

1-1-1987

# Ethnicity and Lifetimes: Self Concepts and Situational Contexts of Ethnic Identity in Late Life

Mark Luborsky

*aa1382, aa1382@wayne.edu*

Robert L. Rubinstein

*University of Maryland - Baltimore County, rrubinst@umbc.edu*

---

## Recommended Citation

Luborsky, M., & Rubinstein, R. Ethnicity and Lifetimes: Self Concepts and Situational Contexts of Ethnic Identity in Late Life. In D. Gelfand, & D. Barresi (eds.), *Ethnic Dimensions of Aging*. New York: Springer. 1987  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/anthrofrp/3>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Research Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Luborsky, M., & Rubinstem, R. Ethnicity and Lifetimes: Self Concepts and Situational Contexts of Ethnic Identity in Late Life. In D. Gelfand, & D. Barresi (eds.), *Ethnic Dimensions of Aging*. New York: Springer, 1987.

### 3

## Ethnicity and Lifetimes: Self-Concepts and Situational Contexts of Ethnic Identity in Late Life

Mark Luborsky and Robert L. Rubinstein

Ethnicity has often been discussed in at least three ways: as the product of historical and cultural group identities (Handlin, 1973); as part of an individual's self-concept and self-identity (Rosenberg, 1981); and as these two in relation, the interaction of individual and group identities over time (Barth, 1969). Certainly, patterns of ethnic behavior may be thought of as a fundamental orientation to living common to individuals who share historical and cultural circumstances. However, ethnicity may also be thought of as situational. Ethnic thoughts and behaviors, conscious and unconscious, may be produced, heightened, or diminished in situations of both ethnic contrast and complementarity.

One such situation is the life course and its component life stages and key events (Frank, 1984). Hypothetically, as has been proposed by Erikson (1968), if each life stage is characterized by central existential or developmental issues concerning "identity" and if ethnicity is a key component of identity, then ethnicity must in some way meaningfully intertwine with the occurrence of life stages and key events. As a person moves through various life stages, he or she may enter settings that call for aspects of ethnic identity to emerge or be submerged (Myerhoff, 1978). Such situations and key events may include school, dating, work, marriage, child raising, neighborhood life, friendships, and, in late life, retirement, widow-

hood, and the subjectively defined onset of old age. Along this line, Kastenbaum (1979) has hypothesized that ethnicity may be "resurgent" in late life, possibly in response to a separation from the public sphere. Psychodynamic and developmental aspects of ethnicity have received little attention. There is increasing awareness, however, of the role of ethnicity in such events in several ways. First, ethnicity shapes individual identity and self-conception. Second, ethnicity can influence the dominant values and modes of communication of ethnic individuals (McGaldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1982). Third, ethnic values and modes of communication can influence how individuals typically relate to one another, either through what is spoken of and how or what is left out and how. And, fourth, as we point out, ethnicity is a popular language of family function (Friedman, 1982). People do not "naturally" know about depth psychology but may speak of many important relational behaviors, especially in regard to the family, through a language of ethnicity.

The life course does not exist in a vacuum. Each part of a lifetime is experienced in a social, cultural, and historical context (Hareven, 1978), which greatly shapes and is shaped by the objective and subjective realities of life. Thus, although it is possible to talk, theoretically, about ethnicity, it is not in fact possible to separate the experience of ethnicity and ethnic identity from concrete historical moments.

Similarly, it would be short-sighted to treat the ethnic identity of elderly individuals as if it exists solely with reference to feelings of ethnicity at the moment. Or, put another way, it is likely that current ethnic identity has been distilled through past ethnic experiences. Thus, if it is true that a present-day sense of identity is constructed from a lifetime of experiences, this should be true of ethnic identity as well.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine ethnicity as a life-course phenomenon and to show how it operates similarly for different groups. In a sense, then, this chapter is not about three discrete ethnic groups but about ethnicity as a social and individual process that may exist regardless of the particular group in question. We further suggest that ethnic identity as viewed from late life draws some of its substance from lifelong ethnic concerns in two ways. First, past experiences relating to ethnic identity serve as salient complements, contrasts, or settings to present-day ethnic identity. Second, there is evidence that each person's identity in late life is organized thematically (Kaufman, 1981) and is constructed from a lifetime of varied experiences. As has been pointed out by those who write about the life review, retrospectivity is purposeful and concerns issues of identity at the present (Butler, 1963).

