

## **Television viewing in the lives of older adults**



# **Television viewing in the lives of older adults**

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

Television viewing seems to have special importance for older adults: research has consistently shown that older adults spend more time watching television than younger people do. The finding that older adults watch more television raises the question what television viewing means in their lives. So far, research presents only a limited answer to this question: a large share of the available literature depicts old age as a life stage characterized by losses in which people use television as a substitute for decreased activities. This dissertation aims to move away from this limited view by presenting older adults' experiences of television viewing, and thus showing the variety of meanings that watching television viewing has in the lives of older people.

In this first chapter, I will introduce the research topic, television viewing and aging (section 1.1), and the broader framework in which this study can be situated: a life-span perspective on media use (section 1.2). Subsequently I will outline the goals of the literature review and the qualitative interview study (section 1.3), and provide an overview of chapters (section 1.4).

### **1.1 Television viewing and aging**

People live longer than ever before. In the second half of the twentieth century, the average life span increased by 20 years (Annan, 1999). This extended life span means that old age now consists of more years than it did decades ago. Whereas in the past, people maybe had a few years left after retirement, now persons who retire at the age of 60 may have 20 or 30 years ahead of them. The changing circumstances raise questions for scholars and for society in general. A growing scholarly interest in the health, socioeconomic, psychological, and communicative aspects of aging is apparent (Barker, Giles, & Harwood, 2004), which partly stems from this increasing longevity across societies (Giles, 1999) and from the fact that older people comprise an increasing percentage of the world population. The proportion of people aged 60 years and over was 8% in 1950 and 10% in 2005, and it will grow to about 21% by 2050 (United Nations, 2004). In the Netherlands, the population currently consists of 2.4 million people aged 65 years and older, and this number is expected to rise to 2.9 million in 2014 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2007b).

The changing circumstances ask for rethinking what it means to grow old successfully, and for inventing ways to spend these years in a meaningful way. Different tones can be heard in the societal and scholarly debate about aging. For

example, Harwood (2007) and Rubin (2007) both made an appeal to their readers to reconsider ideas about aging. Harwood (2007), who has published many studies on communication and aging, argued for a more positive approach to aging than he usually finds in society, the media, and research. He asked people not to cling to the negative aspects of aging, but to recall the positive side as well. He pointed out several positive experiences that are unique to older adulthood, such as: many older people can afford a comfortable retirement in which they can engage in leisure activities and give back to the community by volunteering; older adults have a unique firsthand knowledge of events in the past, and therefore have an ability to understand current events in a unique fashion; and many have a high degree of social confidence as a result of a lifetime's experience in social situations (p. 282). In addition, a positive approach to aging is visible in self-help books (e.g., Friedan, 1993; Rowe & Kahn, 1998) in which authors explain to readers what they can do to age successfully.

Rubin (2007) addressed the limitations of a one-sided positive approach to aging. Rubin, who based her most recent book on 52 interviews with older people and on her own experiences with aging (she is in her eighties), agreed that for too long people have looked at old age solely through the lens of decline. But at the same time old age *is* a time of decline and loss (p. 2), and a focus on solely the positive side is not better than the focus on decline and loss. She described aging as an ambivalent, complex process in which gains occur alongside with decline. People may become wiser, be more satisfied with themselves, and have more freedom, but at the same time they are going through a process of adapting to for example physical problems, memory deficits, and the loss of a spouse. A change in life such as retirement can lead to ambivalent and sometimes contradictory feelings: on the one hand people may feel the relief of not having the pressure of ambitions and aspirations anymore; they enjoy their newly available spare time, but on the other hand they may feel that their job gave them a place in the world and without that place life loses much of its meaning (p. 56). Feelings of uselessness may come into play and the question arises: "what will I do with the years?"

In sum, aging is a complex process in which gains and losses jointly occur (e.g., Baltes, 1987; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Aging involves considerable change because generally accepted meaning sources (particularly work and family-life) alter or stop (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Van Selm & Dittmann-Kohli, 1998). Several other changes and developments may occur that people need to adjust to, such as: physical and cognitive aging, the loss of a spouse and other losses in the interpersonal sphere, changes in social relationships (e.g., Carstensen, 1992), the diminishing time for realizing plans and goals (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Dittmann-Kohli, 1995), a confrontation



with “ageism” (e.g., Nelson, 2002), and a process of evaluating the balance between achievements and missed chances (e.g., Erikson, 1950).

*Television viewing.* Aging thus involves changes and developments in everyday life, and this dissertation studies television viewing within this context. Watching television is a pastime that is part of everyday life for almost all older adults. Television seems to have special importance for older adults: research has consistently shown that older adults spend more time watching television than younger people (e.g., Harwood, 2007; Mares & Woodard, 2006). Data from the United States (General Social Survey, 1972-2000) indicated that adults in their 20s watched just over 3 hours television per day; this amount went down through the 30s and 40s. When people reached their 50s the hours of viewing increased, and it jumped quite noticeably into the 60s and 70s with a slight drop-off among people 80 and older. People in their 70s, the highest viewing group, watched just over 3.5 hours a day (Harwood, 2007, p. 179). The pattern that older people watch more than younger people is also apparent in Europe. Eurostat (2003) listed the results of time budget studies in 12 European countries. These studies showed that, in all of the countries studied, with the exception of Rumania, people aged 65 years and older spent more time watching television than the whole sample. For example, in the United Kingdom, people aged 65 years and older watched television daily for three hours and two minutes, whereas the whole sample aged eight years and older daily watched for 2 hours and 27 minutes. In the Netherlands, people aged 65 years and older watched most television too: about 21 hours per week, whereas young people (15 till 24 years) watched less than 13 hours per week (CBS, 2007a).

Studying the relationship between television viewing and aging is not only relevant because of the amount of time older adults spend on viewing, but also because of the wide variety of meanings that television can have in daily life. People can use television to give them information, for cognitive stimulation, because watching makes them feel less lonely, or because they enjoy the shared experience with partners or (grand)children. On the other hand, television can have negative meanings as well: for some people watching television feels like a waste of time, or television content makes them sad. Because of the variety of its meanings, television can be related to aging in several ways. This study looks at how people adjust their television viewing as they grow older. These changes in viewing involve adjusting viewing after life events such as retirement and the loss of a spouse, as well as more subtle changes in interpretations of television content.

Another reason to study television viewing and aging is that the current cohorts of older adults have experience with more than 50 years of television. This extensive experience with the medium makes it possible for these older people to look back on the

earlier years of the medium, and therefore this study looks into how older adults' earlier experiences with the medium color their current use of television, alongside possible changes in their viewing as they age.

This introduction to television viewing and aging should not leave the impression that older adults are a homogeneous group. Several authors (Harwood, 2007; Mares & Woodard, 2006) explicated that it is important to recognize that there is more variability in television viewing among older people than among younger people. Levels of overall viewing are relatively homogeneous among middle-aged adults and become more variable and idiosyncratic as viewers get older (Mares & Woodard, 2006). For example, at both extremes of television viewing, people aged 80 years and older are the largest group: the proportion of people 80 years and older watching no television is higher than in any other age group, and the proportion watching more than 9 hours a day is higher than in any other age group too (Harwood, 2007, p. 181).

To summarize, television viewing is a pastime shared by many older people that, because of the variety of its meanings, can be related to aging in several ways. There is considerable variability among older people regarding both aging and television viewing. This is the background for the overall **aim** of this dissertation: to gain a better understanding of the relationship between television viewing and aging. More specifically, the goal is to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives.

To reach this goal, the dissertation consists of a literature review (chapter 2) and a qualitative interview study (chapters 3 to 5). So far, this introduction has displayed the societal relevance of the study. The scientific relevance of the study will become clear in the literature review. In short, the literature review will show that a large share of previous research gives a one-sided view on older adults and television viewing which entails that old age is a stage of life characterized by losses in which people use television viewing as compensation. It is relevant for both research and society to move away from this one-sided view and to develop concepts that help to understand the relationship between television and aging, taking into account positive experiences and gains as well as problems and losses. In the interview study, older adults talked about their experiences with television viewing within the context of their everyday lives. Their accounts give insight in the nuances and complexities that are apparent regarding television viewing and aging, and the interviews show the diversity of older adults, aging and television viewing.

## 1.2 A life-span perspective on media use<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation studies television viewing from a life-span perspective. Within gerontology, the life-span perspective involves the study of change and continuity throughout the life span (e.g., P.B. Baltes, 1987). In the introduction (section 1.1), I already mentioned that older adults may adjust their television viewing as they grow older, whereas their current television use can also be colored by their experiences with television viewing over the last 50 years. These two issues, *change* and *continuity* in television viewing, are central to the current study, because they help to gain insight in how television viewing evolves as people age. Studying television viewing in terms of both change and continuity is in line with the argument by Vandebosch and Eggermont (2002) that old age has been studied too much as a separate and problematic stage in life, whereas it is important to take continuity into consideration too: research should not only consider older people's current life circumstances but also their personal developmental history which is interwoven with societal evolutions.

In the present section, I will outline what media researchers have theorized so far about change and continuity in media use. The first aspect, change, can be understood in light of maturational or life-cycle explanations for media use. The second aspect, continuity, can be understood in light of generational explanations for media use. These two kinds of explanations or theories (developmental theories "versus" socialization theories) do not need to be mutually exclusive, but they complement each other. Both kinds of explanations can play a part at the same time (Huysmans, De Haan, & Van den Broek, 2004, p. 207). This section will discuss these explanations, and how they provide the background for the notions of change and continuity in the present study.

*Maturational or life-cycle explanations* entail that media use changes across the life span in response to an individual's development. The basic notion in life-cycle explanations is that media use is related to biological, cognitive and social development across the life-span. Several authors (e.g., Dimmick, McCain, & Bolton, 1979; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989) described this process using the Uses and Gratifications paradigm. The Uses and Gratifications approach studies the needs and gratifications that media use is related to, and the approach can be situated within the wider tradition that views the audience as active: people are considered to be self-aware, goal-directed audience members, who are able to make sensible media choices in order to serve their interests, needs and motives by means of media use (Renckstorf & McQuail, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this section has been published as: Van der Goot, M., & Beentjes, J.W.J. (2008). Media use across the life-span. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication* (Vol. VII, pp. 3020-3025). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Life-cycle explanations in terms of the Uses and Gratifications paradigm say that developmental events and processes create needs as well as resources (such as physical or material resources). Subsequently these needs and resources bring about certain types of media use. Many older people retire, experience physical aging, and are confronted with losses in their social networks. These developments lead to needs such as the need for activities to pass the newly available time or the need for company, and people can use television to meet these needs.

This developmental perspective implies that it is not chronological age that explains changes in media use. Dimmick et al. (1979) used the term *life-span position* to indicate that it is more insightful to think about the relation of media use with life stages such as childhood than to study the relation of media use and age. Nevertheless, researchers commonly include age as a marker variable, that is, an indicator of the stages of life (e.g., Baltes, Mayer, Helmchen, & Steinhagen-Thiessen, 1999). In the current study, respondents were 65 years and older, and I also included enough respondents aged 75 years and older. These ages constitute somewhat arbitrary lines: it is not age that causes changes. However, many researchers find the traditional retirement age of 65 a convenient indicator for old age (Kite & Wagner, 2002), and many authors distinguish between (approximately) 65-74 years and 75 years and older (e.g., Baltes et al., 1999; Rubin, 2007; Schnabel, 2008; Van Campen, 2008a).

The main assumption in *generational explanations* is that the circumstances in which a generation grows up determine to a large extent this generation's behavior later in life. Scholars argue that experiences during socialization or during adolescence, the so called *formative years*, leave long-lasting impressions on values and attitudes, and continue to influence behavior in later stages of life (Peiser, 1999). Generations are supposed to be different from each other because they grow up in different societal, political and economic circumstances. Similarly, scholars have argued that generations are different with regard to media use. Generations may adopt specific patterns of media use when they are young and remain faithful to those throughout the life span (Mares & Woodard, 2006). In other words, generations that are young when a particular medium becomes popular may have a stronger attachment to that medium (or to particular types of content) than previous or later generations.

In the present study, the general notion that media use changes in response to developments across the life span is filled with the experiences of older adults; in the interviews, older people talked about changes in their television viewing, and about how these changes were related to changes in their lives. In addition, the interviews with these respondents from pre-war generations (they were born between 1915 and 1940) reveal what they see as stable in their television use. Some of these stable aspects may

be specific for these generations of older adults. In terms of a life-span perspective it is insightful to study television viewing for these generations of older people: they have known the medium television for a long time, which makes it possible to study what patterns of viewing they have acquired a long time ago in addition to how they have adjusted their viewing in later life. This is in contrast to for instance internet use, because internet was introduced when these cohorts were already older.

### **1.3 Literature review and qualitative interview study**

As mentioned above, the overall aim of this dissertation is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between television viewing and aging. More specifically, the goal is to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives. To reach this goal, the dissertation consists of a literature review (chapter 2) and a qualitative interview study (chapters 3 to 5).

The literature review has two purposes. The first purpose is to give an overview of research on older adults' television viewing. Assumptions and findings about television viewing and its relation with developments in old age are discussed in three sections: time use, social functions, and content preferences. Both studies that contain comparisons between age groups, and studies that focus solely on older people are included. Quantitative as well as qualitative, and American as well as European studies are part of the overview.

The second purpose of the review is to discuss the assumptions and empirical findings in terms of a life-span perspective, which involves the study of change and continuity throughout the life span, and emphasizes that gains and losses jointly occur in later life (P.B. Baltes, 1987). In order to conceptualize how people adapt to gains and losses, P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes (1990) developed the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model. This model, that is widely used in gerontology, describes a general process of adaptation. In the SOC model and elaborations hereof (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993), two strategies are central: selection and compensation. I consider selection and compensation as helpful conceptual tools in understanding the relation between television viewing and aging, because these concepts help to study television viewing both in relation to goals and gains that people experience in their lives, and in relation to problems and losses that people need to deal with. Hence, this perspective offers a broader view on television viewing and aging, and enables me to outline the limitations of previous research into older adults' television viewing.

In the *qualitative interview study*, I continued the development of the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging that I had started in the literature review. I

focused on the everyday experiences of older adults, and continued to use concepts from the life-span perspective because these concepts help to move away from the limited view on aging and watching television that was available thus far. Qualitative research is appropriate, because this research type (especially the grounded theory approach) focuses on building theory. I chose to conduct interviews, because the emphasis in this study is on the experiences and meanings of television viewing and aging, and not on behavior. For example, some older adults watch more television after they retire. This study looks at the meanings of such increase in viewing: people may feel that finally they have the freedom to do what they like to do, which is watching television, whereas on the other hand they may feel that they had a more meaningful life when they had a job and television is an inferior way to fill the available time. The interviews are designed to gain insight in such experiences, choices, feelings and evaluations around watching television.

Three research questions guided the study:

1. What meanings do older adults assign to their television viewing?

This first research question gives room for “all” aspects of television viewing to come to the fore.

2. What aspects of television viewing change, and what aspects of television viewing remain constant as people age?

The notions of *change* and *continuity* in television viewing give insight in how television viewing evolves as people age; the notions invite to obtain a more complete picture of the development of television viewing than the often-mentioned assumption that older people watch more television than when they were younger.

3. In what ways is television viewing part of the adaptation strategies *selection* and *compensation*?

The concepts *selection* and *compensation* help to understand the ways in which television viewing is related to developments in everyday life; the concepts encourage to pay attention not only to how television viewing can be a substitute for diminished activities, but also to how television relates to goals and gains in everyday life.

#### **1.4 Overview of chapters**

Chapter 2 is the literature review about older adults’ television viewing. Chapter 3 outlines the design of the qualitative interview study. Chapter 4 and 5 entail the findings of the empirical study, that is, the conceptual framework about television viewing and aging that I developed on the basis of the interviews. Chapter 6 provides a reflection on the conceptual framework, including a discussion of its transferability to the use of other media and to younger age groups.

## Chapter 2

### Literature review: Older adults' television viewing from a life-span perspective<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this dissertation is to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging. The literature review in the current chapter is the first step toward this conceptual framework. The chapter has two purposes. The first purpose is to give an overview of research on older adults' television viewing. The literature is reviewed in three sections: time use, social functions, and content preferences. The second purpose is to discuss the assumptions and empirical findings in terms of a life-span perspective. The life-span perspective emphasizes that gains and losses jointly occur in later life. Selection and compensation constitute two central strategies in gerontological models of how people adapt to gains and losses, and we use the concepts of selection and compensation to evaluate the available research.

#### 2.1 Introduction

Our emphasis on older people corresponds with the growing scholarly interest in the health, socioeconomic, psychological, and communicative aspects of aging (Barker, Giles, & Harwood, 2004). This growing interest stems partly from the increasing longevity across societies (Giles, 1999). In the second half of the twentieth century, the average life span increased by 20 years (Annan, 1999). Moreover, older people comprise an increasing percentage of the world population. The proportion of older persons (aged 60 years and over) was 8% in 1950 and 10% in 2005, and it will grow to about 21% by 2050. In the more developed countries, one fifth of the population was aged 60 years and older in 2005; experts project that proportion to reach one third in 2050. The fastest-growing age group in the world is the oldest, those aged 80 years and older. By 2050, one fifth of older persons will be aged 80 years and older (United Nations, 2004).

Our reason for focusing on television viewing instead of other communication activities is that it seems to have a special importance for older adults: older people spend more time watching television than younger people do. Previous literature

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter has been published as: Van der Goot, M., Beentjes, J. W. J., & Van Selin, M. (2006). Older adults' television viewing from a life-span perspective: Past research and future challenges. In C. S. Beck (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 30* (pp. 431-469). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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reviews, largely based on American research, consistently concluded that older adults spent more time watching television than any other age group (Davis & Kubey, 1982; Gunter, 1998; Kubey, 1980; Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004; A. M. Rubin, 1982; Schulze, 1998; Young, 1979). This finding was confirmed by a recent analysis that included several cohorts (Mares & Woodard, 2006) and by recent large-scale European research. Mares and Woodard analyzed data from the General Social Survey. The General Social Survey is an almost annual, personal interview survey of U.S. households. With regard to television viewing, respondents were asked: "On the average day, about how many hours do you personally watch television?" Mares and Woodard used six measurement times: 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1994, and 1998. They found that older viewers (60 years and older) indeed watched more television than younger age groups, even after controlling for cohort, period, sex, and education levels.

The European Social Survey (2002/2003) asked respondents ( $N = 40,856$ ) how many hours per weekday they spent watching television. Of the people aged 65 years and older ( $N = 7796$ ), 36% watched television more than three hours a day versus 20% of the whole sample. Eurostat (2003) listed the results of time budget studies in 12 European countries. These studies showed that, in all of the countries studied, with the exception of Rumania, people aged 65 years and older spent more time watching television than the whole sample. For example, in the United Kingdom, people aged 65 years and older watched television daily for three hours and two minutes, whereas the whole sample aged eight years and older daily watched for 2 hours and 27 minutes.

Notably, in the Mares and Woodard (2006) study, mean differences masked the fact that variability within groups was substantial. Standard error terms indicated that levels of overall viewing were relatively homogeneous among middle-aged adults but were more variable among older viewers. Thus, although we emphasize viewing trends of older adults in this chapter, we do acknowledge the diversity of those viewers, and we revisit older audience heterogeneity as we conclude this chapter.

We base our review on empirical research regarding older adults and television viewing. To identify relevant literature, we searched the databases Sociological Abstracts, PsycINFO, and Web of Science with combinations of the following key words: *elderly*, *old*, *television*, *media use*, *media*, *mass media*. We used the same key words in Current Contents to keep track of the emergent literature. In addition, we found literature in the reference lists of relevant articles and books. We selected empirical studies on television viewing that authors specified as being about older people. These studies differed in terms of the precise age group studied. The minimum age of older respondents varied from about 50 to 70 years.



As part of our overview of this field of research, we also include assumptions and empirical studies on television and old age that were published decades ago (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Graney, 1974; Meyersohn, 1961; Schramm, 1969). These perspectives remain relevant because of their significant influence in this field of research. These assumptions also underscore the observation that attributions to older adults and aging (and to other life stages) are not fixed but change over time (Hareven, 1995).

We begin by detailing the benefits of a life-span approach as a theoretical framework for exploring television viewing. We then present our literature review on older adults' television viewing in three sections: time use, social functions, and content preferences. In each section, we summarize assumptions and empirical research around this theme; subsequently, we discuss this literature in terms of selection and compensation.

## **2.2 A life-span approach to television viewing**

This chapter is intended to show what the life-span perspective can contribute to communication scholars' approach to older adults' television use. Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Baringer, and Kundrat (2002) applied the life-span perspective to the field of communication. The life-span perspective, as advanced by P. B. Baltes (1987), involves the study of constancy and change throughout the life span. According to Nussbaum et al., this perspective, applied to the field of communication, frames change across the life span as an essential element in any attempt to examine the nature and functions of communication processes.

In addition to this general orientation on change across the life span, P. B. Baltes (1987) identified seven propositions that underlie life-span research. First, development is a life-long process. Development extends over the entire life span, and life-long development may involve processes of change that do not originate in birth but emerge in later periods of the life span. Second, there is considerable diversity in the directionality of changes that constitute development, even within the same domain. The direction of change varies by categories of behavior. During the same developmental periods, some systems of behavior show increases, whereas others exhibit decreases in level of functioning. Third, throughout life, development always consists of the joint occurrence of gain (growth) and loss (decline). Fourth, much intra-individual plasticity (within-person modifiability) occurs in psychological development. Fifth, individual development can also differ substantially in accordance with historical-cultural conditions. Sixth, for the purpose of organizing the multitude and complexity of developmental influences, scholars have assumed that individuals need to deal with three types of influences: age-graded influences that correspond to chronological age,

similar in direction among individuals for the most part; history-graded influences that relate to historical time, and nonnormative influences that do not follow a general and predictable course. Seventh, development needs to be studied interdisciplinarily.

Viewing development as a gain-loss dynamic holds particular importance for research on older adults because this proposition criticizes the focus on losses, a common orientation among social science researchers of old age, including media researchers. This focus on losses leads to an underestimation of the potential for development in later life. In order to conceptualize how people adapt to gains and losses, P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes (1990) developed the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model. This model describes a general process of adaptation. According to P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes, individuals likely engage in this process throughout life. In the SOC model and elaborations hereof (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993), two strategies are central: selection and compensation. P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes explained that selection means that persons concentrate on high-priority domains that are appropriate, given environmental demands and individual motivations, skills, and biological capacity. Although selection connotes a reduction in the number of high-efficacy domains, it can also involve new or transformed domains and goals of life. P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes contended that compensation becomes operative when specific behavioral capacities are lost or reduced below a standard required for adequate functioning. Compensation involves using alternative means of reaching a goal to keep performance at desired levels. This strategy reflects the need for adults to react to constraints or losses by taking countersteps (O'Hanlon & Coleman, 2004). As P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes detailed, examples of this mechanism include the use of new mnemonic strategies (including external memory aids) and the use of a hearing aid.

We can study communication from a life-span perspective by focusing on selection and compensation strategies. These strategies show how people adapt to gains and losses throughout the life span (P. B. Baltes & M. B. Baltes, 1990), and we argue that communication is part of these strategies. In this chapter, we concentrate on mediated communication and on television viewing in particular. Hence, with regard to television viewing, selection means that people can choose television viewing over other activities for reaching goals in high-priority domains because television viewing is appropriate given environmental demands and individual motivations, skills, and capacities. Compensation means that people can use television viewing as a substitute for diminished abilities or activities.

Looking at the available research in terms of selection and compensation strategies makes visible that a large share of previous research on older adults' television viewing was biased toward compensation, thus neglecting the possible role of television viewing

in selection strategies. That is to say, an important perspective in research on older adults' television viewing holds that older adults value television viewing because it substitutes for diminished activities, such as interpersonal communication. However, this vista leads to an underestimation of the possibility that television viewing can be part of older adults' selection strategies. Older adults can choose to watch television over doing some other activity because television viewing relates to goals in high-priority domains (such as interest in current events and political issues or intellectual stimulation). Therefore, discussing research in terms of selection and compensation illustrates that the life-span perspective can help us to identify biases and weaknesses in previous communication research and that this perspective can give an impetus (both theoretically and methodologically) to future communication research.

### **2.3 Selection and compensation in older adult television viewing**

We review the literature with respect to three themes: time use, social functions, and content preferences. We focus on time use and social functions because the main perspectives on the role of television viewing in old age center on these themes. In short, scholars have assumed that older adults watch more television than younger people because they have more time on their hands (e.g., Robinson et al., 2004), and scholars have supposed that television has a specific social function for older people because their social networks diminish (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Schramm, 1969). In addition, we detail older adults' content preferences because we think that, in order to understand the role of television in older adults' lives, we have to pay attention to which television contents older people select and the reasons for these selections. Within each subsection (time use, social functions, and content preferences), we first summarize the perspectives and empirical research on the theme, whereas subsequently we discuss the literature in terms of selection and compensation.

#### **2.3.1 Time use**

The literature on older adults and television viewing makes the important assumption that older people spend more time watching television than younger people do because they experience an increase in leisure time. Traditionally, scholars have proposed that three changes result in this increase: older people retire from work; activities decline because of physical aging, and older adults experience losses in social contacts (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Doolittle, 1979; Meyersohn, 1961).

Some authors suggested that television viewing can be a substitute for decreased activities (e.g., Graney, 1974, 1975; Schramm, 1969). Bliese (1986) labeled this

supposition the *substitution hypothesis*, in which we can distinguish two main ideas. First, television viewing can be a substitute in terms of time use. When activities decrease, television viewing can be used to fill the available time; it can offer a pastime when people are feeling bored, and it can help to structure the days. Second, television viewing can replace social functions that were previously fulfilled by interpersonal communication. These social functions will be discussed in the next section, whereas, in the present section, we focus on substitution in terms of time use.

*Television as a substitute for decreased activities*

Two qualitative studies support the idea that television viewing can replace diminished activities (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). Gauntlett and Hill analyzed diaries in which approximately 140 respondents of 60 years and older answered questions about their television use. Respondents filled in 15 diaries between 1991 and 1996. On the basis of these diaries, Gauntlett and Hill argued that the importance of television viewing in older people's lives was influenced by several changes. Respondents who grew older and became more used to their retirement experienced an increase in the amount of time spent on watching television. Furthermore, watching television gained importance among diarists who had an insufficient or low income, moderate or bad health, or intermittent contact with friends or family. For this group, television replaced other activities to become a primary source of entertainment and information. On the basis of in-depth interviews in Belgium with persons between 60 and 85 years of age ( $N = 101$ ), Vandebosch and Eggermont reported that respondents with mobility problems spent more time at home and indicated that media, especially television, gained importance for them. Most respondents were in good health, however. Mobility problems also contributed to the larger dependence of widows and widowers on television; for example, several female respondents became immobile after their husbands' death because they lacked a driver's license. Because of these mobility problems, some people listened to church services on television or on the radio.

In addition to these qualitative studies, correlational research (longitudinal and cross-sectional) sheds light on the substitution hypothesis. Several studies examined the relationship between the amount of television viewing and the amount of other activities (Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Kent & Rush, 1976; Mayer, Maas, & Wagner, 1999; A. M. Rubin, 1986). The substitution hypothesis predicts negative correlations between television viewing and other activities (Graney, 1974), but most studies revealed no correlations or positive ones.

Only Graney (1974, 1975) and A. M. Rubin (1986) found negative correlations. Graney (1974) interviewed 60 women between 62 and 89 years of age about their media use (television, radio, books, newspapers, magazines) and other activities (contact with neighbors within walking distance, visiting people outside walking distance, making phone calls, membership of organizations, and attending meetings of voluntary organizations and the church). When the women were first interviewed, it appeared that the older respondents made fewer visits outside walking distance than younger respondents, as was expected, but no correlations emerged between amount of visits outside walking distance and media use (Graney, 1974). After four years, Graney (1975) spoke with 46 of 60 respondents again to determine whether changes in media use in these four years were related to changes in other activities. This study concluded that watching television was negatively related to two activities: attending religious services and reading. A. M. Rubin conducted a secondary analysis on data from two empirical studies (A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a; R. B. Rubin & A. M. Rubin, 1982c). The first study involved a written questionnaire completed by 340 nonconfined people, aged 55 to 92 years (A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b); the second study consisted of interviews held in two Wisconsin counties with 300 people aged 17 to 83 years (R.B. Rubin & A. M. Rubin, 1982c). The secondary analysis of the data of the respondents aged 65 years and older ( $N = 346$ ) indicated that people watched more television when they were less mobile, healthy, active, and satisfied.

In the other correlational studies, no correlations (Kent & Rush, 1976) or positive correlations (Doolittle, 1979; Mayer et al., 1999) were found. In a sample of 150 persons contacted through three projects for older adults, Kent and Rush discovered no substantial relations between watching television, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, participation in local groups, making phone calls, meeting friends outside the home and living alone or with someone. Doolittle interviewed people between 48 and 93 years of age ( $N = 108$ ) about their interpersonal communication and their news consumption in newspapers, news magazines, and television and radio news. News use appeared to correlate positively with interpersonal communication. Therefore, the author suggested that older adults do not use news media to fill an interpersonal void, but rather, as preparation for social situations. Mayer et al. analyzed data from the Berlin Aging Study that consisted of a stratified sample of people aged 70 years and older in West Berlin, Germany ( $N = 516$ ). The study showed that people who were more active outside the home also used the media more. According to the authors, this result showed that media were not used to compensate for a lower activity level.

A specification of the substitution hypothesis is the idea that religious services on television or radio can substitute for church attendance when older people's church

attendance diminishes because of deteriorating health. Hays et al. (1998) and Benjamins, Musick, Gold, and George (2003) analyzed interviews that were conducted in the “Bible Belt” in North Carolina at a three-year interval (1986 and 1989) with people aged 65 years and older ( $N = 2971$  and  $N = 2958$ , respectively). Hays et al. used “functional ability” as an indicator for health, whereas Benjamins et al. operationalized health by asking respondents if they had chronic conditions such as a broken hip, cancer, diabetes, heart attack, or stroke. However, neither study supported the hypothesis. Declining health did lead to a decline in church attendance, but it did not lead to an increase in the use of religious television (or radio).

In sum, two qualitative studies revealed that television viewing gained importance for some older adults who experienced a decrease in activities. However, correlational studies did not lead to uniform results about the relation between television viewing and other activities. The inconsistent findings are difficult to interpret because only bivariate relations were analyzed and because the kind of activities that were related to television use differed between the studies. Moreover, cross-sectional research is not really suitable for the study of changes over time.

#### *Television viewing to pass time and to structure the days*

Television can be a substitute for diminished activities by offering a way to pass the increased amount of leisure time; in this way, television viewing can relieve boredom. In addition, television viewing can help to structure the days (Davis, 1971; Meyersohn, 1961). A first type of empirical support comes from qualitative research among older people. Haddon (2000) held interviews with older adults between 60 and 75 years of age in 20 households. The respondents also completed time-use diaries. The study indicated that older adults who felt a bit bored and not at ease with their retirement turned on the television by default because it helped them pass the time. For many older persons, the extra leisure time originating from retirement or the children leaving home meant that they could turn on the television a bit more every now and then to fill the gaps between activities. In addition, Haddon argued that the television program scheme offered temporal orientation when few other time markers occurred during the days, particularly with less active and more homebound respondents.

Uses and gratifications (U&G) research among older adults (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2002; Korzeny & Neuendorf, 1980; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b) did not address television as a means for structuring the days, but it did include items about television as a means to pass time. In these U&G studies, respondents could designate agreement with items such as “I watch television because it helps me pass the time” on a scale. In this chapter, we report percentages of older people who said that a

particular motive applied to them. When no percentages were reported, we give the mean score on the item and report whether the mean was above or below the midpoint of the scale.

The U&G studies among older adults showed that part of the older audience watched television to pass time (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2002; Korzeny & Neuendorf, 1980; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b). Korzeny and Neuendorf interviewed 112 people 60 years of age and older, and they reported that the mean scores of the items "I watch television because it helps me pass time" (3.7) and "I watch television because it alleviates boredom" (3.3) were above the midpoint. However, the mean score on the item "I watch television because I have nothing else to do" was below the midpoint (2.5). A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1982a, 1982b) interviewed 340 people between 55 and 92 years of age, and they concluded that the item "I watch television because it helps me to pass the time of day, particularly when I feel bored" achieved a mean score above the midpoint (3.1). Eggermont and Vandebosch discovered that 38% of 284 respondents, aged 60 years and older, watched television because they were bored.

U&G studies in which older adults were compared with younger people are also available (Gunter, Sancho-Aldridge, & Winstone, 1994; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990; Ostman & Jeffers, 1983; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981). When we discuss these studies, we report percentages of older and younger respondents who indicated that particular motives for watching television applied to them. Most of these studies did not report on statistical significance in differences between older and younger people. Only Ostman and Jeffers reported on statistical significance of correlations between age and motives for viewing.

The results of these U&G studies were ambiguous: A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1981) and Gunter et al. (1994) concluded that, for older people, passing time comprised a more important motive than for younger people and the general population, but Ostman and Jeffers (1983) reported a negative correlation between age and the motive "television viewing to relieve boredom." A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin interviewed older ( $N = 79$ ; between 62 and 93 years old) and younger ( $N = 73$ ; between 23 and 60 years old) hospital patients about their television use at home and in the hospital. A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin speculated that chronological age did not influence older adults' television use, but their living situations did. According to these authors, older people may live in more confined situations, perhaps comparable to hospitalization. Therefore, the authors expected more differences between older and younger people regarding their television use in the home situation than in the hospital situation. In agreement with this expectation, older people mentioned "television to pass time" twice as much as the

younger group (22% and 6%) with regard to the home situation, whereas, in the hospital situation, “television to pass time” constituted the most important reason to watch television for both groups (older group: 50% and younger group: 69%). This result supported the notion that television viewing is important for older adults because older people have much leisure time and television viewing offers a way to pass the time.

Gunter et al. (1994) conducted a survey in the United Kingdom; on the basis of this survey, Gunter (1998) reported that 20% of the people aged 65 years and older ( $N = 164$ ) responded that they often watched television because they had nothing better to do at that time, whereas this response applied to 16% of the complete sample aged 16 years and older ( $N = 1421$ ).

Ostman and Jeffers (1983) held telephone interviews with 140 persons aged 18 years and older to determine the extent to which motives for watching television correlated with age. In contradiction to author expectations, “television viewing to pass the time when one is bored” correlated negatively with age ( $-0.19$ ).

In sum, the qualitative study conducted by Haddon (2000) showed that some older adults used television to pass time and to structure days, and U&G studies among older people also demonstrated that part of the older audience watched television to pass the time. However, U&G studies did not reveal consistently whether this reason was more or less important for older people than for younger age groups.

#### *Time use in terms of selection and compensation*

Researchers seem to imply that television viewing functions as compensation when they argue that older people watch more television because they retire, experience physical aging, and experience a diminishing social network (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Meyersohn, 1961). However, that older people have more time on their hands and watch more television than younger people does not necessarily mean that television viewing compensates for lost activities (substitution hypothesis). Possibly, people prefer television viewing to other activities, but earlier in their lives, they are prevented from watching television as much as they would like (Robinson et al., 2004).

Empirical findings regarding the substitution hypothesis are inconclusive: negative, positive, and zero correlations were found between television viewing and other activities (Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Kent & Rush, 1976; Mayer et al., 1999; A. M. Rubin, 1986). In addition, two studies found that “television viewing to pass the time and because there was nothing better to do at the time” was a more important motive for older people than for younger people (A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981; Gunter et al., 1994), whereas another study found a negative correlation between age and “television viewing to pass the time when one is bored” (Ostman & Jeffers, 1983).



As mentioned earlier in this section, these inconsistent results may be due to methodological problems. In addition, the substitution hypothesis itself can be criticized from a theoretical point of view, with the use of the concepts of assimilation and accommodation as presented in the gerontological literature (Brandtstädter, Rothermund, & Schmitz, 1998; Brandtstädter, Wentura, & Greve, 1993).

*Assimilative coping* refers to strategies that aim at actively adjusting circumstances so that personal goals and activities can still be realized despite barriers (Brandtstädter et al., 1993, 1998). We argue that the substitution hypothesis (e.g., Graney, 1974, 1975) assumes behavior that is an example of assimilative coping. In his work on the substitution hypothesis, Graney (1975) argues that an *activity constant* is maintained throughout an individual's life as the result of exchanges between behaviors that decline and other behaviors that increase in aging. This contention implies that, when older adults experience a decrease in activities, they have to find other activities, such as media use, to reach the same goals as they had before.

However, besides assimilative coping strategies, people apply accommodative coping strategies, especially when obstacles or losses become too predominant (Brandtstädter et al., 1993, 1998). Accommodation means adjusting one's goals and aspiration levels in correspondence with personal limitations and obstacles in the environment. One may, for instance, start to appreciate smaller goals, judge particular experiences more positively, and use downward comparisons (Brandtstädter et al., 1993, 1998). Brandtstädter et al. (1993) found that elderly participants address negative consequences of particular age-related changes (such as physical aging) by employing accommodative coping strategies.

