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## Haitian Centenarians: An Undocumented Phenomenon

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Haitian Centenarians: An Undocumented Phenomenon

by  
Erna Dasilma

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University  
2020

## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Erna Dasilma under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Erna Dasilma

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Name

December 4, 2020

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Date

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There is no amount of warning, advice or shared experiences that could have prepared me for what this journey has been for me. However, I have to admit, making it to the finish line was not a journey traveled alone and I was fortunate enough to have shared it with those brave enough to embark on it with me. From numerous invasive surgeries, to financial obstacles and even multiple deaths in my family, what would have already been a difficult journey, seemed unbearable. Still, perseverance and unwavering support and faith got me to the finish line. I once heard a quote that says, "Never forget to give roses to those who were there for you while they are still able to smell them". That has remained a subconscious reminder to always acknowledge those that have played those significant roles in my life.

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## Abstract

Haitian Centenarians: An Undocumented Phenomenon. Erna Dasilma, 2020: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: immigrants, professional occupations, ethnic groups, culture, social adjustment

A ceaselessly neglected phenomenon until recent years, especially in developing countries, centenarians bring unique wisdom, perspective, history, and science to our society based on their lived experiences. A strong interest exists in the experiences of individuals over 100 years old, but few formal research studies have been conducted concerning centenarians, principally in developing countries. One of the central goals of this study was to bridge the gap in the literature when it comes to centenarians in less developed countries, given the lack of reported statistics, with emphasis given to those living on the battered, but resilient, island of Haiti while also giving voice to its once assumed voiceless centenarians.

Although this is the first study of its kind to focus on centenarians on the island, there is a wealth of knowledge to be gained from what some would call the island's true survivors. Three significant findings emerged from the study. First, the Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians were outliving their family members, friends, and loved ones. The second finding involved the changes that their physical bodies had gone through with old age. The third finding was the age-related memory loss. Interestingly, they all seemed to mention being afflicted by memory loss, although they were quite lucid as they openly shared their recollection of their youth, past cultural traditions, and wisdom they have gained over the course of a century and beyond. Six themes were formulated from the archival transcripts once the data-analysis process was complete: loss of financial independence, centenarians' mixed emotions about living such a long life, longevity is grounded in God's will and a good heart, centenarians' criticism of today's youth, remarkable resilience, and bestowed wisdom. Participants attributed their longevity to a good heart, being a good person, strong health, and God's will. Spirituality, faith and prayers sustain these centenarians in navigating a world difficult enough to combat as a youth but seemingly impossible for someone over 100 years of age. They face countless physical obstacles, burdened by scarce resources, loneliness, and even neglect.

The study on Haitian centenarians can be beneficial to a large audience. Doctors can be educated on a number of lifestyle practices focusing on preventative measures to reach optimum health and wellness as opposed to post incident care. Others, including school officials, educators, young adults, students, and powerful leaders, can all benefit from their knowledge and wisdom to help prevent any negative history from repeating itself. The contributions that centenarians bring to our society are significant, unique, and immeasurable. Living to be 100 years old or older is inarguably rare, and, for a country in such dire need of basic resources as Haiti, having so many centenarians is nothing short of a phenomenon.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Although the life expectancy of residents of Haiti is only estimated to be 62 (Bruemmer, 2011; Sewell, 1986), there is a population of Haitians who have lived more than 100 years. In high-income countries where the elderly population is increasing, there has been a focus on understanding those factors that contribute to successful aging (Archer et al., 2005; Caselli & Luy, 2013; Darviri et al., 2009; Li et al., 2013; Manning et al., 2012; Tigani et al., 2011; Wagner, 1999; Willcox et al., 2007). However, in low-income countries such as Haiti where life expectancy is low, despite efforts by local and international partners to increase life expectancy, understanding determinants of longevity remain neglected.

Although there is a strong interest in the experiences of individuals who are over 100 years old, few formal research studies have been conducted concerning centenarians. Longevity and successful aging have been coveted throughout history, and, in the 20th century, centenarians have been one of the fastest growing segments of the population (Caselli & Luy, 2013; Freeman et al., 2013). A thorough review of the literature showed that very few qualitative studies have been carried out on this topic until the early years of the new millennium (Darviri et al., 2009). Understanding the secret of longevity through the investigation and experiences of centenarians has been the focus of an increased number of studies that have surfaced (Caselli & Luy, 2013; Darviri et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2013).

### *The Topic*

The topic of this dissertation involved the lived experiences of Haitian centenarians. Studies of elderly individuals who are 100 years old, or older, have been

seen all across the globe. This is inclusive of low-income countries, although not in the same capacity. Elder Bayyinah Bello, a Haitian researcher, has been engaged in a project focusing on centenarians in Haiti and has cared for, interacted with, and interviewed a number of centenarians and supercentenarians. Elder Bayyinah Bello granted the researcher the honor of interviewing her, and the researcher learned that statistics on Haitian centenarians are almost nonexistent. The interview was conducted on March 24, 2018, and Elder Bello emphasized the priceless knowledge and valuable information in relation to health and the oral history of Haiti that lies within these centenarians. They can provide the best informal education on various topics through their lived experiences during their century of life.

### ***The Research Problem***

A ceaselessly neglected phenomenon until recent years, especially in developing countries, centenarians bring unique wisdom, perspective, history, and science to our society based on their lived experiences. Haiti, though small in size, has been plagued with very large issues that have yet to be remitted (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Expanding the literature on its culture and history through the lived experiences and shared stories of its centenarians may be a viable first step. Although studies on centenarians have increased in the United States and in other developed countries, the island of Haiti still lacks literature and data on the topic. Elder Bayyinah Bello has dedicated a great deal of her time to the study of this unique population. She has also refocused some of the work of her nonprofit organization to the matter as well. As a result, she has had the privilege of interviewing and working with hundreds of Haitian centenarians. Her recordings are exceptional and their contributions crucial to the history of Haiti.

### ***Background and Justification***

In the United States, according to Christensen (2001), centenarians constitute one of the fastest growing age groups; however, only one in 10,000 people in developed countries live to be 100 or more. This number has increased based on the research and literature as predicted at the World Conference on Ageing held in Vienna in 1982 and cited in Strejilevich (1983), where it was stated that “the proportion of elderly people will grow more rapidly in the developing countries than the rest of the world” (p. 97). Studies of centenarians can also be beneficial in identifying factors leading to longevity and avoidance of fatal disease (Christensen et al., 2008; Gavrilov & Gavrilova, 2013).

According to Jopp et al. (2016), increased longevity is a result of a number of developments, such as late-life mortality, medical advances in treatment and prevention of common diseases, and drastic improvements in the life conditions and lifestyles. However, Haiti has not been fortunate enough to benefit from any of these developments. This goes especially for the medical advances for treating and preventing common diseases or the improved life conditions and lifestyles, yet a number of functional Haitian centenarians currently residing in Haiti are surfacing again since the start of Elder Bello’s project and her research. Living to be 100 years old or older is unquestionably rare, and, for a country in such dire need of basic resources, having so many centenarians is a phenomenon.

According to Elder Bello, the recorded Census from 1805 to 1806 mentioned the town of Cap-Haitian as having the most centenarians. After 1940 to 1950, there is no recorded census and no statistics on Haitian centenarians. The centenarians interviewed by Elder Bello are not just centenarians; many fall under the category of those referred to as supercentenarians, and more specifically decacentenarians (i.e., people in their 110s),

and dodecacentenarians, or individuals in their 120s, according to the United Nations 1998 World Population Revision (as cited in Wagner, 1999); and to the surprise of many, Haiti bears a number of those individuals. Elder Bello also asserted the fact that all of the centenarians she had worked with were healthy, although, according to her research, it is stated that Haitians barely live to be 40 years of age. This number varies drastically because the reports differ when it comes to life expectancy in Haiti. Some reports claim the life expectancy is 42 or 48 to 49 years of age in Haiti (Bruemmer, 2011; Sewell, 1986; Westhead, 2004); others claim it to be between the ages of 53 and 62 (Bruemmer, 2011; Dyer, 2004; Gonzalez, 2002; Merilus, 2015; Norton, 1998; Slavin, 1993).

According to Krach and Velkoff (1999), from their U.S. Bureau of Census Report of 1991, about 17% of U.S. centenarians were born in a foreign country. In fact, the growing number of foreign-born elders in America is partly what has spiked the interest in global aging (King et al., 2005). Krach and Velkoff also reported that the majority of foreign-born centenarians (83%) entered the United States before 1950, probably around 1910 when they were teens or in their early 20s, and most of them (82%) became naturalized citizens. This corresponds with some of Elder Bello's findings.

For instance, Elder Bello has discovered that there are a number of centenarians presently (i.e., 2018) living abroad, many of whom are not accounted for when focusing on Haitian centenarians. In fact, according to Elder Bello's research, the oldest living person in Canada is a woman who originated from Haiti. The same goes for the oldest person in California, who is a Haitian woman. Cuba at one point had 14 centenarians, six of whom were Haitian. Moreover, the four oldest people living in Cuba were also Haitian. Through her research, Elder Bello also discovered that the U.S. government grants U.S. citizenship to centenarians within 6 months. Officials come to their homes

with the flag and the documents, and, in record time, centenarians who migrate in the United States of America become American citizens, hence American centenarians.

The biological, psychological, and social factors of the living centenarians are also a popular area of focus on the research for those with extreme longevity (Archer et al., 2005; Darviri et al., 2009; Jopp et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Wong et al., 2014). A study such as this one requires a professional equipped with the appropriate tools, background, and understanding to conduct it. The researcher, having lived in Haiti for the first 12 years of her life, was propelled to want to give back. Its populous has so much value and dignity but lacks what so many other countries may take for granted. The researcher believes she is well suited to take on such a task. She is culturally aware, able to travel as needed, and can speak and write all native languages spoken in Haiti (Haitian Creole or French). She has taken the New York State Teacher Certification Exam in Haitian Creole and French.

The researcher obtained her certification in both of these languages, which indicates that she is proficient and certified in speaking, reading, and writing them. She also obtained her bachelor's degree in Psychology and French from Saint John's University. Additionally, she worked as the French Graduate Teaching Assistant at her university, Saint John's University in Queens, New York, while pursuing her Master of Science in Education degree with a Bilingual Extension. She can translate any transcript or document to English, Haitian Creole, or French, whether it be written or oral. She knows how to maneuver around the risks associated with traveling to and from a developing country and is familiar with the instability and the state of turmoil that often arises unexpectedly. Moreover, the fact that her personal mission statement is to provide first-world luxuries to low-income countries through leadership, education, and providing

resources to elevate the collective versus the individual makes her the ideal candidate to conduct such a complex study.

### ***Deficiencies in the Evidence***

The study by Darviri et al. (2009) was a qualitative study with a sampling of nine relatively healthy and functional Greek centenarians: three men and six women between the ages of 100 and 105. All nine participants were in good cognitive and physical health, allowing them to communicate with the interviewer and grant the interview. All nine of the participants were informed on the purpose of the study and granted their consent to participate. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers with prior experience in interviewing centenarians. The interviews were semi structured consisting of 87 open-ended questions that were organized around six themes: life experience, lifestyle, social relationships, socializing, and coping, as well as perceptions of health and longevity and life philosophy. The aim was to obtain autobiographical reflection and narratives on the participants' experiences and everyday life in the past and in the present. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, the analysis of the transcribed interviews was thematic and interpretative, and grounded theory was the analytical framework.

The results depicted three thematic categories from the analysis: socialization strategies, coping strategies, and adaptiveness. The majority of the participants established and kept conditional socialization, which involves social relationships only under specific and well-defined preconditions and terms. Conflict avoidance was another coping method for stress-related life strategies as each correspondent strongly expressed a strong tendency to avoid conflict in their relationships with others by any means. Adaptiveness was one important factor. All participants successfully adapted to their environment as they not only reached 100 years of age but did so while being happy and



functional up until such age. All the participants were also satisfied with their lives and said they would not change anything, even if granted another opportunity.

The study by Darviri et al. (2009), focusing on the nine relatively healthy and functional Greek centenarians, was designed to shed light on the psychosocial dimensions of living to see 100 years or more; however, it did bear limitations. Although the authors emphasized purposely selecting healthy and functional centenarians to highlight themes related to healthy longevity, not all centenarians will be healthy and functional like the ones who participated in this study. According to the authors, this is the first qualitative study on centenarians conducted in Europe and one of the first such studies internationally. For future research on longevity, successful aging, and survival in old age, the authors suggest valuable insight and priorities should be focused on these three domains of life: selective socializing, conflict avoidance, and ability to adapt.

Another study that generated similar results as Darviri et al. (2009) was the hermeneutic phenomenology conducted by Freeman et al. (2013) also focusing on centenarians. The deficiencies in this study were also similar to the study mentioned above by Darviri et al., involving the fact that those selected for inclusion were mostly centenarians who have aged successfully, retaining and maintaining their physical and cognitive abilities. Therefore, the sample selected in this study may not be representative of all centenarians as there are many individuals who are 100 years or older who suffer from multiple comorbidities, such as cognitive impairment and or severe physical debilitating health problems as stated by the authors. Additionally, often times with the study of centenarians, secondary data collection is selected, which prevents researchers and investigators from personally conducting indepth interviews and interacting with the centenarians. This can impact the credibility of the study (Freeman et al., 2013). Benner

(as cited in Freeman et al., 2013) noted multiple observations and follow-up interviews where possible are beneficial to deepen insight into the phenomenon of focus.

The study by Freeman et al. (2013) described the essence of 19 centenarians' lived experiences as they advanced in age. Transcripts, as well as audio and video interviews, were collected on the Internet from these 19 centenarians, 14 men and five women, ranging from 100 to 115 years old. The purpose was to document characteristics perceived by centenarians to be important and central to their attainment of advanced longevity. The study was a secondary analysis relying on primary data collected from self-identified sources. Four key themes were identified in the centenarians' experiences: (a) lifestyle choices, (b) community and environment, (c) attitude towards life, and (d) goal setting and attainment. For 95% of them, the characteristics and themes reported derived from their positive outlook on life expressed through feelings of joy, happiness, success and gratitude for life. Only one centenarian had a negative perception when asked about how they felt having attain advanced longevity. The participant who was 106 years old stated, "Terrible. Everybody regards you as a freak and I guess in a way you are" (Freeman et al., 2013, p. 721).

The centenarians of the study highlighted the importance of life in moderation through concepts of hard work and simplicity when it came to lifestyle choices. They also discussed a diverse list of health-related choices and behaviors they believe are important to successful aging, from clean water to daily consumption of wine, smoking cigars, and the enjoyment of chocolate. In regard to community and environment, all of them emphasized the importance of being connected to their community. They were also active; swimming, bowling, and ping pong competitions such as the National Senior games were among some of their physical activities.

Surrounding themselves with a positive atmosphere filled with sunshine, happiness, and laughter was utterly important as well. Spirituality, faith, and devotion were mentioned in different ways by the centenarians and a sense of gratitude to God was also expressed. For Theme 4, which was goal setting and attainment, almost all centenarians in the study were able to positively reflect on their life's achievement and were able to also recognize the fact that they still had direction for the future and a purpose in this life. The authors also explained the methodology and theoretical framework chosen. According to them, implementing hermeneutic phenomenology was designed to generate an elaborate textual description of centenarians' experience related to acquiring longevity within the life of each person. By analyzing transcripts of Haitian centenarians, the current study also investigated experiences of the lives of these unique group of elders.

There still remains a gap in the literature when it comes to centenarians in less developed countries, given the lack of reported statistics especially focusing on those on the ever-resilient island of Haiti. One of the central goals of conducting this study is giving voice to the once assumed voiceless centenarians. However, the researcher believes there is much more to be learned from centenarians when questions are not being structured and asked. Elder Bello gained a lot of knowledge by simply interacting with centenarians, not just through interviewing them. Organic interaction provides a plethora of information. This highlights the need to investigate interviewers of centenarians for future research.

### ***Audience***

The study on Haitian centenarians can be beneficial to a large audience. Doctors can certainly be educated on a number of lifestyle practices that can safely be

recommended to their patients in order to achieve optimum health and wellness.

Centenarians provide a different type of science to our communities. School officials and educators, young adults, students, and couples can all benefit from the knowledge and wisdom from shared stories and lived social and personal experiences of centenarians. Moreover, a number of myths can also be put to rest, such as the misconception that old age is associated with forgetfulness, disease, sickness, frailty, and so forth.