## Ethnicity and Older Widowers

In this chapter we report on data being gathered in a study of Jewish, Irish, and Italian men, aged 65 and older, widowed 2 to 8 years, after a long-term marriage. The study is being conducted at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center. The focus of the study is on life reorganization by ethnically identified older widowers after the initial bereavement period has passed. Issues of identity reformulation, changes in health and activity patterns, ethnic identity, and lingering attachment to the deceased spouse are central to the study. Ethnicity is operationalized here both as self-identification as Irish, Italian, or Jewish (to screen those who answered ads for men with these "backgrounds") and as lineal symmetry (that both parents were of the same ethnic group). The generation of immigration was not a concern for sample selection. Here we will discuss findings from the initial phase of the research in which we are interviewing 15 widowers from each of the three ethnic groups.

We adopted two strategies in measuring ethnicity. One was to develop a short instrument that focused on behavioral and psychological aspects of ethnicity so as to compare briefly what seemed to be salient indicators of ethnicity as they had been noted in the literature and in our own experience. The second was to develop a series of open-ended questions about the meaning of ethnicity and allow sufficient time for their discussion in the context of a multiple-session, in-depth-interview format.

It is apparent from the responses to questions about ethnicity, identity, and personal beliefs that, although questions of ethnic identity can in some sense be answered with reference to the present day, men in the sample often discuss ethnic identities and their meanings with reference to past events. Let us give a number of brief examples.

Mr. Donnell, aged 76, had been widowed about 3 years. When he phoned in to participate in the study, we assumed his name was Irish but learned it had originally been Doniletti. His Italian ethnic identity was a source of conflict to him. In the interviews he described an early life that featured family strife, conflict, and brutality as well as warm memories of the aunt who raised him. Mr. Donnell's upbringing was reflected in lifelong conflicts about his ethnic identity. On the one hand, he did many things typical of Italian-American elderly in Philadelphia: he lived in an Italian neighborhood, attended church in an Italian parish, married an Italian woman, and had close affinal relations. Most of his acquaintances and significant others on a social network profile were Italians.

On the other hand, his response to a question about the meaning to him of his Italian identity prompted a vigorous discussion of how the Italians were "the worst" ethnic group, this anchored by several stories of how Italians had caused difficulties for him in several employment situations. The rejection of his heritage was played out in other domains. For example, in his 40s he suffered a mental and physical crisis that, among other things, led to a psychologically based stomach disorder. He ceased eating Italian foods, which his wife loved to prepare and eat, and substituted bland American foods, which he processed in a blender and drank. Additionally, his wife's death, 3 years before the interviews, led to a further redefinition of the life-course situation influencing his ethnic identity. After his wife died, he was able to disentangle himself from his Italian in-laws; for his taste, they were too concerned with being "Italian." He was now quite isolated. This latest synthesis about the meaning of his Italian identity—a pulling away from it—was in fact one in a series of lifelong conflicts and resolutions. His current ethnic feeling was thus influenced by an important life-span event (widowhood) compounded by long-standing conflicts.

Whereas Mr. Donnell pulled away from his ethnic heritage, another informant, Mr. Goldberg, drew closer to it. Mr. Goldberg, aged 73, had been widowed for 3 years. A Jew, he made a distinction between Judaism as an ethnic identity and as a religion. Although hardly religious, he had spent much of his life acting on a number of deeply held moral convictions about the need for equality and democracy. He noted that although he was an atheist he felt very much a Jew. Because of his personal concern for social welfare and reform he felt that, although he was not Jewish in a religious sense, he fit well within a Jewish tradition of prophetic protest.

