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## A New Paradigm for Qualitative Research in the United States: The Era of the Third Age

### **Abstract**

This paper reviews qualitative research in the United States, highlighting the ways research has changed in the era of the third age. With growing attention to positive and uplifting aspects of aging, qualitative research has played a critical role in the exploration of the ways in which older adults are engaging in meaningful ways with others. We describe two key methodological approaches that have been important to examining positive aspects of aging and exploring the extent to which a growing number of years of healthy retirement are redefining the aging experience: ethnographic research and grounded theory research. We also review key topics associated with qualitative research in the era of the third age. These topics fit within two dominant frameworks – research exploring meaning-making in later life and research exploring meaningful engagement in later life. These frameworks were critically important to raising attention to meaningful experiences and interactions with others, and we propose that the agenda for future qualitative research in the United States should continue contributing to these frameworks. However, we note that a third framework should also be developed which examines what it means to be a third ager through use of a phenomenological approach, which will assist in the important task of theory building about the third age.

### **Keywords**

Third age; Qualitative gerontology; Meaning making; Meaningful engagement

Early research in gerontology in the United States was spotted with the postulates of theories explaining the causes for decline and disengagement, which consequently led to a field of study and camps of researchers intent on fixing problems associated with old age, i.e., aging being synonymous with decline and disease (Rowles and Schoenberg 2003). However, during the last four decades, gerontology has observed a shift in focus whereby there has been growing interest in examining the positive aspects of aging. One of the major factors contributing to this shift is the emergence of a new social group of healthy and retired older adults who

are poised to experience a wide array of opportunities related to personal development and societal contributions in later life. The third age is often understood to be the period following retirement but prior to the point that health problems interfere with one's independence (Weiss and Bass 2002). This new life phase emerged in response to demographic and societal changes during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These changes, such as those related to public health advances, overall improvements in standards of living, and the institutionalization of retirement, resulted in a larger, healthier older population (Carr 2009). With a growing proportion of the U.S. population able to expect to retire and have a number of years in which they are healthy, the third age has taken shape as an important new life phase in later life during which the positive aspects of aging are particularly visible.

We argue that the intersection of the societal changes that restructured the life course to include a lengthy period of healthy retirement and a shift in the intentions and the approach to inquiry on the part of qualitative researchers has articulated a new paradigm and a new agenda for qualitative research in the United States. This new era of qualitative research, which we refer to as the "era of the third age," has reoriented gerontological study to begin renegotiating the meaning of being "old" through explorations of positive aspects of aging. There are two ways that qualitative gerontologists have witnessed, through thoughtful exploration, the many opportunities associated with aging. First, in their attempts to address more than just the problems associated with aging, qualitative gerontologists have begun to utilize methods that allow them to more effectively serve as agents for change by providing an ethic of acceptance and openness to new voices and experiences of older adults. Second, qualitative gerontological research has introduced and provided important contributions to a wider array of topics that recognize that later life is not merely a period of disability and decline prior to death, but a period in which people continue to develop as individuals and engage in meaningful ways with others in later life.

In this article we review the methodological changes and key literature that exemplifies the changes that have resulted in this new era of qualitative research in gerontology within the United States. We in no way attempt to capture the entire spectrum of qualitative inquiry occurring in the U.S. that highlights positive aspects of aging, but rather we seek to provide a comprehensive review and critique of qualitative research in the U.S. as it pertains to gerontological study in the era of the third age. Our review is divided into three major sections. First, we review changes in the approach to qualitative research through the use of particular methodological tools that have been critical to orienting gerontological research towards explorations of positive aspects of aging. Second, we review topical areas of qualitative research that highlight positive aspects of the aging experience and capture the way the emergence of the third age has changed what it means to be an older adult in the United States. Third, we propose an agenda for future qualitative gerontological research.

## **Changes in Qualitative Methodology and the Era of the Third Age**

In tandem with the societal changes associated with the emergence of a third age, gerontology has observed a shift in the approach to inquiry, of which, qualitative researchers have played a crucial role. Specifically, qualitative researchers in gerontology have, in recent years, broadened the scope of what we know about the process of aging and the lived experience of elders. Similar to that of other disciplines such as anthropology, there has been a paradigmatic shift in

gerontological scholarship marked by a growing reflexivity on the part of gerontologists. The trend toward reflexivity is a conscious move away from conceptualizing old age as a problem. The intentions of qualitative researchers to reconsider assumptions about the uniformity of the problematic aging experience while locating themselves as researchers in that experience has provided a catalyst for the development of new methodological tools with which to examine later life. This new approach to research within qualitative gerontology is characterized by greater openness and acceptance to the potential that aging and a lengthening of the life course has to offer (Rowles and Schoenberg 2002). Arguably, this conscious expansion of inquiry can be credited to the contextually and conceptually appropriate philosophical underpinnings that characterize these endeavors by qualitative researchers who are seeking to explore and redefine the nature of being in late life.

