A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADULT LEARNERS IN THE THIRD AGE: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS LIFELONG LEARNING

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DEDICATION

This completed dissertation is dedicated to my God, and His Son, Jesus, whom I serve.

To my Nana, Bertha A. Caslin, for her wisdom in perceiving God's will for my life and for praying for me even before I was born.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study was to examine contextualized experiences of African-American Third Agers (AATA). Current literature conceptualizes Third Agers as individuals who are societally positioned to experience meaningful and purposeful periods of self-discovery and adult development later in life. However, among Third Age theorists, adult educators, educational gerontologists (a sub-field of adult education), psychologists, sociologists, and diversity theorists, there are comparatively few research studies of the experiences of AATA.   As a result, we do not know much about AATA; this poses a significant problem. Therefore, this investigation of AATA's experiences simultaneously reduced the related literature gap, added to the academic body of knowledge on older adults, and strengthened the emerging study of the third age. The goals of the study were to understand who these individuals are, what their experiences were as adult learners, and what learning meant to them at this stage in life. The overarching research question that guided this inquiry are the following: what *does* it mean to be an AATA adult learner? Within this question are two related questions: (1) What is the experience of lifelong learning as narrated by AATA, (2) What meaning do AATA give to this phase of life as it relates to lifelong learning? Narrative research was used to capture the stories of a small group of participants, with the intent of collecting rich, in-depth narratives on the topic. The data was collected through semi-structured

interviews. Data analysis was guided by the narrative inquiry approach. This study produced an understanding of how AATA perceive of themselves as learners and investigated their attitudes towards lifelong learning for assisting institutions in the delivery of quality educational experiences for an aging population.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Adult educators of the twenty-first century are faced with the on-going challenge to provide culturally relevant adult education in a rapidly changing diverse society (Guy, 1999). The field is also confronted with the unremitting demand to develop new approaches to the education of older adults (Fisher & Wolf, 1998). These two challenges represent the backdrop for this research. An interest in providing culturally relevant adult education and a commitment to advocacy for aging adult learners is what motivates me to engage in this area of research and contribute to the future of the field. However, the future of Adult Education is unfolding in the midst of the emergence of the Third Age. What is the Third Age? Because of the aging Baby Boomer generation, the Third Age is a growing U.S. sociological movement to redefine the postretirement era as a period of self-expression that comprises many forms of meaningfulness including adult educational pursuits (Weiss & Bass, 2002). In essence, I come to this research project inspired by the convergence of three major desires: to engage in culturally relevant adult education, to develop new approaches to the education of older adults, and to explore the emergence of the Third Age and its implications on the field of Adult Education.

The Third Age

America is graying. Along with the graying of America comes the evolution of the Third Age. Age group nomenclature changes and new lifespan stages are not new to our culture. For example, G. Stanley Hall successfully popularized the word "adolescence" in the second half of the Nineteenth Century (Cravens, 2006). Also, in times past, the term "middle-age" dominated research dialogue (James & Wink, 2006). Now, a case is being made for a new stage called the Third Age. This new division of the lifespan, with its origins in France, is gaining momentum in the U.S. as a popular descriptor of late adulthood (Laslett, 1989). Third Agers, those who are aging and entering the Third Age of the lifespan, are uniquely conceptualized as individuals societally positioned to experience meaningful and purposeful periods of self-discovery and development later in life (Weiss & Bass, 2002). The domain of the Third Age has definite challenges for educators (Findsen, 2005). According to Bass (2000), successful aging, good health, active lifestyles, the completion of traditional career responsibilities, independence, and freedom characterize the experiences of the Third Ager. Laslett (1989) did not identify specific age boundaries to the idea of the Third Age. However, as this phenomenon unfolds in America, researchers from the field of aging and retirement are quantifying the Third Age as that period between ages 65 and 79 (James & Wink, 2006). Moreover, due to the improved health of this age group, increased longevity, and an aging Baby Boomer cohort, leading scholars are beginning to engage in intellectual rigor that will chart the Third Age as a new life stage. This research proposes to contribute qualitative data that will enrich the charting of this new life stage.

For an understanding of why the Third Age is coming to the forefront of the academic research agenda, basic knowledge of the latest 2010 Census data is necessary. Between 2000 and 2010 the population 65 years and over grew at a faster rate than the total population. The older population grew 15.1 percent (from 35.0 million to 40.3 million), while the total population grew only 9.7 percent (from 281.4 million to 308.7 million) (Vidal &Werner, 2011).

Even though our society is aging, the current language associated with growing old is in need of modernization. Coupland (2009) points out that language is a "...resource for making and interpreting the meanings of aging, at both the societal and individual and inter-personal levels" (p. 849). Therefore, there is an ongoing need to construct and strive for new positive norms and expectations for older adulthood (Hurd, 1999). Comparably, Jones (2006) studied the use of language among older adults. Her research focused on the phenomenon of older people disassociating themselves from the category of being old, and confirmed that "old" is seldom used to describe oneself. In support, Mehrotra and Wagner (2009) maintain that U.S culture is moving away from negative stereotypes about aging and is beginning to embrace some positive expectations about aging. Similarly, a recent study by the American Council on Education revealed that the current cohort of aging Americans do not want to be called old. Their research found that older adults preferred language such as Third Ager and Lifelong Learner more appealing than outdated terms such as senior citizen or older adult (Larkin, Mullane, Robinson, American Council on Education, & MetLife Foundation, 2008). Despite the research that has been conducted on the Third Age, there is still a deficit in the literature. Much of the uncharted territory on this new delineation of the lifespan has to do with

meaning and experience as lived by individuals in the Third Age.   As a result, this

research investigated lived experiences of actual Third Agers in order to more precisely

chart this phase of older adulthood.

The Baby Boomer Generation

The importance of this research stems not only from the reality that America is

aging, but also from a heightened awareness that the Baby Boomer generation is graying

and entering the Third Age. Olshansky, Goldman, Zheng and Rowe (2009) point out that

the aging Baby Boomer generation has generated a dramatic demographic shift and is one

of the most important factors driving the aging population forecast statistics and the

increase in scholarly research. Notably, this generation added approximately 75.8 million

people to the Nation's population from 1946 through 1964 and fundamentally altered the

age structure of our nation and the world (Olshansky et al., 2009; U.S. Census Bureau,

2003). Olshansky et al. predict that the "...baby boom generation will both demand and

create an array of novel ways for older persons to remain productive and participate in

the creation of a more equitable society"(p. 843). I support their view because they are

referring to me. I am one of the almost 76 million Baby Boomers who is not interested in

sitting back and aging in the same manner as my grandparents. I come to this research,

not only as an aging Boomer, but as a practitioner in the field of adult education who is

interested in scholarly research, advocacy, and policy attention aimed at the adult learner

entering into and experiencing the Third Age.

Why should researchers, policy makers, and institutions of higher education even

begin to understand and predict the consumer demand for lifelong learning among this

unique group? Cruce and Hillman (2011) assert two reasons. First, "Baby Boomers are

expected to live longer and healthier lives, and they are abandoning traditional notions of retirement for a 'third age' of life in which they continue to work and engage actively in new educational experiences and activities related to personal development and community involvement" (p, 594). Furthermore, 33% of adults ages 55–79 participate in some kind of formal learning such as credential programs, work-related courses, or courses for personal interest, whereas 69% engage in some form of informal learning such as participating in clubs or activity groups, or attending conventions or conferences (O'Donnell, 2006).

The second reason why there should be a strong research interest in aging Baby Boomer educational needs has to do with a decrease in the number of traditional-aged students attending college (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2008). According to Cruce and Hillman (2011), "...institutions will again need to act creatively and strategically to tap into new pools of potential students in order to maintain enrollment levels..." (p. 594). The Baby Boomer generation, which fueled college growth in prior decades, could be tapped again to maintain the headcounts and revenues of post- secondary institutions.

The Need for Age Related Research

National discussions surrounding the social, political and economic impact of this unprecedented demographic shift are already underway. In fact, some theorist are convinced that America has already become a Third Age society (Sorensen, 2006). According to Laslett (1991), before a society can be classified as a Third Age society, the adults should have at least a 50-50 chance of surviving to age 65 and beyond. Sorensen (2006) confirms that American adults have had "more than a 50-50 chance of surviving

until age 65 since at least 1950", which more than qualifies the U.S as a Third Age

society (p. 2). Therefore, the need for age-related theoretical and applied research is

pertinent and relevant to our nation. Institutions such as The American Association of

Retired Persons (AARP), the American Council on Education (ACE), and MetLife

Foundation have all joined forces to sponsor extensive research initiatives geared towards

mapping out the future terrain and impact of an aging society on education in our nation.

Their collaboration is specifically interested in addressing key issues about the

composition of the older adult population and their motivations, needs and obstacles to

lifelong learning and higher education. However, there still exists a particular need for

additional age-related research which reflects the racial composition of our nation, and

addresses groups which have been historically marginalized. "Failure to ensure adequate

representation of all segments of the population in aging research results in limited

generalizability and applicability of findings" (Mehrotra & Wagner, 2009, p. 4).

Consequently, the purpose of this research is to expand the body of knowledge as it

relates to older adults, age-related issues, aging, adult education, and the adult learner

while simultaneously putting forth a scholarly commitment to uncovering the contextual

meaning and experiences of African-Americans in the Third Age.

The Field of Adult Education

With the graying of America, the field of adult education is currently preparing its

institutions, researchers, and practitioners for this social reality that will shape the

provision of learning in contemporary American society. Merriam and Brockett (2007),

explain that there are many clienteles for adult education, and they identify older adults

as one of the many. They further contend that "The social climate of an era often defines

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particular groups of adults as targets for adult education" (Merriam & Brocket, 2007, p. 118). I agree; there are several clienteles and targets for adult education. However, this investigation was purposed to specifically gain an understanding of the experiences of African-American Third Agers as lifelong learners, and increase awareness of how they are also consumers of adult education.

Additionally, there is consensus among social scientists and adult educators that the current social climate is experiencing a shift from a youth-oriented society to an adult oriented society that is being solidified by the increasing numbers of older adults in the population (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Their findings conclude that Americans are becoming older, better educated and more culturally and ethnically diverse than ever before. They point out that the implications of these shifts present special challenges to the field and practice of adult education. Accordingly, they believe that the solutions to the challenges lie in ongoing and persistent questioning of the adult learner to discover, "What one needs or wants to learn, what opportunities are available, [and] the manner in which one learns..." (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 25). In essence, they are calling for practitioners to not make presumptions about adult learners, but continually ask the learners themselves about their needs.   Subsequently, the research engaged in is a response to their summons. This study aligns well with what these scholars suggest is essential to the furtherance of the field and practice of adult education in a modern society by asking the African-American Third Ager directly about learning in adulthood. Through narrative inquiry methods this study explored the storied experiences of the African-American Third Agers. The results will assist the field of adult education along with adult educational institutions in navigating the shift from a youth-oriented society to

an aging adult oriented society by influencing the way new program offerings are designed, packaged, and delivered.

A common theoretical assumption in the field of adult education concerning the adult learner is that there are no typical adult learners (Pusser, Breneman, Gransneder, & Lumina Foundation, 2007). Adult learners are diverse. Subsequently, what motivates adults to learn and why adults do or do not choose to participate in learning activities is an ongoing question among practitioners. Merriam et al. (2007) highlight the fact that since participation in adult education is voluntary, knowing reasons for participation can improve delivery outcomes. Concerning participation, Hansman and Mott (2010) assert that the needs and motivations for learning in adulthood change as society, culture, technology, and the economy change. Our society is changing and graying. Wolf and Brady (2010) assert that the motivation influencing the older adult learner is unique and should be studied separately. According to their research the older adult learner views learning as "both a process of understanding and influencing the world" (Wolf & Brady, p. 369, 2010). How an individual views learning will impact their participation.

This research sheds more light about how African-American Third Agers view learning and why they participate in learning activities. The findings of this study may prove beneficial to policy makers and administrators. Similar to Wolf and Brady (2010), Duay and Bryan (2006) also researched the older adult learner as a cohort uniquely distinct from other adult learners. Findings from their 18 participant qualitative study sent a clear message to adult educators; "for these participants, effective learning involves a process of mutual sharing in which teachers learn from their students, students learn from their teachers, and students learn from one another"(Duay & Bryan, 2006, p.

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437). Their findings also revealed that lifelong learning was important. Duay and Bryan (2006) report, "...the participants expressed a strong desire to continue learning and to continue doing things" (p. 1075). When compared to the landmark study by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) which sought to understand why Americans engaged in adult education, it becomes clear that the reasons for participation in adult education have changed drastically. Forty-seven years ago, most American adults participated in adult education because of job related motives (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Back then, employment as a motive for participation in adult education was not even examined as a factor for the older adult. In contrast, forty-seven years later, due to the current economic climate and the increase in the number of older adults, job related motives and economic factors cannot be left out of the discussion of motives that influence the older adult learner. While older adults are sometimes forced by economic factors to remain in the workforce longer, it is not unreasonable to expect that some older learners are still highly motivated by professional advancement (Findsen, 2005). Divergent findings concerning older adults' participation in adult education present a practical need for the type of research I conducted; a study which added new dimensions to the ongoing discourse of who are older adult learners and what are their experiences, motivations and needs concerning learning. This work has implications for the future development of culturally relevant educational programs that may foster meaningful learning later in life.

Rationale

American adults are living longer and entering the third age - an emerging post retirement life stage in adult development marked by freedom, the pursuit of personal achievement, and learning for self-development. Consequently, the Third Age is

becoming an increasingly important area of interdisciplinary scientific research. However, in the midst of the discourse among Third Age theorists, adult educators, gerontologists, psychologists, sociologists, and diversity theorists, there has been minimal attention rendered to the African-American Third Agers as stakeholders. It appears the African-American Third Ager is just not acknowledged by the canon.

Nonetheless, African-Americans are aging and entering the Third Age. Among those aged 65 and over in 2050, 12 percent are projected to be Black, up from 9 percent in 2010 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). However, this aggregation appears to be left out of the discourse. For example, knowledge of the narrated experiences of African-American Third Agers as older adult learners maybe useful as agencies, institutions and even churches, as major providers of adult education, plan, structure and implement both formal and informal learning opportunities for aging adults. Therefore, it is important to address this topic in a wider academic arena so that the voice and experience of the African-American Third Ager is heard and included in the dialogue on learning across the lifespan. In short, this gap in the related literature, and absence from the discourse posed a significant problem because it undermined our understanding of aging in a pluralistic society.

Statement of the Research Problem and Purpose

Given the increase in the older adult learner population, and the rise of the societal construct known as the Third Age, it is essential to begin grappling with issues regarding what learning means in the context of the lives of Third Agers. As a researcher, I am interested in adult learners who are African-American and in the Third Age of the lifespan. There are notable research studies that are interested in the

demographic characteristics, sources of income, and work histories of African-American

Third Agers, but few studies investigate the African-American Third Ager as adult

learner. Failing to capture, research, and investigate the lived experiences of African-

American Third Agers as adult learners is an identifiable problem within the field and

practice of adult education. Furthermore, how can the field genuinely promote

culturally relevant adult education, explore the Third Age, or develop new approaches to

the education of older adults, without increased scientific research on this subject? It

cannot. Consequently, the problem, in the field of adult education, is that we do not know

much about how African-Americans in the Third Age experience and assign meaning in

this phase of adult development. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to

examine the contextualized experiences of African-American adult learners in the Third

Age in order to significantly contribute to the canon of knowledge concerning adult

learners.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study was what does it mean to be an

African- American Third Ager? In particular, the goals of this study were as follows:

- To understand who these individuals are

- To understand and analyze what are their experiences as adult learners

- To investigate and understand what learning means to them at this stage in
  life.

Specific guiding questions included,

1. What is the experience of lifelong learning as narrated by African-American
   Third Agers?

2. What meaning do African-American Third Agers give to this phase of life as it relates to lifelong learning?

By concentrating on meaning and experience this research gives voice to the African-American Third Ager. For answers to these questions the research involved collecting narratives lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes and stories of African-American Third Agers. It is believed that the findings of this research will provide a voice to African-American Third Agers so they can be included as viable stakeholders in the discourse and development in the field of adult education.

Definition of Terms

The following operational definitions will be used and considered germane in understanding this research study.

Adult Education: "is both a field of practice and a field of study" (Peters & Jarvis, 1991, p. 15); it is a process; "a process involving planning by individuals or agencies by which adults alone, in groups, in institutional setting...improve themselves or their society" (Houle, 1972, p. 32); it includes "activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perceptions define them as adults" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 8).

Adult Educators: "...individuals who become involved in leading or guiding or facilitating or organizing learning activities in either informal or formal settings" (Cranton, 1992, p. 1).