He received a large settlement from his wife's insurance policy and spent a good deal of the money lavishly outfitting a woodworking shop in his basement. His wife was Catholic, and when they married, he reported, he and his wife agreed never to discuss religion in the home. He felt that they had kept to this policy. Mr. Goldberg had three daughters, two of whom "practice no religion" and one who had become very involved in Judaism.

A year to the day after his wife's death, Mr. Goldberg was awakened by sharp chest pains. Fearing a heart attack, he was hospitalized for tests, which found nothing. Eventually, one doctor asked him how he felt toward his deceased wife. He told the doctor of many unresolved feelings: guilt about having treated his wife poorly and fear of estrangement from his daughters. The doctor encouraged him to talk with them about his feelings, which he did.

At one point his religious daughter told him that some of the woodwork in her synagogue needed repair, and she put him in touch with her rabbi. He did the work there and was also able to engage the rabbi in conversations about religion. This represented a reconnection of sorts with Judaism as a religious system. Mr. Goldberg also noted that his wife's death enabled him to appreciate more actively the Jewish religion and cultural tradition. He attributed this change to now being free of the pact with his wife not to discuss religious matters. He also felt that the change had to do with his own aging and an increased concern with his place in the world.

### Life-Course Concerns

The ethnic groups represented here each have distinctive cultural practices and world views. Nevertheless, despite such differences, which pertain to both the behavioral content and world view of members of each group, we suggest that developmentally, on the level of the individual, ethnicity has similar moral meanings and tactical applications for the older men we interviewed.

Reflecting on how ethnicity is built from episodes and experiences over a lifetime, we suggest that for the older men in the sample the meaning of ethnicity is related to four intertwined life-course concerns. First, the meaning of ethnicity in late life derives from issues of life-span development and family history. Second, ethnic identity derives meaning from the historical settings and circumstances during which key events are experienced. Third, current-day ethnic identity is situationally evoked depending on the needs and goals of individuals. Fourth, past ethnic identity and experiences continue to be reworked as raw material for current-day ethnic meaning. We will discuss each of these points in turn.

### The Meaning of Ethnicity in Late Life Derives from Issues of Life Span Development and Family History

That the meaning of ethnicity derives from issues of life-span development and family history was quite apparent in the material collected from many of our informants. At one level ethnicity represents continuity, but it is possible to view analytically statements of ethnic identity as a shorthand by which informants express themes of personal development, differentiation, individuation, and identity regarding family as well as intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict. Key points along the developmental cycle may be infused

with aspects of family meaning embodied as ethnic traits, practices, and beliefs.

We became concerned with the possibility that informants were framing ethnicity as a language for discourse on two related issues: family relations and developmental events. Instilling ethnic knowledge of practices and conceptions of self are accomplished in dyadic filial relationships. Moreover, whatever involvement an ethnic individual has in a larger ethnic community, a particular stance on ethnic beliefs and practices is likely to be part of a family's tradition. An individual's subjective sense of identity and attitudes toward his or her ethnicity are enmeshed with those toward parental figures.

Let us briefly consider here some aspects of ethnicity as a language of family relations. Ethnicity has often been operationalized as a unitary thing but in two ways. First, it has been portrayed—for example, in quantitative research—as an independent variable that will wholly or partially explain something about a person. The thinking here is that if a person is known to be an X, his behavior becomes understandable. Second, the unitary conception of ethnicity is found in its conception as a feeling of "we-ness" and a commitment to a community that produces "typical" behaviors or actions. In either version of this unitary view, ethnicity may be said to emerge as a "solid" property of persons and communities. Yet, in contrast, ethnicity has also been portrayed as "fluid" in two ways. First, it has been seen as a set of differences between generations consequent to processes of immigration, acculturation, and generational succession. Second, it has been viewed as a set of differences in what constitutes core or "acceptable" ethnic behavior by individuals. For example, minimally, if persons A and B display the very same ethnic behaviors, but in addition person B enacts many nonethnic behaviors and A does not, who is "more ethnic"? And, of course, further complications in defining the degree of ethnicity will ensue when two individuals do not enact the same behaviors.

