



## Participation narratives of Third Age adults: Their activities, motivations and expectations regarding civil society organisations<sup>☆</sup>



Guido Cuyvers\*, Fleur Thomése, Theo van Tilburg

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

Third Age adults leaving the labour market are not only armed with broad experience and multiple competencies but also find themselves free of professional obligations while still physically sound. The general theory of Third Age of Laslett sheds a new light on characteristics of ageing adults and their role in society. They are able to engage in society in ways inaccessible to previous generations of older adults. According to Laslett, combining a myriad personal strengths and being free of professional obligations they are challenged to make Third Age a time of personal development by making choices of engagement and civic contribution. To enlighten these issues, this qualitative study focuses on how and under what conditions 23 Third Agers invest their strengths in unpaid societal and social participation. Their narratives reveal three types of involvement: holistic, inhibited and social consumerist. The holistic pattern and, to a lesser extent, the inhibition pattern meet the expectations of Laslett about the Third Age. The social consumerist pattern, on the other hand, rather refers to disengagement. These observations imply that to facilitate the societal engagement and social participation of this population, civil society organisations need to rethink their goals, activities and procedures.

### Introduction

Participation in the sense of being involved with other people, groups or organisations plays an important role in the lives of many older adults. The manifold benefits of this participation include increased life satisfaction, subjective well-being, social integration and sustained health (Timonen, Kamiya, & Maty, 2011; Wilson, 2012). On a societal level, participation not only strengthens coherence but offers valuable economic advantages in an ageing society (Godemont & Hustinx, 2012) such as free child and family care. Indeed, the older adult participation is becoming increasingly important as ever increasing numbers of individuals enter what Laslett (1989) terms the “Third Age”. In his opinion Third Age evolved from the 1950’s because of the combination of demographic changes and socio-economic development. That transition was the arrival of an entirely new division of life experience in contemporary societies (Laslett, 1987). Therefore Third Age is a personal and a social experience and coincides with a personal and collective identity. In his study of Third Age Laslett seeks the contrast with traditional views of later life. In the traditional views older adults are ‘stereotyped in an unfavourable, even a hostile, certainly in a rigid and unconstructive fashion’ (Laslett, 1987, p. 154). The stereotype reinforced structural dependency and disengagement from

societal life. When paid work was the central value of life and anything opposite to work was regarded as indolence, old age was seen as problematic.

Next to Laslett’s (1987) analysis of the emergence of Third Age, he constructed a vision of the meaning of Third Age for personal life and of the role of Third Agers in society that stimulated many authors. He perceives Third Age as the crown of life: a period of personal fulfilment and of active contribution to society. He was critical of any signs of indolence of the part of older adults. They welcome their freedom. Participation should be voluntary, not compulsory. Third Age is a time of personal development by making choices of engagement and civic contribution. Finding self-fulfilment implies independency and at the same time to create proper relationships with others. According to Laslett Third Age adults have a unique capacity for participating in society in ways not accessible to previous generations of older adults. The diminution of compulsion in social and individual life creates unprecedented opportunities to engage in unpaid forms of participation. Hence, although ageing adults in the past also engaged in care; the circumstances, their physical conditions and their work obligations were different. Third Age adults make deliberately the choice between engagement and withdrawal into indolence.

Laslett’s theory was criticized. Gillear and Higgs (2007, p. 15) call

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\* Corresponding author at: Ceylonstraat, 12, 2490 Balen, Belgium.

E-mail addresses: [gcuyvers@skynet.be](mailto:gcuyvers@skynet.be), [g.cuyvers@vu.nl](mailto:g.cuyvers@vu.nl) (G. Cuyvers).

it ‘an amalgam of individual development, history and demography’ that fails to provide a convincing analysis of the cultural and social transformation of later life. That leads in their opinion to a moral imperative to become “true” Third Agers. The general theory of Third Age does also not preclude diversity in this group (Chambre & Netting, 2016). Obviously, not all Third Age adults have equal opportunities to choose how, where and to what extent to invest their own potentialities in society. For example, women may be forced by circumstances to take care of a family member and have limited freedom of choice. Rather, the question is how and to what extent current Third Age adults (i.e. those born between 1940 and 1960) want to invest their strengths in society. To concretise this issue, we explore the concept of participation.

#### Participation of Third Age adults

Although the concept of participation is frequently discussed in the social sciences, there is no clear, widely accepted definition (Levasseur, Richard, Gauvin, & Raymond, 2012). Hence, in line with Broese van Groenou and van Tilburg (2012) we distinguish “societal participation” from “social participation” to emphasize that the former is other-oriented and has an added value for others, whereas the latter is self-oriented and entails recreation, continued education or spending time with friends. Societal participation is thus exemplified by volunteering, giving informal care and taking on responsibilities in any of the multifarious civil societal organisations – including networks, associations, groups and movements – which are not connected to the state or market but manifest the interests and will of the citizens (World Health Organisation. Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2007). A further distinction in this context is “formal” versus “informal” societal participation (Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010a, 2010b). Formal societal participation is conducted within an organisational framework, and informal is within a personal network of family and friends or people in the neighbourhood.

