Chapter 3 – Cultural narratives and counter narratives about aging

3.1 Introduction

"Living a life of your own"; "being your own person"; "marching to the beat of your own drum"; "becoming who you are"; contemporary self-realization discourse is replete with images and expressions that suggest a certain view of the self. Although rarely made explicit, this image of the self can broadly be described as self-reliant, independent, autonomous, atomistic and essentialist. It has already been pointed out that in contrast, the reframed understanding of self-realization that this study aims to develop presupposes the embedding of the self in a social and cultural context. Consequently, our identity is seen as a socio-culturally constituted phenomenon, rather than an essential inner "core self". Moreover, our lives and selves are perceived as intrinsically interwoven with those of others rather than atomistic and independent. In other words, who we are can only be understood against the background of the social and cultural context of our lives.

It follows from such a view of the self that the availability of sufficient social and cultural resources of identity is quintessential to a successful process of self-realization. As discussed earlier however (§1.3), this study is fueled by the observation that aging in late modernity lacks precisely those viable, inspiring cultural perspectives on later life that should provide aging individuals with resources for creating and maintaining a meaningful "age identity". Gullette (2004) defines this age identity as "each person's collection of 'information' about age and aging in general and stories about their own age and aging in particular" (p. 15). A further exploration of the relation between cultural narratives, identity building and aging forms the theme of this chapter.

First, a general theoretical perspective on cultural narratives and their role in identity building is presented (§3.2.1). Also, potential identity-related problems associated with dominant cultural "master narratives" are discussed (§3.2.2). These problems, it is argued, can best be understood in terms of failure to recognize and accommodate people's moral agency in different ways

(§3.2.3). Subsequently, ideas about how this identity damage caused by cultural narratives can be repaired by creating viable counter narratives are discussed (§3.2.4). The theory developed by Lindemann Nelson in her work *Damaged identities, narrative repair* (2001), complemented with some relevant insights that can be found in the work of Honneth on recognition (*Anerkennung*) and reification (*Verdinglichung*) (1995, 2008, 2012) form the main basis of the discussion. The general theoretical insights on how cultural narratives and identity can be applied to the context of aging are discussed next (§3.3), drawing first on insights from cultural and critical gerontological thought (§3.3.1). Two dominant contemporary categories of cultural narratives on aging are distinguished and discussed: decline narratives (§3.3.2) and age-defying narratives (§3.3.3). Following this, their problems and limitations are analyzed (§3.3.4). The final section of this chapter is dedicated to an exploration of a set of possible alternative counter narratives about later life (§3.4). In an attempt to repair the most important shortcomings of decline narratives and age-defying narratives, a tentative outline for so-called "narratives of becoming" is sketched. This outline foreshadows some of the important features of the reframed version of the late modern interpretation of self-realization that this study advances.

3.2 Cultural narratives and counter narratives

3.2.1 Cultural (master) narratives and their role in identity-building

In the context of this study, cultural narratives are defined as agglomerates of stories, imaginaries, meanings, representations, archetypes, views and stock images existing in a certain culture about a social group, for instance women, Muslims, gay/lesbian people, or aging individuals. This is a deliberately broad definition which includes, but is not restricted to narratives as traditionally understood stories with a beginning, middle and end. Most importantly, my understanding of cultural narratives presents them as carriers of meaning in the broadest sense. Cultural narratives are disseminated in a given culture through various means, and they pervade our lifeworld in a sometimes conscious, but also often largely unconscious manner (Lindemann Nelson, 2001; Meyers, 1994). They provide the horizon against which we situate our own life narratives (C. Taylor, 1989). They supply us with a reservoir of both narrative form and content on which to model our own identities. Other terms that emphasize this function of cultural narratives are "macro narrative environment" (Randall & McKim, 2008), and "ideological setting" (McAdams, 1996).

From early childhood throughout life, we are constantly confronted with explicit and implicit cultural narratives about different aspects of our world.

They come to us through fairy tales or comic books, advertisements, newspapers, TV shows, exemplary figures like parents or teachers, works of art and many other media. These cultural narratives give direction to our views and perceptions, inform our choices and judgments, influence which social roles are or are not available to us, and influence how we think and act in certain situations. Cultural narratives are thereby indispensable meaning-generating resources without which we cannot form a viable identity. Lindemann Nelson (2001) reminds us that "it's neither possible or desirable to extricate one's thinking to any great degree from all the clichés of one's culture, since these are the understandings we share in common. If a person were to dissociate herself from them completely, she would no longer be able to understand either herself and the people around her or the workings of her society" (p. 85). Despite their indispensable status as identity resources however, cultural narratives may also severely restrict the options that are available to members of a particular social group to form a certain identity. This is the case if they produce and reproduce prejudiced sets of images and expectations that are so pervasive that they are very hard to counter (Meyers, 1994). The expected result is marginalization and oppression. Members of social groups that are thus marginalized in a given culture are unlikely to have the same access to that culture's dominant ideals of a good life.

Any given culture harbors a diverse array of cultural narratives, but some narratives have a more dominant position than others. Lindemann Nelson (2001) describes these as "master narratives" (p. 6). She defines cultural master narratives as "the stories circulating in our culture that embody socially shared understandings" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 84). The role of cultural (master) narratives is expressed by De Medeiros (2005) when she defines them as "the stories (or story fragments) 'told' by a culture to communicate the values, expectations and attitudes of that culture" (p. 2). The quotation marks surrounding the word *told* in this definition emphasize that cultural narratives are very broadly perceived and do not only include traditional stories put into a coherent lingual form, but can also encompass more diffuse expressions, such as artistic expressions or media representations.

Cultural master narratives derive their pervasive force from the fact that they represent convictions and expectations shared by the majority of people in a given context. This grants them the status of self-evident truths. Any alternative narrative challenging this truth will have to go against the tide to convince the majority that what they perceive as the status quo is instead a prejudiced standpoint. Because this is very complicated, cultural master narratives are strongly resistant to change.

But cultural master narratives do not only shape our expectations about what is "fitting" behavior for people in general, they also influence our self-image and what we expect of ourselves. Even if we disagree with them consciously,

our reactions may still unconsciously be influenced by these cultural narratives. Critical feminist gerontologists from De Beauvoir (1970/1972) to Gullette (1997, 2004, 2011) have underscored, for example, how the self-image of older women has become contaminated with cultural expectations about loss of sexual attractiveness and social invisibility. Being constantly confronted with either implicit or explicit confirmations of such a master narrative strengthens and consolidates this view and may result in internalization of the corresponding image.

Cultural master narratives that express socially shared understandings about a certain social group inevitably affect the identities of its members. People always belong to different social groups at the same time. Importantly, some group memberships are "found", such as our gender or our family, whereas others are "chosen", such as our profession, religious affiliation or membership of a sports club or choir. We all negotiate our current identities in interaction with both our found and our chosen communities. Communities of choice, however, grant us the opportunity to resist harmful or limiting socio-cultural positioning that we are subjected to by our membership of communities that are given (Friedman, 1992).

Although many master narratives are benign, some can be morally evil. The latter tend to "unfairly depict particular social groups as lacking in virtue or as existing merely to serve others' ends" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 152). One only need to think of the master narratives about Jews abounding in Nazi Germany to appreciate their potential for damaging consequences. Yet the identity-restricting influence of cultural master narratives can also be much more subtle and even exerted with the best intentions. For example, in cultures where girls are culturally positioned as subservient domestic creatures, expected to bear children and be obedient wives, it is often not perceived in their best interest to engage in a life outside the home. Consequently, elements that could constitute their identity associated with obtaining (higher) education or fulfilling a professional role are generally not available to them.