Thus, in its fluid sense ethnicity may serve as a foil for intergenerational issues in its role as an arena that overlaps, but is analytically distinct from, family process and filial concerns. For example, key developmental issues of individuation and the establishment of individual identity may be conceptualized as both family and ethnic problems for the individual. We would suggest, as many have, that issues of personal identity are lifelong, and we are therefore suggesting that issues of ethnic identity are also lifelong. Ethnic traditions not only afford the individual a sense of continuity with a nationality, family, or heritage but also provide one language for the expression of conflict and the need for redefinition at any

moment in life. When one's cultural heritage and concomitant bundle of values and identities may be difficult to accept during certain periods of life, another package of values and identities may be acceptable and substitutable. This makes even more complex Kastenbaum's (1979) conceptualization of ethnicity as lineage, behavior, and self-conception in that both self-conception and behavior may change periodically.

It would seem that both the fluid and the solid perspectives represent distinctive manifestations of the same phenomenon, and in fact "ethnicity" may constructively be thought of as having these two forms. In the solid form ethnicity is transgenerational, enduring, communal, and positive, and ethnic identity is stable. The fluid form has as its focus each generation and therefore the fact that, within each generation, individuals must make their own way, supplant the older generation, and in a some sense turn against them by adapting new values and deriving core experiences from new situations.

This way of discussing ethnicity bears a striking resemblance to issues of, on the one hand, differentiation, separation, and individuation in the family and, on the other, the continued integration, participation in, and attachment to the family. We learn to be both apart from and a part of our families. As a consequence, we might conclude that one important function of ethnicity is as a distinctive language for an intra- and interfamily dialogue about issues such as attachment, community, individuation, separation, and relationships. In a sense, ethnicity is a language of parent-child relationships.

Some of these issues are apparent in the case of one informant, Mr. Silver, a vital, 90-year-old Jewish émigré from Poland via England who was often loath to talk about personal feelings in our interviews. At key points in his life course his Jewish identity was heightened or diminished, and influenced by particular events, forming a foundation for both individuation and integration. Such key points occurred at the onset of adulthood, at marriage, at retirement, and at widowhood.

The outlines of his life were reviewed in a life history interview we conducted. He went to public school in England; in the evenings he studied for his bar mitzvah at the Hebrew school (*Cheder*). He noted happily that during one of the school terms his mother was the teacher. He viewed his father with no fond memories as a stern, distant man. As a Jew in England he experienced "lots of harassment and bad treatment; you were considered less than a person." When at age 14 he started selling newspapers, he bought his mother

a single fresh peach weekly, a luxury that cost more than a third of his pay. Within 2 years he was fired for refusing to work on Yom Kippur. After a bleak year of unemployment he emigrated to America as his older brother had. During the interview he made the unsolicited comment that "the hardest thing in my whole life was leaving my mother." This statement was surprising in the force of its emotionality because, throughout five interviews, he consistently failed to describe any inner feelings or affect states, even when prompted.

On the boat he shared a cabin with a non-Jew. Mr. Silver feared revealing his religious identity and "being treated as less than a person," so he removed his *tzitzit* (ritual cloths) and hid them under his mattress for the trip. He reported that he forgot to retrieve them from under the mattress in the cabin when he arrived in America. Further, he did not buy a new set once here. Moreover, he failed to attend temple for several years after arriving, but he started regular observances when his mother emigrated to America 6 years later. At age 33 he married and joined the reformed temple his wife attended. He explained the shift by saying that he read Hebrew well but could not translate it, and so he never really knew what was being said. He therefore entered an Americanized contemporary tradition, leaving behind the orthodoxy of his childhood and his mother. In addition, he gave up observing traditional Friday night practices of candle lighting and wine blessing. He was chastised by more orthodox friends for not knowing Hebrew, but he regarded them contemptuously, he said, because he attended temple each week and they did not. After his children were born, he was too busy working to become very active in the Jewish community, he reported. But upon retirement at age 76, he immersed himself in Jewish organizations and received many awards of recognition for his work.