Adult Learners: "...those adults who engage in learning activities that may promote "any sustained change in thinking, values, or behavior (Cranton, 1992, p. 3)

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Baby Boomer: The cohort is usually considered to include those born 1946-1964 (Crystal, 2001). Distinguishable by a dramatic increase in birth rates following World War II, Baby Boomers now comprise what is seen as one of the largest generations in U.S. history (U.S. Census, 2006).

Diversity: Used in reference to "group-level variation within a society" (Mehrotra & Wagner, 2009, p. 25).

Gerontology: "The study of aging from maturity through old age" (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2011, p. 36). It includes "scientific studies of processes associated with aging, scientific studies of mature and aged adults, studies from the perspective of the humanities (e.g., history, philosophy and literature) and application of knowledge for the benefit of mature and aged adults" (Kastenbaum, 2001, p. 441).

Intersectionality: "An analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age from mutually constructing features of social organization" (Collins, 1998, p. 278).

Lifelong Learning: Replaced the term lifelong education in the early 1990s; it is more a "principle or organizing concept than a functioning system" (Maehl, 2000, p. 4); is a broad term that incorporates all forms of learning; "it recognizes the prevalence and value of non-formal and informal learning along with the traditional formal system" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 52).

Third Age: "…an era of personal fulfillment….the age of personal achievement and fulfillment (Laslett, 1991, p. 4). is not wholly defined by chronological age (Laslett, 1991); it is best understood as a period in adulthood "characterized by the pursuit of 'voluntary' and rewarding activities following retirement from a career job and the

termination of responsibilities to one's children" (Siegel, 1990, p. 363); is interpreted as a season in the lifespan where individuals are in search of purpose and meaning which gives way to an avenue for extended self-realization, with 20-30 more years of active living ahead of you (Freedman, 1999; Sadler, 2006; Williamson, 2002). The third age is interpreted in relationship to the fourth age which is characterized by "dependence, decrepitude and death" (Laslett, 1991, p. 4).

*Standpoint Theory***: "**…a social theory arguing that location in hierachical power relations produces shared experiences for individuals in those groups, and that these common experiences can foster similar angles of vision leading to a group knowledge or standpoint deemed essential for informed political action" (Collins, 1998, p. 281).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

History of the Third Age

A review of the historical literature found the earliest discussions of the Third

Age emerged during the 1970s in France (Laslett, 1991). Later, the British adopted the

use of the term in 1981. The literature documents that Peter Laslett, a British historian,

political philosopher, and pioneer in the study of social structure, contributed most to the

theoretical conceptualization of the Third Age. In 1989, Laslett wrote, *A Fresh Map of*

Life: The Emergence of the Third Age. This foundational work began as a "descriptive

historical commentary" (p. xii) on aging. Laslett reported that the intent of the book was

to focus on six critical issues about aging facing his time and his country. However, it is

what he added to this commentary on aging that earned him the title major contributor to

the theory of the Third Age. Laslett wrote, "To the commentary I add a tentative sketch

of the general theory of the Third Age as a diagnosis of the obsolescence of our

educational system" (Laslett, 1989, p. viii). His work facilitated and prompted critical

analysis of education from the point of view of the Third Ager. He argued "...research is

critical to the lifelong educational interchange which is necessitated by the arrival of the

Third Age" (Laslett, 1991, p. 171). From Laslett's provocative claims, theoretical links

and societal implications were established between the emergence of the Third Age and the need for sweeping changes to the current educational system to include learning later in life. Laslett advocated strongly in his nation for intellectual development over the whole life course. His advocacy for the older adult learner and their educational needs led to the founding of the first educational institution exclusively for learners in the Third Age.

Third Age Theory

This section of the literature review is aimed at addressing the general theory of the Third Age as outlined by Laslett (1991). It begins with the generalized assertion: "...it is wrong to suppose that the satisfactions which men and women desire for themselves can all be effectively conceived" (Laslett, 1991, p. 144), and completed within the years prior to retirement. The personal achievements which people strive for are spread out over the adult life cycle. With this in mind, the theory calls for a fresh map of life. According to Laslett's theory (1989), this fresh map of the lifespan has four ages. The "First Age" is characterized by dependency, socialization and education. The "Second Age" is marked by maturity, independence, family and social responsibility. The "Third Age", also known as "the crown of life" is interpreted as a period in the lifespan characterized by independence, leisure, education, and personal achievement. The final age, the "Fourth Age" is initiated by the onset of final physical and health decline, dependence, and notable decrepitude.

It is important to note that Third Age Theory is not wholly defined by chronological age. It is a less precisely delineated segment of the lifespan. Laslett (1989) is careful to note that the Third Age does not begin or end just because one has a

birthday. To emphasize this point he contends, "Because the Third Age has a period of completion and arrival it has no necessary temporal structure...Ideally, he or she should be in a position to savor the experience of the Third Age for any possible duration of years" (Laslett, 1991, p. 153). Since an aging person cannot choose the moment of the onset of the final decline into decrepitude, the end of the Third Age is very individualized. For this reason, the Third Age is best understood as a period in adulthood "characterized by the pursuit of 'voluntary' and rewarding activities following retirement from a career job and the termination of responsibilities to one's children" (Siegel, 1990, p. 363).

Lifestyle is a key word in Third Age literature. The third age lifestyle has been defined "by its independence from work and the leisure opportunities that people of a certain age can enjoy" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p. 39). A continuation of the literature review unveiled details concerning variances within the Third Age. Theorists concluded that the Third Age varies from person to person, and is not bound to, or limited by biological age. In a similar fashion, Sadler (2006) adds to the understanding of the Third Age by referring to it as "a time to change course" (p.12). The changing of the course is what allows a life to flow in many directions. This change of course is the essence that nurtures the Third Age, and positions it as the age of fulfillment (Sadler, 2006). Additional theorists agree and report that the Third Age is characterized by a balance of work, play, freedom, engagement, doing and becoming. Succinctly, the Third Age is interpreted as a season in the lifespan where individuals are in search of purpose and meaning which gives way to an avenue for extended self-realization, with 20-30 more years of active living ahead of you (Sadler, 2006; Williamson, 2002).

The claims of Third Age theory literature also includes changes in relationships. According to Laslett (1989), "the adoption of Third Age attitudes must change the quality of relationships between oneself and others" (p.157). "Choice of association goes with choice of pursuits, and deciding what these pursuits will be is a leading principle of the life course culminating in the Third Age" (Laslett, 1989, p. 157).

One could determine from the literature review that Third Age theory rejects the conceptualization of retirement as a period of rest. "Previously, retirement was considered to be a time of withdrawal, to make room for a younger and better-prepared generation..." (Bass, 2000, p. 7). Concerning retirement and the Third Age, Laslett (1989) emphatically asserts that "Rest is not a value" (p. 157). Weiss and Bass (2002) did a study and interviewed almost a hundred people entering or in the Third Age. Respondents rejected the prospect of "a retirement in which the high point of the day would be deciding where to have dinner" (Weiss & Bass, 2002, p. 6-7). In general, Third Age participants rejected a life of drift and embraced a life of engagement and activism. "This new generation of retired people finds itself in position of greater potential agency" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, p. 369). "Unpaid civic engagement does not decline in the Third Age years and public or community service as well as educational opportunities are attracting third-agers" (Carr & Komp, 2011, p. 25). Theorists of the Third Age convey a common message that "...later life is a time of opportunity and 'old age' a state to be resisted" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, p. 317).

The literature review further indicated that the Third Age is "...a transition of the institutions, norms, and opportunities afforded to older people..." (Bass, 2000, p. 8). According to Laslett (1991), "...the elderly of any society can be said to be trustees for

the future" (p. 196). "The resources they possess that allow them to remain active and retired also give them the means to not only live independently, but also give back to society" (Carr, 2009, p. 155). "Images of the third ager have been mostly White, affluent, healthy, young-old who enjoy their leisure of travel and playing golf" (Taylor-Harris & Zhan, 2011, p. 352). In conclusion, "Those who have recently retired from careers...have made the greatest contribution to the rise in expectation of life, and thus have helped to bring the Third Age into being" (Laslett, 1991, p. 196).

The Context of the Third Age in America

A discussion of selected literature relating to the Third Age in America is included to provide the cultural context and meaning of the Third Age as interpreted in our nation. In America, the spirit of possibility is captured in the term Third Age, which has come to stand for the individual period and outlook of a longer, healthier and more active later life (Manheimer, 2005). The history of the term in America can be traced to Neugarten's (1974) introduction of the term "young-old" over thirty years ago (Carr, 2009b). Neugarten, a Professor of Human Development at University of Chicago, was instrumental in changing perceptions of the American life cycle. In 1974 she wrote, *Age Groups in American society and the rise of the young-old*. The historic precedent-setting strength of the paper was the categorization of the young-old as uniquely different from the old-old. The designation of the young-old, those age 55 to 75, as a group of individuals who "have enormous potential as agents of social change in creating an age-irrelevant society..." (Neugarten, 1974, p. 187) began the scholastic dialogue. The phrase young-old, introduced challenges to traditional lifespan development models which paved the way for the acceptance of the Third Age.

Strong illustrations were given in the review of the literature for specific factors, societal conditions, and federal policies that influenced the emergence of the Third Age in America. Inclusion of these factors, conditions, and polices aids in understanding the unique cultural context and meaning of being a Third Ager in this country. Context and meaning continue to be integral to this research study proposal. There is prolific literature regarding the Third Age in other nations (i.e., England, France, China, Malaysia), however this portion of the review aims to briefly highlight what the literature reports concerning the Third Age in America. For example, the introduction of Federal policies such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and the Older American's Act had a unique effect on the development of the Third Age in this Nation. Such programs "successfully increased the available resources older adults had to maintain a good quality of life and remain independent well into old age" (Carr, 2009a, p. 155). Also, the Third Age in America is shaped by how the age structure of the overall population and the composition of the older population in terms of age, sex, and race are expected to change over the next four decades (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). In 2050, the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to be 88.5 million, more than double its projected population of 40.2 million in 2010. The Baby Boomers are largely responsible for this dramatic shift in the population (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

The related literature on the Third Age in America, not only highlighted who is entering the Third Age, and how many people are entering the Third Age, but what is the Third Age going to cost America? The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society initiated an extensive research investigation aimed at challenging recent government population and life expectancy forecasts. The major assertion of the study

suggests, "Official government forecasts may, however, have inadvertently underestimated life expectancy, which would have major policy implications, since small differences in forecasts of life expectancy produce very large differences in the number of people surviving to an older age" (Olshansky et al., 2009, p. 842). Their study supports the principle conclusion that the cost of an aging society could have been under estimated by $3.2 trillion relative to current government forecasts. In summary, a bottom line view of the literature of the Third Ager in America insinuates there are exacerbating economic challenges posed by a growing elderly population (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Carr, 2009a; Neugarten, 1974). "But if the extension of life achieved in the coming decades can be converted into healthy productive years, then these challenges could be counterbalanced by an equal measure of opportunity and the emergence of a productive and equitable aging society" (Olshansky et al., 2009, p. 858).

The emergence of the Third Age is coming into focus in America and taking a more prominent place in scientific and academic research because the Third Age and the Third Ager is beginning to cost the Nation. As a part of a study of the meaning and experience of the Third Age, Sorensen (2006) noted that for now, "Poverty rates are relatively low and a majority of the people in the Third Age lives in and owns outright their home" (p. 16). From her findings she concluded, "...economic conditions for men and women in the Third Age are quite good...." (p. 16). However, in her findings she also noted that among Third Agers, "African-American women stand out as a particularly vulnerable group" (p. 16). Brown, Jackson and Faison (2006) reported similar findings concerning African-American women. Their research examined life-course work experiences of Black Americans and how these experiences influenced their wellbeing

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later in life. They report, "Our work suggests that the elderly, and older Black women in particular, need research and policy attention to ascertain how best to ease their transition in and out of the workforce during the Second and Third Ages of life" (Brown, Jackson & Faison, 2006, p. 58).

Research findings from Brown, Jackson and Fiaison (2006) have already viewed the AATA from a deficit prospective. The paucity of literature that does mention the AATA focused on weaknesses rather than the strengths they possess. For this reason, my research offers a positive framework for viewing the AATA as an asset that can contribute positively to our nation rather than an extra burden.

Adult Participation in Adult Education

The review of the adult education literature gave rise to the question of who participates in adult education and why adults are participating. Educational psychologist, J.D. Hoy, is noted as one of the earliest scholars to investigate adult participation in adult education (Long, 1991). His study surveyed 372 "evening" students in seven different institutions and concluded, [participation] "...was not undertaken to lead to change in the form of employment but to serve as a relaxation from it or to improve themselves in their present jobs" (Hoy, 1933, p. 13).

In 1959, Brunner, Wilder, Kirchner and Newbury were commissioned by the Adult Education Association, with grant assistance from the Fund for Adult Education, to conduct an evaluative study of adult education research. The aims and outcomes of the study resulted in an "effective description of adult learning, motivation to learn, attitudes, adult interests and, participants, and participation..." (Liveright, 1968, p. 35). "Since 1960's, the field of adult education has demonstrated a strong interest in determining the

motives (a psychological term) for adult participation (a sociological term) in adult

education programs (an adult education term)" (Long, 1991, p. 78).

Accordingly, Houle (1961) stated that at the heart of the field of adult education is

the question "what kinds of men and women retain alert and inquiring minds throughout

the years of their maturity?" (p. x). Houle's (1961) impact on the study of participation of

adults in learning is significant and stimulated the field of practice and study unlike any

other in adult education (Long, 1983). Houle's (1961), *Inquiring Minds: A Study of the*

Adult Who Continues to Learn, represents the initiation of analytical research into

participation. It is a report based on the results of interviews with twenty-two adult

learners.   He found "...the most universal important factor is schooling. The higher the

formal education of the adult, the more likely it is that he will take part in continuing

education" (Houle, 1961, p. 7). Similar to Hoy (1933), Houle (1961) concludes almost

30 years later that "...to get ahead on the job has not been the only reason for [one's]

interest in continuing education" (p.17). Instead, participants had the same basic ways of

thinking about adult education: "They all had goals which they wished to achieve, they

all found the process of learning enjoyable or significant, and they all felt that learning

was worthwhile for its own sake" (Houle, 1961, p. 15). However, Houle (1961) also

discovered that participants varied in terms of the major conceptions and values they

placed on lifelong learning.

Houle (1961) documented these variances among reasons for participation by the

subgroups that emerged. His findings revealed three subgroups: the goal-oriented, the

activity-oriented, and the learning-oriented. According to Houle (1961), the goal-

oriented participates in adult learning because of a need or purpose. Concerning this type

of learner, he writes, "...the purpose is always what initiates the educational effort, and the means are selected on the basis of whether or not they will achieve that purpose" (p. 18). "People who are goal-oriented use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives" (Long, 1983, p. 105). Whereas the activity-oriented learner participates in learning primarily for reasons unrelated to purpose or content. "Those in this subgroup have many different kinds of reasons..." (p. 19). Some of the reasons for participation include loneliness, social acceptance, a place to meet like-minded people, or an escape from personal problems (Houle, 1961). He referred to this group of learners as "course-takers and group-joiners...but it was social contact that they sought and their selection of any activity was essentially based on the amount and kind of human relationship it would yield" (p. 23-24). "They find meaning in the circumstances of learning" (Long, 1983, p. 105). Concerning the learning-oriented, he explained "this group differs from the other two much more markedly than either of them does from the other" (Houle, 1961, p. 24). By this Houle (1961) contends that for the learning-oriented education might be called a constant rather than a continuing activity. "The fundamental purpose which lies in the back of all this activity is, quite simply, the desire to know...these people have the itch to learn" (Houle, 1961, p. 25). "Education for the learning oriented is a way of life" (Long, 1983, p. 105).

The continued review of adult participation literature documents the landmark Johnstone and Rivera (1965) study as the first national investigation to examine the learning habits and practices of adults in America. This study was conducted during 1962 and 1963 and represents "a comprehensive and factual picture of the extent and nature of participation in adult education in the U.S..." (Liveright, 1968, p. 23). "This

monograph reviews the extent and nature of adult participation in continuing education, identifies the people who engage...and reconstructs the personal goals which influenced people to become involved in educational endeavors..." (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965, p. vi). The survey "found that 22 percent of American adults participated in either formal or informal learning activities in the course of one year, and that the majority of these activities were practical and skill-oriented rather than academic" (Kim, Collins Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman 2004, p. 8). Johnstone and Rivera (1965) described the adult learner as follows: "The adult education participant is just as often a woman as a man, is typically under forty, has completed high school or more, enjoys an above- average income, works full-time and most often in a white-collar occupation, is married and has children…" (p. 8).

