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Articles

Old Age, Time, and the Space of the Home: A Qualitative Research Study During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative study analyzes old age, time, and the space of the home by focusing on the mechanisms of mirroring and symbolization. Throughout the subject's life, these two mechanisms have shaped the house and existence within it. By investigating mirroring and symbolization, starting with discussion on the theme of the house, we can further unpack emotional data that are embedded within this dialogue. To this end, 3 men and 3 women (between 75 and 90 yrs.) participated in a Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions; the participants' houses were the setting. Two general hypotheses guided this study: a) that the ability to contain emotions, provided early in life by the maternal function, was transposed in later life to the space of the home, and b) that the ability to be alone was strongly pervaded by the living conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Five major themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: origins, the body, loneliness, death, and the influence of the public health emergency on the experience of the present. Questions of reflexivity and countertransference in psychoanalytically-informed qualitative research are discussed. The results indicate that, despite the exacerbation of loneliness due to the pandemic, the elderly continue to show the emotional intensity of their living spaces and the juxtaposition between the memory of the present and the memory of life in general, thus contradicting the predominant stereotypical image of old age, which focuses only on vulnerability.

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1. Introduction

The Devoto-Oli Dictionary (2018) provides a definition of old age that illuminates how this stage of life has historically been understood, and how it is still understood today: "*Old age: the most advanced phase of the biological cycle, in which showy phenomena of physical decay and a general weakening*

of the organism are manifested […] With reference to man, it is often associated with the idea of a state of inactivity and consequently of need, as well as of extreme fragility from the point of view of health."

However, changes in the life span temporality related to scientific and technological progress, and the consequent extension of life expectancy, make it necessary "*to think of old age from a broad perspective, considering it not only as a stage in which physical and mental handicaps present themselves, but also as a precious moment in which the present and the past can take on new meaning*" (Monterosa, 2020, p. 166).

If the intricate interrelationship between old age and death is inescapable – what Lussana termed the *secret ordeal* in 2012 – this new attempt will need to consider old age as not only the antechamber to death (Balsamo, 2020; De Mijolla, 2020). We must decouple the pairing, typical of capitalist culture, which views old age exclusively in terms of an unproductive waiting for death (Parin-Matthèy, 1997). The attempt will be, rather, to conceptualize death in the time of old age as we would at any other juncture in life: that is, as something terrifying, inevitable, and impossible to symbolize (Freud, 1915). In this sense, death waits, is to be expected, and constantly performs its function of interlocutor in differing ways.

In this vein, Quinodoz (2008) speaks of the *work of aging* as part of the work of living. She refers, accordingly, to the ability of the elderly person to focus on the whole of his/her history, thereby placing the final part of life within an overall frame. Quinodoz, referring to the elderly who age actively (those who have a representation of time that takes into account the limited duration of life), writes explicitly of an "*urgency to* give meaning to the whole of their existence *by integrating, in the present, their past, both happy and painful, in order to prepare for the future, even if it is likely to be short-lived*" (p. 13). In this work of aging, the *ability to integrate memories* plays a specific role in accordance with changes in the perception of time, typical of old age, whereby "*the rhythm of time changes, it moves faster and faster, and the difference between subjective and real time is increasingly evident*" (De Masi, 2020, p. 88).

The specificities of the time of old age (Guillaumin, 1982; Reboul, 1982) are produced by reflections that identify its most recognizable themes, which in turn serve the assumption that behind old age there has always been a childhood, a youth, and a unique life which is itself the product of non-objectifiable results. As Izzo (2020) states, in fact, "*every man ages as he is allowed to, either by his libidinal typology, or by the vicissitudes experienced in the relational field, which have brought new elements to the libidinal structure*" (p. 12).

It is therefore necessary, rather than regarding old age as a phase of life which has the same characteristics for each subject, to specifically analyze the subjective balance between object

libido and narcissistic libido (Balier, 1982) and the transformations of the defensive structure that each individual subject puts in place in order to live well in this phase. As Castiglia (1995) states, regression, "*instead of being perceived from a negative point of view, as if a subject previously capable of initiatives suddenly behaved like a dependent being, could be considered a movement of the psychic apparatus to find a pleasure in functioning as a counterbalance to suffering*" (pp. 5-6). It is true, in fact, that most work devoted to aging emphasizes a "*movement of narcissistic retreat of the elderly subject*" (Le Gouès, 1991, p. 29). This retreat sees the elderly person as an exclusively self-centered subject, preventing a view of the elderly person as a subject still in contact with objects that are meaningful to him/her, and engaged in the process of retracing his/her own existence as if to take stock (Balsamo, 2020; Marini, 1992).