Haitian officials and those in power can also benefit from the knowledge and wisdom of our centenarians in regard to history, past mistakes, civic education, and leadership. The island of Haiti has more nongovernmental organizations than any other nation, with an estimated 100,000 (Allerdyce, 2011); still, the country does not show substantial improvement on many pressing issues. Many of our centenarians living in Haiti have seen it all during their 100-year lifespan. They have lived through the treacherous times; they have witnessed more than many can comprehend and could certainly educate and guide our political leaders. This may be more efficient than the number of foreign nongovernmental organizations that have been unsuccessful to induce significant change to this cultured but struggling nation. This can certainly end the replication of models from developed countries that are not always best for a third world country such as Haiti. The benefits of this study can potentially span for generations to come.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document the lived experiences of Haitian centenarians regarding significant life events, personal experiences of adaptation, and their integration of spiritual beliefs. Much of the research conducted on the topic of centenarians and longevity in high-income countries has focused on the biological,

psychological, social, and even spiritual aspects on one's life. However, according to Manning et al. (2012), the literature has a lack of research focus on centenarians' everyday lived experiences, spirituality, and their meaning of their unique longevity.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledge, history, and science are being lost every time we lose a centenarian. The power of our mind and attitude has direct correlation on the body and overall quality of life. Centenarians, unknowingly, may possess the recipe that benefits the rest of the population. Their choices, lifestyle, mind state, diet, and knowledge are all significant components in possible breakthroughs in science that improve the quality of life of the remaining populous. Taking more initiative to increasingly learn about them is, needless to say, crucial. The researcher hopes this study encourages others to recognize the significance of centenarians and promotes new studies to be conducted regardless of the geographical area.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

Centenarians are, undoubtedly, a very rare population. Regardless of their country of origin, individuals who have managed to see a century of life are often set in their ways. For Haitian centenarians, this could not be more accurate. Haitians value their cultural beliefs and abide by them faithfully, even the unspoken aspects that are inherently known and understood without need of explanation. That being said, this study was grounded in the values orientation theory of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (Hills, 2002).

The values orientation theory was originally developed in 1940 by Clyde Kluckhohn, who argued that humans share biological traits and characteristics, and this provided the foundation for the development of culture. However, people often feel their cultural beliefs and practices are normal and natural and those of others are abnormal or even inferior (Hills, 2002). Clyde Kluckhohn's definition of value (as cited in Hills, 2002) was that value is "a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action" (p. 4). In 1961, Florence Kluckhohn (Clyde Kluckhohn's wife) and Frederick Strodtbeck suggested a theory that put Clyde Kluckhohn's principles into action, thus developing the values orientation theory further.

This framework allows us to understand the source of our values while being mindful that they do differ between culture and among them as well. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck suggested five basic problems they believed to be solved by every society, which can reflect the value of dimensions of the individual or group if asked the questions. These five questions could also be aligned to ground the current study in order to account for the differences in culture and provide a better understanding of Haitian

centenarians, their values, their beliefs, and spirituality, as values drive human's thoughts, their emotions, and behaviors (Hills, 2002). Moreover, how the participants described their orientation to the world in the five dimensions was examined.

The first question of the values orientation theory involves time: Should we focus on the past, present, or future? Individuals of Haitian descent take great value in time. The past is of the utter most importance as it is a way to preserve past traditions, teachings, and beliefs, and it is also a reminder of our ancestors and those who came before us. Haitian centenarians often refer to their past and share meaningful stories. Haitians also do live in the here and now. However, based on the current living situations and struggles often experienced, many Haitians do not focus on the future. Every day brings its share of troubles, so we must not focus on that of tomorrow as tomorrow is not promised is often the mindset.

The second question involves humanity and natural environment: What is our relationship with humanity and its natural environment? Is it mastery, submission, or harmony? When it comes to humanity and natural environment, Haiti plays a major part. Homeopathic medicine is one aspect as we believe that every single illness and ailments has a tree that God has created that can heal and cure it. This also brings forth the supernatural and belief in the higher power, the mystery of the unknown forces that we are too human to understand but wise enough to simply accept. We also use our environment for food, which is produced from the land. The idea is that any land that you own must be able to produce life or sustain life by providing goods that you can consume and live off of.

The third is relating to other people: How do we relate to other people? Is it hierarchical? Often referred to as lineal, is it equal? Referred to as collateral or is it

individual? Based on individual merit? Respect for elders is everything in the culture of the island of Haiti. There is also a social class, and prejudice is very much part of the culture. It is certainly hierarchical. The fourth question involves motive for behaving: Why do we behave the way we do? Is it as a way to express ourselves (being)? Or is it to grow (to becoming) or to achieve? Elders in Haiti take pride in sharing. They share meaningful stories of their past, they share about their ancestors, and they share wisdom and the flood of knowledge they possess, much of which were not taught in school but were lived, experienced, or witnessed.

The last question involves the nature of human nature: What is the nature of human nature? Good, bad, or evil? Or a mixture of it all? People are said to be good, bad, or evil, but it is a matter of choices, beliefs, values, or how you were raised. This is no different for the inhabitants of Haiti; however, the concept of chasing evil or bad spirits remains, and rituals and prayers are often performed to do so. The Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck values orientation theory is well suited for this study as discussed above because, in order to understand Haitian centenarians' lived experiences, stated secrets to longevity, their advice and wisdom, and how spirituality have impacted their lives, one must first recognize their values and understand their culture, which this theoretical framework renders.

The fields of gerontology and geriatrics has generated a number of studies employing the values orientation theory. Sandra Torres (1999) had specifically chosen and adapted the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck value orientation theory to use in her studies of aging-related concepts and had shed light on the assumptions underpinning this culturally relevant theoretical framework for the study of successful aging (Torres, 2001, 2003). Torres (2002) stated, "Gerontologists have disregarded the fact that successful



aging is bound to be socially and culturally determined” (p. 417). The results in Torres’ studies using the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck value orientation theory suggested that there is a relationship between the value orientation that people prefer and the various understanding of successful aging. Torres’ research studies have also emphasized the relevance of cross-cultural gerontology, which is briefly introduced and discussed in the following paragraphs.

The values orientation theory emphasizes the importance of tradition, relationship between younger and older individuals, the basic of human behavior, and understanding each other’s values. Moreover, the theory also examines the changes that occur in cultural mores over time, all of which are relevant to conduct a study abroad, in an underprivileged country whose cultures, traditions, and norms differ tremendously from those of their more developed neighboring countries. Being mindful of these differences, addressing them may contribute to an amicable relationship of individuals in different cultures and those of the same cultures yet differ in beliefs and certain values. Moreover, it will ensure that the essence of the meanings depicted by the life of Haitian centenarians is conveyed properly.

### **Gerontology and Cross-Cultural Research in Gerontology**

The fields of gerontology and geriatrics are facing unprecedented changes, pressures, and opportunities (Torres-Gil, 2017). Arai et al. (2012) stated the following:

Gerontology focuses on health promotion of the elderly by encompassing the study of social welfare, psychology, environment and social systems; and geriatrics, which focuses on the health care of the elderly and carried out research, education and practices to promote health in the elderly, are becoming more important. (p. 16)

The demographic realities of the aging world population, with its social, economic, and political implications, have finally attracted the attention of world leaders and policy makers as well as well as professionals in the field of aging (King et al., 2005). According to King et al. (2005), the United States has made the International Day of Older Persons an official national event. In addition, an increasing number of aging advocacy and service organizations, such as the Global Aging Program of the American Association of Retired Persons and the Gerontological Society of America's Global Connections, have established programs or divisions dedicated to international aging issues.

Chi (2011) emphasized the importance of cross-cultural research in gerontology given how the social processes of ageing vary and stated, "Cross-cultural research is useful for studying any phenomenon affected by cultural factors such as personal and population ageing" (p. 374). Cross-cultural gerontology research, according to Jackson (2002), uses three common research methods: comparative descriptive research, comparative process research, and comparative outcome research. Chi added the following:

Comparative descriptive research describes similarities and differences in ageing across large populations, either within or across national boundaries. Comparative process research describes how the ageing process might be influenced by national origin, culture, acculturative factors, and race/ethnicity. Comparative outcome research examines whether the nature of some relationships is similar across national and cultural boundaries. (p. 375)

Cross-cultural research provides opportunities for researchers to compare different cultures for the purpose of discovering generalities, similarities, differences, and

truths between some, many, or all cultures. Cross-cultural research in the behavioral and social sciences, according to Chi (2011), uses data from a number of societies or distinct cultural groups to examine the diversity often encountered in human behavior and test hypotheses about behavior and culture. Distinguishing the universal from the culturally specific processes and determining how cultural factors influence individual and population ageing is often the aim (Chi, 2011). Given the social class of our society, socioeconomic statuses differ for individuals worldwide. This makes cultural differences of great relevance in the study of the oldest old population, specifically this study because centenarians in Haiti differ in culture from centenarians in more developed countries. There is a socioeconomic difference seen across cultures and within cultures among individuals in Haiti. For the centenarians with lesser financial difficulties who reside there, living arrangements, nutrition, and financial support vary from that of their counterparts.

### **Centenarians: A Growing Population**

Although the number of individuals reaching old age has increased globally in recent years, living to see a century is still a unique phenomenon in itself. Centenarians, commonly referred to as oldest old or exceptional survivors, have been surfacing across the globe and in studies focusing on how the causes of their longevity has followed suit. Understanding the functional characteristics of these exceptionally long lived individuals has generated special interest among researchers worldwide and become an important area of focus for gerontology research (Li et al., 2013; Takayama et al., 2007; Willcox et al., 2007).

The recent advancements in medicine, hygiene, and food supply have led to an increase in life expectancy worldwide, especially in developed countries (Arai et al.,

2012). For instance, these advancements have led to Japan having the longest life expectancy in the world with the percentage of elderly population increasing fourfold from 5.7% in 1960 to 23.1% in 2010, which has also occurred at the fastest rate in the world (Arai et al., 2012). In Hong Kong, the number of centenarians has increased over fourfold from 289 in 2001 to 1,890 in 2011 (Wong et al., 2014). France has seen a twofold increase of its oldest old (Arai et al., 2012), and, in the United Kingdom, the number of centenarians has continuously increased, roughly doubling every 10 years since 1956 (Evans et al., 2014).

In Portugal, the number of centenarians has almost tripled over the last 10 years from 589 in 2001 to 1,526 in 2011 (Ribeiro, Teixeira, et al., 2016). Taiwan has seen an alarming increase of 456% of its centenarians, often referred to as super old (Yang, 2013). The number of centenarians will remarkably increase 18 times from 18,000 in 2000 to 3.2 million by 2050, according to Wong et al. (2014). This growing population of centenarians has generated a dire demand for resources, support, and assistance to serve their unique needs.

The centenarian population is exceptional; however, having reached the age of 100 or older does not mean that they all bear the same needs. According to the literature, many centenarians bear a number of comorbidities, such as diseases, cognitive impairments, physical limitations, functional dependency, and chronic illnesses (Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Pin & Spini, 2016; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Vacante et al., 2012). However, many research studies have also focused on functional centenarians, or relatively healthy individuals who are independent and require minimal assistance for their activities of daily living (Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Pin & Spini, 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Vacante et al., 2012). This corroborates what Jopp et al. (2016) affirmed,

indicating centenarians do present different risk profiles in regard to their health conditions and disabilities, and they also have different values and life goals, hence requiring different environmental and personal resources to benefit them.

### **Landmark and International Research Studies on Centenarians**

There are a number of landmark and international research studies on centenarians, many of which generated even more discoveries. For instance, the Georgia Centenarian Study (Poon et al., 1992), a longitudinal study that originally started in 1988, had three different phases focusing on the reason individuals lived to see 100 years or older. The first phase (1988-1992) primarily focused on how individuals living in Georgia adapt to challenges. The following phase continued with the same focus until 1998, and the third phase adapted a new focus on biomedical constructs. Discovering which characteristics (biological, psychological, or sociological) contributed to such longevity was also an important aim in the study (Stelting, 2017). The findings revealed physical and mental health affected centenarians' cognitive performance, and maintaining instrumental activities of daily living may better be attainable from centenarians with higher intelligence (Yang, 2013). Moreover, personality traits appear to be a predictor of cognition, physical health and loneliness in centenarians from the study (Martin, 2007). Another important finding of the Georgia Centenarian study was religious coping mechanism.

The Swedish Centenarian Study (Samuelsson et al., 1997) recruited elders born between 1887 and 1891, of which 143 were eligible and 100 consented to participating in the study (82 women and 18 men). The areas of interest of the study originated from factors characterized as important from previous studies of older individuals. The study assessed to what extent personality traits predicted activities of daily living. The findings

revealed that centenarians' survival was associated with chance as well as individual characteristics, such as present health, physiological reserve, and functional status. The majority of the centenarians rated their quality of life as either rather good or very good. Social relationships, hereditary components, and personality traits were not contributing factors of survival prediction for these unique individuals.

The First Heidelberg Centenarian Study focal point was understanding German centenarian cognitive status, functional health, mental health, and subjective well-being, in addition to the support and care they use and receive. The Second Heidelberg Centenarian Study was merely an extensive review of their experiences, limitations, and their psychological strengths (Stelting, 2017), as it offered rich and representative data allowing for in-depth investigation of the social resources of these exceptional survivors (Boerner et al., 2016). Moreover, the study also provided a detailed assessment of social exchanges and included centenarian and proxy information as well as the recruitment approach used (Boerner et al., 2016). Self-efficacy and optimism were some of the primary findings of the study, which were later changed to discover other strengths as well as any negative perception of aging (Stelting, 2017).

The New England Study began in 1995. The New England Study primarily targeted the health factors and the cognitive and functional capacities of centenarians, specifically the genetic heredity shared between centenarian siblings and their offspring (Archer et al., 2005; Manning et al., 2012; Stelting, 2017). The findings have shown that many centenarians bear the ability to avoid harmful diseases while others seem to also possess the means to endure chronic illnesses.

The Oporto Centenarian Study (Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016) described the living arrangements, health status, and functional capacity of Portuguese centenarians as well as

their use of care services and their personal attitude towards life. According to this study, reaching extreme longevity does not qualify as successful aging because a considerable number of centenarians experience sensory impairments, poor cognitive functioning, and a decline in their ability to perform activities of daily living. The findings of the Oporto Centenarian Study showed that most centenarians lived at home while being supported by their family. Increased health care needs, living alone, and family caregiving constraints were the most common reasons leading to centenarians entering nursing homes, and the differences found between centenarians living in institutions and those living in the community was in relation to their health status and income adequacy for medical expenses (Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016).

The Barbados Centenarian Study provided a unique opportunity to conduct the first study of its kind in the Caribbean and aimed to elicit the description of the subjective life of centenarians and the exploration of possible contributing factors to life satisfaction, well-being, and the achievement of extreme longevity in the oldest old. The findings of the Barbados Centenarian Study suggested that religion and spirituality played an essential role in the lives of these centenarians, many who were lifelong members of the church (Archer et al., 2005).

The Sydney Centenarian Study was the first Australian study to characterize the health and cognitive profiles of centenarians, and the aim was to establish a cohort of near-centenarians and centenarians to address brain health (Sachdev et al., 2013). Specifically, the study was designed to determine the cognitive profile of exceptionally old individuals (95 years old or older), to establish a centenarian phenotype by examining centenarians from neuropsychiatric, medical, nutritional, and lifestyle perspective, and to also examine the determinants of autonomy in centenarians (Sachdev et al., 2013).

In this study, centenarian health characteristics, such as cognitive status, functional status, emotional status, and rates of dementia, were addressed. Additionally, centenarians' utilization of health services and their sociodemographic characteristics were discussed. Brain scans, blood collection, follow-up assessment, and diagnosis were included. Despite the many challenges, especially recruitment to obtain a representative sample of centenarians (Gavrilov & Gavrilova, 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Sachdev et al., 2013; Yang, 2013) and to assert the age of the participants in researching the very old population, the study was still able to address some very important questions about aging at the extreme end of life (Sachdev et al., 2013).

### **Common Themes in the Literature**

The misconception that old age is associated with forgetfulness, disease, sickness and poor quality of life is all too common. Evidence proves the contrary when it comes to centenarians (Poon et al., 2010, 2016), and reports have shown that there are in fact many healthy and functional centenarians (Li et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2016; Takayama et al., 2007; Vacante et al., 2012). However, there are also centenarians with cognitive and physical impairments and commodities (Li et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Takayama et al., 2007; Vacante et al., 2012).