Subsequent to Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Cross (1981) found that these descriptors continued to apply to participants several years later. "The general conclusions arrived at by Johnstone and Rivera after their comprehensive national study in 1965 is as true today as it was fifteen years ago" (Cross, 1981, p. 53). Kim, Collins Hagedorn, Williamson and Chapman (2004) agree with Collins (1981) in that the characteristics of adult education participants in the year 2001 are largely consistent with those observed by Johnston and Rivera (1965) more than thirty years ago; although some differences were observed. Participation between genders is different. The Johnstone and Rivera (1965) study "did not find a sex difference in participation in the 1960s" (Kim, et al., 2004, p. 12); however, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) purport that since 1978, women's participation rates in adult education have exceeded the men.

Of all the literature reviewed, Aslanian, Brickell, Ullman, and Future Directions for a Learning Society (1980) went the furthest in linking adult education participation to the adult life cycle and adult development. These researchers sought a better explanation for adult participation in adult education "By taking into consideration the scholarly literature describing adult life as divided into stages, as well as the available evidence on the rapid rate of social change..." (Aslanian et al., 1980, p. 1). They were most intrigued by the literature on adult development and life stage theory. Consequently, their investigation of 2000 American adults over age 25 was influenced by prominent adult development researchers such as Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga (1975), Levinson (1978), Gould (1978), and Vaillant (1977).

Aslanian et al. (1980), built upon central ideas about adult development and the life cycle to theorize concerning why adults participate in adult education. A broad synthesis of the adult life cycle literature that influences adult participation in adult education revealed the following. First, "...human beings continue to change throughout their lifetimes according to an age-linked timetable" (Levinson, 1978). Second, "...certain key events----buying a first house....the first loss of a parent, first physical injury or first clear sign of aging---force us to see ourselves..." (Gould, 1978, p. 13). Third, "there are patterns and rhythms to the life cycle" (Valillant, 1977, p. 201). Fourth, "Because [life transitions] entail alteration in role relationships, some adaptation is inescapable" (Knox, 1977, p. 513). Based on these five threads which ran through the adult development literature, Aslanian et al. (1980) conducted a study to analyze "the significance of moving from one stage in life to another as a cause of learning, along with the pivotal role played by specific events that punctuate the life course" (p. 41). The

findings were impressive. "83% of the learners surveyed described some past, present or future change in their lives as reasons to learn...In short, they talked about how their lives had changed, were changing, or would change and how they had to learn to cope with those changes"(p. 49). In sum, their research concluded that life changes and transitions are reasons for adult participation in adult education.

Entering the Third Age is a life change. According to adult learning and development theory life changes are legitimate motivations for participation in adult education. Therefore, one of the goals of this research was to understand what learning means to African-Americans that are in this season of life. Subsequently through understanding what learning means at this stage in the life cycle, their reasons for participation in adult education were an anticipated outcome for this research.

Older Adults and Their Participation in Adult Education

Reviews of the literature over the past several decades have illustrated with a high degree of consistency that adult education participation rates among people age 55 and older have increased (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, 2004, 2006; Manheimer, 2005; Wolf & Brady, 2010). *Reinvesting in the Third Age: Older Adults and Higher Education*, a two-year research project, reported similar growth in participation among older adults (Larkin, Mullane, Robinson, American Council on Education and MetLife Foundation, 2007). They specifically identify "age as the greatest factor influencing older adults' participation in education" (p. 7).

Much of the early literature pertaining to the theoretical basis for participation in adult education by older adults overlapped with literature which addressed the educational needs of older adults. For example, Hiemstra's (1980) highly referenced

article titled, *The Older Adult as Learning Participant,* explains "...some researchers have attempted to provide or develop a framework for better understanding and classifying older adults' learning needs as a step in building the needed theoretical bases [for older adult participation]"(p.348). Many of the theoretical discussions used words such as reasons, motives, goals, and needs interchangeably when analyzing and explaining older adult participation in adult education (Beatty & Wolf, 1996; Hiemstra, 1980; Long, 1983; McClusky, 1970).

Psychologist and educational gerontologist Howard McClusky emerged as a prominent contributor to the theoretical base concerning older adult learners. His classic work, McClusky (1970) and subsequent other works, changed society's orientation towards older people and their readiness, needs, and motivations for participating in meaningful educational activities. According to McClusky (1970, 1974) older persons are capable of participating in, and formulating constructive responses to educational stimulation, and that participation in education will lead to something better in their lives (McClusky, 1970 cited in Hiemstra, 1998).

There was consistent and substantial agreement among the literature reviewed concerning the factors that influence older adult participation. Factors that motivate older adults "to participate are more likely to be related to personal enrichment or growth" (Long, 1983, p. 113). Longer life expectancy and longer life after retirement have encouraged older adults to participate in various emerging and expanding activities, especially those that involve new experiences, contributions to society, and learning (Peterson & Masunaga, 1998). Similarly, Cruce and Hillman (2011) claim older adults "are most interested in learning for personal development or to acquire advanced skills,

and they have a strong preference for educational environments in which they engage in experiential learning and face-to-face interaction with teachers and other learners" (p. 594). Interestingly, Cruce and Hillman's (2011) research specifically addressed aging Baby Boomer motivations for participation and found "Baby Boomers approaching retirement age presumably have different motivations for and expect different returns from taking coursework at postsecondary institutions than traditional-age students, yet limited evidence suggests that some of the known differences in the propensity to attend postsecondary institutions found among traditional-age students are common among older adults" (p. 595-596). In essence, some motivations of Baby Boomers are not unique to aging. To be independent, safe, useful, productive, and to satisfy curiosity are also seen in the literature as priorities which motivate older adults to participate (John, 1988).

Several demographic factors were identified in the literature as influences on the participation of older adults in adult education. Educational attainment, age, socio-economic status, gender, and race were among the factors that account for differences in the meaning and motivation of older adults in learning (Houle, 1961; Peterson, 1981; Scala, 1996; Kim & Merriam, 2004). Educational attainment significantly affects older adult's likelihood to pursue additional education. Drawing from studies of Kleiner and the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), The American Council on Education commented "adults with higher education levels are more likely than those with lower education levels to participate in formal work related education" (p. 7). Kim and Merriam (2004) examined motivations for learning among older adults actively engaged in formal lifelong learning. Their findings supported a robust relationship between

former educational attainment and educational participation among the elderly.

Since aging is a developmental process with psychological and sociological implications, much of the literature on the older adult learner drew from theories and research rooted in psychology, sociology, adult development, and educational gerontology (a sub-field of adult education). There was exhaustive research that contributed to the literature on older adult participation from a psychological developmentalist perspective. This perspective explores the individual's internal process of development (Merriam et al., 2007). The psychological development approach "focuses on how we develop as individuals and examines primarily internal development processes" (Clark & Caffarella, 1999, p. 5). For example, Wolf and Brady (2010) based their research on psychosocial developmentalist, Erik Erikson (1982). They assert concerning older adults who participate in adult education, "For those who seek it the learning process enables the older adult to develop integrality, achieve well-being, and make genuine contributions to culture... participation in adult education experiences is considered a developmental opportunity " (Wolf & Brady, 2010, p. 369). Further investigation of the reasons for participation from the point of view of adult development led to the conclusion by Wolf and Brady (2010) that participation in adult education by older adults "can be the hallmark of the search for hope, meaning, and connection[s]..." (p. 371). Learning as meaning making for the older adult is supported by Fisher and Wolf (2000).

Closely linked to the developmentalist rationale for older adult participation in adult education is the theory of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981, 1991, 1994). According to Mezeirow's theory the transformation of an individual's perspective

through learning "is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222-223). Learning is suggested as a mechanism for finding or making meaning in life. Consequently, participation in learning for older adults is seen as an opportunity or resource for acquiring new meaning, making meaning, or confirming currently held views about the meaning of life.

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation permeated the literature, especially with references to the "disorienting dilemma" and its adaptation to the contexts of older adults. For Mezirow, the disorienting dilemma occurs because long-held assumptions are in conflict with the reality now facing them.   For example, the crisis experienced by the death of a spouse is a disorienting dilemma which sets the transformation in motion (Merriam et al., 2007).   After the death of a spouse, old assumptions are no longer functional. Courtneay and Truluck (1997) argue that new assumptions are necessary to function in the new phase of life as a widow or widower. Therefore, building upon Mezirow's theories of the transformational potential of adult education, Courtneay and Truluck (1997) point to the following as a strong motivation for participation in adult education by older adults; "Education can be a facilitating factor for the older adult facing a situation that poses a threat to previously held assumptions about life by helping older adults identify the underlying tenets of her or his world view, examine their relevance to reality and explore alternative views" (p. 187).

Learning can inform or challenge existing conceptions of the meaning of life (Courtenay & Truluck, 1997). Although there is little consensus on the definition of meaning, and the concept is notoriously vague, meaning can be understood as life's

purpose or goal (Battista & Almond, 1973). Psychiatrist and author, Viktor Frankl, contends, "being human is being always directed and pointing...to a meaning to fulfill..." (1978, p. 35).

Although adult educators recognize that older adult learners are especially interested in answers to questions about the meaning of life and that adult education can facilitate this quest, they have given only sparse attention to the how African-Americans in the Third Age harness education as a tool for meaning making. Given the lack of documented studies specifically focused on the African-American Third Ager and their contextual motivations for participating in adult education, this research helped to understand who these individuals are and how they assign meaning to learning in this phase of life.

The African-American Third Ager: Constructing a Profile

A review of the literature with a narrowed and specific focus on African-American Third Agers indicated a significant void in the knowledge base. There were minimal studies addressing the participant pool proposed in this study. For example, when searching for research studies particularly examining African-American Third Agers, the largest academic research databases yielded only one article: *"The Third-Age African-American Seniors: Benefits of Participation in Senior Multipurpose Facilities* (Taylor-Harris & Zhan, 2011). Although the focus of their investigation, multipurpose facilities, is unrelated to this investigation, their findings concerning Third Age literature lends support to the need for this qualitative research. Taylor-Harris and Zhan (2011) argue, "Images of the third ager have been mostly White, affluent, healthy, young-old who enjoy their leisure of travel and playing golf. Rarely would one connect a third-age

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identity to African American seniors" (p. 352). In general, third agers are often depicted

as those who are best positioned in society to contribute because they have resources to

engage actively in society (Carr, 2009a). Possibly, for this reason, the current knowledge

base has provided very little composite or aggregated qualitative research on who are the

African-American Third Agers. Given the significance of the gap in the literature, I

engaged in a search for data that would assist me in compiling my own preliminary

profile of what the African-American Third Ager looks like in America.   To achieve this

purpose, I examined and distilled specific data elements and demographic information

pertinent to African-American older adults from the following sources: the United States

Census Bureau, U.S. Administration on Aging, the AARP Research Center, and the

AARP Public Policy Institute.

A preliminary review of the data elements highlighted the lack of consensus on

specifically who is Black in American.   Therefore, parameters were selected to

determine which older adults would be used in this research investigation and what

corresponding literature would be included in the review. As a result, only literature

which identified older individuals as Black or African-American were included. This

research will use the definition of "Black or African-American" as used in 2010 by the

U.S. Census Bureau. It is based on the U.S Office of Management and Budget's

Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, &

Drewery, 2011). According to the Office of Management and Budget, "Black or African

American refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

The Black racial category includes people who marked the "Black, African Am., or

Negro" checkbox" (Rastogi et al., 2011).

Given this criterion, the 2010 Census reported 3.4 million individuals claimed to be African-Americans or Black alone and over age 65. Of this number, 1.3 million were male and 2.1 million were female. Slightly more than one third are married (37.8%), and another third (33%) are widowed. The final third are divorced (15%), separated (3.6%) or never married (7.8%). Currently, there are 137,446 African-Americans age 65 and older living in Ohio (Vidal & Werner, 2011).

The U.S. Administration on Aging proved to be a rich source of data on older Americans. Several factors were examined in their research. Factors such as educational level, income, poverty level, and life expectancy were examined, and the reports were stratified by race and ethnicity. Their most current findings specific to older African-Americans, revealed that 68.4% of older African-Americans had completed high school. This represented a significant increase compared to the year 1970 when only 9% of older Blacks finished high school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The search was unsuccessful in retrieving current reports on educational levels for older Blacks beyond high school. However, based on 2008 data, the Administration on Aging reported that over "12% of Black older persons had a bachelor's degree or higher" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, p. 1).

Concerning 2010 income levels, households headed by African-American over age 65 reported a median income of only $37,037. In contrast, White households headed by individuals aged 65 and older reported a median income of $45,763. Moreover, 18% of older African-Americans are below the poverty level. African-American women who live alone experienced the second highest poverty rates. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

According to the Social Security Administration, "African American men who are age 65 in 2011 can expect to live to age 79, compared to age 82 for all men. African American women who are age 65 in 2011 can expect to live to age 83, compared to age 85 for all women" (Social Security Administration, 2013, p. 1).

AARP Public Policy Institute's and Research Center's description of the older African-American was based on figures from 2005. In summary, their findings depicted older African-Americans as disproportionally poor, and receiving relatively little income from sources other than Social Security. Furthermore, according to this report, "Almost 80 percent of African- Americans age 65 and older who receive Social Security depend on it for 50 percent or more of their income, and 44.3 percent of African Americans age 65 and older receive all of their income from Social Security payments" (Bin Wu, 2007). In regard to labor force participation rates, AARP reported that 12% of African Americans age 65+ returned to the workforce from retirement (AARP, 2010).

In summary, there are 3.4 million older African-American in our Nation. The majority of them are female. Most have completed high school and a small percentage have bachelor's degrees or higher. Their incomes are moderate and highly dependent on Social Security. While many continue to work to avert poverty, poverty remains a looming realty.

The above profile was constructed from the literature and confirmed considerable demographic differences between older African-Americans and other older Americans of varying ethnicities. Findings such as these strongly suggests that since there are demographic differences, there may also exists significant experiential differences and differences in meaning making between African-American Third Agers and the Third

Agers depicted in current literature. However, *the problem*, as seen by the under

representation in the canon of knowledge, is that we do not know much about the

experiences of African-American Third Agers. For this reason, this qualitative research

investigation examined the contextualized experiences of African-American Third Agers

as it related to learning in this phase of life.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

This chapter addresses the research design, methodological approaches, and the theoretical framework that was used in the investigation of the experiences of African-American Third Agers as adult learners. This investigation was conducted in a systematic manner using qualitative research design theory, assumptions, methods, and approaches. This particular research design was also deemed suitable because of its emphasis on process, meaning, experience, and the social constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). According to Creswell (2007), "Qualitative inquiry represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research" (p. 11). Many disciplines use qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). More recently, the newest *Handbook of Qualitative Research* refers to the increased use of qualitative research by other disciplines as a "blurring of disciplinary boundaries" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. xi). The humanities, along with the social, policy, and physical sciences are uniting in their support, focus, and use of qualitative research approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative research is the study of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In particular, *interpretive qualitative* research is undertaken when a researcher is interested in learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world. Interpretive qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences from the perspective of the participant, and what meaning they assign to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). I began this research with a desire to add another voice and perspective to the theoretical discussion of the Third Age; the voice of the African-American Third Ager. Rather than simply describing African-American Third Agers, this research sought to understand their experience, to interpret how they think about learning in this specific phase of life, and their perceptions of themselves as adult learners.

Consequently, this investigation required a research methodology that was sensitive to subtle contextual social differences produced by race, gender, ethnicity, and class, and the tensions that may arise from its analysis. Qualitative research is better suited for dealing with tensions and subtle social differences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Also, how people interpret and make meaning of their daily lives is what qualitative research seeks (Merriam, 2009). A synthesis of the literature suggests that a possible outcome of qualitative research is a better understanding of how individuals interpret, construct, and assign meaning to their experiences. Thus, included in the anticipated outcomes of this study, was a deeper understanding of how African-American Third Agers make sense of, envision, and experience learning at this stage of their development. A qualitative approach worked well to achieve these outcomes. Within the qualitative research approach, the particular methodology used for this study was narrative inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research places a value on using individual lives as the primary source of data. In this type of research, it is important to understand how an individual has lived, made meaning, and constructed realities to serve particular purposes brought on by ones social position (Bloom, 2002). For Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). Clandinin and Murphy (2009) note that central to the narrative research project is "the study of storied experience, ours and our participants' [*sic*], composed within the particularities of the personal, social, temporal and place" (p. 600). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) offer a useful description of narrative inquiry: "Story in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful...narrative inquiry is a way of thinking about experience" (p. 375). Also, narrative analysis is particularly useful for providing an insider's view of a culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Since the problem is that we do not know much about how African-Americans Third Agers have lived, made meaning and constructed their reality concerning learning, it is crucial to capture their experiences, meaning, and stories. Additional strong support for using narrative analysis comes from Marshall and Rossman (2006). They state that historically narrative inquiry has been favored by the humanities because of its "power to elicit voice" (p. 118). As the intent of this research investigation was to draw upon the voice and experiences of a group sparsely represented in the current literature on the third age, the use of narrative inquiry methodology served the research purpose well.

