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A Review of Arts and Aging Research: Revealing an Elusive but Promising Direction for the Era of the Third Age

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A Review of Arts and Aging Research: Revealing an Elusive but Promising Direction for the Era of the Third Age

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This article examines arts and aging research over a 40-year period in four highly visible gerontology journals. We examine the content, amount, and distribution of research between 1970 and 2009, identifying dominant themes and research paradigms. Results reveal six themes, with the vast majority of arts research occurring between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Using a critical gerontology lens, we identify and explore the implications of two dominant, often conflicting paradigms that have shaped trends in arts research over the last 40 years. We conclude with recommendations for future arts research for the era of the third age.

KEYWORDS *art, creativity, humanities, critical gerontology, third age*

Historically, discussions about the contributions older adults make to society and the opportunities they have to grow and develop have been largely overshadowed by discussions about the challenges individuals face in later life and problems related to population aging. This is evident from even a cursory examination of gerontological scholarship (particularly in the United States), which has historically focused primarily on loss and decline, physical and mental health concerns, the challenges of role transitions such as

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widowhood and retirement, and social service interventions (e.g., Atchley, 1975; Binstock, 2005; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). These are important areas of inquiry for understanding ways to solve problems associated with the “fourth age” (see Baltes & Smith, 2003), or the period of decline and dependency prior to death. However, in more recent years, research exploring the potential for the expanding period of life during which individuals have time and the physical capability to remain actively engaged suggests that a new collection of expectations and opportunities is developing for later life. This period, which occurs following retirement but prior to the onset of disability, is known as the “third age,” (see Laslett, 1991; Weiss & Bass, 2002). The emergence of this period has poised gerontology to cultivate a greater emphasis on research examining growth and development in later life especially that related to the arts and creativity.

Arts and creativity related scholarship has been influenced by paradigmatic changes in the way old age has been conceptualized. The arts are particularly sensitive to paradigmatic changes like these because: (a) the availability of art opportunities is associated with the way funds are distributed and utilized through federal programs (i.e., the ideological forces influence funding for social policies); (b) art opportunities for older adults are influenced by the way social roles and expectations for later life are constructed; and (c) the purpose and meaning behind art is defined by the sociohistorical period during which it is created. For example, there have been visible concerns about opportunities for older adults to remain “active” in order to avoid disengagement and decline (Cummings & Henry, 1961) since the height of public programming in the late 1960s. During this period, social policies such as the Older Americans Act contained language that encouraged active engagement in later life. As a result, many programs, including those supporting artistic engagement, were readily accessible to older adults in part, because they helped prevent disengagement through the promotion of active aging. However, economic problems associated with solvency of social programs (e.g., Social Security) in more recent years has created a climate of fiscal crisis for federal programming and shifted attention to the costs and “productive” potential of the numerous older adults who are healthy postretirement (i.e., third-agers) (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Since the 1980s, public programs that do not serve the purpose of offsetting costs or increasing economic contributions of older adults appear to have diminished (e.g., Butler & Gleason, 1985), including art programs for older adults.

The present research examines arts and creativity related gerontological research between 1970 and 2009, a 40-year period during which the roles and expectations of older adults changed as a greater number and proportion of the population began to enter old age. This research examines trends related to the amount, location, and variety of research on the arts in mainstream gerontological scholarship. Additionally, we examine the

connection between arts and aging research trends and dominant paradigms related to the way old age is depicted and how aging is conceptualized. Specifically, this research is guided by two overarching questions:

1. How has research about arts and creativity changed over time in mainstream gerontological venues?
2. How has research on the arts and creativity been shaped by changes in the field of gerontology as a whole?

We begin our analysis by describing dominant frameworks in gerontology as they relate to arts and aging research. Then we use content analyses to examine arts research in mainstream gerontology between 1970 and 2009 including the amount, historical location, and content of research. We conclude by using a critical gerontology approach to identify broader implications of our findings and to identify avenues for expansion of research on the arts and aging. In particular, we examine implicit assumptions about aging and older adults in society evident in arts and aging scholarship. By looking beyond the findings to the assumptions, images, and concepts that shape and sustain research paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) we speculate about the role of arts related research in the era of the third age in gerontology.

MAJOR RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND FRAMEWORKS

We begin our exploration by examining the relationship between major research paradigms and frameworks in gerontology and research about the arts and creativity. This review is organized in two sections that are loosely categorized by theme. The first theme is "Active Aging Through Artistic Activities," which describes the role of artistic activities in promoting active aging initiatives, a theme that is also reflective of a number of related areas of gerontological literature such as leisure, productive aging, and successful aging (see Baltes & Smith, 2003; Bass, 2000; Butler & Gleason, 1985; Caro, Bass, & Chen, 1993; Gordon, Gaitz, & Scott, 1976; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Sherraden, 2001; O'Reilly & Caro, 1994; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Timmer & Aartsen, 2003). The second theme is "The Arts as Meaning-Making." This theme describes the link between explorations of the experience of aging over time and the meaning people attach to old age, as well as the use of arts research as a means for exploring processes such as stratification at the societal level and wisdom at the individual level.

Active Aging Through Artistic Engagement

Over the years, published research on the arts/creativity and late life have supported agendas which encourage older adults to remain active in later life.