Rowles and Schoenberg (2002) describe three major methodological trends for qualitative inquiry that pertain to gerontology which illustrate the reorientation of gerontological research to more authentically examine the positive aspects of aging. Early qualitative inquiry in gerontology mainly used qualitative inquiry to strengthen quantitative approaches, a triangulation of methods. Although some qualitative research continues to utilize this approach, it has often been used to support research that seeks to measure the factors associated with the problems of aging. Groger and Straker (ibidem), after using this design, discuss the challenges and opportunities of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. They suggest that although this continues to be a useful method for bringing together multiple sources of measurement in a research study, it often does not provide an opportunity to capture changes in the way people navigate the aging experiences from the perspective of older adults' themselves. The pushes and pulls regarding intention behind the qualitative paradigm are sometimes problematic. For example, the intention of qualitative methods to strive for contextual validity is not necessarily harmonious with quantitative goals of generalizability. This poses a challenge in attempting to inquire into the richness of the lived experience of elders. For these reasons, the first trend of qualitative research does not facilitate research associated with the positive aspects of aging.

A second trend, which has emerged over the last decade, encompasses the importance and recognition of *context* to achieve a deeper understanding of aging. For example, qualitative researchers are recognizing the importance of place in shaping the meaning of age. Groger (2002) described the importance of a nursing home setting in African-American's conceptualization of the portability of home. This study provides an example of how *context*, in this case, environment and understanding the relation of the elder in their environment, is crucial to understanding how a population of individuals define home. A third trend is described as an approach that uses an "almost universal acceptance and increasing sophistication of our understanding of the roles of reactivity and reflexivity in qualitative gerontology" (Rowles and Schoenberg 2002: 16). This approach recognizes that researchers' interpretation of older adults' experiences are influenced by their own personal experiences and perspectives. Rienharz (1997) has encouraged qualitative researchers to recognize the multiple selves present when conducting qualitative research, particularly the multiple selves of the researcher and how that shapes the meaning and interpretation of the data.

These trends have been important in changing the landscape of gerontological qualitative inquiry in the United States. We review two key methodological approaches which have been salient in facilitating changes in the approach to qualitative inquiry, both of which reflect the influence of the second trend of

gerontological qualitative research. The first, ethnography, has been used to highlight positive aspects of aging through capturing the nuanced culture of aging infused with the meaning-making process. The second methodological approach, grounded theory, is a method that imbricates theory building into the process of data collection and analysis, and has contributed to the re-conceptualization of what it means to be an older adult in an era whereby people can expect to experience a period of healthy retirement and thus, a third age.

### ***Ethnography***

Ethnography is an approach that stems from an anthropological tradition, and has its purpose mainly in the description of culture and the meaning of human behaviors within a specific cultural context. Typical of the second trend of gerontological qualitative research in the United States, ethnography emphasizes the importance of context in shaping the meaning of age and aging. Ethnography has a long history of methodological relevance in studies of aging in the United States, beginning with the early work of researchers such as Kevin Eckert's (1980) *The Unseen Elderly*, Vesperi's (1985) *The City of Green Benches*, and others who revealed unique cultural aspects of aging in the United States. Through the work of ethnography, researchers become immersed in the experiences of elders in a way that the researcher becomes a participant, not just an expert observing from the outside. For this reason, this method has provided a powerful approach for understanding the ways in which seemingly problematic aspects of aging are interleaved with positive and uplifting experiences.

Through the work of foundational ethnographic research in the United States, the field of gerontology as a whole has been forced to reconsider assumptions about older adults' ability to continue growing, developing, and engaging in meaningful ways with others. Kauffman's (1986) seminal work *Ageless Self* and Myerhoff's (1979) ethnographic classic *Number Our Days* demonstrate a paradigmatic shift that reoriented research to focus on aspects of growth and meaning-making in later life. This research recognized the richness of the aging experience through celebration of the outliers in the data and acceptance of inconsistency. Kauffman (1986) and Myerhoff (1979) both describe groups typically overlooked in mainstream gerontology research.

Important ethnographic research like this in the United States provided the impetus for further explorations of positive aspects of the aging process. However, during recent years, ethnographic research in gerontology has not remained a prominent method used by qualitative researchers seeking to explore positive aspects of aging. We propose that this method is ideal for expanding our understanding of the cultural context of the growing number of healthy post-retirement years people can expect to experience in the United States. Ethnographers are positioned to empirically explore the nuanced meaning of the third age and the experiences of those occupying the role of a third age.