Research Problem, Purpose, Goals and Questions

The problem undertaken in this qualitative research was that we do not know much about the experience of older African-American adult learners in the Third Age. Given the increase in the older adult learner population, and the rise of the concept of the Third Age, it was essential to begin grappling with issues regarding what learning means in the context of older people's lives. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the contextualized experience of African-American adult learners in the Third Age. The goals of the study were to understand who these individuals are, what their experiences are as adult learners, and what learning means to them at this stage in life. The overarching research question that guided this inquiry was as follows: what does it mean to be an AATA adult learner? Within this question were two related questions:

- What is the experience of lifelong learning as narrated by AATA,
- What meaning do AATA give to this phase of life as it relates to lifelong learning?

By focusing on the experience and the meaning participants give to this experience, the research was designed to create space for the voice of the African-American Third Ager (AATA). It was my hope that this research would produce a richly descriptive product, advancing our understanding of this important phase of adult learning and development.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical and philosophical assumptions cannot be separated from research methodology, design or procedures (Creswell, 2007). Consequently, this next section begins laying out the theoretical framework which underpins this qualitative research inquiry. A clearly articulated theoretical framework guides the researcher and the reader.

Merriam (2009) suggests that the articulation of the theoretical framework begin with a statement of the disciplinary orientation of the researcher. The disciplinary orientation of this researcher is adult education. I am an adult educator. The field of adult education draws from several theoretical perspectives. Nonetheless, Merriam et al. (2007) identify the postmodern perspective as a major contributor to the field of adult education. Consequently, the primary body of concepts, models, themes, definitions, and theories that inform this study are situated within the interpretive community of postmodernism.

There are two reasons why the research design employs postmodernism as the theoretical framework for studying the self-perceptions and attitudes of African-American adult learners in the third age. First, I accede to one of the core principles of postmodernism, which states that there are multiple interpretations and sources of knowledge. There is no mono-singular interpretation of knowledge, but multiple interpretations that are continuously and simultaneously affected by the interrelating tensions of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, "other" group affiliation, and social, economic, political, and cultural factors (Merriam et al., 2007). It is the interrelatedness of these factors that shapes how individuals make meaning out of their experiences. For this reason, this study of African-American Third Agers finds itself situated squarely in the postmodernist theoretical perspective.

Having clearly established my first reason for choosing the postmodern perspective, the second reason is narrower in scope than the first. Reason number two has to do with the notion of self. As stated earlier, self-perception is key to this study. The "Self'" as articulated through a postmodern lens is constantly changing. Merriam et al. (2007), insist, "...the self is multiple, ever changing and some say fragmented" (p.

260). What this means is that the concept of self is not a unitary concept. The

implication is that the self undergoes a series of cycles of construction and reconstruction

that are fortified by reflexive questioning and reflection. According to Clark and Dirkx

(2000), a non-unitary notion of self will redirect the aim of Adult Education as one that

"seeks to foster acquisition of multiple and even disparate potentials for being" (p.112).

Consequently, within the lives of adult learners, viewing self through a postmodern

perspective leads to a greater understanding, honoring, and fostering diversity within

their lives" (p. 112). These postmodern views of self-overlay the goal of this qualitative

research investigation and the use of narrative inquiry in an effort to understand the

experience of the lifelong learning among African-American Third Agers and to study

the meaning this group gives to this phase of their life as it relates to lifelong learning.

Heuristic tools: Standpoint theory and intersectionality. While the

methodology for the research was narrative inquiry, the theoretical framework applied to

this research offers additional interpretive support. Given this, the research relied on

Collins' (1998) standpoint theory and intersectionality as heuristic tools for gaining

understanding and meaning into how African-American Third Agers perceive themselves

as adult learners. A bare-boned description of standpoint is as follows: a situated

standpoint reflects shared knowledge about one's social world, which is the product of

multiple meaningful experiences with individuals who share one's particular social status

or social location (Harnois, 2010). One of the basic premises of standpoint theory is that

"knowledge is socially situated and is influenced by 'non-cognitive' factors [such] as

one's race, gender... and socio-economic status" (Valdez, 2001, p. 70). For Collins

(1998), standpoint theory is based on "the notion of a group with shared experiences and

interest" (p. 203). This is precisely why her work served as a start to better understanding the African-American Third Ager. Collins argues that this notion of group, of which a person cannot just opt out of, carries with it a set of meanings and classifications. Moreover, the meanings and classifications are situated, and constructed in history, society, and unjust power relations. Consequently, this "constructed group" along with its historical set of meanings, social classifications, and experiences of unjust power relations, impacts and shapes the construction of the individual's identity, as well as the identity of the group. In applying standpoint theory to understanding African-American Third Agers, this research hypothesized that third agers in America who are of African heritage may have significantly different experiences from third agers in American of European or other heritages.

This idea of the "constructed group" is a central tenet of Collins' work, and is expressed as she writes, "Race, class, gender and other markers of power intersect to produce social institutions that, in turn, construct groups that become defined by these characteristics" (p. 204). The fact that some groups define, and rule over other groups, leads to the creation of an "overarching hierarchical structure" which in turn situates the individual, and thus determines the individual's position of power. Power relations, specifically, unjust power relations, are a major theme of Collin's work. It is important to note that even though Collins speaks about the individual, the thrust of her work focuses on the group, not the individual. For this reason, standpoint theory will be applied as a heuristic tool for gaining understanding and meaning into how African-American Third Agers perceive themselves as adult learners.

According to Collins (1998), standpoint theory alone is not a sufficient heuristic tool. She suggests using both standpoint theory along with intersectionality. She argues that, introducing intersectionality into the discussion is necessary because of the limitations of race-only or gender-only thinking. Collins (1998) sees this "either/or way of thinking" as a problem and refers to it as "binary thinking" (p. 275). Accordingly, she rejects "binary thinking" because it does not take into consideration group construction at points of intersection. It fosters heterogeneity between groups and ignores dynamics within groups. Based on Collins' views, group construction could be seen as key to the understanding of the African-American Third Ager experience. My reasoning for wanting to use intersectionality and situated standpoint as heuristic tools is that it allowed me to situate African-American Third Agers within a context that many of them share -- historically and currently. This means that the individual narratives were not isolated from societal conditions that facilitate or thwart adult learning.

Additionally, Collins (1998) recommends using intersectionality as a framework for thinking "through social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions..." (p. 205). With this in mind, to map out the future of adult education, other social institutions, organizations and structures without consideration of constructed groups such as African-American third agers, seemed inadequate and incomplete. Therefore, this research was necessary to complete the future dialogue.

Summary of theoretical framework and heuristic tools. I acknowledged the epistemological tensions that may emerge when postmodernism, standpoint theory, and intersectionality form the theoretical frame for research. The tension, which complicate the research, are illustrated in figure 1. For example, the postmodern views of Knowles

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(1970) assert the self-directedness of the adult learner with no mention of societal power influences or power relations. In contrast, standpoint theory along with intersectionality, view the adult learner under the load of unjust power relations. In summary, this research used postmodernism, standpoint theory and intersectionality as heuristic lenses through which to investigate the African-American Third Ager. See figure 1.
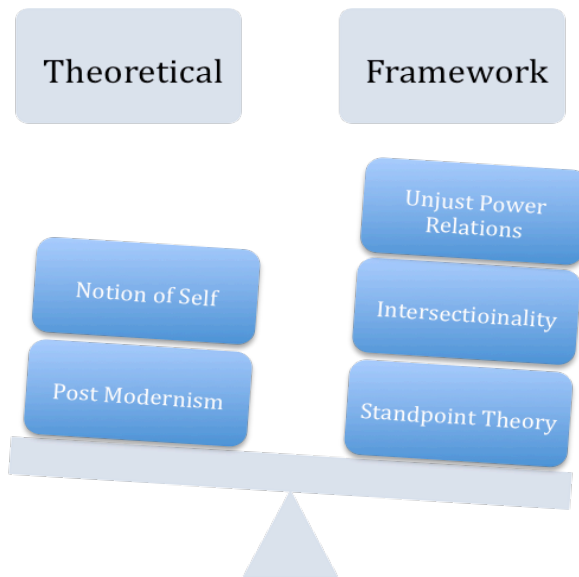
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework and Heuristic Tools

Participants

Sample size is always a relevant question when doing research. Qualitative researchers argue that there is no direct relationship between the number of participants and the quality of the study (Hatch, 2002). Among qualitative researchers there usually is no unanimous agreement concerning correct sample size. In qualitative research the emphasis is placed on meeting the criteria of adequacy rather than the number of participants. "Adequacy is attained when sufficient data have been collected that saturation occurs and variation is both accounted for and understood" (Morse, 1994, p.

230). Therefore, the sample size for this study was based on thematic saturation. Once

the data no longer introduced new themes relevant to the topic, thus having reached a

point of thematic saturation, the number of participants was deemed adequate. Given

this, the number of participants for this study was not certain initially. However, since

heterogeneity was the aim, it was hoped that a small but diverse sample would result in

some degree of thematic saturation. Thematic saturation was achieved with nine

participants.

Non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research,

and the most common form of this type of sampling is purposeful sampling (Merriam,

2009). Purposeful sampling has at its core the assumption that the researcher is

intentional and precise when it comes to selecting participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam,

2009). Proponents of this type of sampling will often use the terms purposeful sampling

and criterion-based selection interchangeably. This study entertained purposeful

sampling because it empowered the investigator to select information-rich cases.

Information-rich cases are participants "from which one can learn a great deal about

issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

LeCompte and Priessle (1993) suggest that the researcher create a list of criteria or

attributes of the participants and or cases that will best suit the study. This study

involved participants who were accessible, willing to provide information, and who met

the following criteria:

- African-American

- Over age 55

- Retired from full or part-time employment

- Attained a High School Diploma or GED

- And acquired at least one year of college or vocational training after high school

Also, this research required that each participant be currently engaged in formal or non-formal education at the time of the scheduled interview. Non-formal education is defined as "…any organized educational activity outside the established formal system...that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives" (Coombs, Prosser & Ahmed, 1973, p. 11).

At this juncture, it was important to note that participants were located through the researcher's professional, academic, and social networks. Consequently, this increased the probability that some of the participants may be personally known by the researcher, and may know each other. However, this study did not propose convenience sampling. Patton (1990), Hatch (2002), and others agree that convenience sampling is the least desirable method of sampling for qualitative research. The design features of this study were more consistent with snowball sampling (a subset of purposeful sampling) than convenience sampling. Snowball sampling, also referred to as "network" or "chain" sampling, produces social knowledge, a unique type of knowledge that is primarily dynamic and socially situated (Noy, 2008). Concerning snowball sampling, Merriam (2009) explains this method involves asking a few key people for recommendations of other potential participants who met the established criteria; thus the snowball or network gets bigger and more data-rich cases emerge (p. 79). However, the selection of participants was purposeful in that I gathered more names of potential participants to place in a pool from which I drew participants, based on each one's ability

to aid in the representation of African-American Third Agers. To achieve diverse

representation among participants, I sought variation in gender, educational level, type of

employment (professional or vocational), degree of family interdependence, and degree

of economic independence. Careful attention was given to Internal Review Board

standards. Therefore, a consent form was used to introduce the study, describe, and

inform participants of any risks and their right to withdraw at any time. See Appendix A.

Recruitment of the participants. A total of 9 African-American participants

were recruited for the study through snowball sampling. From the researcher's

professional, academic and social networks an initial list of 25 potential participants was

compiled. Many of the participants knew each other, but had no knowledge of the fact

that they were participants in the study because very few referrals were done. The

snowball gained essentially no momentum. One person, who did not qualify for the

study because he was not enrolled currently in a learning activity, did refer someone, and

that person became a participant. Because one woman referred her husband, the research

sample included a married couple.

Participants' attitudes towards being in a research study. The participants were

very excited about the prospect of being included in a research study. During preliminary

and introductory statements about the research purpose, goals, and aims they exhibited

enthusiasm and genuine interest. One participant stated, "I've never been asked before to

be in a research study." Another reported, "I participate in studies all the time, especially

at my doctor's office." Additional clarifying information, especially concerning the term

Third Age, was needed each time the investigator talked to a potential participant about

the study. No one was familiar with this term. Substituting the word retired or older

adult for the term Third Age produced immediate acknowledgement of a better understanding of what the study was about. Each person that was asked to participate did participate. There were no refusals to participate.

Participant demographics. All participants were African-American, retired from their primary profession, and engaged in either a formal or a non-formal learning activity at the time of the interview, and were within the theoretical definition of the Third Age—retired with 20+ more active years ahead of them. There were seven females and two males in the sample. The participant ages ranged from 62 to 76 years old, and the average age was 68.4. Figure 2 reports the age of the participant at the time of the interview and their birth year. Reporting the age of the participant along with the year in which they were born, aids in contextualizing their learning experience.

Participant Birth Year

■ Age @ Interview

Birth Year	Age @ Interview
1937	76
1939	74
1939	74
1943	70
1945	67
1946	66
1948	65
1950	62
1951	62
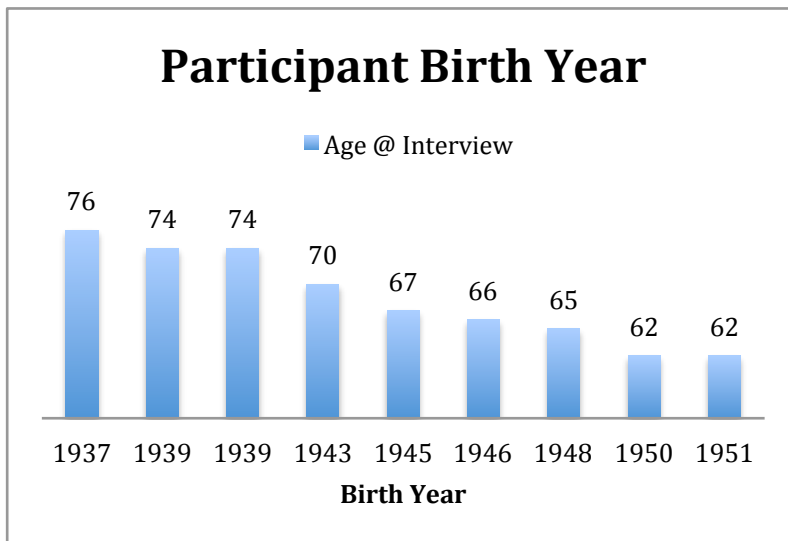
Figure 2. Participant Birth Year

Moreover, four of the participants were born and raised in Cleveland Ohio. One participant was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and relocated to Cleveland in young adulthood; another was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and moved to Cleveland at age 10; still another participant was born in Macon, Georgia, and came to Cleveland at age 3;

and another participant was born in Georgiana, Alabama, and did not come to Cleveland until after she was married. Yet another participant was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and came to Cleveland at age 5 to live with her grandmother. At the time of the interview, the participants were all residents of Northeast Ohio (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Birth Year	Age	City of Origin	Current Residence
1937	76	Georgiana, AL	Cleveland, OH
1939	74	Macon, GA	South Euclid, OH
1939	74	Philadelphia, PA	Richmond Hts., OH
1943	70	Cleveland, OH	Beachwood, OH
1945	67	Louisville, KY	Cleveland Hts., OH
1946	66	Pittsburgh, PA	Cleveland, OH
1948	65	Cleveland, OH	East Cleveland, OH
1950	62	Cleveland, OH	Cleveland, OH
1951	62	Cleveland, OH	Cleveland, OH

Educational attainment levels of the participants varied greatly. However, they appeared to align well with current Federal research on aging. According to the Administration on Aging, in the last forty years, there has been a significant increase in educational attainment among older Black Americans. "In 2009 over 64% of the Black population aged 65 and older had finished high school…" (U.S. Department of Health

and Human Services, 2010). Eight of the participants in this study completed high school; and one participant earned a GED later in young adulthood. Also, in 2008, 13.5% of older African-Americans held a bachelor's degree or higher. Comparatively, five of the participants in this study hold a bachelor's degree and/or higher.

Data Collection Procedures

According to Creswell (2007) data collection is conceptualized as a series of blended interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to help solve the research problem. Since the problem being undertaken in this study is that we do not know much about the meaning and experiences of older African-American adult learners in the Third Age, the data for this study emerged from the participants' responses elicited during semi-structured interviews. Data was also collected in the form of artifacts, documents, photos, journals shared by the participants, descriptions of what the researcher observes, and the researcher's field notes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The semi-structured interview is a type of formal interview (Hatch, 2002). Characteristics of semi-structured interviews include the following: they are planned, the researcher uses an interview guide, they are both structured and flexible, the questions are open-ended, and they allow the researcher to follow the participant's lead into emerging new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 2009; Hatch, 2002). For this study, I utilize a single 60-90 minute interview session. I guided the storytelling process by starting with standardized questions followed by various probing questions. According to Hatch (2002) standardized questions generate data that can be compared systematically. Merriam (2009) recommends using this type of question to gather socio-demographic data from respondents and definitions to certain terms and concepts. These standardized

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questions were followed by probing questions that evolved from the participant's responses in an attempt to delve deeper into the described experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) support and encourage interviews that turn into conversations because they aid the researcher in developing a participatory relationship with the participant. The interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location, where participant privacy can be protected, and where distractions were minimized.