This is evident in several facets of gerontological scholarship. First, arts programming, often involving “arts and crafts” instruction, has been a prominent pillar of multi-purpose senior centers or other congregate settings in which older people socialize (e.g., Banks, 2000; Hoffman, 1980; Sierpina & Cole, 2004). Research describing, upholding, and encouraging older adults’ engagement in activities of this nature often has a didactic quality, aiming to prepare staff to offer and administer such programs (e.g., Greenberg, 1985; Moskow-McKenzie & Manheimer, 1994). However, the meaning of such activities is defined neither by individual expression or specific therapeutic value, so much as by their role in facilitating informal social contacts in settings where time, resources, and expertise are limited (see Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

A second example of this theme is evident in the literature that supports the use of such activity in the service of encouraging health maintenance (e.g., Dawson & Baller, 1980; Lindaur, 1998), or as a tool for addressing such disorders as dementia (Basting, 2006). There are two areas in which this is most often associated. The first is related to the therapeutic benefits of the arts, such as through music or art therapies for which the arts are used primarily as a method to help individuals overcome or manage health problems. Another approach is related to the use of the arts as a way of offsetting health problems. Works such as that of Goldman and Mahler (1995) herald the idealized potential for “late bloomers” to achieve new heights of health and vigor through engagement in artistic activities. Although laudable, this kind of research often betrays a strong normative tone, in line with earlier expressions of “activity theory” (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972) as a way of rationalizing the American “busy-ethic” (e.g., Moody, 1988).

The use of the arts as a way to encourage “activity” in later life has also been recognized as crucially important in light of recent research examining the relationship between continued activity and avoidance of disease and disability (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). This research is founded on the idea that continued activity is critically important in order to delay the onset of dependency that may otherwise threaten the sustenance of our social structure as the population continues to age. For example, recent work by Cohen and associates (2006) documents how physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits of arts participation are a means to offset certain risks and problems associated with aging. This quasi-experimental study of older adult choral singing groups demonstrates significant and lasting benefits for the health and mental well-being of those involved, persuasively upholding the place of arts participation as a broad, and also cost-conscious, strategy for enhancing late life.

The Arts as Meaning-Making

Alternatively, some gerontological writing uses the arts and humanities as a vessel for examining the unique experience of aging and the meaning people attach to this experience. One particular forum for this kind of

writing, the *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging* (e.g., Achenbaum, 1992) is innovative in that chapters range from expansive historical studies (e.g., of the changing images of aging in literature over time), to comparative views of aging as depicted within non-Western religious traditions. For example, in the chapters titled “Creative Process: A Life-Span Approach” (Kastenbaum, 1992), and “The Older Student of the Humanities” (Shuldiner, 1992), creativity is conceptualized as *wisdom*.

In the latter chapter, the author concludes that “the most challenging and empowering forms of humanities study in late life are cooperative ventures—interactive and ‘intertextual’” (Shuldiner, 1992, p. 455) such that the texts of peoples’ lives are valued equally to those of the theorists and writers who have attempted to interpret the human experience. In *Voices and Visions of Aging: Towards a Critical Gerontology*, Cole and associates (1993) provide an example of this kind of research, integrating the humanities and social gerontology, examining meaning-making in later life, and examining the factors shaping the way social roles are being reconstructed in later life.

In addition to Cohen’s path-breaking work (see Cohen, 2000, 2004, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006), several arts and humanities-informed studies have also been used in approaches that bring to light the contextual and evolving meanings of creative activities across the life course (Cole, Van Tassel, & Kastenbaum, 1992). For example, proceeding from more individualistic premises, creativity has been conceptualized and studied as a method for understanding *cognitive functioning* in older adults, often framed by deficit or stage theories (see Quadagno, 2008, pp. 148–172). Other authors, such as Marsiske and Willis (1998) draw on cognitive science approaches to study *problem solving* as an instance of “accumulated domain-specific knowledge” which can be tapped to identify solutions for new problems. These and similar studies discuss how people use analogies, and various novel strategies of problem solving that are often shaped by contrived research aims. These are clearly valuable, and often marshaled to counter claims of cognitive decline in late life. However, their formal, contrived nature undermines the relevance of such research for revealing the diversity and subjective meanings of creativity in people’s daily lives.

Sociologists, including Becker (1982) and Wellin (1993), have recognized the relevance of societal forces in influencing the accessibility of creative pursuits. This kind of scholarship provides a foundation for examining the social organization of the arts as forms of collective action. Similarly, other sociologists have examined the relevance of social networks (e.g., DiMaggio & Useem, 1985) to examine the linkages between education, class, and arts participation. Both streams of research use the arts and humanities to reveal broader observations about the social environment. The first helps explain the extent to which the arts are promoted or made more accessible due to the influence of government entities. The second is essential to understanding diversity/inequality among the older population with respect to their conceptions of and access to particular creative pursuits as they are shaped by social

class. However, in both cases the contexts and meanings of artistic activity—whether individual or collective—are secondary, and properly so, to the investigation of larger institutional and cultural forces.

Alternatively, an innovative study by Sudnow (1978) of improvisation in jazz, is based on his long-time interest and training as a pianist. Such scholarship is important for modeling and documenting how late-life activities and practices transcend the activity itself and *embody* continued growth and development. This view of creativity is similar to that advanced by Baltes and Baltes (2002), in which creativity is tantamount to *wisdom*. Among the elements of creativity they note are “. . . recognition of the relativity of values and priorities within a set of cultural universals; a good sense of the uncertainties of life and the insight that any life decision involves a particular balance of gains and losses . . .” (2002, p. 30). This kind of scholarship seems particularly unique in its ability to promote and illustrate how lifelong growth and development in the form of arts and creative activities, recognizes the practical benefits of participation *as well as* powerful models of collective, intergenerational engagement, and social policy.

