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Aging and older adults in three Roman Catholic magazines: Successful aging and the Third and Fourth Ages reframed



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ABSTRACT

This article is a qualitative content analysis of how aging and older adults are represented in the articles of three Roman Catholic magazines in the United States: *America*, *Commonweal*, and *U.S. Catholic*. The findings suggest that, as in mainstream secular magazines, the concept of successful aging is common in portrayals of older adults in the Third Age. Distinctive in Catholic magazine portrayals of successful aging is an emphasis on meaningful activity and on the wisdom that is gained and transmitted in this stage of life. In contrast to the lack of attention to Fourth Age decline in mainstream magazines, in the Catholic publications the difficult features of such deterioration are acknowledged but are also reframed as potential sources of value. The theoretical implications of these more complex faith-based renderings of the Third and Fourth Ages are briefly explored.

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Introduction

One of the subfields in which research in aging studies has burgeoned in the last few decades is the study of media representations of aging. Such research proceeds on the assumption that media representations both reflect and help to shape cultural understandings of aging and older adults (Featherstone & Hepworth, 2007; Gibb & Holroyd, 1996). As such, scholars have conducted analyses of how older adults are portrayed in a variety of popular print media formats, with work in this subfield on magazines being particularly robust (see the reviews in Vasil & Wass, 1993 and Williams, Ylänne, Wadleigh, & Chen, 2010).

One important finding in such research is that, at least in reference to magazines published relatively recently, older adults are very often portrayed as happy, healthy, affluent and active (Harwood & Roy, 1999; Hurd Clarke, Bennett, & Liu, 2014; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; Lumme-Sandt, 2011; McHugh, 2003; Williams, Ylänne, & Wadleigh, 2007). Generally

speaking, these individuals can be seen as exemplars of what is known as “successful aging,” a concept elaborated and widely disseminated by Rowe and Kahn (1987, 1997, 1998) to refer to those who, although they are advancing in age, are able to stave off diseases and disability and remain physically active, mentally stimulated and socially engaged. Expressed another way, such older adults might be said to embody what Peter Laslett (1989) once called the “Third Age,” a time of life characterized by fulfillment, autonomy and pleasure. Regardless of the label applied, however, the ostensibly positive representation of aging and older adults in many magazines cannot be denied.

Such is an oversimplified picture to be sure, and some researchers have identified variations in the portrayals of older adults based on magazine target audience characteristics such as age (Williams et al., 2010), gender (compare Twigg, 2012, with Hurd Clarke et al., 2014), race (Bramlett-Solomon & Wilson, 1989; Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999) and culture (Raman, Harwood, Weis, Anderson, & Miller, 2008). To date, however, no one has explored how aging is portrayed in magazines targeted to an audience with a specific religious affiliation.

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Within this context, this paper describes qualitative research on a previously unexamined subject: representations of aging in the religious print media. Specifically, I ask how older adults and the aging process are portrayed in the articles of three popular Roman Catholic magazines in the United States (*America*, *Commonweal* and *U.S. Catholic*) from 2004–2013. In doing so, I comment in particular on whether and how the themes on aging – successful aging and the Third (and Fourth) Age – that have been detected and discussed in relation to mainstream magazines are present in the Catholic religious media.

Studying Catholic magazines has merit in part because of the large numbers of Catholics living in the United States (approximately one-quarter of Americans identify as Roman Catholic; *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2008). Moreover, and despite the ready availability of the Internet, Catholics still appear to access religious or spiritual content via denominational magazines and newspapers at relatively high rates (Gray & Gautier, 2011). As such the potential impact of Catholic magazine representations of aging is quite significant, if one considers the number of Catholics who are family members of older adults, who may care for them in their personal or professional lives, or who are of advanced age themselves. Insofar as Catholic print media representations may have some effect on these individuals, on their understandings of self and others, and on the decisions they make, describing and analyzing what those representations involve is a task well worth undertaking.