Data Analysis Procedures

The procedures for data analysis for this study were aligned closely with the steps described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) for narrative inquiry data analysis. The steps included the following: (a) transcription of data, (b) verification of transcript validity through participant member check, (c) multiple readings of the transcripts, (d) coding of the transcripts, and (e) thematic analysis. Member checking, a technique that is for establishing credibility in qualitative research, was utilized in this investigation. This technique required the researcher to seek participants' views of the findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Multiple readings of the transcripts yielded notations, patterns, themes and threads that developed into the research text. According to Creswell and Miller (2000) validity in qualitative research is defined "as how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p.124).

Because this study focused on meaning and experience as narrated by the African-American Third Ager, the data was analyzed through the lens of Collins' (1998) standpoint theory and intersectionality. For Collins (1998), standpoint theory is based on "the notion of a group with shared experiences and interest" (p. 203). This lens was

pertinent to this study because it suggests that individuals who share social location often share meaning and experience. For this reason, I paid attention not only to race, but to other axes of intersection within the AATA experience such as gender, class, educational level, economic independence, and family interdependence.

Researcher's Perspectives

As I stated earlier, I am an adult educator. More specifically, I am an aging African-American female adult educator. As a member of the greying Baby Boomer cohort, I qualify as a future recipient of the possible benefits of this study and others whom are similar to me in terms of adult aging character. Therefore, I am interested in investigations that place African-American Third Agers' experience "at the center of inquiry" as viable stakeholders in the adult education and development discourse. This is the perspective that I bring to this completed qualitative research investigation.

At the time of this writing, my current beliefs about adult education were vastly expanded. I discovered the framework and professional language in which to further develop, understand and articulate my philosophy and definition of adult education. How adult education is defined and perceived is too broad for the scope of this writing. However, I preferred and identified with Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) regarding their definition. They comment, "Adult education is a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills" (p. 9). I feel this is reflective of my beliefs because it goes beyond knowledge gathering to affecting some type of psycho-social change in the person. While I bring to this study a particular subjectivity, the primary intent of this investigation was to listen

for meaning and experience as narrated by African-American Third Agers about adult learning and in this phase of life.

The Interview Process

Interviewing is a data-gathering method used in qualitative research when the goal is to collect detailed experience-centered information (Kaufman, 1994). The conditions where an interview takes place, such as place and time of day, can shape the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, the location of the interview was left to the preference of the participant. The first interview took place in the participant's home. Subsequent interviews occurred in various settings including the investigator's office, participant homes, and a library meeting room. The settings were private and free of distractions. Each interview was approximate 1.25 hours.

Rapport and trust between researcher and participant are essential features of the interview process and can influence the richness of the collected data (Kaufman, 1994). To this end, time was spent chatting about general matters before plunging into each interview. The researcher reviewed the purpose, goals and aims of the study, explained why these interviews are so important, and discussed how the interviews and research findings fit into a larger body of academic knowledge. All the participants were eager to contribute to some larger good and welcomed the opportunity to participate. Once rapport and trust were established, informed consent was introduced and discussed.

The IRB approved consent form (see Appendix A) was given to the participant to read. It included not only the title and purpose of the study, but also explained the interview process, the type of interview, the approximate length of the interview, associated risks/benefits, and permission to digitally record the interview. Confidentiality

and privacy was also discussed. The researcher described how participant responses to interview questions would be kept confidential through a numeric coding system before transcription. Participants were reassured that only members of the research team would have access to the transcripts and recordings. It was also explained and documented in the consent form that excerpts from the interview may be included in a final report, or in related reports during and after the study, but participant names would not be attached to the interview or transcripts, or any subsequent reports. Reassurances were conveyed regarding the voluntary nature of the process, and their right to stop the interview at any time and/or decline to answer a question. All participants were comfortable with the process and signed the consent form.

Each participant interview followed the IRB approved interview guide. (See appendix B). The interview protocol used in this study was deemed good. Merriam (2009), affirms "Overall, good interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon" (p. 99). Moreover, the interview guide was designed to capture background information early on in the interview session. Background and demographic information such as age, where one grew up, educational experiences (K-12), professional work history, current employment status, and where one currently resides was the first topic of discussion in the interview. Subsequent portions of the guide were designed which allowed the interview process to flow more freely, so as to increase the comfort level of the participant. Therefore, a semi-structured instrument interview protocol was used. Indeed, the semi-structured instrument was successful; it yielded thick descriptive data, a decrease in participant

apprehension levels, along with a corresponding increase in participant comfort levels as the interview process progressed.

Although the interview guide (see appendix B) contained fourteen individual questions, in essence, the interview protocol can be conceptualized as a map consisting of six spheres representing phases of the interview (see figure 3):

- Phase I: Background Question # 1

- Phase II: Educational Experiences (Questions 2-4)

- Phase III: Self Perceptions of Aging Process & Learning in Late Adulthood (Questions # 5-6)

- Phase IV: Perceptions of Lifelong Learning and Themselves (Question 7-9)

- Phase V: Introduction of the Third Age (Question 10-11)

- Phase VI: Future Learning Expectations (Questions 12-14)
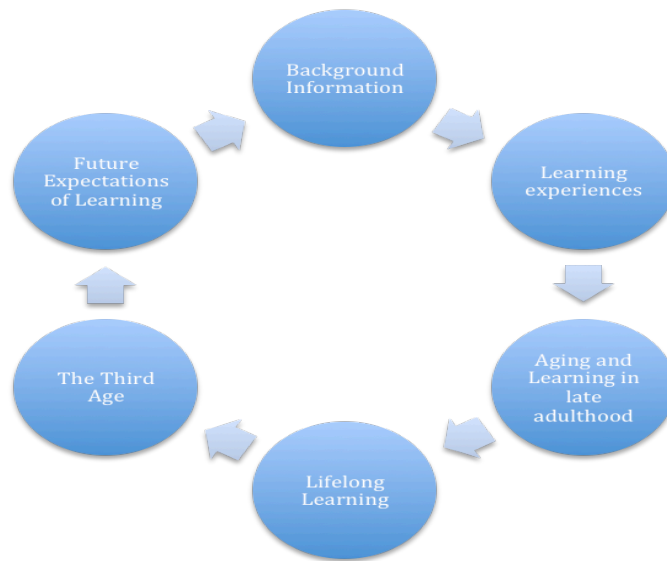
Figure 3. Phases of the Interview

Interview guide: Summarized. This concept map, summarizing the 14 questions, became particularly important, practical, and useful to the researcher during

the interviews because it functioned as a tool to quickly write and categorize participant responses during the interview. For example, often during the interview the researcher would ask a specific question from the list of questions. However, the participant's answer to the specific question would seemingly have nothing (or very little) to do with the question being asked, yet their responses did yield data pertaining to another question on the guide that had not been asked yet. Using the concept map, I could visualize where and how various responses fit, make hand written notes in the appropriate sphere without interrupting the flow of the narrative as the participant told their story. As the investigator, I knew the questions and where I wanted to go, but at the same time, I captured the narrative as it unfolded. Life stories are not shared in neat form, consequently, data for this investigation included my handwritten notes complied during the interview process.

Data Analysis Using Narrative Inquiry Methodology

For this study, the data set consisted of transcribed interviews, field notes, private voice recordings of the researcher's thoughts, feelings and observations; documents, artifacts, and mementos shared by the participants during the interview. Because this study is about meaning and experience, the data were analyzed using narrative inquiry methodology. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest, "…narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). Also, Creswell (2007) asserts, data collected in narrative studies needs to be analyzed for the emerging story of the participant.

Moreover, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stipulate specific steps to be taken for narrative inquiry data analysis. Their data analysis approach is summarized in the

following steps: (a) transcription of data, (b) verification of transcript validity through participant member check, (c) multiple readings of the transcripts, (d) coding of the transcripts, and (e) thematic analysis. This research study relied primary on these steps as a guide for analyzing the data.

The first step involved transcribing the data. Verbatim transcriptions of the recorded interview provide the best data for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Prior work has acknowledged the use of voice recognition software (VRS) in transcription (Park & Zeanah, 2005; Matheson, 2007; Johnson, 2011). Available since the early 1980s, voice recognition software (VRS) is computer software that automatically transcribes digital voice recordings without the need for typing (Matheson, 2007). Therefore, I initially attempted to produce transcripts using voice recognition computer software. I chose Dragon Dictate®. Soon my experience with the VRS mirrored other researchers in discovering that the accuracy of this method is unacceptable rendering it useless. Matheson (2007), laments concerning a major barrier of VRS, " All of the researchers I have talked to cited the same barrier, that currently-available voice recognition software does not recognize more than one voice, therefore appearing to be useless in automating the transcription of digital interview data where there are at least two voices recorded" (p. 547). Similarly, others who have studied VRS concluded that the method is not feasible in that it was overly demanding of the interviewee (Park & Zeanah, 2005). Also, Johnson (2011) who studied the speed and accuracy of VRS, concluded that hiring a transcriptionist was best.

Because the VRS rendered a document that was less than 50% accurate when compared to the digitally recorded audio file, the use of transcription software was

abandoned. This roadblock required the researcher to contract with a professional transcription service to produce the transcripts. Confidentially, privacy and safekeeping of the files were discussed and agreed upon in a written contract between the researcher and the transcription service. The digitally recorded interview files were sent electronically to the transcription service through DropBox®. Dropbox® is a personal cloud based storage service frequently used for collaboration file sharing via the internet. The service completed the transcription and emailed the document to the investigator. Once the documents were received, two copies of each transcript were printed.

The second step taken was verification of transcript validity through participant member checking. Member checking is a technique for establishing credibility in qualitative research. This technique required the researcher to seek participants' views (Creswell, 2007). Participants were either handed or mailed a copy of their transcribed interview along with a letter of instruction. They were instructed to carefully review the document for accuracy and to write directly on the transcript if there were any parts they wanted to elaborate on, change, or delete. All the transcripts were returned to the researcher via mail or in person. Only two transcripts were returned with zero markings. The others had markings indicative of careful review.

Before proceeding on to steps three and four of the data analysis, a note of explanation is needed. It is important to emphasize that, not only was the data analysis guided by the five steps of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) it was also shaped by this important research principle: "All qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes or patterns or categories that cut across the data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 269). What this means is that data collection and analysis were

done simultaneously. The question may arise, how can the researcher simultaneously do data collection and data analysis if a transcription service was utilized? The inductive and comparative method was achieved through repeated listening of the audio recordings. Data analysis began after the first interview and continued throughout the subsequent interviews. Digital files of the interviews were sent to the transcription service while I retained the originals and continued to listen and re-listen to the interviews mining each for codes and themes. Furthermore, upon receipt of the transcribed interviews I read over the transcripts while simultaneously listening to the audio tapes. This was to ensure that the transcriptions accurately reflected what was recorded during the interviews.

In returning to discussing steps three and four, step three required multiple reading of the transcripts and step four involved coding. These steps were ongoing and overlapped. Therefore, step three, necessitated multiple readings of the transcripts which yielded an elaborate list of 21 codes. Step four, coding, was the result of processing, describing, classifying and interpreting qualitative data (Creswell, 2007). During the coding process, the 21 codes were winnowed down and themes began to emerge.

Step five is thematic analysis. Creswell (2007) describes this step as moving beyond coding. For Clandinin and Connelly (2000) step five is a kind of reduction, "a reduction downward to themes" (p. 143). In this study, the winnowing downward reduction process led to four emergent themes: a) critical experiences and influences, b) motivations for participation in adult learning, c) spirituality, d) characteristics, perceptions and interpretations. The themes were congruent with the orientation of the research study and conformed to the definition of a theme as put forth by Braun and Clarke; "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research

question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (2006, p. 82).

Summary of Research Design and Methodology

So far in this chapter, I have outlined the research design, methodological approaches and theoretical framework that guided the investigation. I have argued that within the qualitative approach to research, narrative inquiry is the best fit that supported the purpose of this study. The purpose of this study was to examine the contextual experience of the African-American Third Ager (AATA) as adult learner. Clandinin and Connelly (2002) were cited as key contributors to the field of narrative inquiry. For this reason, much of their work, particularly Clandinin and Connelly (2000), had influenced the design of this research. This study addressed the problem and acknowledged that we do not know much about the adult learning experiences of African-American Third Agers. Therefore, the comprehensive research question that emerged from wrestling with the problem was what does it mean to be an AATA? I have acknowledged the situated context that I bring to this investigation as an aging African-American Baby Boomer interested in the future of the field of Adult Education who has aligned herself with the postmodern theoretical perspective. Moreover, the methodology has rendered an account of the how the participants were selected through purposeful sampling and how the participant number was determined through thematic saturation. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for the method of data collection, and standpoint theory, along with intersectionality for the methods of data analysis. In summary, the methodological design utilized in this this research investigation created space for the voice of the

African-American Third Ager, and to led to an enhanced understanding of lifelong

learning as experienced by this group.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Statement of the Problem

Given the increase in the older adult learner population, and the rise of the

societal construct known as the Third Age, it is essential to begin grappling with issues

regarding what learning means in the context of the lives of Third Agers. As a

researcher, I was interested in the narrated experiences of adult learners who are African-

American and in the Third Age of the lifespan. There are notable research studies that

are interested in the demographic characteristics, such as sources of income, and work

histories of African-American Third Agers, but few studies investigated the African-

American Third Ager as adult learner. Absent from the literature are studies of the

contextualized narratives of African-American Third Age adult learners. Failing to

capture, research, and investigate the lived experiences of African-American Third Age

adult learners is an identifiable problem within the field and practice of adult education.

Furthermore, how can the field genuinely promote culturally relevant adult education,

explore the Third Age, or develop new approaches to the education of older adults,

without increased scientific research on this subject? It cannot. Consequently, the

problem, in the field of adult education, is that we do not know much about how African-

Americans in the Third Age experience and how to entertain and assign meaning in this phase of adult development. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to expand the body of knowledge on older adults, age-related issues, aging, adult education, and the adult learner while simultaneously putting forth a scholarly commitment to uncovering the contextual meaning and experiences of African-Americans in the Third Age.

Introduction to Core Themes

This research was framed by the overarching question of what does it mean to be an African-American Third Ager? The investigation sought to understand how AATA viewed learning and why do they participate in adult learning. Consequently, the goal of understanding and interpreting their experiences and the meaning they assigned to their experiences guided the exploration. I found that for this participant pool learning at this phase of life has a significant role and is laden with meaning. Based on the analysis of the data, four core themes emerged: (a) critical experiences and influential people, (b) motivations for participation in adult learning, (c) spirituality, (d) characteristics, perceptions, and interpretations.

Critical Experiences and Influential People

One theme that emerged from the data was critical experiences and influential people in the lives of the participants. Critical experiences and influential people are interpreted for this study to mean incidents, (personal, historical or societal), and individuals (related or non-related) that had a major impact on the participant's experience of learning whether in childhood or adulthood. These critical experiences and influential people were instrumental in creating game changing moments in the lives of the participants which subsequently contextualized and gave meaning to their learning

experiences. Some of the critical experiences and influences were positive for the

participants and some were negative. However, from the reports, it is clear that their self-

perceptions concerning learning, and being a lifelong learner were shaped by key

incidents and relevant individuals. One participant revealed:

> So you know of course we had the Colored school and then White school, and of
>
> course all of us went to the Colored school, but learning was very good and very
>
> easy for me, pretty much. We had very good teachers, and during that time
>
> basically through higher up in elementary, you know fourth to fifth grade on up
>
> through high school you know I was an A student pretty much, you know B+ to
>
> an A student in most of my classes. Very seldom ever got a C. One of the things
>
> I remember is that we really had teachers that were very sincere about your
>
> learning, and to make you feel comfortable when you moved out of that area.
>
> You know just kind of warning you and letting you know what you might
>
> encounter in other parts of the world, so you knew. You know we didn't have
>
> that myth about coming north and everything was gonna be all right... we had
>
> teachers that came from pretty much all over the country that came down to teach,
>
> so and they were concerned about you really, really learning. That was very
>
> important…

Another participant, who had dropped out of high school, told of a lady who changed her

life as it relates to learning. She reported:

> ...[T]his lady who was a Dietician, who was the queen of North Carolina A&T,
>
> she was the Homecoming Queen, and she came to Philadelphia, and she came
>
> over to me and she asked me if I completed school. I told her no. She told me, "I

think you should," and I wondered, who is this lady telling me what I should do? So I decided to listen, and somehow I came to the conclusion she, this lady, is really concerned about me. So she said, "You can go to school at night and still work in the day," and that's what I did. I went to school.