Two core characteristics of Laslett's general theory of the Third Age, i.e., “personal development” and “engagement” (Laslett, 1989) are especially relevant to Third Age participation. They touch upon both the motivation to participate and the choice of participatory mode. Personal development, is reflected in the motivation Third Agers formulate for their lifestyle. Being free from professional obligations, they have the choice of selection of activities they want to participate in (e.g. volunteering, traveling, and concerts). They also have the choice to select the organisational framework for their activities. So, personal development of Third Agers is realized in a commitment to self-chosen responsibilities (Hustinx, Handy, & Cnaan, 2010). Engagement, the second characteristic, is in other-directed activities (societal participation) as a way to realize Third Agers' desire for self-fulfilment. It is a concretisation of what Laslett calls civic contribution. He adds that social participation cannot be compulsory, although he expects older people to opt for a kind of civic contribution.

The question is whether Laslett's (1989) interpretation of Third Age fits the current Third Agers. After all, since Laslett developed his vision, society has evolved considerably, probably with consequences for later life. Giljeard and Higgs (2005), for example, refer to the transition to a more consumption-oriented lifestyle among the elderly. Others emphasize, perhaps somewhat unilaterally, the strong focus on the self-centeredness (Felling, 2004; Leach, Philipson, Biggs, & Money, 2013). This is manifested in a preference for activities that foster personal development and a sense of personal well-being, sometimes combined with a consumerist attitude. This latter has prompted some authors to depict Third Age adults as selfish (Beckett, 2010).

This study empirically explores the extent to which Laslett's theory is still relevant for understanding the participation practices of current Third Age adults. We have the following research questions: What characterizes Third Age adults' participation practices? Specifically, what are the characteristics of the activities they chose, what is their

motivation to participate and what is the role of civil society organisations in their engagement?

#### Methodology

##### Sample

The overall study focus is the participation of retired Third Age adults, who we operationally define as those in the 55–75 age group (i.e. born in 1940–1960) at the time of data collection (cf. Neugarten, 1974). To obtain a sufficiently diversified sample, we select retired respondents on the basis of four inclusion criteria: gender (16 males, 7 females), age (1 under 60, 5 aged 60–64, 11 aged 65–69 and 6 aged 70 and older), educational background (6 with secondary school, 9 with a bachelor's degree and 8 with a master's degree) and membership in a civil society organisation (4 non-members, 9 passive members and 10 active members). The respondents, all from the Flemish region of Belgium, were selected via a snowballing procedure, initiated in our personal networks, which gathered suggestions from those who agreed to participate for others we could approach. This procedure identified 23 interested persons, all of whom agreed to participate.

The data were collected in 45–90 min interviews conducted in October–December 2014, which were audio-recorded and the responses transcribed verbatim. Before providing their written consent, the potential respondents were informed about the study purpose both orally and in writing, and were also told that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. Immediately prior to the interview, they were also reminded that interaction would be audio-recorded and that they could review and respond to the interview transcripts. To ensure anonymity, all identifiers were removed from the original documents prior to data analysis.

##### Interview scheme

To design the interview scheme, we used the “appreciative inquiry” approach (Barrett & Fry, 2005; Cooperrider & Godwin, 2012), which, rather than focusing on problems related to participation, highlights opportunities for participation with people and organisations. It also devotes attention to what is needed to achieve such participation while still considering necessary changes. Admittedly, despite its advantage of creating an open atmosphere during the interview, this approach can lead respondents into a certain mind set (Shuap, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009); however, we consider it a valuable tool for identifying how respondents shape their ageing and how their personal strengths play a role. The interview protocol thus begins with open questions about positive participatory experiences, which served to break the conversational ice and stimulate respondents to articulate nuanced opinions about participation. In particular, they tended to reveal their aspirations and expectations for participation while also feeling free to make critical remarks about civil society organisations. In fact, some respondents admitted that talking in the interview about their strengths and their role in society prompted them to think more critically about how to approach participation in the future.

The design phase consisted of first identifying and clearly describing the research topic and then formulating the corresponding research questions. For this latter, we drew on Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) suggestions for appreciative interviewing while also considering the participation characteristics described in the Introduction. We ordered the interview questions in a specific sequence, beginning with the open-ended questions about positive experiences and their underlying factors. The subsequent items shifted focus to the future by first asking respondents how they envisioned their future participation and then inquiring which factors and conditions they considered necessary to realize that future. The interviewees were permitted to adjust the protocol during the interview in order to arrive at a richer and more detailed understanding of the respondent's participatory motives and

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