Literature review

Magazine portrayals of older adults

Research on the portrayals of older adults in the magazines of the 1970s and 1980s reveals support for Gantz, Gartenberg, and Rainbow's (1980) assertion that such adults were so infrequently portrayed, and also underrepresented relative to their numbers in the general population, that they were "approaching invisibility" (Bramlett-Solomon & Wilson, 1989; England, Kuhn, & Gardner, 1981; Kvasnicka, Beymer, & Perloff, 1982). Older women were particularly underrepresented (Gantz et al., 1980; Hollenshead & Ingersoll, 1982; Kvasnicka et al., 1982; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Some of this research also established that older adults were often negatively or stereotypically represented, for example by portraying them as helpless, frail or sedentary (Peterson, 1992; Zhou & Chen, 1992).

While there is evidence that the underrepresentation of older adults (and especially older women) has persisted in magazines in more recent decades (e.g., Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999; Harwood & Roy, 1999; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011; Raman et al., 2008) this imbalance has been at least somewhat ameliorated in certain publications aimed at adults in the aged 50+ demographic (Hurd Clarke et al., 2014; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; Williams et al., 2010). More significantly, there has been a change from earlier years such that older adults are now being portrayed far more positively in the pages of a broad array of magazines. Thus in photographs they may be depicted as hiking or biking outdoors, walking contentedly with a romantic partner on a beach, or laughing while socializing with their peers in a retirement community

(Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; McHugh, 2003). Similarly positive portrayals of healthy, physically active, competent and confident older adults are also found in the texts of magazine articles (Hurd Clarke et al., 2014; Lumme-Sandt, 2011).

On the one hand, the benefits of such portrayals cannot be denied, both in terms of countering negative stereotypes of older persons as frail, incompetent or isolated, and perhaps as motivational forces for the promotion of life-long healthy habits among the population (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995). On the other hand, there are problematic aspects of such seemingly rosy portrayals of aging and older adults who appear to be aging "successfully."

The shortcomings of successful aging

As Bülow and Söderqvist (2014) detail, the concept of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997, 1998) has achieved such prominence in contemporary research on aging that it can be considered an "obligatory passage point" (p. 139) for both medical researchers and social scientists in the field. Such status has not precluded, or has perhaps engendered, the emergence of several significant critiques of the concept and the assumptions it entails (see the review in Martinson & Berridge, 2015). One series of influential critiques emerged in the work of Meredith Minkler and colleagues (Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Minkler, 1990; Minkler & Fadem, 2002) who see in the equating of good health and successful aging an implied but prejudicial exclusion of older adults who are aging with a disability, along with a misplaced responsibility for aging successfully on individuals themselves when in fact structural inequalities can render successful aging an unrealistic ideal.

The work of several scholars specifically on representations of older adults in the print media explores similar issues in relation to the unattainability and implications of commonly portrayed measures of "success." Considerable emphasis has been placed on the consumerism that is associated with aging well, especially given the preponderance of print media messages that communicate that aging successfully is a matter of buying the right products (foods, vitamins, clothes, skin creams, etc.) or of traveling to or living in idyllic vacation settings and retirement communities (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; McHugh, 2003; Rozanova, 2010; Williams et al., 2007). On one level, the necessity of consumption for successful aging reveals a classist bias, which excludes those who would not be able to afford the products or engage in the lifestyles associated with aging well (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013; Rozanova, 2010). Yet the products and activities portrayed and the clearly younger or "younger-looking" older celebrities and models used to promote them (Hurd Clarke et al., 2014; Twigg, 2012) also mean that successful aging becomes equated with looking and acting as young as possible for as long as possible – in other words, with not aging (see McDaniel, 2005, as cited in Rozanova, 2010). According to some, then, an overemphasis on successful aging and (as) the quest for agelessness can thus be considered ageist in themselves and are further an indication of our cultural tendencies to deny, devalue and fear agedness when it is associated with disease, decline and death (Hurd Clarke et al., 2014; McHugh, 2003). Finally, and even when negative

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