We can therefore identify a declination of regression that is not necessarily located in the pathological meaning of the term, but in a movement that can be defined as a physiological resistance that does not veer toward narcissistic omnipotence. Indeed, throughout existence, and therefore also in old age, the narcissistic wound, the elaboration and overcoming of childhood omnipotence, and the restructuring of drive organization – in terms of integration of partial drives, as well as sufficiently tempered drive fusion – are issues that the individual finds himself/herself constantly re-experiencing, rethinking, and re-signifying. In old age, this happens under the severe and inescapable watch of the body's decay, which intersects with that organic trap represented by death. In existential, rather than theoretical, terms, this relationship represents perhaps the hardest of realities with which to dialogue.

The consequent adjustment of omnipotence allows the elderly person to be able to elaborate what Izzo (2007) defines as the *feeling of finiteness*: "*that feeling common to those who, because of that capacity for disillusionment that allows them to keep the thread of their own history from beginning to end without interruption, are able to feel the continuity of existence up to that feeling of loneliness, austerely soothing, which accompanies the accomplishment of a task*" (p. 41). For Izzo, such a feeling can be considered the physiological fate of the libido in old age, a product of overcoming original conflicts. Izzo's hypothesis is that, in non-pathological conditions, old age is characterized by a loosening of the investment of the ego libido in favor of a primacy of object relations. Furthermore, old age is also characterized by a feeling of loneliness and an experience of finiteness that should not suggest a psychopathological micro-depression, but rather the successful abandonment of the omnipotent condition (Izzo, 2020).

Along these lines, another fundamental task of old age is facing the losses typical of this stage of life: among others, there are the departure of children from the home, retirement, the death

of friends and companions, sexuality, body changes, and subsequent illnesses that frequently appear in dreams (De Masi, 2020; De Mijolla, 2020; Sommantico, 2018).

The experience of space, in particular the space of the home, in its relation to old age, is intimately connected to the question of temporality. Cultural variables, such as myths and imagery, have contributed to making the three-dimensional geographical space multidimensional, thereby allowing us to understand the environment in its semblance of existential space. This space can thus be designed and built so that it is inhabited by individuals, and so that it becomes the scenario as well as the content of processes of signification and identification (Eiguer, 2004).

As Bachelard (1957) reminds us, when speaking of *topophilia*, research on space should be concerned with the emotional experience of lived spaces, creating as it does locks of resistance to the linear flow of time. This means, therefore, questioning the way in which living space is experienced, how one is rooted in it, how the immobility of space conditions psychic attitudes, and what the house represents as an infinitesimal portion of all humanly recognizable space. It would be impossible, therefore, in such an approach, to separate living from being. As Freud (1899) already pointed out, in fact, the oneiric fantasy arranges "*one particular favourite way of representing the organism as a whole: namely as a house [...] On the other hand, it may make use of a whole row of houses to indicate a single organ […] Again, separate portions of a house may stand for separate portions of the body*" (p. 85).

In *The Unconscious of the House* (2004), Eiguer systematizes an approach for the matrix of the family model of the house, understanding the concept of internal habitat as a "*psychic representation, a synthesis of the representation of one's own body and that of the family group*" (p.6). The relationship with the house is full of ambivalence and precarious equilibrium just like that with the family: it must have containing characteristics of solidity and closure to protect from the outside, but at the same time it must have a ductility and a permeability that allows contact with the outside. According to Eiguer, "*we reproduce more or less on the habitat the 'design' of the body, recreating there the contour of our forms and its physiology*" (2004, p.12). In this sense, in old age the house comes to represent the possibility of intercepting the continuity of one's existence. This anchor, however, also closes a circuit of ambivalence because, if on the one hand mirroring makes it possible to recognize oneself in the material surroundings, at the same time it traps. It crystallizes the development of identification processes, thus providing a solid and immobile form of denial of the flow of time itself, like an embalming that denies the death of those who live in the house.

We can therefore ask whether solitary living in a house provides a way for the living unit to coincide with the body unit, or whether it is the failure of the project of integration between the parts. This failure would make it a form of withdrawal from the conflict/confrontation with otherness. Furthermore, we can ask whether living alone in this stage represents the beginning of finally living one's own old age, or the end of a collective/familial project undertaken in youth, which can be seen as an allegory of what has been lost through processes of intergenerational autonomy (Eiguer, 2004).

2. Method

2.1 Aim and Design

The aim of this work is to analyze the evidence of the past that leaks out from the real habitat that the house represents, in its inextricable connection with the temporality specifically experienced by the elderly subject. In particular, the study aims to understand the subjective experience of old age, time, and space for people living alone at their own house. Using a psychoanalytic understanding of old age, the research design was centered on a qualitative psychosocial method (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Hook, 2008): the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2012) (for a detailed description see the "Data Collection" section). Psychosocial research conceptualizes subjective experience as a dynamic and constant interaction and communication between inner psychological and outer sociological dimensions, which manifest through both unconscious or feeling states, and conscious communication (Hollway, 2004; Roseneil, 2006). Thus, data collection and analysis have taken into account felt emotions and spoken words, as well as the intersubjective dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, depending "*upon some unconscious psychic dynamics that are often only spuriously connected to the degree of social similarity between them*" (Gadd, 2004, p. 397).

