



SCRIPPS GERONTOLOGY CENTER

A RESEARCH BRIEF



IMAGES OF OHIO CENTENARIANS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Purpose

This research report presents findings from face-to-face qualitative interviews with 16 centenarians residing in southwest, central, and northeast Ohio. Our research focused on the following questions: How do centenarians adapt to remain in control of their physical and social environments? How do they sustain morale and motivation in the face of waning energy and declining physical abilities? How do they view the world from their vantage point? How do they interpret the past in light of the many drastic, if not revolutionary changes, they have witnessed in the course of their long lives? How do they go about making meaning of their experience? How do they tell their life stories?

Methods

To answer our research questions, we conducted face-to-face qualitative interviews lasting on average two hours. We used an interview guide to make sure we would cover all the questions we had constructed to operationalize our research questions, starting with "What does it feel like to have reached your age?" In the course of the interview, we also asked about the best and the most difficult things about having lived so long; how participants thought about the future; and which historical events had the most profound and lasting influence. We asked for descriptions of a typical day; tasks participants could no longer perform; things they might have done differently; what they worried about; what advice they would give to younger people concerning old age; and whether and how they think about death. However, true to the nature of qualitative research, we asked additional questions as follow-up or to probe further any unexpected topics the participant wished to discuss. Depending on where participants took us in the telling of their life stories, we used prompts and asked for elaboration and clarification to help us make sense of their stories.

In addition to the stories, we also collected basic demographic information such as date and place of birth, educational attainment, work history, residential history, marital status, family history, extent of support network, and the need for and use of services.

Participants

We recruited 16 centenarians (13 women and 3 men) for participation in our study. Participants ranged in age from 99 to 105, and lived in southwest, central, and northeast Ohio, in a variety of living arrangements: 4 alone in their own home; 2 with a child; 3 in independent housing in a continuing care retirement community; 1 independently in a senior housing project; 4 in an assisted living facility; and 2 in a nursing home. Nine were born in Ohio; the majority (11) were highly functioning: 5 had no activities of daily living impairments; 6 reported difficulty with only one activity of daily living. Thirteen were widowed, the others were never married (1), divorced (1), or still married (1).



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Findings

- Age was not salient for the participants in our study. They acknowledged their age but confessed to not thinking much about it. They were busy living in the present.
- In telling their life stories, participants often collapsed several decades into one succinct statement which we characterized as distillation of life story. In trying to remember specific events of their lives, participants often used other persons' age or major historic events as references to help them locate a personal event in time and to anchor their stories. When they could not remember specific dates they decided that it really did not matter when exactly some event had occurred.
- Based on participants' narratives, we identified six coping strategies they used to deal with declines and losses: putting a positive spin on negative events; minimizing difficulties; comparing themselves to people who are worse off; making adjustments to meet environmental demands; calling on informal support; and engaging formal services.
- Participants revealed a great sense of humor. Most humorous statements were of the self-deprecating kind about their own frailty or memory lapses, often tongue-in-cheek, often about age, frequently about their old "kids," sometimes about death, and also about gender differences.
- In telling their life stories, participants revealed great ability to adapt to a wide range of changes, both good and challenging. They tended to characterize the distant past ambivalently as both the good old days and the bad old days when life was simpler but required more skills and effort. They showed similar ambivalence in evaluating the great technological and societal changes they have witnessed.
- The participants in our project demonstrated, through their narratives, a generalized sense of control over their environment and their psychological well-being.

In Their Own Words

- "I'm scared of death like everybody else because you don't know when it's coming and what it's going to be like." B.H.
- "I would enjoy and have enjoyed wine. ...I do indulge slightly, very slightly, and infrequently, but not a large amount." D.M.
- "What comes around goes around even if it takes 50 years..." E.S.
- "I mean, you don't feel any different, only that your body does. It won't work." G.C.
- "Go to school and get as much education as possible." G.H.
- "Live every day as if this was your last day and live every day as if you would live forever..." K.S.
- "I can't do anything I like to do. Read and write and create things..." T.F.
- "I have no idea. I have no secret. There's no secret to it. I just keep on living, breathing, and staying above the grass." J.J.
- "The only thing I can't go and do is roller skating and just doing a lot of the things that the kids like to do." G.W.

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