The range of identity resources provided by cultural narratives depends on a variety of factors, such as the historical and cultural outlook or one's social position. The analysis of late modernity in chapter 2 suggests that available identity resources have become more pluralistic and insecure given the fact that previously dominant grand narratives, provided by religious and moral traditions for instance, have lost their authority over us. Navigating this pluralism can be cause for identity confusion, but may also harbor opportunities for resistance. The availability of cultural identity resources also fluctuates during the life course. In youth and adulthood, one may have access to resources that become blocked in later life. Obvious examples include the values and social roles our cultures attach to paid labor, which escape our reach upon (mandatory) retirement.

In light of their typical resistance to transformation, changing cultural narratives is a very complicated task. It can never be accomplished by the simple act of an individual, but always requires efforts by many actors at multiple levels (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). The fact that transformation of cultural narratives can be so difficult does not mean, however, that cultural narratives represent static entities, or that they always offer clear and unambiguous sets of stories, views and expectations that raise no doubts or conflicts. On the contrary, cultural narratives are dynamic, evolving and complex phenomena that exert their influence on our lives in many ways that are often difficult to trace.

3.2.2 Damaging effects of cultural narratives

Let me elaborate on how cultural master narratives may exert negative influences on people's identities according to Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory. She emphasizes that malignant cultural master narratives tend to lead to a certain social positioning of a (sub)group (e.g., women, African Americans, Muslims, homosexuals, elderly, et cetera) that is damaging to their identities. Typically, the people belonging to this group become identified with a limited number of stereotypical characteristics. For example, women are supposed to be caring, elderly are expected to be slower, less flexible, or dependent, African Americans are perceived as lazy, et cetera. Other characteristics of (members of) the social group that do not fit the stereotypical image presented by the master narrative get lost from sight. This negates individual differentiation within the (sub)group, making individual differences (socially) invisible or irrelevant. It also results in exclusion from opportunities and social roles (Wolfensberger, 2013). According to Lindemann Nelson (2001), malignant cultural master narratives can exert their oppressive, marginalizing and stereotyping effect in four different ways. Firstly, they can exercise an *expulsive* force, whereby the subject of the narrative is driven out of the larger society. Secondly, they can exert a *dismissive* force, whereby the subgroup is tolerated in larger society but only on the margins. Thirdly, they can exercise a *pressive* force, whereby the subgroup is forced into a servile position towards the dominant group. Finally, they can exercise the *preservative* force, that positions the subgroup in such a manner that it represents the contrasting "other" necessary to maintain the dominant ideology (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 113).

Lindemann Nelson distinguishes between two damaging effects that can be imposed on people by oppressive and marginalizing cultural (master) narratives.

1. *Deprivation of opportunity* (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 23-28), which describes a situation in which people are excluded from certain roles, chances and options as a result of the stereotypical way in which they are presented

by master narratives. Being a member of the group of "older employees", for example, all too often means being associated with diminished strength or speed. This may result in being deprived of the opportunity to solicit functions or tasks requiring these capacities, even if one's individual strength or speed are actually quite sufficient.

2. *Infiltrated consciousness* (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 28-34), which does not operate from the outside, but from within the person itself. Dominant stories and images are internalized by individuals and influence their self-image and the opportunities they envision for themselves. I encountered an interesting example hearing my own parents and their friends say that for them, one of the challenges of retirement was "getting used to *not being needed anymore*". Note that this was expressed as a completely self-evident fact by people with rich social lives who are valued as parents, grandparents, friends, volunteers and so on. Apparently the dominant cultural narrative that being productive in the labor market gives access to a certain good (i.e., being needed in society) which is lost upon retirement is so strong that it is internalized as an inevitable fact of life. Characteristically, people are not aware of the harming effect of infiltrated consciousness, because it is experienced as the "normal" state of affairs. However, this makes its malignancy even more serious.

In order to free people from both categories of harm, it is required that their identity can be *redefined* in the context of alternative stories. One needs to be able to identify with alternative stories replacing the dysfunctional identification (in terms of infiltrated consciousness) with dominant oppressive or restrictive stories, a process Lindemann Nelson describes as "narrative repair" (p. 20). This presupposes (re)gaining access to resources for telling and confirming alternative stories, which should be provided by one's social and cultural communities. The two harms require repair in conjunction with each other; a redefinition of the self that challenges people's infiltrated consciousness may lead other people to perceive the people in question differently, which in turn may result in an increase in opportunities that mitigate the harming effect of deprivation. But it works the other way around as well, because efforts to increase people's opportunities are likely to influence their self-image and increase their self-respect as moral agents; this should have a positive influence on reducing the harm brought about by infiltrated consciousness. The overarching aim of the redefinition entailed by narrative repair of identities is always to reclaim and enhance people's *moral agency*. The next section further elaborates on the connection between this notion and the theme of cultural narratives and identity.

3.2.3 Moral agency and the importance of recognition

The concept of moral agency plays a crucial role in my reframing of the late modern self-realization discourse. I define moral agency as *the ability to lead a good life, with and for others, according to one's highest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community*. The background of this choice of formulation is further elucidated in §5.5. Although Lindemann Nelson's (2001) discussion of moral agency as the good that is reclaimed in the process of narrative identity-repair is not explicitly associated with the theme of self-realization, I think her understanding of moral agency shows sufficient similarities with the one advanced in this study.

In Lindemann Nelson's view, our moral agency is connected to a process of moral self-definition that is the target of identity-repairing counter narratives. Moral self-definitions can be either weak or strong. In the case of weak moral self-definitions, a group or an individual is constructed as basically morally competent. In the case of strong moral self-definitions, the moral competence of agents is deepened by connecting it to the identity-constituting commitments or priorities that give direction to the agent's moral behavior. These need not be the same as those of another moral agent, but are intrinsically connected with one's biography and one's self-understanding. Strong moral self-definition relates our decisions in concrete situations to who we want to be (or become), e.g., a good father, a reliable friend, or a senior maintaining a vital involvement with life.

An important implication of Lindemann Nelson's view is that moral agency requires recognition by others that one is morally worthy to perform one's desired actions freely. This condition is intertwined with the question whether one is given sufficient opportunities to act according to one's moral self-definition (cf. deprivation of opportunity). But importantly, moral agency also requires assessing *oneself* as morally able and trustworthy. The problem is that oppressive narratives may lead to an internalization of damaging images, so that the oppressive narrative affects one's self-image and in effect diminishes one's self-esteem as a moral agent (cf. infiltrated consciousness).

In order to gain a more refined understanding of the link between social recognition and the repairing of socio-cultural damage to people's identity and moral agency, the work of Honneth (1995, 2008, 2012) can provide valuable additional insights that enrich and deepen Lindemann Nelson's (2001) account of moral agency. Inspired by Hegel as well as by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Honneth understands the dynamics of social conflicts directed towards social change in terms of what he calls a "struggle for recognition" (Honneth, 1995). He argues that it is a necessary condition for freedom, autonomy and self-realization that individuals feel recognized as beings whose aspirations, values and goals are legitimate and worthy to strive for. In

Honneth's words, "Individuals achieve self-determination by learning, within relations of reciprocal recognition, to view their needs, beliefs and abilities as worthy of articulation and pursuit in the public sphere" (Honneth, 2012, p. 46). Honneth (1995, 2012) distinguishes between three levels of inter-human recognition, which are all perceived as equally essential, but pertain to different domains of human existence. The first and perhaps most fundamental and basic relationship of recognition is modeled on the unconditional love between mother and child. Through this recognition, we learn to perceive ourselves as subjects worthy of being loved and cherished independent of our efforts and achievements. If this initial relationship of recognition fails to be established in human life, our personhood or subjectivity is basically flawed (Erikson, 1963; Winnicott, 1965). Expectedly, this also impedes our ability to lead good lives which is fundamental to our moral agency.

The second form of recognition distinguished by Honneth (1995, 2012) is located not in the domain of primary relationships, but on the societal level. Essential for the ability to function as moral agents exercising our human potential for freedom and autonomy, is that we are recognized and respected as equal members of the societal legal order. This means being endowed with the status of citizenship that grants us access to fundamental human rights, i.e., being guaranteed a just, fair and equal treatment by the institutions of society. Whereas *love* is the form of expression of the first form of recognition, *respect* is the form of expression of the second.

