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**‘Being Aged’ in the Everyday:  
Uncovering the meaning through  
elders’ stories**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy *General Practice*  
The University of Auckland, 2008**

## Abstract

*It's like the sun and the tide.* The aim of this study was to understand the meaning of 'being aged' through the everyday experiences of those who are aged. Philosophically, this interpretive study was informed by hermeneutics and interpretive phenomenology. The writings of two twentieth-century philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, guided the study's design and research methods. The phenomenon of interest is 'being aged,' a thing which is ordinarily taken-for-granted in the everyday. However, much is already spoken and empirically 'known' about the phenomenon by those who are not yet aged. Methodologically the study's design sought to 'put aside' those voices and listen in closely to what elders themselves had to say about being in their everyday lives. Individual research conversations were conducted with fifteen participants; four Maori elders aged 71 to 93 and eleven non-Maori elders aged 80 to 97 years. All were living in private residences on Auckland's North Shore and recruited by way of the general electoral roll. The conversations were focused on gathering the stories of particular everyday events as well as the person's reflections on aging. Anecdotes drawn from the conversations formed the research text. Hermeneutics informed the interpretive engagement with this text. As a non-Maori researcher, cultural integrity of the text and the interpretations was enhanced through partnership with a Maori advisor. Dwelling hermeneutically with the anecdotal text was a way of listening to the spoken and unspoken words. Four overarching notions were illuminated and form the study's findings. They are my interpretive descriptions of the ordinary ways of 'being in the everyday,' the experiences of 'being with others' in advanced age, the announcing of being aged in the uncomfortableness of 'experiencing the unaccustomed' and how 'aging just is' there in an everyday way. Reflecting phenomenologically on the findings, the meaning of being aged is in its ordinariness. My thesis is that being in the ordinary everyday in advanced age both conceals and reveals the phenomenon of being aged.

## Acknowledgments

I attribute the completion of this thesis to the 15 men and women who welcomed me into their homes and generously shared their stories with me. In spirit they travelled with me through the whole of the research journey.

Along the way my supervisors Dr Ngairé Kerse and Dr Liz Smythe have been my touchstone. In their wisdom they allowed me to wander until I found my pathway while never letting me feel lost. And my thanks go to Dr Peter Davis for his support and advice in getting this study off the ground.

*He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka (a choppy sea can be navigated).* My sincere thanks go to John Marsden, Chief Executive Officer of Te Puna Hauora, for formalising the partnership with Maori and for opening the way for Teri Hei Hei, Kaumatua<sup>1</sup>, to be my guide through unfamiliar territory.

My thanks also go to Janferié Bryce-Chapman, Executive Officer of Age Concern North Shore, for so willingly supporting the study.

I acknowledge Wiremu Tipuna for leading the mihi whakatau<sup>2</sup> at the final participant gathering and for guiding the cultural integrity of the event.

Behind the scenes are those whose shoulders I stand on. My mother Elizabeth encouraged and shared gems of wisdom. My father Rex, who loved to write, left behind his Concise English Dictionary which became my constant desk companion. And others helped just by being there in my life and keeping me sane with swimming, cycling, running and laughing; Ross, Jan, Craig, Simon, Suzanne, Alison, Larry, Duncan, Vicki and Dave.

Lastly, I acknowledge the University of Auckland for its financial support through the doctoral scholarship and funding assistance to attend the Institute of Interpretive Phenomenology in Virginia, USA.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaumatua is a Maori word meaning male elder (Walker, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Mihi whakatau is a formal speech of welcome (Walker, 1990).

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## Before Setting Out

Before the textual journey begins, I offer a clarification of the language used and viewpoints taken within this project.

### Bringing Notions into Language

Language is a symbolic medium and thus plays an important part in communicating hidden meanings. Therefore, in accord with the study's philosophical underpinnings, I speak about participants rather than subjects, research conversations rather than interviews, text rather than data and hermeneutic engagement rather than analysis.

Heidegger (1927/1962) frequently uses the suffix 'ness' to signify the ontological character of things. For example, 'disclose' means "to lay open" while 'disclosedness' signifies "the character of having been laid open" (Heidegger, p. 105). I follow this same practice. Words used by Heidegger are written as they appear in his work, otherwise the suffix '-ness' is used, such as 'just is-ness,' when the word is not found within *The Concise English Dictionary* (Hayward & Sparkes, 1982).

For consistency, Macquarrie and Robinson's (Heidegger, 1927/1962) English translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, originally published in German in 1927, is used throughout the thesis. German words are excluded from direct quotes, except where their inclusion is essential to conveying understanding.

### The Words Chosen

I speak of 'elders' when referring to this study's participants and, where relevant, to older adults in general. Although the term is noted as being somewhat archaic (Simpson & Weiner, 1989b), I use it to signify a person "senior in years" (Hayward & Sparkes, 1982, p. 363). Thus the word is used in deference to the participants and for its applicability when referring to older Maori (Walker, 1990).

For this study, Maori elders were aged 70 or over and non-Maori elders aged 80 or over. Furthermore, my use of the term ‘aged’ is descriptive of the person as being long-lived. Accordingly, the phrase ‘living in advanced age’ is used to signify living in the latter stage of life. And, when I speak of ‘aging’ I am generally referring to the ongoing maturation of those living in advanced age.

## **Understanding the Maori Words**

Maori terminology appears in this thesis. The first time a Maori word or expression is used its English meaning is offered either within the text or a footnote. A glossary of terms (Appendix I) is provided after the final chapter as an easy point of reference for the reader.

## **Who is Speaking?**

Four participants in this study identified as Maori, the indigenous people of this land. In view of this, I have worked to embrace the meanings inherent within te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Treaty of Waitangi, our country’s founding constitutional document. Throughout the research journey I have been privileged to have a Maori advisor walk alongside me, ensuring I protected the Maori elders and their knowledge as treasures within Maoridom. Hence, when I offer interpretation of Maori content, the authoritative voice comes from within this partnership. Otherwise, in the hermeneutic tradition, the interpretations offered in this thesis are mine.

As is customary in phenomenology, the participants’ voices are heard through the inclusion of anecdotal text. When they speak, the text is italicised to distinguish their words from my own. Each voice is recognised through the use of the person’s chosen pseudonym. Where others’ voices are brought into play I have made every attempt to show this clearly using the referencing conventions given in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001). ‘Endnote 10’ is the referencing platform used. And from time to time I use the first person pronoun ‘we’ or the adjective ‘our’ when referring to people in general.