### ***Grounded Theory***

The goal of grounded theory is to inductively develop a "theory" that emerges from a process of patterns and themes within the data being analyzed, data obtained through direct observation, interviewing, and fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory has been a very prominent methodological approach used by qualitative researchers in the United States who have sought to understand the

experience of aging. By allowing older adults themselves to articulate their experiences, data is derived through the voices of a truly lived aging experience, which is analyzed for dominant themes. For these reasons, grounded theory has provided gerontologists with tools to understand the ways older adults experience positive aspects of aging dealing with issues of meaning and purpose in later life.

A number of research articles have emerged in recent years which use grounded theory to explore how older adults engage in society in meaningful ways as they negotiate the growing number of years in which they can expect to be healthy and retired. Price (2000) examines the challenges facing professional women, proposing different ways that women in her study define a new identity as they move into their retirement years. Slevin (2005) describes the retirement activities of African American women, determining that the meaning and their perception of responsibility and obligation to give back to others has been shaped by their social location. Kleiber and Nimrod (2008) examine the dynamics of generative expressivity of individuals in a learning retirement group, identifying the motivations for engagement in later life and how personal agency contributes to participation in "valued life activities" among older individuals. Research using grounded theory provides researchers with the opportunity to give older adults the opportunity to articulate their experiences and the meaning of those experiences. However, as is characteristic of the third trend in gerontological research, the interpretation of these observations are shaped by the lens of the researchers as they seek to construct meaning through a theoretical explanation of the findings.

Grounded theory is a useful tool that allows researchers to derive a greater understanding of the aging experience, and has the potential to uncover the process of transitioning into a third age of life, and how this period of life introduces a unique set of opportunities and experiences not present during other periods. Future research can and should continue to utilize this methodological approach to build theory about the third age of life.

## **Qualitative Research Topics and the Era of the Third Age**

A growing number of topics are emerging in qualitative research that contribute to our understanding of the positive aspects of aging. The first is related to the changing meaning and purpose of aging and old age in the era of the third age. We identify and describe two dominant frameworks that guide the ways in which the positive aspects of aging are being examined. Specifically, the first framework includes research that examines meaning-making, focusing on issues related to identity in later life and the cultivation of meaning in later life. The topics within this area highlight some of the characteristics associated with a third age identity, especially factors shaping the way older people manifest meaning and purpose in later life. The second framework includes research focusing on meaningful engagement in later life describing the roles associated with later life and activities in which individuals who are healthy and active engage.

### ***Meaning Making: Identity and the Cultivation of Meaning in Later Life***

Against the backdrop of a dramatic increase in the number of individuals living longer, researchers have begun to explore and examine the intersection of meaning making and identity in an effort to understand and appreciate the myriad of ways in which older adults make meaning of their lives and to understand how this affects

their lived experience. We know that aging emphasizes existential questions about, self, death, family, loss, and love. Today, new questions are being raised about what it means to be old as the third age becomes articulated as an important and unique life phase. For example, questions such as: *What are the benefits of aging?; What are the health outcomes for those who lead lives of purpose?; and What is the correlation between quality of life, the meaning of life, and personal identity?* are the kinds of questions that are taking on a new meaning as we begin to understand the aging experience in the era of the third age.

In examining the aging identity through the lens of social constructivism, several scholars have pointed out the ways that age is socially, historically, politically and culturally constructed. An aging identity encompasses an even wider range of roles for older adults today than during any other period of history, particularly regarding how older adults spend their time during their post-retirement and pre-disability years. Although the concept of meaning-making in later life involves a great degree of pliable explanations, we highlight three areas of research that are exemplary of how gerontologists describe ways that older adults are constructing meaning in their lives in a positive way: identity, spirituality, and creativity.

### *Identity*

What it means to be “old” in U.S. society reflects a fair degree of fluidity and mutability. Age-identities, particularly those of third agers, are not exclusively matters of private conversations and intimate dialogues, but rather experiences that take place in a larger societal context, reflecting a larger meaning-making process that impacts our everyday experiences (Coupland 2009). At the heart of identity is the concept of relationality, or how age-identities are negotiated between individuals and those larger macro-institutions to which they relate – the intersection between public and private domains (Coupland 2009). As the emergence of the third age brings with it new roles associated with later life, identity is becoming an increasingly important topic. This blossoming of a new kind of age-identity requires gerontologists to consider what it means to be a third ager and how individuals cultivate meaningful experiences in later life.