The third form of recognition on the other hand, pertains to being recognized as a unique person, able and entitled to strive for self-appropriated goals in life. This form of recognition includes the optimal development of individual potentials and acknowledgment for the striving for self-realization. Whereas the second form of recognition requires that subjects are acknowledged as equals, the third form of recognition requires that subjects are valued in their diversity and individuality. This demands that people mutually acknowledge the legitimacy and value of each other's individual strivings for meaning and purpose in life, and are congenial to its realization. The corresponding form of expression associated with this third form of recognition is termed *solidarity* by Honneth.

Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) helps to clarify what is at stake in the narrative repair of the identity-damage inflicted by cultural master narratives. For example, a lack of the first form of recognition, love in primary relationships, may impede moral agency when parents are disappointed with the birth of a daughter, unable to provide her with the same love and support as a son under the influence of cultural master narratives that devalue women. A lack of the second form of recognition, equal respect in societal relationships, impedes moral agency when a certain subgroup in society is denied equal access to certain rights and goods, as used to be the case for the black population in the

United States before the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1968, or in South Africa during the Apartheid-regime (and sadly, some practices of lacking recognition for these groups continue to the current day). A lack of the third form of recognition, solidarity with other people's projects of self-realization, impedes moral agency by denying people the status of individuals with aspirations and capacities that deserve to be valued and supported. In such a case, a subgroup may enjoy the same formal rights and equal position as other groups in society, but be denied the opportunity to strive for certain goals because these don't match the dominant cultural expectations attached to the group in question. This can be illustrated by the case of older individuals who are forced into retirement although they still aspire to perform paid labor. Honneth's trichotomy offers a valuable perspective to arrive at a more refined analysis of how cultural narratives impede moral agency. It teaches us that restoring moral agency that has suffered from oppressive, stereotyping and marginalizing cultural master narratives requires the restoration of relationships of recognition at multiple levels. It sensitizes our mind to the question of which form of recognition is most urgently denied by certain cultural master narratives in a given situation, and at what level the moral agency of the concerned actors therefore needs repair.

Apart from his ideas about recognition, Honneth's (2008) analysis of reification (*Verdinglichung*) also helps to clarify certain damaging effects of oppressive and stereotyping cultural master narratives. This term describes human behavior in which fellow subjects are not treated according to their status as dignified human beings with the same emotions, desires, aspirations and rights as everyone else, but instead as objects or even commodities (Honneth, 2005). The link becomes clear if we notice that malignant cultural master narratives tend to treat people belonging to the oppressed group as objects rather than subjects or moral agents (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). The most obvious examples of reification can of course be drawn from the history of slavery, or from the context of industrialization in which people came to be treated as disposable anonymous laborers. But reification can also take more subtle and hidden shapes, by treating people as de-individualized creatures whose aspirations and rights are overruled. For example, the recurring political representation of older people as societal "burdens" weighing heavily on welfare and healthcare budgets could be interpreted as a case of reification.

Central to Honneth's (2008) analysis of reification is that it disables our engagement with the practices that form our reality from the perspective of a *participant*. Instead, it reduces us to the status of *bystander*, being excluded from those very activities, narratives and social roles that are essential in the constitution of a meaningful sense of identity. Being a participant does not necessarily presume an activist mode of behavior, but it does presuppose that people are fully recognized as agents who co-constitute the practices that make up their living context. The importance of being able to fulfill the role of par-

ticipant can be illustrated by an interesting perspective drawn from the context of disability studies: *social role valorization theory* (Wolfensberger, 2013; Kendrick, 2008, 2009; Osburn, 2006; Lemay, 1999). Social role valorization theory reacts to the problem of social devaluation, or negative perception, of certain people in society. By creating new and positively valued social roles for people, or restoring their access to previously available roles, it is argued that people's chances to participate as full and equal members of society can be enhanced. This could contribute to the strengthening of their moral agency.

An inspiring story told to me by a social role valorization expert sketched the case of a retired carpenter who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Although he was well taken care of in the care institution where he resided, he was utterly bored and fell into depression. His children, in an attempt to try and tackle his boredom and depression, managed to find a carpenter who had previously worked with him. Though many of the tasks of daily living presented him with insurmountable problems, he proved to still be capable of performing some of the operations that were familiar to him from his history of working as a carpenter. He could thereby provide valuable assistance to his colleague. With appropriate support, this man could thus regain access to a valued social role, which enabled him to function as a valued participant again instead of a passive bystander.

Honneth (2008) himself interprets the harmful effects of the phenomenon of reification in terms of a lack of relations of recognition, or rather a disregard for their fundamental role. Although an attitude characterized by reification can have advantages in some domains, for instance when it comes to acquiring knowledge or developing technological solutions for urgent societal issues, problems arise when the fundamental relationship of recognition preceding such instrumental knowledge relations are lost from sight. The implication of Honneth's view requires taking into account that relationships of mutual recognition are the transcendental condition for any viable human practice or society. Negating the importance of these relationships opens the door to morally harmful phenomena like social exclusion, discrimination, paternalism, oppression and neglect. If people, for instance the elderly, are excluded from participation, this will likely impede their moral agency. Good practices call for care institutions that give people their own say in how daily care is organized, for instance, with regard to bathing times or choice of meals. Conversely, care institutions where the systemic logic of efficiency decides about these issues, risk reducing people to "objects" of care, and thus bystanders in their own daily life. Besides consequences on the level of the individual life, reification may also have detrimental effects on society at large. After all, potentially valuable contributions that older people may have to make are overlooked. It follows that both society and aging people would profit from successful strategies to repair

the damaging influences of dominant cultural narratives and enhance people's moral agency.

3.2.4 Narrative repair through agency-enhancing counter narratives

This section will proceed to discuss Lindemann Nelson's (2001) view about how identity-damaging cultural master narratives can be repaired. Transforming cultural narratives that are oppressive or marginalizing requires enduring efforts on multiple levels. Realizing this task is not easy, given the pervasive influence of stereotypical and devaluing images on the dominant mindset of people. Replacing such mindsets often seems a very unequal battle with discouragingly small chances of success. Wolfensberger (2013) aptly formulates the difficulty of this challenge when he states that, "One's experiences will usually have to contradict one's expectancies and stereotypes very powerfully, and almost always very consistently, in order for these latter to be defeated and reversed. On the other hand, it takes only few and/or weak confirmations of one's expectancies and stereotypes in order for them to become well-nigh irreversibly embedded" (p. 58). To repair the harm done by cultural master narratives that are oppressive, denigrating or marginalizing, Lindemann Nelson (2001) suggests the strategy of developing viable "counterstories" or counter narratives. A counter narrative is defined as "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6). By providing alternative stories challenging the damaging identification with oppressive master narratives, a counter narrative can empower the concerned social group, by generating respect and social value for the people belonging to it. Although I share Lindemann Nelson's view about the importance of empowerment, drawing on the argument about Honneth's (1995) three types of social recognition I would add to her definition that counter narratives should not only command respect, but also enhance the opportunities for people to engage in primary relationships of love and care, as well as acknowledge and facilitate each individual's striving for self-realization.

It is important to emphasize that for Lindemann Nelson, it is not just *any* alternative story that qualifies as a counter narrative. To qualify as a counter narrative, a narrative has to represent a set of features: 1) it has to replace as well as resist an oppressive master narrative, 2) it should set out to rehabilitate damaged identities, 3) it should be directed towards freeing a person's moral agency, and 4) it should deliberately cause a shift in the cultural understanding of a certain group, rather than just reflecting one. Consequently, an alternative story that is just a *different* story from the dominant master narrative does not necessarily function as a counter narrative. Although it might be able to repair deficiencies in meaning on the individual level, it does not become a counter

narrative unless it stretches out to the cultural level to challenge problematic socio-cultural positioning and actively present alternatives.