For another participant, it was the influence of the Civil Rights Movement as well as the relatively recent re-election of America's first African-American President. She stated:

...the Freedom Movement was impact[ful] because I was a teenager during that time, and you know just looking at television and seeing our people having dogs sicced on them and water hoses put on them, and being spit on and hit, you know, it really… Well the impact that they [had on me]… because they gave us freedom to do more stuff, and this is what really I enjoy, because if we didn't go through that Freedom Movement, I wouldn't be where I am now. And then I was here when we had our first Black Mayor here in Cleveland. You know our first Black Mayor, and then to be in the society where we had our first Black President for two terms.

It was discovered that for some a life changing critical experience does not have to be as huge as the Civil Rights movement or as monumental as the two-time election of an African-American man to the highest office in the Nation. For one participant, the impetus to becoming a lifelong learner was winning an essay contest; an essay contest about grass. Listen to the narrative of a self- proclaimed class clown as he begins the pivotal transition from class clown to lifelong learner:

When I was going to XXXX School, again in this teacher (Ms. Y's). I was in the fifth grade, and the school was on 77th and XXXX. At that time they didn't have

any grass, so   they were gonna' plant grass and we had to write an essay and,

again, me being the class clown, Ms. Y had said that 'I want you all to write an

essay about our grass and what you think about us getting grass in the front,' and

she said 'Now, when you get up and read your essay,' go back to your seat when

you finish, unless I tell you to put your essay on the table. If not, take it back to

your [seat].' Again, [being] the class clown, she didn't tell me. I put it on the

table. So nobody ever said anything. She never said anything. [The essay

contest] was for the top three kids in elementary school, the 5A, 6B and 6A.

Everybody in those classes, they had to write an essay. So about a month later I

get a call and she told me, 'Mr. T (who was the Principal), he wants to see you.'

Now I forgot all about [the essay]… I don't know. I ain't thinking about this.

I'm thinking, trying to think "What did I do? What did I do?" I can't think of

what have I done, so I could build up an alibi. And he called me down there and I

was sitting and waiting, and all this time I'm thinking "What did I do? What have

I done?" What it was, I had won.

Within the participant narratives there were stories of formal, non-formal, and

informal educational experiences. For this research, informal education or learning is

generally interpreted as unplanned, experience-based, incidental learning that occurs in

the process of daily life (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Informal learning is spontaneous

and unstructured in nature and can occur in the home, neighborhood, library or museums

(Coombs, 1985). Therefore, a grass-less elementary school in the heart of the inner city

and or a pot of Kool-Aid® served with Ritz crackers on a summer day are not to be

overlooked in gaining insight into the contextualized learning experiences of this

participant group of African-American Third Agers. For example, vivid in the narrative

of one participant's learning experience was a pot of Kool-Aid®. In recalling positive

aspects of informal learning, this participant recounted:

> I'll never forget when I was in early elementary school; her name was [XXX]
>
> ...she used to bring out [educational] stuff in the summertime. We would read or
>
> play games... and [if] we did a good job of it, she'd make this great, big pot of
>
> Kool-Aid and it was actually a pot [of] Kool-Aid, and we would have Ritz
>
> Crackers® and peanut butter. That was just enjoyable, but we learned something.
>
> Always learning something in the process...and that was always good for me.

Often for this participant group, formal and informal learning experiences were

indistinguishable. This is possibly the case because, for this cohort of participants,

teachers in formal educational settings were held with the same esteem and respect as that

of a parent or elder family member. In other words, because communities were smaller

and more tightly knit, there was less distinction between formal and informal learning. A

recollection from the above participant is an illustration of the intermingling of the two

types of learning. She recalled:

> ...My 9th grade Algebra teacher, Ms. X. She was very, very instrumental in me
>
> being focused on what I was supposed to be doing, because she took an interest,
>
> not only in the class that she taught me, but in the hallways, wherever I was, and I
>
> think it was so heartfelt for me is because she was my mother's teacher. [She was
>
> my mother's] math teacher, and my mom only went to 8th grade. So she [my
>
> mother] had her [Mrs. X] as a Math teacher in 7th grade, and she always
>
> remembered my mom and she always remembered you know her standards and

what have you, and so she helped me a lot, not only in Algebra, but she taught me

how I should behave in school and she knew what I was doing in my other classes

and she did pay attention and made me pay attention. [These memories]...remind

me of things that I did that weren't particularly school-related, but they taught me.

It is also important to note that the critical incidents and influential people were

not limited to the early or childhood learning experiences of this participant group.

Neither were these factors necessarily always positive. They were varied. It was

common for participants to jump back and forth temporally over their lifespan as they

shared their stories. Many of the participants continued throughout the interview to

report additional narratives of critical incidents and influential people all through their

adult lives that continued to impact their perceptions of learning and what learning means

to them. One participant recalled:

I wasn't cum laude or nothing like that, but I did graduate with honors from

[name of a local area community college] because I was in the class, of course,

with younger kids, and I made up my mind 'They might call me an old lady, but

they wasn't going to call me an old dumb lady.

Two participants shared how negative incidents and negative people impacted

their perceptions and attitudes towards learning. One participant described an experience

around the time her father died.

I had one of the worst… I just blotted him out of my mind, and unfortunately it

was [a] teacher. He was the worse teacher I had at [name of local area

university], and I feel that he was worst because his bedside manner was very

lacking. My dad died while I was taking his course, and his answer to, when I

told him that I didn't get my paper done… because in our family, I was the second mother. So when my dad died, my mother fell apart and plus my mother just does not comprehend as quickly on how to do things, so it was up to me to make the phone calls, to get the insurance, to… I set up his funeral, and that's a lot of work you know. I was 33, and… Matter of fact, I had just turned 34. I'm sorry.... (*Participant pauses because she becomes emotional*) ...Yeah, and his answer was 'Well you know we all have parents who die,' and I never forgot that.

This participant was not turned off to learning by the experience or the person, but found her self-perceptions as a learner challenged. By this I mean, during the interview she described and perceived herself as one who loved learning and exceeded standards and expectations so often that she was advanced a grade level in elementary. "I've always loved school. I've always loved to learn... It was just in my soul." Nonetheless, this particular experience appeared to interrogate her self-perceptions; she stated, "I was so angry with him...I just did enough work to pass his class."

The second participant told of her negative learning experiences at a local seminary and a local college.

It impacted my experiences because in that environment [a local area seminary] there are certain people that they expect everybody to be a lot younger, and so being older, definitely impacts because you have to deal with people who are much younger who feel that older people are outdated, or not so much outdated as "Why do they want to learn?" So that kind of impact[s] how you feel about it and how you deal. So you learn how to communicate and how to deal with that and to walk past certain actually sometimes sarcasm, insults, and then people suggesting

that you answer to them why you want to learn at a certain age. Actually I had

that same problem at [name of local university] because now there's quite a

difference than it was 20 years ago, whatever how they looked at older people

trying to learn. They didn't expect you to want to do it. I guess it's because of

lack of understanding. And particularly another thing too that I found, that race

impacts on that, and now because sometimes they tend to think that as older Black

people [we] are not interested in learning.

Included also in the emergent theme of critical experiences and influential people

was the influence of the family structure. It was not only individual people that came to

bear on learning, but the family's values and perspective towards education had a

particularly strong influence as well. Beyond the traditional Western model of family,

which includes two married parents and their children, historically, the African-American

family structure often includes an extended familial network comprised of older relatives,

long time neighbors, fictive kin, and church members (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005).

Many of the participants shared about the role of their parents, stepparents, and extended

family unit, and how their family structure shaped and gave meaning to their learning

experience. Concerning her mother's influence as well as the impact of her stepfather,

one participant reported:

When it came to school, we had to come home and do homework. We did

that [homework] first. After the homework was done, then we could do

whatever. She really was a stickler for homework. Not graduating from

high school wasn't an option. She said that she can't make us go to

college, but she can make us go to school, and out of the four of us, we all

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graduated. One brother got his GED, but the last three, we all graduated

from Cleveland Public Schools. My stepfather was another [influence].

Yeah, because he was a little disappointed when I decided not to go to

school [college]. He was a little disappointed. That bothered me and that's

what made me later in life go back, because he was so gung ho: [He

would say]...'You need to go to college. You need to do this. If you go to

college, you can demand a certain job. You don't have to settle for this...'

Still another participant recounted:

Yes, they [mom and dad] were instrumental. They always wanted me to [get my

education]… They pushed me and these things were opened up to me. 'If this is

opened up to you, go ahead. Do those things.' I had one sister that went on to

Nursing School, so that prompted me to go bigger and better, to keep on going.

Most of my people [adult family members, older relatives, and fictive kin] came

through factory, and a lot of times you don't want to work hard; you want to work

smart, so you go through those types of things. We were always around people,

too, that pushed you educational wise and were doing different things.

In essence, this participant learned from, and was influenced by her people whom were

predominantly factory workers. They encouraged her to get an education, work smarter,

not harder, always have a job, and to keep learning.

Summary of critical experiences and influential people. This section detailed

the theme of critical experiences and influential people in the lives of the participants.

Crucial incidents and significant persons that had a major impact on the participant's

experience of learning whether in childhood or adult hood were highlighted. Although

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the encounters described by the participants were varied in nature and included a wide range of relationships, the encounters revealed embodied contextualized elements that impacted this group of African-American Third Age adult learners.

Motivations for Participation in Adult Learning

The needs and motivations for learning in adulthood change as society, culture technology, and the economy change (Hansman and Mott, 2010). Motivation was very evident in the narratives of this participant group. Consequently, I have identified motivation for participation in adult learning as another emergent theme. As participants shared their feelings and thoughts about their learning experiences (past, present, and future), key bits of data began to surface and cluster which gave insight into why the participants had been engaged in learning as well as why they continue to learn. For example, it was discovered that for many of the participants motivation for participation in learning was associated with critical experiences and influential people. For this reason, some researchers might not report motivation as a second and separate theme, but as a subset of the first theme (critical experiences and influential people). However, I contend there is significant enough data for motivations to stand alone as a theme, and yet I am willing to acknowledge that the two themes are connected and exist in relationship to one another.

A relationship between the two themes was derived from the data within several of the participants' responses. However, the data presented two noteworthy illustrations of how theme one is related to theme two. First, in the previous section, I reported on a participant as she described her negative experiences with a local seminary and a local

college. And in the same dialogue when talking about the critical learning experience, she said:

"Why would you want to learn, and why is it necessary and what do you plan to do?" I've actually been asked those questions, "What is it that you plan to do with this knowledge?" and of course I feel like knowledge is good at any age and that you always should be knowledgeable and you should always [want to learn].

In this example, theme one (critical experiences...) and theme two (motivations) are closely related. In the context of sharing a negative learning experience, motives for wanting to continue to participate in adult learning at this phase of life are exposed.

The second example illustrates how motivations for learning in adulthood are linked to influential people as well. This participant shared about how her stepfather was "gung-ho" about her going to college, and of his disappointment in her when she did not go to college right after high school. In response, she said, "That bothered me and that's what made me later in life go back [to college]..."

The reason why motivations for participation in adult learning is reported as a theme separate from the first theme is because as the data analysis continued, other subthemes within motivation began to appear. These varied subthemes were unrelated to critical experiences or influential people. However, their relationship to motivation was undeniable. For example, sheer determination to continue to learn emerged as a subtheme contained in the data. A good illustration of this tenacity and determination to learn is exposed through the words of a male participant. He added,

....if you open my car, you'll see books in it. You open places where I relax, you'll see books in it, and I've been a person who's believed in just lifelong

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learning. I've also been a person who believed that you better teach yourself

because a lot of times other people won't teach, and I also have a deep, deep, deep

bias that a lot of times people accept things without looking deeper into exactly

what they are. So I figure the only way I'll find it is myself. I read all kind of

different kind of philosophies, Social Science, and Political Science and books

about different areas of human issues truly drive me.

Moreover, another participant shared how fellow classmates questioned her as to why she

had enrolled in a course of formal study at a local university. The participant reported

that she told them, "That's why [I enrolled because] my desire is to continue to learn,

'cause I always want to know things. Knowledge is good at all times." These two

participant statements are illustrative of the resolve to continue to learn exhibited within

this group of participants. Their resolve to learn reflects their motives to learn.

In addition to the sheer determination to continue to learn, stagnation also

surfaced as a subtheme. The notion of stagnation became apparent as a kind of threat that

increased one's motivation to participate in adult learning. One participant retorted:

I can't get stagnant because my mind is just still going onto other things, [I want

to know] what is that about?' or [I want to know] what that is about. 'Let me read

this.' You have to keep up on things...

Along these same lines, it was interesting how two different participants chose to use the

word "mushroom" when speaking about lifelong learning and the avoidance of

stagnation. One commented: "I think that we should continue to educate ourselves. I

mean we could easily become a mushroom with the TV and all that stuff, but it's good to

get out, and education then also becomes a social venue." Similarly, the other participant expressed:

> Well [name of local community college] presents an interesting venue
> because they allow seniors to take classes on almost anything without
> trying to matriculate toward a degree, but it helps them to explore
> anything that interests them, and gives you classroom settings. You get to
> meet people. It keeps you from sitting at home being a mushroom, you
> know, which unfortunately in the African-American community there are
> a lot of people, there's a large population of retired folks who don't do
> anything.

The use of the word mushroom in this context is analogous to "couch potato" and is interpreted to represent a person who is sluggardly and inactive. For this group of participants, their motivation to continue to learn and remain involved in adult education carried with it the by-product of socialization. This by-product, namely socialization (the notion of being with others, meeting new people and learning new things) aided in warding off the threat of stagnation, and consequently, functioned as a motivator to engage in learning.

Additionally, their narratives were reflective and future oriented, noting things in the past that continue to motivate now, as well as hopes for their futures that impact their motives to continue learning in the future. For example, one participant stated, "But it's just that it's so much out there to learn that I just think if you're not trying to learn, you're wasting a lot of time." One participant described himself as argumentative.

Consequently, his argumentative nature functioned as an impetus for learning. He commented:

> I just sought out things because I either wanted to learn and, another thing was, I'm argumentative. I don't just listen to what somebody says, so I always like to make sure that I know what I'm talking about. So I want to learn and I don't just take what somebody tells me because they have a position or whatever... I've always had a yearning to learn because I always want to know what I'm talking about.

Imbedded within the theme of motivation, there were participants' perceptions and attitudes about lifelong learning. An exemplar of this is best summed up through the words of the second oldest participant. She stated enthusiastically:

> I believe that it [lifelong learning] means that until Jesus comes back and takes us away, there's still an opportunity to learn, and I will be a learner all of the rest of my days. I'm 74. If the Lord says that I can stay here until I'm 104, I'll still be learning.

For another participant, motivations for learning and perceptions of lifelong learning were intertwined with her position as matriarch in the family. She commented:

> Definitely. I'm definitely a lifelong learner. I will be trying to learn something, and I think it's important to me, too, as a grandmother and a great grandmother, and who knows, I might be a great, great grandmother, and I like to interact with the younger people. I think the younger people kind of keep you alert, and so because I would like to help them, you know guidance, kind of counsel with them, kind of direct them to let them know that everything seems like a change,

but it really hasn't changed, and so therefore I would always want to learn so that

I can always be a help to someone else, you know primarily your family...

Just as the aforementioned participant looked forward to future generations in reflecting

on lifelong learning and motivation, another participant looked back to her mother's

words to frame her current motives for learning. She shared:

You learn all your life. As a teenager, I thought I knew everything, but as I got

older and the different things that my mother would say to me I didn't understand,

but as I got older and I was like "Oh, so that's what she meant." So I'm still

learning. I mean learning is a lifelong experience... I feel like you learn until you

leave here.

However, for one of the male participants, he expressed his motivations and perceptions

of lifelong learning in much more quantifiable terms.

Because as long as you live, if you're wise, you gonna' be learning because once

you stop learning, now that means that you think you know it all... And like I tell

everybody, what I know is less than one-tenth of 1% of what I don't know.

Moreover, one participant depicted the blend of motivations and perceptions of lifelong

learning in terms of her 'bucket list'. Concerning her bucket list, she commented:

Oh... I keep saying I'm going back to school and study Anthropology. I just

haven't got there yet. <laughter> I haven't got there yet, but that's on my bucket

list, to go back to [name of a local area community college] because they have

senior classes that you don't have to pay for.

She followed up the comments about her bucket list with these statements regarding her

perceptions of learning in this phase of life.

Lifelong learning to me means that you continue to stretch yourself. You
continue to investigate. When you're not required to do formal education and you
can do informal education, you can choose to study whatever you want to study,
like my bucket list for my Anthropology...