We argue that, when older adults enact accommodative coping strategies, they feel less need to achieve the same activity level as before. Thus, they do not experience a decrease in activities as problematic; they feel less need to fill their time with activities, and they will be satisfied with fewer activities. This approach may explain why not all correlational studies found negative relations between television viewing and other activities and why some older adults are less inclined to mention television viewing as a way to fill their time or as a way to alleviate boredom. When researchers wish to know what role television viewing plays in substituting for diminished activities, they need to gain insight regarding the strategies (assimilative or accommodative) that their older respondents use.

### **2.3.2 Social functions**

Television viewing can fulfill social functions. In the literature on older adults and television viewing, scholars argue that these functions become particularly important for

older people because older adults experience a decrease in the amount of social contacts (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Meyersohn, 1961). In this context, many authors (e.g., Atkin, 1976; Doolittle, 1979; Fouts, 1989; A. M. Rubin, 1982; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002) referred to Schramm (1969), who used the concept *disengagement* to explain the special (social) function that the mass media have for older people. Cumming and Henry (1961) introduced the concept of disengagement and described it as a process of mutual withdrawal between aging people and the social systems to which they belong. Schramm emphasized that, for older adults, feelings such as loneliness, uselessness, and alienation accompany the process of disengagement. He supposed that older persons can keep in touch with their environment through television viewing. Thus, they can maintain the feeling of belonging to society. In this way, television viewing can help to combat feelings such as loneliness, boredom, uselessness, and alienation.

However, gerontologists criticize the disengagement concept. Although they generally agree that rates of social interaction decrease in old age, empirical research did not support the main propositions of disengagement theory about the nature of this decline (Carstensen, 1992). For example, according to Carstensen, the idea of emotional withdrawal during old age remains unsubstantiated, and emotional relationships in old age positively predict happiness and adjustment. Although the concept of disengagement is not very useful for understanding the social changes in old age, the decrease in rates of social interaction in old age still raises the question of which social functions television viewing fulfills for older adults.

*Television viewing as a substitute for social contacts: combating loneliness and offering company*

Several authors contended that television viewing can be a substitute for diminished social activities (e.g., Bliese, 1986). Hess (1974), for example, wrote that television personalities can substitute for individuals who are not available anymore. In this way, television may ensure that older adults, especially those living alone, maintain the illusion of being in a populated world. Bliese offered support for the idea that television viewing can be a substitute for personal contact, drawing from research in which respondents addressed the issue of television as a replacement for interpersonal communication. In addition, qualitative research and U&G research indicated that, at least for part of the older audience, television viewing played a role in combating loneliness by offering company (Bliese, 1986; Davis, 1971; Davis & Westbrook, 1985; Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2002; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000; Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b; Schultz & Moore, 1984; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002; Willis, 1995).

Bliese (1986) held interviews with people aged 70 years and older ( $N = 214$ ) and group interviews with people aged 65 years and older (12 groups of 8 to 13 participants). Bliese asked open-ended questions about television and other media. A large majority of the respondents (89%) said that they more or less frequently used media instead of unavailable or difficult interpersonal communication. Forty percent of the respondents sometimes used the media in this manner when they were ill or when friends or family were away. A smaller share of the respondents (32%) revealed that the media regularly compensate for loneliness that they experienced because friends and family members had died or moved away. For 17% of the respondents, media use substituted for interpersonal contact almost completely; most of these respondents were homebound. Another indication that television can be an alternative to personal contact came from a study in the United Kingdom (Randall, 1995), in which the author conducted in-depth interviews with 10 people aged 60 years and older and concluded that television compensated for lack of social participation.

In several diary and interview studies (Bliese, 1986; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002; Willis, 1995), older adults mentioned that television served as an important form of company for them. Bliese found that respondents turned on the television (or the radio or a phonograph) to have the feeling that they were not alone in their homes. Half of them (54%) said they used media for company at least part of the time. Willis analyzed diaries from a longitudinal study in which questions were answered by people aged 70 years and older ( $N = 58$ ). Willis reported that older people who were still active with several interests gave television a complementary or secondary role, whereas others assigned a greater role to television. For many respondents, television offered company in the evening or a relief from being alone. Gauntlett and Hill based their analysis on more diaries from the same longitudinal study ( $N =$  approximately 140; 60 years and older). They asserted that television functioned as a friend for some people, something that filled the gap in their social lives. Some of the respondents listened to the television when they were alone in their homes. For older people who experienced the loss of loved ones, television could be a welcome friend. Haddon discovered that television broke the silence in the evenings, and it offered some company for older persons who were homebound because of increasing physical immobility or who had lost their partners. On the basis of semistructured in-depth interviews with people aged 60 years and older ( $N = 101$ ), Vandebosch and Eggermont came to a similar conclusion. Widows and widowers often were lonely, and they watched television because it provided company.

Although interview studies concluded that television viewing substituted for social contacts and offered company for part of the older audience, Bliese (1986) reported that

media use as a substitute for interpersonal contact was far from satisfying. A large majority (93%) of the respondents who used media as a substitute for interpersonal contact were moderately to extremely dissatisfied with this alternative. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) reported that television fits into older people's mourning processes in complex ways. Television could be a welcome friend, but it also reminded them of what once was and thus became a marker of loneliness. In this manner, television constitutes a "double-edged sword" in relation to the mourning process.

Like the interview studies, U&G research among older adults indicated that television viewing offered company to part of the older audience (Davis, 1971; Davis & Westbrook, 1985; Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2002; Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b; Schultz & Moore, 1984). Nevertheless, the percentages reported vary widely, so we lack a consensus on how many older people turn to television viewing as a means of fulfilling this function.

In a written questionnaire administered to 174 people aged between 55 and 80 years, 63% of the respondents confided that television offered them company (Davis, 1971). In a sequel to this research, 92% of the 274 respondents aged 55 years and over affirmed this function (Davis & Westbrook, 1985). Korzenny and Neuendorf (1980) reported that the mean score of "I watch television because it provides companionship" was below the midpoint (2.9) ( $N = 112$ ; 60 years and older). However, A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1982a, 1982b) reported that the mean score of company was above the midpoint (3.38) ( $N = 340$ ; between 55 and 92 years old). Schultz and Moore (1984) asked respondents to complete the statement, "When I am alone, I usually . . ." Of the respondents ( $N = 57$ ; between 55 and 92 years old), 37% filled in "watch television or listen music." In comparison, 26% chose "talking to or corresponding with someone." Eggermont and Vandebosch (2002) noted that 40% of the respondents ( $N = 284$ ; 60 years and older) said that they watched television because of parasocial contact. The mean score was below the midpoint (2.3 on a scale from 1 to 4).

Four U&G studies that compared older people with younger age groups did not uniformly support the idea that television viewing for company would be more important for older people than for younger people (Gunter et al., 1994; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990; Ostman & Jeffers, 1983; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981). A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin showed that only small parts of both the older group ( $N = 79$ ; 62 to 93 years old) and the younger group ( $N = 73$ ; 23 to 60 years old) mentioned company (4% and 3%, respectively). Ostman and Jeffers asked respondents ( $N = 140$ ; 18 to 87 years) about their motives for watching television. In correspondence with the authors' expectation, they discovered a positive correlation between age and "television viewing to combat loneliness" (.18). However, the reason "I watch television when there is

nobody to be with or to talk to” did not show a correlation with age. Mundorf and Brownell measured the viewing preferences of older adults ( $N = 74$ ; between 65 and 93 years old) and compared them with those of younger adults ( $N = 149$ ; between 19 and 23 years old). They reported that older adults mentioned company as the most important motive more often than younger people did (10% and 7%, respectively). Even so, the differences between men and women were larger than the differences between the older and the younger group with regard to this motive. Gunter (1998) compared a subgroup of people aged 65 years and older ( $N = 164$ ) with the complete sample of people aged 16 years and older ( $N = 1421$ ). Gunter reported that older people mentioned the motive “company” more often than the whole sample (21% and 14%, respectively). However, older people did not differ from the whole sample with regard to the reason, “I watch television just for background whilst doing something else.”

In sum, the findings that media substitute for unavailable or difficult interpersonal communication (Bliese, 1986) and that television offers company support the assumption that television can serve as an alternative for diminishing social contacts. How many and which older adults watch television for these reasons remains unclear because the percentages reported differ substantially between studies. A possible explanation for these differences involves the wording of items. Two U&G studies employed two items about social functions, and, in both studies, the two largely comparable items led to different results (Gunter, 1998; Ostman & Jeffers, 1983).

#### *Contribution of television to the feeling of belonging to society*

Schramm (1969) suggested that television viewing gives older adults the feeling that they belong to society. Research supported this idea in that older people said that television viewing helped them to understand modern life (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000; Randall, 1995; Willis, 1995).

Willis (1995) reported, on the basis of a diary study ( $N = 58$ ), that many respondents had the feeling that television had opened their lives. Moreover, for some respondents, television was useful for understanding modern life. Willis argued that there is little support for the idea that older persons disengage themselves from the working society; television seemed to play a supporting role in enabling older people to have an outward-looking perspective. Gauntlett and Hill (1999) concluded, on the basis of a larger sample from the same longitudinal diary study ( $N =$  approximately 140), that older people kept contact with the world through television. Television created “virtual mobility” for those who had lost mobility because of physical or financial reasons. On the basis of 10 interviews, Randall (1995) concluded that older adults kept in touch with the world outside their homes through television, particularly with regard to news about

their own region. Randall asserted that television strengthened the connection between older viewers and the rest of society by keeping them up to date about news, fashion and trends. Interviews in 20 households in the study conducted by Haddon (2000) revealed that most respondents between 60 and 75 years old felt that television provided a window on the world and that it had positive educational value. Some respondents shared that television “offered them a different level at which to engage,” enabling many of them to feel part of the social world. According to Haddon, these findings indicate that older people do not become disengaged when they are no longer involved in the social world of work.

In sum, qualitative diary and interview studies attest that television gives some older adults the feeling that they belong to society. Future qualitative research should address the question of what parts of television content contribute to this feeling, whereas future quantitative research should answer the question about the extent of this reaction among older adults.

#### *Television as part of interpersonal communication*

Meyersohn (1961) suggested that an important function of television viewing is that it offers universal topics for conversation. Three qualitative studies showed that some older adults, indeed, watched television because it offered topics for conversation (Bliese, 1986; Riggs, 1996b, 1998; Willis, 1995). In the study conducted by Bliese, 43% of the respondents said they used television (and radio and newspapers) in this way. Respondents turned to television for gathering specific as well as general information. Part of the respondents (29%) mentioned that they watched particular programs that friends viewed as well so that they could use the program as a topic for conversation. Gathering general information was mentioned by 40%. For example, some claimed that “I watch the news so that I do not look stupid.” Willis asserted that television as a topic for conversation comprised a recurring theme in the diaries that she analyzed. Finally, in her article and subsequent book, Riggs specified topics that television contributed to social interactions among residents of a retirement community. The population of this community was homogeneous: white, upper middle class, and well educated. The sample consisted of 26 out of 290 residents; Riggs conducted interviews, focus groups, and observations over a period of two years. Residents relied on high culture content, such as broadcasts of government proceedings and opera productions, to afford them material for meaningful conversation. Residents who said they might not seek out such content on their own confided that they felt some pressure to watch it in order to succeed socially.

U&G studies among older adults also showed that part of the older audience watched television because it offered topics for conversation. Korzeny and Neuendorf (1980) reported that the mean score on the item “television gives me ideas to talk about with others” was above the midpoint (3.4). On the other hand, A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1982a, 1982b) noted that the mean score on “television viewing as a topic for conversation” was below the midpoint (2.8). Eggermont and Vandebosch (2002) concluded that 40% watched television to have something to talk about. Finally, Ostman and Jeffers (1983) found a positive correlation (.24) between age and “watching television to find something to talk about with others.”

In addition to offering topics for conversation, television viewing has a function in interpersonal communication because it can be a shared activity. A few qualitative studies showed that older people watched television together with grandchildren (Fouts, 1989; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). According to Fouts, older people indicated that they enjoyed watching television with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren when they had the opportunity. For older adults, it was important to be with family; watching television together marked only one of several activities shared. Television offered a possibility for cross-generational communication. On the basis of a diary study, Gauntlett and Hill concluded that some grandparents experienced pleasure from watching children’s programs with their grandchildren and participating in related activities. As Vandebosch and Eggermont discovered, grandparents often mentioned that they watched children’s programs together with their grandchildren.

Some U&G studies included items about watching together (Gunter et al., 1994; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981, 1982a, 1982b). Although some older adults enjoyed watching television together (Fouts, 1989; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999), quantitative U&G studies indicated that social interaction was not an important reason to watch television. A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1981) reported that no one in the older group ( $N = 79$ ; 62 to 93 years) said that they watched television as part of social interaction, whereas only 1% of the younger group mentioned this reason. A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1982a, 1982b) indicated that the mean score of “watching television to facilitate interaction when there are visitors” was far below the midpoint (1.73). Gunter (1998) asserted, on the basis of the survey conducted by Gunter et al., that respondents aged 65 years and older ( $N = 164$ ) mentioned that they watched television “to be sociable when others are watching” a bit more often than the complete sample (13% and 10%, respectively). Nine percent of the people aged 65 years and older noted that they watch television “because somebody else is watching and seems interested,” in the whole sample, only 1% more acknowledged this reason.

In sum, for part of the older audience, television appears to contribute to interpersonal communication by providing topics for conversation and by providing the opportunity to do something together. Not much is known, however, regarding the topics that television contributes to conversations between older people and their peers and between older people and people from other generations, both family members and non-family members. Future research about watching television together can be designed analogously to questionnaire studies on parental guidance of children's television viewing (e.g., Warren, Gerke, & Kelly, 2002) or to ethnographic studies of the role of television in everyday life (e.g., Riggs, 1998).

*Social functions in terms of selection and compensation*

The idea of television as compensation for lost interpersonal communication clearly resounds in the literature. Researchers assumed that, when interpersonal contact diminishes, television can combat loneliness and provide company and a feeling of belonging to society. Empirical research provides evidence that television viewing can have these social functions for some older adults, but we cannot determine how many or which older people utilize television in this manner. However, some previous research findings lend themselves to interpretation in terms of selection. Specifically, television appears to function as a source for conversation topics and as an activity that people can share with other persons, for example, with spouses or grandchildren. As such, television use can be said to contribute to a high-priority domain, namely interpersonal communication, including intergenerational communication.

With regard to television and compensation, one study indicated that many older adults are dissatisfied with media use as a substitute for interpersonal contact (Bliese, 1986). To interpret this finding, Carstensen's (1992, 1998) socioemotional selectivity theory can be useful. This theory addresses the functions of social interaction across the life span. These functions include, among others, information acquisition, identity construction, identity maintenance, and emotion regulation. Social interaction also has costs, such as energy and the risk of negative emotions and threats to the self-concept. Therefore, people make choices among social partners to optimize the gains from social contact (Carstensen, 1992). Socioemotional selectivity theory states that the relative importance of the functions of social interaction changes across the life span. An important factor involves "perceived time." Future-oriented goals (such as information acquisition) become more important when people treat time as open-ended. Yet present-oriented goals such as emotional goals take priority when people experience time as limited (Carstensen, 1998). Early in the life span, people strive to attain much information through social interactions, whereas, later on in the life span, social



interactions give less new information and, thus, offer less profit in that respect. Therefore, older adults tend to prefer emotionally satisfying contacts with a limited group of close relations over a larger network that may be more beneficial in terms of information gathering (Carstensen, 1992). This supposition seems relevant for the finding that, on the one hand, television offers company and helps to combat loneliness, whereas on the other hand, older people do not seem completely satisfied with these social functions of television viewing. Because the emotional side of social interaction is of particular importance to older adults (Carstensen, 1992), it is understandable that the use of television as compensation for diminished social contact is unsatisfactory.

### **2.3.3 Content preferences**

In this section, we describe the parts of television content that are watched more by older adults than by younger adults. In terms of genres, older people view more news than younger people (Bower, 1973; Doolittle, 1979; Durand, Klemmack, Roff, & Taylor, 1980; European Social Survey, 2002/2003; Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; Mares & Woodard, 2006; Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey, 2000; Steiner, 1963); they also prefer quiz shows more (Gunter et al., 1994; Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; Steiner, 1963). With regard to fiction, we struggled to determine which genres are watched more by older people because studies differed in terms of program categories, or they used individual program titles. Instead, we discuss the suggestion advanced by Gauntlett and Hill (1999) and Willis (1995) that older people favor nostalgic and gentle fiction. Finally, we examine the proposition that older viewers prefer older television characters to younger characters.

#### *News*

Older adults prefer news more than younger age groups. Three kinds of research about the differences between older people and other age groups supported this claim: research that measured frequency of news use (Doolittle, 1979; Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; Mares & Woodard, 2006; Steiner, 1963), research that used viewing diaries (Bower, 1973; Durand et al., 1980; Steiner, 1963), and research that measured preference for genres (Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; Gunter et al., 1994; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981).

In 1959, in Columbus, Ohio, Hopf and Bedwell (1970) asked a sample aged 10 years and older ( $N = 3218$ ) in a written questionnaire whether they watched television news fairly regularly (at least three times a week). More respondents between 56 and 70 years of age than respondents between 19 and 70 years of age answered in the affirmative. The percentage of fairly regular viewers increased with the age of the respondents. Steiner (1963) posed the following question to people aged 18 and older in

personal interviews: “What are some of your favorite programs—those you watch regularly or whenever you get a chance?” The percentage of people aged 55 years and older who mentioned news as their first answer was larger than this percentage in younger age groups. Doolittle (1979) conducted a third study of the frequency of news use. In this study, frequency of watching television news was combined with news use through newspapers, magazines, and radio, so we cannot draw a conclusion about television news *per se*. Doolittle measured the frequency of news use through personal interviews with people between 48 and 93 years of age ( $N = 108$ ). The study showed that the age groups older than 67 years (between 67 and 74 years old, and between 75 and 93 years old) consumed more news than the group between 48 and 66 years of age. Mares and Woodard (2006) analyzed the General Social Survey. This survey only included a question on television news in 1993. This question was: “Would you tell me how often you watch world or national news programs? Would you say every day, several times a week, several times a month, rarely, or never?” The analysis indicated that the positive relationship between age and news viewing was much stronger than the relationship between age and overall viewing, and it was only slightly affected by controls for, among other things, gender, education, health, and levels of social involvement.

In viewing diaries completed by people in New York ( $N = 237$ ), Steiner (1963) found that people aged 55 years and older watched more news programs than people from two younger age groups. Older viewers observed more news programs in total, and they viewed more news programs relative to the amount of programs watched. On the basis of viewing diaries filled in by people aged 18 years and older ( $N = 344$ ), Bower (1973) concluded that people aged 55 and older spent a larger part of their time watching news (19%) than the two younger age groups. On the basis of viewing diaries ( $N = 6056$ ), Durand et al. (1980) noted that an average news program reached a larger share of the audience aged 65 years and older than of the general audience.

In a written questionnaire, Hopf and Bedwell (1970) gave the respondents ( $N = 3218$ ; 10 years and older) a list with 22 program types from which the respondents selected their favorite six types. The percentage of respondents indicating news as one of their top six was about the same in the following age groups: between 41 and 55 years old, between 56 and 70 years old, and older than 71 years. However, these three groups mentioned news more often than the four age groups younger than 40 years. A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1981) asked respondents ( $N = 128$ ) to specify their favorite programs. The study found that more respondents in the older group (62 to 93 years old) than in the younger group (23 to 60 years old) mentioned news/talk. Gunter et al. (1994) provided respondents aged 16 years and older ( $N = 1421$ ) in interviews with a list of 35

program types and invited the respondents to indicate their degree of interest. This study reported that more people in the oldest age group than in the younger groups were very interested in several news categories (the oldest age group reported with regard to international and national news was 45 years and older; the oldest age group reported with regard to local and regional news was 55 years and older).

Recent, large-scale research (European Social Survey and Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey) also supported the impression that older people watch more news and information than the rest of the population. The European Social Survey (2002/2003) asked respondents what part of their television viewing time that they spent on watching news or programs about politics and current affairs. The survey showed that 78% of the people aged 65 years and older watched news and current affairs at least half an hour per day, compared with 64% of the whole sample. With regard to the American situation, the Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey (2000) is useful. This survey consisted of telephone interviews held in April and May 2000 with a nationwide sample of people aged 18 years and older ( $N = 3142$ ). In response to being asked whether they had watched the news or a news program on television yesterday, 74% of the people aged 65 years and older ( $N = 970$ ) offered confirmation, as opposed to 56% of the whole sample. When asked whether they watched news programs regularly, 86% of the people aged 65 years and older answered affirmatively, compared with 75% of the whole sample.

#### *Current affairs and information*

In earlier literature reviews on older people and television, the relatively strong preference of older viewers for news was reported together with their relatively strong preference for current affairs (Davis & Kubey, 1982; Young, 1979) and information programs (Kubey, 1980; A. M. Rubin, 1982; Schulze, 1998). However, the supposition that older viewers have a stronger preference for current affairs and information than younger age groups received less empirical support than the stronger preference for news described above.

Steiner (1963) found support for the supposition that older people watch more current affairs and information than younger people. Viewing diaries ( $N = 237$ ) indicated that people aged 55 and older watched more information and current affairs than younger age groups. They watched more of those programs in total, and they viewed more of them relative to the total amount of programs watched. Viewing diaries ( $N = 344$ ) analyzed by Bower (1973) revealed that people aged 55 years and older spent 1% more of their television viewing time on information and public affairs than the two younger age groups.

Questionnaires ( $N = 3218$ ) analyzed by Hopf and Bedwell (1970) did not support the supposition. Respondents aged 55 years and older did not list public affairs more often as one of their six favorite programs than younger groups. Program preference measured by Gunter et al. (1994) did affirm the expectation. People aged 55 and older were very interested in current affairs more often than younger age groups.

*Explanation of preference for news and information*

Several authors have sought to explain older viewers' preference for news and information programs. Some authors suggested that older people have a greater need for information than younger people because they miss the information that they had received through their work or on the streets before they retired (Kubey, 1980) and because their interpersonal networks often disintegrate (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000). These explanations correspond with the substitution hypothesis discussed earlier. When activities decrease, television viewing can take over functions previously fulfilled by other activities.

U&G studies (Gunter et al., 1994; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990; Ostman & Jeffers, 1983; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981) upheld the supposition that older people seek information through television more than younger people. A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin reported that 23% of the older group versus 19% of the younger group identified "learning/information" as a reason. Ostman and Jeffers found a positive correlation between "television viewing because it teaches me things I do not learn elsewhere" and age (.20). Mundorf and Brownell specified that 20% of the older group versus 15% of the younger group said they watched television because of information. Finally, Gunter (1998) asserted that 23% of the people aged 65 years and older watched television because they think they can learn something, whereas 20% of the sample aged 16 years and older gave this reason.

In addition to the idea that older people feel more need for information than younger people, researchers have also argued that, compared with younger people, older adults feel less need for relaxation and escape. Most of them no longer work, so they do not need relaxation after a working day (Kubey, 1980), and they experience less pressure, so they do not need television to forget (Ostman & Jeffers, 1983).

However, U&G studies have not clearly supported the supposition that older people feel less need for relaxation. This idea was affirmed by A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin (1981) and Mundorf and Brownell (1990), but not by Ostman and Jeffers (1983). A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin reported that 6% of the older group specified "relaxation," versus 19% of the younger group; Mundorf and Brownell observed that 69% of the

older group noted “entertainment,” versus 74% of the younger group; however, Ostman and Jeffers did not find a correlation between relaxation and age.

U&G studies have also not clearly affirmed the idea that older people watch less because of escape. Only one study (Ostman & Jeffers, 1983) supported this supposition, in contrast to two other studies (Gunter et al., 1994; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981). Ostman and Jeffers found a negative correlation between “television to forget” and age (–.17); A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin determined that 1.3% of the older group mentioned “escape/forget” versus 0% in the younger group, and Gunter (1998) reported that “escape” was a reason for 13% of the people aged 65 years and older, compared with 11% of the whole sample.

### *Quiz shows*

Older people prefer quiz shows more than younger people (Gunter et al., 1994; Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; Steiner, 1963). With regard to quiz shows, studies employed a variety of terms, for example, *audience quiz programs* and *quiz and panel game shows*. By *quiz shows*, we mean programs in which contestants have to answer questions. Only three studies reported results on quiz shows; these studies measured either viewing frequency or preference.

As detailed earlier, Hopf and Bedwell (1970) invited respondents to choose their favorite six program types from a list of 22 types. People aged 55 years and older clearly chose “audience quiz programs” and “panel quiz programs” more often than younger age groups did. Steiner (1963) asked the question, “What are some of your favorite programs—those you watch regularly or whenever you get a chance?” He reported that people aged 55 years and older picked a program from the categories “panel, games and light quiz” or “quiz shows” as the first answer more often than the two younger age groups. Gunter et al. (1994) analyzed a survey in which respondents could indicate degree of interest in 35 program types. The authors reported that, compared with the younger age groups, a larger share of the people aged 45 years and older expressed significant interest in “quiz and panel game shows.” On the basis of this survey, Gunter (1998) concluded that quiz and panel game shows were among the most interesting program types for people aged 65 years and older.

### *Explanation of preference for quiz shows*

Older people explained that watching quiz shows helped them to test and sharpen their cognitive abilities (Bliese, 1986; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002; Willis, 1995). Bliese reported that, in order to challenge themselves, 76% of the respondents watched game shows that demanded skill or memory. They preferred difficult games to games in

which luck played the main role. They believed that participating in difficult game shows helped them to preserve intellectual functions. Willis noted that respondents referred to their memory capacity in viewing diaries. They watched quiz shows to exercise and maintain their memory. The author speculated that this kind of stimulation would not be available to older people without television. On the basis of in-depth interviews, Vandebosch and Eggermont concluded that some older people employed media to avoid mental deterioration, for example, when they tested their general knowledge by participating in quiz shows (at home).

Watching television to test and maintain cognitive abilities does not apply to quiz programs only. On the basis of diaries, Gauntlett and Hill (1999) observed that older viewers tested critical skills by dealing with current affairs in an informed and critical manner. On the basis of their interviews, Vandebosch and Eggermont (2002) argued that avoiding mental deterioration also related to watching foreign television programs to learn languages. A U&G study that included an item on “television viewing to keep the mind in shape” revealed that 65% of the respondents ( $N = 284$ ; aged 60 years and older) watched television for this reason (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2002).

### *Nostalgia*

Gauntlett and Hill (1999) and Willis (1995) contended that older people feel attracted to fiction related to the past. So far, no research has been conducted on nostalgia in younger people’s media use so we lack information about preferences for nostalgic programs according to chronological age. It is very well possible that young people appreciate nostalgia too. According to Willis, many diary respondents (aged 70 years and older) wrote about the pleasure they derived from programs that related to their pasts. Programs shed light on aspects from their pasts and evoked memories. Gauntlett and Hill interpreted the top 10 programs that attracted the largest share of viewers aged 55 years and older in the United Kingdom in 1996. These authors asserted that such programs often had nostalgic themes. Among others, the programs in this top 10 were the *Antiques Roadshow*; the sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*; the light, nostalgic police drama *Heartbeat*, and three episodes of the least gritty British soap opera, *Coronation Street*. In addition, Gauntlett and Hill analyzed diaries from the same longitudinal research as Willis ( $N =$  approximately 140; aged 60 years and older). These authors indicated that a feeling of nostalgia was reported in many diaries. The desire of the respondents not only related to the actual programs, but it seemed to extend to the period that was represented in the programs. Respondents felt that the world used to be far nicer.

A few other studies also supported the idea that older people like watching nostalgic television programs (Riggs, 1998; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). Riggs conducted a study among older female fans of the television series *Murder, She Wrote*, and she reported that, for these women, the program corresponded with nostalgia for an ideal past. On the basis of in-depth interviews, Vandebosch and Eggermont asserted that older people in Belgium were interested in fiction about the country life in the first half of the twentieth century and in programs with traditional German folk music.

Empirical results with regard to music programs on television also corresponded with the supposition that older people like nostalgic programs. Older people expressed preference for programs featuring light music more often than younger people (Bower, 1973; Hopf & Bedwell, 1970; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1981; Steiner, 1963), whereas they expressed less preference than other groups for programs with modern music (Hopf & Bedwell, 1970), teen music or dance (Steiner, 1963), and pop or rock music (Gunter et al., 1994).

### *Gentleness*

The term *gentleness* was used by Gauntlett and Hill (1999) when they characterized the top 10 programs that attracted that largest share of the audience aged 55 years and older. The authors noted that the programs shared some kind of gentleness. The programs did not contain much violence, sex, or bad language; they often had light, pleasant, nostalgic and middle-class themes, and the main characters often were not very young.

Other empirical studies affirmed the supposition that older people do not like sex and violence on television (Bliese, 1986; Davis, 1971; Riggs, 1998; Tulloch, 1989). Davis detailed findings based on a written questionnaire administered to people between 55 and 80 years old ( $N = 174$ ). In answer to an open-ended question about what the respondents found objectionable on television, they mentioned violence and sex. Bliese reported that the respondents preferred programs with little sex and violence and with mild humor, such as *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons*. Many older viewers watched soap operas, but they said that the soaps had gone downhill since they had started to get dirty. According to Bliese, older viewers were more conservative with regard to sex and violence than the younger generation. Tulloch also upheld the supposition by observing that older viewers' letters to the production company of the soap opera *A Country Practice* underlined the clean and nice aspects of the show, as opposed to the constant obscenities, cruelty, and violence that they saw on television in general. On the basis of her study among older female fans of the program *Murder, She Wrote*, Riggs also emphasized that these respondents opposed sex and violence on television.

*Explanation of preference for nostalgic and gentle programs*

Willis (1995) and Gauntlett and Hill (1999) explained that older people like to remember the period in which they were young. In this context, Gauntlett and Hill referred to Coleman (1991), who wrote that reminiscence about the past contributes to maintaining the self-concept and self-esteem during old age. Gauntlett and Hill argued that people watched nostalgic programs to maintain a picture of the world as they would like to remember it: polite, civilized, and good-humored. Viewing certain programs, such as light sitcoms and dramas, may help to maintain an idealistic, traditional view of the world. In addition, costume dramas and programs like the *Antiques Roadshow* may give reassurance that the past is relevant for the future. For most older people, watching such programs played a role in negating depressive feelings that would result from the impression that all good things that people enjoyed in the past had disappeared. In line with this reasoning, Vandebosch and Eggermont (2002) explained the preference of their respondents for German music programs with traditional folk music by suggesting that some respondents romanticized the rural community they once lived in as opposed to the industrial society they were part of later.

Gauntlett and Hill (1999) went a step further when they contended that older adults like to be reminded of their younger years because of the attainment of *ego integrity* (Erikson, 1950). Erikson wrote that ego integrity comprises the eighth and last life stage, in which people come to terms with the lives that they have lived. People who attain integrity know that an individual life is the accidental co-occurrence of just one life cycle with only one segment of history, and they accept their lives as they have lived them.

*Older television characters*

Three types of studies lend some support to the idea that older viewers prefer older television characters over younger television characters. First, research attended to the age of characters in older adults' favorite fiction programs (Bell, 1992) and compared this finding with the age of characters in younger age groups' favorite programs (Harwood, 1997; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990; Robinson et al., 2004). Second, Mundorf and Brownell requested both older and younger respondents to name their favorite television characters, and third, research examined which programs older adults would like to view (Mares & Cantor, 1992).

The first type of research supports the idea that older viewers' favorite fiction programs feature more older characters than younger viewers' favorite programs. Mundorf and Brownell (1990) asked respondents to rank their seven favorite programs out of Nielsen's top 25 entertainment programs. On the basis of the responses, Mundorf



and Brownell reported the top five for younger adults ( $N = 149$ ; between 19 and 23 years old) and for older adults ( $N = 74$ , between 65 and 93 years old). The two favorite programs for older adults were *Murder, She Wrote* and *Golden Girls*, whereas these programs did not appear in the top five for younger adults. Both programs showcased female leading characters in their fifties through seventies. Bell (1992) reported the top 10 prime-time television programs, according to adults aged 55 years and older for the seasons 1989–1990 and 1990–1991 (Nielsen Media Research). These top ten lists included *Murder, She Wrote*; *Golden Girls*; *Jake and the Fatman*, and *In the Heat of the Night*, which all featured older characters portrayed by older actors. Harwood (1997) explored the television ratings of the first 10 weeks of the 1994–1995 season for three different age groups: children (age 2–11), younger adults (18–54 years old), and older adults (65+). For each age group, the four shows that were rated highest and that did not appear in any other age group's top ten were selected for further analysis. Two independent coders assessed the ages of all characters with speaking roles in four episodes of each show. In agreement with Harwood's expectations, the three age groups watched a television population of lead characters that was skewed in favor of their own age. Robinson et al. (2004) examined the viewing patterns from 1991 and 1997. In 1991, *Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote* were the fictional programs most often watched by the older audience, and both contained older characters. These programs were also popular with other age groups, but they were much more beloved by the older age groups (Robinson & Skill, 1995). Similarly, in the 1997 data, the highest rated programs for older viewers (55 to 64 years, and 65+) contained actors and characters that were similar in age. For example, *Walker, Texas Ranger* star Chuck Norris was 57 at the time; *Diagnosis Murder* star Dick van Dyke was 72, and *Cosby Show* star Bill Cosby was 60, clearly different from the ages of central characters in the shows most often watched by younger adults (such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*).

Mundorf and Brownell (1990) invited older and younger viewers to list their five favorite television characters. In this study, older women preferred television characters of their own gender and age. Three out of older women's five favorite characters were females, and three were over 60 years of age. However, according to Mundorf and Brownell, for the older males, only one out of the five actors was over 60 years of age.

Mares and Cantor (1992) asked respondents ( $N = 94$ , 70 years and older) to indicate interest in programs, based on 12 brief scenarios. Respondents rated each scenario on a scale from 1 (no!) to 7 (yes!). Six scenarios described documentaries in which the chief protagonist was an older person: three featured a happy, successful person, and three depicted an unhappy, lonely person. In two other scenarios, a young person was the main character: one was positively portrayed, the other negatively. Results showed that

lonely respondents preferred negative portrayals to positive portrayals, whereas nonlonely respondents favored positive portrayals. Within their favorite (positive or negative) category, however, both lonely and nonlonely respondents preferred the scenarios about the older characters to the scenario about the young character. However, the finding in this study with regard to the age of characters is suggestive rather than conclusive because the scenarios differed in more respects than in their portrayal of older or younger characters.

*Explanation of preference for older characters*

Two explanations were provided in the literature for the finding that older viewers prefer older television characters. First, Mares and Cantor (1992) asserted that this result coincided with social comparison theory's postulate that information about similar people is most relevant in making comparisons. Second, Harwood (1999) referred to social identity theory in order to suggest that the finding that older viewers prefer older television characters can be understood as an attempt to seek support for an important part of their self-concept: *social identity*. The rewards from such viewing choices can be described as *social identity gratifications*. According to Harwood, viewing members of one's own age group on television may serve to reinforce notions that one's age group is powerful in society, that an important societal institution (i.e., the media) values this group, and that this group is demographically strong.

In sum, research revealed that older people prefer news and quiz shows more than younger people. In addition, research suggests that older people like nostalgic and gentle fiction. There is also some empirical support for the notion that older viewers prefer older characters over younger characters. However, this research does not make clear how these preferences are related to each other. It would be interesting to analyze television ratings of older viewers and younger viewers in terms of genres as well as themes (particularly nostalgia and gentleness) and characters (particularly age) in order to gain insight into the factors that determine older adults' content preferences.

*Content preferences in terms of selection and compensation*

Explanations with regard to preference for nostalgic and gentle fiction and older characters can be categorized as indicative of selection strategies. Willis (1995) and Gauntlett and Hill (1999) asserted that nostalgic and gentle programs fit with older adults' need to remember the period in which they were young and that this preference possibly relates to the attainment of ego integrity. Harwood (1997, 1999) argued that older viewers select programs with older characters because they strive for a positive social identity.

In the explanations that authors offered for older viewers' preference for news and quiz shows, the idea of television as compensation is prominent. Older people's preference for news and information has been explained by the suggestion that older adults miss the information that they previously received through work (Kubey, 1980) or social contacts (Nussbaum et al., 2000). In addition, Willis (1995) suggested that older adults watch quiz shows because they lack other ways of obtaining intellectual stimulation.

The research findings regarding news and quiz shows can also be interpreted in terms of selection instead of compensation, resulting in other explanations. An alternative explanation for older people's larger preference for news is that older people take their citizenship more seriously than younger people. Support for this explanation comes from research on political participation showing that older adults vote more often, are more interested in politics, and know more about politics than younger generations (Holladay & Coombs, 2004). Hence, politics constitutes a domain that has priority for older adults, and television viewing may be useful in satisfying this interest. An alternative explanation for older people's interest in quiz shows is that older adults regard practicing their cognitive capacities as a high priority because they expect that their memory and cognitive flexibility may diminish.