At age 83 he became a widower. Now, he noted, he only dates "Jewish girls" and lives in a predominantly Jewish apartment complex. He said that he retains a strong attachment to his wife, wearing her Star of David pin on his jacket lapel and kissing her picture each night and morning on the way in and out of the bedroom. After remarking on his lifelong and childhood experiences of feeling harassed as a Jew, he said he now has only Jewish friends.

In summary, it appears that, at key moments when consolidating a new identity—as a young adult, an immigrant to America, husband and father, retiree and widower—his sense of Jewishness emerges distinctively and serves in part as a means of differentiation, integration, and identity formation and maintenance.

A number of postures are available in respect to ethnicity and self over the life course. Working through tensions about one's ethnic identity may be a mechanism for working through the relationship of a person to his family. Alternatively, one may seemingly accept family relations but reject an ethnic heritage and in so doing reject ethnic values. Thus, ethnic values and practices may become a vehicle for externalizing and objectifying aspects of subjective experience that a person is unable or unwilling to confront directly within the family or community.

#### Ethnic Identity Derives Meaning from the Historical Settings and Circumstances During Which Key Events are Experienced

We will discuss two sorts of such key events here. The first is the creation of a general meaning for ethnicity as a cultural category in society. The second relates to specific events occurring within and influencing the life spans of informants.

One of the most important circumstances has been the changing public climate and meaning of ethnicity in society at large. Ethnic festivals common today suggest that there may now be a generic ethnicity in the folk sociology of identity. This identity is viewed as a part of each citizen's social identity as an individual in America and above and beyond membership in an ethnic family. Such a view of ethnicity contrasts with the other popular notion of ethnicity disappearing in a melting pot.

Among the men we interviewed, ethnicity was regarded as an inherent part of everyone and conceptualized as family background, traditions, and group characteristics, defined in terms of the nationality of immigrant ancestors. Ethnic identity provides members with an affiliation in a particular group of people who share similar "roots." Such a sense of generic ethnicity has been enhanced by its commercialization and its use as a favored expressive entity in the public realm, such as in television news stories and international day festivals.

However, in response to the particular question "Who is most and who is least ethnic in your family?" informants often phrased replies in terms of a continuum spanning from "traditional" to "Americanized." More Italian and Irish than Jewish men, for example, answered in terms of who was most traditional in the old country ways and who was the most Americanized in spending habits, language, cuisine, or education. Persons classed as most ethnic were categorized as still retaining knowledge of family relationships, distant relatives, special foods, holidays, and proper observances, and often as living in the old neighborhood.

There have been specific changes in the meaning of being Italian, Irish, or Jewish across the life span of the informants. Changes have been focused around the meaning of co-experienced events, such as the Depression, World War II, and labor union movements, as well as particular events that seem to pertain more to one group than to another, such as the Holocaust, troubles in northern Ireland, or the fact that Italy was the enemy in World War II. These aspects of ethnic identity again reinforce the importance of attuning analysis of ethnicity to the interplay between individual experiences, historical times, developmental phases, and current situational factors. It is important to note that the awareness of distinctions between ethnic groups has never been uniform during the lives of our older informants but rather has alternated with periods in which there has been a heightened sense of ethnic blurring.