This review suggests that the location of arts scholarship in gerontology appears to have been shaped by two major paradigms. The first paradigm has promoted research on the arts that views the arts as useful for supporting continued activity to avoid, manage, or offset disability and loss of function. The second paradigm has created a framework for research that uses the arts as a mechanism for meaning-making in later life and taking stock of way society is shaped by the arts and how the arts intersect with individual lives. These two paradigms are helpful in understanding the motivation and purpose that research on the arts provides to the study of aging and helps reveal the tension between the intrinsic value of engagement in arts activities and the ways to delay the aging process and thus, promote successful aging. Furthermore, it focuses on particular facets of the aging process rather than on the meaning, opportunities, and ideals associated with older adults' active participation in the arts itself. In the following sections, we systematically identify, categorize, and contextualize trends of arts related gerontological research in prominent U.S. journals to examine how this research has changed over time. Using a critical gerontology framework, we contextualize our findings by examining how the dominant paradigms described above are related to dominant themes and trends in arts and aging research.

CONTENT ANALYSIS: ARTS AND AGING RESEARCH 1970–2009

Data

The journals chosen for this analysis were strategically identified as those which would best exemplify the ways in which arts related research is

characterized in prominent U.S. scholarly outlets. *The Journal of Gerontology (JG)* (including all four sections when it was divided) and *The Gerontologist (TG)* were both selected because they are widely regarded as premier, or flagship, publications for work in gerontology as representative of the research that has characterized our field since their inception (1946 and 1965, respectively). The *Journal of Aging Studies (JAS)* (which did not commence publication until 1987) and the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development (IJAH)* (published since 1970), also highly regarded, were chosen for their dedication to publishing multi-disciplinary and interpretive scholarship on aging and human development. Our aim was to use these journals to examine both the amount and type of arts-related research that appeared during this critical period—one in which the aging population, in the aggregate, became more active, more numerous, and increasingly healthy and financially secure (see Sunderland, 1975).

Study Period

The study period for this research, 1970–2009, includes a period during which ideas about the role of older adults in society has changed. This period is recognized as a time in which people are spending a growing number of years in a postretirement, predisability state and thus, expectations and opportunities associated with later life have changed. The early part of the study period includes a progressive period if not a golden age in social programming for older people, from the federal to local levels of government, and the later part includes a period that is focused on the role of individuals in offsetting the costs associated with population aging. The changes in political climate from, what is often referred to as the era of “compassionate ageism” to the era of “greedy geezers” (Binstock, 1983), and more recently, the era of the “third age” (see Carr, 2005, 2008) have been central to the ideological perspectives driving gerontological research between 1970 and 2009. We examine the way arts and creativity scholarship reflects and is shaped by paradigmatic shifts in gerontology, contextualizing our findings in light of these sociohistorical periods.

Analytical Approach

We use a content analysis to analyze these data. According to Singleton and Straits (1999, p. 555), content analysis is “a set of methods for analyzing the symbolic content of communications, which typically entails (1) defining a set of content categories, (2) sampling elements of the communication that are described by the categories, (3) quantifying the categories such as by counting their frequency or occurrence, and (4) examining related category frequencies to one another and/or to other variables.” Content analysis has proven useful for defining the kind of research that has characterized the field of gerontology (e.g., Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2003). Broadly

described, this approach involves identifying dominant themes by systematically categorizing salient characteristics in a conceptually meaningful way.

The first step of this analysis included identifying all arts, creativity, and humanities related articles published from 1970 through 2009. These articles were identified by examining *all* articles published during the study period within all four journals. Specifically, articles in which the arts, creativity, or humanities subject matter was presented in any capacity were identified through careful examination of titles and abstracts. Two of the researchers identified and categorized the articles to ensure consistent data collection strategies. The final sample included a total of 84 articles. All articles were classified by title, author, date, field of study, and methodology, and using an inductive approach to the analysis, common themes were identified according to the type, subject, and content of the research.

RESULTS

Emergent Themes

In total, six conceptually meaningful categories of articles emerged: presentation of art; participation of older adults in artistic activities; humanities: depiction of older adults and old age within artistic mediums; therapeutic benefits of artistic participation; art as a tool for methodological or theoretical contributions to gerontology; and creativity in old age and over the life course. Of the six conceptually meaningful categories of articles that emerged from the analysis, 67.9% (57) of the articles were in the “humanities: depiction of older adults and old age within artistic mediums” (humanities) category, thus, indicating that this kind of research has been the most dominant thematic focus of arts related gerontological research.

This kind of research tends to use the arts as a way to explain aging, suggesting that the vast majority of research which employs the arts in gerontology is strongly linked to sociohistorical perspectives and explorations related to the way the arts depict the process and experience of aging and old age. This category also takes stock of changing roles, expectations, and opportunities of older adults as depicted within artistic mediums. This category includes articles such as Berg’s (1996) article describing the role that fiction plays in informing topics such as ageism, recognizing a change in the social status of older adults across various sociohistorical periods.