An essential part of identity as it pertains to the third age experience is the potential individuals have to “create meaning through their own decision-making and their own projects” (Everingham 2003: 246). For example, Adams-Price and Steinman (2007) describe how jewelry making provides women with a connection to their cultural identity, and facilitates opportunities to reflect on life’s meaning. Flynn (2001) describes the role of service work on the part of older religious sisters in maintaining a sense of community and individual identity. This kind of research highlights the ways in which individuals craft an identity through engaging in meaningful activities and the cultivation of a meaningful sense of self and purpose.

As research begins to articulate the key components of a third age identity, research that encompasses the culmination of experiences that are made manifest in later life are being examined in a new way. For example, roles related to work and retirement, and widowhood or entry into a late life relationship are being explored in ways that appreciate and direct attention to the myriad of ways older adults experience this new life phase. For example, Noonan’s (2005) qualitative exploration of identity in later life based on work behavior found that older adults continuing to work are doing so in an effort to maintain purpose and meaning in life through their identity as a member for the labor force. Lee and Bakk (2001) used qualitative inquiry to explore how older women navigated the transition to widowhood, illustrating the importance of meaningful relationships in later life for women as key components in

helping women to adjust to this new phase, creating a new sense of self as third agers. This research indicates that the process of creating an identity in later life is strongly tied to the way people interpret their movement through the life course and experience related transitions. As individuals reflect on the significance of salient life course transitions, they begin to explore their roles as members within a community and their presence as a participatory member of a larger society.

### *Spirituality*

Spirituality can be thought of as context for the formulation of a meaningful sense of self and identity (Hall 1985). There is evidence that as individuals age their level of spiritual growth gradually increases, especially with the increase in self-acceptance and perceptions of one's life having integrity or despair (Atchley 1997; Scott-Maxwell 1968). Some argue that the natural process of aging, the passage of chronological time with a finite, foreseeable end, creates a context whereby older adults become self-reflexive and self-accepting, opening the mind/body/spirit to an expansion and deeper sense of knowing one's self (Atchley 1997; McFadden 2005). During recent years, the ways individuals make meaning of their spiritual selves are changing as they negotiate the implications of a lengthening of the life course. As a result, researchers have recognized the importance of exploring how older adults respond to both late life challenges *and* opportunities.

McFadden (2005: 172) points out, "for many, but certainly not all older people, faith communities, religious beliefs and experiences of the sacred will contribute to life quality and meaning." In other words, spirituality has the potential to be a major resource for older adults as they age and they expand their spiritual consciousness. In the context of a growing amount of time for growth and development in later life, researchers have explored the universality of spiritual resources and how it helps offset challenges associated with aging. For example, MacKinlay (2001), while investigating the spirituality of healthy older adults, finds that all individuals have a spiritual dimension and through the process of aging, there are certain common tasks associated with spiritual growth which are used to foster growth and development in later life. Nelson-Becker (2004) describes older Jewish and African-Americans' spiritual resiliency in coping with stress associated with aging and aging related changes. These findings are particularly revealing of the role of spirituality in constructing meaning during later life, which is an important finding in lieu of the claim that spirituality is a basic human capacity, and the majority of individuals are capable of having spiritual experiences (Atchley 2009; Moberg 2005).

In the era of the third age, older adults face new challenges in cultivating purpose and meaning in life. Spirituality is vital to understanding the meaning making process in later life, and provides a framework for our sense of self in the larger context (Sinnott 2009). The longevity revolution and the changing experience of what it means to be old in today's society requires researchers and practitioners to continue to engage in discussions about meaning and purpose in later life (Butler 2009). As we continue to unravel the complex meaning of spirituality during the era of the third age, it is important to allow elders to use their own words to articulate the process of meaning-making in the context of spirituality.

### *Creativity*

Creative engagement among older adults has been examined by qualitative gerontologists in the United States for more than 40 years. Much of the early research on creativity tended to include descriptions of ways that creative pursuits

gave older adults opportunities to remain *active*. More recent research recognizes the role of creativity in meaning-making whereby artistic engagement is used as a vessel for examining the unique experience of aging and the meaning people attach to the aging experience (Carr 2009). The focus on the meaning and purpose of creative engagement is related to the increasing number of years of healthy retirement, whereby individuals have the opportunity to become active participants in the meaning-making process through engagement in particular activities. In this way, creativity is viewed as a process of development, as opposed to a finite activity in which older adults remain occupied. Thus, a growing emphasis within gerontological research on creativity involves lifelong learning, discovery, and innovation on an individual level. For example, Hickson and Housley suggest that “characteristics of curiosity, inquisitiveness, wonderment, puzzlement, and craving for understanding are critical ingredients” for older adults to adapt to the ever changing world and their place in it, which they describe as fundamental components of the creative process (1997: 545). Creative engagement is critical to the way older adults formulate their sense of self and purpose in life during the era of the third age.