## **2.4 Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to give an overview of research on older adults' television viewing and to discuss the assumptions and findings included in our overview from a life-span perspective. In this section, first, we summarize our findings in the light of a life-span approach. Second, we advance a research agenda that situates television viewing within a larger life context, and third, we note the need for more complex descriptions that can capture and appreciate the rich diversity of older adults.

### **2.4.1 Summary of findings**

We have discussed the literature on older adults' television viewing in terms of selection and compensation strategies as defined by P. B. Baltes and M. B. Baltes (1990). Gerontological models present both compensation and selection as strategies that people use to cope with gains and losses in later life. Applied to television viewing, selection means that people can choose television viewing over other activities for reaching goals in high-priority domains. Compensation means that people use television as a substitute for abilities or activities that have diminished in later life.

Discussing the available research on older adults and television viewing in terms of selection and compensation makes clear that a large share of this field of research is

biased toward compensation. Specifically, research tends to treat old age as a life stage characterized by losses, in which television viewing presumably functions as a substitute for decreased activities (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Schramm, 1969). This substitution hypothesis asserts that television viewing can be a substitute in terms of time use (e.g., Graney, 1974, 1975) and that television viewing can replace social functions that were previously fulfilled by interpersonal communication (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Schramm, 1969).

Empirical support for these two ideas remains far from conclusive. Notably, studies do not consistently affirm that older people use television to fill the time when other activities decrease (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Mayer et al., 1999; Ostman & Jeffers, 1983). The ambiguity of these findings stems at least partly from methodological problems, specifically the use of cross-sectional designs that failed to include third variables. The notion that television replaces social functions has received more empirical support. Qualitative (e.g., Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000) and quantitative (e.g., A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b; Schulz & Moore, 1984) studies indicate that some older people watch television because it offers them company. In addition, qualitative interview and diary studies show that television can contribute to a feeling of belonging to society (e.g., Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000). However, it is unclear what types of television content fulfill these social functions, and which subgroups of older people these functions apply to.

The idea of television as compensation is also prominent in the explanations that authors offered for older adults' content preferences. Older people's preference for news and information has been explained by suggesting that older people miss the information that they previously received through work (Kubey, 1980) or social contacts (Nussbaum et al., 2000). In accordance with this assumption, studies have demonstrated that viewing television as a means of obtaining information is more important for older viewers than for younger people (e.g., Gunter et al., 1994; Mundorf & Brownell, 1990). Notably, although the preference for other types of informational programs has often been reported in combination with the preference for news, we lack conclusive support for the assumption that older viewers hold a stronger preference for current affairs and information than younger age groups. Furthermore, scholars have suggested that older adults watch quiz shows because they lack other ways of getting intellectual stimulation (Willis, 1995). Qualitative interview research affirms that older people watch quiz shows because it helps them to test and sharpen their cognitive abilities (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). Yet, because the available studies involve relatively small groups of respondents, we do not know the extent to which this finding can be generalized.

Although our discussion of the literature on older television viewers in terms of selection and compensation makes clear that this field of research is biased toward compensation, some ideas and findings lend themselves to interpretation in terms of selection. With regard to time use, scholars generally assume that older adults watch more than younger people do because older adults have the time and opportunity (Robinson et al., 2004). However, this perspective does not necessarily mean that television use compensates for lost activities. Possibly, as Robinson et al. discussed, people prefer television viewing to other activities, but earlier in their lives, they lacked the opportunity to follow their preference. Research on social functions indicates that television viewing can play a role in interpersonal communication. Television viewing can provide topics for conversation (e.g., Riggs, 1996b, 1998; A. M. Rubin & R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b), and it can be a shared activity (e.g., Fouts, 1989; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999). These findings suggest that some older people select television to play a role in a domain that is important to them, namely interpersonal communication, including intergenerational communication. Finally, authors offered explanations for older adults' preference for nostalgic and gentle fiction and their preference for older characters in terms of selection. Older adults may select nostalgic and gentle programs because these programs fit with older adults' desire to remember the period in which they were young (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Willis, 1995), and older adults might prefer older characters because people strive for positive social identities (Harwood, 1999).

Consideration of selection strategies can help us to find explanations for older people's television use other than those that have been traditionally provided in this field of research. For example, an alternative explanation for older adults' preference for news is that older people take their citizenship more seriously than younger people do. Indeed, research on political participation suggests that politics is a domain that has priority for older adults (see Holladay & Coombs, 2004). In addition, another explanation for older adults' preference for quiz shows is that older adults regard practicing their cognitive capacities as a high-priority domain because they expect that their memory and cognitive flexibility may diminish.

As argued in this chapter, in order to gain insight in older people's television use, gerontological insights seem particularly valuable. In addition to selection and compensation strategies, we have discussed another conceptual pair (accommodation and assimilation, in Brandtstädter et al., 1993, 1998) in order to understand the inconsistent findings that were found in studies related to the substitution hypothesis (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Mayer et al., 1999). If people use assimilative strategies, they experience a decrease in activities as a problem, and they seek other activities, such as media use, to reach the same goals as they had before. If,

however, people employ accommodative strategies, they adjust their goals and aspiration levels. Consequently, they do not experience a decrease in activities as problematic, and they do not use television as a means to fill their time or as a way to alleviate boredom. Therefore, if researchers want to know the extent to which television viewing replaces decreased activities, they need to investigate the strategies (assimilative or accommodative) that older respondents use.

#### **2.4.2 Need to explore intersections of television viewing with other aspects of later life**

The main theme of our review is that research on older adults' television viewing appears to be biased toward compensation, whereas research in this field insufficiently considered selection. Therefore, future research should formulate questions on how television viewing is part of selection strategies. This orientation on selection (in addition to compensation) leads to a focus on the function of television in older adults' high-priority domains. The following high-priority domains appeared in our review: interpersonal communication, remembering the past, social identity, political citizenship, and cognitive abilities. In addition, health constitutes a high priority for older adults (e.g., Thompson, Robinson, & Beisecker, 2004) that may be related to their television use. Research should ask about the extent to which older adults employ television to reach goals in the above-mentioned domains. For example, how do older people use television in intergenerational communication?

In order to answer this type of question, knowledge of older adults' high-priority domains is essential. For example, in our review, we argued that the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) can contribute to our understanding of television viewing. This theory relates to interpersonal communication and analyzes how the functions of social interactions change across the life span. This knowledge contributes to our understanding of why some social functions of television viewing are unsatisfactory for older adults.

Our review not only suggests that media researchers should consider findings from other research areas, but also that research in other domains can benefit from the incorporation of knowledge of older adults' television viewing. Television viewing appears to have diverse functions in older people's lives and can hence contribute to various areas. Therefore, research on, for instance, older adults' interpersonal communication, political communication, and health communication should include older adults' television viewing.

Computer-mediated communication constitutes another domain that should be studied in relation to older adults' television viewing. Older adults' selection of media is

influenced by the media that are available to them, and cohorts of older adults differ in the media they grew up and live with. Baby boomers, the generation who will retire in the next decade (Holladay & Coombs, 2004), were not only acquainted with television at an early age, they also live in a different media situation characterized by an increasing choice of television channels and an increasing integration of television with other, more interactive media (Riggs, 1998). It has been suggested that new, more interactive media may widen older adults' horizons because limitations of the aging body (with regard to, for example, mobility and appearance) may be irrelevant in cyberspace (Featherstone, 1995).

Interestingly, analogous to older people's television use, older people's internet use has been met with the assumption that the internet may replace social contacts when older adults can no longer maintain their interpersonal contacts (White et al., 2002; Wright, 2000). The perspective that both television viewing and internet use can compensate for interpersonal communication suggests that the functions of these forms of communication should be studied in relation to each other. Although previous research has shed light on the different functions that television use has had and still can have for older people, we should also be aware that changing circumstances can lead to new functions of mass communication. The changing media situation seems to call for ethnographic research designs in order to trace perhaps unprecedented types of media use.

#### **2.4.3 Need for explorations of diversity among older viewers**

In this review, we discuss the category of older viewers as opposed to younger categories. However, scholars in the field agree that older people form a heterogeneous group (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Robinson et al., 2004; A. M. Rubin, 1982). Because of the accumulation of life experiences, the group of older adults is even more heterogeneous than younger age groups (Mares & Woodard, 2006).

The concepts of selection and compensation underline the diversity in the older audience. Selection means that people choose television in correspondence with their high-priority domains, and older adults differ in what domains are important to them. This choice probably depends, for example, on marital status, social network, gender, health, and socioeconomic status. Qualitative research is needed to reveal the ways in which television viewing is related to high-priority domains. In addition, quantitative research should assess the extent of these television uses among older populations and the extent to which these uses are related to older adults' characteristics.

Diversity between cohorts of older adults is also apparent. Cohorts differ in terms of societal structures, and these societal structures influence people's lives (Riley, Kahn, &

Foner, 1994). Indeed, one of the propositions within the life-span perspective emphasizes that historical circumstances influence individual development (P. B. Baltes, 1987). From the life-span perspective, cross-sectional research that compares older adults with younger people is defective because it cannot show whether differences in television use between these age groups are caused by age-related influences or by cohort-related influences (Meyersohn, 1961). Specifically, communication researchers should consider that different cohorts (generations) grow up in different media landscapes, possibly yielding specific patterns of media use that people remain faithful to across the life span (Mares & Woodard, 2006).

#### **2.4.4 Final reflections**

Older adults constitute a growing part of our society. They spend more time on television viewing than any other age group, which raises the question of what functions television viewing has for them. In our review, we discuss the available research in terms of selection and compensation. Generally, older adults' television viewing has been framed as compensation. We have argued that research can be enriched by taking a selection perspective that regards television viewing as an activity that helps people to reach goals in high-priority domains. In this context, we underlined the relations between television viewing and other aspects of later life. We hope that our approach will inspire future research on older adults' television viewing that acknowledges that older adults not only watch television to compensate for losses, but that they also watch because television viewing relates to domains that are important to them.



## Chapter 3

### Problem definition and design of the interview study

The empirical study in this dissertation consists of a qualitative interview study among older adults about television viewing. In the current chapter, I will first discuss the problem definition that the study is based on and the research questions that guided the study (section 3.1). Subsequently, I will describe the characteristics of a qualitative interview study (section 3.2) and the design of the study (sections 3.3 to 3.8).

#### 3.1 Problem definition and research questions

The main conclusion of the literature review (chapter 2) was that a large share of previous research on older adults' television viewing appears to be biased toward compensation, thus neglecting the possible role of television viewing in selection strategies. That is to say, growing older is largely presented as a life stage characterized by losses, in which television viewing presumably functions as a substitute for decreased activities and interpersonal communication (e.g., Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Schramm, 1969). This conclusion is in agreement with the work of other authors (Harwood, 2007; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002) who also argued that the focus on losses is a limited view on aging and television viewing. The limited vista leads to an underestimation of the possibility that television viewing can be part of older adults' selection strategies, that is, older adults can choose to watch television over doing some other activity because television viewing is related to goals in high-priority domains (such as interest in current events and political issues, or intellectual stimulation).

In reaction to the focus on losses and compensation a more advanced and multifaceted view on aging and television should be built. Therefore I conducted the qualitative interview study in which I aim to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives.

The emphasis in the study is on the experiences and meanings of television viewing, because the study of such meanings is necessary for the analysis of television viewing in terms of *selection and compensation*. For instance, some older adults watch more television after they retire. Whether such increase in viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies, depends on how the people involved perceive such change. People may feel that finally they have the freedom to do what they like to do, which is watching television. In that case, television viewing is part of selection strategies. On

the other hand, they may use television viewing as compensation for activities that are not possible anymore and feel that television is an inferior way to fill the newly available time.

Three central questions guided the empirical study:

1. What meanings do older adults assign to their television viewing?

The first research question gave room for “all” aspects of television viewing that are relevant to older adults to come to the fore.

2. What aspects of television viewing change, and what aspects of television viewing remain constant as people age?

I derived this question from the life-span perspective which involves the study of constancy and change throughout the life span (Baltes, 1987). Regarding television viewing and aging, it is relevant both to study how television viewing changes in relation to developments in old age, and to study viewing patterns that have remained stable over the years (see chapter 1). The notions of change and continuity invite to obtain a more complete picture of the development of television viewing than the often-cited observation that some older people watch more television than when they were younger.

3. In what ways is television viewing part of the adaptation strategies *selection* and *compensation*?

In the literature review (chapter 2), I employed the gerontological concepts selection and compensation to show the one-sidedness of a large share of previous research. I recommended that future research on older adults’ television viewing should take selection strategies into consideration, in addition to compensation strategies. Consequently, selection and compensation were “sensitizing concepts” in the interview study: I used the experiences of older adults with television viewing to “fill” the concepts of selection and compensation with empirical material.

### **3.2 Qualitative interview study**

Qualitative research was appropriate because the goal was to develop a conceptual framework, based on meanings of television viewing in everyday life. In this section I will discuss what qualitative research entails, why I chose in-depth interviews as the research method, and what theory development is in the context of the present study.

Many authors have tried to define what qualitative research is. Mason (2002) looked for common elements in the rich variety of qualitative research strategies and subsequently gave the following definition that says that qualitative research is:

1. Grounded in the philosophical position which is broadly “interpretivist” in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted. (...)
  2. Based on methods of data generation which are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced (rather than rigidly standardized or structured, or entirely abstracted from “real-life” contexts).
  3. Based on methods of analysis, explanation and argument building which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. There is more emphasis on “holistic” forms of analysis and explanation in this sense, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. (...)
- (p. 3)

I conducted the current study in line with this definition. The study looked at older adults’ experiences, thoughts, choices, feelings, satisfaction, and evaluations regarding their television viewing and their aging.

Within qualitative research, several types of research are possible, such as a case study or ethnographic research. I chose to conduct an interview study because in interviews respondents can articulate their meanings, experiences, feelings and evaluations about watching television. A research focus on television viewing behavior itself (for example when older adults watch television; how partners interact when they watch) would have led to another way of data gathering, such as observation. As I argued above, the study of meanings is necessary for the analysis of television viewing in terms of *selection and compensation*. Interviewers conducted in-depth interviews with an interview guide; they asked open-ended questions and needed to probe. This procedure ensured that the accounts of the respondents determined to a large extent the course of the interview. During the analysis, I paid attention to formulations that respondents had used, and I present citations from the interviews in the results chapters (chapters 4 and 5).

The aim was to develop a conceptual framework based on the interviews. The grounded theory approach (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a type of qualitative research that is specifically directed at building theory. In her book on grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) explained: “data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct. (...) We try to learn what occurs in the research setting we join and what our research participants’ lives are like. We study how they explain their statements and actions, and ask what analytical sense we can make of them” (p. 2-3). The developed theory provides the following: “our analytical **categories** and the **relationships** we draw between them provide a

**conceptual handle** on the studied experience” (p. 3, my emphasis). Grounded theorists develop conceptual handles to explain what is happening in the setting (p. 92). Or as Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 11) put it: qualitative analysis has the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in data, and then organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme. The goal of my study can be understood in terms of these descriptions. The aim was to construct concepts and to describe the relationships between them, so that the framework is a conceptual handle that helps to understand television viewing in the context of aging.

### 3.3 The research process

Typically, qualitative research involves a cyclic process in which data gathering and analysis alternate, guided by reflection (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2002, p. 180; Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 40). In this study, data gathering took place in successive phases. I will describe the sampling procedures and the composition of the sample in section 3.4. In section 3.5 and 3.6, I will focus on the interviews. I conducted the analysis of the interviews partly during the period of data gathering, partly afterwards. The phases in the analysis will be discussed in section 3.7. Finally, the ways in which I tried to ensure the validity and reliability of the study will be discussed in section 3.8.

### 3.4 Sampling

Respondents aged 65 years and older were interviewed. The data gathering took place in three rounds (see table 3.1). First, I conducted interviews; second, students in a research seminar that I taught conducted interviews, and third, I conducted new interviews.

*Table 3.1 Rounds in data gathering*

<i>Rounds</i>	<i>Interviewers</i>
First round	I conducted interviews
Second round	Students in research seminar conducted interviews
Third round	I conducted interviews; theoretical and purposeful sampling

In the first two rounds of interviews, I tried to ensure a varied sample. In the third round, I selected respondents based on the composition of the sample thus far. I selected on three characteristics: age, household composition (living together or alone), and gender. The distribution on these characteristics for the complete sample after the three rounds is visible in table 3.2. I will discuss why these three characteristics were relevant.

Table 3.2 Composition of the sample

	<i>Living alone</i>	<i>Living together</i>	
65 – 74 years	<i>n</i> = 17 4 men 13 women	<i>n</i> = 22 10 men 12 women	<i>n</i> = 39
75 years and older	<i>n</i> = 29 8 men 21 women	<i>n</i> = 18 9 men 9 women	<i>n</i> = 47
	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 40	<i>N</i> = 86

*Age.* Chronological age may be a poor predictor of behavior (Pecchioni, Ota, & Sparks, 2004, p. 170), but nevertheless researchers commonly include age as a marker variable, i.e. an indicator of the stages of life (e.g., Baltes, Mayer, Helmchen, & Steinhagen-Thiessen, 1999). Sixty-five years and above is the most common definition of the point at which “old age” begins (Kite & Wagner, 2002; Thorson, 2000, p. 1; Van Campen, 2008b, p. 23). People aged 65 years and older are such a diverse category that further age divisions are apparent in the literature. Many authors distinguish between (approximately) 65-74 years and 75 years and older (e.g., Baltes et al., 1999; Rubin, 2007; Schnabel, 2008; Van Campen, 2008a). For example, Baltes and Staudinger (1996, p. 23) distinguished between *late adulthood* (60 to 75 years) and *very old age* (75 years until death), each with its own developmental tasks. They described late adulthood as characterized by tasks such as promoting intellectual vigor, redirecting energy toward new roles, accepting one’s life, and developing a point of view about death. Very old age is characterized by coping with physical changes of aging, developing a psychohistorical perspective, and travelling uncharted terrain.

In the present study, people aged 65 years and older were interviewed, and I ensured that both people in the category 65 to 74 years, as well as people in the category 75 years and older were included. A few interviewees were in their nineties; the oldest was 92 years. I used age as an indicator to obtain variety in the sample. I do not argue that chronological age is directly related to television viewing; therefore I did not include age in the framework that I developed.

*Household composition.* The analysis, during the second round of data gathering, showed that the difference between respondents living alone and respondents living together was relevant to the experience of television viewing. Some respondents who lived alone (many of them were widows) explained how their television viewing had changed after their partner had died and how television viewing was part of adapting to the new situation. Whereas respondents who lived together with someone talked about

how they experienced watching together. After the first two rounds of data gathering, people who were 75 years and older and who lived together with someone were underrepresented in the sample. Therefore, in the third round of interviews, I interviewed several couples aged 75 years and older. I conducted three of those interviews with both husband and wife (consequently the amount of respondents is 86 and the amount of interviews is 83).

*Gender.* In the first two rounds of data gathering, more single women than single men were interviewed. In the third round of interviews, I chose to conduct interviews with widowers, because literature suggests that gender is a relevant variable regarding television viewing (e.g., Fiske, 1987), and research has shown that there are gender differences regarding adaptation to the loss of a partner (e.g., Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Stevens, 1995; Van Baarsen & Van Groenou, 2001).

The sampling procedure in this study is called purposeful (or purposive) sampling. Patton (1990) described purposeful sampling as follows: “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 169). In my study, variation regarding age, household composition and gender ensures that many different meanings of television viewing will come to the fore.

Theoretical sampling is one type of purposeful sampling, where sampling is conducted according to the categories that the researcher develops during the analysis (Coyne, 1997). The ongoing analysis during the second round of interviews made clear that the difference between people living alone and people living together was relevant for the conceptual framework that I was developing. My subsequent decision to interview couples aged 75 years and older, and single men, can be seen as a result of theoretical-sampling considerations.

### **3.5 Interview guide**

Interviewers used an interview guide (for a discussion of interviewing with an interview guide, see for example Gorden, 1992; Heldens & Reyssoo, 2005; Patton, 1990). The guide contained two questions as starting points for talking about television viewing: “can you describe when you switch on your television on an average day?” and “what do you like to watch on television?” (see Appendix A). The interviewers used probing to learn about the reasons why respondents switched the television on, and why respondents chose particular programs. It depended on the respondent how this probing proceeded: some respondents reflected very precisely on what programs they watched and why, while for other respondents their experience of television viewing had more to

do with the activity of viewing television than with the content of programs. In reaction to what the respondent was saying, the interviewers asked retrospective questions in order to gain insight in changes in television use: interviewers asked “since when” or “for how long” respondents had used television in the ways they mentioned. In addition, interviewers asked if the respondent had experienced changes in their television viewing now that they were growing older. Continuity and change in television viewing were covered this way.

The interviewers were instructed to probe in such way that they received sufficient information to interpret the respondent’s television use in terms of the adaptation strategies selection and compensation. I defined *television as part of selection strategies* in chapter 2 as: choosing to watch television over doing some other activity because television viewing relates to goals in high-priority domains (such as interest in current events and political issues or intellectual stimulation). Therefore, the interviews had to provide information on why respondents chose television viewing over other activities, why they chose particular programs, and how television viewing was related to domains in respondents’ lives. For example, when a respondent chose to watch television programs on history because history was his/her hobby, the interviewers were instructed to probe into this domain “history” as well. Thus, interviewers took television viewing as a starting point, and subsequently probed into aspects of everyday life that television viewing was related to.

I defined *television viewing as part of compensation strategies* in chapter 2 as: television viewing is used as a substitute for diminished abilities or activities. Therefore, when respondents related their television viewing to a decrease in abilities or activities, interviewers were instructed to obtain information about the decrease or problem, about the role of television viewing in relation to the decrease, and about how satisfied the respondent was with this role of television viewing. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked a set of closed-ended questions to obtain some background information (see Appendix B).

### **3.6 Interviewers**

Interviews were conducted by me, and by students who participated in a research seminar on qualitative research methods that I taught. As was indicated in section 3.4, I conducted interviews in two rounds: one before and one after the research seminar. The interview guide changed slightly over the course of time in reaction to the ongoing analysis. In particular, in the third round of interviews I wanted to attain more information about continuity and change in television viewing, and about the meanings of watching television together with other persons.

In the research seminar, students familiarized themselves with the topic *television viewing and aging*, with the life-span perspective and with the concepts of *selection and compensation*. Chapter 2 was part of the course materials. After several weeks of classes, three training sessions about interviewing with the interview guide took place. The students conducted two interviews each, and received individual feedback on their first interview. Students contacted participants through their social network; therefore in some cases the respondent and the interviewer knew each other beforehand (e.g., grandparent and grandchild). Interviews took place in the homes of the participants, and the duration of the interviews ranged from half an hour (those were exceptions, most interviews were longer) until three hours. In some cases I spent four or five hours with the respondent. Interviews were held in Dutch, audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were the basis for the analysis.

### 3.7 Analysis

I derived guidelines for the analysis from methodological literature on qualitative analysis (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004). More specifically, I worked with the division of the analytical process in four phases that Wester and colleagues (e.g., Wester, 1995; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004) formulated as part of their variant of the grounded theory approach. Wester et al. described theory development as a complex process, and therefore they cut the analytical process in phases with specific subgoals in order to give researchers some guidance. The phases and steps are not meant to be a rigid model and it is possible to mix phases, coding procedures, and research actions (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 147).

In this section, I will discuss the logic of the analysis in the current study. For each of the four phases, I will discuss the aim of the phase, the activities I performed, and the result (see table 3.3). However, the four phases did not take place as clear-cut and chronological as the description in this section may suggest.

I used two tools during the several phases. First, I worked with the computer program *Atlas.ti*, which can be referred to as computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (MacMillan & Koenig, 2004). Below, I will discuss how I used the program in the different phases. The second tool was writing memos. Memo-writing is part of qualitative research: the researcher reflects in memos on the different aspects of the study, particularly on the analysis and the concepts that are developing (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Wester & Peter, 2004). During the course of the study I wrote numerous memos: about the interview guide, the sample, profiles of



the respondents, elements of the conceptual framework, and relations between categories<sup>1</sup>.

*Table 3.3 Phases in the analysis (derived mainly from Wester, 1995; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004)*

<i>Phases in the analysis</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	<i>Results</i>
1. Exploration phase	Open coding or initial coding	Three themes within experiences of television viewing
2. Specification phase	Focused coding, axial coding Constant comparison Concept-indicator models, dimensions	Dimensions within each of the three themes Continuity and change within each of the three themes (chapter 4) Selection and compensation
3. Reduction phase	Matrix with “scores” on the dimensions	Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies (chapter 5)
4. Integration phase	Writing up conceptual framework Comparing framework with previous literature	Comparison with literature (chapter 6) Dissertation

### *1. Exploration phase*

The exploratory phase is dedicated to finding as many concepts and categories as possible that can offer an overview of what is relevant in the field, in light of the problem statement (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 151). The main task in this phase is open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004) or initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) described coding as follows: “coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for that piece of data. Your codes show how you select, separate, and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them” (p. 43). Initial coding should stick closely to the data (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher formulates as many codes as may be relevant in view of the research questions. Thus, open coding focuses on the formulation of

<sup>1</sup> The transcripts, codes, and memos were in Dutch. Only the final research reports are in English.

many substantive concepts, so that the researcher will elaborate a framework that fits the interview data (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 152)

I conducted open coding on interviews that provided rich material (the respondents were able to formulate their experiences well) and that described contrasting experiences of television viewing. I divided the interviews in fragments and added codes to them, both on paper and in the computer program Atlas.ti. I read the interviews line-by-line to remain open to respondents' formulations and to all the meanings they expressed. I added both thematic codes (what respondents talked about) and variation codes (what they said about these topics) (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 94). This coding resulted in many rather specific codes close to respondents' words and experiences. In this way, I gained insight in the actor perspective (Wester & Peters), that is to say, in how respondents themselves experienced television viewing in the context of aging. The first research question ("What meanings do older adults assign to their television viewing?") indicates that there was room for analyzing older adults' experiences without immediately putting their accounts in clear-cut categories.

I tried to develop themes that were closely related to the respondents' experiences and perspectives: so-called substantive concepts. As a result of the open coding, I concluded that the accounts about television viewing could be divided in three themes: first, television viewing in a palette of activities; second, television viewing in the social context; and third, television content. I distinguished the first theme (television viewing in a palette of activities), because it was common that respondents explicitly related their television viewing to other activities. They said for example: "I don't watch television at daytime, I have enough to do," "I always have too short a time," or "I can't do anything else."

Regarding the second theme: the social context was clearly important to the experience of television viewing. Some respondents explicitly related watching television to being alone ("of course I watch TV, I'm alone"), whereas others described how they watched together with their household members. Also, respondents' accounts clearly showed how they adjusted their television viewing after a loss in the interpersonal sphere.

The third theme concerns meanings of television content. Respondents talked about a wide variety of genres and specific programs. They clearly differed in the type of programs that they talked about and the tone in which they spoke about them. Some respondents emphasized watching for serious information ("I watch very selectively, only the news and some other informative programs"), whereas the accounts of others related television much more to pleasure, laughing, and good moods.

A researcher is not a *tabula rasa*, but he/she starts with general ideas, the so-called sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). Sensitizing concepts do not prescribe what the researcher has to see, but they provide angles from which to look at the material (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 24). I worked with the sensitizing concepts *change and continuity* (research question 2) and *selection and compensation* (research question 3). I added the four concepts as codes to interview fragments (among many other codes). In this way, I used the interviews to “fill” the sensitizing concepts with empirical material. For the concept of *change* I made a table to obtain an inventory of all changes in television viewing that respondents had mentioned (see Appendix C). In the table I noted for every interview ( $N = 83$ ) the change in television viewing that the respondent mentioned (if any), the related change in life (if any), and how the respondent evaluated the new role of television viewing.

The analysis in terms of the sensitizing concepts will be discussed more elaborately in the next phase, the specification phase. The result of the exploration phase was an overview of the elements of a conceptual framework that could provide insight in television viewing and aging. I distinguished the three themes, and I decided that *change and continuity*, and *selection and compensation* would continue to have a place in the analysis because they were relevant for understanding television viewing.

## 2. Specification phase

The aim of the phase is to *specify* the concepts and categories in relation to the central topics. The codes should be ordered and elaborated on, so the researcher develops a framework that describes the aspects that are important in the field in light of the problem statement (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 156). Coding in this phase is referred to as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006, p. 57) writes that the codes during focused coding are more directed, selective, and conceptual.

*Themes.* Within each of the three themes, I compared all interview fragments related to the theme. I looked for similarities and differences between the fragments in order to develop categories. This procedure is called *constant comparison* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis was guided by the idea of a *concept-indicator model* where each concept rests on empirical indications (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187). I regarded each of the three themes as a concept in a concept-indicator model, and the related interview fragments as the empirical indicators of that concept. While I compared the fragments within a theme, I looked for *dimensions*: I analyzed whether I could divide the fragments into poles of a dimension. I formulated the labels for the dimensions and poles on the basis of the interviews. To support the analysis in terms of dimensions, I

worked with a table for each theme (see Appendix D). In the table, I noted for each respondent what he/she had said regarding the poles of the dimension. For example for the third theme (television content), I noted whether the accounts referred to the pole *information and learning* or *pleasure and feelings* (or both). At the same time, I added related codes such as *news* and *pleasure* to the relevant interview fragments in the computer program Atlas.ti. When I wrote the results chapters, I printed the interview fragments that corresponded with a particular code and chose which one to use as a citation in the text. The analysis thus resulted in a description of dimensions for every theme. I will discuss the dimensions in chapter 4.

*Change and continuity in television viewing.* I decided to divide the changes, of which I had made an inventory in the exploration phase, in terms of the three themes; the three themes are close to the actual experiences of the respondents, and respondents clearly related changes in television viewing to changes in activities (theme 1, mainly retirement and physical changes), changes in the social context (theme 2, mainly the loss of a spouse), and they mentioned changes in their content preferences (theme 3). For the analysis, I made a table for each theme in which I reported the changes (see Appendix E). For instance for theme 1, I noted the change in the palette of activities, the change in television viewing and the evaluation of the new role of television viewing. The result of this analysis is a description of change and continuity for every theme. I will present this description in chapter 4.

*Selection and compensation.* I interpreted the information within each theme (the dimensions, and change and continuity) in terms of selection and compensation strategies. The just-mentioned tables regarding the changes within each theme included my interpretation in terms of the SOC-model (see Appendix E): on the basis of respondents' evaluations of the new role of television viewing, I tried to interpret whether watching television was part of selection or compensation strategies. The result was that I formulated three ways in which television viewing was part of selection strategies: one for each of the three themes. Along the same lines, I formulated three ways in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies. I will discuss the ways in which people use television in selection and compensation strategies in chapter 5. To summarize, the result of the specification phase was the conceptual framework that consisted of three themes, each with dimensions and a description of continuity and change.

### 3. Reduction phase

In the specification phase the analytic framework is developed "vertically," in the sense that for every research topic the structure of the relevant concept and related

dimensions, variables, and categories is elaborated. In the reduction phase, the theory is developed “horizontally:” the relationships between topics, and the relationships between concepts and between variables are specified (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 160).

My aim was to gain insight in the interrelations between the three themes (television viewing in a palette of activities, television viewing in the social context, and television content); their dimensions; change and continuity, and selection and compensation. In other words: in the previous phases I deconstructed television viewing into three themes, and in the reduction phase I reconstructed television viewing by looking at the three themes together.

To understand the relation between change and continuity in television viewing, I made a table in which I reported for respondents what they had said about change and what they had said about continuity (see Appendix F). The conclusion was that continuity and change in television viewing coexist. I will describe the relations between continuity and change, across the three themes, in chapter 4 (section 4.4.2).<sup>2</sup>

To analyze the connections between the three themes, I made a matrix that showed for each respondent ( $N = 55$ ) how he/she experienced television viewing in the palette of activities, television in the social context, and television content (see appendix G). As can be seen in the matrix, I used a classification of television viewing (i.e., meaningfulness versus meaninglessness) that does not appear in the results chapters of this dissertation. At that time, I made a dimension that ranged from *television viewing in a meaningful life* to *television viewing in an everyday life that was not experienced as meaningful*. Thus, the matrix shows how different typologies are possible on the basis of the dimensions that I had developed in the previous phases. While working on the matrix, I chose to focus on television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies, because that distinction makes it possible to describe how television viewing is related to developments in everyday life.

#### 4. Integration phase

The “final” phase is dedicated to defining the theory precisely, testing the relationships between the core concept and other concepts in the theory through new data, and formulating an answer to the problem statement, illustrating it with observations from

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<sup>2</sup> I started the interview study with more focus on change in television viewing than on continuity. During the exploration phase, this focus led to a table on changes in television viewing (Appendix C). As I described in chapter 1, aging involves changes and developments, and the question was how television viewing changes in relation to changes in life. During the specification phase, the notion of continuity clearly came to the fore, particularly with regard to television content (Appendix E). This transition during the analysis explains why I labelled the conceptual pair *change and continuity* in chapter 1, whereas the conceptual framework as presented in chapters 4 and 5 includes the conceptual pair *continuity and change*.

the data. The analysis has the characteristics of systematic research on the basis of a stable and complete analytic framework. The final analysis takes place on the profile card of each case, which contains summaries of the central topics. The observation units (respondents) are described and characterised according to the variables and relationships that make up the (new) theory. Now, it can be tested for every case whether the core concept is capable of reflecting the core of the respondents' perspectives, and the relationships of the core and central concepts for the research group as a whole can be tested (Wester & Peters, 2000, p. 162).

I did not conduct new interviews in this phase. I described the conceptual framework (chapters 4 and 5), and I made an extensive comparison of the framework with previous research, using qualitative research among older adults in other countries, and media research that included other age groups. I present the comparison with other literature in chapter 6.

### **3.8 Quality of the study**

Researchers use validity and reliability as criteria for assessing the quality of research. Several authors have argued that the criteria of validity and reliability are applicable to qualitative research, but that the criteria have to be adjusted to the characteristics of this type of research (e.g., Hak, 2007; Mays & Pope, 2000; Nievaard, 1990; Wester & Peters, 2004). Some authors (Guba, 1981; Miles & Huberman, 1994) therefore use different terms for referring to validity and reliability in qualitative research (internal validity = credibility; external validity = transferability; reliability = dependability). Below, I will discuss the ways in which I tried to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview study. In the concluding chapter (chapter 6), the transferability of the conceptual framework to other contexts ("external validity") will be discussed. Relevance and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) are other criteria for assessing the quality of a conceptual framework, and chapter 6 will show what the conceptual framework adds to previous research and I will outline its societal relevance.

*Validity.* Internal validity concerns the question to what extent the findings correctly represent the phenomenon that was studied. In qualitative research the term *fit* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) has been used to indicate that the conceptual framework should fit the phenomena that were observed. The question is whether the concepts represent the perspective of the respondents: is the actor's point of view or member knowledge represented (Hak, 2007)? I will discuss six ways in which I tried to improve the internal validity or fit of the conceptual framework.

First, the means of data gathering should fit with what the researcher aims to study (Hak, 2007; Van Zwieten & Willems, 2007). Respondents' perspectives can not be

represented “correctly” when an inappropriate way of data gathering is used. In this study, the focus was on the meanings regarding television viewing. Interviews were appropriate, because here respondents could articulate their meanings, experiences, feelings and evaluations about watching television; whereas a focus on the behavior itself would have led to another way of data gathering, such as participant observation. Important in the interviews was to give respondents room to talk about their experiences; therefore only a few initial questions were included on the interview guide. The interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes in order to create a natural context. Both interviewers and respondents referred to this context in many cases, for example when respondents showed where and how they sat when they watched television.

Second, several authors have indicated that researchers should have a prolonged engagement at a site to test their own biases and perceptions (Guba, 1981, p. 84); they should feel at home in the field under study (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 194). The researcher should use everything that occurs to increase his/her understanding and to elaborate the framework to describe the reality under study (Wester, 1996, p. 66). Such extensive experiences improve the “fit” between the concepts and the perspectives of the people who are studied. Therefore, in addition to conducting the “formal” interviews, I tried to gain insight in the everyday lives of older adults in several other ways. I have been a volunteer for three organizations in order to work with older adults; I spent several days observing day-care projects for older people; I attended lectures and plays that were organized by and for older people; I conducted interviews with people who worked with older people, and through all of this I had many informal conversations with older people over the years and developed long-standing relations with a few persons. I met both people who were active in social life, who volunteered and attended meetings, and people who were (almost) confined to their homes. The citations and case descriptions that I present in chapters 4 and 5 are all from the “formal” interviews, but I made memos about my other experiences and these experiences make me more certain that the conceptual framework refers to issues that are relevant to older adults.

Third, peer debriefing involves discussing results and the developing conceptual framework with other researchers in order to increase the quality of the conclusions and interpretations (Wester & Peters, 2004). I applied the obvious instances of peer debriefing: I discussed the results with my supervisors, and in meetings with colleagues of the department of Communication Science in Nijmegen. In addition, during a four-months stay at her department, I had multiple discussions about the present study with

Louise Mares, an expert on television and aging who works at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

Fourth, triangulation refers to the use of different methods to produce findings (e.g., Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963; Wester, 1990, p. 112). Triangulation, the use of multiple methods, is employed to more accurately assess what is going on and to reduce the flaws of a single method. Triangulation is not necessarily used to “uncover” one certain truth, but triangulation can also reveal differences (Duits, 2008, p. 82). I employed three types of triangulation.

