

# Qualitative Gerontology

Second Edition

---

A Contemporary Perspective

Graham D. Rowles, PhD  
Nancy E. Schoenberg, PhD  
Editors



Springer Publishing Company

and Nursing, Director of the Ph.D. Program in Gerontology, and Associate Director of the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Rowles' research focuses on the experience of aging in different environmental contexts. A central theme of this work is exploration, using qualitative methodologies, of the changing relationship between elders and their environment with advancing age and the implications of this relationship for health and wellbeing. He has conducted in-depth ethnographic research with elderly populations in urban (inner city), rural (Appalachian), and nursing home environments. His publications include *Prisoners of Space? Exploring the Geographical Experience of Older People*, and three co-edited volumes, *Aging and Milieu: Environmental Perspectives on Growing Old*, *Qualitative Gerontology*, and *Long-term Care for the Rural Elderly*, in addition to more than 50 book chapters and articles. He is a Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education and received the 1997 Distinguished Academic Gerontologist Award of the Southern Gerontological Society. He was Editor of the *Journal of Applied Gerontology* from 1995–1999.

**Nancy E. Schoenberg, PhD**, is Associate Professor of Behavioral Science, Anthropology, and Internal Medicine (Cardiology) and a faculty member in the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging and Associate of the Center for Health Services Management and Research at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Schoenberg, a medical anthropologist and gerontologist, examines the illness experience in the context of local cultures and the wider array of structural arrangements. Incorporating anthropological principles, including holistic, critical, and grounded perspectives, she attempts to understand how older adults respond and adjust to chronic illness. Dr. Schoenberg particularly is interested in examining health disparities in the United States, specifically focusing on the experiences of African-American, rural and female elders and health threats of hypertension, diabetes, food insecurity, and coronary heart disease. Her research interests include self-care decisions of older adults toward heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes, qualitative and combination methods, and culturally appropriate long-term care options for elders. She currently is involved in research on self-care decision-making for coronary heart disease, experiential dimension of health care utilization for congestive heart failure, and a multi-ethnic comparison of diabetes self-care beliefs and behaviors.

# Contents

Copyright © 2002 by Springer Publishing Company, Inc.

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Springer Publishing Company, Inc.

Springer Publishing Company, Inc.  
536 Broadway  
New York, NY 10012-3955

*Acquisitions Editor: Hekvi Gold*  
*Production Editor: Janice Stangel*  
*Cover design by Susan Hauley*

01 02 03 04 05 / 5 4 3 2 1

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Qualitative gerontology : a contemporary perspective / Graham D. Rowles, Nancy E. Schoenberg, editors.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8261-1335-4

1. Gerontology—Research. 2. Old age—Research. 3. Aging—Research. I. Rowles, Graham D. II. Schoenberg, Nancy E.

RA564.8 .Q355 2001

362.6'072—dc21

2001 020646

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

**8078069**

*Contributors*

vii

*Preface*

ix

## Part I: Introduction

1. Back to the Future  
*Nancy E. Schoenberg and Graham D. Rowles* 3

## Part II: Telling Stories

- Introduction  
*Hege Ravidal* 30
2. Guided Autobiography: In Search of Ordinary Wisdom  
*Gary M. Kenyon* 37
3. The Study of Lives in Progress: Approaches to Research on Life Stories  
*Johannes J. F. Schroots and James E. Birren* 51

## Part III: Being There

- Introduction  
*Sharon R. Kaufman* 68
4. Ethnography of the Particular: The Individual Case and the Culture of Death in America  
*Sharon R. Kaufman* 73
5. Participant Observations of a Participant Observer  
*Juliet M. Corbin* 93
6. Online Ethnography: Studying Group Dynamics of a Virtual Community of Dementia Caregivers  
*Margaret A. Perkinson* 109

Part IV: "Let's Talk"

Introduction <i>Nancy E. Schoenberg</i>	130
7. The Qualitative Interview With Older Informants: Some Key Questions <i>Robert L. Rubinstein</i>	137
8. The Active Subject in Qualitative Gerontology <i>Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein</i>	154

Part V: Hybrid Vigor

Introduction <i>Nancy E. Schoenberg</i>	174
9. Counting and Recounting: Approaches to Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Data and Methods <i>Lisa Groger and Jane K. Straker</i>	179
10. Maximizing Methods: Interviewers as Informants <i>J. Kevin Eckert and Sheryl I. Zimmerman</i>	200
11. Seeking Diagnosis for a Cognitively Impaired Family Member: Evidence From Focus Groups <i>David L. Morgan</i>	213

Part VI: Looking and Seeing

Introduction <i>Graham D. Rowles</i>	234
12. A Picture Is Worth . . . : The Use of Photography in Gerontological Research <i>Dena Shenk and Ronald M. Schmid</i>	241
13. Seeing the Unseen: Literary Interpretation in Qualitative Gerontology <i>Maria D. Vesperi</i>	263