Centenarians are considered to be one of the fastest growing segments of the population (Archer et al., 2005; Caselli & Luy, 2013; Evans et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Kato et al., 2016; Passarino et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016; Sachdev et al., 2013; Vacante et al., 2012; Willcox et al., 2007; Wagner, 1999; Wong et al., 2014), and studies involving centenarians have increased and become an important topic of interest in recent years, generating special interest among researchers (Archer et al., 2005; Caselli & Luy, 2013; Darviri et al., 2009;



Li et al., 2013; Manning et al., 2012; Tigani et al., 2011; Wagner, 1999; Willcox et al., 2007).

Some of these studies are focused on specific topics, such as the causes of longevity (Caselli & Luy, 2013; Darviri et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2013; Gavrilov & Gavrilova, 2013; Li et al., 2013), life events (da Rosa et al., 2014; Gavrilov & Gavrilova, 2013; Hensley et al., 2012; Poon et al., 2010), personal experiences (Archer et al., 2005; Darviri et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Wagner, 1999), and spirituality (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Manning et al., 2012; Poon et al., 2016). The biological, psychological, and social factors of the living centenarians are also a popular area of focus in research studies of extreme longevity (Archer et al., 2005; Darviri et al., 2009; Jopp et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Wong et al., 2014; Yorgason et al., 2018).

### ***Causes of Longevity***

The first theme in the literature from all the qualitative research studies reviewed involved the causes of longevity. The centenarians credited the causes of their longevity to their lifestyle choices (Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Vacante et al., 2012), their community and environment (Freeman et al., 2013; Li et al., 2013; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017), their quality of life such as their life satisfaction and overall attitude towards life (Archer et al., 2005; Freeman et al., 2013; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017), their spirituality (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Manning et al., 2012; Vacante et al., 2012), and their positive outlook on their life's achievement, their goals, their gratitude, and finding purpose to continue living, which was also highly valued (Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Wong et al., 2014).

Centenarians did not believe in any unknown mysterious forces as the causes of their longevity, mainly tangible life choices and religious beliefs. They all believed that happiness and longevity came from within as all individuals possess the power to control their lives.

**Health and Functional Status.** Good health habits and nutrition (Archer et al., 2005; Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2016; Vacante et al., 2012; Yorgason et al. 2018), regular daily exercise, which for most was walking or going to church, good form of communication, and positive interaction with family members (Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Vacante et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2014; Yorgason et al., 2018) were the contributing factors of longevity as per the findings of some of these studies. Moreover, results on centenarians' health showed that reaching 100 did not mean that centenarians were escaping diseases associated with aging (Araújo et al., 2016, 2017).

According to Poon et al. (2010), health can be measured objectively through diseases, medications, hospitals and physician visits, blood chemistry, an inventory of past and present health history, and a number of biochemical markers; however, the best predictors of overall health are an individual's perception and self-rated health. Self-rated health is widely used to measure health among the extreme old due to its correlation with functioning and mortality and is defined as a holistic picture of one's health (Poon et al., 2010). Based on the study by Poon et al., who utilized new data from Phase 3 of the Georgia Centenarian Study, most centenarians reported that their health was either good or excellent, which is similar to the findings of Freeman et al. (2013), Gondo et al. (2006), Willcox et al. (2007), and Martin et al. (2012), where a number of centenarians reported being in either good, excellent, or functional health.

**Cognitive Functioning.** Cognitive functioning plays a critical role in the lives of centenarians (Poon et al., 2010), as cognitive abilities represent a predictor of outcomes such as institutionalization, everyday functioning, physical health, and nutrition. Furthermore, cognition is significant when determining vitality, longevity, and successful aging, and the findings from Poon et al. (2010) study demonstrated that cognitive abilities work in conjunction with other psychosocial variables as well as indicators of physical health in determining the quality of life in the extreme old. Stroke and fracture were two illnesses found by Takayama et al. (2007) to be associated with decline in physical activity and cognitive function because they were the primary reasons for elderly persons to be bedridden.

It is noted that generalizing cognitive function findings across age group may be misleading, as a significant difference is seen between octogenarians and centenarians (Hagberg et al., 2001; Poon et al., 1992, 2010). Moreover, centenarians are reported to have varying levels of cognitive impairment (Garasky et al., 2012; Hagberg et al., 2001; Martin et al., 2012). According to the results from the centenarians in Japan, Sweden, and the United States, Hagberg et al. (2001) found that some centenarians performed as well as the average younger person cognitively, and others showed lower performances that were not inevitable among their age group.

### ***Life Events and Personal Experiences***

The second theme involves the major life events and personal experiences mentioned, whether positive, negative, or stressful. This theme is considered the personal history and/or lifetime traumas of these unique and resilient centenarians. The life events and experiences were combined into one theme because any life events, whether traumatic or happy, are actually experienced throughout a lifetime, and the centenarians

recounted those difficult times, potential stress, and life events when asked about their personal experiences (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2012).

According to Martin (2007), centenarians define themselves by drawing into their personal experiences and life stories because those experiences gained and losses encountered over the life span are an essential part of their self-definition. For some of the centenarians, these life experiences, events, and traumas were either marriage, the birth of grandchildren, divorce, retirement, health decline, loss of independence, being institutionalized, or the loss of parents, a spouse, or child because centenarians outlived most of their family members and friends (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Hensley et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2012; Poon et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2014).

The infidelity or institutionalization of a spouse, unhappy marriages, destruction of home by fire, domestic abuse or chronic physical pain, school-education, religion-spirituality were some of the personal experiences (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Manning et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2012). The life events were not only important determinants of physical and mental health in the oldest old but were also an influence in their overall health and quality of life (Poon et al., 2010). There were also major historical events, such as World War I and World War II, the Holocaust, the Great Depression, the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and major natural disasters (da Rosa et al., 2014; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Poon et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2014), to name a few. However, religious coping or turning to God was how they all managed these stressful life events and experiences (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Manning et al., 2012).

**Spirituality.** Spiritually was extremely important to all centenarians of the studies

reviewed. Spirituality, faith, and devotion were all mentioned in differing ways by the centenarians (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Heinz et al., 2017; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Manning et al., 2012; Vacante et al., 2012). As mentioned earlier, religious coping or turning to God was how most centenarians managed these stressful life events and experiences (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Heinz et al., 2017; Manning et al., 2012).

**Personality.** Several studies have assessed personality traits in centenarians (Kato et al., 2016; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2006; Poon et al., 2010). Centenarians, like any other age group, rely on several different sources in order to cope with life's stresses or changes, and drawing on their own personality has been one important resource for centenarians thus why personality traits is often found in studies of centenarians (Kato et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2010). The most consistent personality trait found in almost every centenarian study focused on low level of neuroticism (da Rosa et al., 2014; Kato et al., 2016; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2006, 2012; Poon et al., 2010). Centenarians were found to be more optimistic, easygoing, outgoing, and considered laughter very important than the average older adult population (Freeman et al., 2013; Kato et al., 2016).

The positive attitude and personality traits demonstrated by these exceptional individuals seem to represent a protective factor against depression, disability, and pain (Kato et al., 2016); moreover, having these characteristics in conjunction with better self-rated health and socioeconomic resources may promote emotional and physical well-being and contribute to better mental health outcomes in the oldest old (Kato et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2012). All in all, personality traits seem to play an important factor in the lives of our exceptional centenarians (da Rosa et al., 2014; Darviri et al., 2009; Hensley et al., 2012; Kato et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2010; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2006,

2012; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Tigani et al., 2011; Vacante et al., 2012).

**Resilience.** A resilient personality appears to be quite common among centenarians, and the theme of resilience has spawned some attention in centenarian research (Martin, 2007). Resilience is often used to describe individuals who survive in the face of adversity. Centenarians seem to have met all the requirements associated with resilience, including having to survive and adapt to 100 years or more of sickness, health decline, physical limitations, stressful life experiences, events, and traumas, major historical events (i.e., wars, Great Depression, natural disasters), outliving most of their family and friends, financial hardships, and any other threats, risks, losses, and negative experiences that may surface during the course of an individual's life span. The survivorship of these centenarians seems to be characterized by high levels of resourcefulness in coping (Martin, 2007), an area that Martin (2007) cautioned is a valuable one to assess further in centenarians to uncover how these exceptional individuals deal with adversity and what coping behaviors they are more likely to employ.

Martin et al. (1992) reported, from their assessment of different modes of coping among centenarians, that centenarians were low in behavioral coping and high in cognitive coping. They were likely "not to worry" (Martin, 2007, p. 99) and relied on "religious beliefs" (p. 99), "taking things one day a time" (p. 99), and "accepting health problems" (Martin, 2007, p. 99). The study by Manning et al. (2012) demonstrated that spirituality was a vital source and a strong promoter of resilience in centenarians. Relying on cognitive, religious, and spiritual modes of coping when dealing with problems may be the appropriate approach for centenarians on the behavioral side of personality, according to Martin (2007), because direct behavioral coping methods are progressively

hard to use for this incomparable population. Nonetheless, a resilient or robust personality is necessary for survivorship into such exceptional old age (Martin, 2007; Poon et al., 2016) and may be a contributor to centenarians adapting well to later life (Martin, 2007).

**Social Support.** Social support is an immensely influential factor in the lives of centenarians. Pin and Spini (2016) stated, “Centenarians have complex and multidimensional needs” (p. 220). According to Brandão et al. (2017), caring for centenarians is becoming a common situation due to the longevity phenomenon, and recent findings worldwide have highlighted the increased number of centenarians living at home, close to, or with family members. There are a number of factors to acknowledge when it comes to understanding the social support associated with caregiving needs and challenges, family demographics, family care, social and cultural differences, and living arrangements of centenarians. Knowledge of the demands associated with caregiving situation is still limited in spite of the increase in awareness regarding caregiving relationships and informal support of centenarians (Boerner et al., 2016; Brandão et al., 2017; Jopp et al., 2016).

Centenarians emphasize the importance of being connected to their community and strong relationships with family and friends in creating that community (Freeman et al., 2013). However, family caregivers or children of centenarians are more likely to also be advanced in age and may present a number of health issues of their own (Boerner et al., 2016; Brandão et al., 2017; Jopp et al., 2016; Pin & Spini, 2016; Ribeiro, Teixeira, et al., 2016; Yang, 2013); they also may be in their caregiving role for a number of unexpected years, which can often lead to a long, burdensome strain on them and family financial resources (Boerner et al., 2016; Brandão et al., 2017), thus making anxiety,

depression, and caregiving burden the most common negative outcomes associated with long term of centenarians (Brandão et al., 2017), especially with minimal public or community support and health resources.

The Tokyo Centenarian Study (Gondo et al., 2006), for instance, showed that more centenarians lived with family members than in nursing homes or institutions (Brandão et al., 2017). The findings of the Oporto Centenarian Study (Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016), the second Heidelberg Study (Boerner et al., 2016), and the Taiwan Centenarian Study (Yang, 2013) also showed similar findings: most centenarians lived at home while being supported by family. However, there is also a significant difference among the oldest old residing at home or with family members and those residing in nursing homes or care facilities (Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016).

Centenarians in care facilities had significantly lower cognitive, physical, or functional abilities (Boerner et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Yang, 2013). Furthermore, the reasons centenarians were entering nursing homes were associated with increased health care needs, living alone, family caregiving constraints, increased functional dependency, or scarce economic resources for medical expenses (Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016; Yang, 2013). Living arrangements, as well as adequate social and economic resources, greatly impact the mental and functional health of centenarians and contribute to their overall quality of life and life satisfaction (Freeman et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2010; Yang, 2013).

## **Wisdom**

Wisdom, according to Baltes and Smith (2003), “represents an ideal combination of mindfulness and virtue” (p. 126). According to Glück and Bluck (2013), Staudinger and Glück (2011), Sternberg (2005), and Thomas and Kunzmann (2013), the misconception behind wisdom is that it can be referred to as intellectual knowledge



acquired through direct instructions or academics. However, this concept takes an approach that blends the insight of the human nature achieved through exposure to difficult situations and deep reflections. Wisdom is gained through one's evaluation about personal experiences and what was learned.

Wisdom is not an entity that belongs to elderly individuals. Anyone can be wise, young and old alike. However, we often associate old age with frailty as well as physical, functional, and cognitive decline and forget to look beyond the limitations. Centenarians bring more than just the negative stereotypes associated with extreme longevity. Many centenarians, as research has shown, do live a full life to the best of their abilities and despite some of their limitations. Baltes and Smith (2003) stated, "Older persons can be more effective and productive members of a well-functioning society than the culture of old-age permits" (p. 133), and many certainly do maintain a very social life as research has proven. Centenarians represent a vast pool of knowledge and experiences that extends far beyond old stories and the recollection of past historical events. They bring something far more valuable than that of any material gains and that is wisdom, which can certainly be said to be the hallmark achievement of reaching the milestone of being a centenarian: celebrating 100 years of life.

### **Centenarians in Haiti**

Studies of centenarians have been seen across the globe but mostly in developed countries as previously stated (Archer et al., 2005; Passarino et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Tigani et al., 2011), and Krach and Velkoff (1999) affirmed so in their report to the U.S. Bureau of the Census. According to the report, information regarding centenarian populations living in other countries of the world is limited mainly to developed countries with population registration status or census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

However, centenarians are surfacing in developing countries (Archer et al., 2005; Strejilevich, 1983), although very few studies have been conducted involving these centenarians (Archer et al., 2005). The island of Haiti is home to a number of centenarians and supercentenarians, and they continue to surface. Many of these Haitian centenarians are not documented because there is a lack of literature on Haitian centenarians and no official studies have been conducted and published on the topic in the developing country of Haiti.

Although education (Caselli & Luy, 2013; Cho et al., 2013; da Rosa et al., 2014; Jopp et al., 2016; Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016; Tigani et al., 2011; Vacante et al., 2012), economic support (Cho et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Poon et al., 2010; Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016), living arrangements (Boerner et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2013; Ribeiro, Araújo, et al., 2016; Ribeiro, Teixeira, et al., 2016; Tigani et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2014), and personality traits (da Rosa et al., 2014; Darviri et al., 2009; Hensley et al., 2012; Kato et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2006, 2012; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Tigani et al., 2011; Vacante et al., 2012) were also included in the potential causes associated with longevity in centenarians, this study was not inclusive of education, economic support, and personality trait in a detailed manner because Haiti is a developing country and its culture differs from that of its more developed neighboring islands and countries where many of the studies such as the Georgia Centenarian Study (Poon et al., 1992), the Okinawan Centenarian Study (Willcox, Willcox, He, et al., 2008), the Sydney Centenarian Study (Sachdev et al., 2013), and the study of Centenarians in Barbados (Archer et al., 2005), to name a few, were conducted.

Moreover, many of our Haitian centenarians do not know how to read or write. This high illiteracy rate among centenarians was also found in a number of studies, such

as the Taiwanese Centenarian Study conducted by Yang (2013). Some similarities to Haitian centenarians were seen in the demographic profiles of the Oporto centenarians who were less educated and also had financial difficulties (Poon et al., 2016), even if it was not to the extent seen in Haiti, a third world country where the average individual earns and lives off less than \$1 U.S. a day. The unfortunate living conditions of Haitian centenarians living in Haiti did not allow for an education or income, among many other basic necessities that centenarians in the more developed countries have had at their disposal. Nonetheless, this asserts that, in spite of what popular beliefs may infer, longevity is not reserved for the educated and wealthy population (Poon et al., 2016).

One important aspect that must be acknowledged when discussing centenarians in Haiti involves the cultural differences. Being sensitive to cultural difference and, as stated by Jopp et al. (2016), to societal context as well, can help to evaluate whether distinct policies enhance or hinder the aging process of the oldest old while also providing knowledge for future policies for them and their families. This also highlights the importance and aim of cross-cultural gerontology research mentioned earlier. For Haiti, it must be acknowledged that there is no ethnic or racial diversity, and the cultural, economic, and political differences are so profound that many of the findings, policies, and insights for future research and policy makers discussed in the literature from previous studies may not all be applicable because the circumstances in which Haitian centenarians live cannot relate or be compared to centenarians in more developed countries. This is also a notable limitation in the study.