2.2 Participants

Six participants (3 men and 3 women) were purposively selected because they live alone and are aged 75 or older. These people live in different types of houses and belong to different social contexts, but they all live in the city of Naples (see Table 1 for demographics). People who live alone were selected on the basis of the hypothesis that this variable would make clearer and more immediate two factors: firstly, a connection between the internal habitat (Winnicott, 1967) and the space of the house (Eiguer, 2004), and, secondly, the processes of deformation and transformation that accrue around and symbolize the experiences of the elderly subject in the house.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Marital status	Living arrangements	Contact time with participant (h)
Anita	F	75	Widowed	Own house lives by herself	1,20
Barbara	F	79	Widowed	Own house lives by herself	1,35
Concetta	F	90	Widowed	Own house lives by herself	1,40
Domenico	M	79	Widowed	Own house lives by herself	1,50
Eugenio	M	75	Divorced	Own house lives by herself	1,30
Francesco	M	81	Unmarried	Own house lives by herself	1,25

2.3 Data Collection

The FANI method (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2012) was used to elicit narratives of elderliness, time, and the space of home. This type of interview involves the use of an initial question, which does not directly correspond to the research question and thereby leaves the interviewee space to tell his/her story. In this specific case, the initial question used for the interviews was: *What is the history of the house you live in?*

As stated by Gadd (2004), "*the social discourses respondents routinely reproduce are used because they enable so many (biographically unique) individuals to defend against feelings of anxiety. To move beyond these defensive social discourses Hollway and Jefferson urge interviewers to pay particular attention to the contradictions, inconsistencies, hesitancies, absences, avoidances, and changes of emotional tone in narrative accounts"* (p. 386). In this way, the encouragement addressed to respondents to freely associate in response to the initial question facilitates the manifestation of the respondent's unconscious, as well as of the unconscious intersubjective dynamic of the interviewer-interviewee situation.

The three fundamental assumptions on which the FANI method is based are: 1) Unconscious intersubjectivity, understood in terms of a psychosocial analysis that makes dialogue a co-product of the unconscious, and which pays particular attention to the relational dynamics between interviewee and interviewer; 2) "Defended subject" rather than unitary rationality, i.e., emphasis on the defensive mechanisms enacted by the research subject, as well as the researcher; and 3) Free association method (Semi, 2011), which opens up the possible emergence of latent content in the narrative, and which places attention on the processes of signification inherent in the connections between the topics discussed (Archard, 2020).

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) thus present the idea of a defended "*psycho-social subject* [who is] *simultaneously psychic and social*" (p. 14), with a constant interplay between internal and external experiencing, with experience in and feedback from the external world informing the internal sense of being in the world. They also extend the idea of subjectivity by suggesting that subjects are not only positioned in discourse, but they are also invested in. So, by referring to Kleinian

(Klein, 1946) ideas of defensive splitting against anxiety, Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 2012) suggest that psychosocial subjects develop identity investments in their subject position over time and that they defend these positions in their narrative. The role of anxiety in driving investment in and defense of subject positionings becomes a strong theme in the data.

The interviews were conducted between January and March 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they took place in the participants' homes. The desire to preserve this setting inevitably led to a reduced number of subjects willing to participate in the research, due to the COVID-19 containment measures (in the region where the city of Naples is located there were strict quarantine-isolation measures). Another factor was the relative state of apprehension that affected, perhaps particularly, older people. Furthermore, the fact that interviews were conducted during the pandemic has inevitably impacted the themes of the research, ensuring that the initial references that constituted the frame of meaning then intertwined not only with the specificity of the themes brought forth by the research subjects, but also with the peculiarity of this historical and social moment.

A final necessary observation concerns the difficulty that emerged in relation to the management of digressions in the stories of the subjects interviewed. The isolation required by the pandemic, together with the vastness of the anecdotes that a whole life contains, were a combustible combination: for each interview of an average duration of one hour, the average time spent at the homes of the research participants was about three and a half hours. This fact led to a reflection on the method of interviewing used: if the subject must say as much as possible without being interrupted, if he/she must be left free to express him/herself because it is only in this way, through association, that he/she will enable a narrative increasingly free from defenses, then how can we avoid distancing ourselves from the specific themes of the research? In the text presenting this interview method, Hollway & Jefferson (2000, 2012) agree that there are, beyond the research theme, other themes that act as corollaries. According to them, the passage through these corollary themes leads, by unexpected ways, to the composition of a mosaic. The interviews thus constitute a kind of curve that travels away from the initial question, only to then rejoin it slowly towards the end of the meeting, sometimes after the recorder has been turned off. An additional element, however, was central: the individuals' expression when the recorder was on or off showed significant differences. It needs no emphasis that being recorded reactivates more or less latent paranoid anxieties. A short list of auxiliary questions certainly helped in conceptually rejoining the discussion with the research theme. Some of the questions are closer to the research theme, and others are more oriented towards the desire to break through the discourse, thus in some way regenerating it.