Part VII: Perspective

14. Forward to the Past <i>Nancy E. Schoenberg and Graham D. Rowles</i>	281
<i>Index</i>	285

# Contributors

**James E. Birren**, Center on Aging, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California

**Juliet M. Corbin**, Department of Nursing, San Jose State University, and Research Associate, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, California

**J. Kevin Eckert**, Departments of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, Maryland

**Lisa Groger**, Department of Sociology, Gerontology and Anthropology, Miami University of Ohio, Oxford, Ohio

**Jaber F. Gubrium**, Department of Sociology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida

**James A. Holstein**, Department of Sociology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

**Sharon R. Kaufman**, Department of Anthropology, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, California

**Gary M. Kenyon**, Gerontology Program, St. Thomas University, Fredricton, New Brunswick, Canada

**David L. Morgan**, Institute on Aging, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon

**Margaret A. Perkinson**, Program in Occupational Therapy, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri

**Hege Ravdal**, PhD Program in Gerontology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky

## The Active Subject in Qualitative Gerontology

Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein

An image of the aging subject always stands behind the actual individuals and interactions studied in gerontology. The image affects the researcher's basic understanding of how the older person fits into the world. This image does not directly pertain to the individual respondent who actually answers questions in interviews, nor does it refer to the real behavior and interactions observed in field research. Instead, the image depicts what researchers imagine animates these respondents and social actors as research subjects. This may range from a subject who is passively animated by external or internal forces, to one who actively shapes the world in his or her own right.

This chapter is concerned with how researchers imagine the subject in qualitative gerontology. It is not directly about research procedure, although research design is necessarily implicated. By comparing two different images of the subject—one passive and the other active—we hope to show the advantage of qualitative gerontology's particularly active way of imagining the aging experience. In our view, how researchers conceptualize the research subject is as important for understanding the logic of research and the value of results as are the actual research methods. As we will see, this implicates the subjectivity of researchers in the sense that there is also a subject behind the researcher.

Researchers often ignore the assumptions they make about their subjects, as well as their own place in the scheme of things. They are rightfully concerned with justifying research methodologies in grant applications, presenting details of research design and methods of procedure in publications, and otherwise legitimizing the technical details of their work. But one cannot expect to comprehend why qualitative gerontologists, in particular, pose the research questions they do, why

they might be more concerned with allegedly small samples instead of larger ones, or why they orient to data interpretively rather than causally, without understanding how qualitative researchers in general orient to their subjects and subject matter. Oddly enough, questions related to sample size, the reliability of instruments, or the ostensible representativeness of findings are not their leading concerns, simply because these often derive from an entirely different way of imagining subjectivity. Unfortunately, standards based on an inappropriate set of methodological relevancies are often applied, resulting in the unfair evaluation of qualitative research and its findings. While we do not address such technical matters here, we do offer a framework for approaching their relevance to qualitative inquiry.

### *The Image of the Passive Subject*

We begin with the image of the passive subject, which will provide a basis for comparison with the more active subject envisioned by qualitative researchers (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). We will also consider the equal importance of the counterpart image of the subject standing behind the researcher or interviewer. At one time, the image of the passive subject dominated social and behavioral research. Researchers formulated arguments centered on the impact of conditions, such as class, generation, health, and morale, on the experience of aging. While this is no longer as pervasive, the image still informs quantitative researchers of how to think about their questions and observations, how to apply them, and how to evaluate the results. More than anything, this passive image makes it reasonable for quantitative researchers to orient methodologically to their projects in the way they do.

*Respondents as Vessels of Answers.* In quantitative approaches, those studied are conceived as passive vessels of answers for questions put to them in the role of respondents. The subjects behind these respondents are assumed to be repositories of experience. They hold the answers to demographic questions related to matters such as age, gender, race, occupation, and socioeconomic status. They contain information about social networks, including household composition, friendship groups, circles of care, and other relationships. These repositories also hold a great deal of experiential data, including attitudes, feelings, and activities. In principle, the vessel-like subject behind the respondent passively possesses all the information the quantitative researcher wants to know;

the respondent merely conveys, for better or worse, what the subject already owns.

The distinction between the subject on the one hand, and the respondent on the other, is tacitly acknowledged in quantitative studies. Survey researchers, for example, regularly differentiate the attitudes of their subjects and the corresponding opinions conveyed in respondents' answers. The goal of survey questions is to obtain valid and reliable data about these attitudes, which come in the form of opinions communicated by respondents in interviews. As a result, there is continuing concern over whether opinions provided by respondents actually correspond to their attitudes. This then leads to questions regarding the accuracy of measurement and related issues of reliability and validity.

Given a passive subject, all questions surrounding the relationship between the respondent and the subject are necessarily methodological. The passive subject is, after all, just there; information about his or her experience is simply waiting to be more or less precisely obtained for research purposes. At no time are these subjects viewed as contributing to this information in their own right. Ideally, they merely release information to researchers, information that has been held uncontaminated within their vessel of answers.