However, centenarians across many countries, as mentioned by Yang (2013) “appear to share more similarities than differences in their individual traits, health status and subjective qualities of life or life satisfaction” (p. 403). Elders are honored and

respected in the Haitian culture. Similar to Haiti, in the Chinese culture, elders are held in the same high regard, as Poon et al. (2016) asserted, and happiness and longevity are also important concepts of high quality of life. According to Mackowicz and Wnek-Gozdek (2018), cultural differences cannot be neglected as they may increase or decrease loneliness in old age. Mackowicz and Wnek-Gozdek argued that family culture dominates in Poland and other South and East European countries. This is the same culture that the island of Haiti adopts.

In Haiti, family members, mostly children, bear the responsibility of care for older members, just as Mackowicz and Wnek-Gozdek (2018) and Jopp et al. (2016) discussed, and it is commonly accepted and provides a special type of bond between generation in a family and in the parent-children relationship. Cultivating that feeling of community brings forth strong relationships that survive through their lives, and such community cultures prevent loneliness through social integration. In the same manner, loss of close relatives makes the lives of the oldest old more difficult when it comes to meeting basic needs related to intimacy and social integration, synchronously contributing to loneliness (Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2018). Additionally, children of centenarians are also advanced in age and may present health issues of their own (Boerner et al., 2016; Jopp et al., 2016), making caring for centenarian parents burdensome (Brandão et al., 2017).

In Haiti, there are autonomous centenarians who have proven that individuals can reach 100 years of age or older and still be in good physical and cognitive health and maintain a satisfying life, even when health limitations occur and resources and support are almost nonexistent. Centenarians in Haiti adapt to multiple adverse conditions (social, political, economic, medical), which doubtlessly increases their resilience and self-efficacy. According Jopp et al. (2016), those centenarians who are able to live

autonomously can help understand how they manage to do so, despite any restrictions in their health and social resources. Centenarians in Haiti can assist in determining how they are able to remain active and how they may combine well-known or lesser known resources, as Jopp et al. expressed it, and this can certainly enlighten the development of prevention and intervention programs.

### **Oral History**

Most centenarian studies, according to Poon et al. (2016), focus on their current state of being and ignore their histories. Heinz et al. (2017) adopted Baum (1980), as well as the Collins and Bloom (1991) definition of oral history research: “a research method for assessing the stories and records that aid in the understanding of previous events in history as well as the feelings surrounding such events” (p. 8). Heinz et al. also noted that “oral history provides researchers opportunities to access narratives and compare them to existing theories of aging” (p. 8) and to “understand positive aspects of aging (e.g., assessing growth, wisdom, and meaning of experiences and life events)” (p. 8), especially when much of gerontology research often focuses on the challenges and deficits associated with aging. Additionally, the flexible style of oral history research offers greater openness to story sharing and provides participants with greater control in setting the pace of the interview, even though such research utilizes less structured approaches than other methodologies (Heinz et al., 2017).

Oral history fills a gap on the written history from an elite, limited perspective. Haitian centenarians’ oral history fills a major gap in the lack of written history of Haiti. For Haiti, storytelling is a prominent way to share past traditions, teach younger generations, and cultivate histories and memories. The lack of education and the inability to read and write have made storytelling the primary way in which Haiti has been able to

preserve its unique culture for centuries, enlightening the significance and value of oral history for many. There are various factors that affect and shape our lives, and, through oral history, we are provided with a clear understanding of the uniqueness of our centenarians' longevity.

### **Insights and Potential Concerns for Policy Makers**

According to Pin and Spini (2016), aging now in a demographic reality worldwide and the increased number of older individuals poses several challenges to governments and policy makers, yet centenarians represent a growing segment of the population often overlooked by policy makers. The lack of knowledge and understanding on the functioning and challenges faced by centenarians leaves many unanswered questions about the services and support needed for this alarmingly growing population (Jopp et al., 2016). One of the main objectives highlighted by Pin and Spini was for public policies to improve care and support for very old adults as well as to improve the living conditions of these exceptional survivors. Yang (2013) stated, "Social support plays a crucial role in explaining the survival, physical and mental health, sense of loneliness, and quality of life of elderly people" (p. 399). Support is needed for our exceptional survivors as well as their family members. Family members who work as long-term caregivers for our centenarians require assistance, especially because many of them have reached advanced age and may present health issues of their own, as previously noted (Boerner et al., 2016; Jopp et al., 2016).

Continuing training and education are other objectives, as they are important educational contexts to improve the quality of health, medicine, and social practices to alter the negative stereotypes and deepen the understanding of lived vulnerability for our oldest old population (Pin & Spini, 2016). As the aging population accelerates, the issue

of securing a sustainable labor force of care workers will be an extreme challenge (Yang, 2013) to provide them the support needed. Moreover, our oldest olds are the largest consumers of health resources and will pose significant economic consequences (Willcox et al., 2007).

For instance, the challenges of an aging society are inclusive of earlier retirement, rising healthcare costs, inadequate personal savings, and declining level of family support, as reported by the Global Aging Initiative (2006), and, according to Leslie and Makela (2008), today's elderly account for approximately 13% of the U.S. population, but they receive more than 60% of all federal social spending. Therefore, creative and effective initiatives are to be properly implemented for our oldest olds' formal (e.g., competent care workers, health care, health professionals, medical devices, care facilities) and informal (e.g., family caregivers, volunteer, community senior services, cohabitating) support.

Providing assistive and technological devices, building appropriate housing solutions, addressing future developments in home care services, promoting social integration, and forming inclusive care communities (Pin & Spini, 2016), while taking into account the role culture might play, are a few of the ways in which policy makers can restructure the lives of and provide governmental support to our unique centenarians. The ultimate goal is to ensure everyone has access to the services needed, regardless of their age, health, or socioeconomic status (Pin & Spini, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. What are the lived experiences of Haitian centenarians?

2. What are Haitian centenarians' stated secrets to long life?
3. What advice and wisdom can be provided by Haitian centenarians?
4. How has spirituality impacted the longevity of Haitian centenarians?

### **Conclusion**

Cultural understanding of elders is a valuable component for those interested in working with this exceptional population. The contributions that centenarians bring to our society are significant, unique, and immeasurable. Centenarians do share a number of similarities pertaining to health status, individual traits, and overall life satisfaction; however, as studies have shown, no single individual is the same, and causes of extreme longevity differ for individuals across the globe regardless of their socioeconomic status.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this qualitative study was to document the lived experiences, significant life events, personal experiences of adaptation, and the integration of spiritual beliefs of Haitian centenarians who are residing in Haiti. This study was also designed to fill the gap in the literature about centenarians in less developed countries, specifically those in the country of Haiti. In this chapter, the researcher described the systematic search for reliable primary and secondary documents, as well as the methodology for this proposed study about Haitian centenarians. The research approach utilized was content analysis as an inductive approach. Content analysis is the qualitative research method that best accesses the meaning of a text within the context of the writers and readers of text-based documents (Gall et al., 2007). Archivists, researchers, and social historians have embraced content-analysis methodology to analyze historical documents with rich sources of data (Krippendorff, 2004, 2013; Yilmaz, 2019). This chapter also provided a description of the data-collection procedures, analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, research bias, and limitations of the study.

### **Qualitative Research Method**

Content analysis was the qualitative approach used for this dissertation study. This methodology has generally been defined as “a research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text” (Dasgupta, 1975, p. 87). As defined by Stone et al. (1966) and Krippendorff (2013), it is a research technique for making reliable and valid inferences from documents and artifacts within their own context. This study examined archival interviews of Haitian centenarians, specifically those who have spent their entire lives living in Haiti and many

who still reside there. Using the content-analysis design for the existing archival data provided context to better understand and examine perceptions and the life portraits of Haitian Centenarians in Haiti.

### **Early History of Content Analysis**

According to Dasgupta (1975), content analysis had its beginning in the field of American journalism. By the 1920s, it was centered in the school of journalism in Columbia and culminated in Malcom Willey's study entitled *The Country Newspaper* in 1926. The early investigators then used to measure attention devoted to straight topic categories, such as fashion and sports from newspapers and journals. These actual measures were said to be taken in terms of space as column and inches, and large portions of these studies were focused on who said how much of what to whom with no clear significance for any theory or hypothesis (Dasgupta, 1975). It was the work of Harold Laswell and his associates in the 1940s that put the content-analysis approach in a refreshing, superior, and more significant perspective with an extensive study of political propaganda. Their work offered a major opportunity to make advances both in conceptualization and technique, which is summarized in their book entitled *Language of Politics* (Dasgupta, 1975).

In the 1950s, according to White and Marsh (2006), content analysis as a research methodology was rooted in the study of mass communication. Since then, the first description of content analysis based on Berelson (1952) was developed exclusively for a quantitative positivistic approach; however, later descriptions have indicated that content analysis has undergone comprehensive changes, moving it into a more interpretative approach within the qualitative paradigm (Graneheim et al., 2017). Since the middle of the 1950s, the use of content analysis has not only been seen in journalism and political

science, but also in other fields, such as psychology, history, anthropology, education, sociology, linguistics, philosophy and literary analysis (Dasgupta, 1975).

By the beginning of the 1960s, researchers realized how difficult, expensive, and time consuming it was to employ human coders to follow the complex analysis directions, especially when dealing with large amount of textual materials. These considerations resulted in turning to computers, which opened a new phase in content-analysis research. The goal was for the computer to take over the tedious aspect of handling textual material of large volumes with the unthinkable speed that human coders could never reach (Dasgupta, 1975). The implementation of procedures on a computer was further suggested to ensure that they would be both systematic and objective (Dasgupta, 1975). The field of content analysis was thus further expanded to include the use of technology.

### **Conventional Content Analysis: Inductive Approach**

Qualitative content analysis consists of conventional, directed, and summative approaches for data analysis (Downe-Wambolt, 1992; Morse & Richards, 2002). This study employed conventional content analysis, which is the inductive approach, also called data-driven approach (Schreier, 2012) or text-driven approach (Krippendorff, 2013), and is characterized by a search for patterns in the text (Graneheim et al., 2017). During the analysis process of the inductive approach in content analysis, the researcher looks for similarities and differences within cases and across cases, described in categories and themes on various levels of abstraction and interpretation. The research moves from the data to the theoretical understanding, from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) provided a brief overview of the inductive approach of

content analysis as described in previous research and formulated as follows:

When data are collected primarily through interviews, open-ended questions and probes are usually used, and at times, they may be specific to the participants' comments rather than a preexisting theory; reading all data repeatedly to reach immersion and obtain a sense of whole would be the start of the data; the researcher then read the data word by word in order to develop codes by first highlighting the exact words from the text that appear to capture key thoughts or concepts. Next, the researcher approaches the text by making notes of his or her first impressions, thoughts and initial analysis and as this process continues, labels of codes emerge that are reflective of more than one key thought. These often come directly from the text and are then converted into the initial coding scheme. Codes are then sorted out into categories based on how different codes are related and linked. These emergent categories are used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters. (p. 1279)

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) also warned about challenges from this type of content analysis. One challenge involves the failure to understand the context completely, which can result in the inability to find key categories, leading to results that fail to represent the data. The result of a conventional content analysis, also known as inductive approach, is often concept development or model building (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Graneheim et al. (2017) stated the challenge in conducting inductive analysis is "avoiding surface descriptions and general summaries" (p. 30).

One example of inductive content analysis is a study by Graneheim and Lundman (2010) about loneliness among the very old. Individual interviews were conducted, and the texts from these interviews were divided into meaning units that were condensed and

coded. The codes were interpreted and compared for differences and similarities and sorted into 27 tentative subthemes. The authors agreed on 15 subthemes through a process of reflection and discussion, and then four themes were developed that unified the content in the subthemes. The descriptive themes highlighted the variation of loneliness among the very old and were living with loneliness, feeling abandoned, living in confidence, and feeling free (Graneheim et al., 2017). The inductive methodological approach of content analysis was best suited for this qualitative study because it allowed the researcher to find the similarities and differences in the archival data.

### **Data Source: Background Information on Haitian Centenarian Project**

The data source for this inductive content analysis study involved archival interviews of Haitian centenarians conducted by the Fondation Félicité in Haiti. Elder Bayyinah Bello is a well-known Haitian cultural historian and the founder of the Fondation Félicité, residing in Tabarre, Haiti. During an interview that this researcher conducted with Elder Bello on March 24, 2018, Elder Bello discussed how she initiated the start of her project on Haitian centenarians. Elder Bello revealed the following:

First, it was just a hazard I guess. Meeting people that are 100 and more and running into them, hearing them. First one, second one, no big deal. Then when you thought, wait a minute, four, five, what's this? I thought Haitians do not have....I then started to question it. But I really started to put it into a system when I met this guy Kanis Ogis. The first time I met him he was 114 years old. When I met him again, he was 120....I took him in. He could no longer work, and they were threatening to put him out of his home since he could not pay his rent.

(Excerpt from the Interview conducted at the Fondation Felicite in Tabarre, Haiti)

This was how the project of Elder Bayyinah Bello was birthed. Elder Bello

conducted radio and television interviews that generated a lot of feedback and incited a number of centenarians to surface. Elder Bello travelled all around the country of Haiti, in different regions and cities, and interviewed a number of healthy and fully functional individuals who were verified to be 100 years or older. Elder Bello admitted that the centenarians themselves influenced her to take on the project. The more she interacted with them, the more she was fascinated and motivated in conducting this exceptional research project.

The project took a turn all around the country from the many radio and television shows conducted, and the churches started celebrating their members when they reach 100 years and they would invite Elder Bello and her associates to attend the celebration. Many people started reaching out to her Foundation, providing information on anyone they knew who were, 100 years or older. Elder Bello's interviews with these amazing and unique exceptional survivors were more like dialogues, similar to the one the researcher had conducted with Elder Bello. Elder Bayyinah Bello learned so much during her interaction with the amazing centenarians she befriended. The knowledge, oral history, wisdom, and lived experiences of Haitian centenarians were examined in this dissertation study.

### **Data-Collection Tools**

The researcher developed an instrument guided by the four research questions to help systematize her analysis across cases (see Appendix A). The researcher used the instrument that she developed, called a data extraction form, to help systemize her analysis. The data extracted from the transcripts and recorded on the data extraction form were later coded and further analyzed. Additional rows were added if necessary on the data extraction form for each transcript analyzed in this study. These added rows were

used to record any emerging data that were not in transcript form yet posed relevance for this study. The researcher also kept research journals to record thoughts, reflections, impressions, and discoveries gathered from the data.

### **Procedures**

Once Institutional Review Board Approval was granted, the researcher contacted Elder Bello by email for data-collection approval (see Appendix B) and to set up an appropriate time to meet so that the researcher could receive the data. The researcher obtained original videos and audio recordings of transcripts, as well as archived transcripts of Haitian centenarians. Elder Bello was asked to provide 20 recordings or transcripts or both that were aligned with the research questions of this study (i.e., autobiographies, lived experiences, shared knowledge, principles, and traditions). To store the data that were in digital form, the researcher used a password-protected flash drive to avoid possible cyber breach. All other data were stored in a locked container to which only the researcher had access. The researcher adhered to the following timeline:

1. Week 1: Sought permission (Institutional Review Board and Elder Bello approval, confirmed meeting date with Dr. Bello).
  2. Week 2: Traveled to Haiti to obtain the documents that formed the data of the study.
  3. Weeks 3 and 4: Listened to recordings and respective transcripts and took notes. The researcher focused on reading all data repeatedly to reach immersion and obtain a sense of whole.
  4. Weeks 5 and 6: Translated from Haitian Creole or French to American English
  5. Weeks 7 and 8: Translated from Haitian Creole or French to American English
- continued.

6. Weeks 9 and 10: Sent transcripts to selected designee for back translation (Selected designee had 2 weeks to verify the accuracy of the translated transcripts).

7. Weeks 11 and 12: Spent 1 to 2 days on each transcript to ensure immersion in the data. This process started with the researcher reading the data word by word in order to develop codes. The researcher first highlighted the exact words from the text that appeared to capture key thoughts or concepts (Kuckartz, 2014). Next, the researcher made notes of her first impressions, thoughts, and initial analysis on the data materials and as this process continued, labels of codes that emerged even if they were reflective of more than one key thought. Codes were then sorted out into categories based on how different these codes were related and linked. These emergent categories were used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For this process, the researcher used the data extraction form she created to record the data collected from the transcripts provided by Elder Bello. Additionally, the researcher took notes in a journal dedicated for the sole purpose of this data-analysis procedure. Williams and Moser (2019) stated, “Regardless of the research approach, the methodology employed for data collection and organization must be clear and repeatable, leading to and enabling data analysis” (p. 45).