2.4 Data Analysis

The average duration of each interview was about 1 hour/1.30 hours, and at the end of each interview a transcription was made. The researcher's analysis and interpretations of the transcriptions were validated by an academic and psycho-dynamically trained practitioner in one-to-one supervision (e.g., Ogden, 2005) and a reflecting panel, aimed at reflecting on the participants' and researchers' emotions during the interview process. The reflecting panel brought together 3 academics from clinical, dynamic, and developmental psychology. The one-to-one supervision hinged on the analysis of transference/countertransference and reflexivity as cornerstone concepts for recognizing and using the participation of the researcher's subjectivity in the qualitative approach (Gemignani, 2011; Hollway, 2016; Holmes, 2013). More specifically, the attention paid to the transference/countertransference dynamic is due to its use as a tool for knowledge of aspects that are not reported via language. Thus, the dynamic opens up a reflection on how to replay, in the context of the interview, emotions related to previous events. Of course, this approach assumes that these emotions are projected onto the other, in continuity with the assumption of unconscious intersubjectivity (Ogden, 1994).

2.5 Ethical Standards

The study complied with the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical standards in the treatment of human research participants and conformed to the provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki in 1995 (as revised in Edinburgh 2000). Ethical clearance was gained for both taped and written consent, as signatures can be threatening for some older people. Furthermore, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II (prot. no 34/2020).

3. Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed five thematic areas: origins, the body, loneliness, death, and a present compromised by the public health emergency. These themes, closely interconnected, made their appearance in each interview, often following the same order of appearance. In this sense, each interview exhibited a sort of general trend.

3.1 Origins and Generations

The theme of the house of origin emerged spontaneously in the stories of almost all the subjects interviewed, overlapping with the theme of youth. This juxtaposition allows us to highlight one of the cornerstones of this research, which is the inevitable associative passage from the memory

of present living to the memory of life in general. In the excerpts of the interviews that will be reported below, it is possible to perceive a still alive and current link with the houses of origin.

In the case of Francesco, for example, the interview hinged almost entirely on the story of returning to the house of origin in old age:

My father bought this house in the '60s, and we were a family of father, mother, four children and my maternal grandmother... Here is the story of many memories, many lives, of moods, of lives spent together... But I was completely detached, I had my own house, with my life, with my things... Then I left and moved back here... It's not that I experienced it as a regression, I even got used to it a bit, things are quite familiar, I know the people in the building, those who stayed, and so this is the relationship with this house, with which I actually have a form of recognition... There are still ghosts here (Francesco).

What is perhaps most interesting in this excerpt is the hypothesis that seemingly private, intimate spaces may continue to be crowded by original figures. The world of ghosts (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985) is a mechanism that holds together the home and the familiar: the primary scene, with which the walls of a house may continue to be imbued.

The structure of 'before and after' is repeated several times in the dialogues of these interviews, given that they represent micro-fractures in existential continuity and open up space in the narration for the telling of a past, even as idealized or mystified. A melancholic shadow often appears: something has been lost, be it youth, children, or childhood homes. In addition to these object losses, which are in a certain sense concrete, it also seems that parts of the subjects have remained anchored to these losses (Freud, 1917).

Time itself is considered to be a lost object, which finds in the space of the house, and of the interview that takes place within it, the possibility of being collected and retained. In this way, narration fulfills the function of attesting to and claiming the contents, dispersed in time, with which the individual continues to identify. We speak here of identity, meaning that it is a sort of product between the subjective perception of one's own existence and the generational lens through which one has lived: a more or less conscious perception of oneself that straddles ontogeny and history in the broadest sense. The interviews addressed the issue of what the interviewee thought home represented for the generation to which he or she belonged. This theme will also be dealt within the analysis of countertransference, which at this juncture takes on the features of both a cultural and trans-generational countertransference.

The house for my form of socialization has always represented a fixed point, a reference - Ithaca for Ulysses. Even if it is difficult to reach it is there, you know it is there and that it can guarantee, once reached, a security

for the life that then would have had further to go. For this reason, I remember having made great sacrifices together with my ex-spouse for the purchase of the house (Eugenio).