In quantitative research, the trick is to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to undistorted communication between researcher and respondent. Much, if not most, of the methodological literature on interviewing deals with the procedural nuances of these complicated matters. For example, the vessel-of-answers view cautions interviewers to be wary of how they ask questions, lest their mode of inquiry bias the respondent and contaminate what actually lies within the subject. There are myriad techniques for obtaining unadulterated facts, most of which rely on interviewer and question neutrality. It is assumed, for instance, that the interviewer who poses questions that acknowledge alternative sides of an issue is being more neutral than the interviewer who does not. Researchers are advised to take this into account in elaborating interview questions. Valid results are believed to flow from the successful application of such guidelines.

All of this applies as well in quantitatively oriented observational studies. The subject behind the actor or informant is similarly passive and not engaged in the production of knowledge in his or her own right. If observation "goes by the book," is unobtrusive, and unbiased, it can be assumed that actors will validly present what their subjectivity merely holds within them—the unadulterated details of their conduct or way of life. Contamination emanates from undue research intrusions

in the social settings being observed or from the self-presentational distortions that arise when actors shape their conduct for the observer.

*The Passive Subject Behind the Researcher.* The subjectivity of the researcher also distinguishes quantitative and qualitative work. In quantitative work, a passive subject lurks behind researchers. Interviewers, for example, are expected to keep the respondent's vessel of answers in view and not unduly interfere in data collection. This is a matter of controlling oneself as an interviewer so as not to influence what the passive interview subject, who, except for perhaps the recalcitrant respondent, is only too willing to communicate. Interviewers must shake off serious self-consciousness; they must not take to heart the possibility that their presence in the interview may itself be constructing a distinctive subject behind the respondent. Most of all, interviewers must not seriously consider that their very own questions supply a particular frame of reference for the respondent's answers. To the extent such frameworks are considered to exist, they are viewed as embedded in the subjects' world behind the respondent, not behind the researcher. If the interviewer is to be at all self-conscious, it is limited to being alert to the possibility that the interviewer may be biasing or otherwise unduly influencing the research process.

Interviewers are expected to keep their personal opinions to themselves. While, of course, some minimal, neutral reaction to answers is necessary to acknowledge what respondents communicate, nothing further is normally deemed acceptable. For example, should the respondent discuss various sentiments surrounding caregiving, the quantitative interviewer might confirm this, but only as a way of inviting the respondent to elaborate on what already has been communicated. Ideally, the interviewer uses his or her interpersonal skills to merely encourage the expression of, but not to help construct, the attitudes, sentiments, and behaviors in question. In effect, the image of the passive subject behind the interviewer is one of a facilitator. As skilled as the interviewer might be in practice, all that he or she appropriately does is to promote the expression of the actual attitudes and behavior under consideration, information that lies in waiting behind or within the respondent.

The image of the passive subject behind this interviewer encourages the interviewer to control the interview situation so as to facilitate candid, uncontaminated communication. Ideally, the interview should be conducted in private. This assures that respondents will speak directly from their vessel of answers, not in response to the presence of others. Curiously enough, this assumes that the researcher merely facilitates the expression of what otherwise remains unaffected by his or her

presence. The presence of a merely facilitating interviewer, in other words, is not viewed as itself infringing on interview privacy. As Jean Converse and Howard Schuman (1974) note in their book on the informal aspects of survey interviewing, the seasoned interviewer learns that the "pull" of conversation, which might have an interpretive dynamic of its own, must be managed so that the "push of inquiry" (p. 26) is kept in focus. The hope is that the communicative pressures of conducting inquiry will produce "good hard data," facilitated by means of the interviewers' "soft" (p. 22) but not empirically intrusive conversational skills.

The watchword here is "control." Control signifies a passive subject behind the researcher, suggesting an interviewer who limits his or her involvement in the interview to a specific role, one that is constant, in principle, from one interview to another. Should the interviewer go out of control, so to speak, and introduce anything but variations on specified questions into the interview, the passive subject behind the interviewer is methodologically compromised. It is not the passive subject who is the problem, but rather the interviewer who has not adequately regulated his or her conduct or the situation so as to facilitate the pure expression of the respondent's vessel of answers.

### *The Image of the Active Subject*

What happens to research procedure if we *activate* these images? What happens if we view all participants in the research process as actively making meaning? This is precisely what takes place in varying degree in qualitative research. While there are technical differences as well as similarities between quantitative and qualitative research, the heart of the distinction centers on differences in their respective images of subjectivity. It is a hallmark of qualitative research that the image of the subject behind all participants in the research process is active to some degree. Whether it is the image of the subject behind the respondent in interview-based studies, the image of the subject behind the informant in observational research, or the subjectivity of the researcher him- or herself, the leading idea is that asking questions, eliciting stories, conducting participant observation, and the like requires us to consider that both those who are studied and those who conduct research actively assemble their lives and worlds in the process.

*The Active Subject.* Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds the details of a life history of experience but, in

the very process of offering them up to the researcher, constructively shapes the information. The active respondent can hardly "spoil" what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating in the interview process. Indeed, the activated subject pieces experiences together before, during, and after occupying the respondent role. This subject is always making meaning, regardless of whether he or she is actually being interviewed.

