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Participation narratives of Third Age adults: Their activities, motivations and expectations regarding civil society organisations[☆]



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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. Gilleard and Higgs (2007, p. 15) call

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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 interviewers 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

modes.

The final version of the interview protocol contained the following five questions: 1. Think of an experience or period when you did something you felt very passionate and knowledgeable about that you were proud of. We are looking for talents and experiences that gave you energy, made you forget the time. 2. Which of your strengths can society, people and organisations rely on? 3. What (belief, philosophy, ideal) has inspired you to use your strengths? 4. How and under what circumstances can society, people and associations rely on your strengths? What kind of associations can rely on your strengths? 5. What changes would you like to see in society (people, associations, yourself) so your and other people's strengths are invested even more? Whenever necessary, the interviewers also asked additional questions to stimulate discussion and help respondents clarify their vision; for example: Please tell me about an experience in which you did something for someone else and in which you felt good. We are looking for forms of engagement to others that gave you energy. What made this situation give you so much energy? What in your story that it makes you proud, happy and enthusiastic? Which of your strengths have you been able to use? What was the effect on yourself of this experience?

Data analysis

The first phase of data analysis, conducted using NVIVO-10 (QSR International, 2012), consisted of four stages. In the initial coding, we moved quickly line-by-line through the data and selected fragments relevant to our research. Then, following Charmaz (2006), we constructed codes (tag words or phrases) that reflect action. Given the open-endedness of our prompts, these initial codes were necessarily provisional and data grounded, so as labels, we frequently used words and fragments taken directly from the raw responses. Then in the second stage, we decided which initial codes best clarified the participation practices in a way that would facilitate data categorization. Because some respondents were later explicit about what was implicit in their earlier statements, this process involved non-linear tracing back and forth between transcripts.

In the third stage, axial coding, we related categories to sub-categories and specified categorical dimensions, which enabled us to reassemble the data fractured during the previous two stages. As a double check, we also conducted a hermeneutical reading of the transcripts to detect meaning and relations that had not become apparent during the NVIVO-10 analysis. Whereas the coding stage is analytical and dissects texts into pieces, an hermeneutical reading focuses on the totality of a text or at least on larger pieces in order to discover additional meanings. It is thus a comprehensive review conducted with constant concern for what the text teaches about motivations and participatory modes. As a result of this close reading, we made additions and adjustments to the categorical framework, thereby demonstrating the ability of the two approaches to complement each other and yield a richer understanding of the text. This dual process in fact identified four primary factors (characteristics, motivations, expectations about organisations and cultural context), which we used in the last analytic stage to enable comparison of participation patterns. The purpose of this final stage, theoretical coding, was to conceptualize how the codes might be related to each other and how such relations could be integrated into a theory.

Results

The qualitative analysis described above identifies three patterns of participation activity: societal, which can be either formal (mostly in the management of civil society organisations or local communities) or informal (primarily in child or other family care); social; or holistic, a diverse combination of the previous two (see Table 1). Engagement in these activity patterns can be further categorized as either inhibited or social consumerist. The first refers to Third Age adults who are involved

Table 1
Types of participation: activities.

	Holistic engagement (n = 12)	Inhibited engagement (n = 4)	Social consumerist engagement (n = 7)
Formal societal participation	X		
Informal societal participation	X	X	
Social participation	X	X	X

in both social and informal societal participation but feel too inhibited by time pressure or a perceived lack of opportunity to engage in formal societal participation. The second characterizes those who are not committed to either formal or informal societal participation practices but rather focus exclusively on social participation. These patterns of activity and engagement allow us to adequately characterize the participation behaviour of all respondents.

We find that twelve respondents, including three (out of seven) females and nine (out of sixteen) males, have adopted a holistic participation pattern. Of these, six (out of eight) have a master's degree, four (out of nine) have a bachelor's degree and two (out of six) have a secondary level education. Of the one female and six males whose participation can be characterized as social consumerist, one has a master's degree, two have a bachelor's degree and four have a secondary education. Of the three females and one male whose engagement is inhibited, one has a master's degree and three have a bachelor's degree. Not only is each of these patterns associated with motivations and expectations regarding civil society organisations, but each can be placed in the context of participation types. Hence, before discussing the categorical relations in more detail, we synthesise the findings for each pattern in Table 2 and link them to respondent characteristics in Table 3.