1. I applied triangulation within method (Hijmans, 1994). In the interviews, interviewers asked about the topic television viewing with two different initial questions: “can you describe when you watch television on an average day?” and “what do you like to watch?” (see Appendix A). Thus, the respondent was invited to think about television viewing in two different ways. On the basis of the answers to these two initial questions, the interviewer could obtain a “complete” picture of the experience of television viewing. In addition, interviewers used two different ways to ask about changes in television viewing: first, interviewers asked “since when” or “for how long” respondents had experienced a particular aspect of their viewing as such; second, interviewers asked respondents directly whether they had experienced changes in their television viewing (see appendix A).

2. I employed theory triangulation. I analyzed the interviews from the angle of different perspectives. I used both *change and continuity*, and *selection and compensation* as sensitizing concepts. In the reduction phase I analyzed the relations between these concepts. This combination of perspectives led to a more complete picture.

3. Researcher triangulation took place, regarding both the interviews and the analysis. Interviews were conducted by me and by students. The advantage is that weaknesses or biases of interviewers are less problematic, because other interviewers do not have the same weaknesses. In the research seminar, students conducted open coding and tried to formulate concept-indicator models including dimensions. Particularly their definitions of, and difficulties with, the concepts of selection and compensation were useful to me and have influenced the current definitions.

Fifth, member checks refer to reporting back to the people involved so that they can comment on the researcher’s descriptions (Wester & Peters, 2004). I applied a very limited form of member checking during the interviews: interviewers summarized respondents’ accounts during the interviews so that respondents could correct interviewers if they had misinterpreted respondents’ stories. In addition, an older friend of mine read a previous version of chapter 4 and wrote down her comments: she



explained what she had recognized in my descriptions, and she added information about her own television use and that of older people she knew.

Sixth, looking for negative cases, rival explanations and outliers is a way to ensure that the researcher consciously leaves his/her viewpoint (Charmaz, 2006, p. 101,102; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 271). The results of this exercise can signal that the researcher had a biased point of view (Wester, 1990, p. 114). I employed this strategy particularly in the reduction phase when I was analyzing connections between concepts. For example, when I analyzed the relations between the changes in the three themes, I developed the hypothesis that particularly respondents who experienced problems in their lives reported that they had grown more sensitive and preferred cheerful content. When I looked for negative cases, I found that also respondents who did not mention problems in their everyday lives indicated that they were particularly interested in cheerful content. Consequently, I decided to adjust the hypothesis and to report that becoming more sensitive, regarding television content, was not necessarily directly related to changes or problems in everyday life (see section 4.4.2).

*Reliability.* Reliability refers to the way in which the researcher carries out the study, and more specifically the extent to which other researchers can follow the research process (Hijmans & Wester, 2006). In most qualitative research, other researchers can not really replicate a study, but at least other researchers should be able to follow how the researcher conducted the study and, in theory, should be able to go through the phases in the study (Wester & Peters, 2004, p. 192).

In the current chapter, I provided the logic of the study and the arguments for the choices that I made. I based this report on the memos that I wrote during the study. The tables and the matrix in the appendixes make visible how I conducted the analysis. Moreover, the presentation of citations in chapters 4 and 5 makes clear that the data are actually there, and makes it possible for others to verify the relations between the “raw” data and the interpretations (Van Zwieten & Willems, 2007).

While I conducted the study, I had to make my viewpoints regarding the analysis explicit. I worked with student-interviewers, which entailed that I had to explain to others how the interviews should be conducted. I had to make clear what the probing should be directed at and what information the interviewers should strive for. In that sense, it was possible for others to follow how I conducted the interviews and how I wanted to analyze them. Peer debriefing, as described above, implied that I had to explicitly formulate my viewpoints during the ongoing analysis.

### **3.9 Preview of chapters 4 and 5**

The conceptual framework of television viewing and aging will be presented in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 contains a description of the three themes: television viewing in a palette of activities, television viewing in the social context, and television content. For each theme, the dimensions and *continuity and change* will be outlined. Chapter 5 describes how television viewing is part of selection and compensation strategies.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Interview study: Continuity and change within three themes**

This is the first of two chapters that involve the findings of the interview study. The goal of the qualitative interview study was to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives. I studied this topic from a life-span perspective, and therefore I focused on continuity and change in television use, and on how television viewing is part of the adaptation strategies selection and compensation.

On the basis of the interview study, I have developed the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging that will be described in two chapters. The framework consists of the following major components:

- 1) Three themes within older adults' experiences of television viewing: first, television viewing in a palette of activities; second, television viewing in the social context, and third, television content. The three themes together provide a picture of how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives.
- 2) Continuity and change in television viewing. The description of continuity and change within the three themes shows how television viewing evolves as people age.
- 3) Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. The description of television viewing in terms of selection and compensation strategies shows how television viewing is related to developments in everyday life.

In the current chapter, I will describe the three themes; for each theme I will describe the variations within that theme, and how continuity and change were apparent. I will discuss television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies in chapter 5.

#### **4.1 Analysis: Construction of the three themes**

The themes are based on how older adults (people aged 65 years and older,  $N = 86$ ) talked about their television viewing. I divided their accounts into the three themes and within each theme I compared the interview fragments and formulated dimensions that show how the accounts vary within that theme. Thus, the themes and dimensions are close to the everyday experiences of the older television viewers. The three themes

together provide a picture of how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives. In order to gain insight in how watching television develops as people grow older, I made overviews of what interviewees had said about continuity and change within each theme<sup>1</sup>.

In the current chapter, each section is devoted to one theme. Within each section I will discuss the variations within that theme, and subsequently describe continuity and change. Table 4.1 is an overview of the dimensions and *continuity and change* within each theme, and thus can be used as a guideline when reading this chapter.

#### **4.2 Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities**

The first theme involves how respondents experienced the activity of viewing television amidst the other pastimes that they had in their everyday lives. I distinguished the theme *television viewing in a palette of activities* because it was common that respondents explicitly related their television viewing to other activities. Some respondents were eager to explain all the things that they did in addition to watching television. They said for example: “I don’t watch television at daytime; I have enough to do” and “I always have too short a time.” On the other hand, respondents explained how their television viewing was determined by the lack of other activities. They said things like: “I can’t do anything else” or “Filling the time is a very big problem.”

##### **4.2.1 Experience of the pastime television viewing amidst other activities**

Respondents clearly differed in how they experienced television viewing in relation to other activities. These experiences ranged from “experiencing television viewing as a choice amidst other meaningful activities” to “watching television because other activities are not possible.” These two extremes will be discussed below.

##### *Television viewing as a choice*

*Television viewing as a choice* refers to the situation where respondents had a palette of activities that were meaningful to them and that they were able to do, and within this context they chose to watch television because television contributed something to their lives. Thus, television viewing was a positive choice, in the sense that television was chosen because it had something to contribute, and television viewing was not related to losses or decreases of other pastimes. As an aside, when I signal that television viewing is a choice, I do not mean that television viewing is necessarily part of a conscious

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3 (section 3.7) provides a more elaborate description of the analysis.

Table 4.1 Overview of the three themes in experiences of television viewing

**Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities (section 4.2)**

**Dimension: Experience of the pastime TV viewing amidst other activities**

Ranges from *TV viewing as a choice* to *TV viewing for want of something better*.

**Change:**

Three changes in life are important for the experience of the pastime TV viewing: available time, physical possibilities, desired activity level.

Changes in the amount of viewing: increase in viewing experienced as positive, neutral or negative; decrease in viewing.

**Continuity:**

The abovementioned changes in TV viewing are absent.

Continuity in status of TV viewing.

**Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context (section 4.3)**

**Dimension: TV viewing as part of relatedness**

Ranges from *positive* to *negative*.

**TV viewing and autonomy**

**Change:**

TV viewing as part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere.

**Continuity:**

Changes in TV viewing in the social context are absent.

**Theme 3: Television content (section 4.4)**

**Dimension 1: Functions of television content**

*Information and learning* versus *Pleasure and feelings*.

**Dimension 2: Relationship of television content with domains in viewers' everyday lives**

Television content is related to domains that range from *concrete* to *abstract*.

**Dimension 3: Status of program types**

Status varies from *low* to *high*.

**Continuity:**

Continuity in interests.

**Change:**

Television content in relation to changes in themes 1 and 2: continuity in content preferences remains important; television content in adaptation strategies after losses; some content becomes less important because of changes in activities; physical challenges sometimes ask for particular kinds of programs.

Three changes regarding television content are more independent of changes in the activity and social context: putting things into perspective, becoming more sensitive, and the focus on keeping the brain active.

Nostalgia and evaluations of changes in program supply (both continuity and change).

decision-making process in which respondents weigh up the pros and cons of different activities; when respondents talked about what they liked about television viewing (and when they did not relate watching television to losses or problems in their lives), I concluded that they chose to watch because television added something to their lives.

Respondents for whom television viewing was a choice were highly diverse in their use of television. They differed in how enthusiastic they were about television viewing: some respondents did not like television viewing and only watched a few specific programs, whereas other respondents enjoyed watching television several hours a day. In addition, respondents differed in why they chose television: some focused more on the pastime television viewing (for example watching the whole evening or watching together with somebody else), whereas other respondents focused more on choosing particular programs. The specific reasons for watching television will be discussed more elaborately in the sections about the other two themes.

Respondents for whom television viewing was a choice were not only diverse in their television use, but also in their radius of action. On the one end, there were respondents who had very active lives outside of their homes, sometimes including trips to other continents or countries. Some of these respondents explained that they had other things to do and therefore they did not need to rely on television. Sometimes they compared their situation with the situation of other people who were more confined to their homes. These “active” respondents pointed out that when they would be more confined to their homes, maybe they would watch more television, but that at this time they did not need the television that much. The idea that one does not watch that much television because there are other activities to do can be illustrated with the following excerpt:

I have a sister who is a widow and she watches all those series and she knows everything about that, and we [he and his wife] are not interested in that. But that’s also because we talk with each other, we go out, we go singing, yes, we have so many other things. (#69, man, 75 years)<sup>2</sup>

On the other end, some of the respondents who spent most of their time at home perceived their television viewing as a choice too and saw the variety of the pastimes they had. They perceived television viewing as a choice amidst pastimes such as reading, making crossword puzzles, and doing needlework. It seemed important for respondents to feel that they had meaningful activities and that they had enough to do despite the fact that they spent much time at home. The following citation illustrates the significance of meaningful pastimes inside the home:

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<sup>2</sup> I translated citations from Dutch and edited them.

It is for about six years now that we actually never leave the house. But we are lucky that we have many hobbies so we do not have to be bored. It is often too short a time.  
[Then I think:] God, is it already that late? (#44, woman, 78 years)

In these cases, despite the fact that interviewees were confined to their homes, television viewing was satisfactory because respondents felt that they had several activities to choose from and they had reasons to watch. In these cases, respondents focused on what they were able to do and they did not perceive their television viewing as determined by what they were not able to do (anymore).

*Television viewing for want of something better*

On the other end of the spectrum were respondents who felt that they watched for want of something better. Respondents were dissatisfied with the role of television viewing in their lives when they saw their television viewing as determined by things that they were not able to do (anymore). They preferred to do something else, but that was not possible. Here, television viewing is bittersweet (see also Gauntlett & Hill, 1999, p. 207): pleasure alloyed with pain. On the one hand television viewing provides some pleasure to these respondents, but on the other hand television viewing came with negative feelings, because other activities actually would have been better.

There were two main reasons why respondents had problems with conducting pastimes besides television viewing. First, some respondents felt that they did not have enough to do: they felt an incapability to have meaningful pastimes. Second, some respondents saw their television viewing as determined by their physical constraints.

*Having things to do.* Some respondents felt that they did not have enough to do. Physically they were able to do several things, but they did not know what to do with their time. Interests and hobbies ask for initiative and psychological resources; at the same time, television is readily available and does not require much initiative. When people watched television because they felt they had nothing else to do, they did not find television viewing satisfactory. This can be illustrated by a man who described himself as addicted to television: he watched television from when he got up until when he went to bed. Previously he had done volunteer work, but he did not feel like doing that anymore. He said that he was not a hobbyist and that previously he had had other things, but now the television was what remained for him: “or you have to stare out of the window all day.” Television was an agreeable repose to him: it did give him some pleasure. However, he was not happy with this life:

Filling the time is a very large problem in fact. I fall back on television because I like it, but in fact it is not an active life that I am leading. It is very much, I'll say it, an awful life isn't it? When you're so dependent on television.

*Interviewer: Do you experience it like that?*

Yes, I do. But you are who you are, aren't you? You don't change anything about it. People sometimes say: "you should go do this or you should go do that," but what if I don't feel like that? (...) In fact I think this is a negative approach to my life, but yeh, I am at peace with it.

*Interviewer: Yes, because you could choose to go to do something else.*

Yes, but I wouldn't know anything. I do take a walk, every day for half an hour; you have to keep up with that. I also do some grocery shopping although I have meals-on-wheels, so.. There is nothing more to say about it, right? (#3, man, 72 years)

Here we see that the interviewee did have some things to do in his daily life, but he felt like he had almost nothing to do. He felt rather depressed about his life. He appreciated television viewing because it gave him something to do, but he felt that his life in which television viewing played such a central role was not how his life should be.

*Physical limitations.* The second way in which respondents related television viewing to things they were not able to do, was when they saw their television viewing as determined by their physical limitations. They felt that they did not watch television of their own free will: they would rather do something else but that was not possible, which led them to television. They were dissatisfied with their situation, and television, one of the few options available, was not able to make the situation right. One of the respondents who experienced television viewing this way had a lung disease which made it difficult for her to breathe and which made her very tired. Even switching on the television was a challenge: sometimes she got so tired from going to the other side of the room to switch on the television, that she was not able to make coffee anymore. She watched television all day:

I am actually confined to it [television], because I can not do anything else. I watch very differently than you normally watch television. Previously, I never watched television the whole day. But now it is from early in the morning till late at night. So the main thing is boredom. Because I can not do anything; I can not have a hobby or something. Because after doing a few small things, I already don't have air anymore. So, because of my disability I am confined to the television, let's put it like that (...). Well, looking at my situation, televisions are at least good for something. (...) Other people are lucky; they can stretch their legs; they can get out. I am at home and confined to my chair. I wish it would be different [sighs]. (...) What else can I do? Because I do not have other options. I have nothing at all. (#32, woman, 66 years)

This interviewee had been housebound for half a year. Before that, she was able to go out on her "scoot mobile," which she preferred over television viewing.

Then I would go for a ride in the afternoon; I didn't watch television in the afternoon then. Then I went into town; I made sure that I had to get a few groceries myself, so that I had a purpose to go into town. Unfortunately I can't do that anymore. That is very



unfortunate. If it would have been possible, I would have been on that thing by now. I would put on my clothes and go. (#32)

Within her problematic situation, she also looked at the positive side, in the sense that she was glad to have television. She considered herself lucky, compared with other people, because she had a dish and therefore was able to receive a lot of channels. Despite her positive notes, all in all, her television use was determined by her impossibilities:

*Interviewer: So within the circumstances you are satisfied with the TV?*

Yeh. And by the way, I have to. I have to adjust myself. Yes, television is the only thing that I've got. (#32)

To sum up, I have described the two ends of the spectrum: on the one end, people who experience television viewing as a positive choice amidst other meaningful activities, and on the other end people who watch television because it is (almost) the only thing they can do. There are people whose situation is in between these two extremes: they sometimes watch television for want of something, as a way to pass the time when nothing better is available, but they do have other options too.

#### **4.2.2 Television viewing in a palette of activities: change and continuity**

In order to shed light on how watching television develops as people age, I will describe what respondents said about continuity and change within the first theme. I will start with the description of change, because part of the discussion of continuity will simply consist of saying that for some respondents the changes described did not occur.

##### *Change*

First, the experiences of the pastime television viewing (i.e., seeing television viewing either as a positive choice or as determined by impossibilities) were related to changes in life. Second, changes in the amount of television viewing were experienced in very different ways (see table 4.1 for a summary).

*Changes in life.* Three changes in life appeared to be particularly important for the experience of the pastime television viewing: changes in available time, changes in the range of activities that were physically possible, and changes in the desired activity level. First, many respondents had more time available for television viewing and other leisure than before, because they had to spend less time on obligations. Because of retirement and children leaving home, many respondents had more freedom than before to decide for themselves how they wished to spend their time. This increased freedom meant that more than earlier in their lives, people needed to take initiative to have meaningful pastimes in everyday life. Some respondents had the possibility of watching

television the whole day if they would want to, and this situation seemed to be a reason for several respondents to explain what they did with their time, and to emphasize that they did not watch television during the day. Although there often was an increase in available time because of retirement or changes in family life, there were also new “obligations” such as taking care of an ill partner, doing volunteer work, or taking care of grandchildren.

Second, changes in physical possibilities determined which activities were possible and which were not. Some respondents did not report any physical problems, but others had (severe) physical limitations. However, it was not simply a matter of physical possibilities; central to the experience of respondents was how they perceived their situation: some of them focused on what they were able to do and saw television viewing as a choice amidst these other possibilities, even when they had fewer possibilities than before, whereas others saw television viewing as determined by what was not possible (see section 4.2.1).

Third, some respondents experienced a change in the need for active and/or diverse pastimes. Some interviewees indicated that they desired more rest than before: they wished for fewer activities or less active pastimes. In reaction to physical aging or a period of illness, they preferred to live their life in a more relaxed way. Even though in some cases they were physically able to do almost the same things as before, they felt it was time to slow down a bit. For example, several participants indicated that previously they had liked to go on holidays, whereas they did not feel that need anymore.

*Changes in the amount of television viewing.* The second observation regarding change within the first theme was that changes in the amount of viewing were experienced in different ways. I will discuss how respondents evaluated an increase in viewing as positive, as neutral, or as negative. Increases in viewing were related to the three changes in life: retirement, which is the most frequently mentioned change in available time, changes in physical possibilities, and changes in desired activity level. The evaluations concern the increase in television viewing, not the change in life. Subsequently, I will describe what respondents said about a decrease in their television viewing.

*An increase in watching television: experienced as positive.* A positive experience of an increase in viewing came from experiencing television viewing as a choice. Several respondents explained that they watched more television after their retirement. Some respondents experienced the increased role of television after retirement as positive because they felt that now they had the freedom to choose what they wished to do, in contrast to when they had worked. The positive experience of having more room after retirement for one’s own choices can be exemplified with the following citation:

Television viewing is a very important part of how I spend my time.

*Interviewer: Has it always been like that?*

No, no, for sure not when I worked. That is the big difference. I worked till I was sixty years old and during those years I brought work home, well, then that thing [television] would not even be switched on, because I did not want to run that risk, because I had to get into the things regarding work. So no, I did establish priorities. But actually I have given myself permission, by saying: I am retired now and now I can nicely do what I personally find most fun and relaxing. (#76, woman, 73 years)

Physical problems sometimes meant that respondents watched more television than before, because television viewing was one of the activities that was possible for them: television is available inside the home, and television has both sound and images, which was an advantage when for example reading was a problem. Respondents were satisfied with the new role of television viewing, when they felt that watching television was still a choice among several activities, and when they chose television because they liked it. This can be exemplified with the following story: one of the interviewed couples spent most of their time at home; it had been like that for the previous eight years. This situation was caused mainly by the health condition of the man; she took care of him, which was a lot of work, and therefore she was confined to the home most of the time as well. They indicated that this was not an easy situation, but that they tried to accept the situation and to keep their spirits up. In good spirits they explained how they were never bored: they liked to read, to make crossword puzzles, to work with the computer, to play rummikub, and to watch television programs that they enjoyed. Previously they had not been really television-minded; because of their confinement, they watched more television than before. They emphasized that they chose particular programs, and they talked enthusiastically about those.

Man: We're not sitting in front of the television that much. Only those programs that we like. But not the rest of the time. We really do not need to be entertained by the television. (...)

Woman: We watch a bit more nowadays; actually I do like that. (#40, man, 92 years; woman, 75 years)

In short, even in light of limitations in possible activities, some respondents experienced television viewing as a choice.

An increase in viewing can also be related to the third change in life: the process of feeling the need for a life with fewer or less active pastimes. Consider the following citation:

I watch more television now. Previously, I could go for a bicycle ride of 20 kilometres, but I can't do that anymore. That it becomes less is noticeable in cycling and walking. Sometimes you don't want to know that things really become less and that not

everything can be fixed anymore (...). And I can't complain because there are a lot of things that I can do (...). I am tired sooner, so I sit down nicely by the television and make it cozy with a drink and those kinds of things (...). And when I watch a program that I like, then I really like television viewing (...). Every night I enjoy the moment that I can sit down nicely, put the cushions easily, have a cup of tea, and watch television. (#18, woman, 81 years)

Here, television viewing served the goal of making it cozy inside the home, which had become more important because of physical aging. Television viewing was related to positive feelings. Other activities were possible as well, and among these the interviewee chose television because television contributed something to her life. She adjusted her goals and focused on what she was able to do.

*An increase in watching television: experienced as neutral.* An increased role of television viewing was not necessarily viewed as positive or negative. Some participants took it as a matter of fact: their situation had changed, which just made it *possible* to watch more or to watch at daytime. Some interviewees signalled that retirement or the decline of social contacts resulted in more spare time and therefore they "automatically" watched more television. A man explained that he had resigned from several functions in social life, like being president of the tennis club and serving on boards, because he could not stand the pressure anymore and felt that it was time for young people to take over. He said that it was nice to have more time available; he felt free because he had fewer obligations now. He described that his television viewing had increased simply because he had more time available; he did not evaluate the increase in viewing as either good or bad.

I watch more television now than before. It is not out of boredom; that goes too far. Because you can switch the television off; it is just you watch more because of this change. You have to fill the time. That may sound a bit negative, but I just mean: you have 24 hours a day; of those 24 hours you sleep say 8 hours.. so you just get more time when something else stops. You fill that time, partly with television viewing. (#34, man, 67 years)

*An increase in viewing: experienced as negative.* There were respondents who considered the growing importance of television viewing in their lives as negative, because they felt that the activities that they had previously done were more valuable. They focused on what they had had before, what they were not able to do anymore, on what they had lost. The following interviewee explained that she and her husband had moved from their farm to a smaller home (for seniors) ten years ago, which had resulted in more time for them to do other things. Especially after her husband had died, she watched television at night as a way to pass the time:

When we came here, we had more time than before. So automatically we watched more television. Previously we just did not have time to watch television, and then you also didn't feel that need, because you had enough to do. Then we were on the land and everything was good. There, you really had things to do. (#28, woman, 83 years)

Physical aging sometimes led to an unsatisfactory situation. An example was a couple who lived in a nursing home. Particularly the woman expressed that she was not happy that they had had to move to the nursing home, and she said that they watched television out of boredom. Regarding living in the nursing home she said:

We have been here for a couple of years. Two years.

Husband: This is our last ride, isn't it? For everybody who lives here.

Wife: Yes. It is not pleasant; I don't think it is pleasant. Then one person dies, then another person dies. You have that when you live in your own normal house too, but not like this.

Husband: That's how it is.

Wife: Yes, that's how it is. And Dad [her husband] wanted to move here, not me, I wanted to stay where we lived. (...) We feel old, we are not as firm as we used to be. This way you have to give up everything. I wouldn't be able to live in our big house anymore. I do not like it here, but on the other hand I think: we didn't have a choice. (#45, woman, 91 years; man, 89 years)

Within this situation, that she did not like, she described television viewing as follows:

When we are bored, we turn the television on. We don't go anywhere. We do not have a car anymore. So we are completely dependent on the children and they are busy too. I don't get anywhere because I have trouble walking. (...) Sometimes when we are bored, we switch it on. Because we do not have anything else to do. I can't read anymore. (...) We do have to pass it, don't we, the time.

*A decrease in watching television.* There were respondents who reported a decline in television viewing. One respondent explained this decline in viewing after his retirement as follows:

It may sound funny, but I have the impression that, since I have retired from work, I watch less television than when I did work. Maybe at that time it was a form of relaxation or distraction. Now I watch a little bit of television, because at daytime I have enough distraction in the form of cycling and walking and reading for example, so now I watch television more selectively than I did before. Back then, sometimes I was hanging in front of the television the whole evening, so to speak. And that hanging in front of the television has decreased since I do not work anymore. (#55, man, 65 years)

In addition to retirement, there were two other circumstances that led to a decrease in television viewing: first, a period in which respondents watched more television because they were homebound because of physical problems (of themselves or their partners) was sometimes followed by a period in which they watched less television again.

Second, some respondents watched less television than before because taking care of their partner took a lot of their time.

#### *Continuity*

I will discuss two main observations regarding continuity within the first theme: first, continuity simply occurred in the sense that for some respondents the abovementioned changes in life and/or television viewing were not present. Second, continuity was sometimes apparent regarding the status of the pastime television viewing.

*Continuity in amount and role of television viewing.* Some respondents still had their paid jobs and reported that they had not changed physically. In addition, there were respondents who did retire and for whom retirement had led to adaptation to the new situation, and therefore to changes in pastimes, but for whom television viewing was not part of these changes and had remained stable. For example:

When you go into retirement, you think: now I have an enormous amount of time. But it has occurred to me that I actually always have too short a time. And how is that? Because you see it coming: well, I do not have a regulated job anymore; I have to make sure I stay active. There are a great many things I have jumped into. Among others: [lists several activities]. So the whole day I have work to do. And I would also feel a bit guilty when I would watch that stupid thing [television]. Like, don't you have something more useful to do? (#69, man, 75 years)

In addition, there were respondents who had physical problems and were therefore (almost) confined to their homes, and who did not change their television viewing. An example was an interviewee (#39, man, 81 years) who had severe health problems and almost did not leave the house. He said that he and his family had never been fond of television. Even though he spent most of the time at home, he only watched a few particular programs that he liked and focused on things that he was more interested in such as reading.

*Continuity in status of television viewing.* Some respondents indicated that they had always been critical towards television viewing, whereas others said that they had always been enthusiastic about television. Some interviewees saw watching (too much) television as a waste of time, and therefore watching television was sometimes accompanied by feelings of guilt. These attitudes and feelings toward television viewing were part of the process when people watched more television than before. Some respondents indicated how they went through a process of allowing themselves to watch more: they used expressions such as "giving myself permission" or they anticipated such changes: they hoped that if they would get ill, they would be able to put aside their critical attitude toward television. This critical attitude seemed to be a reason why many

respondents stressed that they did not watch that much television and/or that they also conducted other activities.

#### **4.3 Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context**

In the interviews, many respondents talked about how they watched television together with other people or they explicitly related their television viewing to living alone. In other words, the social setting in which older people watched television was relevant to their experience of television viewing. Like a woman said (#48; 65 years, divorced for 20 years): “I am just a single person, so what else should I do, right?” I will describe the experiences of television viewing for older adults who lived together and for older adults who lived alone (section 4.3.1). The description will show that television viewing was part of relatedness and autonomy. Subsequently, I will focus on change, that is, on how television viewing was part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere (section 4.3.2).

##### **4.3.1 Meanings of television viewing in the social context**

Television viewing was part of relatedness and autonomy. In psychological literature, relatedness and autonomy have long been recognized as basic needs (Kagitcibasi, 2005) or central motives across the life span (Bode, Westerhof, & Dittmann-Kohli, 2001). Relatedness refers to bonds with other people (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994), and autonomy refers to self-rule and volition (Kagitcibasi, 2005). The interviews showed that television viewing was part of relatedness in several ways, that is to say, television viewing contributed to connections with other people and with society. Below, I will discuss the dimension that shows these contributions to relatedness. Subsequently, I will discuss the issue of autonomy, i.e., the extent to which people could make their own television choices.

##### *Television viewing as part of relatedness*

The contributions of television viewing to connections with other people and society ranged from positive to negative. Clearly, the issue of relatedness was different for older adults who lived together and older adults who lived alone, therefore I will discuss these two social settings separately. The dimension is summarized in table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Television viewing as part of relatedness

<i>Contribution of TV viewing to relatedness</i>	<i>Social setting</i>	
	<i>Living together</i>	<i>Living alone</i>
Positive contribution	Enjoyment of sharing television viewing	Television brings life and “people” inside the home
Potentially problematic	Necessity of attuning behavior	
Negative contribution	Television limits conversation	Not sharing television viewing with another person

For people who lived together, television viewing was part of relatedness because television viewing played a role in the relationship between household members<sup>3</sup>.

*Enjoyment of sharing television viewing.* Television contributed positively to relatedness, when respondents watched television with their partners because they enjoyed sharing this activity. Some respondents experienced it as cozy to watch television together, and for some this was the most important reason to switch on the television. The importance of watching together is exemplified by a woman who explained that she had several activities, always time too short, and she liked watching together with her husband:

When I am home alone at night, I switch it off; then I sit down and read. But when dad [husband] is at home we watch together. We can't do without it. (#58, woman, 75 years)

Some respondents particularly enjoyed television viewing as a shared activity, because partners had many different activities and did not have that much time together. On the other end, television viewing could also be especially important when respondents spent most of the time at home and therefore did not attain much new input for their conversations. The following excerpt comes from a couple that I mentioned in section 4.2.2, who lived in a nursing home and watched television out of boredom. They explicitly explained how they needed television as input in their relationship:

Man: And then when she is not here and I am, I find something [on television] what we can discuss together later; otherwise it would be very quiet here.

Woman: As you grow older, you don't have much to talk about anymore, right? Because you do not experience anything anymore.

Man: No

<sup>3</sup> In the study, most people who lived together were married couples.



Woman: Because I always ask him: “and, was there any news downstairs?” [In the common room where they can meet other residents; she rarely goes there]. Well, no.

Man: Well, no, nothing special.

Woman: Then we have nothing more to say.

*Interviewer: But are you saying that the television sometimes gives something to..*

Man: Television is an addition to the emptiness of other conversations.

Woman: With other people.

Man: A counterbalance. That you have something: “oh did you hear that?” (#45, woman, 91 years; man, 89 years)

Not only household members enjoyed television viewing as a shared activity. Television viewing was also shared with people outside of the own household, thus contributing to relatedness to them. Some respondents explained how they shared an interest in particular programs with siblings or friends, or they enjoyed watching together with grandchildren. As an example: a woman (#7, 69 years) described that she had one addiction per day, the soap opera *As The World Turns*, that her sister introduced her to, twelve years ago. The respondent visited her sister sometimes and then they read magazines with stories about the actors and actresses. Also, respondents sometimes made an event out of watching together. For example with important soccer matches or ice skating races: watching together, dressed in orange, the color of the Dutch team.

When interviewees were asked about viewing with their grandchildren, they did not comment on it that much: they mentioned that sometimes the grandchildren watched something and they may or may not watch with them for a bit. Talking about watching with their grandchildren seemed a bit off topic for some respondents in the interviews, because this television use was not part of their everyday routines or because within the relationship with their grandchildren they did not consider watching television especially important. Television viewing was only one of the shared activities with grandchildren. However, some grandparents talked enthusiastically about situations in which they watched television with their grandchildren together. For instance, a woman (#6, woman, 67 years) described very enthusiastically how she watched *Dancing with the stars* one night together with her husband and two grandchildren. She described vividly how the grandchildren (ten and twelve years old) loved watching the show, and how they were jumping up and down in excitement about the scores the contestants received. This interviewee loved seeing the grandchildren enjoying themselves while watching, whereas she also liked sharing other activities with them such as playing cards and doing games.

*Necessity of attuning behavior.* I have just described how watching together can be a pleasurable experience and thus contributed positively to relatedness within the

household. However, the downside of living together was that people needed to attune their television behavior, which was especially problematic when people differed in their attitudes toward television viewing or to specific programs. When partners found a satisfactory solution to deal with these differences, television was a positive or neutral element of relatedness; household members felt connected because the television situation was satisfactory to both. However, arguments about television viewing were a hindrance to relatedness.

Some respondents expressed disappointment about the television choices their partner or other household members made. For example, a female respondent (#38, 82 years) considered herself to be pro television. In the interview she said to her husband (82 years): “you’re always kind of negative about it [television]; sometimes I think that is a pity.” To which he said: “well, I am really critical; I think: nonsense.”

When partners differed in their stances toward television viewing or particular programs, they indicated three scenarios in their behavior: first, they did watch a program together although one of them was not particularly interested in that program; second, one of them did not watch and did something else, and third, they both watched television, but different programs on different television sets.

Regarding the first scenario: some respondents indicated that they mainly watched a program because their partners watched it, not because of the program itself<sup>4</sup>. Like in the following citation:

There is the series *Keyzer en de Boer*. We watch that. I do not like it all that much, but my wife does. So regularly we do watch that kind of episodes together. I do not think it is great, but well, we watch it together. It is of course suitable for doing something together. We are both rather active; my wife is even more active than I am, and of course we do not spend that much time together. (#34, man, 67 years)

Some respondents indicated that such co-viewing led to discovering programs that they had not watched before. A man (#52, 65 years) had started watching particular programs, not very high-standard ones according to him, because his daughter temporarily lived with him and watched those programs. It turned out that he found those programs interesting too.

The second scenario, in which one partner watches television while the other person does something else, is exemplified by a woman (#7, 69 years) who said that her husband watched science fiction movies a lot, whereas she preferred to do something else: these programs did not inspire her that much.

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<sup>4</sup> In Dutch some respondents used the word “meekijken” which signals that they watch something because they watch it **with** someone; they are exposed to television because another person is watching.

Third, some couples had (at least) two television sets in their homes, so each of them was able to watch what they preferred. The couple that I described before, who lived in a nursing home and watched out of boredom and as input for their conversation (#45, 91 and 89 years), explained jokingly that their children had given them a second television set to put in the other room in their apartment because he watched a lot of sports and she did not like to be part of that all the time.

*Television viewing limits conversation.* Some respondents mentioned that television viewing takes the attention away from the conversation with other people, thus hindering relatedness. This downside of watching television together was mentioned with regard to watching with household members, as well as watching with visitors.

An example regarding watching within the household is provided by a woman (#51; 65 years) who described how her husband and son ate dinner in front of the television. She did not join in that practice, because she did not agree with it: she ate in the kitchen. Thus, she missed out on things that her husband and son talked about when sitting in front of the television, which evoked negative feelings in her regarding relatedness. For her the kitchen table meant a place to share things and talk, and television had ruined that.

This downside of watching television, i.e., television limits the conversation, was frequently mentioned with regard to watching when people come to visit; it was a common pattern that respondents said that they did not watch when they had visitors. They stated that watching television limited the conversation with visitors, and they only watched television together in case of something special such as an important soccer match. For example, a man (77 years) said: “When you have visitors, then you have to talk and the television is off. Otherwise it is not cozy anymore.” A similar attitude came across in the interview with the woman whom I referred to earlier, because she enjoyed watching *Dancing with the stars* together with her grandchildren (#6; 67 years). She thought that it was not cozy at all to have the television on when people came to visit, because in that case everybody would keep an eye on the television set.

*Living alone.* Also for people who lived alone, the contributions of television viewing to relatedness ranged from positive to negative. Television viewing contributed positively to relatedness because television made viewers feel connected with people outside the home, and the negative side was that some people felt sad because they were not able to share television viewing with another person (in the house) anymore.

*Television brings life and “people” inside the home.* When interviewees talked about their television watching when living alone, some of them said that television brought “people” and life inside the home, or they talked about the voices and sounds

that television brought to the home that otherwise would be quiet. Television brought life and “people,” which can be understood in terms of relatedness: television contributes to the feeling of having contact. A respondent (#13, woman, 76 years, widowed since 5 years) said that she switched on the television for company and to have a voice inside the house: “Then there is life in my home. I do have a fish, but he doesn’t say anything!” Along the same lines, a man explained:

When I drink coffee in the morning, at ten o’clock and I sit here alone, then I switch on the television for a bit. Then I, yes, why do I switch it on, then I don’t feel so alone with that coffee. (#74, man, 75 years, widowed for 2 years)

So television brought life and sounds into empty homes, but there was variation in this function of television: for some respondents this use of television indicated some kind of routine that did not seem to refer to problems, whereas other respondents used television as a help in resolving negative feelings such as loneliness and restlessness. This variation can be clarified with the following two examples. The use of television as company, not related to problems, was visible in the story of a woman about whom I related earlier that she watched television less than before because she used to watch together with her family members (#56). She explained that sometimes she switched on the television when she came home late at night:

When I come home at night, and it doesn’t matter where I’ve been, a concert or the children, or a birthday, then the first thing I do: I take off my shoes, have a drink and switch on the TV. (...) I don’t know what it is, whether it is because I had people around me the whole evening and... It’s not that I have problems with coming home. Maybe it is that empty house, that I want some movement around me. I don’t know, I always do it, always, I switch on the TV. (#56, woman, 74 years, divorced since 23 years)

This respondent switched on the television for some movement in the empty house, and she did not think underlying problems were the reason for this habit. In contrast, another interviewee described that she always had the television on all night, because of her problems. Television, or the radio, gave her the feeling that somebody was at home and that she was not alone: “Then I share something; then I hear about life around me, and then I live more.” She articulated why she was not able to switch off the television:

There are many things in my life that actually do not give me the rest and concentration that I would need to live a peaceful life. Actually that restlessness, that internal restlessness, is masked by television, and it is easier to live with when I turn on the television. (#11, woman, 68 years, no relationship)

This respondent used television to mask her negative feelings. However, this type of television use was not satisfactory to her. She said it would be much better if she would be able to turn the television off: “It is seldom that I really switch it off. I hate that about

myself.” Her underlying restlessness prevented her from switching off the television, which she would prefer because it would enable her to do other things such as reading.