Recent qualitative inquiry on creativity in the United States focuses on ways that creative processes encourage opportunities for older adults to form meaningful bonds with others while also cultivating personal development. For example, Cheek and Piercy (2008) describe the use of quilting as a form of generativity that promotes development in old age whereby older adults connect with the cultural significance of passing down techniques from previous generations, as well as fulfilling an important role in their respective communities. In their words, older adults describe the ways in which quilting and artistic engagement promotes development of selfhood in later life through the articulation of a sense of purpose and meaning associated with being an elder quilter in their community. Similarly, Coffman (2002) and Carr (2006) describe the role of music participation in the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships through a shared commitment to high quality musical engagement. These articles describe the complex interactions between the individual and the social as music performances facilitate intimate interactions with others through group performances. Fisher and Specht (1999) contextualize the individual experiences of creative engagement by describing the relationship between creative processes and successful aging. Successful aging, a concept popularized by Rowe and Kahn (1998), is often used to explore factors that contribute to positive health outcomes in later life. Fisher and Specht’s findings, however, suggest that creativity contributes to successful aging by providing a sense of purpose, as well as facilitating interactions with others, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy, *and* by contributing to positive health outcomes.

Through the lengthening of the life course, old age is being redefined such that individuals no longer view old age as the period preceding death, but rather as a time to continue to participate in personal growth and development. Creative engagement is an important way in which older adults have an opportunity to communicate and generate meaning, materializing experience into expression. Future research on the third age should explore linkages between creativity as it’s interwoven with the identity of being a third ager.

### ***Meaningful Engagement***

In addition to the focus on what it *means* to be an older adult in the era of the third age, a second dominant research agenda within qualitative gerontology is examining what people *do* in later life. The demographic and social changes



associated with the emergence of the third age resulted in a lengthier, healthier post-work period, and one in which older adults have greater opportunities to remain engaged in meaningful ways for a longer period. There are two dominant frameworks within qualitative gerontological research that examine issues related to meaningful engagement. The first is related to the meaning that people attach to activities or the benefits they receive from that participation. Historically, this kind of research has included observations and attempts to understand the ways in which older adults remain engaged in social roles that replace the loss of a work role by remaining active (e.g., older reference). However, with greater attention to opportunities for growth and development during later life, this theme has expanded to include the ways older adults engage in personally meaningful activities such that, rather than facilitating busyness in later life, the individually beneficial aspects of activities are emphasized.

The second dominant theme focuses on the benefits society receives from older adults' participation in activities. The threat that the "tsunami" of baby boomers moving into retirement during the first three decades of this century may result in an economic collapse of industrialized nations like the United States (e.g., Gee and Guttman 2000); this threat has contributed to an ideological shift in what is expected of older adults in an era whereby later life will potentially claim almost a third of the life course. Because a growing group of older adults have the time and the capability to remain actively engaged in society, scholars are beginning to explore the ways that older adults can engage in economically valuable activities during later life to help offset some of the costs of population aging and demonstrate their social value. This perspective appears to provide much of the rationale for explorations into ways in which industrialized nations can better utilize the experience and expertise of older adults (Freedman 1999; Harvard School of Public Health/Metlife Foundation 2004). Qualitative researchers have played an important role in these discussions through explorations of what older adults can and should be doing, and through critical explorations about the implications of such expectations which is described below.

These dominant themes, those focusing on the personally meaningful aspects of engagement and those focusing on the socially beneficial aspects of engagement, are infused into the research on meaningful engagement and are often present simultaneously as research examining personally meaningful activities are sometimes justified by the socially beneficial aspects of that engagement. A review of two broad topical areas within qualitative gerontology, productivity and health and well-being, illustrate the influence and role of these themes and how they articulate a meaningful engagement framework in this new era of qualitative research.

### *Productivity*

The early introduction of retirement in the United States functioned as a mechanism to remove older adults from the labor force and make room for workers of younger ages. In recent years, population aging in coordination with increased longevity threatens to create a labor force shortage. As a result, productivity in later life has become an important topic of research within gerontology with retirement being redefined as a period of productivity, not just a period of leisure. A growing focus on maximizing the economic and social contributions of older adults, who are increasingly thought of as an "untapped resource" (Cnaan and Cwikel, 1992), has led to the formation of three major areas of research within this topical area: work in later life, lifelong learning, and volunteerism, or unpaid work. Qualitative researchers have contributed to discussions about work, lifelong learning, and volunteerism through

explorations of individual experiences and descriptions of late life productivity as well as through critical explorations about the implications of productive aging rhetoric.