Holistic pattern

Activity characteristics

The holistic pattern, which combines the elements of the other two activity categories, includes a diversity of involvement that ranges from volunteering or engaging in association management (formal societal participation) to family care, grandparenting and small kindnesses (informal societal participation). Of the twelve respondents exhibiting this pattern, eight were participating on their own initiative and four because they had been asked to do so. All reported finding their activities meaningful, which Riet (62) interpreted as '...looking for a kind of commitment that yields something meaningful for society'. These holistic participants not only have a history of involvement but intend to continue such engagement as long as their physical and mental capacities allow, meaning that their holistic activities extend over lengthy periods of time. Their participation is thus often rather time consuming. Seven of the twelve are active in more than one association and have a broad interest in diverse aspects of social life. Max (70) explained his own broad commitment as follows: 'I always like to deal with people. That is why I was already on the boards of numerous associations during my professional career. When you retire young, at 60, you are naturally asked to continue your engagement in the same associations. I support them now more actively than when I was working and did not have enough time for them'. In contrast, three of the twelve were looking for limited involvement, including Filip (64), whose societal participation was limited to the presidency of an inter-school consultation bureau.

Motivation

Among the holistic participants, the most important motivation for societal participation was the desire to engage in activities that benefit

Table 2
Description of types of participation: activities, motivations and expectations regarding organisations.

	Holistic engagement	Inhibited engagement	Social Consumerist engagement
Characteristics of activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Broad range of practices, mostly societal participation - Enduring engagement - Within traditional organisations (mostly) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal societal participation - No opportunities to invest other than caring strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social participation - Self-oriented activities
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To benefit other people - Invest communicative and organisational strengths - Inspired by personal history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To have contact with other people - Invest relational strengths - Feel compelled by needs of relatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To enjoy (social) life - Self-development
Expectations regarding organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community building - Commitment to the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pleasant culture - People are invited to participate - Conditional commitment to the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisational goals of secondary importance - Meets personal needs - Opportunities to meet other people - No commitment to the organisation

Table 3
Characteristics of respondents and participation pattern.

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Participation pattern
Roza	Female	59	Bachelor	Inhibited
Riet	Female	62	Master	Holistic
Celia	Female	63	Bachelor	Holistic
Griet	Female	63	Bachelor	Inhibited
Anna	Female	64	Master	Holistic
Gemma	Female	65	Master	Inhibited
Ines	Female	65	Secondary	Consumeristic
Filip	Male	64	Bachelor	Holistic
Mathias	Male	65	Master	Holistic
Frans	Male	65	Master	Holistic
Stan	Male	65	Bachelor	Holistic
Guillaume	Male	65	Bachelor	Inhibited
Jonas	Male	66	Bachelor	Holistic
Jos	Male	67	Secondary	Consumeristic
Rutger	Male	67	Master	Holistic
Lowie	Male	68	Bachelor	Consumeristic
Jasper	Male	69	Master	Holistic
Max	Male	70	Secondary	Holistic
Julien	Male	70	Master	Consumeristic
Raf	Male	71	Secondary	Consumeristic
Jim	Male	71	Bachelor	Consumeristic
Paul	Male	72	Secondary	Consumeristic
Alex	Male	78	Secondary	Holistic

other people. Eight respondents linked this desire to their personal background, seeing themselves as children of their era who are simultaneously linked, at least partly, to their past. Of particular importance to them, are the values and lifestyle learned from their parents. As Mathias (65) explained, 'It comes from my family. My mom and dad were very helpful people and convinced their children of the importance of helping behaviour. It was spoon fed to us. It was only logical for us to do the same'. Other respondents identified a sense of duty as the external motivator of their societal engagement, seeing it as a consequence of being a member of a community or having been given opportunities. In Riet's words, '... we have a duty to make a contribution to society. If you are healthy you should try to give something back to society'.

All twelve respondents connected their reasons for societal engagement, whether formal or informal, to a need to invest their strengths in contact with other people. They thus made frequent mention of 'ease at making contact with other people' and 'communicative skills'. Mathias, for example, referred to an ability to '... interact with people. [To] listen to people, and especially try to discover what their needs are, their problems, their questions, and then try to offer an answer'. The other relational strengths mentioned were leadership and influencing people, which Alex (78) defined as follows: 'I am very engaged in my organisation; I have to play the role of draft horse'. Another reason for their participation is continuity in the investment of

strengths once a professional life is over. As Frans (65) put it, 'I think of my last job. I was working with asylum-seekers. When I had to retire, I wanted to continue working with them.'