*Not sharing television viewing with another person.* Some respondents felt it was a pity that they could not share their viewing with another person (anymore). For some, television viewing or particular content lost its charm. Sadness particularly came into play when in the past sharing the activity was the essence of watching television. An example comes from a participant (#20, woman, 87 years, widow since one year) who described how she used to watch soccer together with her family. Her husband used to support a particular team, whereas she and the children supported another one. They gave comments during the match, teased each other, and jumped up when there was a goal. Now, she did not watch those matches anymore. Sometimes her children called her to say that their team had won, and then she maybe watched for a little bit, but it was not how it used to be.

#### *Television viewing and autonomy*

I have just described how living and watching alone can be negative, because of the lack of people to share the activity with. However, people who lived alone also mentioned a positive element of living alone, namely that they had the opportunity to make individual television choices, whereas people who lived together needed to attune their television behavior.

An example of a respondent who positively evaluated the ability to make her own decisions regarding television was a woman (#37; 75 years) who had been divorced for twelve years. Her ex-husband disliked television, and she laughed when she explained that she obviously did not agree with him on that. She watched more now than when she had lived with him. About that change in television viewing, she said:

I have been divorced for twelve years now. So now I get round to what I actually like. That sounds positive, but actually I mean it like that: if you must live alone, then you can get round to what you like. (...). Yes, that is, besides that everything is not that nice of course, that actually is a gain.

This respondent evaluated the freedom to make her own decisions as a gain; that is to say, television viewing was part of her sense of autonomy. Other participants described the room for their own decisions as a matter of fact and did not further reflect on it.

Interviewees who were divorced or widowed changed their television viewing behavior in different ways: some of them chose to watch more, for which they did not get the chance when they had lived together. Others watched less than before, because previously they had spent time watching programs that their household members had liked. For instance, a woman explained that when she had had a family the television

used to be on almost all the time, whereas now the television was more off than on. She referred to her ability to make her own choices now:

Because my partner and the children watched, then that thing is on and automatically you watch with them. Now I rule this house so I can watch what *I* want and that makes a considerable difference in television viewing. Well, the programs: in the past I used to watch with them: soccer. I never, never, never watch soccer. Because I don't understand it when they say "he is off-side." Then I think: "yeh, right." Then I don't know what it is about. So soccer, no. (#56; 74 years, divorced since 23 years)

This citation also illustrates, regarding television content, that some participants did not watch particular content anymore that they had mainly watched because others had watched it. At the same time, they were able to watch content that their partners had not liked. Another woman (#14; 73 years, widowed since 10 years) explained that she did not watch soccer anymore. Instead, she watched movies now, a genre that her husband had hated terribly.

#### **4.3.2 Change: television viewing as part of adaptation to a loss in the interpersonal sphere**

The previous section (4.3.1) already addressed some characteristics of the transition from living together to living alone: first, television brought life and sound into otherwise empty homes; second, the downside of watching alone was that television lost its charm because it could not be shared anymore, and third, people who lived alone had more room for their own choices. The current section deals specifically with how respondents used television in adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere: after children left home, a divorce, or the loss of a spouse. In other words, this section describes how interviewees used television in getting accustomed to the new situation in their household.

I will outline the functions that television viewing had when respondents were in the process of getting used to the new situation. Subsequently, I will focus on the observation that some respondents avoided television during difficult times. Continuity in the social context simply entailed that some respondents did not report changes in their household composition, or they did experience such changes but they did not use television viewing in their adaptation strategies; therefore, continuity within this theme will not be discussed separately.

*New functions of television viewing after a loss in the interpersonal sphere*

Some respondents gave television the following functions when they were adapting to a loss: television provided company; television helped to pass the time; television helped to structure the days; and television offered distraction from sadness.

*Company.* As described earlier, television can bring “people” and sound inside the home. This can be helpful in the first period after the loss of a spouse. A woman (#12; 77 years, widowed since 17 years) explained that, in the period after her husband had died, she watched television from early in the morning till late at night. The apartment had been so quiet after all the visitors were gone, and one of her daughters had advised her to turn the television on so she would have some sound around her. That was the reason she had the television on: “At that time I really had the television on in the morning just to see people.”

*Passing the time.* Some respondents used television to pass the time. Several people (both male and female) described that they had less activities outside of the house since they were alone. They explained that their life was different from how it used to be. Several of them indicated that the evenings or days seemed long to them. A woman (#20; 87 years, widowed since a year) said: “now that I’m alone I sometimes think: oh, again, such a long evening.” When I discussed negative experiences of an increase in viewing, I mentioned a woman who watched television at night to pass the time, especially after her husband had died (#28; 83 years, widowed since one year). She said that previously they were busy all day and the time flew by. Now she watched television to shorten the time a little. Otherwise she would just be sitting there all night, so she figured that watching television was kind of the only thing she could do.

*Structuring the days.* For some respondents the loss of a spouse meant developing new daily routines, including new television routines; in some cases television explicitly helped to structure the days. New routines often had to do with having dinner. Respondents explained that they were not comfortable with eating alone, and thus changed their schedule a little so that they could eat in front of the television. Or they would eat a sandwich early at night, so they could watch television after that. In some cases, respondents explicitly used television to provide structure to the day. This can be exemplified with a woman (#14; 73 years, widowed since 10 years) who started to watch the 8 a.m. news, after her husband had died, in order to bring regularity in her life. After the hectic time after his death, she had said to herself that she needed to keep regularity in her life and she should not stay in bed until she felt like getting up: “Just get up at a fixed time, quarter to eight [determined tone in her voice], eight o’clock the news and you move on like that: after that, getting dressed, eating something.” Thus, the 8 a.m. news came to provide a starting point for her days.

*Distraction from sadness.* Another function was that television provided distraction from sadness; in some cases particularly humorous programs fulfilled this function. The woman (#14) who watched the 8 a.m. news to start the day explained the following:

There was once a situation and I think about that rather frequently; it was in that difficult period too [after her husband had died]. It had gotten quite late because of several circumstances; I turned on the television just for a little while, and then there was some very silly movie, and I was laughing about it really loudly on my own, just as some kind of reaction to all the tension and the state of things. And they sometimes broadcast this movie again and then I do think about it again. (#14; 73 years, widowed since 10 years)

In that situation, the movie enabled her to laugh, amidst of all the turmoil she was going through. After that, she sometimes watched movies for relaxation. Another example came from a man (#33; 84 years, widowed since 2,5 years) who did not really like television and who did not watch much television, but since his wife had died he sometimes watched particular programs that helped him to relieve his sadness. When sadness overwhelmed him, watching particular comical series (such as *FC De Kampioenen*) improved his mood.

#### *Avoiding television*

Thus, for some respondents television viewing helped them when they went through difficult times. However, other respondents avoided television because television did not fit in with their feelings after such loss: either because they felt too restless or too sensitive to watch, or because television reminded them too much of shared experiences from the past. A respondent who had felt too restless too watch, was a woman about whom I wrote earlier that she saw the increase in her television viewing as positive because she enjoyed that television made her home cozy (#18; 81 years, widowed since 24 years). She said that, when her husband had passed away, a very different life had started for her. A lot of restlessness came into her life. In the beginning she was not really interested in television; she preferred to go for a stroll at night. Little by little, she became more restful again, and therefore she started to watch television more consciously.

A woman whom I referred to earlier because watching soccer matches had lost its charm after her husband had passed away (#20; 87 years, widow since one year) indicated she could not listen to music anymore. Her husband had been really fond of music, and because he enjoyed it so much, she had enjoyed it too. She felt emotional because she had lost her daughter to cancer and her husband had suddenly died, so she could not listen to music anymore, nor watch particular DVD's and movies. In addition,



she said that she did not watch soaps series because they were always hatred and malice: “that does not cheer me up at all. And when you are alone, like me now, you’re very sensitive to that.”

#### **4.4 Theme 3: Television content**

The third theme concerns television content: what respondents watch on television. In the interviews, respondents explained what content they watched, and what they liked and disliked about it. I will describe three dimensions that I distinguished in the meanings regarding television content (section 4.4.1), and subsequently I will discuss continuity and change within the third theme in section 4.4.2 (see table 4.1 for a summary)<sup>5</sup>.

##### **4.4.1 Three dimensions in meanings of television content**

I distinguished three dimensions in the meanings regarding television content: first, the functions that television content fulfilled; second, the relationship of television content with domains in viewers’ everyday lives, and third, the status of television programs.

###### *Dimension 1: Functions of television content*

Respondents described what television content offered to them. I made a distinction between accounts in which interviewees explained the ways in which they used television for information and learning, versus accounts in which respondents related television content to pleasure and feelings.

###### *Information and learning*

Many respondents used television to attain information and to learn. Several of them stressed the importance of learning and stated explicitly that one is never too old to learn. Three forms of information attainment and learning occurred frequently in what interviewees said. First, many participants used television, particularly news, to keep abreast of current events. Second, some respondents watched for cognitive development; particularly quiz shows were mentioned in this regard. And third, some respondents acquired information on specific topics.

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<sup>5</sup> Theme 3 involves the meanings older viewers assign to television content. To give a general impression of the programs older people watch most, Appendix H presents the Top 25 of programs watched by older viewers (65+) in the Netherlands in the year 2007 (based on television ratings, Stichting KijkOnderzoek).

*Keeping abreast of current affairs.* A large share of the respondents indicated that they watched the news<sup>6</sup>. Many of them indicated that they watched it every day. Sometimes watching the news was part of their daily pattern: interviewees watched it every day at the same time. The typical answer to the question why the respondent watched the news was that they wanted to keep abreast of current events. Sometimes they felt particularly involved with a specific topic, whereas other interviewees wanted to know in general what the current developments were. One respondent explained her news viewing in a way that reflected the stance of many participants (#19, woman, 82 years). She said that she watched the news to keep abreast of what was happening. Especially politics, she thought it was really important to keep up with that. She was not very interested in politics, but she did want to keep up with what was going on because politics affect us all and you have to know what the situation is. She was not interested in a specific topic, but needed to know what happened in the country and in the world (disasters, floods and the like).

Whereas many (not all) respondents watched the news, there was variation in how important news watching was for respondents: they differed in what they did with the information. In addition, respondents varied in terms of their interest in politics: some were very interested, others were not. Some people kept up with the local news but apart from that were not particularly interested in developments around the world. For example, a woman who was interested in local and regional news, said about news watching:

He [husband who has died] watched the news almost every hour, but that was a bit too much for me, then I said: “now switch the television to something else; you’ve seen it so many times.” And you know what, like that foreign news and all that stuff, I do not follow everything of that. There are people who can say all those names and the like, but for me that is not that necessary. That’s just fine by me. (#15, woman, 83 years, widowed since 12 years)

On the other hand, there were respondents who, in addition to the news, watched current affair programs, read newspapers, who felt engaged, who wanted to develop an opinion on the events, and who sometimes felt worried about matters. The engagement of some respondents with politics became apparent because they expressed their political opinions or their views on recent topics during the interview. For instance, the woman whom I mentioned earlier because she watched the 8 a.m. news to structure the days after her husband had died (#14; 73 years) said that the issue of asylum seekers was

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<sup>6</sup> In the Netherlands, the Public Broadcasting System broadcasts news bulletins during the day, and the main evening news programs are at 6:00, 8:00 and 10:00 p.m.. These news programs include both national and foreign news. Commercial channels also broadcast news; some of these programs are more focused on national news. In addition, regional and local stations broadcast regional and local news.

very close to her heart. Sometimes she got really tense about that topic. In the interview, she expressed her opinion on the matter: how, on the one hand, she understood why people want to come to this country, whereas on the other hand, the country can not allow everybody to stay.

A final remark about keeping up with current events is that keeping abreast is related to interpersonal communication. Several respondents indicated that they talked about current affairs with others. A man (#35; 68 years) explained that knowing what happens in society is important for communication in two ways. First, you would come across as rather careless when something terrible has happened, for example a disaster near or far, and you do not know about it. Second, most people watch the news, which makes news a starting point for conversations or it helps when the communication does not run smoothly.

*Cognitive development.* Some respondents watched television for cognitive development; they mentioned particularly quiz shows in this regard. Interviewees indicated that part of the appeal of the genre was that they could be actively involved while watching: they could participate by trying to answer the questions. Trying to answer the questions had several related functions. First, it offered a possibility to test oneself: some respondents enjoyed the challenge. Second, they saw participating at home as a way to keep the brain going. Third, several respondents said that old knowledge could be refreshed or new knowledge could be acquired. A different matter was that quiz shows told respondents something about the current educational system, particularly the quiz show *Achmea Kennis Quiz* in which children from secondary schools participated.

*Information on topics.* In addition to keeping abreast of current events by watching the news, and watching quiz shows for cognitive development, respondents mentioned other ways in which they learned from television. Through television, some respondents acquired information on particular topics. First, television provided practical advice applicable in everyday life. Respondents used programs on consumer issues and programs about swindle and scams for advice. For example, a woman (#10; 71 years) saw programs such as *Opgelicht* that deal with frauds and swindle as warnings.

Second, some interviewees learned about interpersonal situations from soap series and programs such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. As an example: a respondent (#8, woman, 73 years) learned about social relations from watching soap series. She learned that she should not conceal information from other people, and that she should stand up for herself, something that she had not done previously.

Third, some respondents learned about topics that they were interested in, such as nature, languages, sports, medical issues, art, and countries that they had travelled to or

planned to travel to. I consider these topics as domains in respondents' everyday lives: an issue that I will address specifically in the second dimension, which focuses on these domains.

#### *Pleasure and feelings*

Television content brought pleasure and contributed to good moods: television made people cheerful; television made respondents laugh; viewers experienced pleasure when they sympathized with characters or contestants; several respondents watched positive content as an antidote to bad things that happened; and programs offered relaxation and an opportunity not to think. I will detail these meanings of television content on the basis of the interviews.

Some participants explicitly said that some programs made them cheerful; others talked very enthusiastically about programs. They used expressions like "wonderful," "fantastic," and "I love it." Content that respondents talked about in this manner ranged from shows, music, series and movies, to nature, sports and television personalities that respondents liked.

Sometimes television contributed to respondents' good moods because television made them laugh. A respondent (#12, woman, 77 years) was laughing while she explained during the interview that she considered the American comedy series *The Nanny* very funny. She watched *The Nanny* every night, and she talked about the different characters in the show: she considered the nanny and her mother very funny and the butler terrific.

Respondents enjoyed sympathizing with characters in series, contestants in quiz shows, or contestants in sports games. Indicative of this television use was that respondents, while watching television, talked to the persons on television, and enjoyed taking part "in the action." The respondent about whom I wrote earlier that she learned about social relations from watching soap operas (#8, woman, 73 years) talked enthusiastically about how involved she felt when she watched the soap opera *As The World Turns*. She would say to the television when a character rang at the wrong door "oh blast, just walk a bit further!" With regard to sympathizing with contestants on a quiz show, a respondent (#24, woman, 70 years) said that she very much liked to participate in quiz shows (at home) and that she sympathized with the contestants, which meant that she would think "hurry up!" when a contestant was too slow and that she thought "oh what a pity" when that person lost anyway. About watching tennis a respondent (#38, woman, 82 years) explained that she gave comments, like: "smash well," "more to the baseline" or "come on boy, win for once!" She explained that she always chose sides when watching tennis, because she liked to feel involved; watching

like that brought excitement. When her favorite player lost the match, she felt bad about it too.

Several respondents watched positive programs as an antidote to bad things that happened. They explicitly said they watched cheerful content in contrast to difficult things in their lives, or particular content as a distraction from problems. The woman who enjoyed sympathizing with quiz-show contestants (#24) expressed that she liked bright, cheerful programs, such as *Tros Muziekfeest* in which popular Dutch singers perform. Such programs made her cheery again; they gave her another feeling, especially when she had a lot of trouble in her life. Then such programs provided something quite different.

Programs offered relaxation and an opportunity not to think. The accounts above show how respondents got rather involved with television content; when interviewees talked about television as relaxation, they did not talk in such an explicitly enthusiastic manner. Sometimes respondents watched programs more because they were broadcast at a particular time than because of the content. The respondent whom I quoted earlier because she used television as company to cover up feelings of restlessness (#11, woman, 68 years) said that she liked watching quiz shows like *That's the Question* and *Lingo* when she was at home at night between 6 and 8 p.m. She found it relaxing to see how contestants formed words, and at the same time she would do something else. So she did not really follow the program, but found it relaxing to have it in the background. A man (#35; 68 years) liked to watch the sports program *Studio Sport* every night because he thought it was beautiful to see how people are able to achieve something. In addition, the program offered relaxation to him in the sense that he did not have to think.

I have described how content provided pleasure and contributed to good moods. Along the same lines, several respondents avoided certain content, particularly violence and sadness. For example, some did not want to see anything with murder and manslaughter because that made them go to bed stressed out. Sometimes respondents did watch programs that brought about unpleasant feelings. Current events sometimes evoked negative feelings, or game shows had seemingly unfair rules, or content touched upon sensitive topics in respondents' lives.

#### *Information and feelings intertwined*

So far, I have discussed how respondents used television to acquire information, and how television contributed to pleasure and feelings. In some ways these two aspects were opposed to each other: respondents used television to learn and think, or in contrast they used television not to think. The television-content-menus showed that

some interviewees focused more on information attainment, whereas others watched more for pleasure. However, in many cases, the two aspects (information and feelings) are intertwined: content contributed to both at the same time.

Watching quiz shows offered an opportunity to learn, while at the same time some respondents enjoyed sympathizing with the contestants, were curious who was going to win, and found watching those games relaxing and/or exciting. The same applied to watching soap series and to watching topics such as nature or sports: interviewees found aspects of nature or sports beautiful; they enjoyed seeing it, whereas they learned from it too. With news watching, we see that many respondents watched to keep abreast of current events, whereas some of them mentioned that watching the news (at the same time every day) was a kind of relaxation too. Also, some respondents became upset about what they saw on the news.

*Dimension 2: Relationship of television content with domains in viewers' everyday lives*

Respondents appreciated certain television content because the content was related to domains in respondents' everyday lives, outside of television viewing. Domains can be seen as concerns or interests that respondents feel engaged with. Television added information to these domains, and/or contributed to pleasure. The domains that television content contributed to ranged from concrete to abstract. Concrete domains involved activities, such as hobbies and professions. The most frequently mentioned examples were sports and travel. On a more abstract level, television content was related to a certain attitude to life.

*Sport.* Sport was one of the program types that many participants liked because it was related to experiences outside of television viewing. In some instances, participants liked watching the sport that they practised themselves: they learned from watching other people play or they felt involved with the sport. Some respondents were still active players, whereas for others it was something they had done in the past. A respondent (#7, woman, 69 years) watched tennis, no other sports, because she had played tennis herself. Unfortunately she had needed to quit playing because of a knee injury. She kept up to date with the sport, and when she watched, she sympathized with the players and thought "gosh, I used to do it like that too."

Personal experiences regarding sport did not only include that respondents (had) practised a sport themselves; some respondents enjoyed watching a particular sport because their (grand)children practised it or because they had gone to sport games when they were younger and hence felt involved. A man (#34; 67 years) liked to keep abreast with soccer, and he was supporter of the soccer team *PSV*. When he was around 27 years old, he had had a neighbour who was friends with one of the *PSV* soccer players.

Therefore they were able to get very good seats during the home games. Since then, he had been a supporter for *PSV*: “that never goes away.”

*Travel.* Travel programs, or other programs in which distant countries played a role, were clearly related to personal experiences. Some people watched these programs to learn about countries or cities they planned to visit, whereas other interviewees liked to see places where they had been before, to bring back memories. Like with sports: some respondents still travelled, whereas others did not travel anymore because they were not able to or because they did not feel the need anymore. When respondents really wanted to get particular travel information, the programs sometimes disappointed them:

I like to travel, and I like to travel frequently, and then such a girl [presenter] walks around, and it is all so unreal and superficial. And then it’s about where you can have nice food, and there are of course people who think that’s important, but I want to learn what I can see there you know. (#57, woman, 74 years)

In other cases, participants enjoyed travel programs that brought back memories. For example, the woman who watched tennis because she had played herself (#7; 69 years) was very enthusiastic about seeing places again where she and her husband had been. They had been to the USA, and when they would see visited places on television, she would say: “look at that; we’ve been there too; San Diego; do you remember that we were sitting there on the beach?”

To summarize sport and travel: television provided vicarious mobility (see also Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1998; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). Respondents experienced activities and places through the experiences of people on television. Importantly, not only respondents who were not able to practice sports or travelling anymore, but also people who themselves played sports and travelled, enjoyed the vicarious experiences.

*Other domains.* In addition to sports and travel, television content contributed to other concrete domains. Also in these cases, television offered information and/or enjoyment. I will sketch some of the domains that television contributed to, to make the wide variety of domains visible: some respondents enjoyed medical programs about operations they underwent themselves or they attained information about illnesses that family members had; some respondents enjoyed watching nature on television because they had grown up on farms or because their parents had taken them out into nature; some respondents liked music programs and participated in bands or choirs themselves or attended music performances; some respondents liked to watch programs related to their hobbies such as history (e.g., expressed in collecting items) or learning a language (e.g., expressed in taking a course); some respondents liked *Tussen Kunst en Kitsch*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dutch version of the *Antiques Roadshow*

because they had objects themselves that possibly were worth money; and some respondents explained how their (previous) profession affected their television viewing, for instance having been minister in a church led to attention to how presenters delivered information. As a last example, a woman (#48; 65 years) was very fond of television shows concerning spirituality, for example the show *Char- het medium* in which the spiritist Char Margolis made contact with dead people. Spirituality was important in her life: she went to events where people predicted the future, and she read many books related to this.

On a more abstract level, television content was related to a certain attitude to life. For example, some participants were interested in people, and therefore enjoyed interview programs in which guests talked about their lives. Or learning was important to them, and therefore they enjoyed quiz shows. Another interviewee, the one who supported the soccer team *PSV* (#34, man, 67 years), said that “striving for freedom” had always been an important theme in his life, and that this urge probably explained his interest in cowboy movies.

So far, I have discussed that television content contributed positively to domains, varying from concrete to abstract. Two final remarks regarding television and domains in everyday life are in place. First, television content was not only related to positive domains, but also touched problematic domains that respondents felt sensitive about because of personal experiences, such as a stillborn child or problems in relationships. Second, television content could become a domain. That is to say, for some respondents television programs led to activities. The woman about whom I wrote earlier that she learned about social relations through soap operas (#8; 73 years) had visited the studios in the USA where one of her favorite soap operas (*the Bold and the Beautiful*) was recorded. In addition, she had participated in *Spoorloos*<sup>8</sup> because she had information about someone they were looking for, and she found an old school-friend through the program. Some respondents tried to think whether they had clues for the police when they watched programs such as *Opsporing Verzocht*, in which the police asked viewers for help in solving crimes. A woman (#4; 74 years) explained that she and her husband always watched *Opsporing Verzocht*. She laughed enthusiastically when she said in the interview: “Maybe we are able to help the police. We are really watching like that.” Sometimes, when she was not able to sleep at night, she watched out of the window, because maybe she would see something useful.

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<sup>8</sup> Program in which reporters try to find people with whom there is no contact, for example parents of children who have been adopted.



*Dimension 3: Status of program types*

When respondents talked about what they watched, the status of the genre sometimes shined through. The status of genres varied from low to high. Some respondents assigned low status to entertainment programming (particularly entertainment on commercial channels) and to soap operas. In the accounts of some (not all) respondents, watching for information and keeping abreast was of higher value than watching genres that offered “only” relaxation.

When interviewees ascribed low status to a particular genre, the typical reaction was to avoid watching that program type. Many respondents indicated that they did not like particular programs or that programs irritated them. For example, they did not like the way people talked to each other on television, or they were annoyed by the amount and the loudness of commercials. In those cases, their reaction generally was to avoid those programs or that content. However, with soap operas the accounts were a bit different: some viewers assigned low status to soap operas, but at the same time they did watch them. Several soap-opera viewers indicated that soap operas were not important, that soap operas sometimes annoyed them, and some respondents seemed embarrassed that they watched the genre. This stance toward soap-opera watching can be illustrated with the following account, by a woman who watched the Dutch soap series *Goede Tijden Slechte Tijden*:

I actually think “how can I be so stupid to watch it?” Because often enough it makes no sense at all. But I just find it cozy [laughs]. (...) It is actually stupid that I am telling you this, but well, an interview is also supposed to be honest of course. I can also skip this, but of course that is not the intention of the interview. (...) But well, it is just such a program with which you don’t have to think and you can just sit down, cozily and watch. (...) I am irritated enormously as well. When I think about it now, I think: “what am I doing?” (#6, woman, 67 years)

It appeared to be rather characteristic for soap-opera viewers to say that they regularly watched soap operas, whereas the program irritated them as well. However, other interviewees enjoyed watching soap series without feeling uncomfortable, like the woman (#7; 69 years) about whom I wrote earlier that her sister had introduced her to the series *As The World Turns* and now she watched it every day: “And I am not embarrassed about it at all, because there are enough friends and acquaintances who watch it.”

High status, on the other hand, was assigned to news watching and high-brow informative programs such as documentaries. Several people indicated that they wanted to watch content that was mind enhancing, whereas they would feel guilty watching “just for pleasure.” Several respondents said explicitly that it was important (to them) to

watch the news. Some accounts signalled that news watching was something that respondents thought they were supposed to do.

#### **4.4.2 Television content: continuity and change**

Respondents talked about their content preferences, and interviewers were instructed to probe since when the respondent had liked that program type. Many respondents experienced considerable continuity in their preferences: they indicated explicitly that particular preferences had roots in their youth or in any case many years ago. Changes in reactions to television content were also present: some of the changes were connected with changes in other activities or in the social context (i.e., with changes in theme 1 and 2), whereas other changes were more independent of such changes in the context. After the discussion of continuity and change, I will describe nostalgia and evaluations of changes in program supply, because these reactions involved content from the past which asks for a separate discussion of continuity and change.

##### *Continuity in interests*

Continuity was apparent in interests in content. Respondents indicated that they had particular interests since they had been young. They said things like “it has always been in me” or “it is innate.” Learning was regularly mentioned this way. When talking about quiz shows, several respondents indicated they had always been interested in learning. Another example came from the woman (#4, 74 years) about whom I wrote earlier that she hoped to have clues for the police; she saw continuity in her preference for sensational programs. She said she had an innate liking of sensation. She described how she, as a child, was standing right next to an accident: “there was a child completely run over; her whole head was open; the brains...” And she stood there and watched because she wanted to see it. For her, this incident illustrated that already at a young age she was attracted to sensation. Other respondents saw continuity in interest in particular topics, such as history, languages, medical topics or bridges.

In addition to continuity in such interests, continuity in genre preferences was apparent too. In some cases, these genres were still available in the current program supply. Particularly news was a genre that had been available for several decades, about which many respondents related that they had “always” watched it. News watching seemed to have been a routine for many years, and it seemed taken for granted to watch it. In other cases, the genres were not available in the current supply. Some respondents still liked to see the kind of cabaret, shows or plays that were broadcast in the period, roughly, between the 1950s and 1980s. However, these were scarcely available in the current supply.

Some of these lifelong or decades-long interests had roots in specific events in respondents' lives. In other words, particular personal experiences in the past affected later content preferences. For example, an interest in a sport or in a sports team sometimes had started with playing the sport oneself or with going to matches with one's father. Also, some respondents connected their liking for nature programs with how they grew up on a farm or with how their parents took them out into nature. Enthusiasm about the royal family, for some, had started because one grew up with hearing about this family or with collecting pictures of the princesses.

Personal experiences led to lifelong interests as well as lifelong aversions. Many respondents had personal experiences with the Second World War. During the interviews, several participants talked about their war experiences. For some respondents, war experiences had led to a lifelong interest in information about the war and an interest in politics, whereas other respondents did not want to be confronted with war and violence anymore. Like a respondent (#45, man, 89 years) said: "In the war I was in Germany: deported by the Germans. Well I have seen so much misery and blood there that that doesn't interest me anymore." Another respondent (#39, man, 81 years) explained the difference between him and his wife regarding content about the war. Whereas his wife said: "all those horrible things: I don't want it anymore," he was interested in everything regarding war. He thought the wars were terrible too, but he was interested in it from an historical perspective.

*Change: television content in relation to changes in activities and the social context*

The next question was what happened to content preferences or functions of television content when changes occurred in activities or in the social context (i.e., changes in theme 1 or 2). I will describe four observations.

The first observation was that continuity in content preferences remained important despite changes in the context. The interviews showed that when older adults watched more than before, they tried to find programs in line with their previous preferences. When a respondent watched a bit more than before, it was common that they chose programs that fit with the preferences they had had before. Even respondents who had changed their television drastically, such as the man (#3; 72 years) who watched television all day because he did not have other meaningful activities and the woman (#32; 66 years) who was confined to television because of her lung disease, reported continuity in particular content preferences.

Only when their amount of viewing had increased exceptionally or when they had started to watch at a particular time, respondents also turned to genres that they had not been interested in before. So in addition to genres that they had liked before, they also

turned to other genres. For instance, I described earlier that a woman (#12; 77 years, widowed since 17 years) started to watch television the whole day, after her husband had died, to have “people” around her. Because she watched television so much, she had to turn to genres that she had not watched before. Sometimes, when she could not find anything else on television, she turned to snooker. This way she had learned the rules of snooker, and now she liked watching it, although tennis was still her favorite. As I explained in section 4.3.2, adaptation to a loss in the interpersonal sphere sometimes led to new routines determined by the time of day, for example, the 8 a.m. news to get up, or television as company when having coffee or when having dinner. These new structures led to watching programs that respondents had not watched before.

The second observation about television content in relation to the context was that some interviewees used television content in adaptation strategies after a loss, either a social loss or a loss of activities. The use of television viewing in adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere meant that some people preferred cheerful, upbeat, optimistic, and sometimes comical television content. Such content brought people in a better mood when they were sad, such content provided company, and distraction from problems. I discussed this topic in section 4.3.2; one of the examples was a man (#33; 84 years, widowed since 2,5 years) who watched the comical series *FC De Kampioenen*, when sadness about the loss of his wife threatened to overwhelm him. However, some uses of television after a loss in the interpersonal sphere were determined more by the time of day and did not involve a specific kind of television content.

In addition to television content’s role after social losses, television content was also a substitute for input that older adults had previously gained from other activities. In these cases, television content provided vicarious experiences. I will mention three ways in which television content was a substitute.

1. Television content provided information and a way to participate in society that respondents had previously obtained by more active participation in society. Some respondents indicated that television provided them with information which they had previously gotten from going to places themselves. Some of them saw it as negative that they had to rely on television now; they thought it was better when they were younger. For instance, a woman (#16; 89 years old) said that she was confined to television to still participate in everything. It was very important to her to keep up with what happened in society; therefore, she followed all kinds of current affairs and interview programs. In the past, she had participated more actively in society, for example by

serving on the board of a museum. She said it was logical that her previous, more active, engagement had been much nicer.

2. Television content provided cognitive stimulation, which respondents had gained in the past from other activities. A woman (#10; 71 years) said that when she was younger, she had needed to think anyway. She had helped her children regarding school, regarding their work; she had always made time to answer their questions. Now that she was older, and alone, she sometimes did not remember particular things anymore, and therefore she wanted to watch quiz shows to let her brain work. For the same reason, she did crossword puzzles.

3. Television content provided a substitute for activities previously conducted by older people themselves, such as going to church, enjoying nature, or dancing. Several interviewees indicated that they watched church services on television instead of going to a service themselves like they had done before. A participant (#64, man, 66 years) could not go to church because of his circumstances. He would have preferred to go himself, but he saw the church services on television as a good replacement.

The third observation about television content and changes in the situation was that changes in activities sometimes led to a decrease in the importance of particular content. Some respondents indicated that information attained from television was less necessary in their current everyday life than it had been in the past. For instance, a man (#1; 71 years) was still very interested in the news, but explained that strictly speaking the information on the news had been more directly necessary for him when he was working with the trade unions and needed the information for that work. Also, a woman (#12; 77 years) liked consumer programs, but the information in these programs was less necessary for her now because she was alone and did not need that many groceries anymore.

The fourth observation was that physical challenges sometimes asked for particular kinds of programs. Some participants indicated how their physical problems influenced the programs that they chose to watch. Some people had problems with the senses (sight and/or hearing), had problems with following programs, or were not able to concentrate on long programs anymore. Therefore, they preferred Dutch programs or short programs. For example, the woman with the severe lung disease (#32; 66 years) was very exhausted because of the illness. She tried to find short programs because she was not able to concentrate on longer programs. She had tried to watch longer programs, such as movies, but then she had lost track of the story.

*Changes regarding television content- independent of changes in the context*

Three changes in content preferences or interpretations of television content were independent of changes in activities and the social context: putting things into perspective; becoming more sensitive; and the focus on keeping the brain active.

*Putting things into perspective.* Growing older meant for some respondents that they did not take things on television as seriously as they had done when they were younger. The respondent who was supporter of the soccer team *PSV* indicated that in the past he could get very upset about watching sports. He still watched sports, but he was less touched by it now. Because he grew older, he had more eye for the relativity of things. He looked more at what was important in his life and what was not. He felt that his family was important to him, whereas soccer may not be that essential after all:

Important to me, are my wife, my children, my grandchildren (...). And the rest is less important. I think that is a kind of development, because of my age, that I find fewer and fewer things important. (...) There are more important things in life, and that is not always soccer or sports. (#34, man, 67 years)

A similar development applied to politics: some participants said that because they had witnessed so many government formations by now, they were far less worried about it than they had been before. The man who was interested in war from a historical viewpoint (#39; 81 years) said that decades ago he had been heavily interested in government formations and he had wanted to know everything. Nowadays he understood much better what was going on, and sometimes he thought: "I've seen it all before; it is not really hot news." He said that because he grew older, he put things more into perspective: "I am still interested, but it doesn't get to me that much anymore." Along the same lines, some respondents indicated that they were less impressed when something new was announced ("New? We've seen it before"), that they had become more critical, and that they had less patience with the things on television.

*Becoming more sensitive.* Several participants pointed out that they had become more sensitive as they grew older. Some related this to having problems in their personal lives. Becoming more sensitive led to stronger reactions to emotional television content or to avoidance of such content. A woman whom I referred to earlier because she gave herself permission to watch more television after she had retired (#76; 73 years) avoided programs with many emotions, such as *Ik mis je*. She did not want people whom she did not know to evoke emotions in her, and she did not want to get so emotional that it would touch her. She related this avoidance to growing older and to her age. Because she grew older, she experienced more sadness. In her younger years she had experienced sadness too, but now that she was older she had gone through sadness more often and more consciously, and therefore she felt more emotional. She

observed that this process was not the same for everybody, because for example her sister really liked watching programs such as *Ik mis je*.

*Keeping the brain active.* For some interviewees, watching television to keep the brain active became more important as they grew older. The focus on keeping the brain active appeared to come from fear of forgetfulness and fear of dementia. Some respondents talked about how they experienced more trouble than before with remembering names, or words, or television content that they had seen. These troubles and fear of dementia seemed to trigger their motivation to keep their brain active with the help of television. In addition, they referred to doctors and the media who hinted at the importance for older people to train their cognitive abilities. To clarify: both continuity and change were part of watching quiz shows for cognitive development. First, continuity was apparent because respondents indicated their lifelong interest in learning; second, quiz shows were a substitute for cognitive stimulation that respondents had previously obtained through other activities; and third, keeping the brain active became more important as respondents grew older, triggered by fear of forgetfulness and fear of dementia.

*Nostalgia and evaluations of changes in program supply*

Some respondents derived pleasure from seeing programs again that they had seen in the past or that were related to the past. Some of them explicitly used the word “nostalgia.” The woman whom I mentioned earlier because she liked sensational programs (#4, 74 years) thought it was great to see content from the past, such as *Swiebertje* and *Snip en Snap*, again. Jos Brink, a Dutch television host, had a program in which he showed old television fragments, and she said: “that is nostalgia; that opens your heart again.” She related these nostalgic feelings to growing older, because she said that when you grow older, things from the past are especially great. She appreciated programs from the past more than current programs.