Qualitative researchers have examined aspects of the growing focus on the role of work in shaping late life productivity. For example, qualitative researchers in the United States have explored the factors that influence work participation patterns (e.g., Rocco, Stein and Lee 2003), the influence of work history in shaping the extent to which leisure is defined in a productive way (Allen and Chin-Sang 1990), identifying and describing the work force experiences of older workers (Noonan 2005), and the extent to which bridge employment (i.e., part-time work between work and full-retirement) redefines the meaning of retirement (Ulrich and Brott, 2005). These kinds of studies are largely descriptive in nature, and have been particularly useful in raising attention to the ways in which later life employment in the United States involves a very different set of experiences and opportunities than those earlier in life. Qualitative explorations on this subject have noted that people of traditional retirement ages may be interested in working in different kinds of jobs, working fewer hours, and may work for different reasons than younger workers (Barth, McNaught and Rizzi 1995).

Lifelong learning has become a key theme of qualitative gerontological research in the United States due in part to the growing popularity of Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR) programs, interest in training for a new career during later life, and, although less popular, the presence of policies like “Program Sixty” in many states that allow individuals age 60 and older to audit college courses for free<sup>1</sup>. Qualitative researchers have examined both the individual experience of being involved in learning communities as well as the societal benefits associated with lifelong learning. For example, Kleiber and Nimrod (2008) examined generativity among individuals participation of learning in retirement communities. They noted that civic participation was very high among such participants, and that there was a link between generative behaviors and the extent to which individuals felt that they received personal benefits from participation of the learning in retirement communities. Brady, Holt, and Welt (2003) examined the unique challenges faced by lifelong learning institute instructors who are themselves, third agers. Their positions, which are voluntary in nature, require an ability to effectively communicate knowledge about a subject in which they are viewed as an expert, to individuals with diverse educational backgrounds and knowledge of subject matter. Instructors felt as though their hard work was not always appreciated and they note the limitations of the ILR program structure such as the location of classes and the lack of consistency in the format for classes.

The third theme related to productivity is volunteerism, which has been examined predominantly through critical analyses, a less traditional but increasingly accepted form of qualitative inquiry. For example, Holstein and Minkler (2003) propose that a growing body of quantitative literature on volunteerism may demonstrate positive outcomes like expanding role options in later life, but that there are fundamental problems associated with the formation of normative paths for later life that include expectations of unpaid work. Specifically, they suggest that the meanings implied by new roles described as civically responsible, have political and economic dimensions that may create confining expectations for what makes a “good” old age. In another article, Minkler and Holstein provide a personal response to address similar concerns regarding productive aging initiatives whereby they raise questions about the extent to which volunteerism should be promoted as a way of filling the “gaping holes in the safety net” of social support in later life

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Program Sixty, see <http://www.csus.edu/registrar/sixtyplus/index.stm>.

(2008:197) Martinson and Minkler question: “If our governments are taking away resources that support the community good, is the answer to have older people—many of whom have already been negatively and disproportionately affected by these cutbacks—step in to fill those unmet needs, thereby releasing government of long-term responsibility?” (2006: 321). Critical research of this nature has been very powerful in raising important ethical questions about the way the third age is developing as a period of productivity through “voluntary” unpaid work. Critical gerontologists propose that although volunteerism in later life may provide meaningful experiences to some older adults, not all older adults have access to opportunities to engage in this variety of meaningful engagement.

### *Health and Well-being*

A very important factor associated with the emergence of the third age and the growing focus on more positive aspects of aging is the recognition that individuals are living longer, healthier lives. However, what has been of particular interest in gerontology are ways to improve the quality of later life and support a “good” old age. The tenets of activity theory, which are fundamental to discussions about positive outcomes in later life, were built on the belief that those who remain active age more successfully than those who disengage (e.g., Palmore 1979). Although activity theory paved the way for explorations of ways to age in a positive way, in the current era, activity theory has been transformed through paradigms such as the wellness model (Montague et. al 2001) and discussions about what it means to age successfully (e.g., Rowe and Kahn 1998) that examine how engagement in certain activities produce positive health outcomes. As a result, the link between what people *do*, and their overall wellbeing in later life has become an important topic in third age literature, particularly with regard to the role of individual behavior in producing positive late life outcomes. Qualitative researchers have sought to capture the meaning and value of activity in producing positive health outcomes through the lens of older adults themselves.