Because the respondent's experience is continually being assembled and modified, the truth value of interview responses cannot be judged simply in terms of whether they match what lies in an objective vessel of answers. From a quantitative standpoint, the truth of interview responses can be assessed in terms of reliability (the extent to which questioning yields the same answers under similar circumstances) and validity (the extent to which inquiry yields the correct answers) (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Different criteria apply when the interview is viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion. They center as much on *how* meaning is constructed as on *what* those meanings are. These "how" and "what" matters necessarily go together in qualitative research because active subjects construct meaning as an integral part of its communication (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). This is not the case in quantitative studies; there, researchers hope that the *hows* can be separated from the *whats* so that the *what* issues become the exclusive focus of attention. Ideally, the *how* questions are treated as technical issues; that is, they are limited to what the researcher does to obtain reliable and valid responses.

If qualitative researchers attend to the meaning-making process as much as to the meanings produced, it is because the image of the active subject requires it. This is not an aesthetic indulgence or a peculiar habit of procedure. Indeed, not attending to meaning production in qualitative research would be most invalid procedurally. Because research is viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making process, different methodological criteria apply, centered on how meaning is constructed, the circumstances that shape meaning, and the meaningful linkages that result. Of course, qualitative researchers do vary in the extent to which they emphasize the *hows* over the *whats*, but they all combine interest in them to some degree (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As such, the validity of their data does not derive exclusively from the data's correspondence to meanings held within the respondent, but from the data's capacity to convey experiential realities in terms that are circumstantially comprehensible and accountable.

*The Active Researcher.* The counterpart to the active subject behind those studied is the active subjectivity of the researcher. It is characteris-



tic of qualitative researchers that they are not comfortable conceiving of their role as composed of passive theorizing, a priori hypothesis specification, and detached data collection. Rather, these are actively and simultaneously engaged in qualitative research. More important, they must be engaged if the subject behind the researcher is activated. Again, this is not just force of habit or a matter of research tradition; the active subjectivity of the qualitative researcher requires it.

The activated researcher can move in a number of directions, each of which will be illustrated empirically in the next section. One of these is "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The grounded theorist is active in the sense that she or he realizes from the start that the premature formulation of a theoretical perspective or the a priori specification of hypotheses can significantly color findings. Realizing this, the grounded theorist studiously avoids shaping the empirical material in advance of data collection and, instead, turns to the world of meaning of those studied for theoretical direction. Theory formation and hypothesis setting are viewed as matters best taken up in relation to the empirical material, not beforehand. In other words, these are to be figured from the ground up, thus the term, grounded theory. Theory develops hand-in-hand with data collection and, in the process, the researcher "constantly compares" empirical material in order to increase the generality of the emerging configuration of categories and types.

A second direction is represented by the growing interest in life stories in social research. Here, the researcher actively seeks to document the narrative formulations and/or the narrative activity of the storyteller (Gubrium, 1993; Kaufman, 1986; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). Narrative research focuses on the ways life stories or other narratives of experience are put together by the storyteller, how this is accomplished, and the conditions that shape the process. The researcher actively seeks the narrative qualities and contours of the experiences in question. To the extent that the *how*s of the narrative process are emphasized over the *whats*, the researcher attempts to document the ways in which the respondent's own narrative competence organizes the story communicated.

A third path toward activation of subjectivity directs the researcher to the active use of social forms and categories by those studied. This centers on the social rhetorics of age in everyday life. Rather than focusing on the way a life story is assembled by the respondent, research deals with how accounts of all kinds are used to persuade and to accomplish various ends in particular circumstances (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). The focus here is on what is done with these accounts to create particular contexts for making age-related decisions, not on the analysis

of story contents per se. The narrative process and its social influences are highlighted, not the internal organizations of stories themselves. Many of these studies feature the actor as directly involved in particular ongoing concerns—households, support groups, clinics, hospitals, nursing homes, friendship circles—whose participants put a premium on interpreting the meaning of age in particular ways (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a, 2000b).

### Forms of Active Subjectivity

To illustrate how qualitative researchers activate their own subjectivity as a way of activating the subjectivity of those studied, consider the following research projects, which exemplify the three directions noted.

*The Active Subject of "Grounded Theory."* Kathy Charmaz's (1991) study of people who suffer from chronic illness—many of whom are elderly—is described in her book, *Good Days, Bad Days*, and is a fine illustration of a grounded-theory orientation to qualitative research. Following in the footsteps of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who pioneered grounded theory, Charmaz asks how it is that those who suffer from serious chronic illnesses, such as cancer, lupus, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, and cardiovascular disease, construct their lives in relation to their illnesses. Rather than theorizing her respondents' lives and adaptations in advance, Charmaz works from the ground up, beginning directly with the experience of chronic illness itself.