Several subjects interpreted the interviewer's cue, with respect to the generational theme, by associatively relaunching the theme of a sacrifice made to purchase a house, in a sort of simultaneous object and goal. In particular, the excerpt reported above can be seen as the 'base' that builds up to this moment and is confirmed in other interviews. For example, there is Concetta who, after the death of her husband, utilized all possible resources to buy the house in which she lived with her three small children; Domenico, after the conception of her daughter, looked for a bigger and more beautiful house in which to bring the child up.

Another intergenerational theme that emerged is that of 'passing of the baton', summarized in the following two, most striking example interviews:

To keep everything for oneself is a form of weakness and selfishness at the same time because I think it is difficult to conceive that children are entrusted to us by nature until a certain age but are not the property of the parents (Eugenio).

The initial pleasure inherent in generational legacy represents a need that becomes an objective and looks to the vitality of youth as a source of personal renewal and the possibility of survival beyond one's own body.

Barbara: So now I'm left with the hotel job... I must tell you that I'm a bit tired, yes, I do everything I do but I'd like to live alone in my own world...

Interviewer: Do you feel calm at the thought of slowly leaving the leadership to your daughters and grandchildren?

Barbara: No, no, not much, but you have to leave it, also because my daughters have their own children and they have to be able to work, I have three grandchildren... They are grown up now, they have to come in too.

In this second fragment, the emerging adulthood of those who were once dependent is expressed as an end, rather than a goal. More specifically, the end of one's adulthood as making way for old age is understood as the letting go of the end of existence, rather than the transition to other, possibly gratifying identifications.

3.2 The Body and Loneliness

The way in which we identify with the space of life is at the heart of this research: the connections between body, mind, space, and time are clearly impossible to decode in their entirety. What we want to bring out, rather, is the emotional intensity of living spaces and the way in which this affectivity is resolved in a form of mirroring.

An issue that intersects with the interviews is that their emergent themes can be traced back to the house as a body, as symbolized precisely in the body of the house. Each subject expressed in his or her own way the connection between the body of the house and his/her identification with it.

This house was in a messy condition... Most of the things I drew and imagined, and many things I did... Come on, I want you to get a good feel for what it looked like. The thing I'm probably most proud of is the ladder, you see?... Then some of these carpets come from my travels and that support on which there is the ficus I took at the Polytechnic, they had thrown it away, it was an antique adjustable support for some tool... I restored it, look, the mechanism works! And I want to show you another one, which is very ingenious, out there in the kitchen, I created a system for hanging clothes with boat knots (Domenico).

At this moment in the interview, all the points of Domenico's life story recounted during our meeting resurfaced, through the description of her home. The theme of the transformation of space is central and the feeling is that, since the beginning of his widowhood, Domenico has stopped creating and transforming that space, which is now crystallized in the past. The intention brought to bear on the space and on the objects that populate it is the expression of a living present, in which every internal change can still correspond to an active drive in the space. It is as if this were an indicator of the presence of a will to go out into the world, and to live rather than to 'be lived in'.

Just think that my husband used to tease me back then by saying, "I know where I get up in the morning, but I never know where I'm going to lie down at night," because I was constantly changing the arrangement of the furniture! The house is always in my image and likeness... I would wax it, so I could move all the furniture more easily, I would move it barefoot pushing it with my back, once I was done I would go out the front door and come back in, I would say hello almost as if it wasn't my house and I would try to capture the impression a stranger would have when entering my home, if I wasn't satisfied I would change it again! It has always been a necessity to change, I still do, I change fabrics, I change colors (Concetta).

This place, on the one hand, guarantees the maintenance of certain vital psychic functions, while, on the other hand, it itself becomes the field of these emotional experiences. Loneliness seems to be constantly searching for something, between the walls and among the objects, that confirms and at the same time defeats the past.

3.3 Death, Pandemic, and Isolation

We have already mentioned how old age is connected with death, which becomes increasingly imminent. It is clear that the period when these testimonies were collected was fractured by the

isolation required by the pandemic, and that this rupture is nearly incurable for those who know that they do not have their whole life ahead of them to repair the damage done.

The discourse of death has recurred in each of the themes in the previous paragraphs: aging houses, objects that become more and more distant in time, children and grandchildren who become more and more adult, and loneliness that becomes more and more intractable and presents itself mostly as an emotional nuance in the interviews.

What I want to say first of all is that they have made many old people die just to not pay their pensions, this is the truth. Having said that, I have been living here for 47 years... When this whole situation didn't exist, I used to go to the club near here, we were all women and almost all widows... We weren't like now without doing anything! It was a way of escaping, right at this time, you see, I used to close everything here and go there for a couple of hours; now it's closed, rightly so... Do you realize how many things we've lost? I'm not used to being in the house... When I fall asleep then after a while I wake up, and I stay awake a few hours in bed thinking, I get thoughts at night, I think about what will be, everything we're going through has not left my mind free... Everyone's mind has been compromised by COVID-19, it's not that you become crazy, because if you are crazy you just are, but my thoughts go to the future, how will this thing end, I don't see the future, I don't see anything, there is no tomorrow, I am old and I can almost accept it, I am 75 years old and I think "what do I care" but how can young people go on without seeing the future? My grandchildren are starting their lives, I can't think about it (Anita).