Some research has been more directly focused on participation in activities and perceived improvements in health. For example, Wilcox and associates (2009) examined older adults’ perceptions of the role of physical activity and nutrition in maintaining cognitive health. This research focused on participant description of knowledge rather than participants interpretation of positive health outcomes. Grant (2001), on the other hand, examined the extent to which physical activity in later life is inhibited by ageist conceptions of what older adults can and should do. He suggests that the physically active body represents a conscious, feeling, thinking, and reflective self, and that the benefits of continued physical engagement in sports and exercise during late life are vast. However, perceptions of being “too old” to engage in such activities create barriers to continued activity, and inhibits individuals from choosing to engage in meaningful, healthy ways. Other qualitative research on health and wellbeing focuses more directly on individual interpretations of the positive connection between engagement in meaningful activities and improved well-being. Rossen and associates (2008) examined older women’s perceptions about what it means to age successfully, determining that personal, social and behavioral issues contribute to one’s ability to positively manage the stresses associated with transitions that occur in later life such as the loss of a spouse. Hutchinson and associates (2008) research support these findings, indicating that social participation in an organized group like the Red Hat Society provides women with a resource for coping with challenges and losses in later life and promotes positive physical and psychological health and improved quality of life. In particular, Son, Kerstetter,

Yarnal, and Baker (2007) note the benefits reaped from participation in this group includes psychosocial health benefits such as the facilitation of happy moments, helping with transitions and negative events, and enhancing the self. Together, these findings indicate that participation in activities that are meaningful to older adults produce a broad array of positive outcomes that contribute to improved well-being in later life.

Qualitative research has enhanced our understanding of the role of meaningful engagement in producing positive health outcomes by allowing older adults to use their own language to describe their experiences. This kind of research has broadened the way health and well-being is conceptualized, and has opened the door for conversations about what it means to older adults to engage in activities associated with “third age lifestyle,” or the activities and roles associated with being a third age (Gilleard et al. 2005).

## **An Agenda for Future Research**

As we reflect on the implications of the emergence of the third age and its impact on the field of gerontology as a whole, we consider the areas in which qualitative research in the United States has contributed in innovative ways to our understanding the meaning-making process in later life. As this review describes, qualitative research in the United States has provided important contributions to our understanding of the positive aspects of aging and the implications of the growing number of healthy retirees. Qualitative researchers have begun emphasizing the importance of understanding the way older adults cultivate meaning in their lives, and the implications of changes in roles and expectations associated with the emergence of the third age. As baby boomers enter retirement, issues related to the third age of life will become increasingly important, and the meaning and purpose of this period will continue to evolve.

Qualitative researchers have played an important role in revealing the positive aspects of aging in the face of negative stereotypes of aging in the past, and future qualitative research in the United States should build on this momentum. Therefore, we propose that the agenda for future qualitative research on third age issues in the United States should include research that continues to contribute to the two dominant frameworks described in this review: meaning-making and meaningful engagement in later life. We also propose that the agenda for future qualitative research on the third age should include a third framework which includes research that examines and defines what it means to be a third ager. The topics under the purview of this framework will include the ways individuals define their own identity as a third ager, what third agers view as their roles in society, and the characteristics that are uniquely associated with being a third ager. In the following section, we describe ways this important framework can be developed.

### ***Development of a New Framework: What it Means to be a Third Ager***

Through critical explorations of the changing normative expectations of older adults, Minkler and Holstein (2008) encourage us to consider the way social location and individual interests and preferences produce a variety of identities in later life. Likewise, the experiences associated with the third age should also be recognized as multi-faceted and shaped by both internal and external forces. As is emphasized in the third trend of qualitative research in gerontology, as aforementioned, understanding what it means to be a third ager requires recognition of the role of

reactivity and reflexivity in interpretations of older adults' descriptions of what it means to be a third ager. Currently, there are no dominant qualitative research methods or approaches that reflect this trend which seek to examine positive aspects of aging or issues associated with the third age. For these reasons, we propose that future research should build knowledge about what it means to be a third ager through the lens of older adults themselves; a phenomenological approach is well suited for this task.

Phenomenology is not a particularly common research method among qualitative gerontologists in the United States, though it is emerging as a key mechanism by which gerontologists can produce theoretically rich understandings of aging experiences that authentically represent the experiences of older adults themselves. The phenomenological approach involves the systematic investigation of consciousness or the enriching work of understanding the particular human experience as phenomenon. This approach has been valuable in gerontological research in the United States by shedding light on the ways that older adults construct meaning in their lives, allowing researchers to articulate aging phenomenon that has not been previously examined. Phenomenology is useful in helping researchers unlock the human consciousness, and understand what it means to be a human situated in a particular life course with a particular experience (Longino and Powell 2009). These authors explain that phenomenology reveals critical consciousness, personal identity, and social meanings. Regarding the experience of aging, phenomenology is useful in illuminating how "human aging is implicated in the production of social action, social situations, and social worlds" (Longino and Powell, 2009: 386). For these reasons, phenomenological research is an ideal approach for examining the lived experiences of third agers because it involves focusing on them as objects rather than subjects, appreciating their abilities and desires to construe a purposeful existence, and their attempts to be social actors rather than problematic spectators.