Several of the older Italian men, for example, reported incidents in the 1920s and 1930s in which they suffered at the hands of the Irish. Mr. Donnell, mentioned above, could "pass" as Irish because of his name, although he is Italian. As a young man he worked on vegetable farms in southern New Jersey and benefited from his fictitious ethnicity in the hierarchical organization of the farms: English were owners, Irish were managers, and Italians were field pickers. Mr. Passo, an Italian, spent much of his childhood in a Catholic orphanage run by nuns who were of Irish descent, and he suffered, he felt, because they tended to favor the Irish orphans. Both men view the Roosevelt administration and World War II as the time at which these sharp ethnic distinctions began to wane. It is clear that for both men certain eras affected ethnic definition and that, at the current time, the historicity of ethnic experiences serves as backdrop for their ethnic identity.

#### Current-Day Ethnic Identity is Situationally Evoked

That current-day ethnic identity is situationally evoked among the older widowers we have interviewed should be clear from the discussion above. Yet this too is somewhat paradoxical and is best understood, we feel, in light of a conceptualization of ethnicity as both solid and fluid. Ethnic identity should be continuous, constant, and community-reinforced, not only as an attribute of personhood, like gender, but also as a product of popularized ethnicity. However, among the older men in the sample, important situations evoked reconsideration of ethnicity. These included the need to reorganize their lives after the death of a spouse and the onset of aspects of a

subjectively defined old age. Such tasks may engender, for example, a desire to forge a sense of continuity with one's past or one's "people" or, conversely a withdrawal of sorts. The former may be interpreted in part as a projection of the desired continuity with one's departed spouse into a larger system of shared substance.

Mr. DiAngelo exemplifies these dimensions. Italian born, at 2 years of age he and his mother joined his father, who had already emigrated to Philadelphia. They shared a house with other members of his father's family in the Italian neighborhood and led a "traditional" Italian home life. Family life was described as paramount. His father and brothers ran a clothes-making business. His Italian identity and lack of formal education at that time limited his employment prospects. He spoke of being harassed by non-Italians at school and elsewhere. He framed accounts of his life history by aligning himself with his father, who early on admonished him "above all else you care for the family you bring into the world." He described a major goal throughout life as to give all to his family and children and to provide them with a "good" (i.e., Catholic) education. Although it was his role to earn the money, his wife managed it and prepared and distributed food among family members following traditional patterns of Italian commensalism.

Although he continues to grieve for his wife, Mr. DiAngelo attributes learning to manage his grief equally to the need to set a good example for his children and grandchildren and to the desire to live for his wife to see how the grandchildren turn out. Nowadays he has invested himself with the role of preparing and distributing traditional Italian foods to his two daughters and their families, his sister, and his 94-year-old mother. In this fashion he has taken on aspects of his deceased wife's family role, which also was in part a way of vivifying his attachment to her: "My wife's family ran a restaurant. She learned cooking there, and I learned from her." He frequently receives orders from sons-in-law and grandchildren for special dishes and desserts. He makes weekly trips to the old Italian neighborhoods to buy fresh Italian breads and pasta for his daughters' families who live in the suburbs. In brief, the Italian family culinary heritage and patterns of exchange provide him with outlets and materials for building a new identity, both as an Italian and as a widower.

Mr. DiAngelo described himself as "the black sheep of the family," referring to his English-language abilities, job, and residence. He described his father as very strict about defending the family's Italian name, speaking only Italian at home, and not becoming

Americanized. His brothers, sisters, and relatives who worked in the clothing factory all spoke Italian at work and at home. Mr. DiAngelo broke with his family when he did not join the family business. At age 14, when he left school, he took a job as a metalworker, an occupation he would retain throughout his life. The predominant language was English wherever he worked. He gave this as the reason for his weaker grasp of Italian. Contrasting the generations and at the same time identifying himself with his mother, he depicted himself as "just like, but the opposite of my mother. She spoke Italian only but could understand English. I speak English but understand Italian." He was among the first in his family to move out to the suburbs; his mother and sister still live in the old neighborhood.