The other side of the coin was that some respondents said it was a shame that particular old programs were not broadcast anymore. Some respondents explained how much they had liked the big shows and plays that were broadcast in the earlier years of television, which they had watched together with their families. They said it was a pity that such shows were not broadcast anymore. Another example was cabaret. Some interviewees had loved the comedians of the earlier years of television, in contrast to the ones who performed nowadays. Some people described how they had loved for example Toon Hermans (1916 - 2000), Wim Sonneveld (1917 - 1974) and Wim Kan (1911 - 1983), whereas they could not relate to someone like Bert Visscher (1960). Another example was music. Some respondents liked genres that originated years ago, such as

light music, (light) opera, musicals, classical music, old songs, in contrast to modern pop and rock-music that they disliked. Some of them were fine with the fact that the current youth enjoyed modern music; it was just not for them, older people.

*Changes in program supply.* Variation was present in evaluations about changes in program supply and society. I have just discussed how some respondents were enthusiastic about content from the past, such as big shows, plays, cabaret and music. Sometimes this preference went hand in hand with a negative stance toward the current program supply. Some respondents watched less than they had done before, because they liked the current programs less than the programs that were broadcast in the past. In addition, some interviewees were worried about sex and violence on television and in society as a whole. On the other end of the spectrum were respondents who were positive about the changes in program supply and society. They enjoyed current entertainment, current comedians and satire, and/or modern music. They appreciated that there were more television channels than in the early days of television and that therefore everybody was able to find something that they liked. In addition, some appreciated that in contemporary society there is more freedom regarding sex, and people have more freedom to choose their own path in life.

The reactions to content related to the past signaled both continuity and change. Continuity was apparent because some television content first broadcast decades ago still had appeal. At the same time, change was visible in several ways: watching old television content again invoked different reactions in respondents than when they first saw that content; some respondents said that nostalgia became more important as they grew older; and they witnessed changes in program supply and society over the years.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the first part of the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging. I have discussed three themes within older adults' experiences of television viewing: first, television viewing in a palette of activities; second, television viewing in the social context, and third, television content. Within each theme, I have discussed the variations in viewers' experiences, and how continuity and change were apparent. Thus, this chapter showed the wide variety of meanings that television viewing has in older adults' everyday lives, and how television viewing evolves as people grow older. The conclusion is that continuity and change in television viewing coexist. When changes in television viewing occur, continuity is apparent at the same time. This conclusion is mainly based on section 4.4.2 that showed that continuity in content preferences remained important despite changes in the context.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Interview study: Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies**

This is the second of two chapters that present the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging that I have developed on the basis of the interview study. The previous chapter described continuity and change in television viewing within three themes, whereas the current chapter concerns television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. The description of television viewing in terms of selection and compensation strategies shows how television viewing is related to developments in everyday life. Television viewing is part of selection strategies when people choose to watch television because television adds something to their lives, whereas television viewing is part of compensation strategies when people use television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that have diminished.

The present chapter will show that television viewing was mainly part of selection strategies: older adults chose to watch television because television viewing contributed something to their lives. In addition, some older people used television in compensation strategies: they used television as a substitute for activities that had diminished. However, the interviewees never discussed their television viewing as merely compensation. In other words, for some people television viewing was part of solely selection strategies, and for other people television viewing was part of both selection and compensation strategies.

In the chapter, I will describe television viewing as part of selection strategies (sections 5.1 and 5.2) and television viewing as part of compensation strategies (sections 5.3 and 5.4). Subsequently, I will address the question whether particular television viewing behavior (e.g., amount of viewing) tells us which strategies television viewing was part of (section 5.5). Table 5.1 is an overview of television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies, and thus can be used as a guideline when reading this chapter.

*Table 5.1 Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies*

<p><b>Ways in which television viewing is part of selection strategies (section 5.1)</b></p> <p>Television viewing is part of selection strategies when people choose to watch television because television adds something to their lives.</p> <p>Three ways in which television viewing is part of selection strategies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The activity television viewing is a choice amidst other possible activities.</li> <li>2. Television viewing is chosen because of its positive contributions in the social context.</li> <li>3. Television content is chosen because it offers information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to domains in everyday life.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Television viewing behavior when television is part of solely selection strategies (section 5.2)</b></p> <p>Television viewing behavior is varied in terms of: importance of television in everyday life, content preferences, attitude toward television viewing.</p>
<p><b>Ways in which television viewing is part of compensation strategies (section 5.3)</b></p> <p>Television viewing is part of compensation strategies when people use television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that have diminished.</p> <p>Three ways in which television viewing is part of compensation strategies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The activity television viewing as a substitute for activities that are not possible (anymore).</li> <li>2. Television viewing as part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere.</li> <li>3. Television content as a substitute for input that people previously gained from other activities.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Television viewing behavior when television is part of both selection and compensation strategies (section 5.4)</b></p> <p>Television viewing behavior is varied in terms of: how much television needs to compensate, importance of television in everyday life, content preferences, attitude toward television viewing.</p>
<p><b>Strategies cannot be inferred from television viewing behavior (section 5.5)</b></p> <p>Particular television viewing behavior and particular circumstances do not automatically signal whether that television use is part of selection or compensation strategies.</p>

### 5.1 Ways in which television viewing was part of selection strategies

Television viewing was part of selection strategies when people chose to watch television because television added something to their lives. I distinguish three ways in which television viewing was part of selection strategies. The three ways are part of the three themes within television viewing that I described in Chapter 4, and will be explicated below (an overview is presented in table 5.2).

*Table 5.2 Three ways in which television viewing is part of selection strategies*

<i>Themes within television viewing</i>	<i>TV viewing as part of selection strategies</i>
Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities	1. The activity television viewing as a choice amidst other possible activities
Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context	2. Television viewing is chosen because of its positive contributions to the social context
Theme 3: Television content	3. Television content is chosen because it offers information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to domains in everyday life

The first way in which television viewing was part of selection strategies was that respondents experienced the activity of viewing television as a choice amidst other possible activities; they had a palette of activities that were meaningful to them and that they were able to do, and within this context they chose to watch television viewing because television contributed something to their lives. Thus, television viewing was a positive choice, in the sense that television was chosen because it had something to contribute and television viewing was not related to losses or decreases of other pastimes. Regarding changes in television viewing, the interviews showed that some respondents experienced an increased role of television viewing in their lives as positive, because they felt that now they had the freedom to choose what they wished to do, in contrast to when they had worked.

The second way in which television viewing was part of selection strategies was that respondents chose television viewing because of television's positive contributions within the social context. Some people who lived together appreciated television viewing because it was an activity that they could share with their partner or other persons. Some partners especially valued television viewing as a shared activity, because they had many different activities and therefore did not have much time together. For some respondents who lived alone, the positive contribution was that

television brought “people” and life inside their homes. I considered this use of television to bring life inside the home as part of selection strategies when respondents indicated that they chose to use television in this way because of what television contributed, and when they did not see this use of television as substitution for missing contacts.

Another issue within the social context was who was in charge of making choices regarding television. Respondents who lived together with someone needed to attune their television behavior; for some partners who had different interests, this attunement was problematic. Respondents who lived alone were able to decide individually whether, how much, when and what they would like to watch. Some interviewees who lived alone after having lived together indicated that they had changed their television use because now they were able to choose themselves how much or what to watch. Some of them saw their freedom to make their own decisions, regarding television, as positive. In that case, television viewing contributed positively to a sense of autonomy.

The third way in which television viewing was part of selection strategies was that respondents chose television content because it offered information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to domains in respondents’ everyday lives. Domains that television content contributed to ranged from concrete to abstract. Concrete domains involved activities, such as hobbies and professions. On a more abstract level, television content was related to a certain attitude to life. Both continuity and change in content choices occurred: continuity in interests was visible, whereas participants also indicated that for example watching for cognitive development became more important.

In sum, when television viewing was part of selection strategies, television was a positive choice amidst other meaningful activities, and interviewees chose television because of its social functions and/or because of the functions of television content. Respondents differed in the emphasis they put on either the activity of viewing television or television’s social functions or specific television programs. Some respondents emphasized that they liked watching together or they liked the company that television provided; they put less emphasis on specific programs. Whereas other respondents emphasized that they chose specific programs and provided the rationales for choosing particularly that content.

## **5.2 Television viewing behavior when television was part of solely selection strategies**

Television viewing behavior was highly varied for respondents whose television viewing was a positive choice that was not related to losses. Variations were visible regarding three characteristics of television viewing.

1. Importance of television viewing. For some respondents, television viewing played only a minor role in their lives. They indicated that they were not avid television viewers and that they only watched particular programs. On the other end of the spectrum were respondents who enjoyed television viewing a lot and for whom watching television constituted quite a large part of the day and who found many programs that they liked to watch. For some, the amount of time spent on television viewing had remained stable, for others the amount of time had increased, or decreased. Some respondents experienced the increased role of television as positive because they felt that now they had the freedom to choose what they wished to do; in contrast to when they had worked.

2. Preferences for types of television content. Some respondents focused more on information attainment; they chose highbrow content such as documentaries, whereas other respondents watched more for pleasure and relaxation, and were enthusiastic about for example series, shows, and music programs. However, many respondents had television-content-menus that were a mixture of both information and entertainment programs.

3. Attitudes toward television. Both positive and negative attitudes toward television occurred. In other words: when I signal that for some respondents television viewing was part of selection strategies, I do not only mean people who liked television viewing without reservation and therefore chose to watch, but also people who were critical toward television and therefore chose to watch not that much or not to watch particular content. Respondents who used television viewing in selection strategies mentioned four negative aspects of television viewing. First, some respondents assigned low status to the pastime television viewing or to particular genres. They considered watching (too much) television as a waste of time, or they saw particular genres as ridiculous. Second, some respondents expressed a negative attitude toward the program supply in general or to characteristics of programs. For example, they did not like the manners of persons on television; they found persons on television too rude, or they said it was a shame that some of the programs that they had liked were not broadcast anymore. Consequently, some respondents watched less television than before because they did not like the program supply anymore. Third, some respondents had difficulties with the attunement of their television behavior to the preferences of their partner or household members. Some respondents were disappointed when they differed with their partner in enthusiasm for watching television or for particular genres. Fourth, some respondents who lived alone after having lived together expressed that particular content had lost its charm because they were not able to share the content with another

person anymore; and some content led to sadness because the programs brought back memories of when the respondent was still able to share them.

*Two cases.* Interviewees for whom television viewing was a positive choice were highly varied in the television viewing they chose and in their circumstances, which can be illustrated with the help of two cases. The first case (#5) involves the everyday life of a man, aged 65 years, who had been divorced for 12 years. He worked as the director of his company, did not report any physical problems, and lived alone. He did not watch television during the day because he worked, and switched on the television at night for relaxation. He did not watch every night, because sometimes he was busy with his hobbies. He liked his job and hobbies, and was satisfied with what he watched on television. He watched the news and current affairs programs to keep abreast of current affairs; he emphasized that he wanted to watch programs of high quality. In addition, he watched quality quiz shows to acquire knowledge. He watched sport programs, particularly the sports he conducted himself all his life. Sometimes he watched documentaries in which he recognized aspects of his job. He liked contemporary cabaret programs. He did not mention any changes in his television viewing.

The second case (#12) describes the everyday life of a woman, aged 77 years, who had been widowed for 17 years. I have described some aspects of her television viewing in chapter 4. She was very enthusiastic about television viewing. As soon as she came home, she looked in the TV guide if there was some program that she would like to see. She talked enthusiastically about the programs she watched. Her favourites were watching sports, particularly tennis. Sometimes she got so fanatic while watching, that she had to leave the room because she was not able to deal with it anymore. She had favorite players in tennis and also in soccer. She watched the comedy series *the Nanny* every day; she loved this series and saw it as very funny. She loved travelling vicariously, that is to say, television enabled her to see places she otherwise would not have seen. She did not watch cabaret anymore; she used to love for example Wim Kan (1911 - 1983) and Wim Sonneveld (1917 - 1974), but she did not like contemporary comedians such as Bert Visscher (1960). Her content preferences predominantly signalled watching for pleasure. In addition, she watched the news every day. It was important to her to know what happened in the world, and she liked the national news. She did not want to watch a current affairs program when it focused on something dreadful such as a war.

There had been a period in her life in which she had watched much more television. After her husband had died, she had had a period of extensive television viewing. Her family had told her that she could watch television in order to have some life around her, and for a while she had watched almost all day to have company. So she had used

television viewing as part of compensation strategies after the loss of her husband, but currently she did not use television as a substitute for something but as a positive contribution to her life. At the time of the interview, she lived in an apartment building where she was happy because she had good relationships with the other residents, something that she had missed terribly during the period after her husband's death. Now she said that growing older was not a problem; she had a good time with the people around her, and they laughed a lot.

To summarize, the two cases seem very different, but have in common that television viewing was part of solely selection strategies: the interviewees chose television viewing in a way that fitted their lives. For people whose television viewing was part of solely selection strategies, television viewing behaviors were highly varied, and both continuity and change in television use were apparent.

### 5.3 Ways in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies

Television viewing was part of compensation strategies when respondents used television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that had diminished. I discern three ways in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies. The three ways are part of the three themes within television viewing that I described in Chapter 4, and will be explicated below (an overview is presented in table 5.3).

*Table 5.3 Three ways in which television viewing is part of compensation strategies*

<i>Themes within television viewing</i>	<i>TV viewing as part of compensation strategies</i>
Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities	1. The activity television viewing as a substitute for activities that are not possible (anymore)
Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context	2. Television viewing as part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere
Theme 3: Television content	3. Television content as a substitute for input that people previously gained from other activities

The first way in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies was that respondents used the activity television viewing as a substitute for other activities that were not possible (anymore). Some respondents experienced the new role of television viewing as problematic. These older adults watched television for want of something

better: they preferred to do something else, but other activities were (almost) not possible. Respondents were dissatisfied with the role of television viewing in their lives because they saw their television viewing as determined by either their physical constraints or their incapability to have other meaningful pastimes. There were respondents who considered the growing importance of television viewing in their lives as negative, because they felt that the activities that they had previously done were more valuable. They mentioned what they had had before, what they were not able to do, and what they had lost.

In less extreme cases, older adults experienced the new role of television viewing (as a substitute) more positively. The more positive evaluations stemmed from the fact that the limitations regarding other activities were less severe for these people or they focused more on their possibilities than on their limitations. Although their palette of possible activities had become smaller, they still saw television viewing as a choice amidst possible pastimes and they chose television viewing because they liked it. In such experiences, both compensation strategies and loss-based selection strategies can be discerned. Television viewing can be seen as part of compensation strategies, because respondents experienced the decrease in possibilities as a loss, and because television filled this void. Loss-based selection strategies, which refer to the process in which decline or loss leads to the selection of another goal (Freund & Baltes, 2000, p. 38), were in place, because in reaction to a loss, respondents focused on what they were able to do and developed new goals and domains. The co-occurrence of compensation and loss-based selection strategies can be illustrated with the case of an older couple (#40, man, 92 years; woman, 75 years) whom I mentioned in chapter 4. This couple spent most of their time inside the home, because of the husband's physical limitations. The situation was not easy to them, but they tried to accept the situation and to keep their spirits up. They explained how they were never bored: they liked to read, to make crossword puzzles, to work on the computer, to play rummikub and to watch television programs that they enjoyed. Previously they had not been really television-minded; because of their confinement they watched more television than before. They emphasized that they chose particular programs, and they talked enthusiastically about those. Compensation strategies were present in the case of this couple, because television viewing took the place of previous activities that were not possible anymore. At the same time, loss-based selection strategies were apparent, because the couple looked for new goals in their more confined situation and they focused on their possibilities.

The second way in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies was that respondents used television viewing in adaptation strategies after a loss in the



interpersonal sphere, such as a divorce or the loss of a spouse. Functions that television fulfilled in reaction to such loss were: television provided company, helped to pass the time, helped to structure the days, and offered distraction from sadness. Particularly when respondents turned to television for company, as a way to pass the time or to structure the days, it was possible to explain this television use in terms of compensation strategies. Previously, children or the partner had been part of how respondents spent their days in a meaningful way. The loss left a void and television (among other things) was used as a new means to reach the goal of spending the day in an agreeable manner. In this manner television was used in compensation strategies, but at the same time television viewing was part of loss-based selection strategies after such loss. The loss had led to a new situation in which respondents chose television viewing because it contributed positively in their current situation. After the loss, respondents orientated themselves on new domains or new goals: they developed new routines such as watching television to get up in the morning or when having dinner, or they used television as distraction when they were sad. Another way in which television was part of compensation strategies in the social context was that some couples watched television together to obtain input for their interaction, because they were homebound, and therefore lacked topics to talk about.

The third way in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies was that interviewees used television content as a substitute for input that they had previously gained from other activities. In some cases, respondents saw it as negative that they had to rely on television, and thought the situation had been better when they were younger. There were basically three ways in which television content was a substitute for other input: first, television content provided information and a way to participate in society that respondents had previously obtained by more active participation in society; second, television content provided cognitive stimulation, which respondents had gained in the past from other activities; and third, television content provided a substitute for activities that older people had previously conducted themselves, such as going to church, enjoying nature, or dancing.

#### **5.4 Television viewing behavior when television was part of both selection and compensation strategies**

None of the respondents used television viewing solely in compensation strategies. That is to say, regarding television viewing, compensation strategies did not occur in isolation from selection strategies. The coexistence of compensation and selection strategies was visible in two ways. First, compensation strategies and loss-based selection strategies were hardly separable in some cases because some functions of

television after a loss can be interpreted in terms of both compensation and loss-based selection strategies (see section 5.3). Second, when respondents used television as a substitute in some way, at the same time television viewing was part of selection strategies in other ways. For example, a respondent watched church services because he was not able to go to church anymore (compensation), whereas he also watched the news to stay informed about current affairs (selection). Therefore, I will describe television behaviors for people who used television in both selection and compensation strategies.

There were variations in television viewing behavior for people who used television in both selection and compensation strategies. I will describe variations regarding four characteristics of television viewing.

1. The first variation concerned gradations in the limitations of the palettes of activities, and thus in how much television viewing needed to compensate. At one end of the spectrum, television viewing was almost the only possible pastime; at the other end, television viewing functioned as a substitute in some way, whereas other activities were possible too.

The first end of the spectrum, where television viewing was almost the only available option, was experienced as problematic. Respondents felt convicted to either watching television or staring at the wall. Here, the role of television viewing was bittersweet (see also Gauntlett & Hill, 1999, p. 207): television did bring some pleasure, but at the same time these respondents felt that a life dominated by television was not a real life. The older people wished that their situation would be different; television could not make the situation right. The stories of the respondents signalled depression and loneliness. The two main reasons for the inability to have other activities were physical constraints and psychological problems with having meaningful pastimes. A story, that I previously used in chapter 4, describes these problems: a man (#3, 72 years, divorced for 23 years) described himself as addicted to television. He saw television viewing as almost the only thing that he had, and he watched television from when he got up until when he went to bed. He said that he was not a hobby person and that previously he had done other things, but now he had problems to pass the time and he felt lonely. Television was what remained. He saw television as an agreeable repose; television helped to pass the days, and he did not feel lonely all the time because he had his television. However, he was not happy with this life. He felt that he did not lead an active life, and he said that a life in which he was so dependent on television “sucked.” Because he watched so much television, he had to watch programs that he had not been interested in previously. For example, he watched German talk shows, mainly because he considered them to be the only decent content that was broadcast during the day. In

addition, he had become a “news junk.” He thought it was important to keep up with current affairs, but that had become an addiction too, and he checked the news about 20 times per day. It is relevant to note that whereas his television viewing had changed fundamentally, continuity was apparent in his content preferences. For example, he was interested in sports since, as a child, he went with his father to soccer matches of the team *NEC*; and he liked programs such as *Spoorloos*, because he had always liked to track things down.

At the other end of the spectrum were respondents who used television as a substitute in some way, whereas other activities were possible too. These respondents used television as compensation in (one or more of) the ways that I described (in section 5.3): they used television as a substitute after a decrease in activities, or they needed television (a bit) more after a loss in the interpersonal sphere, or they used television content as a substitute for input previously gained from other activities. In addition to such use of television as a substitute, they conducted other activities that were meaningful to them. The use of television as compensation in a context with other meaningful activities can be exemplified with the story of a man (#33, 84 years) whose wife had died 2,5 years ago, and who spent more time at home than before because of physical problems. At night he sometimes felt sad, because his wife was not with him anymore, and then he occasionally watched comical TV series to be released from sadness. Also, because of problems with his leg he had to stay at home now and then, and therefore was not able to go to the choir. When he needed to stay home, he watched a specific television program as a substitute for going out, although he preferred going to the choir. In other words, in specific cases he used television in compensation strategies. Apart from that he had never really liked television, and television hardly played a role in his life. He was much more focused on other activities. Despite his physical problems, he took a lot of initiative. Among others, he was volunteer for several organizations, and he went for a bike-ride of 10 kilometres every day. He maintained good social relations; several people called him regularly, and a boy in the neighbourhood saw him as his granddad and visited him from time to time. He just watched a few specific television programs; he sometimes watched French television to keep up with his languages, and he sometimes watched *Discovery Channel* because of his lifelong interest in mega constructions.

2. Respondents who used television as compensation differed in the importance of television viewing in their lives. For some respondents, television viewing played only a minor role in their lives. They indicated that they were not avid television viewers, and that they only watched particular programs. An example was the man (#33) whom I just mentioned. On the other end of the spectrum were respondents who watched almost all

day, as I illustrated with the story earlier (#3). Some people watched more than before (because they used television as compensation), but the increase varied from just a little bit more to much more.

3. There were differences in the types of television content that respondents used as compensation. The use of television in compensation strategies did not involve a typical type of content, which can be illustrated by the three ways in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies (section 5.3). The first way was that the activity of television viewing was a substitute for activities that were not possible anymore. This use of television did not refer to a specific content type. Generally, respondents tried to find programs in line with their previous preferences. The second way was that respondents used television as part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere. In some cases, they preferred cheerful, upbeat, optimistic, sometimes comical television content. However, some uses of television after a loss in the interpersonal sphere were more determined by the time of day and did not involve a specific kind of television content. The third way was that respondents used television content as a substitute for input that they previously gained elsewhere. A wide variety of television content provided a substitute: among others, informative programs, church services, and nature programs.

4. Differences were visible in the attitudes toward television. Both positive and negative attitudes toward television were present. Some participants liked television without reservation, and others were critical toward television and pointed out the same negative elements of television viewing as older adults who used television as part of selection strategies. Those negative elements were: low status of the pastime television viewing or of particular genres, a negative opinion about the program supply, difficulties with the attunement of television behavior with household members, and some programs lost their charm or brought sadness because respondents were not able to share the content with another person anymore. Some of the respondents who used television as compensation emphasized that they wanted to be selective regarding television viewing. They did not want their life to be dominated by television, and they tried to watch television not too much and not genres that they did not like. However, some respondents had problems with having other meaningful activities and therefore felt convicted to watching television. Some of them felt uncomfortable about their television viewing, partly because of the low status of television viewing, and because they watched programs that they actually were not that interested in.

In sum, regarding television viewing, compensation strategies did not occur in isolation from selection strategies. People who used television in compensation strategies, used television in selection strategies too. Their television viewing behavior

was highly varied in terms of for example importance of television viewing. Change in television viewing occurred for all of them (because they adapted their television viewing after a loss), and continuity was visible too, particularly in content preferences.

### **5.5 Strategies cannot be inferred from television viewing behavior**

Previous sections in this chapter showed that television viewing behavior was varied when older adults used television viewing solely in selection strategies (section 5.2) and also when older people used television viewing in both selection and compensation strategies (section 5.4). The next question is whether television viewing behavior (e.g., amount of viewing) tells us which strategies television use is part of. The answer is “no.” Particular television viewing behavior and particular circumstances did not automatically signal whether that television use was part of selection strategies or compensation strategies.

*Television viewing behavior.* I will discuss three aspects of television viewing: the amount of viewing, the television content that respondents watched, and the status of television viewing. First, all amounts of viewing can be part of either selection strategies or compensation strategies, depending on the motivations that people have for watching television. For example, watching television a large part of the day was part of selection strategies when respondents explained that they chose to watch television because it brought something to their lives, whereas the same television behavior was part of compensation strategies when respondents explained that they watched so much because other activities were not possible. Although the whole range of amounts of viewing can be part of either selection or compensation strategies, watching almost no television is most likely to be part of selection strategies, and an excessive amount of television viewing (almost all day) is more likely to be part of compensation strategies than to be part of solely selection strategies.

Second, watching television in selection strategies involved such a wide variety of content, and so did watching as part of compensation strategies, that it was not possible to say that particular content was related to a particular strategy. A particular use of television content (such as watching a program to obtain information, watching quiz shows to keep the brain active, watching cheerful and upbeat programs) can be part of either selection or compensation strategies, depending on the motivations that older people had for that television use. For example, watching quiz shows to keep the brain active was part of selection strategies when respondents expressed that the focus on keeping the brain active came from fear of forgetting things or fear of dementia, or because of their life-long interest in learning. Whereas watching quiz shows to keep the

brain active was part of compensation strategies when respondents used quiz shows as a substitute for cognitive stimulation that they had gained in the past from other activities.

Third, no clear difference in status of television viewing was apparent between selection and compensation strategies. In both cases, there were respondents who assigned low status to television viewing. Some interviewees saw television viewing as an inferior pastime, potentially a waste of time; some assigned low status to particular genres or were not satisfied with the program supply. When television viewing was part of solely selection strategies, respondents did not choose the programs that they did not like, and their television use was in agreement with their wishes. For some respondents who used television viewing as compensation, television viewing implied struggle: some had to come to terms with an increase in viewing because they did not consider watching such a valuable activity; some watched more than they actually wanted to allow themselves or more than what they judged to be the right amount.

*Circumstances.* I will discuss two characteristics of respondents' situations: their palette of activities (relevant because of theme 1) and their household composition (relevant because of theme 2). In the sample, palettes of activities ranged from on the one end a diverse palette both outside and inside the home (e.g., including travelling overseas) to on the other end a palette that was very limited, with only a few activities possible inside the home. The very diverse palettes provided the background for television use as part of selection strategies: respondents chose television viewing amidst other possibilities and did not relate television viewing to losses. For the other end of the spectrum, with television viewing as almost the only possibility, it is plausible that respondents experienced television as compensation because they had almost nothing to choose from. However, a situation with very limited possibilities did not automatically mean that people used television as compensation or that television viewing had a major role in everyday life. Some respondents who had only limited possibilities used television in selection strategies (and not compensation strategies). There were respondents who spent most of the time at home because of an illness (of themselves or their partner) and who did not adjust their television viewing in reaction to the loss in activities. An example was a man (#39, 81 years) who had been through a lot of operations and who spent most of the time at home, together with his wife. Inside the home, his days were full with things that he was working on and thinking about. Continuity in status of television viewing was apparent. He said that he and his family had never been very fond of television, and he watched only a few specific programs that he was interested in: informative programs about politics, arts, history and religion. In sum, he did not adjust his television viewing in light of a decrease in possible activities, and his critical attitude toward television remained of decisive importance.

Regarding household composition, the interviews showed that both people who lived together and people who lived alone used television viewing in selection and compensation strategies. Couples used television in selection strategies for example because they enjoyed sharing the activity. Couples used television as compensation when they experienced a lack of input in their conversations, and used television to fill that void. I described how some respondents who lived alone, mainly widows, used television in compensation and loss-based selection strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere. This description did not mean that television use by widows was automatically part of compensation strategies. Some respondents did not change their television use in reaction to the loss of their spouse, or they had used television viewing as compensation after the loss of their partner, but their current television use was not determined by that loss anymore. The case of the woman (#12, 77 years, widowed for 17 years) about whom I wrote earlier (in section 5.2) exemplified that television can be a substitute during a stage in life, whereas later television is part of solely selection strategies again. The woman had used television as compensation after the loss of her husband, but after a period of time she had moved to another apartment building where she enjoyed the people around her, and therefore she did not need television as compensation anymore.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the final part of the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging. I showed how older adults' accounts of their television viewing can be interpreted as part of selection or compensation strategies. The first conclusion is that television viewing was mainly part of selection strategies: older adults chose to watch television because television viewing added something to their lives. Some people used television as compensation, but this use of television as a substitute was not in isolation from selection strategies. This conclusion is important because the literature review (chapter 2) showed that a large share of previous research on older adults' television viewing appeared to be biased toward compensation, whereas research insufficiently considered selection strategies. The current chapter underlines that a bias toward compensation is indeed problematic, because selection strategies provide a better characterization of older people's television viewing than compensation strategies.

The second conclusion is that overt television behavior did not automatically signal what this television viewing meant in the lives of older people. For example, watching television several hours a day was part of selection strategies when respondents chose to watch television because television added something to their lives, whereas the same television behavior was part of compensation strategies when respondents watched so

much because of the lack of other activities. These findings teach that it is not possible to say on the basis of “facts” about television viewing, such as amount of viewing, that older people use television viewing as compensation after losses.

As a point of discussion: television viewing as part of selection strategies may seem to represent a more positive picture of aging than television viewing as part of compensation strategies. This image is accurate in the sense that in the first case television viewing is a positive choice that is not related to losses in any way, whereas in the second case losses are part of the picture and television is not always a satisfactory substitution. However, two comments are in place that show that the picture was not that black and white. First, the discussion centred on television viewing, which makes less visible that some respondents who used television in selection strategies did experience losses; they just did not use television viewing in their adaptation strategies. Second, the adaptation strategies *compensation* and *loss-based selection* in themselves can be seen as positive, because people apply these strategies to come to terms with their situation.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions and discussion**

The starting point of this dissertation was that a large share of the available literature about older adults and television viewing depicts old age as a life stage characterized by losses in which people use television as a substitute for decreased activities. In reaction to this one-sided view, the goal was to develop a more advanced conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives. To reach this goal, the dissertation consists of a literature review (chapter 2) and a qualitative interview study (chapters 3 to 5).

In the current chapter, the conclusions of the literature review (section 6.1) and the conceptual framework that I developed on the basis of the interview study (section 6.2) will be discussed. Subsequently, I will outline the societal relevance of the study (section 6.3) and the transferability of the framework to other contexts (section 6.4). In the last section, I will provide suggestions for future research (section 6.5).

#### **6.1 Conclusion of the literature review**

The main conclusion in the literature review (chapter 2) is that a large share of previous research on older adults' television viewing appears to be biased toward compensation, thus neglecting the possible role of television viewing in selection strategies. I derived the notions of selection and compensation from the theory of Selective Optimization with Compensation (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Freund & Baltes, 2000) and elaborations hereof (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). The bias toward compensation in television research has been expressed in the so-called substitution hypothesis asserting that television viewing can be a substitute in terms of time use and that television can replace social functions that were previously fulfilled by interpersonal communication. The idea of television as compensation is also prominent in the explanations that authors offered for older adults' content preferences.

Consideration of selection strategies can help to find explanations of older people's television use other than those that have been traditionally provided in this field of research. Selection strategies imply that older adults can choose to watch television over doing some other activity because television viewing relates to goals in high-priority domains (such as interest in current events and political issues, or intellectual stimulation). In sum, the focus on compensation does not capture the rich variety of aging that also includes gains and the development of new goals. In search for a more

multifaceted understanding of television viewing and aging, I conducted the qualitative interview study.

## **6.2 Conceptual framework of television viewing and aging**

I have developed the conceptual framework on the basis of the qualitative interview study ( $N = 86$ ; 65 to 92 years old). In order to apply a life-span perspective to older adults' television viewing, I focus on continuity and change in television viewing, and on how watching television is part of selection and compensation strategies.

One important conclusion of the interview study is that overt television behavior (e.g., amount of viewing, watching alone, or content preferences) does not automatically signal which meanings older viewers assign to their viewing or, more specifically, whether television behavior has changed or remained stable, and whether television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies. For instance, some people watch television several hours a day because they enjoy television viewing and feel that television adds something to their lives, whereas other people watch several hours because they have nothing else to do or have nobody to talk to. These findings teach that it is not possible to say on the basis of "facts" about television viewing behavior, such as amount of viewing, that older people use television viewing as compensation after losses.

The conceptual framework about television viewing and aging that I developed consists of the following major components:

- 1) Three themes within older adults' experiences of television viewing: first, television viewing in a palette of activities; second, television viewing in the social context, and third, television content. The three themes together provide a picture of how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives.
- 2) Continuity and change in television viewing. The description of continuity and change within the three themes shows how television viewing evolves as people age.
- 3) Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. The description of television viewing in terms of selection and compensation strategies shows how television viewing is related to developments in everyday life.

In the current section, I will present the conclusions and main findings for each component.

### *Three themes*

The description of the three themes, in chapter 4, shows the wide variety of meanings that television viewing has in older adults' everyday lives. Within each theme, the experiences of television viewing are highly varied, and both continuity and change are apparent.

*Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities.* Obvious differences are visible in how older people experience the pastime television viewing amidst other activities. On the one end, there are older adults for whom television viewing is a positive choice amidst other pastimes that are meaningful to them and that they are able to do. On the other end of the spectrum, there are older people who watch television for want of something better: they would rather do something else, and they see their television viewing as determined by either their physical constraints or their incapability to have other meaningful pastimes.

*Change.* When circumstances change, television viewing may get another role in everyday life. Three changes in life are particularly important. The first change concerns available time. Many respondents have more room than before to decide how they wish to spend their time, because they do not have a paid job or the primary care for their children anymore. Second, physical possibilities sometimes determine which activities are possible and which are not. Third, some interviewees indicate that they desire more rest than before: they wish for either fewer different activities or less active pastimes.

Both increases and declines in amount of viewing occur. Here, I will focus on differences in how older viewers evaluate an increase in viewing. A positive evaluation of an increase in viewing comes from experiencing television viewing as a voluntary choice. Some people experience the increased role of television after retirement as positive because they feel that now they have the freedom to choose what they wish to do, in contrast to when they had their jobs. A neutral evaluation holds that viewers signal that they have more time available which makes it *possible* for them to watch more without evaluating the increase as either positive or negative. Other people experience the growing importance of television viewing in their lives as negative, because they feel that their previous activities were more valuable.

*Continuity.* Continuity simply occurs in the sense that for some respondents the abovementioned changes in life or in television viewing are absent. More interestingly, however, continuity regarding the status of the pastime television is apparent. Some people have always been critical toward television viewing and remain being so, whereas others have always been enthusiastic about television.

*Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context.* The description in chapter 4 shows that television viewing is part of relatedness and autonomy. The contributions of

television viewing to relatedness, i.e., to connections with other people and with society, range from positive to negative. Clearly, the issue of relatedness is different for older adults who live together and older adults who live alone. For people living together, television viewing plays a role in the relationship between household members. Television viewing contributes positively to this bond when people enjoy sharing this pastime. However, the downside is that people need to attune their television behavior, which is especially problematic when people differ in their stance toward television. Arguments about television are a hindrance to relatedness in the household. Another negative contribution, that some interviewees point out, is that television limits conversations.

For older adults who live alone, television viewing contributes positively to relatedness, when television brings life and “people” inside the home. The negative side is that some people feel sad because they are not able to share television viewing with another person (in the house) anymore. However, people who live alone also mention a positive element of living alone, namely that they have the opportunity to make individual television choices. Some experienced the room they had for their own decisions regarding television as positive; for them television viewing was part of a sense of autonomy.

*Change.* I already mentioned some changes regarding television viewing in the social context, such as the fact that some people feel sad that they cannot share watching television anymore. In addition, television viewing can be used in adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere, such as a divorce or the loss of a spouse. Some older adults give television the following functions during the process of getting accustomed to the new situation: television provides company, helps to pass the time, helps to structure the days, and offers distraction from sadness. Thus, for some respondents television viewing contributes positively when they are going through difficult times. In contrast, for some respondents television viewing does not give any relief in the period after such loss. They avoid television, either because they feel too restless or sensitive to watch, or because television reminds them too much of shared experiences from the past.

*Theme 3: Television content.* Three dimensions show the variations in experiences regarding television content. First, the functions of television content. On the one hand, television content provides information and an opportunity to learn: older viewers use television to keep abreast of current affairs, for cognitive development, and to gain information about particular topics. On the other hand, television content brings pleasure and contributes to good moods: television makes people cheerful and makes respondents laugh; viewers experience pleasure when they sympathize with characters

or contestants; they watch positive content as an antidote to bad things that happen; and programs offer relaxation and an opportunity not to think.

Second, television content is related to domains in viewers' everyday lives. Domains can be seen as concerns or interests that respondents feel engaged with. In these domains, television adds information and/or contributes to pleasure. Television content is related to domains that range from concrete to abstract. Concrete domains involve activities, such as hobbies and professions. On a more abstract level, television content is related to a certain attitude to life (e.g., cowboy movies are attractive to viewers who feel a desire for freedom).

Third, the status of program types ranges from low to high. What shines through in the accounts of some respondents is that watching for information and keeping abreast is of higher value than watching genres that offer "only" relaxation.