By inviting older adults to tell their stories and explain the reality of the experience of being a third ager using methods like phenomenology, gerontologists can begin developing theory that explains the meaning and purpose of the third age category and how third agers interface with society. Although the implications of an increasingly healthy and financially secure older population has been explored for more than thirty years in the United States (e.g., Neugarten 1974), agendas that target third agers as ideal contributors to society through participation in unpaid, economically valuable roles have become prevalent. For example, Civic Ventures is an organization that encourages older adults to contribute their lifetime of knowledge and experiences back to society through volunteerism. However, despite the push to redefine the third age with uniquely different roles, opportunities, expectations, and experiences from other periods of adulthood, there has been little theoretical development with which to understand this life phase over the last three and a half decades. If individuals in the early stages of old age in fact have uniquely different needs, experiences, opportunities, and expectations from other adults, as was proposed by Neugarten, these needs cannot be appropriately addressed without theories to guide research and accumulate knowledge about third age phenomenon. Theories should provide a set of lenses through which to view research findings, a cognitive map to make sense of our world. In the context of qualitative research on the third age, theory building should be derived from older adults' descriptions of their life experiences and narrative accounts related to observations of human experiences, as is emphasized in phenomenological research.

There are very few examples of research that has utilized a phenomenological approach to understand issues related to the third age with the purpose of building theory. However, the small amount of phenomenological research that has emerged provides a starting place for building theory associated with the era of the third age. For example, Adams-Price, Henley, and Hale (1998) used a phenomenological approach as they examined the meaning of aging defined by older adults. They determined through their analysis of in-depth interviews that older adults were inclined to view aging as a positive experience and described the everyday experiences of aging in ways that revealed the kinds of uplifting experiences that mark later life today. This kind of research illustrates how this methodological approach captures the way that older adults make meaning of their lived experience through the stories that they tell (Kahn 2000), and explains aging phenomenon associated with the era of the third age. Future research can take the lead from research like this to continue to carefully examine the nature of aging, with the intention of understanding and seeking to explain the nature of aging through the experiences of third agers themselves.

As we look to the future, we contend that qualitative researchers have not only the opportunity, but the responsibility to take the lead in understanding what it means to be an older adult in the era of the third age. Research using methodological approaches like that of phenomenology provides the unique opportunity to develop theoretical frameworks that can be utilized to understand how the experiences of third agers differ from that of other social groups. As we accumulate knowledge about this period of life, gerontologists can more appropriately address the unique needs of this group, and support older adults' growth and development in later life.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In this review of qualitative research in the United States, we highlight the way research has changed in the era of the third age. With growing attention to positive and uplifting aspects of aging, qualitative research has played a critical role in exploring the ways in which older adults are engaging in meaningful ways with others. In particular, two key methodological approaches that have been important to revealing positive aspects of aging and exploring the extent to which a growing number of years of healthy retirement are redefining the aging experience: ethnographic research and grounded theory research. Ethnographic research highlights the role of context and environment in shaping the lived experience of elders. This research raised attention to positive aspects of aging at a time when most gerontological research focused on the problems associated with aging. Grounded theory has become a particularly important method for understanding the way older adults engage in society in meaningful way. This approach set the stage for understanding growth and development that is occurring in later life.

In addition to the use of particular methodological tools, we also review the key topics associated with the qualitative research in the era of the third age. These topics fit within two dominant frameworks – research exploring meaning-making in later life and research exploring meaningful engagement in later life. Within meaning-making research, we describe research on three topics that are most salient: identity, spirituality, and creativity. Within meaningful activity research, two dominant themes of research exist – that which describes the individually meaningful aspects of engagement in activities and that which describes the socially beneficial aspects of individual activity. These themes are embedded in two topical areas: productive

aging and health and wellbeing. Within the topic of productive aging, the sub-topics of work, lifelong learning, and volunteerism are most prominent. These two frameworks were critically important to raising attention to meaningful experiences and interactions with others, and we propose that the agenda for future qualitative research in the United States should continue contributing to these frameworks. However, we note that a third framework should also be developed which includes a clear exploration of what it means to be a third ager. In the future, greater emphasis of a phenomenological approach will assist in the important task of theory building about the third age.

Qualitative research in the United States has played an important role in facilitating a shift in perspective about aging whereby old age is no longer synonymous with decline and disengagement. Rather, qualitative researchers have emphasized the important ways in which the growing number of years individuals spend in healthy retirement has changed what it means to be an older adult in the United States by creating new opportunities for meaning-making in later life. Future qualitative research can continue to serve as a vehicle aiding in our ability to fully explore and celebrate the richness of meaningfulness embedded in what it means to be a third ager.

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