Lindemann Nelson distinguishes three possible levels of resistance: refusal, repudiation and contestation.

1. *Refusal* is usually limited to the individual level, when individuals deny that a damaging (for instance ageist) stereotype applies to them, and form their own alternative story to identify with. Since there is no necessity or guarantee of an extension of this alternative story to the cultural, collective level however, refusal stories cannot function as proper counter narratives; they remain incomplete and their reach is limited. For example, an individual older woman may resist the stereotype of diminished sexual activity or beauty associated with aging on the individual level, but it may still be very hard for her to shrug off the internalization of these stereotypes in all situations.
2. *Repudiation* goes a step further, not only implying identification with an alternative story, but also actively opposing the denigrating stereotypes in social contexts. The resistance remains a piecemeal activity however, limiting its scope as a counter narrative to what Lindemann Nelson (2001) calls "patchwork forms of resistance" (p. 171). The activities of the Red Hat Society[1], or the "Raging Grannies" (Caissie, 2011) might count as examples of repudiation of aging stereotypes. A danger of this type of resistance through counter narratives is that they result in the creation of alternative stereotypes. Because these alternative stereotypes can be easily ridiculed, the intended effect of repudiation is weakened and disarmed.
3. *Contestation* represents the full resisting potential of a counter narrative, by systematically and collectively challenging stereotypes in public. Resistance to aging master narratives on this level is worryingly scarce in our culture. However, the activities of the Gray Panthers, for instance, may serve as a promising example. This organization publicly refutes the implicit belief that turning 65 means retreating to a passive role. Moreover, the organization strives to advance the opportunities for older people to lead good lives. The following phrase from their mission statement expresses a welcome sensitivity to the importance of focusing on the moral agency and self-realization of older people: "The concept of aging takes into account an individual's growth during their entire life span, from birth to death in personal development, social involvement, and self-fulfillment".[2]

1 | http://redhatsociety.com

2 | www.graypanthers.org

It is crucial that counter narratives transform both how *other* people think about the marginalized group and how members of this group think about *themselves*. The quintessential factor is the creation of new opportunities for identification and self-definition, which should ensure (renewed) access to socially valued goods and roles. As a result, components of meaning can be integrated into one's life and identity that were previously unavailable due to blocking by stereotyping, de-individualizing master narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). Participant roles in valued and shared human practices can then be opened to people who were previously disregarded by these practices as morally inferior bystanders. In Honneth's (2008) terms, this implies becoming aware of and strengthening the constitutive relationships of mutual recognition that sustain human (or better: humane?) societies in order to remedy the adverse effects of reification.

Importantly, when people (or groups) are marginalized and lack recognition as full moral agents, this is often accompanied by social silencing. Feminist approaches in particular, stress that counter narratives should strengthen people's moral agency by making their *voices* heard (M. Walker, 2007; Meyers, 2004; Lindemann Nelson, 2001). According to these authors, narratives play an important role as instruments that give people a voice. This can take place at several levels, ranging from enabling people to tell their individual life stories to disclosing and presenting collective histories that have been suppressed in dominant cultural master narratives. M. Walker (2007) distinguishes between three interdependent categories of narratives: identity constituting narratives (who am I as a moral agent), narratives about relationships (with whom am I connected, for whom do I feel responsible, et cetera) and narratives about moral value (what do I regard as valuable, what is the meaning of my narratives, et cetera). Together, the three forms of narratives are fundamental to what M. Walker terms our *moral integrity*.

In accordance with Lindemann Nelson's (2001) approach, M. Walker (2007) emphasizes that it is crucial that people are granted an "epistemological position" which gives them access to socio-cultural resources of identity. This means that people should be endowed with the status of legitimate sources when claiming knowledgeability about matters regarding their own lives. Their narratives about themselves have to be taken seriously by others in order for them to fulfill their potential for moral agency. For example, if older people are culturally perceived as a-sexual creatures, or if their sexuality is regarded as deviant or repulsive, their activities to engage in sexual relationships are likely to be regarded as ludicrous or sad, instead of taken seriously as attempts of moral agents to create viable narratives of identity and relationships for themselves. As long as people are denied epistemological authority regarding their own life orientation and choices, problems arise if they want to aspire to a self-determined life as moral agents.

3.3 Cultural narratives about later life

3.3.1 Cultural and critical gerontology on the cultural positioning of aging

In this section, the discussed theory about cultural narratives is connected to the context of aging. One of the claims this study started out with was that existing cultural narratives about later life fall short in providing sufficient resources for meaning, both on the individual and on the societal level, by presenting aging in a problematic way. Initially, this claim was based on rather anecdotal evidence and observations, ranging from an old acquaintance repeatedly warning me "not to become older than 80" because she was convinced that everything above that age would bring sorrow and misery, to the photograph of an old lady in a sexy bikini posted in a Dutch Facebook group entitled *the New Aging*, suggesting that the best way to age is to keep up with youth culture as long as possible. These personal and random observations are confirmed, however, by the research and analyses of cultural and critical gerontologists, which will be discussed below. First, however, it should be asked whether it makes sense to apply Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory about cultural master narratives to the context of aging? Are older people in fact a culturally marginalized group in the sense her theory describes? My contention is that they are indeed, and that this justifies the focus on cultural (master) narratives about later life in the current study's analysis of late modern aging (see also Laceulle & Baars, 2014).

To begin with, according to Lindemann Nelson (2001) it is typical of being a member of a culturally marginalized group that one is identified with a limited number of stereotypical characteristics. For aging people this is often their calendar age (Baars, 2012b), but they are also identified with stereotypes like frailty, dependency, disability, lack of productivity, et cetera (Cruikshank, 2003; Grenier & Phillipson, 2013). As a result of such identifications, it becomes difficult to acknowledge the high degree of individual diversity and heterogeneity that characterizes the aging population. Second, this identification with a limited amount of features tends to influence how people are encountered by others, but also how social institutions and policymakers treat them. This may lead to both deprivation of opportunity and infiltrated consciousness, the two harmful effects discussed by Lindemann Nelson (2001; see §3.2.2). In accordance with this, aging people's identification with stereotypical categories such as decline often leads to an overruling of their self-determination and a neglect of their own aspirations and life purposes, for instance in the organization of care arrangements (Agich, 2003). It proves to be very difficult to counter such stereotypical positioning. Third, aging people too are vulnerable to the dangers of internalization of stereotypical socio-cultural positioning sketched in Lin-

demann Nelson's theory. The effect of this internalization on older individuals is illustrated by the so-called *stereotype embodiment theory* (Levy, 2009). This presents empirical research on stereotypes about aging which suggests that internalization of both positive and negative age stereotypes (defined as beliefs about older people in general) can have either beneficial, or detrimental effects respectively, even on supposedly "objective" factors such as cognitive and physical functioning. According to Levy (2009), "stereotypes are embodied when their assimilation from the surrounding culture leads to self-definitions that, in turn, influence functioning and health" (p. 332).

The three points discussed above, I believe, offer sufficient argumentation in favor of the application of Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory to the context of aging. One important nuancing remark with regard to her strong emphasis on socio-cultural construction of identities needs to be made, however. Several gerontological authors emphasize that, although social and cultural constitution is vitally important and very influential to the experience of aging, living in an aging body cannot be reduced to socio-cultural construction alone (Cruikshank, 2003; Holstein, Parks & Waymack, 2011). As Holstein, Parks and Waymack (2011) put it, "There are certain commonly shared experiences of having an aging body that cannot simply be written off as cultural norm: that one's body may begin to hurt, that it may no longer be able to do what we expect, and that its appearance may change over time cannot be eliminated by any cultural change, no matter how significant" (p. 50).