A rather small minority of articles explores research involving the examination of individual engagement in artistic activities (depicted in themes A, B, and F in Tables 1 and 2). In combination, these include 21.4% (or 18) of the total articles. Eight, or 9.5%, describe “participation of older adults in artistic activities” (participation). This category includes articles such as Lieberman and Lieberman (1983) who described elders who engage

TABLE 1 Distribution of Themes

Themes	Percent (Number)
A. Presentation	2.4% (2)
B. Participation	9.5% (8)
C. Humanities	67.9% (57)
D. Therapy	7.1% (6)
E. Gerontology	3.6% (3)
F. Creativity	9.5% (8)
Total	100% (84)

TABLE 2 Distribution of Articles Across Journals

Themes	Journals			
	<i>JG</i>	<i>TG</i>	<i>IJAHD</i>	<i>JAS</i>
A. Presentation	0	1	1	0
B. Participation	0	5	3	0
C. Humanities	0	26	9	22
D. Therapy	1	5	0	0
E. Gerontology	0	1	0	2
F. Creativity	0	1	6	1
Total	1	39	19	25

in art as a second career during later life. Only 2.4% (2) fall into the category “presentation of art” (presentation), which includes artistic works of older adults published in gerontology journals. An example of this category includes Leeds’s (1971) publication of two poems describing the experience of being a 50-year-old. Another eight, or 9.5%, fall into the “creativity in old age and over the life course” (creativity) category. For example, Reed (2005) explored creativity and motivation in later life, looking at self-perceived changes in creativity over the life span. This kind of research describes the contributions older adults provide through creative expression and the ways in which creativity evokes personal benefits in later life.

Although motivated in a different way, theme D, “therapeutic benefits of artistic participation” (therapy) also recognizes the use of art in supporting adults’ ability to remain actively engaged. This type of research is present in six, or 7.4%, of the articles. However, unlike those articles that examined the ways in which art served to support continued engagement in society, art therapy research is often focused on offsetting or managing health problems. The arts, as conceptualized within the medical model, have often been used to justify the importance of the arts by seeking to quantify the benefits that people receive from participation. This variety of research is well recognized and readily available; the low number of articles describing research on the therapeutic arts in these prominent gerontology venues is speculated to be because only one of the journals that published this research (*Journals of Gerontology*) had a clinical focus.

However, a number of journals specialize in clinical issues associated with aging, and the therapeutic arts in particular, publishing this variety of research exclusively (e.g., see the *Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*). An example of research examining the therapeutic benefits of art include, for example, Mainz and Salthouse (1998), who examine the relationship between age and spatial memory with regard to visual presentation of music, suggesting that music may help improve cognitive activity.

The final category, theme E, includes three articles, or 3.7% of the total articles. This category, “art as a tool for methodological or theoretical contributions to gerontology” (gerontology) includes those articles that focus on the use of the arts as a way of examining and understanding aging. This kind of research also recognizes the value of the arts in examining other social processes associated with aging. An example of this kind of research includes Magilvy et al. (1992), who describe the use of photography as a method for investigating rural home care for older adults.

Distribution of Themes Over Time

The overall distribution of themes suggests that the majority of arts and aging research seeks to examine the way aging is depicted in the arts, often as a way of understanding the roles and expectations of older adults depicted within artistic mediums (i.e., humanities). Figure 1 shows that an influx of humanities-based arts research occurred during the 15-year period between 1985 and 1999. Subsequent to this period, humanities research has declined substantially. The other themes identified during this study have remained fairly stable, with two exceptions. Descriptions of actual participation in the arts were

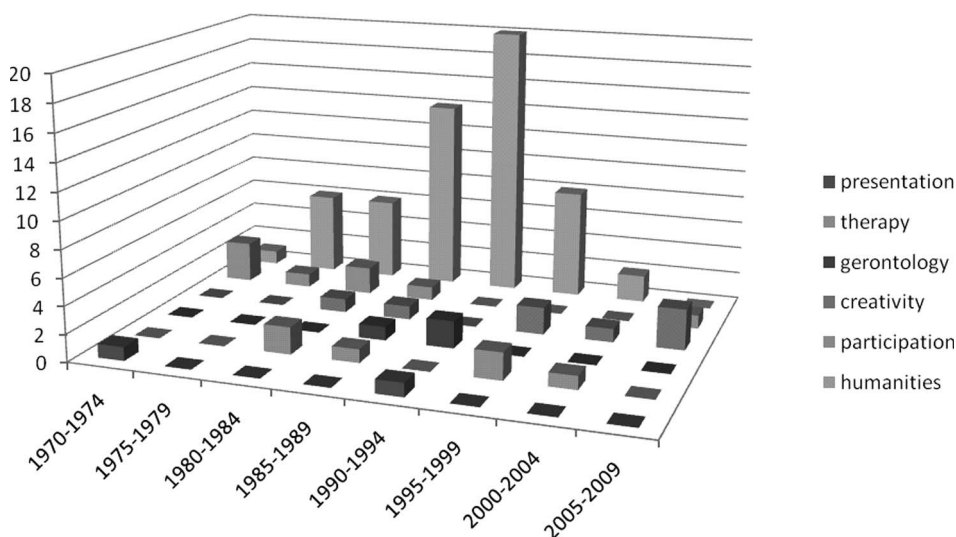


FIGURE 1 The distribution of arts and aging themes, 1970–2009.

more prevalent early in the study period and the research on creativity has become more prevalent in recent years. This may indicate that ideas about participation in the arts are changing whereby participation is being depicted as a creative contribution rather than just as a way to stay “busy.”