*Continuity.* Continuity is present in interests in content. Learning is regularly mentioned as a lifelong interest. People also see continuity in their interests in particular topics, such as history or languages. In addition, continuity in genre preferences is visible. News is a genre about which many respondents relate that they have "always" watched it. For other genres goes that there is continuity in viewers' preferences but that the genres are scarcely available in the current program supply. Some of these lifelong or decades-long interests have roots in specific events in respondents' lives. The circumstances in which generations grow up play a role. Many respondents have personally experienced the Second World War, which has led to lifelong fascinations and lifelong aversions.

*Change.* The next question was what happened to content preferences or functions of television content when changes in activities or in the social context were present (i.e., changes in theme 1 or 2). The interviews yield two conclusions. The main conclusion is that continuity in preferences remains important despite changes in the context. The interviews show that when older adults watch more than before, they try to find programs in line with their previous preferences. Only when the amount of viewing has increased exceptionally or when they have started to watch at a particular time, older people turn to genres that they have not been interested in before. The second conclusion is that older adults use television content in reaction to changes in circumstances. The interviewees discuss two types of circumstances: losses in the social environment, and the inaccessibility of valued activities. After a loss in the interpersonal sphere, some people prefer cheerful, upbeat, optimistic, sometimes comical television contents, whereas others' television use is more determined by the time of day. As a substitute for other activities, television content provides information and a way to participate in society that respondents previously obtained from more active

participation in society; television content provides cognitive stimulation, which respondents have gained in the past from other activities; and television content provides a substitute for activities that older people previously conducted themselves, such as going to church, enjoying nature, or dancing.

There are also changes regarding television content that are not related to changes in circumstances. First, growing older means for some people that they do not take the things on television as seriously as they did when they were younger. Second, some interviewees point out that they become more sensitive as they grow older. For them, becoming more sensitive leads to stronger reactions to emotional television content or avoidance of such content. Third, cognitive development becomes more important for some people as they grow older. This focus seems to come from fear of forgetfulness, or fear of dementia.

Evaluation of changes in program supply, the last issue regarding television content, signals both continuity and change. Some respondents express nostalgia: they derive pleasure from seeing television content again that they have seen in the past or that is related to the past. The other side of the coin is that sometimes they are disappointed that particular “old” content is not available anymore in the current program supply. Continuity is visible because some television content first broadcast decades ago still has appeal. At the same time, change is apparent in several ways: watching old familiar television content invokes different reactions in older people than when they first saw that content, and some respondents say that nostalgia becomes more important as they grow older.

#### *Continuity and change in television viewing*

The findings in the three themes (in chapter 4) lead to the conclusion that continuity and change in television viewing coexist. When changes in television viewing occur, continuity is apparent at the same time. An observation that has led to this conclusion is that continuity in the status of television viewing and in content preferences co-occurs with changes in the activity of television viewing. For example, when people watch more television than before because they have more time available, they are as critical about television as before and they seek out the kind of programs that they have “always” liked.

#### *Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies*

The conclusion, based on the findings in chapter 5, is that television viewing is mainly part of selection strategies: older adults choose to watch television because television viewing adds something to their lives. In addition, some older people use television in

compensation strategies: they use television as a substitute for activities that have diminished. When people use television as compensation, television viewing is part of selection strategies too. In other words, for some people television viewing is part of solely selection strategies, and for other people television viewing is part of both selection and compensation strategies. The findings entail that selection strategies provide a better characterization of older people's television viewing than compensation strategies, and therefore the findings show that the emphasis on television as compensation does not reflect what television viewing means in older adults' lives. I will summarize the findings that I described in chapter 5.

According to my analysis, television viewing is part of selection strategies in three ways that are related to the three themes within television viewing: first, the activity of viewing television is a positive choice amidst other possible, meaningful activities; second, television viewing is chosen because of its positive contributions in the social context; and third, television content is chosen because it offers information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to domains in everyday life.

People also have three ways of using television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that have diminished. The three ways are also related to the three themes within television viewing, and show how people use television in reaction to losses: first, the activity television viewing is a substitute for activities that are not possible (anymore); second, television viewing is part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere; and third, television content is a substitute for input that people previously gained from other activities.

The respondents who use television in compensation strategies, also use television in selection strategies. Their television viewing behavior is highly varied in terms of how much television needs to compensate, importance of television in everyday life, content preferences, and attitude toward television viewing. On the one end, there are older adults for whom television viewing is almost the only possible pastime; whereas on the other end, there are older people who use television viewing as a substitute in some way and who have other meaningful and possible activities too. Change in television viewing occurs for all people who use television as compensation (because they adapt their television viewing after a loss), whereas continuity is visible too, particularly in content preferences.

The final conclusion is that particular television viewing behavior and particular circumstances do not automatically signal whether television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies. For example, watching quiz shows to keep the brain active is part of selection strategies when respondents express that the focus on keeping the brain active comes from fear of forgetting things or fear of dementia, or

because of their life-long interest in learning. Whereas watching quiz shows to keep the brain active is part of compensation strategies when people use quiz shows as a substitute for cognitive stimulation that they gained in the past from other activities. Regarding circumstances, the study shows that people who are confronted with limitations in their possibilities or with losses in the interpersonal sphere do not necessarily use television as compensation, and television viewing does not necessarily have a large role in their lives.

### **6.3 Societal relevance of the study**

First, the study's picture of the everyday experiences of older people is relevant to the societal debate about aging. Several authors in both scholarly work and work for a wider audience (e.g., Harwood, 2007; Sipsma, 2008) argue that the image of aging in our current society and in the media focuses too much on the negative side of aging and on losses; therefore these authors strive for a more positive approach to aging. At the same time, presenting old age as a life stage that consists of solely gains is not fair either, because aging does have negative sides (Rubin, 2007). The present study includes the experiences of a very diverse array of older people, in their own words, and thus helps to see older adults as a heterogeneous "category" in which aging has both positive and negative aspects. Positive elements include the increased freedom to make choices (e.g., because of fewer obligations than before), and negative aspects include physical problems and losses in the interpersonal sphere. The respondents in the study range from people who travel overseas and who watch television for information and entertainment to people who can not leave their house and are dependent on television for passing the day in a way that is bearable.

Second, the conclusion that the same television behavior has different meanings is important for the question whether television viewing is a sign of disengagement or stimulates older adults' participation in society. On the one hand, television viewing can be seen as a passive pastime, and an increase in television viewing as a sign that people diminish their active participation in society (e.g., De Boer, 2006 p. 250). On the other hand, television, with the information it provides, can actually strengthen the connection to the wider society. Whether television viewing is an expression of disengagement or engagement, depends on how older viewers use television. Some people who watch a lot of television are isolated, lonely and disconnected from society. However, the current study shows that there are also older adults who are homebound because of physical problems, but who know a lot about politics and current affairs and are more connected to society than their neighbour who goes out every day, but who does not care about what happens in society.



Third, the interviews show that older people experience their television viewing as positive when they see television viewing as a choice amidst other possible activities. This experience also holds for people who are confronted with a decline in possibilities and who are housebound because of limitations. Therefore, it may be useful in communication with older people who have limitations in available activities, to make them aware of the choices they have. Although people may not be able to change their circumstances, they can make conscious choices about television viewing or other pastimes inside the home, and choose contents that help them feel good. A classic study (Langer & Rodin, 1976; Rodin & Langer, 1977) shows that in a nursing home people who have choices and options for control are happier and healthier than residents who are not given those options (see also Harwood, 2007, p. 84). In her recommendations about activity planning in the nursing home, Hajjar (1998) advises to encourage institutionalized older people to continue previous media consumption practices. The expression of individual tastes and preferences combats some of the negative effects of institutionalization by encouraging continuity with the former lifestyle (p. 141).

Fourth, the results underline that older adults are a very diverse “category” that cannot be approached as one group. Instead, television producers and marketers need to focus on attracting subgroups. Television ratings give some insight in older adults’ preferences (see Appendix H), but the current study shows the variety in preferences and reactions. The present study indicates that some older viewers use television predominantly for information and learning. News, and to a lesser extent current affairs, are important to them. Some of them appreciate in-depth background information, quality programs, and serious conversations in which guests get a chance to talk without being interrupted all the time. They are interested in diverse topics. Some of them appreciate quiz shows as they offer an opportunity to learn, to keep the brain active, to sympathize with the contestants, and to have fun. In addition to information and learning, older adults watch television for pleasure, to attain a good mood, and for entertainment. Some of them appreciate gentle, uplifting, cheerful programs, which may make them laugh. Some of them enjoy seeing things from the past (nostalgia) and would like to see things that they enjoyed in the 1950s to 1980s such as big shows, plays and cabaret. Nostalgia is an example that illustrates the problem of approaching older viewers as one group: whereas some older people are really pleased to watch nostalgic programs, other older viewers are offended when they get the feeling that television producers think that older people only like things from the past.

I wish to prevent that the discussion of continuity leads to the impression that older adults, although their circumstances sometimes change, cling to what they already know, live in the past, and are not in touch with modern times. Respondents do indicate

continuity in their preferences, but continuity in for example news watching or learning are explicitly related to the wish of being up-to-date with current times and developing oneself. Many respondents are very knowledgeable about and appreciative of all kinds of life nowadays. Some do state that they liked that television content better than contemporary content, but there are also older people who like the current program supply better.

#### **6.4 Transferability of the framework**

The interview study concerns television viewing by older adults in the Netherlands, interviewed between 2005 and 2007, and does not include empirical comparisons with other countries, other periods, other media, or other age groups. The question is to what extent the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging is “transferable” to other contexts. In this section, I will use other empirical research and arguments to make a comparison with other countries, other cohorts of older people, other media and other age groups. The components of the framework (the three themes; continuity and change; selection and compensation) guide the comparisons.

##### *Other countries*

There is no reason to assume that the framework about television viewing and aging does not apply to older adults’ television viewing in other Western countries, because older adults’ everyday experiences reported in the present study show remarkable similarities with qualitative research about television viewing among older people in other countries, such as the USA (Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1998), United Kingdom (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999), Germany (Scherer, Schneider, & Gonser, 2006), and Belgium (Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002). Among others, emphasis on information and news-viewing (Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1996b, 1998), preferences for uplifting and cheerful contents (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1996a), television as company when people are alone or homebound (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999; Scherer et al., 2006; Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2002), the low status of television viewing (Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1998; Scherer et al., 2006) and continuity in preferences (Hajjar, 1998) have been reported elsewhere.

However, intensity of changes may vary between different countries. The American culture places much emphasis on work, ambition and achievements which makes the transition to other meaningful pastimes after retirement possibly more difficult than in Western European countries. According to Rubin (2007), who writes about aging in America based on interviews and her own experiences, the biggest question about aging is: “what will we do with the years?” Without work, life is stripped of much of its

meaning (p. 56). An aspect of this issue is that in America a higher percentage of women has a paid job than in Western European countries. On the other hand, Americans watch more television on average than Europeans, which might make television viewing a more acceptable pastime. Further research is needed into the values that people assign to work, other pastimes and television viewing in different cultures.

Another difference between countries is their television tradition. The Netherlands started with public broadcasting in the 1950s, and commercial television entered the television landscape in 1989. One of the highlights of public service broadcasting were big shows that were broadcast on Saturday night; they were popular and family members sat down together to watch them. Such traditions are an element in continuity in television viewing; some Dutch older people indicate that they still prefer public broadcasting over commercial stations and really would like to see such big Saturday night shows again. The situation in the USA is different, with public service broadcasting playing only a minor role in the television landscape and with the most widely viewed shows traditionally broadcast during the week.

#### *Other cohorts of older people*

The components of the framework (the three themes; continuity and change; selection and compensation) will probably remain relevant to media experiences of future cohorts of older adults, but their contents will be different. Generational explanations of media use and other behavior hold that the circumstances in which a generation grows up determine to a large extent the generation's behavior later in life; generations are different from each other because they grew up in different societal, political, and economic circumstances (Baltes, 1987; Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). Along the same lines, generations may adopt specific patterns of media use when they are young (media socialization), and remain faithful to those across the life span (Hofmann & Schwender, 2007; Mares & Woodard, 2006).

The older adults in the current study are from the pre-war generations, born between 1915 and 1940. For them, television has been available for about 50 years of their lives. They got used to particular genres and developed their preferences. This experience influences how they use television in their adaptation strategies. They do adjust their television after changes such as retirement and widowhood, but the functions they subsequently ascribe to television viewing are not entirely new to them.

The circumstances are different for the next generation of older people, the Baby Boom generation. They were born between 1946 and 1964, and will reach the age of 65 years from 2011 onward. The three themes in the framework can be used as a guideline to spark ideas about the ways in which television viewing may be different for the next

generation of older adults. For instance regarding the first theme, the pastime television viewing amidst other activities, there are several reasons to expect that the next generation will be different from the current one. The next generation, on average, will have more opportunities for activities because they will have higher income, better education and better health (e.g., Dorrestein, 2008). In addition, in the next generation more women will have had a paid job. Also, the status of television viewing may be different (this suggestion is also put forth by Scherer et al., 2006, p. 345) The current generations of older people grew up with the Great Depression, and one or two world wars, and thus grew up with the ideal of hard work and little time for idle pleasure. The Baby Boomers and subsequent generations grew up with another idea of leisure time and thus may have a different stance toward “idle pleasure” such as television viewing. Differences between generations are also caused by changes in the media landscape. By the time Baby Boomers grow old they may use internet in a way in which the functions of both television and internet are more intermingled than they are for older adults now.

#### *Other media*

For the current cohorts of older people, television viewing seems to serve a more varied array of functions than newspapers and radio. Some respondents talked about newspapers and radio in the interviews, because functions of television reminded them of the use of other media. Television and newspapers are mentioned together because they both provide information on current affairs. Some respondents prefer television because it is easy and includes images, whereas others prefer the more in-depth information in newspapers. Television viewing and radio are mentioned together because they can both provide company, information, relaxation, and music. What television in general seems to have extra is its value as a shared activity, either when people are watching together in a room or the knowledge that many people watch the same program or event simultaneously.

The comparison between television and internet is complex for the current generation of older adults. There is a body of research about older adults’ internet use (e.g., White et al., 2002; Wright, 2000), but research is needed on the comparison between the two media. The three themes give ideas about similarities and differences and provide a guide for future research. Relevant to the first theme, the pastime television amidst other activities, is that older adults currently assign different values to the activities television viewing and internet use. Continuity plays a part here; older adults are used to watching television, because they have known television for about 50 years. In contrast, internet became widespread when these adults were in their 50s and older and it takes effort for them to learn how to use it. That people have to learn to use

internet when they are older, can be experienced as a hindrance to internet use, but as a benefit too. Whereas many people seem to look down on watching television, the use of internet has more status: people feel good when they have learned how to use it. The difference between the two activities may be understood in terms of the difference between serious leisure and casual leisure (Brown, McQuire, & Voelkl, 2008). According to Brown et al., serious leisure involves the occasional need to persevere to overcome difficulties, there are stages of achievement and involvement, and it is necessary to acquire knowledge, training or skills. These characteristics seem to apply to internet use for the current generation of older adults. Casual leisure on the other hand is defined as “an immediately rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.” Brown et al. mention television viewing as an example.

Regarding the second theme, social context, similarities are visible between television and internet. Both television and internet have the potential to contribute positively to relatedness. The current study shows that some people enjoy watching television together, and some feel connected to wider society because of television content, and other studies have shown that interpersonal communication is an important function of older people’s internet use. An online survey of Australians aged 55 years and older found that older people used internet primarily for interpersonal communication (Sum, Mathews, Hughes, & Campbell, 2008). Likewise, a study among Dutch users of SeniorWeb (50+) reports that the most popular activity is e-mail and that a quarter of the respondents got to know new people through the internet (Duimel, 2007).

Analogous to older people’s television use, older people’s internet use has been met with the assumption that the internet may replace social contacts when older adults can no longer maintain their interpersonal contacts (e.g., White et al., 2002; Wright, 2000). In other words, both media are supposed to operate as compensation for lost contacts.

However, obvious differences between the two media are present too. Internet can facilitate contacts in a much more direct way than television does, because internet can bring people with similar interests or problems in touch with each other. On the other hand, internet use in itself is individualistic in the sense that people usually sit alone at the computer, whereas television viewing can be a shared activity in the living room.

Regarding the third theme, content, we see that both television and internet offer information. The internet offers more choice in information about all kinds of hobbies that older people are interested in; respondents mentioned for example genealogy and quilting. The other main function of television content for older people, that it contributes to pleasure, offers uplifting, heart-warming content, and makes people

laugh, is currently less fulfilled by internet than by television. The abovementioned online survey among Australians found that older people use internet primarily for interpersonal communication, seeking information, and commercial purposes, whereas entertainment was not an important function (Sum et al., 2008).

#### *Younger age groups*

The conceptual framework identifies the aspects on which researchers can compare different age groups. The components of the framework (the three themes; continuity and change; selection and compensation) are applicable to the television experiences of all age groups, but there are differences between groups in the importance of particular aspects. In this section, I will compare age groups with regard to each theme and subsequently for *selection and compensation*; this comparison will show what is specific for older adults' television viewing.

*Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities.* Previous research has consistently shown that older adults spend more time watching television than younger people (for an overview, see chapter 1 and 2). On average, older adults watch a bit more television than younger people do, and some older people may watch more than younger adults because they do not have a paid job, and to a lesser extent because of poorer health or a lower income. This is the conclusion from a cohort analysis in which Mares and Woodard (2006) compared average television viewing for different age groups in America across several measurement times between 1978 and 1998. The authors wrote that maturational differences did occur, but less strongly or clearly than simplistic descriptions suggest (p. 612). Being unemployed and having health problems are not exclusive for older adults. In sum, the simplest answer to the question why older people watch more than younger people seems to be the best answer, namely that older adults have more time available, because they do not have to go to work (p. 612). The current qualitative study adds to these insights by describing how people experience such increase in their viewing in very different ways.

For the Netherlands, similar conclusions can be drawn. Time use data, based on diaries, showed that for every measurement time between 1975 and 2000 people aged 65 years and older watched more than younger age groups (Huysmans, De Haan, & Van den Broek, 2004, p. 71). In addition, for all measurement times, retired people spent more time watching television than people who studied or worked. These findings lead to the obvious conclusion that older people watch more because they have more time available. However, and again, these effects are smaller than one may expect. When the researchers controlled for other variables, the analysis showed that age and cohort had

less influence on the amount of watching television and listening radio than gender and educational level (p. 217).

In addition, the increasing heterogeneity as people age is important (Mares & Woodard, 2006, p. 613). Mares and Woodard (2006) wrote that most discussions of why older people watch more television focus on mean differences and subsequently provide social, health-related, and demographic explanations, although it may be more important to describe the aggregation of life experiences that creates an increasingly heterogeneous population (p. 611). The authors used the metaphor that the older population spreads out “like a fan” as individual experiences accumulate (p. 611). Interestingly, they found in the cohort analysis that with each successive life stage, demographic and social predictors explained less of the variance in viewing.

*Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context.* The cohort analysis by Mares and Woodard (2006) showed that widowhood and other variables concerning social contacts did not have an effect on the differences between age groups in amount of television viewing. This is not surprising in view of the variety in the current interview study: after the loss of a partner, some people watch more than before, others watch less or do not change their viewing. Also, some people get new relationships or other new circumstances which changes their viewing again.

Possibly, age groups differ in how people experience several aspects of television viewing in the social context. Questions that have not been answered yet are for instance: how do younger and older couples differ in the role of television viewing in their relationships? How do younger and older adults differ in their reactions toward a loss in the interpersonal sphere and the subsequent role of television viewing?

*Theme 3: Television content.* The catalogue of media uses and functions is the same for all age groups (Bliese, 1986, p. 581). Functions of television such as information, entertainment, providing company, and helping to pass the time are apparent for all age groups. Older people do not suddenly discover functions of television content that younger people could never think of. However, age groups can differ in the importance of particular functions or content preferences. In the literature review (chapter 2), I concluded that Uses and Gratifications research does not show clear-cut differences between age groups in the importance of functions. Empirical research did show that older adults seem to prefer news and quiz shows more than younger people do. On the basis of the current qualitative study and other recent research, three differences between age groups become apparent in the centrality of content functions or preferences. Both continuity and change are part of these differences.

First, emotional development seems to lead to changes in content preferences. In the interviews, some respondents indicate that they become more sensitive as they grow

older. For them, becoming more sensitive leads to stronger reactions to emotional television content or avoidance of such contents. Other respondents explain that they feel the need for uplifting, heart-warming content, in some cases in reaction to widowhood or other problems in their personal lives.

Interestingly, Mares, Oliver and Cantor (in press) found age differences in people's film preferences that correspond with the current finding. Older people, 50 and over, expressed more interest in watching heart-warming and uplifting content than middle-aged (26 to 49 years) and younger adults (18 to 25 years). The younger adults expressed greater interest in watching films to feel sad or scared, and more attraction to films with dark, violent, scary and sad content. Older participants' retrospective accounts were in line with the cross-sectional findings. Mares et al. argued that the age differences reflected maturational or developmental processes in which affective preferences are related to life tasks that individuals face at different points in their lives. They explained the age differences with the help of two theoretical frameworks that point in the same direction: Carstensen's work on socioemotional selectivity theory and Arnett's work on emerging adulthood. Socioemotional selectivity theory (e.g., Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000) argues that older adults have a heightened sense of time as a scarce commodity, which makes them feel that life is too short to spend on unnecessary unpleasant experiences. Mares et al. used Arnett's description of emerging adulthood as a period of conscious exploration of emotions, personality, and life experiences, including dangerous, exciting experiences. Therefore it makes sense that young people are attracted to films that offer the chance to vicariously experience danger, sadness or horror.

The second difference between older and younger people is that older adults seem to have a heightened interest in television content that helps them to keep their brain active. In the interviews, older adults explain that they watch to learn, and for cognitive stimulation. Respondents mention particularly quiz shows in this respect. In the literature review (chapter 2), I described that older people prefer quiz shows more than younger people. Several developmental explanations are suggested by the interviews, both in terms of selection (the domain of cognitive development becomes more important because of fear of dementia and forgetfulness) and compensation (people experience less stimulation than before). Continuity also plays a part in the preference for quiz shows; several respondents explain that they have always felt the need for learning.

The third difference between older and younger people is that older adults have developed uses of television and of particular genres, which makes their generation



different from younger people. For example, they are socialized into using television news as an important source of information, whereas the current youth does not focus on traditional television news anymore (Costera Meijer, 2006). In addition, children and youngsters nowadays grow up with a mixture of media that they use simultaneously; they are accustomed to multitasking. Therefore, it does not make that much sense anymore to focus studies on young people solely on the medium television. The notion of continuity holds that current youth's media use will influence their media experiences as they grow older.

*Selection and compensation.* Television viewing as part of selection strategies involves that people choose television because it adds something to their lives. Different life stages involve different life tasks, and therefore an emphasis on different television goals. The present study and the literature discussed above suggest that for older people emotion regulation and cognitive training are particularly important. In addition, some respondents indicate how aging involves a reassessment of what is important in life, which may lead to the realization that some things, such as particular television content, are not as important as they once thought they were. For younger people, other life tasks such as identity formation (e.g., Arnett, 2000) are central.

Television viewing as part of compensation strategies means that people use television as a substitute after a decline. The current study shows the ways in which older adults use television as compensation, and so far the question is unanswered whether younger people use television as a substitute in the same ways. The authors who developed the theory of Selective Optimization with Compensation (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000) state that gains and losses jointly occur across the life span, and that the balance between gains and losses becomes less positive with age. Applied to everyday life experiences, this statement means that, on average, older people may experience situations that ask for compensation strategies more often than younger people. To a lesser extent, younger people also go through changes, such as unemployment and illness, which may involve compensation strategies. The current study shows that watching more television in reaction to retirement, physical aging, or the loss of a partner does not automatically signal compensation strategies. Thus, a question for future research is whether older and younger adults differ in how they use television in adaptation strategies after unemployment, illness or the loss of a partner, and whether their television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies.

The conclusion about older adults in comparison with younger people, on the basis of the current interview study and recent work by other authors, is that older adults seem to share several characteristics that make them different from younger people. In short, older people watch more television than younger people, because not having a paid job

and loss of health occur a bit more often in older people's lives; there are differences in content preferences because of emotional development and an increasing importance of exercising cognitive abilities; and some aspects of media use and content preferences, such as the centrality of television news, seem to be determined by the (media) circumstances in which a generation grows up. In addition, older adults show more heterogeneity than younger people.

### *Conclusion*

The main components of the conceptual framework (the three themes; continuity and change; selection and compensation) appear to be transferable to other contexts, in the sense that the components stimulate comparisons with other countries, other cohorts of older people, other media, and other age groups. The comparisons show that whereas the main components are transferable, differences are visible in more specific elements of the framework. The framework seems best transferable to older adults' television viewing in other contemporary Western countries, although even this comparison reveals differences (such as television traditions) that ask for more research. The other three comparisons (other media, cohorts of older people, and age groups) have shown obvious differences that require future study. For instance, young people are confronted with other life tasks than older people, and supposedly use media in their identity formation, and for sensation seeking and arousal more than older adults do. Therefore, a conceptual framework that aims to apply to all life stages should include these media functions.

### **6.5 Suggestions for future research**

One of the purposes of qualitative research is to spark ideas for further study. The previous section has shown how new ideas are generated by a comparison of the conceptual framework with different contexts. In the current section, I will outline other suggestions for future research inspired by the present study.

*Quantitative research.* The most obvious recommendation after a qualitative study is to say that quantitative research is needed to study the extent to which the phenomena occur in the population, in this case older adults in the Netherlands. A questionnaire should include questions regarding the use of television in selection and compensation strategies (based on the current study), television viewing behavior (e.g., amount of viewing and content preferences) and circumstances (e.g., regarding activities, social context, and socioeconomic status). Thus, the survey could help to answer the question whether particular amounts of television viewing and particular genres are more likely to be part of compensation strategies than others. The conclusion that particular

television behavior, such as amount of viewing or content preferences, does not automatically signal either selection and compensation, does not rule out that particular television behavior may be more likely to be part of either selection or compensation strategies.

*Television content.* The current interview study and the literature review (in chapter 2) point to a lot of possible research questions regarding the meanings of television content. I will describe three of them. First, more research is needed on television viewing and nostalgia, particularly on differences between age groups in the functions of nostalgia. The interviews indicate positive aspects of nostalgia; some respondents explain how they derive pleasure from watching familiar programs that they have seen in the past. This finding is in line with other qualitative research in which interviewees expressed strong and fond memories of television series broadcast in the 1950s and 1960s (Dhoest, 2006, 2007), and with research on nostalgia (Wildschut, Sedikides, & Routledge, 2008). Wildschut et al. described nostalgia as a predominantly positive emotion. Their empirical research showed that nostalgia served four functions: nostalgia generates positive affect; it maintains and enhances positive self-regard; it strengthens social bonds, and it imbues life with meaning which facilitates coping with existential threat. However, the research did not involve television programs, and, more importantly, the authors derived these functions from research with undergraduate students. From a life-span perspective, the issue of nostalgia is especially interesting, because viewers' reactions to television programs related to the past directly touch upon both continuity and change. Continuity is apparent because some television content broadcast decades ago still has appeal. The appeal of content related to the past may have to do with how memory works. Several authors refer to the "reminiscence bump or peak" that implies that memories of adolescence and early adulthood tend to be stronger than those of subsequent periods in life; these are the formative periods in life in which many changes occur (e.g., Dhoest, 2006; Draaisma, 2008). At the same time, change may be at stake, because nostalgia may serve another function for older adults than for younger people. Nostalgia might have greater significance in old age (Wildschut et al., 2008). Gauntlett and Hill (1999) suggested that nostalgia is part of the process of ego integrity (Erikson, 1950), the last life stage, in which people come to terms with the lives that they have lived. Research is called for that delves into age differences regarding nostalgia: does nostalgia become more important as people grow older? What television content invokes nostalgia for different age groups? Does nostalgia involve different feelings for older compared to younger adults?

A second suggestion for research concerns the relationship between television characters and viewer identities. In chapter 2, I have discussed that studies lend some

support to the idea that older viewers prefer older television characters over younger characters. Harwood (1999) suggested that older viewers prefer older television characters as an attempt to seek support for their social identity as older adults. Some interviewees do mention that they like to see older famous persons again because they have already “known” these famous persons for a long time. However, the current interviews were wider in scope, and were not appropriate to tackle specific questions regarding the interactions of viewers with television personae. Future research is needed to study older adults’ favorite television characters, and how the television characters are related to viewers’ identities.

Third, the present study and the literature review (chapter 2) indicate several content preferences that may be rather typical for older adults. I just mentioned older viewers’ preference for older characters over younger characters. In addition, older people seem to have a stronger preference for news and quiz shows, uplifting, heart-warming and gentle programs, and possibly for nostalgic programs. A step forward would be to analyze television ratings of older viewers and younger viewers in terms of genres as well as themes (particularly nostalgia and gentleness) and characters (particularly age) in order to gain insight into the factors that determine older adults’ content preferences. In such research, television ratings would be combined with content analysis.

*Media biographies.* To conclude, I will return to the notion of continuity and change in media use. This dissertation shows that generational influences on media use (continuity) and developmental aspects of media use (change) are involved in an intriguing dance. In order to gain more insight in both continuity and change in media use, information about media use of several generations from childhood till old age is called for. In other words, insight in media biographies or media careers would be useful. The three themes within television viewing help to identify what research should focus on, because continuity and change occur within each of those themes. So far, only a few cohort analyses have been conducted (e.g., Danowski & Ruchinskis, 1983; Mares & Woodard, 2006), and they were able to include only a limited measure of television viewing. When researchers will be able to compare such cohort analyses with cross-sectional surveys, experiments and qualitative research that include comparisons between age groups and between media, they will work toward a better understanding of media use from a life-span perspective. It will be exciting to study what will happen to television viewing and internet use as Baby Boomers grow older, and to follow how young people will continue their intermingled use of media as they pass through several stages in life.

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## Appendix A

### Interview guide

Interview guide as used in the second round of interviews, i.e., the research seminar.<sup>13</sup>

Introduction and goal of the interview:  
 I would like to talk with you about television viewing. I wish to obtain a good picture of you as a television viewer.  
 [Other elements of the introduction were practised in the research seminar]

<i>Television viewing as an activity</i>	<i>Television content</i>
1. Can you describe when you switch on your television on an average day?	What do you like to watch on television?
<p>For the mentioned aspects of television viewing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>reasons</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* why is the television switched on at those times</li> <li>* why is a television program chosen</li> </ul> </li> <li>- <b>change</b> <p>For the mentioned aspects of television viewing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* since when..</li> <li>* how did it start..</li> <li>* for how long..</li> </ul> </li> <li>* do you see changes in your television viewing now that you are growing older?</li> <li>- <b>selection:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* reason to switch on television, to choose a program</li> <li>* high-priority domain (information about that domain in life, in the past and in the present)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- <b>compensation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* what is the decrease or the problem</li> <li>* what is the role of television viewing in relation to the decrease</li> <li>* how satisfied is the respondent with this role of television</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

<sup>13</sup> All materials in the appendixes are translated from Dutch.

## **Appendix B**

### **Background characteristics**

1. Gender
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
2. Date of birth:  
Age:
3. Marital status
  - a. Unmarried
  - b. Married
  - c. Widowed, since
  - d. Divorced, since
4. Amount of children:  
How often do you see them?
5. Amount of grandchildren:
6. Living situation
  - a. Independent
  - b. Assisted living
  - c. Nursing home
7. Household composition
  - a. Lives alone, has relationship
  - b. Lives alone, no relationship
  - c. Lives together with partner
  - d. Lives together with partner and child(ren)
  - e. Lives together with child(ren)
  - f. Lives together with others (e.g., brother, sister, others)
8. Until what age have you had a paid job?
9. What was your occupation?
10. Which activities do you conduct outside of your home?  
(E.g., taking a course, volunteer work, church, sports, hobbies)
11. Are you satisfied with the social contacts you have?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No, because:

12. Do you have physical impairments?

- a. No
- b. Yes:

13. Do these physical impairments limit the activities that you are able to do in your daily life?

- a. No
  - b. A bit limited in the things I am able to do
  - c. Severely limited in the things I am able to do
- What activities are affected?

14. Do you use:

- a. Assistance regarding physical care? Yes/no
- b. Assistance regarding meals, e.g., *Tafeltje Dekje*? Yes/no

15. City where interviewee lives:

How long have you lived in this city?

16. Relationship between interviewee and interviewer

- a. Interviewee is grandparent of the interviewee
- b. Interviewee is a family member of the interviewer, but not grandparent
- c. Interviewee and interviewer know each other, but are not family members
- d. Interviewee has been approached through interviewers' network (they do not know each other)
- e. Other:

## Appendix C

**Table: Changes in television viewing (part of exploration phase)**

Each table in the appendixes C to F includes two interviews as examples.

	Change in life	Change in TV viewing	Evaluation of new role of TV viewing
<i>Interview number</i>	<i>Summary</i> <i>This column included summaries of changes in life relevant to television viewing. Mainly:</i> 1. Change in activities - physically - retirement 2. Social context - children left home - widowed - illness of partner	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Summary</i>
#2	2. Ill husband, widow, alone	TV because: Ill husband, in nursing home. When they had been together, they were able to talk about something at night. But when husband was in nursing home, she didn't have energy for other things. When she was alone at night she searched for something. Since that time she watches <i>the Bold</i> : routine.	"I didn't have a choice; I had to deal with it. I could say: I don't do anything anymore, but that wouldn't bring me much further either. So that was ok." "I don't say: hurray, I'm alone." Coping: she has a positive attitude, she tries to make something of her life. In the beginning her sons said: you have to go out. Compensation: husband is not there anymore; at night a replacement is necessary. The starting point is something negative, a problem. But of course TV can not be a replacement for a husband. Selection: new function of TV.

Table: Changes in television viewing (continuation)

	<b>Change in life</b>	<b>Change in TV viewing</b>	<b>Evaluation of new role of TV viewing</b>
#16	1. Change in activity. Physical: less is <u>possible</u> now. Previously she did not have time.	Now she has more time to watch. TV to participate in everything. More time; "then you go and see what is there."	In the past she had other things. "That is much better; that is logical." She would like to do more active things. Palette smaller = loss-based selection Experienced negatively = compensation

## Appendix D

### Tables: Dimensions for each of the three themes (part of specification phase)

**Table D1**

**Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities**

Dimension: Television viewing amidst other activities

	<b>Pole 1. TV viewing as a choice amidst other activities</b>	<b>Pole 2. TV viewing for want of something better</b>
<i>Interview number</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>
#6	Television is a choice. There are other things than TV. She is really busy. Other things are more important than TV. (Difference summer-winter). She can do without TV.	
#3		TV for want of something better. Problem: no meaningful activities. Addicted. Watching all day. He does not have any hobbies. Keeping busy. TV because there is nothing else to do at home. TV is what is left. Sometimes: not in the mood to watch anymore. By the clock. Going to the hospital is a way to get out of the house. Filling the time is a big problem. Bittersweet. Life sucks when it is so dependent on TV.