In the list of 'before and after' situations that accompanied the re-reading of this interview, that of pre- and post-COVID-19 seems to be the most striking, and the one in which the past is most idealized relative to the current restrictions and loss of references. In none of the interviews, in fact, is there any mention of a future, or of a future project beyond that of survival, or maintaining life as it has already been constructed.

Interviewer: Has your life changed with the public health emergency?

Concetta: Absolutely not, and I don't really care, I received my first dose of vaccine yesterday and I feel great, but my life does not depend in any way on this situation.

Concetta is the oldest of the interviewees, and her 90 years of age certainly make a difference in the way she lives her life. However, like Concetta, there will be many other 90-year-olds who will have perceived the pandemic as tangential, without allowing themselves to be impacted: certainly, by implementing defensive mechanisms to distance themselves from the threats that this disease represents, especially for their generation. They will have experienced the flow of their days as affected in a more relative way, as they are already made up of home, loneliness,

and memories. Elders, in some ways, have found ways to nurture new hope. As Kaës (2020) reminds us, "*the pandemic is an unexpected and paradoxical contribution to contemporary malaise. On the one hand, it accentuates its different dimensions and brings new ones; on the other hand, it gives rise to unprecedented experiences, opening up partial and still precarious ways of freeing oneself from it, mobilizing the hope that another way of life is desirable and possible*" (p. 207).

With this situation of the pandemic, it has become heavy because being alone is heavy indeed, even relationships with neighbors are all filtered by fear, there is distancing, everyone's social life is very compromised, sometimes you forget how to talk. I've never been a loner (Domenico).

That "sometimes you forget how to talk" is one of the most significant phrases that emerged in these meetings. The exacerbation of the condition of loneliness due to the pandemic is still, in Domenico's life, a progressive withdrawal that, over the years, has distanced him more and more from friends, passions and family ("there is no one anymore", "I have lost many people on the road"). The occasion of the interview seemed to be one of the few circumstances of exchange and expression that Domenico allowed himself after so long.

3.4 Countertransference and Reflexivity

As anticipated before, the questions of countertransference and reflexivity were central in this research. Regarding countertransference, as Gemignani (2011) says, "*When doing research on topics that are sensitive and involve core dimensions of the researcher's identities and subjectivities, the process of inquiry is likely to generate significant emotions, attachments, and reactions that transgress traditional forms of data and research positions*" (p. 701). This is strictly connected to reflexivity, intended as "*an attempt to recognize and use the inevitable participation of the researcher's subjectivity in the process of finding out*" (Hollway, 2016, p. 1).

In this vein, the gender of the interviewer undoubtedly played a central role in conducting the interviews, either fostering (or not) a feeling of identification and recognition. The latter, moreover, found specific expression in the type of reciprocal defenses used.

I just want to finally enjoy my old age... That freedom of the mind of not having anyone in the house is fundamental... I can decide everything at the last moment... It's not that before someone was in charge of my life... But my husband didn't like it if I was distracted by activities that didn't involve him... I do things like a robot because whoever works in life then does so, like a robot, everything by the hour (Anita).

The theme of relationship to domestic life for the women of Anita's generation, as she expressed it, compresses an important element of the gender issue in southern Italy: namely, that of home care as work that is carried out through individual sacrifice in the name of the family, and which

generates automatisms that seem to escape consciousness and separate daily practice more and more strictly from deeper and more intimate needs. This element, present in all the interviews with the women, seems to revolve mainly around the feminine/maternal axis of reflection (Soulié, 2005), and often clashed with profoundly different experiences with respect to the feminine and maternal on the part of the interviewer.

Conversely, in the interviews conducted with male subjects, the interviewees showed more interest in the meaning and purpose of the research, rather than the content. Eugenio's interview was the most significant in this respect. In fact, after the opening question, Eugenio immediately proceeded to ask another of the interviewer, regarding the reasons that had led him to choose this field and this research topic. Eugenio's disposition, along with an intellectualized tendency in his sentence formation, very much characterized the atmosphere of the meeting, which also mostly focused on political narratives.

The result was a sort of chain reaction of a series of joint defensive expressions that deflected, and in some ways dampened, the emotional component of the encounter. One might say that the interview had the feel of a dialogue between generations, or between fathers and sons in a broad sense.

Beyond issues related to countertransferential content, such as those just discussed which are related to the issue of gender or to the recognition of a generation gap, something also must also be said about anxieties linked to the pandemic. These anxieties reactivate archaic anxieties, such as those expressed in the previous paragraph, and they constituted a background of alliance and connection upon which all the interviews found support.