When applying the general insights on cultural narratives and their influence drawn from Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory to the context of aging, one needs to understand how aging is culturally perceived and communicated in our current Western, late modern world. After all, it follows from this theory that our expectations and experiences concerning aging are inevitably colored by the prevailing cultural images and stories about later life. This theme has been addressed in several gerontological studies analyzing the cultural discourse about aging, from a mostly critical (and often feminist) point of view (De Beauvoir, 1970/1972; Gullette, 1997, 2004, 2011; Cruikshank, 2003; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995, 2005; Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991; Andrews, 1999, 2012; Calasanti, 2008; Calasanti, Slevin & King, 2006; Tulle, 2004; Hurd Clarke, 2001; Twigg, 2004; Katz, 2010; Biggs, 1997, 1999; Blaikie, 1999). Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) argue that cultural imaginaries about aging and old age have two functions: "first they are a cultural resource we draw upon to give meaning to later life [...]; and, second, [...] they provide important evidence of the kinds of cultural resources a specific society draws upon to give meaning to later life" (p. 30-31). This provides further basis to our claim that a discussion of cultural narratives about aging is highly informative regarding the meanings given to later life in our contemporary societies.

Importantly, De Medeiros (2005) suggests a discrepancy between the *cultural* identities of aging individuals and the way they *individually* experience their aging process. Lack of attention to this distinction may lead gerontology to interpret certain narrative self-presentations as expressing something about the aging self while in fact, they are more properly interpreted as expressions of cultural master narratives about aging. She also cites Hazan and Raz (1997), who suggest that "narratives of elderly people, that is, interviews, life stories, and other utterances, are too often interpreted as authentic narratives of 'old age' rather than a 'reiteration of the discourse of aging' perpetuated by life-course and life-cycle perspectives" (as cited in De Medeiros, 2005, p. 7). In response, De Medeiros suggests a conceptual model in which a distinction can be drawn between the self as externally presented and constantly negotiated in relation to cultural expectations and norms, and the "complementary self", encompassing those aspects of our selves that are at odds with existing cultural narratives, or are silenced or suppressed by them (De Medeiros, 2005).

In general, the critiques of existing cultural representations of aging that are voiced by cultural and critical gerontology have two distinct targets. On the one hand, there is a critique against the cultural reduction of old age to a period characterized by decline and steady, inevitable deterioration into a state of frailty, dependency and misery (Gullette, 1997, 2004, 2011; Cruikshank, 2003; Andrews, 2012; Tulle, 2004). This critique focuses on the one-sidedness of this monolithic identification of old age and decline which results in an overlooking of "possibilities of growth, renewal, change, repair and healing" (Cruikshank, 2008, p. 150) that may also be part of later life. On the other hand, critique is expressed against cultural perceptions of later life that implicitly express the message that in order to age "successfully", one should aim to stay young and avert decline as long as possible. This critique focuses, for instance, on the way aging people are falling prey to an anti-aging industry promising eternal youth, and points out that this strategy is ultimately self-effacing. It also targets the ideology that exalts the freedom and opportunities of the Third Age at the expense of the misery and dependency associated with the Fourth Age, which excludes Fourth Agers from what is perceived as "good" or "successful" aging (§2.4.3) (Katz, 2005, 2010; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005, 2011; Gullette, 2011; Twigg, 2004). In the context of this study, I have used these two broad strands of critique against existing cultural meanings about later life to reconstruct two categories of cultural master narratives about aging, which I propose to call *decline narratives* and *age-defying narratives* (Laceulle & Baars, 2014). These will be further discussed in the next two sections.

3.3.2 Decline narratives

Decline narratives equate the aging process with an inevitable and steady decay. They draw on the assumption that aging represents a biological process of inescapable deterioration. We gradually lose our physical and mental strengths and capacities. We have less purpose to strive for in our lives. We are confronted with loss and vulnerability. Eventually, we approach death. But the expected decline extends beyond the biological realm, since decline narratives often also presuppose a decrease in social relations and an increase in loneliness and dependency, as well as a self-evident loss of social roles. The classic gerontological disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961) is based on such line of thinking, as it argues that it is "natural" and fitting for aging individuals to withdraw from society and gradually accept their decline when nearing death.

Cruikshank (2003) defines five different ways in which aging is socio-culturally presented nowadays. These provide a perfect illustration of the effects of decline narratives on contemporary aging discourse. In the first place, aging is heavily medicalized. Second, forceful stereotypes associated with decline influence the way the process of aging is conceived as well as experienced. Third, aging is broadly perceived as frightening and deterrent, both for individuals and for society at large. Fourth, aging is culturally perceived as genderless and sexless, as well as, fifth, regarded to be unrelated to class or ethnicity. Aging is, in other words, conceived culturally and socially as a "great leveler", erasing or making redundant all individual characteristics previously meaningful during the life course.

The socio-cultural constitution of later life that is typical for decline narratives thereby tends to reduce the identity resources of aging individuals to a limited amount of pitiable images and roles of sickness and dependency. Consequently, decline narratives fail to acknowledge the individual diversity of the aging population. As a result, they are unable to provide social recognition to people's aspirations of self-realization (Honneth's third category, see §3.2.3) needed to facilitate moral agency, because acknowledging individual diversity is a precondition for this type of recognition.

Importantly, decline narratives typically reinforce deep festering fears and anxieties about losing control over one's life that is often perceived as one of the typical characteristics of late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2001). The fact that the probability of being confronted with existential vulnerability increases with age seems to make aging an especially disturbing phenomenon for modern individuals socio-culturally "programmed" to strive for autonomous control over their lives.

The socio-cultural perception of what it means to fall victim to Alzheimer's disease or other forms of cognitive deterioration offers a good illustration. Alzheimer's disease seems to be the embodiment of everything late modern people

fear about aging: loss of independence, autonomy, self-determination, control, and ultimately one's self. It is often presented as the ultimate counterexample if one dares to assume that later life can also be a period with potential for growth and flourishing, as I have experienced in several discussions about my work on aging and self-realization (see also §9.4.6). To avoid misunderstanding, there is no doubt in my mind that Alzheimer's represents a horrible disease, which often terrifies its sufferers in the way it disorients them and seizes the elements that were once constitutive of who they were. Being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease is, bluntly put, an existential tragedy for the people concerned (both sufferers and their loved ones). However, experiential reports from Alzheimer's disease sufferers and the people working with them suggest that there are still possibilities for experiencing meaning in life, if one is willing to see them (see for instance, Kitwood, 1997; Sabat, 2001; Bruens, 2013). Sadly, these differentiating remarks hardly enter the common cultural perception of this disease, which remains one of massive misery and utter anxiety.

This perception of Alzheimer's, which can be seen as an example of a decline narrative, tends to reduce the person to the disease. Importantly, this reduction hinders the realization of the social recognition needed to advance people's moral agency. This happens, for instance, when the fact that people still have legitimate personal aspirations regarding their own future, and the potential to engage in certain valued social roles, is overlooked in view of the disease (§3.2.3). Of course, one may argue that the tragedy of Alzheimer's is precisely that the disease destroys the person, leaving ultimately nothing but an empty shell. Although this may be true for the most advanced stages of the disease, it is often preceded by a gradual process of deterioration which, depending of course on how the condition develops, may still provide ample chances for self-realization and moral agency. It is my contention that under the influence of the anxious and grim image raised by decline narratives, sufferers of Alzheimer's (or any other feared condition associated with old age) are *prematurely* denied access to several cultural resources that could help them and their surrounding uphold a meaningful identity, including participation in valued social roles. By contrast, a viable counter narrative that contests the assumptions underlying decline narratives may be able to provide victims of Alzheimer's with a socio-cultural positioning that grants them *more* opportunities for moral agency for a *longer* time. This would require, at the minimum, showing that decline is not the only reality of later life in such cases, and that even suffering from a condition like Alzheimer's disease does not (or at least not for a long time) close off opportunities to lead a good life with and for others, according to one's own aspirations and capacities, participating meaningfully in one's society or community – in other words, moral agency as defined in this study.