8. Weeks 13 and 14: Immersion in the data continued (1 to 2 days dedicated to each transcript as stated above in Weeks 11 and 12).

9. Weeks 15 and 16: Immersion in the data continued (1 to 2 days dedicated to each transcript). The process of Weeks 11 and 12 were repeated.

10. Weeks 17 and 18: Immersion in the data continued (1 to 2 days dedicated to each transcript; process of Weeks 11 and 12 repeated).

11. Weeks 19 and 20: Immersion in the data continued (1 to 2 days dedicated to



each transcript; process of Weeks 11 and 12 repeated).

12. Weeks 20 and 21: Reviewed all transcripts and data analysis to ensure all was well. Additionally, this review served as a verification method to warrant that the researcher made certain she had conquered some of the challenges associated with the inductive approach of content analysis as mentioned by Graneheim et al. (2017) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005). These challenges included “failing to develop a complete understanding of the context which will result in failing to identify key categories and lead to findings that do not accurately represent the data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1280) and “avoiding surface descriptions and general summaries” (Graneheim et al., 2017, p. 30).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis searches for patterns in the data and the identification of themes and writing narratives to explain the themes. The data in this study were drawn primarily from text-based documents. Once the researcher was in possession of all of the archival transcripts and data materials, she organized the transcripts in alphabetical order using only pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality and identity of the centenarian participants. The researcher then proceeded by reading the transcripts several times in their entirety. As the materials were read and reviewed, summary notes were written in the researcher’s respective journal to begin the process of analysis. The emphasis of analysis was to answer the research questions while also taking into account any transformation that the initial foreshadowing questions may have undergone during the coding or any new questions or themes that emerged during the coding (White & Marsh, 2006).

### ***Coding Manual***

The researcher kept a coding manual, within which she recorded all decisions that she made about codes. Weber (1990) advised researchers to develop a coding manual which usually consist of category names, definitions or rules for assigning codes and examples. Moreover, Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) reminded researchers that some coding manuals possess an additional field dedicated to taking notes as coding proceeds. Definitions of each code that emerged from analyzing the data was kept in the manual. Defining the codes minimized a cognitive possible change during the process of analysis in order to increase the reliability of the analysis.

The coding manual described four categories of codes that were used in this study. Each level represented a predetermined category of codes that were directly linked to the research questions. The first category of codes identified key concepts and thoughts about the lived experiences of the Haitian centenarians in the study. The second category of codes focused on what Haitian centenarians in the study identified as the secrets to their longevity. The third category of codes identified any advice and wisdom that the centenarians may have provided during their interviews. The fourth category of codes explored whether spirituality impacted the lives of the Haitian centenarians of this study.

### ***Research Journal***

The researcher kept a research journal, within which she recorded thoughts, reflections, impressions, and discoveries. This journal documented the researcher's internal thinking and emotional process throughout the data analysis portion of the study. Ortlipp (2008) asserted that some things that researchers may not have considered at the beginning of the study may very much become apparent as the research progresses, and this is all a result of keeping a reflective research journal.

### *Steps in Data Analysis*

The researcher followed four steps in the data-analysis process that were proposed by Bengtsson (2016): decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation.

**Stage 1.** Decontextualization: The researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts. Through this process, she began to obtain the sense of the whole before the data could be broken down into smaller meaning units. A meaning unit is “the smallest unit that contains some of the insights the researcher needs, and it is the constellation of sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other, answering the question set out in the aim” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11).

Each identified meaning unit was recorded on the data extraction form in the corresponding broad coding category row. This step continued until the entire transcript was complete, and all the meaning units recorded on the data extraction form. The same procedure followed for each of the transcripts. Once all the data extraction forms were completed, each was then further coded in a more detailed manner. The meaning units were labeled with a subcode as they emerged, or new codes. The coding was done in relation to the context of the meaning units, a process known as open coding, as mentioned by Berg (2001). The codes were designed to facilitate the identification of concepts around which the data could be assembled into blocks and patterns (Bengtsson, 2016). The coding process was performed repeatedly, starting on the different pages of the text each time to increase the stability and reliability (Bengtsson, 2016).

Coding is an important step in content analysis. Saldaña (2009) stated, “A code in qualitative method inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of

language-based text or virtual data” (p. 3). For this research study, the researcher employed holistic coding. Holistic coding is an attempt to “grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole [the coder as ‘lumper’] rather than by analyzing them line by line [the coder as ‘splitter’]” (Dey, 1993, p. 104). This allowed the researcher to better grasp the intent of the transcript and capture the essence of the lived experiences of the Haitian centenarians interviewed. This holistic coding method was a preparatory approach to a unit of data before a more detailed coding or categorization process through first or second cycle methods followed suit. Holistic coding was applicable because the researcher already had a general idea of what to investigate in the data or “to ‘chunk’ the text into broad topic areas, as a first step to seeing what is there” (Bazeley, 2007, p. 67). As previously stated, the research questions guided this study; therefore, the researcher had a general idea of what to investigate in the data.

**Stage 2. Recontextualization:** Once the meaning units had been coded, the researcher then checked whether coding was complete. According to Bengtsson (2016), the original text is to be reread alongside the data on the data recording sheets, and, following this process, the researcher then considered whether the unused text was to be included. If the unused text provided additional information, then it was included in the analysis, but, if not, then it was not necessary and was simply omitted (Bengtsson, 2016; Burnard, 1991, 1995). Bengtsson also warned that, when the researcher is profoundly immersed in the data, everything seems to be of relevance, and, once this is the case, a process of distancing is necessary. The researcher must be able to let go of the insignificant information that does not correspond to the aim of the study (Bengtsson, 2016).

**Stage 3. Categorization:** During this stage, prior to creating categories, the

researcher must condense extended meaning units. This required that the number of words to be reduced without losing content of the unit (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), as discussed in Bengtsson (2016). The depth of the meaning units determined the level at which the analysis was performed. This process of condensation was often needed when data were based on interviews as well as when latent content analysis was to be carried out (Bengtsson, 2016). Additionally, categories and patterns were identified during this stage (Bengtsson, 2016).

**Stage 4. Compilation:** During the compilation stage, Bengtsson (2016) emphasized that, once the categories were established, themes would be generated, and then the write-up process began. Bengtsson advised the researcher or investigator to consider the data collected, the analysis, emergent themes, and exemplar quotes from a neutral perspective and also consider their objectivity. The researcher, however, did have a choice between the latent and manifest level, according to Bengtsson, and the depth of the analysis did depend on how the data were collected. In a manifest analysis, the researcher used the informants' words and remained aware of the need to refer back to the original text, which made it possible to stay closer to the original meanings and contexts (Bengtsson, 2016), contrary to latent analysis, which invited the researcher to immerse himself or herself to some extent in the data in order to identify hidden meanings in the text (Bengtsson, 2016).

### **Proposed and Applied Method**

Conventional content analysis is an inductive approach. It is also called a data-driven approach (Schreier, 2012) or text-driven approach (Krippendorff, 2013) and is characterized by a search for patterns in the text (Graneheim et al., 2017). This conventional content-analysis approach served as the proposed and applied method of

this study. During the analysis process of the inductive approach in content analysis, the researcher looks for similarities and differences within cases and across cases, described in categories or themes or both on various levels of abstraction and interpretation. The research moves from the data to the theoretical understanding, from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general (Graneheim et al., 2017).

The first step of the researcher's analysis was to get lost in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). For this research study, the researcher read and reread her transcripts a number of times to make sense of them. Given she did have video recordings with audio to accompany the interview transcripts that she generated, the researcher listened to the recordings multiple times as she read the transcripts and was able to greatly capture the essence of the meaning of the lived experiences of the Haitian centenarian participants in the study. The second step was the initial noting, which Smith et al. labeled as being the most detailed and time consuming.

During this step, taking notes on the transcripts begins. The goal is to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data, conduct a close analysis, and avoid commenting on mainly what we expect to see in the text. The aim is to capture participants' explicit meaning (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher coded them through some of the materials she expected to see through the data based on her research questions and prior knowledge from the research and literature review conducted on the topic. This aided her in understanding the methodology to be used and allowed her to avoid any confusion when noting some of the comments that she explained as she grasped the centenarians' experiences, beliefs, and lifestyles.

The researcher went through her transcripts numerous times, and, each time, she focused on different things. For instance, the first time she went through the transcripts,

she focused on anything pertaining to the role spirituality played in the lives of Haitian centenarians. The second time, she focused on how age affected the quality of life of Haitian centenarians and continued with the same pattern, keeping a specific research question in mind each time until all of the information and answers pertaining to the research questions were labeled. She also accounted for any information she deemed relevant, even if it was not specifically in relation to the research questions. As she focused on the spirituality aspect of the centenarian within the transcripts, she used the letter S and highlighted any comment or reference to spirituality in yellow. As she focused on how age affected the quality of life of the centenarians of the study, she used the letters AQL and highlighted any comment or reference to such in neon green.

For any reference to the youth, the letter Y with the color pink was used. The color pink was also used for any advice or wisdom that the centenarians may have articulated with the letter A and the letter W. In regard to what the centenarians attributed their long life to, or any stated secrets to their longevity, the researcher used the letter L and highlighted in red. This was the researcher's initial noting, which led to coding. She also accounted for lived experiences, which she highlighted in aqua with the letters LE, and lifestyle, which she highlighted in teal blue with the letters LS. For any nutritional references or information, she used the letter N and highlighted in olive green. She also used olive green for any health matters but used the letter H. For any emotion, attitude, or feelings concerning death or dying, she used the letter D and highlighted in dark green. Light gray was used to highlight culture-related information and statements with the letter C and also for family with the letter F. Any other relevant information or new ideas that emerged were highlighted in simple gray with the letter R.

Provisional coding was employed in this research study, given the researcher was

able to establish a predetermined start list prior to receiving the data (Saldaña, 2009, 2015). Saldaña (2009) stated, “These codes can be developed from anticipated categories or types of responses/actions that may arise in the data yet to be collected” (p. 120).

Saldaña added the following about codes:

They can be generated from preparatory investigative matters such literature reviews related to the study, the study’s conceptual framework and research questions, previous research findings, pilot study field- work, the researcher’s previous knowledge and experiences (experiential data), and researcher formulated hypotheses or hunches. (p. 121)

As qualitative data are collected, coded and analyzed, provisional codes can be revised, modified, deleted, or expanded to include new codes. Additionally, Saldaña asserted that this type of coding is appropriate for qualitative studies that build on or corroborate previous research and investigations.

The researcher was able to generate provisional codes prior to receiving the archival data (i.e., video recordings) because she interviewed the primary researcher who conducted the initial interviews with the Haitian centenarian participants where she was able to get a background on how and why the centenarian project was birthed in Haiti. Additionally, she was given an overview of some of the information shared during her interaction with these amazing exceptional survivors. Following the interview with the primary researcher, she started her research on the topic, conducted her literature review, generated her research questions, and wrote her proposal and waited for approval, all of which occurred prior to receiving any data. Predetermined codes were as follows: functional centenarians, lucidity, secrets to longevity, spirituality, wisdom, lifestyle, lived experiences, resources, family, feelings, culture, and nutrition.



The researcher simply wrote what came to mind as she thought of centenarians based on her prior knowledge, and then she thought of centenarians from a developing country. There was not much literature on centenarians from any developing country; therefore, focusing on her experiences in a developing country, as well as information shared during her interview with the primary researcher, assisted with generating some codes. Additionally, she compared some of the information from the literature review of the more developed countries on centenarians with the less developed countries.

The researcher was mindful to exercise caution, as Saldaña (2009) suggested, when using provisional codes because researchers may be unwilling to modify the codes, they may lose their objectivity and even their interpretative observation on what is really happening there within the data, and, lastly, they may at times fail to be open to new ideas or alternative ways of thinking. As the researcher worked with her provisional codes, the goal was to make sure she did not focus on finding out only the preconceived notions from her start list and her research questions but also any new information, patterns, codes, or themes that may have emerged from the video recordings or transcripts.

The first category of codes identified key concepts and thoughts about the lived experiences of the Haitian centenarians in the study and how age had affected their quality of life. The second category of codes focused on what Haitian centenarians in the study identified as the secrets to their longevity. The third category of codes identified any advice and wisdom that the centenarians may have provided during their interviews. The fourth category of codes explored whether spirituality had impacted the lives of the Haitian centenarians of this study. The fifth category of codes identified any relevant information, new ideas, codes, or themes.

As the researcher transcribed the video-audio recordings and translated them from Haitian Creole to English, she became truly familiar with the information being conveyed, which facilitated immersing herself in the data prior to the initial coding and the overall data-analysis process. She proceeded to the third step proposed by Smith et al. (2009), which is developing emergent themes. In looking for emergent themes, the task of the analyst changes, according to Smith et al., as the researcher “attempts to reduce the volume of detail in the data” (p. 91). For the purpose of this step, researchers are to use the initial noting if any and the different types of noting, which, in this case, were spirituality, age and quality of life, lived experiences, advice, and secret to long life, youth, wisdom, resilience, and so forth, from the previous step as this maintains the complexity in terms of mapping out the interrelations, connections, and patterns between the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher mapped out her themes from her notes, identified how they were connected, and ensured the important concepts were acknowledged. She also made sure to capture the meaning and essence from the transcripts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The conduct of research is value laden and, therefore, is subject to ethical concerns (Gall et al., 2007). There were no ethical issues associated with data collection, as this study used archival data. However, the researcher did observe discretion about the historical record and treated individuals with respect (Rampolla, 2007). Therefore, the researcher used only participants’ pseudonyms and kept all transcripts in a password-protected laptop and all paper written materials in a locked coded safe to which only the researcher knew the combination.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers in a comprehensive sense to the entire study (Graneheim et al., 2017) and is important to establish validity in this study (Gall et al., 2007). For any questions and concerns that the researcher did have, the researcher consulted with Elder Bello and anyone who possessed strong and trustworthy knowledge or lived experiences on the historical events mentioned by the centenarians. Moreover, the researcher shared the analysis of the data and the findings with Elder Bello and her team for their feedback. The researcher solicited the assistance of a transcription auditor to review the translation and ensure that the translation of the data was, in fact, reliable (Bengtsson, 2016).

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher planned to manage potential bias by keeping a reflective journal of her perceptions and understanding of the data. Further, the researcher's analysis process and the findings that derived from it were shared with Elder Bello and her team for feedback (i.e., coding decisions, codes, categories, themes, and findings). Researcher bias was one of the great intellectual epiphanies of the 20th century (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bias can be conscious or unconscious and requires the researcher's perception to select a particular version of an event or data that can be overlooked, distorted, or falsified. This is influenced by the researcher's competence, personal position, and relationship to the event (Gall et al., 2007). This insight has both transformed and informed research, particularly empowering qualitative research techniques in the social sciences.

Researchers are particularly susceptible to bias in their role as interpreters of events and data. In the case of this study, the author did have a personal and professional interest in the topic. Her mother is of Haitian origin, and her maternal side of the family has a number of close family members currently residing in Haiti. The desire to understand and evoke the experience of many of the cultural and traditional norms that

has shaped her ancestors, her mother's generation, and her upbringing represented a strong influence on the author's selection of the topic. Although born in the United States, the author spent the first 12 years of her life residing in Haiti, where the culture and many of the traditions were instilled in her. She knows the role elders play in the overall history of the country and how they are respected. Oral history is aligned with the Haitian culture, and such culture is strongly connected with our elders. Many traditions, history, principles, knowledge, tales, and cultural norms are passed down from generation to generation from elders, including centenarians' stories of lived experiences and wisdom (Mills, 2003; Riessman, 2008).

Additionally, the author attended school and has learned the history and lived through some of the political events and traumatic experiences as well as the cultural mores and celebrations of Haiti. The author also has an interest in highlighting the positive and uniqueness of Haiti, a country that has been portrayed only in a negative light, and its incredible inhabitants, specifically the resilient centenarians who have not been acknowledged until recently through the initial research of Elder Bello. The author of this study has truly made it her commitment to educate and share with the world that Haiti does bear countless centenarians, and they are exceptional and bring a unique knowledge and shared experiences to Haiti and the rest of the world.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations inherent in this research method and the specific topic. The study exclusively looked at archival data from Elder Bayyinah Bello's nonprofit organization, Foundation Félicité. The study also focused specifically on Haitian centenarians, both men and women, as long as they were Haitians and within the age group stated and had lived in Haiti all their lives until the age of 100 years or older.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this applied research dissertation study. The findings were generated from archival data consisting of interview video transcripts from the selected Haitian centenarian participants and are presented in a narrative manner. The research approach used is also described and the research questions restated as a way to highlight and better align the findings. The data-analysis process is explored, and the significant findings and themes are discussed with direct quotes and selected texts from the analyzed documents or transcripts that support the significant findings and themes.