Distribution Among Journals

In examining the articles in the sample, the distribution of articles between the four gerontology journals reflects the relative salience of arts and aging research in the field of gerontology as a whole, its placement in particular outlets, and its visibility as a research topic within mainstream gerontology. In general, over the 40-year study period, the vast majority (46.4%) of the articles were found in *TG*. With 17 fewer years of publications, however, the *JAS* contributed nearly one-third (29.8%) of the total articles identified during the study period. The *IJAHD* contributed 22.6% of the articles, and the *JG* contributed only one (2.1%) of the 84 articles.

Considering the contributions that arts and aging research make to discussions about growth and development in later life, the small number of total articles published during this expansive period is surprising, but of further concern is the lack of articles published in the flagship *JG*. However, this finding is likely related to the fact that this journal does not focus (both in terms of content and methodology) on the type of research and subject matter typically associated with creativity and arts related research. Therefore, we might assume that arts and aging research are likely to have a greater presence in journals more receptive to such research or in ones that specialize in this area. This is somewhat true.

TG, which has the highest impact-factor of all gerontology journals, published the largest proportion of the research articles identified for this study. This is promising given the visibility of the journal; however, the emergent themes present in *TG* reveals that a rather limited type of research is represented (see Figure 2). In particular, as is evident in Table 2, *TG* published predominantly humanities research (26 articles), followed by participation and therapy research articles (5 each). It appears that his journal may value research that examines the way aging is depicted by the arts, and secondarily, the participation of older adults in the arts, and the therapeutic/medical benefits associated with participation in the arts. The relative importance of arts research as it relates to examination of the actual participation of older adults in the arts is relatively less visible compared with research that examines the extent to which the arts *depict* the process of aging or the process of meaning-making. A similar theme is evident in the *JAS* and the *IJAHD*. The *IJAHD* published a slightly greater amount of research about elders' engagement in creative pursuits over the life course than the other journals.

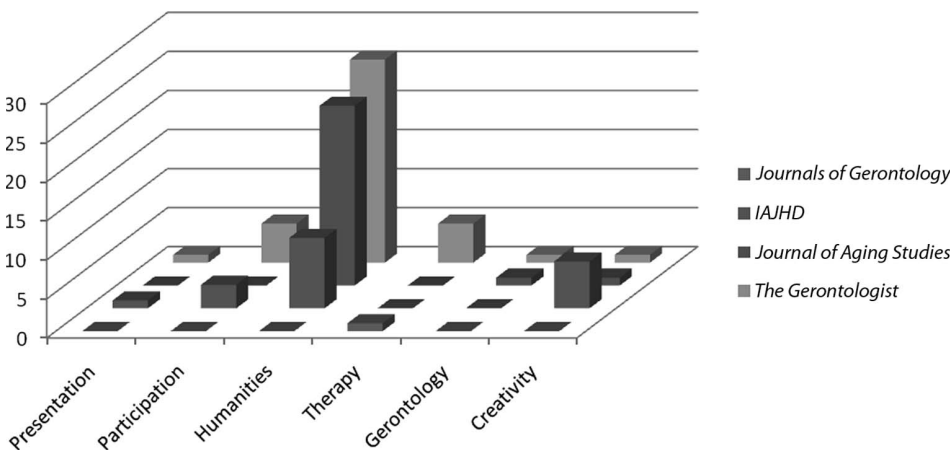


FIGURE 2 Distribution of arts and aging research themes among journals.

Distribution of Articles Over Time

Examining the distribution of published arts and aging related research over time is revealing of the changing values within the field articulated by the characteristics of the research within mainstream gerontology. Although arts and aging research has never been a dominant theme in gerontological research, there have been certain time periods for which it has been fairly visible in mainstream gerontology. Chart 1 shows the 40-year trend of gerontological literature on the arts. It is important to note that the *JAS* was not introduced until 1987.

Figure 3 reveals an eight-year period (1988–1995) during which arts and aging research was the most prevalent. Although the cause for the increased visibility given to arts related research between 1988 and 1995 in gerontology cannot be determined by this research, the *JAS* contributed a substantial number of articles, and none after this period (see Figure 4). Furthermore, this trend occurs during the period in which research about

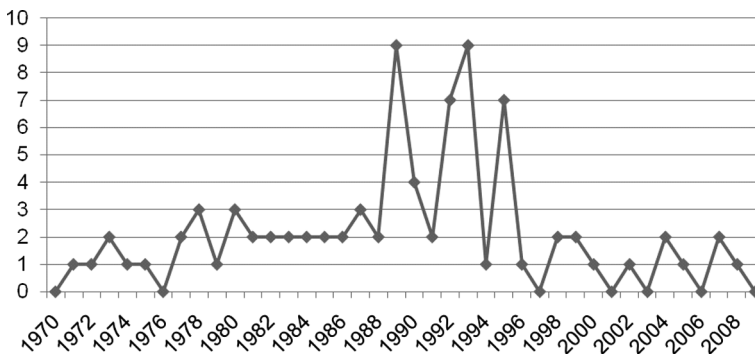


FIGURE 3 Distribution of all arts and aging research articles, 1970–2009.