It should be remembered that defenses are not limited to protecting the Ego from distressing feelings (A. Freud, 1936), but that they also represent organizing principles of psychic life which are developed to evade and alleviate conflicts at the level of both the internal world and external reality.

Likewise, the dominant aspect of the countertransferential dimension was, firstly, that of the perception of a fragility inherent in the interviewees, and of a corresponding perception of the intrusiveness of the interview encounter. Fragility is here understood both in a literal sense and as a kind of real construct for the time of old age. That is to say, a new conceptualization of frailty emerges that is dynamic and active, wherein some connections (physical/social/emotional) are lost, others sustained, and still others created from scratch (Nicholson et al., 2013). The conservative value of established defenses must be respected in a special way in a research context such as this. In Domenico's interview, for example, this theme

emerges clearly. He appeared, from the beginning, as if locked in a bubble: as if every word uttered corresponded to a fatigue, not only in speaking, but a fatigue in remembering, and in suddenly resuming the thread of his life.

As much as the subjects freely accepted to participate in the research, the method of free associations, which is the basis of the interview dynamic, together with the corresponding associative framing provided by the interviewer, reactivated modalities of narration and correlative affects in a very deep way. Therefore, this decisively influenced whether or not some associative topics were relaunched. A fear of hurting the people spoken to, who all belong to a stage of life in which some of the consolidated defenses constitute a necessary element for the maintenance of a balanced psychic existence, served as a filter. At the same time, there was also fear, on the part of the interviewer, of being wounded by the inexplicability and the magnitude of the themes being dealt with.

This opens us up to a second aspect of the countertransference, which is a more 'cultural' aspect: that of a corresponding defense against death, for both interviewee and the interviewer. In the context of the reflecting groups, it was noted that the defense that most represented the expression of this anxiety was that of avoidance/denial. For the reasons stated above, and due to the implementation of deep defensive processes, none of the interviews ever directly discussed the topic of death, the decay of body or mind, or future prospects. Rather, the narratives were an expression of a present fragmented by memories. The desire to find coherence in one's life may sometimes come into conflict with the unconscious desire to erase the overview of one's history, as an attempt to defend oneself from any confrontation with its finiteness. For such older people, life is experienced as a set of separate and juxtaposed moments that represent partial objects (Klein, 1946).

In sum, working with countertransference and reflexivity in psychoanalytically-informed qualitative research means that while the researcher can know something in an affective and not objectifying way, he/she can also show a reflective capacity that will help him/her to be clear about whose feelings belonged to whom, thus avoid confusing transferences (Hollway, 2016).

4. Discussion

In the introduction, questions about old age were posed and, in response, it was hypothesized that the home would provide a place for these questions to be explored: a space that would facilitate and deepen reflection on time. This was a central assumption in the development of this work, perhaps even becoming its soul, and it has informed the way the research was carried out: with the home as the setting for the interviews, as well as the choice of the question with

which to begin the meetings. It was initially hypothesized that the ability to contain and process emotions, which is guaranteed at the beginning of life by the maternal function, was transposed, in old age, to the space of the home. Equally central was the thought that the ability (or not) to be alone (Winnicott, 1958), both in the home and during old age, has been strongly pervaded, although not generated, by the conditions of life related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In every interview conducted, loneliness represented an unavoidable stage, or a certain landing place: so much so that, in a sense, it became the third variable in this work. The way we understand the concepts of loneliness and isolation in this research identifies the first as a condition consubstantial to human existence, as in the loneliness of/in the body.

The second is something that is close to a form of closure with respect to the outside and to the other, in which the individual is not allowed, or in which he/she does not allow him/herself, to enter into a relationship with what surrounds him/her. From the material collected it was, in fact, possible to identify three different experiences of loneliness (Klein, 1963): one peaceful, gratifying, or elaborate; one resilient, with reference only to the temporary pandemic; and one depressive and isolating, in which a likely already corrosive relationship with this condition found, in the present difficulties, an exacerbation. The accounts of life during the pandemic certainly compressed the themes of death, distress, and isolation in a particular way. As Kaës states, "*anguish is also linked to this omnipresence of death in information and media [...] formed from the Latin word* Angus *meaning shrinkage, confinement is a space of shrinkage*" (2020, p. 203). At the same time, however, the unspoken but ever-present question, "Will everything be the same again?" seems to be linked precisely to the terror that this will actually happen. The meeting of the internal catastrophe with the real one can also become, in old age, a landing place from which to link the anguish for inevitable death and decay with the original catastrophe of annihilation. These considerations are in line with recent qualitative and quantitative studies highlighting the strong impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on population well-being (Sommantico et al., 2022; Moroianu et al., 2021; Rollè et al., 2022; Veronese et al., 2022).