Conventional content analysis was the methodological approaches used for the study. It is also called data-driven approach (Schreier, 2012) or text-driven approach (Krippendorff, 2013) and is characterized by a search for patterns in the text (Graneheim et al., 2017; Tesch, 1990). This conventional content-analysis approach served as the proposed and applied method of this study. The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. What are the lived experiences of Haitian centenarians?
2. What are Haitian centenarians' stated secrets to long life?
3. What advice and wisdom can be provided by Haitian centenarians?
4. How has spirituality impacted the longevity of Haitian centenarians?

The data analysis generated significant findings, and six themes were formulated from the archival interviews and transcripts. These significant findings and six themes are shared in the following paragraphs, along with the direct quotes from the centenarians.

### Significant Findings

There are many struggles associated with living to be 100 years old or older in

Haiti. Centenarians articulated a long life is a struggle and emphasized a lack of tangible resources. Living long comes with the reality of outliving your loved ones, the reality of the lack of family support and physical mobility due to a weakened body. Yet, all of the centenarians interviewed for this study were still fully functional and very much able to perform activities of daily living but had age-related memory loss.

### ***Outliving Family***

Outliving family and friends was a reality associated with living to be 100 years old or older. Many of the centenarians mentioned the loss of their children, family members, and friends. Francine recounted, “My mom and dad died in the capital of Port-au-Prince. I do not have any family left. All of my close family members, they all died. Yeah, I did have some kids, they all died. They are all dead.” Elisia S. expressed the following:

I don't have any kids. I only had one child and he had 17 kids and they all died young. His kids keep having a bunch of kids...if they could, they would take care of me [But they do not have the means], they would be able to send a little food my way. Only God knows.

Thea A. also expressed, “I don't have any children; they all died.”

### ***The Physical Body***

The centenarians talked about the changes that affected their physical bodies over time. Living long is associated with a weaker physical body and, in most instances, great pain. Thea A., for instance, described how injuries sustained decades ago still very much affect her today:

I have like this chest pain and plus I got kicked by a horse in the ear. Yes, real long ago. Since I was a young child. I was old enough to be aware, but I did not

have a lot of years yet...my mom is the one who tended to my wounded ear to heal it. Until this day, sometimes, it hurts. Anywhere in my head, sometimes it just hurts. What hurts me more is where I got hit. Sometimes it just hurts so bad. Other than these aches, I do not have any other problems.

Elisia S. also talked about not doing well physically. She described that, although mobile when it comes to physically moving around, she does have pain in both of her legs and does not see too well. She also cannot be useful to herself the way she had hoped to by going to work regularly to earn a living. She stated that it is not her who is discouraged but her physical body:

It is not me who is discouraged. My physical body...I do not feel okay at all. I am not okay. My physical body isn't okay. Yes, I have pain. That's not it. I have things that my physical body responds to. I can walk however I want to. But I cannot be useful to myself the way I need to be. For me to be useful to myself I need to be able to handle my business, hustle...make some money to make a life. I walk to go to church but other than that, I don't walk much. I don't see well and in addition, I have pain in both of my legs.

It is the same for Louis S., who also mentioned aches and pains in eyes and feet: "I am doing alright by the Grace of God. I have some aches and pain in my eyes and my feet as well." Charles A. compared his physical body to that of an ant because he lacks the strength he once possessed. He is, however, fully functional and possesses all his skills as he stated but can no longer perform the work he used to do to earn a living back then because such work requires great strength:

I still possess all my skills; I just lack strength. Now, I don't even have the strength of an ant....Some days I look at myself and I look at my body, I almost

don't recognize the body. It is nothing but a lot of dry bones with pain. There is no disease, but there is no health either. To memorize requires a lot of effort. To walk is very difficult. Every simple thing becomes complicated. This body does not look like mine. It's like I am on one side and the body on another. Now it is not as when I was 80 to 90 years of age. It's been only 3 years I used to go to the marketplace, go to church, wash and iron my clothes.

### *Memory*

Age-related memory loss was a common factor seen across all of our centenarians during their interviews, and they all also mentioned their struggle with memory. Louis S. stated that he does not really remember because his brain does not function the same due to his old age:

I don't really remember... you know this brain doesn't function the same. It is a bit blurry and sometimes my thoughts are all over the place. My age makes my mind a bit scrambled. I don't remember anything that I could have said to you...The age is so much higher than the memory. I don't remember anything anymore. Because I sit here all day and have no one to talk to.

Helena stated that her head is full. Even though she does remember, her head is not quite there: "My head is full. I remember, but my head is not quite there." Charles A. could not remember the names of all his brothers and sisters, including the ingredients and details needed to make the wellness potion he once used to earn a living by selling and using it to nurture individuals back to full health: "I don't think I can remember the names of all my brothers and sisters [and]...there are some details I forgot; that's why I can no longer make the syrup."



## Themes

Six themes were formulated from the archival transcripts once the data-analysis process was complete: loss of financial independence, centenarians' mixed emotions about living such a long life, longevity is grounded in God's will and a good heart, centenarians' criticism of today's youth, remarkable resilience, and bestowed wisdom. The themes are discussed in the following paragraphs, along with a few of the direct quotes from the centenarians from whom they were generated.

### *Loss of Financial Independence*

The centenarians described how hard it was to lose their financial independence and be dependent on others. The loss of financial independence was particularly difficult for these centenarians who had been independent earlier in their lives. Mrs. Alga described how her life had changed as she grew older and she no longer had a way to generate income. She shared, "Nowadays, I cannot get nor make any money to help me survive. As you can see, the days are not the same anymore." Similarly, Elisia S. explained that the price of living had increased at the same time that she had no way to earn money and had to rely on what others give her to meet her basic needs:

Things are expensive and I do not have anything to do...I do not have any "side hustle." I do not have any means to do anything, No 'Negos' (small trade commerce). If I had a little 'Negos' (*Trade commerce*) to do, to sell my little salt, my little soap, my little kerosene, those little things, it would help. But in the meantime, I do not have anything, I take what is given to me, I make a life with it. And once it is done, I am left with nothing. I just cross my arms and I can see that I am not well.

For Charles A., loss of financial independence included not always having access to food.

Charles A stated that, although the hunger passes once you eat, the memory of being hungry continues to bother you:

There are some days I don't even find a chair to seat, need not tell you about a cup of coffee. Oh, be calm. Since I came to Port-au-Prince, things have been really hard. There is some hunger time you go through, even after food arrives; the pain of the hunger still comes back to haunt you.

### ***Centenarians' Mixed Emotions About Living Such a Long Life***

Living long may be a blessing in itself, but it does certainly bear a number of difficulties and struggles, especially living in a country that lacks resources and support for the elderly. Wisdom, gratitude, acceptance and resignation are depicted through the lived experiences of the Haitian centenarians. Many are simply waiting to die. For example, Mrs. Alga is fully ready to die and has prepared all her things, including her coffin, which was clearly seen in the video interview in a corner in her living room.

She stated the following:

A little bit of food, health and death. There's nothing else, because I'm just waiting. All my things are ready. Yes, even my clothes. Only my underwear for when I die, I am currently missing. Besides that, all my things are here and ready.

Elisia S. was very clear and direct in regard to her life and how primitive things are presently. She lamented on her life from back in her early years because life now got her discouraged. She also clearly stated the following:

I am not happy to be here, but I am still here. Life got me discouraged. I do not have any friends. After God, my pastor... Yes, I would like to die...that's easy! But that is not what God wanted. This life is hard. But God does what He wants. Me, if God wanted me to live another century, I would be thrilled and would do it.

Charles A. was also very clear, stating his resignation and regret in living to be a super centenarian. Everyone wants to live long, he said, but living long is hard when you think of all the things you were once able to do and can no longer do. He often asked God if he has forgotten about him because he is ready to leave this world:

Look at where I am. I ask myself where I am supposed to go. I ask myself why God still keeps me alive. I am asking myself what it is I was supposed to accomplish that I have not accomplished yet. I have some news for my mom [who is deceased]. There are things I need to talk to my dad [who is also deceased], but God keeps me waiting, waiting, waiting without knowing what I am waiting for.

Charles A. went further and expressed the following:

Everybody would like to live longer. But this is not easy if you think of all the things you used to do that you can no longer do, of all those friends that are no longer here. When I remember how handsome I was, now that I can only see bones and skin, it is not easy. Sometimes I ask myself if God has not forgotten [about] me. Sometimes I get tired of changing habits and working hard. I really get tired... I do have a prayer, which helps me get through this life. I believe in God, I trust God, I am the will of God.”

### ***Longevity Is Grounded in God's Will and a Good Heart***

The centenarians attribute their longevity to God's will, being a good person, a good life, and strong health. Elisia S. talked about being alive only because God wants her to be. She strongly believes that God is watching over her:

No, I don't have that....It is God who wanted to keep me. God wanted to keep me and that is why I am still here. If not, I wouldn't be here. I am alive and as long as God wants me alive, I will continue to be alive.

Marie C. stated that she has lived to see all these days because God wanted her to see them: “All the days I lived because God has blessed me to see them.” Charles A. believed in fervent prayers, not mere words from the mouth, but a prayer where the words are felt and they come from the heart; that kind of prayer is a source of health and helps you live longer, if that is what you desire. Charles A. believes that if someone does not pray, how can they live? Prayers are truly essential to sustain life. God holds our destiny:

Who can claim to know why people live longer? I don't believe anybody can assure this. I believe it is the content of one's spirit and one's heart. I believe breastfeeding and good food establish how the body will develop over the course of one's existence. I believe in prayer; I don't mean mere words from the mouth. I mean a prayer where you feel all the words, where the words come from your heart. I believe such a prayer is a source of health and it helps you live longer, if it's what you want. I better be quiet.

### ***Centenarians' Criticism of Today's Youth***

The centenarians had criticism of new generation youth and their parents for the lack of respect and the disregard for traditional Haitian cultural values. The youths' respect for their elders is of the utmost importance, especially within the Haitian culture. Elisia S. stated her views on the youth of today:

The youth is living an intolerable life. Me, I am no longer a youngster. The intolerable isn't for me but I see them living this way. They live a way I do not understand. They live a life I do not understand...they cohabit without being married. When you are not married, you do not [really] get together and the stuff does not meet. Long ago things were not like that. You must get married then

cohabitate. If we ain't married, we ain't getting down.

Alan M. described the youth as wastefulness: "Wastefulness. Waste on top of waste.

Wasting themselves, their bodies, and putting their family in a hassle." Charles A. found the younger generation to be indecisive and somewhat of a waste: "The youth nowadays.... in the morning they're in agreement, but in the evening they're not (Laughter). If they had received a good education, they wouldn't be a waste."

Given that the youth is considered the future of an entire nation, our exceptional survivors had some advice to share with them. Thea A. advised them to treat the elderly right, to respect them, and respect their parents as well so that they can benefit from their guidance and wisdom in the near future: "To treat elders right so that they give them some words of wisdom to guide them in the future. For them to respect their mom, their parents and elders. So, this is what I would ask of them." Alan M. wished for them to pray for their parents and family members, pray for their fellow Haitians so that they do not live in regret:

For our youth, I ask that they follow their path easily, pray for their mom, pray for their dad, pray for their family and members of their race (people of the nation), for them not to find any fault in themselves to regret.

Marie C. felt the kids of today should really bring their scattered brains together to be there for their mom and dad, as well as their family members. She stated, "Well, the kids of today, their brains are all scattered, they need to bring it together so that they can be there for their mom, their dad, their aunts and uncles...all of their family members."

Charles A. advised youth to serve their mom and dad, represent their family well, refrain from shaming them, and, of course, to remember that time is of the essence as things are not how they used to be long ago:

Which advice should I give them? I would tell them that the times are not good. Time is of the essence. They must stick around and serve their mom, serve their dad. Represent your family. Don't shame them. Shaming them isn't good. Doing right is good. But shaming them is not good. The young people of today have no rules. They tear others down. It isn't good this way.

Charles A. also found the youth to be disrespectful among themselves and even their parents. They do not respect anybody. If there is no respect for the parents, then there is no family, and that is equivalent to no society. Charles A. believed that you learn to respect people at a young age, and if you do not possess such respect, then you will not have respect for anything when you get older:

Today, children don't respect anybody. They don't respect their parents, not to mention their peers. For what I have heard children tell their moms, oh God! Forgive me. In the absence of any respect for the parents, there is no family. In the absence of children respect for their parents, there is no society. For if you do not learn to respect people when you are young, you will not have respect for anything when you get older. If you don't have respect for people, you will not respect the law unless it is accompanied with a stick ready to hit you. Today's children do not respect anybody.

### ***Remarkable Resilience***

The Haitian centenarians demonstrate remarkable resilience as they adapt to the ever-changing world and society around them: overcoming all struggles, barriers, and sufferings, as well as surviving many natural disasters, sicknesses, diseases, epidemics, civil and political unrests, and maintaining their will to live in the midst of loneliness, neglect, hardships, and overall poor quality of life. Elisia S. described some of the

horrifying things witnessed from the president, government leaders, and those in positions of authority:

I was young, but I witnessed a lot of things happening in front of me that were pleasant. Now the things that are happening are not pleasant at all.... I remember Kako. Kako [forced labor to work in coffee fields)! The president took all the little boys, sent them to work somewhere that.... a little boy didn't go to work, they took him, and (one boy was) poked with 4-tooth fork and hung. Yes, I saw these with my own eyes.”

Mrs. Alga witnessed the civil war in Haiti and started singing the chorus that the opposite would sing when they were passing by:

It meant that they were suffering. They've been taught the song to sing. They weren't from there. They were people from here who had moved to the North. Two of my cousins when they came, I was a young kid, and they taught us to sing.

Francine also started singing a song to honor the many corpses she witnessed: “I sing this song, the reason I sing this song is for people who died. It's for all the people who died and the many corpses I saw carried in front of me.” Elisia S. reminisced about how good things were back in the days when life was inexpensive. People did not take what did not belong to them:

Back in the day, things were good. Back in the days everything was here. Things were on the floor just there and now everything is expensive. Life is expensive!!! When I used to eat, when I was born it was 5 cents I used to go to the Supermarket and with 5 cents I came back home with a little money.

Marie C. survived and healed her loved ones at a very young age from one of the

first epidemic disease (Verret–petite verole [Smallpox]) seen in Haiti with the gift of healing she possessed:

So, I said, soon I will make a remedy for you. That's when I took a basin full of water and placed it in the sun. There were no needles during that time. No, there weren't any, so I went and looked for a grapefruit tree to grab its torn. I bathed my father, took a cloth to dry the legions well, then, I poked them. Kept poking them to remove pus from them...and every so often I bathed him, but I also applied pressure. I did not let the pus sleep in them. I was clever. I was old enough to be aware of things. In a number of days, my dad said, if I didn't die, it is because of you my child. I bathed my dad really well, they told me not to bathe him anymore. I cooked and fed him. I ate. He said thank you my child thank you. I will give you a garden. Once I am healed, I will give you a garden. Once he was healed for real, he felt better, he said thank you to me, and then he went and gave me a garden for real. I did not know how to work then...when I give (indistinct mumble) to work the soil for me, I came out with corn, couscous, Congo beans...Maybe it is those things that are the reason why I am here.

Elisia S. lives in poor conditions. Her home was destroyed by bad weather, and she uses bags that she ties together to cover it up and uses sheets as walls and gets drenched every single time it rains. Her home also caught on fire twice because open fire is what she uses for her cooking needs as well as electricity. Her home has been structurally unkempt since August 12, 1954 as a result of unfortunate weather, yet she still lives in it and is proud and grateful to still have a home to call her own:

Yes, I cook for myself. I make my little food, but I do not have a home. My home has been wrecked by bad weather. I cover it with bags that I tied together. When it



rains, I sweat. I am drenched. This worries me a lot. Because if I live here I am not okay. Twice here caught on fire. I put the fire on the floor for my use and fire caught here...My House. Mine. Mine. Mine. That's where lived...since...Bad weather broke it down. Bad weather broke it down since August 12, 1954.