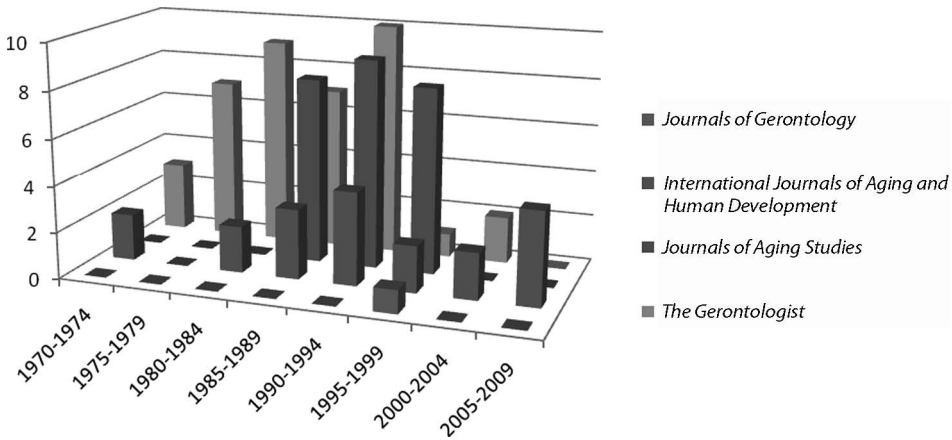


FIGURE 4 Distribution of arts and aging research articles among journals, 1970–2009.

the third age, and related research such as productive and successful aging, became a dominant topic of discussion in gerontology.

Agendas that previously focused on identifying ways to help people remain active in later life shifted towards exploring ways for people to remain productive in later life (e.g., Caro et al., 1993; Laslett, 1989). This growing interest in the economic value of older adults' active engagement in later life (e.g., Rowe & Kahn, 1997; see also Carr, 2008, and Holstein & Minkler, 2003 for critical examinations), were especially focused on exploring ways to offset health problems and thus, health costs for which the arts may be viewed as inadequate or inconsequential to society's bottom line; arts related research tends not to be linked with discussions about health or economics.

Trends in the amount of arts related research in mainstream gerontology journals indicates that *TG* published the majority of arts and aging related research until the mid-1990s. Since that time, arts related research has nearly disappeared, which may be partially related to the introduction of the *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* in 2007. The *JAS*, as noted here, contributed a number of articles soon after its conception, which was also the period when arts and aging research was most prevalent (late 1980s and into the early 1990s). No arts related research has been published since that period. The *IJAHD*, possibly because of the orientation and purpose of the journal, has continued to contribute a small but steady stream of research about the arts, and more recently, as noted above, to the topic of creativity in later life in particular.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Using a critical framework, we describe the implications of our findings and identify future avenues for research on the arts and creativity. In particular,

we describe the implicit assumptions about aging and older adults in society evident in arts and creativity related scholarship. We contextualize our findings by examining the relationship between the trends in arts and aging research and the major research paradigms and frameworks in gerontology. Like others before us (e.g., Estes, 2001; Katz, 1996; Luborsky & Sankar, 1996; Manheimer, 2005; Minkler & Estes, 1999), this approach allows us to reflect upon the broader implications for gerontology and aging-related research.

The themes identified in the study were not categorized by purpose or intention and therefore, our analysis is related only to the content and distribution of articles. However, based on the historical changes that occurred during the study period, we speculate about how both the subject matter itself and the time in which that subject matter was prominent in mainstream gerontology venues reveals important ideas about the role of arts research in gerontology. The major frameworks guiding arts related gerontology research expose competing ideas about the role and purpose of older adults in society as well as the role of gerontology in defining the purpose of the arts in the lives of older adults.

From Active to Productive

Critical gerontologists who have examined issues associated with healthy and retired older adults have pointed out that this kind of research focuses heavily on explorations about the economic contributions of older adults with little concern about the individual meaning associated with such activities (e.g., Holstein & Minkler, 2003). These observations are in part related to the recent shift in focus within gerontology that occurred during the last several decades from exploring ways for older adults to remain active and avoid disengagement to exploring ways to offset the costs of population aging by identifying ways to help older adults remain productive as long as possible and delay the onset of dependency. Arts research in gerontology has been influenced by this shift in perspective, and the change in priorities evident in arts and aging research and programming.

Proponents of the Older Americans Act in 1965 were invested in providing opportunities for older adults to retain an active role in society post-retirement. These values implicitly shaped programs during that era and reflected the progressive nature of the times—when older adults and the arts were both viewed as worthy of public support. This act contained language stipulating that Senior Centers and other settings should provide a range of educational, recreational and health/social service resources to older people, regardless of their ability to pay, with the express purpose of making activities available to *all* older adults. The results of our study demonstrate that despite the funding for federal programs that promoted activity in later life, arts related research during this era, the 1970s and the early 1980s, was not plentiful. However, the research that was published at

this time focused on participation of older adults in artistic activities more heavily than any other period, which included research involving evaluations of arts programs and descriptions of the ways in which they facilitated activity in later life. Given the ideals guiding gerontological research, it is likely that research on creativity and therapy during this period may also have emphasized the use of creative/therapeutic arts in helping older adults remain active to delay or offset the problematic aspects of aging.