From in-depth interviews conducted over a number of years with 110 individuals, Charmaz quickly learns that chronicity implicates the self in a way that acute illness does not. From the outset, her data begin to suggest that this is a difference in kind, not degree. Assuming that one recovers from an acute illness, the illness runs its course fairly quickly and those affected return to their lives, taking up where they left off. In contrast, those suffering from serious chronic illness live in relation to their illnesses for long periods of time. This shapes the very meaning of these lives. The result is a process of life reconstruction that shifts in relation to the pains and inconveniences posed by the illnesses.

Charmaz orients to those with chronic illness as actively responding to the effects of their illness, not as long-term passive sufferers. These activated respondents are not simply there to be interviewed. Charmaz's activation of their subjectivity leads her to focus on the ways they expressly assemble their experience, distinguishing the approach as an interpretive form of grounded theorizing. A passive subject would be

merely there to respond to questions about the personal sentiments and daily rhythms of the chronic illness experience. Charmaz views her activated subjects as doing more: they actively construct and reconstruct the complex meanings of the chronic-illness experience as that develops from day to day. This naturally turns her to the questions of how this is accomplished and what the end results are, which respectively require detailed descriptions of the processes entailed and consequences for the meaning of everyday life.

Charmaz discovers that there are different ways that individuals construct their illnesses, which are affected by their place in the trajectory of the illness, as well as by the problems of daily living posed by specific symptoms. Her presentation centers on three types of response to chronicity—chronic illness as interruption, as intrusive illness, and as immersion in illness. As she takes us through her material and we hear the respondents describe their lives and related illnesses, we learn that these are *ways* of experiencing chronic illness; they are not characteristic of particular individuals. The same individual may at times construct his or her illness, as intrusive in his or her life and, at other times, construct life as immersed in the illness. On “bad days,” one may become immersed in one’s illness, with the resulting pathological implications for one’s identity. On “good days,” one’s illness may be experienced as merely intrusive, the individual otherwise being mostly engaged in the normal rhythms of daily living. As a result, we are witnesses to subjects who not only actively construct the meaning of chronic illness, but who deftly do so in relation to their illnesses’ shifting daily symptomatology. These activated subjects are not experiential “dopes,” adjusting wholesale to their illness, but take account of the changing experiential contours of chronicity in discerning who and what they are as sufferers. Chronicity implicates the self in the process. As Charmaz explains,

“Each way of experiencing and defining illness has different implications for self and for meanings of time” (p. ix). Repeatedly, her respondents couple their statements about the daily travails of their illness with thoughts about who and what they have become, how their lives have changed, and what this means to them in the immediate scheme of things. Serious chronic illness and its daily vicissitudes are not just another series of passing events of daily living, as successful recovery from surgery or a bout of the flu might be, but make for complex and continuing changes in the sense of who one is as a person. Chronic illnesses are more than sicknesses; their fluctuations serve to continually redesign the selves individuals live by. In this regard, we are witnesses to identities that are wounded on bad days and, in the same individuals, identities that resiliently spring forth positively on good days.

All of this might easily have been missed had Charmaz oriented to her respondents’ subjectivity as simply being that of sick people passively responding to their illnesses. The underlying lesson here is that we do great damage to our understanding of these experiences when we do not allow distinctly active respondents to communicate them to us. Equally instructive, especially for social gerontology, is the suggestion that the experience of being old, insofar as that is linked with chronic illness and dependency, may be constructively transitory and not be fixed by a particular stage of the life course (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b). Charmaz is informing us that the active subject can tell us *when*, not just *how* or *what* they are as particular selves, something which the typical passive subjectivity imposed by quantitative researchers commonly freezes in time. Indeed, if the activated subject behind the chronically ill respondent may, on good days, construct one self and on bad days construct another, the overall duration of one’s experience with serious chronic illness may even add its own layer of meaning to self-construction. Clearly, this is no simple picture of passive responses to disease.

*The Active Subjectivity of the Storyteller.* A second direction for activating the subject stems from the view that experience is not just lived, but comes to us in the form of stories (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). The analysis of life stories has been growing in popularity and, in the case of qualitative gerontology, is making visible the complex narrative quality of the aging experience. Narratively oriented gerontological researchers have shown that the personal story and related forms of communication construct and reconstruct experiences as part of the ongoing representation of everyday life (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots, & Svensson, 1996; Kenyon & Randall, 1997, 1999; Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, in press). From diverse quarters, we are being informed empirically that the personal past has not simply gone by, but is continually lived out in new terms as its storytellers speak of life (Gubrium, 1993). The present and the future are implicated as well, as narrativity designs experience through time.

The activeness of the storyteller varies in narrative studies. At one end of the spectrum is the existential storyteller, a subject whose emotionality is even creatively formulated (Douglas, 1985). Introspective skills can be an abiding concern, even while the emphasis on the free play of narrative expression at times seems excessive (see Ellis & Bochner, 1992). At the other end of the spectrum are studies in which the narrator is viewed as embedded within, or guided by, larger forces of storytelling, such as the historical events that shape both how stories



are told and what is conveyed (Bertaux, 1981). The link between storytelling and historical events may lead to the formulation of overly typified historical accounts for the experiences in question. The difference in emphasis results in deeply personalized and inventive accounts on the one hand and detailed, subjective articulations of historical events on the other.