### ***Bestowed Wisdom***

Centenarians seem to have a natural-born wisdom about them. Many of their quotes, expressions, and wise words can be applied for centuries to come and may guide us in making better and wiser life choices. Elisia S. and Charles A. shared some wise words that are quoted below and can really make a difference for the inhabitants of Haiti and even those across the globe. Elisia S. stated the following:

Well, darling, giving will not make me lose. Because when you think about it...what you give with your left hand, your right hand does not know. So now when you give, you get back more. When you give, you get more.

Charles A. added the following:

My mom gave us a good education. She never got into other people's business. She taught us some very good principles. She always told us: "Don't get into other people's conversation." She always told us not to talk loudly. "Only the person with whom you are speaking is supposed to hear you." She said, "Talking loud will make you deaf." She said when there is food for one, there is also for two, three, four... as long as the person who has it is willing to share... She said to never beg. If they offer you, you may take it but don't forget to say thank you, never beg. When you don't have anything, stay calm. A hungry person never dies suddenly. This is what my mom taught me and this is how I have lived up to today. But God did not see the necessity to give me a son so I could pass these on

to him.

It is very simple. For a country to be better, two things are necessary: first children must respect adults; second, adults must respect the law. This is it. But people of today are not ready to do it. They need to grow first.

### **Conclusion**

Centenarians from Haiti have outlived their family and friends. For the few who are lucky enough to have family members who are still alive, these family members do not support them. They are often estranged and neglected by their living families. As a result, these Haitian centenarians all struggle for basic necessities such as food. Haitian centenarians bear great criticism for the youths' lack of self-respect and respect including their disregard for traditional cultural values. They believe the youth of today to be a waste and a hassle for their families. However, while every centenarian had concerns regarding the disrespectful nature of our youth, centenarian Charles A. highlighted that parents should also refrain from abusing and beating the children through this statement: "So, hold the kids, don't beat them, don't torment them, leave them be. It is God our Father who gave them to us, so He will always be the one to lay hands on them."

Living long can bear good and bad emotions, and, for our Haitian centenarians, living long, although considered to be a blessing in itself, certainly bears a number of difficulties and struggles. The Haitian centenarians attribute their longevity to a good heart, being a good person, strong health, and God's will. This highlighted another noteworthy finding among all of the Haitian centenarians of the study, which is how spirituality, faith, and prayers are a great part of their everyday lives. Spirituality, faith, and prayers are three of the major things that appear to really sustain these centenarians in navigating the world of the oldest old as they face hardships, scarce resources,

loneliness, neglect, and a number of mixed emotions, such as wisdom, gratitude, acceptance, and resignation that are depicted through their lived experiences.

Centenarian Charles A. affirmed by prayers, it is not just “mere words from the mouth, but a prayer where you feel all the words and where the words come from the heart.” According to all the centenarians, no one can really claim to know why people live long; no one can assure that. People die at any age but “the content of one’s spirit and one’s heart” may very well play a role as long as it is God’s will. Most of the centenarians interviewed were lucid and self-sufficient in completing their activities of daily living, and they were articulate enough to be understood by anyone they communicated with. Moreover, they all showed remarkable resilience from their lived experiences and overall lives.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction

When it comes to centenarians, our exceptional survivors, there is an array of knowledge to be gained. Although this is the first study of its kind to focus on centenarians in the developing country of Haiti, for the brilliant Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians, they are simply living their lives. There were three overall significant findings from this research study. The first was that the Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians were outliving their family members, friends, and loved ones. The second involved the changes that their physical bodies have gone through with old age. Lastly, the third was the age-related memory loss that they all seemed to mention, although they were quite lucid as they openly recalled and shared stories of their younger days, the changes they have witnessed, and their lived experiences as the years go by, leading to them reaching the exceptional survivors status, the oldest of old, that we are so privileged to hear and learn from presently.

### Discussion of Significant Findings

#### *Outliving Family*

Many of the centenarians have outlived their family members and loved ones. For the few who have family members who are still alive, often times, these family members do not support them. They are often estranged and neglected by their living families, especially when these family members are great grandchildren (fourth generation). As Montayre et al. (2019) noted that the issues of older adults outliving family members and living alone with no family support or existing social network continue to raise concerns about the health and well-being of this particular population group. This has certainly been the case for our Haitian exceptional survivors. Many are left alone struggling with

the lack of support, along with the many hardships and complications associated with living to be 100 years or older. New friends certainly do enter the picture for many adults, as Lawrence and Schigelone (2002) stated and one of the participants in their study highlighted, “The loss of a loved one is hard to deal with....The older you get, there are more of them gone.” Elisia S., one of the Haitian supercentenarians who is 129 years old, stated, “I had friends but no friends no more. They are gone. They traveled away and me, I am still here.”

### ***The Physical Body***

The Haitian centenarians have expressed great concerns with their physical body. According to Mao et al. (2013), many changes in the human body occur with physiological aging. Jing et al. (2008) even attested that disabilities are extremely common in the very old, and the oldest old, according to their study, have significantly worse physical function, cognition, and social functioning than younger older people. However, in spite of these findings and the fact that the Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians of this study expressed how weakened their bodies have become compared to when they were younger, as well as their loss of vision, aches and pains, and not hearing the same, they were still extremely mobile, fully functioning, and independent when it came to their activities of daily living. For instance, Elisia S. demonstrated, “I am fully functional and can be useful to myself. (*Stands up and turns and walks back and forth and dances a little to show she is strong and fully functional*) See, I can turn myself, I can flip myself, I can take care of myself; I don’t need no nursing home.”

According to the study by Willcox, Willcox, Wang, et al. (2008), functionally, most centenarians were independent in activities of daily living at 100 years of age. In

Haiti, there are autonomous centenarians who have proven that individuals can certainly reach 100 years of age or older and still be in good physical and cognitive health and maintain a satisfying life, even when health limitations occur and resources and support are almost nonexistent.

### ***Memory***

According to Pressman et al. (2016), normal, healthy aging is also associated with declines in processing speed, attention, and memory, even in the absence of any known vascular disease. All of our centenarians mentioned not being able to remember things the same, yet they were doing a remarkably fine job sharing their stories. They were lucid and able to hold conversations and shared so many aspects of the oral history of Haiti, their current struggles, their feelings on living so long, and some of their lived experiences, hence how it was possible to gather so much information to conduct this study and share with the world. They are truly exceptional in every sense of the word: “I don’t have the same memory anymore. Everything I once knew....Now...I don’t foresee anything” (Elisia S., age 129).

### **Interpretation of Themes**

There are six themes that were identified during the completion of the data analysis process. The complexities of living more than a century have been highlighted further in the paragraphs below in an interrelation of all the different aspects of the centenarians’ lives and from their experiences.

### ***Loss of Financial Independence***

According to Terry and Perls (2002), with each additional healthy year for centenarians comes an increase in financial considerations that include cost of living, health-related expenditures, housing expenses, and leisure expenditures. As a result,

Terry and Perls cautioned individuals to plan for their financial security accordingly. Unfortunately, Weierich et al. (2011) asserted, “As average life expectancy increases, many retirees will be faced with inadequate savings to live comfortably until the end of their lives” (p. 195). Financial independence has been linked to living a successful and healthy life in adulthood. Regardless of the age group, losing financial independence poses to be a stressor. A number of studies by the Aging Mental Health, according to Urošević et al. (2015), confirmed that worrying about money is a significant predictor of depression in elderly people. For the Haitian centenarians, this fact is no different.

Our centenarians were deprived of the many of basic necessities that are often taken for granted by individuals in more developed countries. Consequently, for the many Haitian centenarians who did not expect, plan, hope, or wish to live this long, a financial plan was something farfetched, especially because many of these exceptional survivors came from humble beginnings and a few others spent a great deal of their lifetime in poverty. These Haitian centenarians could not escape what O’Neill (2008) cautioned us about: “With increased longevity are the twin financial challenges of saving adequately and planning so that one does not outlive one’s assets” (p. 45). With limited food to eat, no means to earn a living, no governmental assistance, and no family support because they have outlived them all, these brilliant and resilient survivors certainly did not possess any assets. Nevertheless, the centenarians in this study were not wealthy, but they all earned a living in their younger years. It is the inability to still earn a living that seemed to be one of the main concerns for these Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians. Elisia S. shared the following:

Yes, back in the days, I used to work. I used to sell goods, but I don’t do that anymore. I used to sell butter, goat, pigs, and things like that....Under the

administration of Vincent, under President Duvalier I was a merchant. I do not do that anymore. Selling animals like goats, cows, and pigs. I no longer do those things anymore.

She also added the following:

But other people would pay me, come get me to go care for them...but since I became old ... (*sighs*) I do it all but have not done so in quite a long time since old age came upon me. Once you're getting old, they say you are a *Lougawou* (evil spirit).

Becoming a centenarian changed life as she once knew. She could no longer do the things she did to earn a living and people refer to the oldest old as poltergeists, sorcerers, evil spirit and so forth, as if they cheated death. Some of the stereotypes associated with old age has overshadowed her ability to also earn a living as a caretaker to provide for herself and her great grandchildren. Mrs. Alga also shared how she earned a living through trade commerce, similar to Elisia S. Mrs Alga stated, "Didn't I tell you what I did? I was into commerce of different types of fish (morue, ti sale...), you hear, trade commerce of herring...Buying containers of harang, (herring) morue (cod fish), 'ti sale' (saltfish)."

For Charles A., it was also the same. He shared how he once earned a living until old age:

I liked to farm bananas, yams, sweet potatoes, taro and all kinds of roots. Until today I still have my skills: weeding, digging, and burning when necessary.... I still possess all my skills; I just lack strength. I used to make syrup with cow and pig legs combined with all kinds of wild roots and leaves... There are some details I forgot, that's why I can no longer make the syrup. That syrup was good for people with general weakness. It strengthened them quickly. You don't need



to swallow pills and other medicines. Just one spoonful of syrup in the morning will make you stand on your legs, solid like a cow.

Charles A. also proudly shared his experiences in the Public Work Division: “I used to work in the Public Works Division. I was part of the team with shovels and axes.”

The centenarians were hard workers and had worked all their lives from a very young age until the circumstances of old age robbed them of such pride. Working hard seemed to be something that was embedded in them. It surely explains why the loss of financial independence seemed to affect our centenarians so greatly. In addition to not being able to earn a living due to old age, these centenarians also lacked the familial and communal support to substitute, as previously mentioned.

### ***Centenarians’ Mixed Emotions About Living Such a Long Life***

Although “research on how the elderly feel about getting extremely old is scarce” (Karppinen et al., 2016, p. 543), the Haitian centenarians of this study were extremely open in discussing their mixed emotions about living so long and becoming exceptional survivors. Being a centenarian is not an unalloyed blessing. It comes with great complications, struggles, and mixed feelings. Many of the centenarians interviewed expressed a feeling of resignation to still be alive after so long. Charles A. clearly reiterated on numerous occasions, “I did not need to live this long.”

Is living to be a centenarian something to be dreaded or admired? Well, it all depends in what lenses you view such extreme longevity. First, it is imperative not to claim and believe that, for all seniors, being old means weak and frail body, unproductive, boredom, no physical pleasures of any sort, and fearing their death day. This may be the case for some elderly individuals, but it certainly is not the case for the exceptional Haitian centenarians in this study. Haitian centenarians do not live in

constant dread approaching death. For instance, Elisia S. emphasized her willingness to accept dying: “That does not hurt me, darling; we must die no matter what. We must die no matter what, so I am not hurt by that.” In fact, most of the centenarians were anticipating their death, impatiently waiting for this very day. To them, it was something that was beyond their control, and they were simply ready and waiting.

Most of them are more than prepared, as we witnessed in the case of Mrs. Alga who had everything ready from her clothes to the very coffin she wished to be buried in; she had willingly and conveniently placed a coffin in a corner of her living room. The declining quality of life may often outweigh the extra time alive for centenarians, but, for our Haitian centenarians, it still remains a blessing to live this long because, to them, it is in fact God’s will. Many even demonstrate contentment and shared their gratitude on living such a long life but still feel overwhelmed and weary by the complexities and struggles that accompany their 100 years and counting. They truly depict mixed emotions for having made it beyond a century.

According to Pressman et al. (2016), in contrast to cognitive decline in older adults, many aspects of emotional functioning are maintained or even improved as part of healthy aging. Pressman et al. also highlighted that high levels of happiness exist even among centenarians, and older adults maintain the ability to generate and experience emotions and empathic responses to others. Despite shrinking social networks, decreasing cognitive agility, and declining physical health, older adults demonstrate an emotional well-being that is equal to or better than their younger counterparts (Pressman et al., 2016). The Haitian centenarians who participated in this study sang, danced, clapped their hands, and still demonstrated great joy in the midst of the struggles and paradoxes that they shared related to living long and lacking so much.

### ***Longevity is Grounded in God's Will and a Good Heart***

Numerous research studies have credited genetics (Archer et al., 2005; Manning et al., 2012; Stelting, 2017), nutrition, good health habits (Archer et al., 2005; Freeman et al., 2013; Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2016; Vacante et al., 2012; Yorgason et al., 2018), lifestyle choices (Freeman et al., 2013; Gondo et al., 2006; Jopp et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Vacante et al., 2012), life events (da Rosa et al., 2014; Gavrilov & Gavrilova, 2013; Hensley et al., 2012; Poon et al., 2010), personal experiences (Archer et al., 2005; Darviri et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2010, 2016; Wagner, 1999), personality traits (Kato et al., 2016; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2006; Poon et al., 2010), resilience (Martin, 2007), and spirituality (Archer et al., 2005; da Rosa et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2013; Mackowicz & Wnek-Gozdek, 2017; Manning et al., 2012; Vacante et al., 2012) as contributing to longevity. The Haitian centenarians attributed their longevity to simply a good heart, being a good person, strong health, and, most importantly, God's will. This highlighted another noteworthy finding among all of the Haitian centenarians of the study, which is that spirituality, faith, and prayers are a great part of their everyday lives and sustain them as they navigate the world of the oldest of old.

Given the elderly are among the fastest growing segment of the population, Hausman et al. (2011) asserted that it is imperative to understand not only the influence of modifiable lifestyle factors such as diet and nutrition in achieving exceptional longevity but also the role, if any, of these factors on maintaining optimal cognitive, mental, and physical health into advanced age. However, based on the systematic review of Hausman et al., they concluded that it is unlikely that there is one particular dietary pattern that promotes exceptional longevity.

Based on the findings from the Haitian centenarians who participated in this study, Hausman et al. (2011) seemed to be correct. Although good nutrition appeared to be a contributing factor to strong health, there was not one particular dietary pattern that promoted exceptional longevity, and, as mentioned above, a good heart, being a good person, and God's will, were what the Haitian centenarians credited their long life to. For instance, one of the centenarians stated, "I doubt that food has something to do with it. It is more about what's in your heart and what's in your spirit that is what makes you live longer." He added the following:

But I have to say I don't believe eating has anything to do with health. If there is any connection, it may be food one eats early in childhood. Because I have gone through so much hunger since I came to live in Port-au-Prince, I don't think eating has to do with my 122 years today.

The centenarians, although without food and proper nutrition and without one particular diet pattern to attribute their extreme longevity to, do in fact eat rather healthy. For starters, there are no processed foods or fast foods for them to splurge into. In Haiti, most people grow their food, and the most common grocery stores are the farm market where individuals buy their produce. Even in many of the grocery stores, produce from nearby outskirts is what is being sold. Some ate food from their gardens, and others ate food that was provided to them. However, they all claimed that they do not eat everything, and most certainly did not eat a lot of meat. Elisia S. shared the following:

Well darling, what I like to eat...when I have a little money....No, I only eat liver. Liver with green beans, now that's my food. Other than that, I do not eat all kinds of things. I may eat one potato or two potatoes...after that, I do not like everything. Then I make "sòs pwa" Miami (chili beans) that's what I do when I

can....if I have money. I never eat bad food. No, No Pork. I do not eat meat at all. What I eat is fish. I do eat fish, and other than that, I do not eat any kinds of meat at all.

Charles A. stated the following:

My mom was a hog retailer. My father raised a lot of hogs. Therefore, there was a lot of meat in the house. But I never like meat a lot. Meat is not that good for health. Right now, I only eat a little bit. Foods that would be good for health include corn, sweet potatoes, yams, and bananas. Spinach and young squash leaves are good too. To eat well today, one must eat vegetables. Then there are all kinds of fruits such as mangoes, oranges, grapefruits, lemon, and others. But we do not protect the soil. The soil is losing nutrients to a point where the roots and the leaves that are good for us will not grow because we do not protect the soil.