To conclude, the most disturbing characteristic of decline narratives is perhaps that they reduce the diversity and potential richness of older people's

life experiences to a saddening story of inevitable decay. Moreover, they rub it in that there is ultimately nothing we can do about our own decline. Decline is presented as an unfortunate fact of life that one should passively undergo, when the time comes. Before that time however, people are "advised" by contemporary cultural aging discourse to *avoid* decline as long as possible. This results in the other category of cultural master narratives I distinguish, termed age-defying narratives.

3.3.3 Age-defying narratives

Age-defying narratives oppose the exclusively negative associations connected with aging in decline narratives. Instead, they emphasize opportunities for prolonged vitality, social activity and resilience. It is typical of age-defying narratives that aging well is implicitly equated to *staying young*, or warding off the negative consequences associated with aging as long as possible. As Andrews (2012) puts it, "increasingly in western society, the old, and being old, have been identified by what they are not: young" (p. 388). Note that this position leaves the strong association that decline narratives assume between aging and decline intact.

Broadly speaking, the category of age-defying narratives can be divided into three sub-categories. All share in common the rejection of a "deficit perspective" on aging (as exemplified in decline narratives), and instead plead in favor of what Tornstam called a "resource perspective" focusing on the positive potentials of later life (Tornstam, 2005). However, their interpretation of what it means to "age well" differs.

1. The first subcategory focuses strongly on *resisting* decline, by emphasizing the importance of remaining active and productive, and taking all sorts of measures to ensure continuing health. This approach is exemplified in gerontological approaches advancing "successful", "healthy" or "active" aging (Havighurst, 1961; Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997, 1998; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996; Ryff & Singer, 2009; Knipscheer, 2010). These approaches lay a heavy emphasis on functional and health concerns (Depp & Jeste, 2006). Rowe and Kahn intended their concept of successful aging to allow for more differentiation within the group of "normal", that is, healthy older individuals. They measured "success" in aging through three interrelated factors: the absence of disease, the maintenance of a high level of cognitive and physical functional capacities and the active (social) engagement with life (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). The scientific concept of successful aging also translates into more popular aging discourses. In a provocative article in *The Atlantic* published in October 2014, Ezekiel Emanuel described the activities a successful aging strategy may result in as follows: "Americans seem to be

obsessed with exercising, doing mental puzzles, consuming various juice and protein concoctions, sticking to strict diets, and popping vitamins and supplements, all in a valiant effort to cheat death and prolong life as long as possible. This has become so pervasive that it now defines a cultural type: what I call the American immortal" (Emanuel 2014).

2. The second subcategory of age-defying narratives is more concentrated on successful *adaptation* to aging processes. These approaches focus on the importance of compensating for age-related losses. This can be achieved by maximizing one's remaining strengths and making optimal use of them, and minimizing the potential harms that can be caused by inevitable age-related losses. Examples include Baltes' *Selection-Optimization-Compensation* model (Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998) and the *socio-emotional selectivity theory* by Carstensen and colleagues (Carstensen et al., 2006; Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles 1999). The bottom line of these psychological perspectives purports the idea that people maintain a sense of well-being and a positive self-concept despite loss and decline. In order to do this, people need to develop adaptive strategies, such as adjustment of aspirations and goals to fit new situations characterized by diminished levels of competency and mastery (Labouvie-Vief, 2009). For example, an inevitable loss of speed and physical strength in older workers can be compensated by the fact that accumulated years of experience have taught people to use their powers more effectively than younger workers. Other examples of adaptive age-defying strategies include programs of fall prevention in order to avoid physical dependency or memory training in order to delay cognitive deterioration.
3. The third subcategory of age-defying narratives focuses on the opportunities that later life – and in particular the Third Age – have to offer for *self-fulfillment* through leisure, consumption and education. Examples of this can be found in the abundance of cultural expectations that are communicated through advertisements of anti-aging products, senior travel, and retirement leisure options. All of these suggest that the prevailing associations between aging and decline do not have to be accepted as an unfortunate truth of life, but can – with the help of right products, of course – be reverted. This category of narratives tends to lead to so-called "commodification": older people are perceived primarily in their role as consumers, being subjected to pervasive temptation strategies of the anti-aging market. This market offers an endless variety of products and services aimed at warding off old age as long as possible. The main valued social roles left for aging individuals in these cultures are related to leisure and consumption (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, 2005; Katz, 2005).

It could be said that generally, age-defying narratives are to be preferred over decline narratives, given their objection to the monolithic identification of later life with negative images of loss, decline and misery. Age-defying narratives have certainly helped to challenge ageist assumptions based on decline narratives. They have extended the horizon of what is deemed possible in later life to include opportunities that would have been unthinkable in earlier times. In contrast to decline narratives, age-defying narratives explicitly present later life as a period with many chances for living a rich, satisfying, flourishing life. In this regard, age-defying narratives can be perceived to offer much better opportunities to enhance the moral agency of aging individuals and enlarge their cultural repertoire of meaning and identity resources.

Nevertheless, there remain some fundamental problems attached to age-defying narratives that nuance this optimistic analysis and call for other alternatives. As Katz (2005) argues, "anti-ageism is not without problems of its own [...] the positive, political energies of the grey movement are dispersed and redeployed in the service of a commercial spirit of a senior's market culture" (p. 16-17). In their concern with the economic capitalist and consumerist issues connected to a growing elderly population (Biggs, 2001), age-defying narratives lack a genuine focus on the enhancement of people's moral agency that should characterize successful counter narratives. Or at least, they reserve it for a healthy and wealthy minority.

Age-defying narratives seem to replace the stereotype of the deplorable sick and dependent creature characteristic of decline narratives, with another, more positive stereotype: the healthy, active, productive, and self-fulfilling senior consumer. But as a stereotype, this image seems equally insensitive to differences within the aging population, and it can be equally oppressive. Moreover, age-defying narratives seem to transfer value frameworks belonging to youth and adulthood to old age, neglecting the possibility that later life may also have a value of its own (Cole, 1992; Atchley, 2009; Tornstam, 2005; Laceulle, 2013; Rentsch et al., 2013). Thus, although age-defying narratives set out to fight ageism and secure valued social roles for the elderly, they in fact celebrate a rather limited view of success and value in later life, that many older people are unable to live up to (Chapman, 2005; Holstein, 2011).

3.3.4 Limitations of existing cultural narratives on aging

Let me now briefly analyze some problematic implications that arise from the sketch of existing cultural master narratives about later life. This analysis will lead to a set of conditions that viable cultural counter narratives about aging should answer to.

1. The equation of aging with decline – explicit in decline narratives and implicit in age-defying narratives – is so pervasive that it obscures other possible characteristics of later life. This effect is described by Gullette (1997) as the "default" position of decline narratives: "Culturally, default standing means that the subject feels an internal pressure to speak in decline terms, even when resistant experience or theory intervenes. [...] Alternative narrative doesn't feel as real" (p. 173-174). The association of decline with aging is so deeply entrenched in our cultural meaning system that we no longer tend to question it. As a result, profound tensions may arise between the meanings of aging that cultural narratives communicate and one's private experience. The influence of cultural narratives can even be so strong that our individual experiences lose their authority for us (Lindemann Nelson, 2001).
2. The stereotyping force of decline and age-defying narratives ignores the diversity existing among individuals within the aging population. Blaikie (1999) argues, "as each individual ages so the stock of their differentness from the next person increases – the older the cohort, the greater is the degree of diversity and individuality to be expected" (p. 7). By neglecting this fact, aging people's widely varying aspirations and capacities are also overlooked. This hinders the full realization of their potential for moral agency and precludes Honneth's third form of social recognition (1995; see §3.2.3). From the viewpoint of self-realization, acknowledging the unique potentials of *this specific individual person* for flourishing, creativity and resilience is of course crucial. It seems, however, that neither decline- nor age-defying narratives are able to accommodate this insight in a satisfactory way.
3. The implicit message that aging well is equal to staying young represents a severe impoverishment of cultural meaning resources. It suggests that later life has no value of its own, because apparently, whatever meaning can be given to later life has to be borrowed from youth-related frameworks. Again, in terms of Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory, this poses a limitation on the moral agency of aging individuals, because it inhibits them from perceiving later life as a possibly attractive phase which harbors potentially valuable and enriching experiences and goals to strive for. To provide an example: the poetry volume *Body bereft* by Krog (2006) describing the subtle delights of an aging couple's sexuality raised protest in her country South Africa, because it was considered appalling and repulsive, not fitting the expectations one had of older women. Apparently, the culture was not ready to acknowledge deviations from the norms of youth. Consequently, the potential for meaning and identification such poetry could communicate to older people – a hopeful and beautiful message indeed – is blocked by the cultural prejudice that all good is to come from youthfulness, even in later life.