Summary of motivations for participation in adult learning. The focus of this
section was motivation: the second theme to emerge from the data analysis. It reported
factors that motivated the participants to engage in adult learning. The analysis revealed
a relationship between critical experiences and influential people (theme one) and
motivation for participation in adult learning (theme two). Furthermore, this section
introduced and discussed varied subthemes contained in the data that were expressions of
the motives behind the participant's desire to continue to learn at this stage in life. These
subthemes included determination, not wanting to become couch potatoes, influences
from their past, hopes for their future, and their attitude towards lifelong learning.
Surprisingly, alongside the emergence of motivation as a theme, specific and unique
aspects associated with the participants' spirituality began to surface as well. However,
as the analysis continued, it became evident that the data supported spirituality as a theme
in its own right. Therefore, the theme of spirituality will be discussed next.

Spirituality: Meaning Making

Spirituality emerged as a third theme in this investigation. When referencing
spirituality in contemporary adult education contexts, it is most often referencing "an
individual's personal experience with the sacred, which can be experienced anywhere;
[whereas] religion is about an organized community of faith, with an official creed, and
codes of regulatory behavior" (Tisdell, 2008, p. 28-29).

Nonetheless, for this research study, the emergence of spirituality as a theme was unexpected and prominent. Throughout the interviews each participant interjected aspects of faith, spirituality, formal religion, religious practices, and references to God into their responses. They did not hesitate to speak freely about God, the Bible, their Christian faith, and religious practices which included learning in formal and non-formal settings. All participants in this study indicated that learning in this phase of life is interrelated to their faith in God--their personal experience with the Sacred. The participation in routine, systematic, and continuous study of the Bible, either on their own on or with a group, emerged as a common learning activity among all the participants.

This theme began to unfold was when I asked the participants to talk about the learning activities they were currently participating in. It is important to recall that one of the criteria for participation in this research project was that one had to be currently engaged in formal or non-formal education at the time of interview. In the field of adult education, the term non-formal learning has been used to describe organized learning opportunities outside the formal educational system. Non-formal learning offerings are usually community based, voluntary, with few prerequisites; nonetheless, they typically have a curriculum and a facilitator (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

For example, when questioned about their current learning activities, all of the participants reported being part of a Bible study or some type of religious or spiritual learning. One participant pointed to a pile of certificates on her dining room table and shared:

I'm in Bible study. Now all these certificates are classes that I completed in the bible school, but on Wednesday night we have bible study. So I usually go to

church on Wednesday to bible study, you know but all those are certificates I got

from different classes I took…

There were over fifteen different certificates on the table from various religious study

courses. They were all dated after the time of this participant's retirement. Still,

another participant talked about being enrolled in an eight-week training course to

become a spiritual care volunteer for a local hospice. Similarly, another reported, "I

love reading the Bible... there're studies that I do with other Christians, and there're

studies that I do on my own. So I am, you know, always engaged in some kind of

learning." Another participant reported:

> I took religious courses at Moody, extension course/class here in Cleveland. Most
>
> of the classes that I took were audited... and the last two years I've been going to
>
> [Name] Theological Seminary taking Hebrew and Greek, again, auditing the
>
> classes, not for any type of credit.

   Also, spirituality also surfaced in relation to future learning experiences and what is

meaningful in this phase of life. Participants were asked what remains important to you

as something you would like to continue to study or simply to learn more about?

Spiritualty was not the only thing mentioned in their responses to the question, however,

100% of the participant pool included in their response something about the Bible,

theology, or faith. They spoke of personal experiences with the sacred. One person

responded:

> I like [to learn] more about my Savior. What can I say? I enjoy reading the
>
> books of the Bible. I like knowing that it's God-inspired work and for me to live

by it, and the correct way to live my life. So those are basic for me, very basic for

me. If I learn something else along the way, I'm blessed, you know.

Similarly, others responses included: "Actually I would really like to learn more

biblically. That's the main thing"; and "I just am always trying to learn more about the

Bible..." However, the voice of one participant best summed up the consensus of the

group and their desire to remain engaged in learning in relation to the sacred when she

said: "The Bible... it's just amazing to me..." Their responses revealed insights into what

is meaningful at this phase of life, as well as what is it this participant pool would like to

continue to study. As one participant revealed, faith is important, "Basically in my case

at this point, the Bible, and the things that are associated with [it]..." The data revealed

that spirituality for this group of African-American Third Agers is not dissociated from

life-long learning.

African-American Third Ager Characteristics, Perceptions, and Interpretations

The fourth theme sustained by the data was descriptive in nature. This category

represented an amalgamation of significant characteristics, perceptions, and

interpretations possessed by the group. Because this qualitative investigation sought to

examine and understand the lived experiences of African-American Third Agers and the

meaning they assigned to this phase of their lives, as well as discover who these

individuals are, any and all descriptive aspects of their experiences were welcomed. That

is the reason why narrative analysis was used. It was employed purposefully because of

its particular usefulness for providing an insider's view (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The contribution of the insider's view is essential to the adult education discourse. It is

vital because in the 2010 Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, Wolf and Brady

(2010) admit, "Sometimes in our zeal as educational gerontologist, we err on the side of stereotyping older people" (p. 376). Therefore, it is imperative to report notable characteristics, perceptions, and interpretations unique to this participant group as contained in the data.

Characteristics; who are these individuals? The research included nine participants; seven females and two males. All of the participants were retired from their professions/vocations and engaged in a formal and/or a non-formal learning activity at the time of the interview. Moreover, their narratives revealed busy lifestyles with no time for, or interest in employment. Third-Agers are often depicted as those who are best positioned to volunteer (Carr, 2009a). Volunteerism was a prevalent characteristic among the group in my research. Their volunteer venues were varied and diverse and included the following: church, a local elementary school, a local hospice, a community hospital, a community youth organization, and a local prison.

The participants were adult learners who were also engaged in teaching others. The role of teacher / educator was another feature evident in this participant pool. Their stories revealed that they were not only life-long learners and volunteers but they were also teachers, educators, instructors, and facilitators of learning in various settings; settings which included their families, churches, community organizations and, other institutions. It was discovered that at the time of the interview, five of the nine participants were volunteer educators in some capacity or another related to their love of learning and their interests. For example, one participant shared:

I've just taken a ton of classes. When I retired, I took a lot of classes at [XXXX]

Center for the Elderly, and then I became a volunteer and taught classes.... I took

a lot of computer classes, and then I became a Computer Instructor...

Another participant, who is a volunteer for a local youth organization and also volunteers

at the local prison, further revealed herself perception of a facilitator of learning when she

expressed her desire to...

...become increasingly involved with the youth of this generation, because in my

opinion, due to the lack of fathers being in the home and other circumstances, the

youth are desperately in need of training, training to learn how to work, learn how

to love, learn how to trust, all of those things.

Their impetus for learning was intertwined with a desire to help others, share knowledge,

and remain engaged in the world around them.

An additional trait indicative of the nine was a high disregard for inactivity in

retirement. Participants initially revealed an aversion to inactivity while discussing

motivations for learning. Throughout the interviews were impressions that this group did

not tolerate do-nothingness. One participant voiced:

Some people when they retire, they make the statement, 'I done worked and I

ain't doing anything else.' [I disagree]. It's like [even though you are retired]...

you're still alive. You need to do something else, or otherwise you're gonna'

waste away. And then there [are] a lot of people, they don't want [to do anything

after they are retire]…

Overall, distaste for idleness in retirement was epitomized as one group member

recounted:

So you know I sat in a retirement session at [on my job in anticipation of retirement] and it was so sad. It was so sad to hear people actually afraid to retire, and so I told them when it got around to me, like they were going around and I'm listening to these people that don't know what to do with themselves, and I said 'Well I'm retiring hopefully to ministry and to do this and this,' and they're like 'You've been planning it?' I said 'Well yeah!'

Self-assured, energetic, positive, innovative, spiritual, helpful, and thirsty for learning are among the several traits descriptive of this group of African-American Third Age adult learners. However, since this inquiry sought to elicit voice, the final voice summarizing the characteristics of an African-American Third Agers should come from within the group. One woman testified:

I love volunteering. I love interacting with people, helping them. Interestingly enough, I interact with a lot of older people at my church and I kind of try to keep them motivated, rather than for them to just sit down, and so I try to encourage them to go to Bible Study, to go to Sunday School, and to that end, I even started a midday Bible Study for older people who don't drive at night...

Perceptions and interpretations; Making meaning of one's experience. This section reports the perceptions, attitudes and interpretations of the African-American Third Ager towards life-long learning. The perceptions, attitudes and interpretations reported in this section are overlaid with the postmodernism view of the researcher that there is no mono-singular interpretation of knowledge, but multiple interpretations that are continuously and simultaneously affected by the interrelating tensions of race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, "other" group affiliation, and social, economic, political,

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and cultural factors (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). It is the interrelatedness of these factors that shapes how individuals make meaning out of their experiences.

Since self-perception was key to this study, this sections also takes into consideration the postmodern view of self. The "Self'" as articulated through a postmodern lens is constantly changing. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), insist, "...the self is multiple, ever changing and some say fragmented" (p. 260). What this means is that the concept of self is not a unitary concept. The implication is that the self undergoes a series of cycles of construction and reconstruction that are fortified by reflexive questioning and reflection. According to Clark and Dirkx (2000), a non-unitary notion of self will redirect the aim of Adult Education as one that "seeks to foster acquisition of multiple and even disparate potentials for being" (p.112).

Furthermore, because this study focused on the contextualized meaning and experience as narrated by the African-American Third Ager, Collins (1998) Standpoint theory and Intersectionality were also applied as heuristic tools during data analysis. For Collins (1998), standpoint theory is based on "the notion of a group with shared experiences and interest" (p. 203). Additionally, Collins (1998) recommends using intersectionality as a framework for thinking "through social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions..."(p.205). Consequently, viewing the situated self-perceptions of this participant group through a postmodern perspective, integrated with the use of standpoint theory and intersectionality, led to a greater appreciation and respect for the authentic voice of the African-American Third Ager.

Many of the participants were clear and emphatic in articulating their understanding, perceptions and attitudes towards life-long learning. For example, concerning life-long learning, one participant said:

To me that means every day you're learning something. I'm looking for something to learn new every day, and I don't mind sharing what I learn with somebody either. ...well one thing I know, [is] that you should keep learning. You should never stop, and whatever you learn, nobody can take it away from you. You know people say 'Oh you still going to school?' 'Yeah, and what about it?' But I also know that you don't retain or it's not as easy as it used to be...

This participant also expressed, "...I have a thirst for learning. I mean a lot of these things [workshops] I go to I am the only Black one in the group." Still another reported,

I found that I can learn anywhere, and it's not just in a book. Learning happens every minute of the day, if you allow yourself to be in tune to it and alive to it. Even being here and looking outside watching the animals, it's amazing how not so different we are, and if you don't stop and take the time to watch that, it just never clicks, but it's amazing....

As a whole, the group exhibited positive perceptions and attitudes towards aging as adult learners situated in the Third Age of the lifespan. The narratives were replete with the desire to continue to learn. However there was unanimous agreement that there have been changes in how the participants are experience and assign meaning to learning as they have grown older. Comments included statements such as "[My desire] hasn't changed... I have a desire to learn." And, "I've always had it [passion for learning]...but now the passion is greater." Specifically, one participant commented,

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Well I think my desire to learn remains the same, but I think as you get older and you progress, you rely a lot more on your experience sometimes than just necessarily academic learning, but they both are very, very important, but I think that's more of what happens... as I got older that I rely a lot on my experience, but of course learning, from what I've learned you know academically and biblically, it still is very good.

Another commonly reported perception was the pace at which learning is now taking place. "[Since] I've gotten older, I don't grasp things as fast, but I still grasp things, but I think that [is] the big factor... getting older." One of the male participants summed up his perception of the pace at which he now learns by saying, "I think it's more of a slower pace, rather than… You know the energy of 21 is a lot different from 65, but I still like to learn." Comparatively, another participant reported, "the grasping has slowed... I guess that would be the same thing as not learning as fast…slowed down a little bit…Slowed down…but not stopped…It hasn't stopped…"

There is no lack of research on the topic of memory and aging. Most of the studies done on this topic conclude that among the aging there is memory loss. (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Many of the participants shared their perceptions about aging, concentration, and memory. There was honest acknowledgment that learning in this phase of life is impacted by memory. For example, concerning learning and memory, one participant shared:

[I] don't retain or it's not as easy as it used to be, and so I have to write...and the more I write, the better I learn. When I study, I write. I'll read a question and

then I'll write the answer and then go and check, but the writing makes it stick for me.

Some of the participants did not speak in terms of forgetfulness or memory loss explicitly, but reported how their learning has changed. Exemplar of this is seen in the words of one participant as she shared how learning has changed: "It has changed, because [when I was] younger I could remember everything I read. Now when I read, it doesn't seem like I'm retaining it." Still other participants spoke more frankly about memory loss and made blunt statements such as: "...my memory is not as good as it used to be... " and "I don't remember things like I used to..."

Summary of characteristics, perceptions, and interpretations. This section introduced notable characteristics, perceptions, and interpretations identified within the participant group. I started this section with a brief statement attesting to the purposeful use of narrative analysis because of its usefulness of eliciting voice; voice is considered the insider's perspective of the participant. I then pointed out common traits among the nine participants as evidenced by the data. Some of the common characteristics among this group were as follows:

- a busy lifestyle
- a non interest in full or part-time employment
- a high level of volunteerism in various settings
- an affinity for teaching others and facilitating learning in their homes and community.
- an aversion to do-nothingness
- a slower pace of learning

Additionally, how these individuals perceived adult learning and their attitude towards learning at this stage in life was emphasized. The notion of group affiliation was interjected and discussed early in this section because it aided in understanding how one's perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations are contextualized, and therefore provided meaning to the experience. The link between perceptions and meaning-making was established. For example, the way in which this group of African-American Third Age adult learners made meaning of the aging process was reflective in their attitude towards aging. There was acknowledgement of a slower pace of learning and cognitive changes. However, in the end, the evidence pointed to an undiminished veracity for learning among this group of African-American Third Agers.

Results Summary

This chapter began by identifying the problem addressed in this research study and the corresponding research questions. The problem in the field of Adult Education is that we do not know much about how the African-American Third Age Adult learner experiences and meaning is assigned in this phase of adult development. Therefore, this study sought to understand how the participants in this study viewed learning in the Third Age and why they participated in adult learning. The analysis of the data revealed four core themes: (1) critical experiences and influential people, (2) motivations for participation in adult learning, (3) spirituality, (4) characteristics, perceptions and interpretations.

Based on the data analysis, for this participant pool, learning in the Third Age is a significant experience and is laden with meaning. Critical experiences and influential people shaped their learning experiences throughout their lives. These experiences and

people were also included as part of the factors that made up their motivations for continuing to participate in adult learning in this phase of their lives.

Overall, their motivations for participation in adult learning were rooted in their love of learning and their faith in God. This led to the third theme: spirituality. For this study, spirituality came to be interpreted as the participant's personal experience with the Sacred in everyday life. Each participant shared many aspects of how their spirituality gave meaning to their learning experiences, past, present and future.

Finally, this chapter discussed the fourth theme embedded in the data: Characteristics, perceptions, attitudes and interpretations. Because this investigation sought to understand who these individuals are, it was important to identify and report any descriptive elements of data surfaced during the analysis as well. This participant group can be described as adult learners in the Third Age who are self-assured, energetic, positive, innovative, spiritual, helpful, and possess a thirst for learning.

An understanding of self was key to this study. Consequently this study analyzed the narratives of participants while employing a theoretical framework which included postmodernism, standpoint theory, and intersectionality. What this means is that the researcher was mindful during data analysis to pay attention to the voice of the participant as an individual, and to also attend to the situated group based identity of the participant pool. Therefore, the perceptions, attitudes and interpretations found among the data are to be understood as those unique to the individual participants as well as those reflective of this societally situated group of African-American adult learners in the Third Age.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: The Voice of the Nine

The findings from the voice of the nine are relevant because it enables the topic of

the AATA adult learner to be addressed in a wider academic arena. The field of adult

education is currently preparing its institutions, researchers, and practitioners for the

social reality of an increase in the older adult population that will shape the provision of

learning in contemporary American society. Preparation for this social reality requires

research findings that produce insight into a cohort of older learners whom are active

consumers of adult education. Therefore the conclusions drawn from the research

findings are necessary because they narrow the literature gap that currently exists

concerning what it means to be an African-American Third Age adult learner.