The debate surrounding this variation in narrative activeness is a point of contention in Sharon Kaufman's (1986) book on the sources of meaning in late life, *The Ageless Self*. Kaufman takes a distinctively active orientation to her respondents' narrative subjectivity. She refuses to treat their life stories as the narratives of older people or as the narrative by-product of this generation's historical experiences. It is clear in respondents' commentaries that age figures into what is said in a complex way; certainly these are not the straightforward stories of elderly persons, even while all are over the age of 70. Rather, if age is a topic at all in the narratives, it is represented as a particular image of the self, rather than being a framework for conveying who these respondents are tout court. As Kaufman reminds us, "The old Americans I studied do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age" (p. 6).

Nor does generation specify these life stories. While most of the respondents lived through the Great Depression and World War II, these events do not govern their life stories. Interestingly enough, they do not even figure as major themes. Instead, the stories Kaufman elicits from her respondents are actively constructed in relation to a variety of narrative resources, many of them centered on personal values, but not especially on the historical events they experienced earlier in life (see Ruth & Öberg, 1996, for contrasting results).

Kaufman asks two questions of her narrative material: What thematizes the life stories of these older Americans and from where do they draw meaning to construct their accounts? Sixty people participated in open-ended interviews, important elements of which centered on their life story. In the book, Kaufman focuses on three respondents in order to highlight active subjectivity in detail. Their narratives show how inventive respondents can be in constructing their experience when given the opportunity. Millie, who is 80 years old and had been living in a nursing home before Kaufman met her, constructs her story around affective ties. Kaufman explains that most of the conversations she had with Millie over the course of the 8 months she was interviewed, focused on her interpersonal likes and dislikes, especially who she was attracted to, cared for, or loved. Millie uses the word "attach" repeatedly in her narrative: "I grew very attached to him and he to me." "I am so attached

to her," "We developed an attachment to one another" (p. 33). "Love," too, is part of her vocabulary, continually inserted to embellish her affectivity.

Ben and Stella assemble their stories around different themes. Ben, who is 74 years old, presents a dichotomous self in his story. According to Ben, his life has been a battle between his sober, responsible side and his carefree, romantic side. The theme crops up repeatedly as he talks of his past, his present, and the years to come. At one point, he speaks of looking into the mirror and seeing his father, who, he notes, was "a very serious," "no-nonsense guy." Ben explains that this is the kind of image he conveys to the world, even though, he points out, "I don't feel that way. I feel carefree and happy . . . and I could easily slide or slip into a romantic adventure" (p. 48). Other themes are drawn from his need for financial security and his religion.

Stella was born in 1897 in the rural South. The central theme of her life story is her achievement orientation. According to Stella, "I don't look back at all. I only look forward to what I'm going to do next." Even her past is something she competes with, not something she longs for. A second theme relates to the first—her aesthetic sense and desire for perfection. Stella links both themes with a need for relationships that, she explains, prompts her to create new roles for herself.

Although there are various ways the lives in question are given meaning, they have two important things in common. One is that none of them is thematized in terms of old age. Of course, age does come up in the accounts or is brought up by the interviewer, but it is tied to more significant narrative anchors. Another important commonality, which works against the idea that subjectivity passively reflects larger social contexts, is the lack of emphasis on major historical events. As we noted earlier, the two world wars and the Depression were key events in the lives of all 60 respondents, but the respondents draw very selectively from history to assemble their narratives. We find that these lives narratively unfold in the meaning-making context of vastly inventive storytelling, the constructive skills of their narrators weaving experiences together in varied and sundry ways, far removed from what a late life story of "this" particular generation might be presumed to convey.

### *Actively Using Age to Construct Context*

If Kaufman shows us how older people select from contexts other than old age and history to thematize their stories, James Holstein's (1990) ethnomethodologically informed study of involuntary psychiatric hospi-

talization hearings illustrates how age is used rhetorically to create persuasive contexts for interpreting experience. Holstein's fieldwork centers on the judges, attorneys, psychiatric consultants, witnesses, and candidate patients involved in the commitment decision. The leading question here is how is age used to build a case for or against involuntary commitment. Rather than treating age as a background variable that affects the likelihood of involuntary commitment, which would constitute passive subjects, Holstein views it as a narrative resource selectively applied to make a case for or against commitment (Garfinkel, 1967). The standard background factor of age, which typically explains life events, is adopted by participants to influence commitment decision making.

Combining a focus on constructive activity and on the use of age to construct context, Holstein presents narrative material to show how participants in involuntary commitment hearings themselves theorize old age for various purposes. As Gubrium and Wallace (1990) have argued, gerontological theorizing is not exclusively a gerontologist's concern, but is part and parcel of popular explanations of aging. For example, Holstein (1990) illustrates how vernacular versions of disengagement and activity theories are used by judges in two different hearings to account for their decisions. As extracts from the hearings show, these "theories-in-use" can be seen as ways of constructing useful contexts for action, rather than just being researchers' explanations for the causes or consequences of aging. The subjects involved in commitment decisions are not passive vessels of answers for testing gerontological theories of aging, but are shown to be theoretically active in their own right.