4. Age-defying narratives stimulate and promote active and healthy lifestyles as an individual task and responsibility. In the process, however, these narratives paradoxically saddle older individuals with social stigmatization once they prove unable to live up to the corresponding standards and fall prey to frailty and dependency (Katz, 2005). As a result, the share of the aging population that is in fact experiencing frailty are further stigmatized as pitiable "losers". The irony is, of course, that given the biological reality of senescing processes, we will all fall into this category ultimately, which seems to prove that decline narratives are right after all. This makes the age-defying cultural narratives that dominate an important portion of the aging discourse in late modern societies eventually self-effacing.
5. Both decline- and age-defying cultural narratives are empirically flawed, because they disregard the fact that in reality, even people suffering age-related losses often manage to lead meaningful, flourishing, creative and inspiring lives (Ryff et al., 2012). Holstein, Parks and Waymack (2011) aptly formulate this problem when they state: "The anti-aging movement gains what momentum it has by means of denigrating the lives of our elderly as they in fact live. This, we think, rather than senescence and eventual death, is the real tragedy. We prefer to think that there can be, and indeed are, virtues that are possible in and appropriate to being elderly. If we lose sight of those virtues, we will all be less well off." (p. 100). The empirical inadequacy of existing cultural narratives is also illustrated by the "positivity effect" (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). This paradox expresses the fact that older people tend to have a functional bias towards positive experiences. This results in a discrepancy between what people subjectively perceive as satisfying and successful old age and the scientific criteria for successful aging. The strong emphasis that science places on health, productivity and independent functioning, for instance, proves to be less important to people than meaningful social relationships (Torres, 2006; Reichstadt et al., 2007, 2010; Phelan et al., 2004; Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003)
6. Neither decline narratives nor age-defying narratives provide satisfactory resources for people to integrate existential vulnerability into their lives in a meaningful way. By *integration*, I mean the inclusion of an experience of adversity in one's life story in such a way that its reality is not disavowed, but neither does the situation lead to a permanent loss of vital involvement in life. Integration could be seen as the outcome of a process of grief over what is lost that restores one's sense of coherence in life. Whereas decline narratives generally encounter existential vulnerability with a strategy of passive surrender, age-defying narratives only have strategies of rejection to offer. Both strategies seem hardly satisfactory in this regard. Further, since existing narratives seem to offer no guidance towards a possible middle road between these strategies, people experiencing instances of existential

vulnerability are poorly facilitated when they seek access to cultural meaning resources to enhance their ability to lead a good life (i.e. moral agency) in the face of the tragic dimension of existence (Nussbaum, 2001).

It can thus be concluded that both decline- and age-defying cultural narratives about later life ultimately fall short in providing satisfactory resources of identity to aging individuals. They function as stereotyping and restrictive models of aging which block our view of the value of its own that later life could have. Also, they neglect diversity and hinder access to valued social roles that could help aging people advance and express their potential for moral agency. This calls for the development of viable counter narratives about later life that are able to enhance aging individuals' moral agency and provide access to a richer array of cultural resources of identity and meaning. From the analyses so far the following desired features for such counter narratives can be deduced:

- They should resist the association of aging with decline and aging well with staying young that is characteristic of the discussed cultural master narratives
- They should offer a viable alternative that is able to:
  - Acknowledge that later life can be a period with a value of its own, offering potential for growth and flourishing
  - Acknowledge that later life is also a period in which one is ever more radically confronted with the existential vulnerability of the human condition
  - Provide resources to meaningfully integrate this existential vulnerability into the narratives constituting one's identity, so that coherence is restored and vital involvement with life remains possible

3.4 Conclusion: In search of viable counter narratives about aging

In this final part of the chapter, I propose a tentative outline for an alternative category of cultural narratives about later life. These alternative narratives aim to meet the conditions defined in the previous section: acknowledging the value of later life and its potential for flourishing as well as its reality of existential vulnerability, and providing resources for the integration of the latter. My proposal will draw on ideas associated with the philosophical discourse on self-realization (Laceulle & Baars, 2014; see further chapter 4). It thereby advances toward the intended formulation of a reframed discourse of self-realization that forms the theme of the coming chapters. Making a plausible case for a cultural counter narrative about later life drawing its resources from the self-realization

discourse, will hopefully strengthen this study's overall argument that the ideal of self-realization can be fruitfully applied to the context of aging, as long as some crucial shortcomings of the late modern interpretation are remedied (see §2.5).

The term "narratives of becoming" that I choose to describe these alternative narratives serves as a prelude to the idea of self-realization as a process of moral self-development, or becoming who you are (see §4.2). This terminology also conveniently underscores the continuing search for an equilibrium between engaging in activities purposively furthering our growth and flourishing on the one hand, while on the other hand, acknowledging the contingencies of life expressed in terms of existential vulnerability, which confronts us with the limitations of our purposive influence and control. Alternatively, Gullette (2011) proposes the term "progress narratives" in order to challenge the decline narratives that are so detrimental for an enriching and meaningful experience of later life. However, the notion of progress harbors an association with linear ascent that can misguidedly present old age as the ultimate culmination of development throughout the life course. Gullette does recognize part of this risk herself, when she states that, "Positive aging should not impose progress narrative on people, forcing them to deny their sorrows and the external facts that weigh on them. But neither should dominant culture impose decline narrative as the only possible truth" (p. 165). Katz (2005) expresses the same concern when he warns about a "tyrannical" positive aging culture. Apart from its congeniality to the self-realization discourse, this serves as an additional reason to prefer the term narratives of becoming over progress narratives in this study.

Broadly speaking, narratives of becoming suggest the following image of later life: on the one hand, they express how later life offers ample opportunities for self-realization, for instance, in the sense of growing in self-knowledge, improving our relationships with others, or acquiring virtues previously underdeveloped in one's life; on the other hand, they suggest that aging well means that we are able and willing to encounter the limitations we confront in our lives in a certain way. Instead of denying or rejecting our vulnerabilities, narratives of becoming suggest that we would do well to face them with an attitude characterized by realism and practical wisdom. This should not only enable us to see what we can do to improve the situation, but also what lies beyond our control and must be gracefully accepted.

Before proceeding to discuss the advantages that narratives of becoming may have to offer, let me begin with two concrete examples of what the associated image of aging well could look like in people's lives. The first example introduces an older woman I once met. On becoming a grandmother, she was delighted and aspired to engage in activities with her grandchildren that had been very important in her own life, such as supporting them in sports. But due to severe physical ailments, she was no longer able to do this. At first, this

was a great disappointment to her, because she had always dreamt of being a vital, active grandparent and senior. The confrontation with her own physical fragility precluded this aspiration. However, by transforming her limitations in this regard into an attitude of quiet presence, she was able to provide her grandchildren with a peaceful and stable haven of calmness. This turned out to be most welcome to them, especially when it could not be provided by their busy parents. This realization made her aware of how her "activist" manner of raising her own children in the past had led her to neglect other equally important dimensions of being a good parent. She was able to speak about this with her daughter and it deepened and enriched their relationship. In the end, she told me that taking care of her grandchildren had taught her many things about her qualities and limitations as a mother in retrospect. It had deepened her self-insight and transformed her image of who she wanted to be.