But he also regarded being a black sheep in a positive light. He believed he was specially able to care for his wider kin because of the new (among tailors) skills in metalwork and construction. Repeatedly during the interviews he stressed that the whole family depended on him to do things around the house that they, as garment workers, could not do. He installed concrete patios, built fences, and did minor electrical repairs, among other tasks, which saved them from having to hire an outside contractor. In part, he regarded himself as having taken a step away from the traditional ways of life and skills of his natal land, becoming skilled for life in America.

Another example shows how current-day ethnic identity is situationally evoked. Mr. O'Connor, aged 77 years and widowed 3 years, was devastated by the loss of his wife and "was pretty bad off for a year, year and a half after she died." After her death he sold their Florida condominium and moved back to Philadelphia, where they had lived for many years. The property sale, his wife's savings, and insurance benefits left him with more than \$100,000. He enjoyed giving most of it away: \$15,000 to each of three sisters, \$1,500 to each of 20 nieces and nephews, \$1,000 to each of 18 cousins.

He got the idea for this distribution, he said, from his mother's uncle, who, arriving from Ireland in the 1840s, settled in the Midwest, became wealthy, and gave members of his own family substantial sums of money in a similar manner. During a trip to Ireland, Mr. O'Connor returned to his mother's hometown and found the cemetery of his mother's family, where the grave stones were inscribed with a note that they were provided by his mother's uncle from "Indiana, USA." This was a satisfying link in a circle of identity for him.

### Past Ethnic Experiences Continue to be Reworked as Raw Material for Present Day Ethnic Meaning

Our fourth point in examining ethnicity as a lifetime phenomenon is that past ethnic identity and experiences continue to be reworked as raw materials for current-day ethnic meaning. By this we mean that the construction of ethnic identity by individuals across their life span is not immutably fixed in youth or young adulthood. Rather, the personal meanings of ethnicity are important materials for reworking notions of the self and social identities in later life. Further, the ethnic experiences of youth and adulthood are reinterpreted over the life course. Whereas we previously described how ethnic identity can be rejected or elaborated in part as a language for familial issues, it is also necessary to consider there may be a different set of meanings attributed to reembracing or rejecting dimensions of one's ethnic identity in later life. This can be illustrated in the case of Mr. Green.

Mr. Green, a 66-year-old widower, was born in America 4 years after his parents emigrated in 1914 from Russia. He considers himself to be very Jewish. A difficult birth left him with only partial use of his left hand. As a child he worked hard at therapy to overcome the disability. He reported with satisfaction how he refused to accept his disability. Rather than becoming dependent, as a youth he took up woodworking, to his parents' chagrin. His ability to do woodwork was a personal symbol throughout his life of his being able to overcome adversity and to thrive despite limitations.

Two years after his wife's death Mr. Green moved into a converted garage attached to his daughter's house. He would not date other women, noting "that part of my life is over," and he had not relinquished his grief or disposed of his wife's personal belongings. His current-day life revolves around family and religious activities. He helps care for his two preschool grandsons and is proud of them. An accomplished woodworker, he teaches crafts at a senior center 2 days a week. He also actively attends religious services.

His fondest memories as a child were walking to and from temple with his grandfather, who was a respected religious teacher who prepared boys for their bar mitzvahs. When his grandfather died, his father took over those same duties in the community. His grandfather, and later his father, gave him several prayer books for the various holidays and commentaries on the Torah. He cherished these not only for the memories they evoked but also because they allowed him to carry on traditions of the Jewish people and the roles of his paternal ancestors.

He built a special bookcase to keep the collection of old prayer books. In addition, he taught the Hebrew alphabet to his grandson. Before his marriage he was "not too observant." Once married, however, he joined the temple's men's club and served as secretary for several years. He was most active when his children were growing up and became less active as they got older. However, after his wife's death he increased involvement by attending morning and evening services and serving as an usher. Traditional mourning practices including attendance at the temple, provided him with a framework for daily actions at a time when he "did things automatically without feeling or thought for a long time." He reported feeling closer to his Jewish faith since his wife's death, wanting to participate even more. Fifteen months after his wife died he made his first trip to Israel and was preparing for a second trip at the time of our interviews.