The following extract from proceedings at Metropolitan Court, which is a pseudonym for one of the settings studied, shows a version of "disengagement theory" being applied by a judge to construct an age-related context warranting a decision against further hospitalization. Henry Brewer's hospitalization was initially ordered because his family believed that he was, in their words, "depressed" and "responding badly" to his recent retirement. A psychiatrist had testified that Brewer was indeed "withdrawn" and "suffered from acute depression." After being assured that medications would control these conditions, the judge nonetheless assimilated Brewer's behaviors to his own theory of aging, effectively normalizing Brewer's conduct by casting it as the inevitable withdrawal associated with aging. As a folk-disengagement theorist, the judge suggested that Brewer's increasing detachment from prior roles and activities was typical of those entering the later years and not a basis for commitment.

I'm going to release Mr. Brewer if he'll agree to move back in with his daughter. It's pretty clear that he's slowing down a bit, but that's to be expected from a man his age. I think we just have to leave him to his own small pleasures and not worry so much about what he doesn't do anymore. As long as he's not causing anyone any trouble, and he's happy spending his time by himself, I don't see any reason for further hospitalization. We really can't expect him to keep up with the old pace if he doesn't feel up to it (Holstein, 1990, p. 124)

Compare this with the gerontological theorizing implicit in an extract from hearings at Eastern Court. Here, Dwight Berry's involuntary commitment is under consideration, and the extract illustrates a different explanatory context being constructed by the judge for his decision, in this case to continue hospitalization. The account in this illustration is more reminiscent of "activity theory."

Mr. Berry hasn't been responding very well to his [mental] disability and I'm afraid he's not ready to leave [the psychiatric treatment center]. I think part of it is something we're all going to go through someday. Here's an older man who's not working, and now everyone wants to take care of him and he's been taking care of them all his life. He's having trouble figuring out what to do with himself. He might be okay in a retirement home, but I don't think he's ready for that yet. I like the idea of keeping him at Willowhaven [the psychiatric treatment center] because they've got all of those programs to try to get him involved. I'm hoping they can fit him into one of their vocational programs and get him on track, give him something to do that he can care about. Maybe then we can talk about a [retirement] home placement (p. 124).

Here the judge views Berry's problems in terms of the typical difficulties of adjusting to the changing and reduced opportunities and demands of old age, in the judge's words, "something we're all going to go through someday." Berry has lost his well-defined roles, due, in part, to his age, which in the judge's opinion can be addressed by "[giving] him something to do that he can care about." The ending phrase, "that he can care about," suggests activities that have a positive valence. In contrast to the Brewer case, the judge here assembles an account justifying further remedial intervention rather than benign inattention.

At times, participants disagreed about how to classify a candidate patient in terms of age, focusing proceedings on the construction of age itself, not on explanations of aging. Note how in the following extracts, the local meaning of 51-year-old Lois Kaplan's age emerges in her commitment hearing in Northern Court. Kaplan's public defender initially argued that

... a woman her age should do just fine in a board-and-care facility because she's gotten to the point where she's not likely to be too difficult to look after. She seems to have stabilized and at her age she's not likely to go looking for trouble. The best part about Crestview [the board-and-care facility] is she'll be able to live on her own but there'll be someone there to look after her. She's at a point in her life where that won't take much (p. 125).

But the judge was skeptical about the public defender's claims of Kaplan's manageability and presented his own gloss on the consequential meaning of Kaplan's age, instead emphasizing vulnerability.

[To the public defendant] I'm not sure that I agree with you, Mr. Lyle. The problem with getting older is you sometimes need a little more attention. Little things seem like major problems. They seem to get out of hand a lot quicker. I know I have to do a lot more for my own mother now than just a couple of years ago. As far as I know, Crestview is a fine facility, but their policy is for residents to be able to pretty much do it on their own. I'm not convinced that Lois won't need more help than they can give her (p. 125).

Clearly, there was no consensus here over what it meant to be Kaplan's age, even while it was agreed that she was "getting older."

There were several further exchanges about Kaplan's age, specifically concerning how getting older related to whether Crestview could handle Kaplan's problems. The two perspectives were repeated and larded with other arguments. Eventually, the judge took a different tack, this time linking vulnerability to gender, not just age.

You know what's bothering me? I think it's the fact that we're talking about letting an older woman live alone, even if there is someone looking in on her. I can't help but worry that she's going to do something and nobody's going to notice until it's too late. It's so easy for someone like her—mental problems, getting a little older, not able to do everything she once did—to do something that might really be dangerous, something that could hurt her real bad (p. 126).

In this context, "getting a little older" means that, as an older woman, Kaplan is more susceptible to harm.

