016; Gullette 2017, 2020; Lamb 2018). In the prevailing pandemic public discourse of aging, we are bombarded with overgeneralized images of all older people as 'those who are about to die,' vulnerable, frail, unable to employ new virtual technologies, and not innovative in times of dramatic change.

By seeking out older Americans' own voices and perspectives – concentrating for this project on those who were able to communicate virtually, with privileged access to the internet and technology – we see some alternatives to the prevailing stereotypes. The abundant conversations and narratives shared by my interlocutors shed light on more complex and nuanced pandemic aging experiences, providing an antidote to the homogenization and anonymization of a large and diverse group. These fieldwork conversations have helped me see how an anthropology of aging in pandemic times needs to regard both the harsh realities of the immense suffering of many older people, and the diverse ways the positive human experiences of optimism, resilience, hope, empathy, strength, and creativity can come to matter across the life course.

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Notes

1. This announcement was made by the Brandeis University IRB on March 19, 2020, and remained posted on its website as of this writing: https://www.brandeis.edu/ora/compliance/irb/. Accessed September 23, 2020.

2. From March through June 2020, Brandeis undergraduate research assistants Ji Chen, Izzy Hochman, Gabriela Mendoza, Claire Ogden, Tirtza Schramm, and Lin Xinbei participated in many of the Zoom interviews and

helped with interview transcribing and data analysis.

3. See also MacLeod *et al*. 2016 for a review of gerontological literature on resilience among older adults.

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