A first finding to emerge from the narratives of the interviewees is the subjectivity of the experience of temporality. A subjective temporality that does not coincide with objective time – a homogeneous time, scientifically measurable – and that is perceived and experienced not on the basis of physical laws, but rather on the basis of the subject's emotionality and lived experiences (Bergson, 1889; Tatossian, 1977). Furthermore, what emerged from some of the interviews is that, in old age, the appropriation of the capacity to reorganize intrapsychic, intersubjective, and pluri-subjective spaces (Sommantico, 2019), as well as physical ones, is

forced to constantly interface with a sense of irreparability: a lack of time, or a conception of the umpteenth transformation as too tiring or useless. To again quote Kaës: "*The pandemic is an unexpected and paradoxical contribution to the contemporary discontent. On the one hand, it accentuates its different dimensions and brings new ones; on the other hand, it gives rise to unprecedented experiences, opening up partial and still precarious ways of freeing oneself from it, mobilizing the hope that another way of living is desirable and possible*" (ibidem, p. 207).

This concept gives centrality to what Melanie Klein describes in a passage of the essay *Our Adult World* (1959): that the internal world is in part a reflection of the external one, and that the mechanisms of interaction between these two worlds feed introjections and projections throughout life. What is perhaps worth emphasizing is that libidinal object investments persist throughout life, driven and hindered by the whole set of relationships and complexes of the past that are always re-actualized in the most varied forms. Indeed, with the elderly, not only the psychic complexes accompanying the individual's life story remain and manifest themselves in different forms, but also there is no longer a need to mask the complexes; there is rather the need to clarify them, as this facilitates a narrative of the Self and therefore a greater clarification of the life story (Frisone, 2019; Kast, 2014). This treatment process, which does not necessarily have to take place in the therapeutic field, facilitates the elderly to give and/or reinforce the meaning of existence (Chang & Patricia, 2000; Hofer et al., 2014; Takkinen & Ruoppila, 2001).

Furthermore, in lonely old age, and especially in times of pandemic, the house is invested, as an object, with all of those drives that the world, more and more distant, seems no longer able to accommodate. It is conceivable that the expression of that feeling of finiteness mentioned in the introduction finds in the house a possibility of realization, and that this occurs in a form that is not at all de-eroticized.

Indeed, as stated by Clerk, "*to grow old is to find ourselves, more than at any other time of life, alone, not in the presence of the reassuring mother but in the presence of ourselves. It is essential to recognize that age does not eliminate our intrapsychic dramas, but accentuates them, and that understanding them in the last phase of life, while in no way eliminating the existential anguish of old age, will allow us to ensure that aging does not mean rupture, arrest, sterility, but creative continuity*" (1995, p. 73).

5. Strengths and limitations

The exploratory nature of the study does not permit findings' generalizability, especially due to the small sample size. Despite this, qualitative research is concerned with informational richness and exploring ideas from data rather than establishing prevalence. Indeed, the subjectivity of being an elder is important and allows for a focus on individuals' own perspectives.

Specific factors led to the trustworthiness of qualitative findings: assimilating the theory and practice of psychodynamic approaches, clinical supervision, and the use of reflecting teams to strengthen some interpretive hypotheses and lessen others. Attempts at confirmability included researcher reflexivity (Elliott et al., 2012; Hollway, 2016), which attended to the position and influence of the researcher in both data collection and analysis. Within psychosocial research, this moves beyond the researcher's social positioning to the emotional response and its influence on shaping interpretation (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway, 2006). The joint use of in-depth analysis of data, and of reflexivity and validation via theory and reflecting groups with diverse theoretical perspectives, has allowed for a valid interpretation of the data.

6. Conclusions

This study sought to deepen the subjective experience of ageing, time, and space for older people living alone at their own house, using a psychoanalytic framework and a qualitative research approach. Despite the exacerbation of the condition of loneliness due to the pandemic, it argues that older people continue to show, through their narration, the emotional intensity of their living spaces as well as the juxtaposition of the memory of present living and the memory of life in general. The capability of older people to relate to their ordinary world in a new way rarely equates to the predominant stereotypical image of old age, which is only centered on vulnerability. What emerges, then, according to Ferrant (2015), is the arduous work of reorganization that the elderly must do, from a background of grief and loss which is to be processed both from the narcissistic and objectual points of view. In sum, these findings concur and argue for a more detailed focus on the work of ageing, by holding together loss and the capacity to face them, as well as by accepting our mortal nature and that time is running out.

Author Contributions

ML and MS substantially contributed to the conception of the study. ML conduced the interviews and drafted the transcripts. ML and MS, the latter in the role of supervisor, substantially contributed to the analysis and interpretation of data, as well as to drafting the manuscript and revising it critically.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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