Marie C. offered the following comment:

I did not know how to work then...(my dad gave me a garden) (*unclear mumble*) to work the soil for me, I came out with corn, couscous, Congo beans...Maybe it is those things that are the reason why I am here because.

### ***Centenarians' Criticism of Today's Youth***

The Haitian centenarians of this study had advice and numerous wise words to share with the youth. To be clear, when referring to the youth of today, it is not solely our young adults, teenagers, or young children. Centenarians, being so old, having lived a century and counting, refer to anyone younger than them as the youth. That being said, your 67-year-old mother, your 85-year-old grandfather, your 6-year-old grandchild, as well as your 16-year-old daughter or 22-year-old nephew are very well considered the youth of today. After all, these centenarians are over 50 years our senior, more than half

of a century older than most. The criticism that all the Haitian centenarians had for the youth of today pertained to their lack of respect and their disregard for traditional Haitian cultural values. Within the Haitian culture, the youths' respect for their elders is of the utmost importance. However, in the midst of all the critics, the centenarians had some wise words and worthy advice for our youth as shared earlier in the discussion.

### ***Remarkable Resilience***

Personal resilience (e.g., personality), cognitive resilience (e.g., intellectual functioning), and social and economic resilience (e.g., social support and economic resources) are three important resilience domains among centenarians that Martin et al. (2012) highlighted and asserted to be the psychosocial resources of resilience linked to overall functioning and survivorship in our oldest old. According to the authors, centenarians' personalities act as a resource to maintain their resiliency, and, through the interesting conversations held with the centenarians in Haiti during the unstructured interviews, the researcher believes this to be true. Haitian centenarians, having survived and adapted to a century and counting of countless conflicting conditions and situations (e.g., sickness, health decline, physical limitations, stressful life experiences, events and traumas; major historical events, outliving loved ones, financial hardships, and many other threats, risks, losses) seem to have met all the requirements associated with resilience. Haitian centenarians, without a doubt, possess a level of resilience that is unparalleled.

Death of a loved one can really interfere with one's life and overall functioning, especially at such old age. Centenarians, having lived 100 years and lost almost everyone close to them, highlighted one area where their resilience is undeniable. For instance, Van Humbeeck et al. (2016) explained, "When a young child dies, there is almost an

immediate outpour of support for the young parents” (p. 607). Things can certainly be different when an adult child dies because, often time, less consideration is given to these parents. Van Humbeek et al. added, “As if the normality of losing someone in old age makes one immune to the pain, the intrusiveness, and the need for care” (p. 608).

Financial stress is also a significant way that Haitian centenarians demonstrate the manner in which their resiliency is immeasurable. Haitian centenarians are at a disadvantage in almost every aspect of their lives as they lose loved ones, lose their financial independence, many have lived in poverty, and most have struggled to adapt to the many changes (i.e., physical, memory, quality of life, material loss), yet they all manage to rise above and be overcoming. This is resilience in its purest form. They all demonstrated a sense of self that was simply strong and resilient, something that is not expectant of individuals who have lived for over a century in conditions that were less than desirable. Elisia S., age 129, stated the following:

Yes, I cook for myself. I make my little food, but I do not have a home. My home has been wrecked by bad weather....When it rains.... I am drenched. This worries me a lot. Because if I live here I am not ok. Twice here caught on fire. I put the fire on the floor for my use and fire caught here. *(She uses open fire for electricity as well as her cooking needs)*. My House. Mine. Mine. Mine. That’s where I lived...since...since....Bad weather broke it down. Bad weather broke it down since August 12, 1954. *(She is using sheets and cloths as walls)*.

Jopp et al. (2016) stated that centenarians who are able to live autonomously can help us understand how they manage to do so, despite any restrictions in their health and social resources. Oseland et al. (2016) supported Jopp et al.’s suggestion, stating that centenarians do in fact maintain a “unique biopsychosocial resilience, making them an

important population within which to study the impact of traumatic life events on outcomes in late life” (p. 435). Haitian centenarians are the perfect group of oldest old for such research, and this acknowledgment from Jopp et al. is what has been attempted to showcase with the findings from this Haitian centenarians’ study. All in all, perhaps one should adopt Oseland et al.’s explanation: “As individuals age, maybe, just maybe, past experiences no longer play as strong a role and present functioning becomes more strongly shaped by proximal experiences” (p. 441).

### ***Bestowed Wisdom***

Wisdom is often acquired through challenges and one’s evaluation of past experiences and learned lessons. Wisdom is not an attribute of the old and weary. Increased longevity does not always bring increased wisdom as anyone can be wise, young and old alike. According to Thomas and Kunzmann (2013), “any phase of life offers opportunities for the attainment of wisdom-related strengths as long as an individual is willing and able to actively engage in life’s ongoing challenges” (p. 897). Erikson (as cited in Thomas & Kunzmann, 2013) proposed that each stage in the life cycle brings forth specific challenges and tasks for an individual. Thomas and Kunzmann explained this proposed theory further with this example:

Old age has been described as a period of loss during which individuals need to let go of many goals and find meaning in their lives as lived. Eventually because of their greater exposure to the theme of loss, older adults may be more likely to gain wisdom-related knowledge about the problems and challenges that surround this theme than their younger counterparts. This does not necessarily mean, however, that older adults generally have greater wisdom-related knowledge than younger people. (p. 898)



Centenarians bring more than just the negative stereotypes associated with extreme longevity. Many centenarians, as research has shown (Li et al., 2013; Poon et al., 2016; Takayama et al., 2007; Vacante et al., 2012), do live a full life to the best of their abilities and despite some of their limitations. The centenarians in Haiti possess greater awareness, wisdom, and gratitude than one could have imagined, having experienced and overcome so many conflicting trials over the course of the century lived. Karppinen et al. (2016) stated, “Old people seem to value life despite the negative conditions associated with living long like chronic diseases disabilities and numerous losses” (p. 543). In addition, Pence (2019) discussed the great joy and pleasure experienced by centenarians:

The truth is that the pleasures of seniors sometimes *surpass* those of youth.

Seniors can savor the anticipation of biting into a fresh, home-grown tomato....Some savor reading their previous work or diaries, and others savor the joy of natural sleep. (p. 825)

In spite of mixed emotions and having experiences 100 years of different challenges and misfortunes, the Haitian centenarians value life and all of its simple pleasures, the very simple pleasures that many of us recurrently take for granted. Charles A. stated the following:

I like food. The mouth is feeling good; it appears to be the only healthy part. I have to tell you my son: I know hunger. Some days, I would lie down on my back and wonder how a piece of banana would fall into my mouth. I stayed in bed for days, I didn't have the strength to get up and I didn't have anybody to hand me a glass of water. Days and nights succeeded without anything in the mouth. Now I am looking at nice meals coming to me without knowing where they come from. This is very nice. This is the work of God.

Charles A. currently resides at the Fondation Félicité where Elder Bello and her team care and provide for him. With more experiences under their belt than anyone, centenarians have great stories, unparalleled perspective, and sage advice for different aspects of life that can be useful for generations to come.

### **Lesson Learned and Recommendations**

As interest in longevity and living long has spiked, so have research studies, myths, and stereotypes on the oldest of old population. Through conducting this research study, so much has been learned on this exceptional group of individuals, and numerous myths and stereotypes have been put to rest. As the findings of this research have demonstrated, there is misinformation regarding the overall impact of old age. We have learned that being 100 years old or older does not automatically mean frail body, disabilities, chronic diseases, and loss of mobility and functionality.

Age does affect the quality of life but not to the extent that society once believed. The numbers of centenarian studies over the years (i.e., Georgia Centenarian Study, Swedish Centenarian Study, Second Heidelberg Centenarian Study, Sydney Centenarian Study, and Oporto Centenarian Study) have enlightened us on the lives, experiences, personality traits, challenges, and social support of our exceptional survivors to say the least. However, this study has taken it even further and provided us with the lacking knowledge of the world in regard to centenarians in low-income countries and their challenges, experiences, and believed secrets to extreme longevity, which very much differ from those of their peers in the more developed parts of the world.

The loss of financial independence experienced by the centenarians seems to have been the most bothersome concern, especially because it brought forth a lack of the basic necessities, especially food. The centenarians all seem to have a concern in not having

enough to eat due to their nonexistent finances. All they seem to need is a little bit of health, a little bit of food, and their death, as Mrs. Alga clearly emphasized. They all want some financial assistance to start “a little hustle” to earn some money to secure their daily meal.

In addition to the significant findings and themes mentioned above, another form of education was one of the findings that the researcher found to be of relevance. A good education is not always from an academic standpoint. One can be very well educated without knowing how to read and write or obtaining a higher education degree. We often think of education solely from an academic standpoint; however, in the Haitian culture, an education can also stem from the manner in which one was raised. The principles instilled in them, being polite, kind, the values they uphold, their morals, and so forth all play a role in what consists of a “good education.”

Many of the Haitian centenarians’ knowledge did not come from textbooks and homework assignments over the years, but from life experiences, and from applying the principles that were instilled in them. Great teachings, strong traditional and cultural values, wisdom, and certain experiences can all contribute to one’s education and a good life. The Haitian centenarians honor and live by their principles, all the while putting God at the center of their very existence. This was seen through Charles A.’s interview where he not only stated his choice of not attending school but despite that, you can also see how educated he was through his understanding, his principles, his wisdom, and the advice he shared for the youth of today and for the inhabitants of Haiti as a whole.

Charles A., age 122, offered the following comments:

My mom did send me to school, but I refused to go. Even my sister Zileni refused to go to school. I did not go to school. I never learned how to read. My mom did

put me to school, but I did not want to learn. If I knew how to read, I would have died already. Yes, that's the way it is.

My mom gave us a good education. She never got into other people's business. She taught us some very good principles. She always told us, "Don't get into other people's conversation." She always told us not to talk loud. "Only your interlocutor is supposed to hear you." She said, "Talking loud will make you deaf." She said when there is food for one, there is also for two, three, four... as long as the person who has it is willing to share. My mom taught me to never sit on people's bed when visiting them. She said to never beg. If they offer you, you may take it but don't forget to say thank you, never beg. When you don't have anything, stay calm. A hungry person never dies suddenly. This is what my mom taught me and this is how I have lived up to today. But God did not see the necessity to give me a son so I could pass these on to him.

Nowadays, people don't think they need to pray and show respect. It is very simple. For a country to be better, two things are necessary: first children must respect adults; second, adults must respect the law. This is it. But people of today are not ready to do it. They need to grow first.

### **Suggested Areas for Future Studies**

The primary researcher's original intent of research with the Haitian centenarians was to bridge the gap and learn about the oral history of Haiti. For future research, one-on-one interviews with centenarians in Haiti would provide richer information and opportunities to probe. A cross-sectional sampling of centenarians from various countries could provide a comparative lens in understanding their individual and collective experiences of aging. Future research could primarily focus on the financial planning and

decision making that centenarians confront as they begin to reach age milestones per decade. Additionally, an in-depth study could focus on the challenges, overall support, services, and needs of centenarians in developing countries. This can potentially assist policy makers in allocation of resources to provide the necessary care, support, and living arrangements for centenarians in these less fortunate parts of the world. Finally, a prospective study could use an in depth, longitudinal lens of research to document the role of culture, cognitive and functional capacities of centenarians.

### **Conclusion**

Long life does not prolong suffering, boredom, and loneliness as many believe (Pence, 2019). More and more centenarians seem to have arrived at 100 largely on their own and are still healthy (Pence, 2019), and we have certainly seen that among our exceptional Haitian survivors. According to Pence, “in late life, if one writes at all, it is likely to be about a subject one cares deeply about and is more likely to be carefully constructed and to ring of truth” (p. 825). Similar to Pence’s acknowledgment, Haitian centenarians’ storytelling and oral histories often ring of truth. They do not try to convince you to believe them, and their stories are not biased. They simply speak their minds and often speak facts. What you make of it, whether you believe their stories to be true or not, is solely your personal prerogative. The lack of education and the inability to read and write have made storytelling, as opposed to writing mentioned above, the prominent way to share past traditions, teach younger generations, and cultivate histories and memories. This has indeed allowed Haiti a way to preserve its unique culture for centuries while reminding us of the uniqueness of our centenarians.

The straightforwardness and bluntness of our Haitian centenarians through the unstructured interviews were apparent, and they seem to feel valued through the

conversations of these unstructured interviews. It almost felt as if it was therapeutic to them. It meant a lot to our Haitian centenarians to be seen and to feel valued. Haitian centenarians take great value in their lived experiences and the respect that is shown to them. They would benefit from financial assistance from their government and policies created to assist them, especially those without any family support. Financial planning for elderhood should also be a central part of life planning for all elders. Through the mixed emotions, feelings of resignation, gratitude, happiness, excitement in the storytelling, and weariness from the worry of securing their next meal, or being a burden to others, these centenarians have certainly reminded us, especially the inhabitants of Haiti, to reevaluate our approach to financial planning, investing, retirement, and so forth.

Financial planning is not something that was ever at the forefront for Haitians, with more than half of the country living in poverty and because we were always thought to worry about today. The saying, “à chaque jour suffit sa peine” (to each day its own worry), was one that the researcher grew up hearing from older folks, always reminding her to worry about today’s concerns because tomorrow, although not promised, will bear its own troubles. Likewise, the Haitian centenarians have assuredly shown us that walking by faith and staying steadfast in prayer will also carry us through because, in the end, God is in control and God’s will trumps all things. They did not have the financial means to live rich. Many actually grew up poor, yet here they are, still living fully and peacefully, sharing with us the blessings, principles, worth, and great loves and troubles of this life. Your bank account may facilitate many aspects of your life, but it will not secure you a century-long life nor prevent suffering and illness. A century-long healthy life lies in your good deeds, your good heart, maintaining your health, and, most importantly, God’s will.

Centenarians are a blessing to all with priceless knowledge and wisdom. They retell an important historical legacy that should be honored. They are an immeasurable contribution to our society as a whole, regardless of cultural differences and socioeconomic status. The researcher hopes this study encourages others to value and learn from these exceptional survivors for centuries to come, from their loquacious storytelling to their sage silence, where indeed lies invaluable wisdom.

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Appendix A  
Data Extraction Form

## Data Extraction Form

**Transcript Identifier:****Date of Interview:****Date of Analysis:**

Interviewer	
Participant pseudonym	
Quality of recording	
Quality of the interview	
Age of participant	
Description of where the participant lives	
How was the participant selected?	
Description of participant	
Length of interview	
Lived experiences	
Secrets to long life	
Advice given/Wisdom	
Spirituality	
Additional code categories to be added as they emerge	



Appendix B  
Permission to Conduct Study

## Permission to Conduct Study

### Letter to Elder Bayyinah Bello...

My Name is Erna Dasilma, I am a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University, presently working on my Applied Dissertation which is a study about Haitian centenarians. The study was birthed from Elder Bayyinah Bello's Haitian Centenarian's Research originated in Haiti. After an interview conducted with Bayannah on March 24th, 2018, it was decided that I will be the chosen candidate to conduct this qualitative content analysis study to bridge the gap in the literature regarding centenarians in less-developed countries, specifically those on the ever-resilient island of Haiti. This study will introduce the array of Haitian Centenarians and Supercentenarians that have and are still residing in Haiti and document their lived experiences, significant life events, personal experiences of adaptation, and their integration of spiritual beliefs.

I, ERNA DASILMA, have agreed to conduct this qualitative study using the archival data from Elder Bayyinah Bello's research which focused on the oral history and lived experiences of Haitian Centenarians and Supercentenarians. I will share all data analysis, results and findings with Elder Bello and her associates. Elder Bello and her associates will also be the designated individuals to verify all back translations of the transcripts including the data analysis and results to ensure all is accurate.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date

11/11/2019

I BAYYINAH BELLO have agreed to grant permission to doctoral candidate Erna Dasilma to conduct this qualitative content analysis research using archival data for my years' worth of research on Haitian centenarians and supercentenarians. Approximately 20 transcripts that align with the research questions of the study will be shared with Ms. Dasilma. I agree to review and verify all back translations and data analysis conducted by the researcher, Erna Dasilma and provide feedback as needed.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date

11-09-2019