**Table D2**  
**Theme 2: TV viewing in the social context**

	<b>Pole 1. Meanings of living and watching alone</b>	<b>Pole 2. Meanings of living and watching together</b>
<i>Interview number</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>
#6		<p>Attuning behavior with husband. Reading newspaper at the same time. They both like quiz shows.</p> <p>Cozy with the grandchildren. The grandchildren are allowed to switch channels.</p> <p>TV off when there are visitors: not cozy. Only when there is an important sports event: cozy.</p>
#11	<p>Lives and watches alone. TV in the background: as if somebody is at home. As if she is not alone. "You share something with someone." People in the home.</p> <p>[Interesting with regard to living alone]</p> <p>[This TV function started after she got divorced. Problem: discuss in the section about change?]</p>	<p><i>Postcodeloterij</i> because of a friend. For fun. Relaxation, shared experience</p> <p>Talking about current affairs.</p> <p>Han Reiziger: she watched it sometimes with ex-husband, now sometimes with friend [= behavior]</p> <p>World Championships soccer: previously with friends, they passed away. More because of being together than because of soccer. The atmosphere. Everybody in the Netherlands watches = shared experience.</p>

**Table D3**  
**Theme 3: Television content**

	<b>Pole 1. Information and learning</b>	<b>Pole 2. Pleasure and feelings</b>	<b>Summary pole 1 and 2</b>	<b>Which domains?</b>
<i>Inter-view number</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>	<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>		<i>Summary of relevant fragments</i>
#1	<p>News important: developing an opinion. Political judgment.</p> <p>Quiz shows: participating actively (important)</p> <p>Nature: instructive (emphasis)</p>	<p>Quiz: enthusiastic, children, wonderful.</p> <p>Nature: beautiful.</p> <p>Music, comedy, soccer</p>	<p>Emphasis on information and learning. Wants to use TV actively. By the program. Pleasure plays a role as well.</p>	
#2	<p>Medical information interesting (domain)</p> <p>News to keep up to date with current affairs. <i>Nova</i>, <i>Den Haag Vandaag</i>.</p>	<p>-Sport: beautiful</p> <p>- <i>The Bold</i>: excitement</p> <p>- <i>Jag</i> (I don't know why she likes it)</p> <p>- Big shows of the old days: wonderful.</p> <p>- Musicals, opera: crazy about.</p> <p>- <i>Hart in actie</i>: helping people, good presenter</p> <p>- <i>Rijdende rechter</i>: fun</p> <p>- Likes debates</p> <p>- Nature beautiful</p> <p>- Oprah Winfrey: nice girl</p> <p>- Church, Schuller: beautiful</p> <p>- When you see all those terrible things on TV: doubt about God.</p>	<p>Emphasis on pleasure and feelings.</p> <p>News is a routine that "almost everybody" has; respondents do not really vary there.</p>	<p>Sport, because of sons.</p> <p>Medical information because of grand-daughter who died. Operations she had herself.</p> <p>Going to musicals.</p>



## Appendix E

### Tables: Changes for each of the three themes (part of specification phase)

Table E1

Process 1: Changes in television viewing amidst other activities

Inter-view number	Change in the palette of activities	Change in TV viewing	Evaluation of TV	In terms of SOC-model	Tentative label
#2	<p>Physical: assistance regarding taking a shower etc. This is different than before; she doesn't mention that explicitly. She mainly talks about the transition into widowhood.</p> <p>Change in desired activity level: travelling abroad is not necessary anymore. That is because she is alone now = connection between changes in palette and social context</p>	<p>"No"</p> <p>She relates change in TV (more; <i>the Bold</i>) to becoming a widow, not to physical changes.</p>	-	-	-
#3	<p>Unemployment, 20 years ago: he does not relate TV to that transition.</p> <p>No more volunteer work: he does not feel like doing that anymore.</p> <p>No more car = he cannot get around easily. He used to have other things to do. Other things on his mind.</p>	<p>Addicted to TV.</p> <p>He used to watch television much more superficially.</p> <p>[TV is because of a lack of meaningful activities <u>and</u> loneliness]</p>	Bittersweet He is happy that TV is there, but it is a life that sucks.	<p>Life used to be more meaningful = loss</p> <p>Not satisfied with role of TV. He would rather do something else.</p> <p>Compensation</p>	<p>TV because of lack of meaningful activities.</p> <p>[This does not include change explicitly]</p>

**Table E2**  
**Process 2: Changes in television viewing in the social context**

Inter-view number	Change in the social context	Change in TV viewing	Evaluation of TV	In terms of SOC-model	Tentative label
#2	Widow (79 years), widowed for 3 years. Before that: 6 to 7 years of living alone. Being alone is not easy = loss.  Changes in activities, e.g., vacation.	She searched for something. More TV New routine: <i>the Bold</i> every day at 5:30 pm. Eating a sandwich at the same time. Also other activities in adaptation process.	Automaticall ly more TV.  “I had to deal with the situation; I did not have a choice.”	Change = loss  TV offers something, e.g. when having dinner. Loss-based selection.  Reconstruction: with husband it used to be better; learning how to deal with this. Compensation.	TV in adaptation to widow-hood
#3	Divorced when he was about 50 years old (same period as unemployment)  Lonely	Addicted to TV.  [TV is because of a lack of meaningful activities <u>and</u> loneliness]	Bittersweet. He is happy that TV is there, but it is a life that sucks.	Life used to be more meaningful = loss  Not satisfied with role of TV. He would rather do something else. Compensation	TV to fight loneliness.  [This does not include change explicitly]

**Table E3**  
**Process 3: Changes in meanings of television content**

Inter-view number	Change in life	Change in TV viewing Continuity	Evaluation of TV	In terms of SOC-model	Tentative label
#2	Widow	Becoming a widow led to a new program: <i>the Bold</i> .  [I discuss that at the social changes.]	She considers <i>the Bold</i> exciting and she stopped watching <i>GTST</i> .	Loss-based selection.	A new TV program because of widowhood  Is that “becoming interested in something new”?
		Continuity: sport is beautiful; she has always experienced it like that.			
		Continuity: she would like to see big shows again.			
#3	Fewer activities  Divorced	Addicted to television because of palette of activities and social context. Therefore he watches things he did not watch before (e.g., talkshows during the day). [where can I discuss that?]			
		Continuity: music of his own youth. 25, 30 years ago he liked particular music (e.g., <i>Dolly Dots</i> ), not anymore. Music used to be more civilized than it is nowadays.			
		Continuity: “I’ve always had that: wanting to track things down.” <i>Spoorloos</i> etc.			
		Continuity: sports: as a child he went to <i>NEC</i> with his father.			
		Continuity: interest in the stock market. In 1984, he speculated on the stock market.			

## Appendix F

**Table: Change and continuity in television viewing (part of reduction phase)**

Interview number	Change in TV viewing	Continuity in TV viewing	Connection change and continuity
#1	<p>TV-information has become more important. News a few times a day. Otherwise you would become blunt; “I would not know what to do the whole day” (not explicitly discussed as change). Loss-based selection.</p> <p>TV-information has become less important. He uses the information less, outside of the house, than before.</p>	<p>TV in a palette of activities.</p> <p>Watching together.</p> <p>Content: news, quiz shows, nature.</p>	<p>Not much has changed; emphasis on continuity.</p>
#2	<p>Social context: widow: new role of TV. Because she became a widow she watches new programs such as <i>the Bold</i>.</p> <p>Palette of activities is connected with transition into widowhood.</p>	<p>Content: sports, big shows.</p>	<p>TV has changed, in particular because of widowhood. In connection with that: change in palette. Emphasis on change. Continuity in content.</p>

**Appendix G**  
**Matrix with “scores” on the three themes (part of reduction phase)**

	Theme 1 Palette of activities		Theme 2 Social context		Experience of the activity of viewing TV in everyday life			Theme 3 TV content			
	TV as a choice	TV for want of some- thing better	Satisfied (alone- together)	Un- satis- fied	Meaning- ful	Problems	Meaning- less	Change	Info	Pleasure	Nostal- gia
#1	Choice  News at daytime possible		Attuning fine		Satisfied. Meaning- ful life, interests. Not much change			Info less necessary outside the home	Emphasis: info, learning, partici- pate actively	Less emphasis	Program supply used to be better
#2	Choice  Initiative within possibi- lities  By the program		TV new role in widow- hood. <i>The Bold</i> . She had to deal with it.			There are some problems. She does not say hurray about being alone.		<i>The Bold</i> was added, apart from that conti- nuity in content	News Medical domain	Emphasis on feelings	Big shows
#3		Filling the time is a pro- blem		Lone- liness			Happy that TV is there, but this life sucks	Other content because he watches so much. Also conti- nuity	Crazy about the news	Sensation  Sympa- thizing	Music of his youth

## Appendix H

### Top 25 of programs watched by older viewers

To give a general impression of the programs that older people watch most, appendix H contains the Top 25 of programs watched by older viewers (65+) in the Netherlands in 2007 (based on television ratings). The Top 25 for the general audience is presented too. For programs that are broadcast regularly (such as news programs or series), only one episode has been included.

Top 25 – 2007 65+			Top 25 – 2007 General audience (6+)		
	Program title	Channel		Program title	Channel
1	40 jaar huwelijk HKH prinses Margriet	Nederland 1	1	Schaatsen WK allround	Nederland 1
2	Spoorloos	Nederland 1	2	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1
3	Radar	Nederland 1	3	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6
4	Journaal 20 uur	Nederland 1	4	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6
5	Schaatsen WK allround	Nederland 1	5	Journaal 20 uur	Nederland 1
6	Tussen kunst en kitsch	Nederland 1	6	Voetbal AZ-Ajax	Tien
7	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	7	Boer zoekt vrouw	Nederland 1
8	Vermist	Nederland 1	8	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	RTL4
9	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	9	Voetbal EK onder 21	Tien
10	Boer zoekt vrouw	Nederland 1	10	Boer zoekt vrouw	Nederland 1
11	Memories	Nederland 1	11	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1
12	Opgelicht	Nederland 1	12	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	Tien
13	Tv show	Nederland 1	13	Spoorloos	Nederland 1
14	Boer zoekt vrouw	Nederland 1	14	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6
15	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6	15	Domino Day	SBS6
16	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	16	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6
17	Op zoek naar Evita	Nederland 1	17	40 jaar huwelijk HKH prinses Margriet	Nederland 1
18	Memories Tour d'amour	Nederland 1	18	RTL voetbal eredivisie	RTL4
19	André Rieu live	Nederland 1	19	Youp Schreeuwstorm	Nederland 1
20	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	20	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	RTL4
21	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	SBS6	21	Domino Day de uitslag	SBS6
22	Voetbal EK kwalificatie	RTL4	22	Wedstrijden zondag	Tien
23	Portret van een prins	Nederland 1	23	Op zoek naar Evita	Nederland 1
24	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	24	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1
25	Schaatsen WK	Nederland 1	25	Voetbal Champions League	Nederland 3
Stichting KijkOnderzoek			Stichting KijkOnderzoek		

## Summary

Television viewing seems to have special importance for older adults: research has consistently shown that older adults spend more time watching television than younger people do. The finding that older adults watch more television raises the question what television viewing means in their lives. So far, research presents only a limited answer to this question: a large share of the available literature depicts old age as a life stage characterized by losses in which people use television as a substitute for decreased activities. This dissertation aims to move away from this limited view by presenting older adults' experiences of television viewing, and thus showing the variety of meanings that watching television viewing has in the lives of older people.

The overall aim of this dissertation is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between television viewing and aging. More specifically, the goal is to develop a conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, based on how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives. The study has three basic considerations. First, the study gives room for "all" meanings of television viewing to come to the fore. Second, attention is paid to both change and continuity in television viewing. Older adults may adjust their television viewing as they grow older (change), whereas their current television use can be colored by their experiences with television viewing over the last 50 years (continuity).

Third, the concepts selection and compensation are used to obtain a broad view of television viewing and aging. The concepts are derived from the theory of Selective Optimization with Compensation (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Freund & Baltes, 2000) and elaborations hereof (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). The life strategies *selection* and *compensation* help to understand the ways in which television viewing is related to developments in everyday life; the concepts encourage to pay attention not only to how television viewing can be a substitute for diminished activities, but also to how television relates to goals and gains in everyday life. To develop the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging, the dissertation consists of a literature review (chapter 2) and a qualitative interview study (chapters 3 to 5).

In the literature review (chapter 2), assumptions and findings about television viewing and its relation with developments in old age are discussed in three sections: time use, social functions, and content preferences. In each section, I interpret the available literature in terms of selection and compensation.

The main conclusion is that a large share of previous research on older adults' television viewing appears to be biased toward compensation, thus neglecting the possible role of television viewing in selection strategies. The bias toward compensation has been expressed in the so-called substitution hypothesis asserting that television viewing can be a substitute in terms of time use and that television can replace social functions that were previously fulfilled by interpersonal communication. The idea of television as compensation is also prominent in the explanations that authors offered for older adults' content preferences.

Consideration of selection strategies can help to find explanations of older people's television use other than those that have been traditionally provided in this field of research. Selection strategies imply that older adults can choose to watch television over doing some other activity because television viewing relates to goals in high-priority domains (such as interest in current events and political issues, or intellectual stimulation).

In the *qualitative interview study*, the development of the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging continued. Chapter 3 describes the problem definition and the design of the interview study. Qualitative research is appropriate because the goal is to develop a conceptual framework, and qualitative research (especially the grounded theory approach) focuses on building theory. Interviews are called for because the emphasis in this study is on the experiences and meanings of television viewing and aging, and not on behavior. For example, the point is not that some older adults watch more television than before, but the question is what the increase in viewing means to them.

Typically, qualitative research involves a cyclic process in which data gathering and analysis alternate, guided by reflection. Data gathering involved interviews with respondents aged 65 years and older ( $N = 86$ ) that were conducted in three rounds by me and by students in a research seminar that I taught. Purposeful and theoretical sampling led to a sample that was varied with regard to age, gender and household composition. Interviewers needed to probe to learn about the reasons for television uses, and asked retrospective questions in order to gain insight in changes in television use.

During the analysis, I worked with four phases in the analytical process that Wester and colleagues formulated (e.g., Wester, 1995; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004). In the first phase, the exploration phase, I conducted open coding, which led to three themes that were closely related to the respondents' experiences. In the second phase, the specification phase, I looked for dimensions within each theme. In the third phase, the reduction phase, the aim was to gain insight in the interrelations between the three



themes. While I worked on a matrix with the “scores” on all dimensions, I decided to focus on television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. In the last phase, the integration phase, I described the conceptual framework and made a comparison of the framework with other research.

On the basis of the interview study, I have developed the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging that is described in chapters 4 and 5. The framework consists of the following major components:

- 1) Three themes within older adults’ experiences of television viewing: television viewing in a palette of activities, television viewing in the social context, and television content. The three themes together provide a picture of how older adults experience television viewing in their everyday lives.
- 2) Continuity and change in television viewing. The description of continuity and change within the three themes shows how television viewing evolves as people age.
- 3) Television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. The description of television viewing in terms of selection and compensation strategies shows how television viewing is related to developments in everyday life.

The description of the three themes, in chapter 4, shows the wide variety of meanings that television viewing has in older adults’ everyday lives. Within each theme, the experiences of television viewing are highly varied, and both continuity and change are apparent.

*Theme 1: Television viewing in a palette of activities.* Obvious differences are visible in how older people experience the pastime television viewing amidst other activities. On the one end, there are older adults for whom television viewing is a positive choice amidst other meaningful pastimes. On the other end of the spectrum are older people who watch television for want of something better. When circumstances change (for instance a change in available time), television viewing may get another role in everyday life. An increase in viewing may be evaluated as positive, negative, or neutral. Continuity is apparent regarding the status of the pastime television.

*Theme 2: Television viewing in the social context.* Television viewing is part of relatedness and autonomy. The contributions of television viewing to relatedness, i.e., to connections with other people and with society, range from positive to negative. Clearly, the issue of relatedness is different for older adults who live together and older adults who live alone. With regard to autonomy, the respondents who live alone have

the opportunity to make individual television choices, and for some television viewing was therefore part of a sense of autonomy. Television viewing can be used in adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere, such as a divorce or the loss of a spouse. When people are in the process of getting accustomed to the new situation, television can provide company, help to pass the time, help to structure the days, and offer distraction from sadness.

*Theme 3: Television content.* Three dimensions show the variations in experiences regarding television content. First, the functions of television content: television content provides information and an opportunity to learn, and also contributes to pleasure and good moods. Second, television content is related to activities in everyday life, and to a certain attitude to life. Third, the status of program types ranges from low to high.

Continuity is present in interests in content. Interestingly, continuity in preferences remains important despite changes in the context. Another observation is that some older people use television content in reaction to changes in circumstances; for example, television content provides information and a way to participate in society that respondents previously obtained from more active participation in society. There are also changes regarding television content that are not related to changes in circumstances. One of these changes is that some interviewees point out that they become more sensitive as they grow older, which leads to stronger reactions to emotional television content or avoidance of such content. A separate issue is nostalgia, which involves both continuity and change.

The analysis in terms of selection and compensation strategies (in chapter 5) shows that television viewing is mainly part of selection strategies: older adults choose to watch television because television viewing adds something to their lives. In addition, some older people use television in compensation strategies: they use television as a substitute for activities that have diminished. When people use television as compensation, television viewing is part of selection strategies too. In other words, for some people television viewing is part of solely selection strategies, and for other people television viewing is part of both selection and compensation strategies.

According to my analysis, television viewing is part of selection strategies in three ways that are related to the three themes within television viewing: first, the activity of viewing television is a positive choice amidst other possible, meaningful activities; second, television viewing is chosen because of its positive contributions in the social context; and third, television content is chosen because it offers information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to activities and attitudes in everyday life.

People also have three ways of using television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that have diminished. The three ways are also related to the three themes within television viewing, and show how people use television in reaction to losses: first, the activity television viewing is a substitute for activities that are not possible (anymore); second, television viewing is part of adaptation strategies after a loss in the interpersonal sphere; and third, television content is a substitute for input that people previously gained from other activities. The respondents who use television in compensation strategies, also use television in selection strategies. Their television viewing behavior is highly varied in terms of how much television needs to compensate, importance of television in everyday life, content preferences, and attitude toward television viewing.

The study has led to several conclusions, as presented in chapter 6. One important conclusion of the interview study is that overt television behavior (e.g., amount of viewing, watching alone, or content preferences) does not automatically signal which meanings older viewers assign to their viewing or, more specifically, whether television behavior has changed or remained stable, and whether television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies. For instance, some people watch television several hours a day because they enjoy television viewing and feel that television adds something to their lives, whereas other people watch several hours because they have nothing else to do or have nobody to talk to. These findings teach that it is not possible to say on the basis of “facts” about television viewing behavior, such as amount of viewing, that older people use television viewing as compensation after losses.

Another conclusion is that continuity and change in television viewing coexist. When changes in television viewing occur, continuity is apparent at the same time. An observation that has led to this conclusion is that continuity in the status of television viewing and in content preferences co-occurs with changes in the activity of television viewing. For example, when people watch more television than before because they have more time available, they are as critical about television as before and they seek out the kind of programs that they have “always” liked.

The final conclusion is that selection strategies provide a better characterization of older people’s television viewing than compensation strategies. This finding shows that the emphasis on television as compensation does not reflect what television viewing means in older adults’ lives.

The societal relevance of the study can be expressed in four points. First, the study’s picture of the everyday experiences of older people is relevant to the societal debate

about aging. Second, the conclusion that the same television behavior has different meanings is important for the question whether television viewing is a sign of disengagement or stimulates older adults' participation in society. Third, the interviews show that older people experience their television viewing as positive when they see television viewing as a choice, even in light of a decline in possibilities. Therefore, it may be useful in communication with older people who have limitations in available activities, to make them aware of the media choices they have. Fourth, the results underline that older adults are a very diverse "category" that cannot be approached as one group. Instead, television producers and marketers need to focus on attracting subgroups.

The question is to what extent the conceptual framework of television viewing and aging is "transferable" to other contexts. In chapter 6, I use other empirical research and arguments to make a comparison with other contexts, and the conclusion is that the main components of the conceptual framework (the three themes; continuity and change; selection and compensation) appear to be transferable to other contexts, in the sense that the components stimulate comparisons with other countries, other cohorts of older people, other media, and other age groups.

The comparisons show that whereas the main components are transferable, differences between contexts are visible in more specific elements of the framework. The framework seems best transferable to older adults' television viewing in other contemporary Western countries, although even this comparison reveals differences (such as television traditions). The other three comparisons (other media, cohorts of older people, and age groups) have shown obvious differences. For instance, young people are confronted with other life tasks than older people, and supposedly use media in their identity formation, and for sensation seeking and arousal more than older adults do. Therefore, a conceptual framework that aims to apply to all life stages should include these media functions.

One of the purposes of qualitative research is to spark ideas for further study. The interview study generates input for a representative survey. The current study also points to several possible research questions regarding the meanings of television content: more research is needed on television viewing and nostalgia, and on the relationship between television characters and viewer identities. In addition, this dissertation shows that generational influences on media use (continuity) and developmental aspects of media use (change) are involved in an intriguing dance. In order to gain more insight in both continuity and change in media use, information

about media use of several generations from childhood till old age is called for. It will be exciting to study what will happen to television viewing and internet use as Baby Boomers grow older, and to follow how young people will continue their intermingled use of media as they pass through several stages in life.

## Samenvatting

### Televisiekijken in het leven van ouderen

Televisiekijken lijkt voor ouderen van bijzonder belang: onderzoek laat consistent zien dat ouderen meer tijd besteden aan televisiekijken dan jongere mensen. De bevinding dat ouderen meer televisie kijken roept de vraag op wat televisiekijken betekent in het leven van ouderen. Onderzoek geeft tot nu toe slechts een beperkt antwoord op deze vraag: een groot deel van de beschikbare literatuur schildert ouderdom af als een fase van verlies waarin ouderen televisie kijken als vervanging voor activiteiten die zijn weggevallen. Het proefschrift wil dit beperkte beeld achter zich laten door de ervaringen van ouderen met televisiekijken naar voren te brengen en daarmee de variëteit te laten zien van de betekenissen van televisiekijken in het leven van ouderen.

Het doel van dit proefschrift is om bij te dragen aan een beter begrip van de relatie tussen televisiekijken en ouder worden. Meer specifiek geformuleerd is het doel om een conceptueel model van televisiekijken en ouder worden te ontwikkelen, gebaseerd op de ervaringen die ouderen hebben met televisiekijken in hun dagelijks leven. Er is gewerkt met drie centrale uitgangspunten. Ten eerste is er ruimte gegeven aan “alle” betekenissen die televisiekijken heeft in het leven van ouderen. Ten tweede is er aandacht voor zowel verandering als continuïteit in televisiekijken. Wellicht passen ouderen hun televisiekijken aan naarmate ze ouder worden (verandering), daarnaast kan hun televisiekijken gekleurd worden door de ervaringen die ze de afgelopen 50 jaar hebben opgedaan met het televisiekijken (continuïteit).

Ten derde zijn de concepten *selectie* en *compensatie* gebruikt om een breed beeld te krijgen van televisiekijken en ouder worden. De concepten zijn afgeleid uit de theorie van Selectieve Optimalisatie met Compensatie (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006; Freund & Baltes, 2000) en uitwerkingen hiervan (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). De levensstrategieën selectie en compensatie helpen om te begrijpen hoe televisiekijken gerelateerd is aan ontwikkelingen in het dagelijkse leven. De concepten stimuleren om niet alleen aandacht te besteden aan televisiekijken als vervanging voor dat wat wegvalt naarmate men ouder wordt (compensatie), maar ook te bestuderen hoe televisiekijken in verband staat met doelen en winst in het alledaagse leven (selectie). Om het conceptueel model van televisiekijken en ouder worden te ontwikkelen, bestaat het proefschrift uit een literatuuroverzicht (hoofdstuk 2) en een kwalitatieve interviewstudie (hoofdstukken 3 t/m 5).

In het literatuuroverzicht (hoofdstuk 2) worden de aannames en bevindingen over televisiekijken en haar relatie met de ouderdom besproken in drie secties: tijdsbesteding, sociale functies, en voorkeuren voor bepaalde televisie-inhoud. In elke sectie interpreteer ik de bevindingen uit eerder onderzoek in termen van selectie en compensatie.

De belangrijkste conclusie is dat een groot deel van voorgaand onderzoek naar ouderen en televisiekijken de nadruk legt op compensatie, waarbij de mogelijke rol van televisiekijken in selectiestrategieën wordt genegeerd. De nadruk op compensatie komt tot uitdrukking in de zogenoemde substitutiehypothese, die stelt dat televisiekijken vervanging kan zijn voor weggevallen activiteiten, en dat televisie sociale functies over kan nemen die eerder vervuld werden door interpersoonlijke communicatie. Het idee van televisie als compensatie is ook prominent aanwezig bij verklaringen die auteurs geven voor de programmavoorkeuren van ouderen.

Het in ogenschouw nemen van selectiestrategieën kan helpen om andere verklaringen te vinden voor het televisiekijken van ouderen dan de verklaringen die traditioneel in dit onderzoeksveld zijn gegeven. Selectiestrategieën houden in dat ouderen televisiekijken verkiezen boven een andere activiteit, omdat televisie aansluit bij doelen in domeinen die belangrijk voor hen zijn (zoals interesse in actualiteiten en politiek, of intellectuele stimulatie).

In de *kwalitatieve interviewstudie* gaat de ontwikkeling van het conceptueel model verder. Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft de probleemstelling en de onderzoeksopzet. Kwalitatief onderzoek is geschikt omdat het doel is om een conceptueel model van televisiekijken en ouder worden te ontwikkelen, en kwalitatief onderzoek (met name de gefundeerde theoriebenadering) richt zich specifiek op het ontwikkelen van theorie. Interviews zijn nodig omdat de nadruk in het huidige onderzoek ligt op betekenissen en ervaringen en niet op gedrag. Het gaat er bijvoorbeeld niet om dat sommige ouderen meer televisie gaan kijken naarmate ze ouder worden, maar het gaat erom wat die toename voor hen betekent.

Kenmerkend voor kwalitatief onderzoek is een cyclisch proces waarin dataverzameling, analyse en reflectie elkaar afwisselen. De dataverzameling bestond uit interviews met ouderen (65 jaar en ouder;  $N = 86$ ), die in drie ronden werden gehouden door mijzelf en door studenten in een onderzoeksseminar waarvan ik docent was. Er is sprake van een doelgerichte en gedeeltelijk theoretische steekproef die gevarieerd is met betrekking tot leeftijd, sekse en samenstelling van het huishouden. Interviewers werden getraind in het doorvragen om de redenen voor het televisiegebruik te achterhalen, en

in het stellen van retrospectieve vragen in verband met mogelijke veranderingen in televisiekijken.

Tijdens de analyse werkte ik met vier fasen die door Wester en collega's zijn geformuleerd (e.g., Wester, 1995; Wester & Peters, 2000, 2004): de exploratiefase, de specificatiefase, de reductiefase, en de integratiefase. Op basis van deze analyse heb ik het conceptueel model van televisiekijken en ouder worden ontwikkeld dat wordt beschreven in de hoofdstukken 4 en 5. Het model bestaat uit de volgende hoofdcomponenten:

- 1) Drie thema's in de ervaringen van ouderen met televisiekijken: televisiekijken in een palet van activiteiten, televisiekijken in de sociale context en televisie-inhoud. De drie thema's samen geven een beeld hoe ouderen televisiekijken ervaren in hun dagelijks leven.
- 2) Continuïteit en verandering in televisiekijken. De beschrijving van continuïteit en verandering in de drie thema's laat zien hoe televisiekijken zich ontwikkelt wanneer mensen ouder worden.
- 3) Televisiekijken als onderdeel van selectie- en compensatiestrategieën. De beschrijving laat zien hoe televisiekijken in verband staat met ontwikkelingen in het dagelijks leven.

De beschrijving van de drie thema's (in hoofdstuk 4) laat de grote variëteit aan betekenissen zien die televisiekijken heeft in het dagelijks leven van ouderen. Binnen elk thema zijn de betekenissen zeer gevarieerd, en komen continuïteit en verandering voor.

*Thema 1: Televisiekijken in een palet van activiteiten.* Duidelijke verschillen zijn zichtbaar in hoe ouderen televisiekijken ervaren temidden van andere activiteiten. Aan de ene kant zijn er ouderen voor wie televisiekijken een positieve keuze is temidden van zinvolle activiteiten. Aan de andere kant van het spectrum bevinden zich ouderen die televisie kijken bij gebrek aan beter. Wanneer omstandigheden veranderen (bijvoorbeeld een verandering in beschikbare tijd), kan het zijn dat televisiekijken een andere rol krijgt. Een toename in hoeveelheid televisiekijken kan zowel positief, negatief, als neutraal geëvalueerd worden. Continuïteit is zichtbaar met betrekking tot de status van de activiteit televisiekijken.

*Thema 2: Televisiekijken in de sociale context.* Televisiekijken kan bijdragen aan verbondenheid en autonomie. De bijdragen van televisie aan verbondenheid, dat wil zeggen aan het onderhouden van contacten met anderen en het voeling houden met de bredere maatschappij, zijn zowel positief als negatief. Met betrekking tot de bijdrage aan verbondenheid zijn er duidelijk verschillen tussen ouderen die samen wonen en



ouderen die alleen wonen. Met betrekking tot autonomie laten de interviews zien dat de mensen die alleen wonen de gelegenheid hebben voor individuele televisiekeuzes. Voor sommigen draagt televisiekijken daardoor bij aan een gevoel van autonomie.

Televisiekijken kan gebruikt worden in aanpassingsprocessen na een verlies in de interpersoonlijke sfeer, zoals een scheiding of het overlijden van de partner. Wanneer mensen zich aanpassen aan de nieuwe situatie, kan televisie gezelschap bieden, een manier zijn om de tijd door te komen, helpen om de dagen te structureren en afleiding van het verdriet bieden.

*Thema 3: Televisie-inhoud.* Drie dimensies laten de variaties in betekenis van televisie-inhoud zien. Ten eerste de functies van televisie-inhoud: televisie draagt zowel bij aan informatie en leren, als aan plezier en een goede stemming. Ten tweede is televisie-inhoud gerelateerd aan activiteiten in het dagelijks leven en aan een bepaalde houding ten opzichte van het leven. Ten derde varieert de status van televisiegenres van laag tot hoog.

Continuïteit is zichtbaar in interesses in bepaalde inhoud. Het is interessant dat deze continuïteit aanwezig blijft ook wanneer er veranderingen in de context zijn. Een ander punt is dat sommige ouderen televisie-inhoud gebruiken naar aanleiding van veranderingen in hun omstandigheden: bijvoorbeeld, door informatie via de televisie kunnen mensen zich verbonden voelen met de maatschappij wanneer ze niet meer in staat zijn om op een actievare manier aan de samenleving deel te nemen. Er zijn ook veranderingen met betrekking tot televisie-inhoud die niet direct in verband staan met situationele veranderingen: één daarvan is dat sommige respondenten aangeven gevoeliger te worden naarmate ze ouder worden en daardoor sterkere reacties hebben bij emotionele televisie-inhoud of dergelijke inhoud vermijden. Een apart onderwerp is nostalgie, zowel continuïteit als verandering zijn daar een onderdeel van.

De analyse in termen van selectie- en compensatiestrategieën (in hoofdstuk 5) laat zien dat televisiekijken met name onderdeel is van selectiestrategieën: ouderen kiezen televisiekijken omdat televisie iets biedt in hun leven. Daarnaast zijn er ouderen die televisie gebruiken in compensatiestrategieën: ze gebruiken televisie als vervanging voor activiteiten die afgenomen zijn. Echter, er zijn geen respondenten die hun televisiekijken beschrijven als louter compensatie. Met andere woorden, voor sommigen is televisiekijken alleen onderdeel van selectiestrategieën, terwijl andere ouderen televisie gebruiken in zowel selectie- als compensatiestrategieën.

Volgens deze analyse is televisiekijken onderdeel van selectiestrategieën op drie manieren die gerelateerd zijn aan de eerder genoemde drie thema's: ten eerste, de activiteit televisiekijken is een positieve keuze temidden van andere mogelijke en

zinnvolle activiteiten; ten tweede, televisiekijken wordt gekozen vanwege haar positieve bijdrage in de sociale context; ten derde, televisieprogramma's worden gekozen omdat ze informatie en/of plezier bieden, soms in relatie tot activiteiten in het dagelijks leven.

Ouderen geven ook drie manieren aan waarop ze televisie gebruiken als vervanging voor activiteiten of mogelijkheden die afnemen, waarbij de drie manieren weer aansluiten bij de drie thema's. Ten eerste, de activiteit televisiekijken is vervanging voor activiteiten die niet meer mogelijk zijn; ten tweede, televisiekijken is onderdeel van aanpassingsprocessen na een verlies in de interpersoonlijke sfeer; en ten derde, televisie-inhoud is vervanging voor input die respondenten eerder verkregen uit andere activiteiten. De ouderen die televisie als vervanging gebruiken, gebruiken televisie ook in selectiestrategieën. Hun televisiekijkgedrag is gevarieerd in termen van het belang van televisiekijken in het dagelijks leven, programmavoorkeuren en houding ten opzichte van televisie.

Het onderzoek heeft geleid tot verschillende conclusies die worden gepresenteerd in hoofdstuk 6. Een belangrijke conclusie van de interviewstudie is dat televisiekijkgedrag (in termen van de hoeveelheid televisiekijken of programmavoorkeur) niet automatisch zegt welke betekenis ouderen aan het televisiekijken toekennen, en meer specifiek, of dat televisiekijkgedrag is veranderd of stabiel is gebleven, en of dat televisiekijkgedrag onderdeel is van selectie- of compensatiestrategieën. Bijvoorbeeld: sommige ouderen kijken een aantal uren televisie per dag omdat ze televisiekijken fijn vinden en televisie iets toevoegt aan hun leven, terwijl anderen hetzelfde aantal uren kijken omdat ze anders niets te doen hebben of niemand hebben om mee te praten. Deze bevindingen leren ons dat het niet mogelijk is om op basis van "feiten" over televisiekijken, zoals kijktijd, te zeggen dat ouderen televisiekijken als compensatie voor een verlies.

Een andere conclusie is dat continuïteit en verandering in televisiekijken samen voorkomen. Wanneer er veranderingen in televisiekijken zijn, komt ook continuïteit voor. Een van de waarnemingen die tot deze conclusie hebben geleid is dat continuïteit in status van televisiekijken en in programmavoorkeuren voorkomt samen met veranderingen in de activiteit televisiekijken.

De laatste conclusie is dat selectiestrategieën meer kenmerkend zijn voor het televisiekijken van ouderen dan compensatiestrategieën. Deze bevinding laat zien dat de nadruk op televisie als compensatie, zoals aangetroffen in de literatuur (hoofdstuk 2), geen juist beeld geeft van wat televisiekijken betekent in het leven van ouderen.

De maatschappelijke relevantie van het onderzoek kan worden uitgedrukt in vier punten. Ten eerste geeft het onderzoek een beeld van de dagelijkse ervaringen van

ouderen en dit is relevant voor het maatschappelijke debat over ouder worden. Ten tweede, de conclusie dat hetzelfde televisiekijkgedrag verschillende betekenissen kan hebben, is van belang voor de vraag of televisiekijken een teken is dat mensen zich terugtrekken uit de maatschappij of dat televisiekijken de participatie van ouderen in de samenleving juist bevordert. Ten derde, het onderzoek laat zien dat ouderen hun televisiekijken als positief ervaren wanneer ze het zien als een keuze. Dit geldt ook wanneer ze geconfronteerd worden met afnemende mogelijkheden. Daarom kan het zinvol zijn om ouderen die te maken hebben met een afname in mogelijkheden bewust te maken van mediakeuzes die ze hebben. Ten vierde, het onderzoek onderstreept dat ouderen een diverse categorie zijn die niet als één groep benaderd kan worden; programmakers en marketeers moeten zich daarom richten op subgroepen.

De vraag is in hoeverre het conceptueel model van televisiekijken en ouder worden overdraagbaar is naar andere contexten (de zogenoemde *transferability*). In hoofdstuk 6 gebruik ik ander empirisch onderzoek om een vergelijking te maken tussen dit conceptueel model en andere contexten, en de conclusie is dat de hoofdcomponenten van het model (de drie thema's, continuïteit en verandering, selectie en compensatie) overdraagbaar zijn naar andere contexten, en dat de componenten daarmee de vergelijking met andere landen, andere cohorten van ouderen, andere media en andere leeftijdsgroepen stimuleren.

De vergelijkingen laten zien dat de hoofdcomponenten weliswaar overdraagbaar zijn, maar dat verschillen tussen contexten zichtbaar zijn met betrekking tot meer specifieke elementen van het conceptueel model. Het model lijkt het best overdraagbaar naar het televisiekijken van ouderen in andere hedendaagse Westerse landen, maar zelfs deze vergelijking wijst op verschillen (bijvoorbeeld in televisietraditie). De andere drie vergelijkingen (met andere cohorten van ouderen, andere media en andere leeftijdsgroepen) laten duidelijke verschillen zien. Bijvoorbeeld: jongeren hebben te maken met andere levenstaken dan ouderen en gebruiken de media waarschijnlijk meer voor het vormen van hun identiteit, voor sensatie en voor spanning dan ouderen. Een conceptueel model dat van toepassing is op alle leeftijdsgroepen zou deze mediafuncties een plaats moeten geven.

Eén van de doelen van kwalitatief onderzoek is om ideeën te genereren voor vervolgonderzoek. De interviewstudie leidt tot ideeën voor vragen in een representatief survey. Daarnaast leidt het onderzoek tot mogelijke onderzoeksvragen met betrekking tot betekenissen van televisie-inhoud: meer onderzoek is nodig naar televisiekijken en nostalgie, en naar de relatie tussen televisiepersonages en de identiteit van kijkers. Tot

### *Samenvatting*

slot laat dit proefschrift zien dat generationele invloeden op mediagebruik (continuïteit) en de ontwikkeling van mediagebruik gedurende de levensloop (verandering) verstrengeld zijn in een intrigerende dans. Om meer inzicht te krijgen in zowel continuïteit als verandering in mediagebruik is het nodig om informatie te verkrijgen over het mediagebruik van verschillende generaties, van de kindertijd tot de ouderdom. Het zal fascinerend zijn om te onderzoeken wat er gebeurt met televisiekijken en met internetgebruik wanneer de Babyboomers ouder worden, en hoe het mediagebruik van de huidige jeugd zich zal ontwikkelen tijdens hun latere levensfasen.

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## Curriculum Vitae

Margot van der Goot was born on September 24, 1978 in Amsterdam. After finishing secondary school, she studied Communication Science at the Radboud University Nijmegen from 1996 to 2001. In those years, she spent a semester at the University of Sunderland in England, studying Media and Cultural studies, and worked as editorial assistant for the journal *New Media and Society*. After obtaining her Master's degree (cum laude), she started working as junior researcher and junior lecturer at the Department of Communication Science in Nijmegen. She has published in *Communication Yearbook 30* and the *International Encyclopedia of Communication*. In addition, she taught various courses, and she spent four months as visiting scholar at the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.