The second example presents a man in his mid-seventies who had become a widower three years earlier. In a conversation, he admitted to me that this new social status had initially confronted him with some inconvenient truths about himself and his relationship with his late wife. He discovered how he had always taken for granted that she was the one maintaining their social contacts as a couple. After her death, it became clear to him that his character was still lacking in the qualities needed to nourish friendships. Because his wife had always been the one investing true attention in others, many of their mutual friends disappeared from his life after her demise. Being confronted with loneliness, at first he fell prey to self-pity and anger at the people who he felt had abandoned him. Gradually, however, he came to realize that the loss of his wife, however painful, offered him the opportunity to start working on acquiring the virtues of friendship that he had neglected in his life so far. So, by acknowledging his own limitations and the fragility of his social network, this man eventually gained self-knowledge and opened up new roads for moral self-development for himself.

What do these stories have to tell us about narratives of becoming? Which characteristics can be deduced from them?

- First, the term *becoming* suggests a continuous developmental process that encompasses the entire duration of the life course. The goal of development is to optimize one's ability to lead a good life with and for others (i.e., moral agency, see §5.5). Narratives of becoming refute the idea that development and growth is something reserved for youth and adolescence, and not for adulthood and old age. This also contributes to the rebuttal of equating aging well with staying young. In this sense, narratives of becoming express the idea that later life can also be a period of growth and even flourishing, that I have mentioned as one of the criteria for a viable cultural counter narrative for later life. From a self-realization perspective, the acknowledg-

ment of growth potential is of course an essential aspect. It is not difficult to imagine how the absence of this has a negative impact on the possibilities to ascribe meaning to later life. Cruikshank (2003) has observed that in contemporary aging discourse, "Old women and men are seen in a utilitarian light of cost rather than potential. *Who they can become is an unasked question"* (p. 7; emphasis added). This further underscores the relevance of paying attention to the notion of becoming through the counter narrative suggested in this study.

- Second, the notion of becoming also expresses the *dynamic* character of moral self-development. Though it is important for identity to reach a certain degree of continuity (§4.2.2), there is no stable and unchanging status quo position. Who one is remains constantly open to revision. The direction this revision will take highly depends on the individual value orientation that we have acquired during our lives. It also depends on whether our surroundings have a stimulating or restrictive influence. In other words, one's self-realization continues for as long as one lives and is always subject to socio-cultural influences that can either impede or facilitate moral agency.
- Third, the striving for moral agency that is advanced by narratives of becoming represents both a *purpose* and a *means* at the same time. In line with Lindemann Nelson's (2001) theory, I contend that counter narratives should aim at repairing moral agency; thus moral agency is the purpose strived for, the end result of a successful counter narrative. On the other hand, it seems clear that challenging dominant cultural master narratives involves, indeed requires, a strong level of moral agency to be successful. Moral agency is then perceived as the necessary means to repair damaged identities or enlarge the possibilities for meaningful identification. The paradox here is that apparently, moral agency (or the potential of it?) already has to be present in order to realize moral agency. The same paradox is echoed in the expression *becoming who you are* that we encounter later in the discussion of the philosophical discourse on self-realization (see §7.3.2). Apparently, you already are someone, but at the same time, you are summoned to become yourself. The ambivalence of this expression emphasizes that self-realization requires a life-long process of work and practice, in order to transform qualities that are potentially available in one's personal outlook into lasting, durable attitudes, expressing vital characteristics of one's self.
- Fourth, narratives of becoming also advocate *realism*. They acknowledge that this developmental process need not always be easy, or proceed in the desired direction. While the term narratives of becoming does wish to emphasize the often neglected potentialities for growth that can feature in later life, it does not quite defend a teleological culmination hypothesis that assumes a linear ascent towards an ever more fulfilled and complete life. After all, this would present a one-sided optimism negating the ex-

istential realities of vulnerability and loss that resembles the perspective of age-defying narratives. Instead, these realities need to be acknowledged and integrated if narratives of becoming are to supply a convincing meaning-generating view of aging.

- Fifth, through their dynamic and realistic character, narratives of becoming are able to answer the second criterion for a viable counter narrative about later life: offering guidance for the meaningful *integration of existential vulnerability*. These narratives acknowledge that our striving towards a good life always includes the possibility of failure; in reaching our goals, fulfilling our aspirations, becoming who we wish to be. We may frustrate our own purposes by succumbing to our weaknesses or following the wrong passions, but our self-realization can also be stymied by bad life circumstances beyond our control, from illness or accident to malignant socio-cultural positioning. By acknowledging the fact that our striving for a good life is inherently vulnerable, narratives of becoming emphasize how difficult it can be to navigate our social and cultural world in our aspiration for self-realization. However, by also acknowledging the moral importance of striving to become who we are, narratives of becoming escape the objection of falling prey to either passive surrender or active rejection of existential vulnerability. This was the critique made against decline- and age-defying narratives. The emphasis of narratives of becoming lies instead on developing an *optimal attitude* to whatever we may encounter in life and use these experiences in the service of a continuing process of moral self-development.

On what grounds should narratives of becoming be preferred over decline narratives and even the more positively oriented age-defying narratives? It is important to realize that this question touches upon a fundamental overarching problem confronting any philosophical argument that takes a normative stand. Who are we philosophers to prescribe to others how to live? Who are we to decide that an image that equates aging well with staying young is not as satisfactory, and even harmful, compared to an image proposing aging well as an ongoing and deepening process of becoming, of moral self-development? This issue, which also haunts the discourse of self-realization in general (see §9.4.5), is highly complex and may never find a fully satisfactory answer. Here, I restrict myself to the commentary that I believe we can safely say that any human being is basically trying to live a good life. Granted, this observation still offers room for many and possible contradictory interpretations of what this "good" life is, and does not provide criteria for an objectively justified choice between such interpretations. However, my definition of moral agency as the ability to lead a good life does suggest that cultural narratives that *help to enhance* people's moral agency should be preferred over cultural narratives that tend to *restrict* it.

This accords with Lindemann Nelson's (2001) analysis about counter narratives and their role in strengthening moral agency (see §3.2.3).

Following this line of argument, it is important to realize that both decline narratives and age-defying narratives present us with problems when it comes to developing an age identity that is satisfactorily rich to infuse one's experience of aging with meaning and value. This can be detrimental to people's chances to develop and maintain their moral agency. By focusing on the importance of moral self-development, narratives of becoming aim to provide an alternative that does offer aging individuals the chance to acquire a sense of moral identity and the corresponding qualities of moral agency that will enable them to lead a good life (see §5.5). Hereby, narratives of becoming present a distinct advantage over the other categories of cultural narratives that have been discussed.

In short, narratives of becoming express the moral importance of a lifelong process of working on ourselves in order to actualize our best potentialities. The developed qualities help us to function as moral agents. Importantly, this includes confronting existential vulnerability in a way that does not compromise our *vital involvement* with life. The term vital involvement is inspired by the classic study of Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick (1986) that illustrates the resilience of older people beautifully. Cruikshank (2003) aptly summarizes the attractive perspective this offers: "Learning to be old may be the last emotional and spiritual challenge we can agree to take on. While aging is shrouded in denial or shame, it will be seen simply as defeat. [...] The promise of other ways to age is exhilarating, though, if we can imagine late life as the time when we are most fully ourselves" (p. 7). Eventually, it can be said that narratives of becoming perceive aging well in terms of acquiring the kind of practical wisdom that is expressed in the well-known creed: the courage to change what you can change, the strength to endure what you cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. The idea that later life can be dedicated to acquiring this attitude, I argue, presents a welcome addition to current cultural narratives about later life, and offers potential resources to generate the resisting force that should characterize a true counter narrative.