Implications

In desiring to help educators work more effectively with adults who are members

of marginalized groups in society, Guy (1999) calls for the development of teaching

strategies that minimize the potential for further exclusion of already marginalized adult

learners. Culturally relevant educators should find ways to learn about the cultural

backgrounds of their adult learners. An acceptable method of understanding more about

an individual's cultural background is to take a racialized view. According to the Handbook of Race and Adult Education (2010) a racialized perspective means to view something through the lens of one racial group's lived experiences, access the educational value, contribute to the cannon, advance the field, and improve practice. To that end, my research findings fit squarely into the cannon of knowledge with implications that will assist those committed to providing culturally relevant education because the findings reveal insight into the cultural backgrounds of nine African-American adult learners from their lived experiences.

One of the main findings of this research is that for these participants, critical incidents and influential people make up the fabric of meaning which overlays their learning experiences. The findings indicate that the experience of life-long learning, as narrated by these African-American Third Agers, is a composition of decisive events and persuasive people. Understanding their learning experiences was essential to this research. A principle conclusion that can be drawn from this understanding of meaning is that this participant group contained cultural knowledge not previously tapped.

Understanding cultural knowledge is of particular importance when it comes to ensuring relevant adult education when serving culturally diverse populations (Ross-Gordon, Martin and Biscoe, 1990). Moreover, Guy and Colin (1998) encourage new contributions to the domain of adult education inquiry from the African-American perspective. For them, cultural knowledge is important to the practice and profession of adult education because it aids in the formation of a more inclusive curriculum. Along these same lines Merriam and Brocket (2007) purport that the production of knowledge is achieved when people take their lived experience and make sense out of their world.

This is exactly what this research accomplished. The findings of this study provide reliable new knowledge, specifically, reliable cultural knowledge about what it means to be an African-American Third Ager adult learner in urban Northeast Ohio.

The implications of this new urban knowledge are twofold. First, it should stir the interest of educators that are truly committed to the delivery of culturally relevant adult education and who want to improve their practice. Second, this research further challenges practitioners, especially urban practitioners, to "keep in mind the respective needs of people at the margins" when developing educational opportunities and programs for the adult learner in the urban context (Rogers and Hansman, 2004, p. 26). According to Martin (2004), "the urban context represents the social and environmental situations that inform the lived experiences of individuals...that reside in densely populated urban areas" (p.3).

Furthermore, the findings concerning critical experiences and influential people have important meaning and implications to adult development theory because they are consistent with the literature indicating that a life-long learner begins early in life (Stehilk, 2003). It also underscores the fundamental role that experience plays in learning in adulthood and adult development. Adult learners tend to describe themselves by their experience (Knowles, 1989). The adult learners in this study identified themselves as life-long learners for many reasons. However, the primary reasons they saw themselves as life-long learners was because of the defining events and people who gave guidance in their life, their motivation for continuing to learn, and their spirituality.

Also, Kolb (1984) states, "Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience" (p. 27). There is no disagreement among scholars that the learning

experience cannot be detached from context. Context is very important in understanding

adult learning and development. Based on the findings of this research, I argue that

context matters. Context proved to be an essential thread that ran through the fabric of

meaning for the voice of the nine. According to Merriam et al. (2007), understanding

context in learning is vital because it acknowledges how structures and institutions of

society affect learning, particularly societal structures such as race, class, gender, age,

and culture. The sociocultural perspective of context on adult development provides a

lens through which to understand how individuals grow, change, and transform across the

life span under the structural forces of society. The findings indicate the impact of race,

class, gender, age, and culture on the development and learning experiences of the nine.

The conclusions of this study highlight the contextualized experiences of the

participants and how those experiences are integrated into motivation and meaning

making in the Third Age of life. In particular, we witnessed the impact that the urban

context has on the lives of the adult learner, as acknowledged by Martin and Rogers

(2004). They assert that there are social, structural, economic, and even technological

barriers unique to the urban contexts that challenge adult learners in their pursuit of

quality adult education. However, these findings reveal that, despite the challenges of the

urban context, the nine remained highly motivated to continue to learn well into

retirement and the Third Age.

A New Model for Motivation: What Motivated The Nine To Participate?

Both historically and currently adult education inquiry is galvanized by the

overarching questions of who participates and why. As scholars we often forget that each

participation theory that firmly undergirds our current practice began as a simple

investigation. The research of Cyril O. Houle (1961), resulted in the now-famous publication, *The Inquiring Mind*, which examined underlying factors that motivate adults to become lifelong learners was based on the experiences of twenty-two adults. Likewise, my research findings support the idea of rethinking a model of motivation for participation that includes factors not previously conceived.

Based on the voice of the nine, the findings help construct a new model for motivation. Figure 4 illustrates a conceptualized model to depict the interrelatedness of factors that motivated the nine participants to continue to engage in adult learning. These factors emanated loud and clear from the voice of the nine. In essence, the model represents converging motives that answer the question why do the nine continue to learn and participate in adult learning? According to the voice of the nine, their motivation to continue to participate in adult learning at this phase in life is simultaneously being impacted by one or several of the factors as illustrated in the model. The Therefore, I argue that this research affirms and advances other important research surrounding motivations, needs, and trends for understanding why adults continue to participate in lifelong learning. Moreover, understanding their motivations for participation has important implications for educators, program planners, and administrators because a better understanding can inform curriculum development and lead to better program outcomes.

Figure 4. A Model for Motivation: AATA Motivating Factors

Another conclusion that may be drawn from this research is that for these nine participants, spirituality is inextricably linked to meaning making and life-long learning. It was discovered that their learning experiences are steeped in their spirituality and religious beliefs. On this point, the findings are consistent with the work of Elizabeth Tisdell. Over the past decade, in the field of adult education Tisdell has emerged as a leader for her research interest in the role of spirituality in learning in adulthood and higher education. Her work is credited for setting the current context for accepting spirituality in adult education as a category of analysis (English & Tisdell, 2010). Her work has paved the road to a scholarly consensus that connects spirituality with adult learning through meaning-making, and that our spiritual selves help define who we are (Tisdell, 1999). Therefore, the findings from this research are in agreement with leading scholarship because it speaks directly to how the nine participants engage in meaning-making and offers insight into who these learners are. However, the findings extend beyond the work of Tisdell and others because the findings highlight the significance of participants' of faith in God and their religious practice.

On the other hand, the findings of this study relating to spirituality are more consistent with the findings of Johnson-Bailey (2002), Rogers (1998), and Gyant (1991) because their work exposes the role of spirituality in everyday life of African-Americans. Overall, findings expose the centrality of both spirituality and religion. For this reason, the implications on practice challenges the field to push past the examination of spirituality only and to begin to examine the role of faith in God and religious practice in the life of the older adult learner.

Additionally, the findings on spirituality have implications for the growing body of literature focused on adult learning from a holistic perspective. Research encompassing a more holistic understanding of learning has become a prominent trend in the field of adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Scholastic inquiry along these lines posits that learning is more than a cognitive process; it is a process that extends to the somatic, affective and spiritual domains (Boucouvalas and Lawrence, 2010; Dirkx, 2001). Given the centrality of spirituality in this study, the findings contribute to the knowledge base related to the body of holistic learning literature because it captures and validates alternative ways of knowing. The findings provide underpinnings for Tolliver (2010) who stresses the importance of honoring alternatives to Eurocentric ways of knowing and being in the world as legitimate and valid knowledge.

In summary, what do these findings surrounding spirituality and the voice of the nine mean for contemporary adult education practice? It means that spirituality, and possibly even religion, has to be included in the framework of thinking, strategizing, and mapping out the future the older adult learner. I further contend that no matter how uncomfortable the topic may be for some, the profession and practice has a responsibility

to push past its comfort zone in an attempt to make space for what the learner deems important and essential.

Beyond the field of adult educations, the findings have implications for the field of educational gerontology and geragogy. The former is a field of study and practice dedicated to the education and learning potential of older adults (Findsen, 2005), and the latter is focused on teaching and learning strategies where the target audience is older people (Fornosa, 2012). Over a decade ago, adult educator and gerontologist, Mary Alice Wolf (1998) called for practitioners to prepare for demographic shifts that will propel the older adult learner to the forefront of academia. That time is now.

As of the year 2012 there are over 40 million individuals over age 65 living in the United States: this figure is expected to grow. Consequently, the findings of my research alert us to a new type of older adult learner whom has emerged on the scene. A new type of older adult learner calls for new approaches and teaching methodologies more suitable to the educational demands of this market segment. Hence, the implications of this research are enormous in terms of how practitioners of educational gerontology and geragogy will sustain the discourse that shapes the theoretical and practical training of educators of Third Agers.

Charting the Third Age

The findings of this research add new detail to the evolving theory of the Third Age. Much of the uncharted territory on this new delineation of the lifespan called the Third Age has to do with meaning and experience as lived by the individuals approximately age 65 to 79 (James & Wink, 2006; Carr, 2009b). Similarly, my findings corroborate their conclusions that experience, meaning, and purpose are central to this

age group. However, when compared to a broad overview of the Third Age literature, my findings are distinctive because they delve deeper into the cultural factors that interplay in meaning making and understanding one's experience.

Even though the original theory of the Third Age as put forth by British researcher Laslett (1989; 1991) has advanced over the years, it does not align exactly with how the emerging literature base in America is currently conceptualizing the Third Age. This is important to note because the comparison illustrates more precisely where these new findings are situated in the ongoing conceptualization of the Third Age.

There are two primary points upon which they differ. First, originally, Laslett (1989; 1991) did not assign exact chronological age brackets to the Third Age, but simply described it as the period later in life, after the responsibility of children and family, where the individual can focus on personal fulfillment before the onset significant physical decline to the point of needing a caretaker. Second, Laslett (1989; 1991) theorized in response to the obsolescence of the British education. His work was a critique of an outmoded educational system that did not value older adult learners. On the other hand, the American approach to research on the Third Age is primarily driven by the economic impact of aging Baby Boomers and is developing around redefining retirement; finding meaning, purpose, and reengagement in post-retirement. Nonetheless, my findings support and build upon tenants of both prongs of theoretical thought concerning the Third Age.

For example, when viewed from the perspective of Laslett (1989; 1991) my findings are similar because they challenge and critique traditional approaches to the education of aging adults. Yet, when examined from the current American focus of

inquiry, the findings fit well because they contribute an insider's view as what is important and meaningful to a particular group of Third Agers. Because Third Agers in America are being viewed with an economic lens as a growing consumer market segment (Cruce & Hillman, 2012), having an insider's view of what it means to be a Third Ager, has economic implications for higher education, community centers of non-formal education, and other consumer based initiatives.

An important, but not surprising, conclusion drawn from this research is that Third Agers are not a homogeneous group The lived experiences of the individuals within the group were diverse and represent findings not dissimilar from those of Frey (2007) who examined future changes in American's aging population. This detail confirming the heterogeneity of older adults should not be over looked because Third Age theory is restructuring the rapidly changing societal views of aging and older adults in this Nation. In the restructuring of how society views aging, these findings are likely to engage the attention of aging theorist, gerontologist, and educational practitioners in charting a better understanding of the Third Age.

Recommendations for Future Research

This investigation sought to address the problem that we do not know much about African-American Third Age adult learners, their experiences, their attitudes and perceptions towards lifelong learning, and how they assign meaning in this phase of life. By concentrating on meaning and experience the goals of this research were accomplished and the gap in the literature narrowed. Although the goals of this study were achieved, the need for further exploration is evident. First, it is recommended that this study be reproduced on a larger scale; locally, and then nationally. The rationale

behind this recommendation would be to gain more understanding about the differences and similarities among African-American Third Agers adult learners based on geographic location.

A second recommendation for further research exploration is an analysis of the significance of the role of spirituality in the Third Age. This recommendation is based on the findings that indicated a relationship between spirituality and the meaning of learning in Third Age. I hope to continued rigorous inquiry along these lines towards the possible development and theorization of Third Age Spirituality.

On a final note, I acknowledge that all of the implications for future research launched by this investigation are too numerous to consider adequately at this time. However, most importantly for the future, I recommend research explorations that are participatory in nature and continue the academic momentum, initiated by this study, towards unpacking the complexities of the African-American Third Age adult learner.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB CONSENT FORM

I, _____ hereby give permission for Darcia L. Simpson to use this taped interview of my life history as part of the course material for her doctoral program in Urban Education at Cleveland State University in which she is enrolled.

I also understand that any artifacts, documents, or photos shared during the interview will be considered data for the study. She also may use any or all aspects of the taped interview for the completion of her dissertation.

As part of this consent, I understand that the faculty associated with the program may also review the interview tapes. At the conclusion of the project, I give permission for Darcia L. Simpson to make the transcriptions from the taped interview available for potential use as part of archival collection.

I understand that Darcia L. Simpson will use narrative approach to gather a perspective of African-American Third Agers as lived and both personally and professionally. I understand that she is conducting this research because there is little written reference and few formal research studies about the contributions of African-Americans as Third Agers as adult learners.

I understand that I am consenting to participate in a semi-structured interview which will take approximately 60-90 minutes and audio taped.

I understand that I have the right to refuse participation in the project or withdraw from the project, once initiated.

I have the right to place restrictions on the use of the transcripts of the interview, including sealing of information for a designated period of time.

I have the right to not answer any questions I choose not to answer.

I understand that I will receive a copy of the draft of the transcript to review and to correct for transcription errors. I understand that I then will receive a copy of the final transcript. I understand that copies of the tapes and transcripts will not be made available to anyone for purposes not stated in this informed consent form without my approval.

Name: (print) _____

Address:_____ State:_____ Zip Code: _____

Primary Phone Number: (_____) _____

Signature: _____Date:_____

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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Could you provide me with some background information that would be helpful to my study?

    *   Your age

    *   Your education (k-12, any professional training and/or postsecondary education)

    *   Are your retired or employed now and if so, in what field?

    *   Tell me about your professional work history.

    *   Where you grew up and where you are living now?

2. Before we met I asked if you could bring an object, photo, memento, or some memory from your educational experience. Could you talk about what you brought and what it means to you?

3. Could you talk about your experience of formal learning while you were growing up? Informal learning?

    [Has learning always been an engaging and positive experience? Are there times when it has been difficult and could you talk about why that was so?]

4. Are you currently engaged in any formal or informal adult learning activities?

5. As you have grown older, how has your experience of learning remained the same and how has it changed?

    Have there been historical junctures – personal or societal – that have impacted your experience of learning?

6. In what places and through what experiences would you say that learning takes place for you at this time in your life?

7. What remains important to you as something you would like to continue to study? Or simply to learn more about?

8. Could you talk about what gets in the way of your desire to learn more and your efforts to do so?

9. What do you think the expression "life-long learner" means? Would you say you are a life-long learner?

10. Have you ever heard of the term Third Age or Third Ager when referring to older adults?

If yes, then describe for me your definition of the Third Age

If no, then give them a copy of the definition and have them read it.

Third Age -- "an era of personal fulfillment....the age of personal achievement and fulfillment (Laslett, 1991, p. 4). is not wholly defined by chronological age (Laslett, 1991); it is best understood as a period in adulthood "characterized by the pursuit of 'voluntary' and rewarding activities following retirement from a career job and the termination of responsibilities to one's children" (Siegel, 1990, p. 363); is interpreted as a season in the lifespan where individuals are in search of purpose and meaning which gives way to an avenue for extended self-realization, with 20-30 more years of active living ahead of you (Sadler, 2006; Freedman, 1999; Williamson, 2002). The third age is interpreted in relationship to the fourth age which is characterized by "dependence, decrepitude and death" (Laslett, 1991, p. 4).

11. How would you describe yourself in terms of the Third Age? Would you consider yourself in the Third Age of life? (Why or why not?

12. What are your expectations for the life you would like to lead as you grow older? How might these expectations be similar or different to common views about this phase of life?

13. What are your hopes for your future?

14. If you were planning or developing a class (a formal leaning session) on a subject you liked, tell me some of the things that would be important to you as developed and planned the class.

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Cleveland State
University
engaged learning

Memorandum

Institutional Review Board

To: Anne Galletta
Curriculum & Foundations

From: Craig M. Zullig
Director
Office of Sponsored Programs & Research

Date: July 29, 2013

Re: Results of IRB Review of your project number: #29879-GAL-HS
Co-Investigator: Darcia Simpson, Student
Title: A Qualitative Investigation of the Experience of African-American Adult Learners in the Third Age: Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Life-Long Learning

The IRB has reviewed and approved your application for the above named project, under the category noted below. Approval for use of human subjects in this research is for a one-year period as noted below. If your study extends beyond this approval period, *you must contact this office to initiate an annual review of this research.*

By accepting this decision, you agree to notify the IRB of: (1) any additions to or changes in procedures for your study that modify the subjects' risk in any way; and (2) any events that affect that safety or well-being of subjects. Notify the IRB of any revisions to the protocol, including the addition of researchers, prior to implementation.

Thank you for your efforts to maintain compliance with the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects.

Approval Category: **Approval Date:**   **July 26, 2013**

_X_   **Expedited (9)**   **Expiration Date:**   **July 25, 2014**

cc: Project file

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