The synagogue is valued by him now as a community, as well as a religious center. In order to cope with his wife's death, he said, he "buried myself in woodworking to avoid sitting and thinking of her." Nowadays "people ask for advice for fixing things. I now do repairs on the chairs for the *bimah*" [raised area at the front of the temple]. About a year after his wife's death he noted that the temple's wooden chairs and the children's jungle gym were in bad condition, and he spent many satisfying hours rebuilding them. He makes special wood pointers used for reading from the Torah during services. He presented his nephew with a specially carved pointer for reading the Torah during his bar mitzvah. Several of the religious objects he makes are in use by Jewish people around the United States and in Israel.

After his wife died, Mr. Green closed that part of his life and sought to fulfill his needs for intimacy within his daughter's family. He revitalized his Jewish identity and his role as a religious teacher, following the path of his father and grandfather. The dynamics of his life reorganization included combining woodworking skills, Judaic religious practices, and a Green family role for older men. The older men instill in children Jewish knowledge in preparation for adulthood. Woodworking carried, for Mr. Green, a vigorous sense of his lifelong tenacity at overcoming adversity, epitomized and acted out through his craft, despite a partially disabled arm. Woodworking is an instrumental activity by means of which he keeps busy and meets people, and it is also a personal model, developed in his youth, of how to overcome disability, which he has applied to today's challenge of adapting to being a widower.

He is combining these elements of life experience, Judaism, and family roles for older men in religious training to work out a new synthesis of his identity and life.

### Broader Significance

To close, we would like to indicate how our approach and data may be relevant to other ethnic groups, and also their bearing on the field of ethnicity and aging.

Our approach in using the concept of lifetime ethnicity suggests, first, dimensions that may be common to many ethnic groups. These were illustrated here with cases from three different ethnic groups. The data suggest that, for each group, ethnicity intertwines with life stage and that the personal meanings and social experiences of ethnic identity continue to be salient and mutable in late life. Yet many other questions remain. We examined three Caucasian ethnic groups. We suspect that the mutability of ethnic identity seen among these groups might not be duplicated among minority, non-White ethnic groups, the social meaning of whose ethnicity is less amenable to so much individual redefinition. Thus, some differences may be revealed by applying that concept to ethnic minorities. Differences may suggest limitations or alterations to the concept. The concept poses a second interesting question. Ethnic identity would appear to be "fixed" within the person and redefined at different points according to an internal ethnic cycle across people's lifetimes. The relationship of a particular ethnic identity cycle to other life-course cycles and developmental tasks may differently shape individuals' attraction to or distancing from their own ethnic identities. Such questions need to be addressed in new studies.

These concerns lead to considerations for the field in general. Ethnicity is a basic variable traditionally used in social science research. Our data suggest that we must be more sensitive to its construction and relevance because it may be neither unchanging nor carrying the same meaning from one group to another. Rather, ethnicity may also be fluid and may operate at several levels. Our approach suggests that ethnicity should be viewed not just in terms of its specific content but also as a vessel that facilitates public expression of subjective experience and meanings. Thus, the cases of late-life ethnic experiences we presented suggest that ethnicity also serves to foster transformation and reworking of new symbolic meanings (Peacock, 1968) or to revitalize and intensify traditional

values and meanings. In summary, the approach and data outlined above suggest that studies of ethnicity and aging need to consider ethnicity and ethnic identity as both a stable variable and as a vehicle by which an individual creatively transforms or revitalizes social identity and self. More fundamentally, the approach presented in this paper may help to overcome a limitation inherent in much previous work by providing a concept for more clearly understanding the psychodynamic and developmental aspects of ethnicity in life-course perspective.