Across the hearings, it is evident that age has no fixed meaning. Indeed, the same age may be used in a variety of ways to build contrasting contexts for the matters under consideration. In turn, these contexts supply warrantable answers to questions of aging as this relates to the consequential decisions. From this perspective, active subjectivity extends to the very sense that is made of these candidate patients as "aging" individuals.

## Conclusion

What are the empirical advantages of taking an active orientation to subjectivity? First, and perhaps foremost, is that ultimately the perspectives of the older people we have discussed would not become available to us as researchers if we did not activate our own subjectivity. Passively orienting to the empirical world as quantitative gerontologists typically do—being concerned with collecting information from the vessels of answers that subjects are taken to be—would merely reproduce preexisting conceptions of age and related variables. We would not be attuned to how these matters become distinct variables in the worlds of those we study, nor be attentive to where and how they are used by those whose lives are in question. Instead, a passive orientation would simply accept that these matters exist with sufficient existential constancy to permit their measurement and analysis for research purposes. An active orientation, in contrast, continually resonates the leading concerns of qualitative gerontologists, centering on when and how matters of age and aging enter into experience.

A second advantage of adopting an active orientation to subjectivity is that the researcher's world is not viewed as categorically separate and distinct from the world of those studied. As researchers, we are charged with recognizing that our own subjectivity helps to distinctively constitute the subjectivity of those we study. The resulting qualities of our respondents' or informants' lives, indeed, are in some sense the responsibility of *qualitative* research. In the final analysis, this is precisely what distinguishes our work from that of our quantitative counterparts: an abiding awareness that the way subjectivity is conceived—whether passive or active—will significantly affect the kinds of data obtained. The awareness creates a moral, not just a scientific, environment for research efforts, the form of data collected being as much a matter of how we choose to view subjectivity as it is a matter of how technically adequate our research procedures are.

A third advantage of an active orientation is the ability to recognize the deep complexity of lived experience. Much of the intricacy of everyday life is glossed over in research models that conceive of the empirical world in terms of fixed variables, and research subjects as vessels of answers. We ignore how empirically and theoretically astute those studied are in their own rights. For example, we fail to take account of the shifting meaning of self in the later years as that is organized in relation to the sense of whether life is surrounded by good days or bad days. We ignore the existentially important worlds that active subjects construct on their own—the ones they assemble as they narrate their lives, as

opposed to the "larger" worlds we habitually place them in for research purposes. In general, we miss the opportunity to appreciate how much active subjects are like researchers themselves as they frame their views of empirical matters, proffer theories for why these matters work as they do, and account for the relation between the two.

A fourth and final advantage of an active orientation relates to the public relevance of scientific knowledge. It is our obligation as social researchers to inform the public of what we know about individual lives and social experiences. Here, subjectivity is crucial. An orientation to a passive subject leads us to report and inform in quite a different way than an orientation to an active one. In studies of later life, both passive and active approaches describe and inform the public about the aging experience, but it is to the credit of qualitative gerontology that it communicates the varied constructive activities and abilities that individuals exhibit in relation to the aging experience. Often overlooked by other frameworks, these qualities open to public view the complex workings of aging and the myriad ways there are to be and to grow old.

## REFERENCES

- Bertaux, D. (Ed.). (1981). *Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Birren, J. E., Kenyon, G. M., Ruth, J. E., Schroots, J. J. F., & Svensson, T. (Eds.). (1996). *Aging and biography*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Charmaz, K. (1991). *Good days, bad days*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Converse, J. M., & Schuman, H. (1974). *Conversations at random: Survey research as interviews see it*. New York: Wiley.
- Douglas, J. D. (1985). *Creative interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (1992). Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice in abortion. In C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity* (pp. 79-101). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Garfunkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gubrium, J. F. (1993). *Speaking of life: Horizons of meaning for nursing home residents*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (1997). *The new language of qualitative method*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (1998). Narrative practice and the coherence of personal stories. *Sociological Quarterly*, 39, 163-187.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Wallace, J. B. (1990). Who theorizes age? *Ageing and Society*, 10, 131-149.

- Holstein, J. A. (1990). The discourse of age in involuntary commitment proceedings. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 4, 111-130.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000a). *Constructing the life course* (2nd ed.). Dix Hills, NY: General Hall.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000b). *The self we live by: Narrative identity in a postmodern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kaufman, S. (1986). *The ageless self*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kenyon, G. R., Clark, P., & de Vries, B. (in press). *Narrative gerontology: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Kenyon, G. R., & Randall, W. (1997). *Restoring our lives: Personal growth through autobiographical reflection*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Kenyon, G. R., & Randall, W. (1999). Narrative gerontology [Special issue]. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13(1).
- Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ruth, J.-E., & Öberg, P. (1996). Ways of life: Old age in a life history perspective. In J. E. Birren, G. M. Kenyon, J.-E. Ruth, J. J. F. Schroots, & T. Svensson (Eds.), *Aging and biography: Explorations in adult development* (pp. 167-186). New York: Springer Publishing Company.