In more recent years, many of the same programs that were created in light of ideological views related to older adults and the arts being viewed as worthy of support (e.g., arts programs for people of all ages), have disappeared or faced financial shortfalls. Some scholars suggest that this is largely the result of tax cuts and deficit spending associated with an ideology of “fiscal crisis” (see Binstock, 2005) such that societal aging was imminent and doing something to improve or ameliorate it seemed daunting (Estes, 2001). As the expense associated with population aging has become more visible in the mainstream, especially since the mid- to late-1990s, scholarship examining productive aging and successful aging has become prominent (e.g., O’Reilly & Caro, 1994; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). This is evident in research that seeks to justify the role of certain kinds of activities by indicating how they offset the expense of population aging (e.g., Kershner, 1992).

Continued engagement in activities, especially those considered to be “productive,” were heralded as important to improving both the lives of older adults and aging societies (see Holstein & Minkler, 2003 for a critique of this topic). This shift in focus (with regard to funding for social programming as well as in research), is essentially an extension of the same concerns associated with helping older adults remain active. The original agenda seeking to diminish disengagement in later life re-emerged with a slightly different motivation—helping older adults avoid becoming dependent. Both perspectives, supported active engagement in later life. However, those concerned about helping older adults age “successfully” were motivated by offsetting costs of population aging. Thus, in this current era, arts programs have become more difficult to justify. This is evident in the present research, whereby since the mid-1990s, research on the arts has nearly disappeared in all journals. Although not prominent, a resurgence of research on creativity suggests, however, that arts research may have an opportunity to be reborn.

Meaning-Making

Despite the prominence of activity-oriented frameworks for arts programs, in the period that arts and aging research was at its height, between the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, an alternative paradigm appears to have had a more dominant presence in arts research. During this period, funding for the arts, like other areas of social programming, waned as the Reagan era sought to shrink government expenditures for public programs; yet, the

average age of retirement continued to drop while the onset of physical decline lengthened. As a result, the meaning and purpose behind a new phase of healthy retirement, a time we now refer to as the “third age” (see Laslett, 1991), was examined for the first time.

For the first time, explorations about the meaning and purpose in later life were highly visible—chapters with this theme were prominent in handbooks on aging (e.g., *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences, 1996*) and other books that usually covered only issues related to the problems associated with aging. Arts research often focuses on explorations of the meaning and purpose of later life, which may be why it was so prominent during this period (especially humanities-based research), despite the fact that programming and funding was unavailable. Without this financial and structural support, however, this research merely set the stage for further explorations, but the momentum to continue this theme of more positive aspects of aging was not available.

The prominence of arts research as a whole during this period, suggests that the arts and aging research, for this brief period, aligned with the implicit values in mainstream gerontology venues. This is particularly evident because during this period, research about the contribution of the arts to methodological and theoretical approaches in gerontology emerged. In particular, between 1990 and 1994, the vast amount of research on the arts, and the humanities especially, facilitated explorations of the meaning and purpose of later life, as the first discussions about the third age and productive aging became visible in gerontological research.

Although all arts research themes identified in this study were present in some form at this time, the prevalence of research that facilitated discussions about the meaning and purpose of aging and older adults in society suggests that this period was one of reflection for gerontology, and a period in which arts research more soundly connected with the ideological perspectives guiding the field. It is with this approach that we propose future arts research may gain greater prominence in gerontology.

The tension between paradigms related to active/productive aging and meaning-making in arts research are reflective of a broader tension in the field of gerontology as a whole between explorations about the positive and uplifting aspects of aging and the concerns about the problems associated with aging. Particularly research examining active aging movements were motivated by concerns about older adults having a “roleless role” and becoming “useless” to society (Offenbacher & Poster, 1985). However, the resurgence of these same ideals in the form of productive aging initiatives are also focused on the problems of aging, but shifted the concerns from identifying ways to help individuals offset the problems associated with their own aging to ways that individuals could offset the problems associated with population aging. This greater attention to the economic aspects of population aging and the individual responsibility for solving these problems continues to perpetuate the “problem centered” view of aging that Estes (2001) and others suggest

has plagued gerontology research over the years. Although research on issues related to meaning-making provide a more positive alternative, our findings are troubling, suggesting that gerontological research has historically and continues to focus on problem-oriented aspects of aging.

THE FUTURE OF ARTS AND AGING RESEARCH IN THE ERA OF THE THIRD AGE

Despite the extent to which problem-oriented research remains prominent in gerontological research, we propose that arts research has the unique potential to focus on the personal and societal benefits that older adults provide through engagement in artistic activities. The emergence of the third age raised attention to the opportunities for growth and development in later life, a step up from merely exploring ways to maintain a social role in retirement. However, the presence of a third age for the average citizen in many developed nations has led to new discussions whereby this period has become redefined as successful and productive aging initiatives intersect with this life phase. For example, "third agers" are often identified as "successful" agers and who are therefore, capable and expected to contribute in economically valuable ways. Similarly, even though humanities-based arts research provided a mechanism for examining the potential and the purpose of later life, the shift in attention to offsetting the costs of population aging has trumped these kinds of discussions with explorations about economically valuable contributions older adults can and should make.

As a result, the arts, which provide a way to enrich culture, promote self and societal reflection, raise attention to important social issues, and bring people together through common interests and values, have been overshadowed by more quantitatively measurable activities (e.g., formal volunteerism). Thus, we propose that future gerontological research on the arts and aging expand research on issues relevant to the era of the third age by bringing attention to the value older adults provide without losing sight of the key role that arts research plays in examining growth and development in later life. There are several ways we suggest that this can happen.

First, *arts and aging research should demonstrate the economic, social, and cultural contributions that older adults make as a result of engagement in artistic activities*. By recognizing the value of these contributions, explorations of growth and development in later life can include broader discussions related to the role of societal forces in facilitating engagement in the arts and the societal benefits resulting from older adults' active engagement in creative pursuits. For example, work like that of Cohen and associates (2006) examines the individual (health, psychological, and social) benefits that older adults receive from involvement in artistic activities.

However, it also describes the ways in which participation in arts programs brings together people of all ages, which leads to the accumulation of these benefits at the individual, community, and societal levels. Cohen and associates (2006) used a control group of non-participants, which provided particularly compelling evidence of the ways in which artistic engagement is economically valuable. However, research like that of Pickles (2003) and Carr (2006) uses qualitative, in-depth interviews regarding participation in artistic activities to demonstrate the social and cultural benefits that are more difficult to measure. Both approaches to arts research are needed and intersect with the intrinsic values shaping research in the era of the third age.

Second, the arts have the unique capability of benefiting individuals and communities because the arts bring together people of all ages to learn from one another. Thus, arts research is uniquely positioned to examine the reformation of social roles in an environment whereby chronological age is secondary to the purpose of the social interaction. Thus, we propose that *arts and aging research should seek to demonstrate the personal and societal benefits of engagement in creative pursuits*. For example, Manheimer (2005, 2007) has studied and organized formal educational programs in support of creative retirement that traced “linkages between theories of aging, rationales for older learner programs, and concurrent changes in public policy regarding retirement, social and health care insurance, and other age-based entitlements and policies” (2005, p. 199). This research has demonstrated ways in which research examining the benefits of creative engagement in later life can advance research, practice, and policy, while challenging the traditional approach to the way social roles and expectations are assigned to individuals moving through later life. This kind of intergenerational exchange provides a foundation for discussions about alternative life course structures that challenge the dominant linear and unidirectional segmentation of the life course by education, work, and leisure (Riley & Riley, 1996), an issue of grave importance as retirement is being redefined and the third age is becoming a more fluid life stage.

Third, social gerontology research allows for the unique opportunity to link multiple disciplinary perspectives in order to fully understand the aging processes. During the era of the third age, social gerontology as a discipline will benefit from a more integrative approach to examinations of growth and development in later life. Thus, *arts and aging scholarship should seek to bridge the gap between social science, humanities, and policy perspectives*. This kind of integration of ideas can inform what Weiss and Bass (2002) identify as the *Challenges of the Third Age*, by capturing the significant impact such involvement has on the quality and continuity of experience throughout the life course. Further, because artistic activities provide “a social space, an interpretive zone wherein actors not only ground their self-appraisals . . . but express themselves” (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004, p. 110), interdisciplinary arts research can reinforce the crucial importance of the

role that formal structures play in the provision of economic and cultural capital to all members of society (Carr, 2005). By doing so, this kind of research may unveil the critical space between intention and agency that acknowledges the contradictory nature of the stories that we are encouraged to live by in later life (Biggs, 2001), and thus, create a scholarly environment that facilitates the interaction between individual growth and development and contributions to society in later life.

As we look to the future, gerontological research can and should seek to reconcile the imbalance between explorations of the costs and opportunities associated with the emergence of the third age as a component of the modal life course structure. Mainstream scholarly literature in social gerontology as revealed the structural lag related to the failure to rethink social roles and institutions with an aging society in mind (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). Baby boomers, who will retire in the tens of millions in the next few years, would find little in this literature that reflects or could inform their aging process or retirement (an issue also raised by Weiss & Bass, 2002).

Especially with concerns associated with population aging evident in political rhetoric and gerontological research, it is easy for the arts and creativity to be viewed as frivolous and profligate. However, there are a number of reasons why discussions about the arts and creativity in later life have an important role in shaping the path for research examining the third age. Gerontological scholars need to take the lead in identifying meaningful *and* valuable roles for individuals navigating later life, and both are encapsulated in arts and aging research.

CONCLUSIONS

This research indicates that the amount and variety of arts research that emerged during the last 40 years has been strongly influenced by broader gerontological frameworks. Arts research has been shaped by two major paradigms that often have conflicting goals: one serves as a framework for explorations of the value of active (and productive) engagement and one serves as a framework for explorations of meaningful engagement in later life. We propose that future gerontological research on the arts and aging has the unique potential to expand research on issues relevant to the era of the third age, providing an alternative to more problem-oriented perspectives by bringing attention to the contributions older adults make without losing sight of the important process of understanding and facilitating growth and development in later life.

In particular, we propose that: (1) arts and aging research should demonstrate the economic, social, and cultural contributions that older adults make as a result of engagement in artistic activities; (2) arts and aging research should seek to demonstrate the personal and societal benefits of engagement in creative pursuits; and (3) arts and aging scholarship should

seek to bridge the gap between social science, humanities, and policy perspectives. With these intentions, we believe that gerontological research will avoid segregating theoretical development from explorations of the intrinsic benefits individuals attain from participating in creative pursuits over the life course, not just within the third age in particular. This kind of research can cultivate explorations of the value of the arts in later life as a mechanism for promoting more balance and integration between the material focus and the existential focus of aging research, theoretical, and policy development.

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