Most of these respondents also expressed a need for autonomy in their commitment, which above all means opportunities to implement their own ideas. In Jasper's (69) words, 'You have your own ideas about society, collaboration, how society can evolve and grow, what is important and of course you want to try to carry out of those ideas'. Because autonomy includes self-direction, many respondents remarked that older people should take the initiative themselves and actively look for opportunities to participate societally. They recognized, however, that to do so, older adults need space to make their own choices in keeping with their skills. Some of the respondents also wanted opportunities to participate in temporary projects and not in rigid structures. For instance, Frans, in describing his own choices, said, 'I looked for a structure, but one that is not too determinative. Preferably something temporary, not something permanent. A project for a limited period of time so you do not become stuck in it'. Jasper, on the other hand, put greater emphasis on worth: 'I just deal with the things I believe in so I can think: here I can actually add something meaningful. So I have the freedom to choose things I am convinced are important.' As the subsequent discussion makes clear, the need for autonomy is distinguishable in all patterns.

As regards their social participation, these respondents reported it to be motivated mostly by a desire to enjoy life but also by a need to grow and develop. Whereas they equated the first with doing nothing, dreaming, doing what one likes and tranquillity; those who mentioned growth and development associated it with learning, a broadening of horizons and trying out creative things. In Alex's words, 'Develop yourself, there are so many options'. This need to grow also recurs in the two engagement patterns of inhibition and social consumerism.

Expectations for civil society organisations

The organisations with which most respondents had been or were involved tended to be of the sustainable type, such as associations for the elderly, parishes, schools and the municipality. For example, Celia (63), in her retirement years, had become more active in her church. Only two respondents reported participating in innovative organisations that rely more on free initiative, are less structured and have a short life span, such as a group that distributes food to refugees (Frans) or one developing a co-operative housing project (Jonas, 66). Most respondents, however, stressed the importance of feeling that their voluntary contribution to the organisation is appreciated. Hence, Riet, who has had a great deal of organisational experience, suggested that these latter '...should appeal to people individually to do a well-defined task. If you give them responsibility, you will see people take responsibility and are proud of it'. The respondents also admitted to not wanting to be pressured to invest: as Filip put it, 'It has to be free engagements, limited in time. And where I am the master of my own

agenda.’ Other respondents insisted that it had to be in keeping with their ideological convictions. Whichever the priority, however, the responses suggested that societal participation tends to generate a stronger commitment to the organisation as a whole.

At the same time, the respondents also wanted the organisations to work for them; for example, by considering member preferences in their choice of activities and/or providing networks and opportunities through which to share experiences. They also suggested that organisations should connect people and stimulate the development of a community, meaning that they should reach out to their members as individuals. As Riet explained it, ‘I find community development important, but you should try to do it in a contemporary way.’ Hence, in addition to expecting civil society organisations to tailor their activities to suit the various members’ ages, interests and needs; the respondents expressed a hope that these agencies would respond to and connect with new themes so as to make them more attractive to Third Age adults. At present, Jonas complained, organisations tend to take up new themes only sparingly.

Inhibited engagement pattern

Activity characteristics

The four respondents whose engagement pattern met the inhibited criteria were all active in informal societal participation. Hence, unlike the holistic participants, they never engaged in formal societal participation and spent a limited amount of time on social and leisure activities and/or continuing education. As the major factors inhibiting their participation, they identified responsibilities and a lack of opportunity for the continued use of their professional skills. They thus expressed regret at having insufficient time for formal societal participation, which also interested them, and a hope for new opportunities for societal engagement. For example Roza (59), who had to invest a great deal of time in caring for her mother and grandchildren, characterized her current life as overburdened with no time left for other forms of societal participation. She did, however, enjoy her relaxation group once a week and likes traveling: ‘I like it when we’re together, for example with the Tai Chi people, when we pay attention to each other. I also like to do pleasant things together, like go on vacation. Then you have time for each other and you can enjoy beautiful things’. Although the duration of family (child) care depends on external circumstances, ending only with a relative’s death or transfer to residential care (or when the child grows up), all these respondents characterized their caring commitment as temporary.

As to the two respondents who bemoaned not being to apply their professional skills despite continued interest in formal societal participation, because their attitude towards societal participation was primarily expectant, they themselves had taken no steps to identify a suitable organisation or activity. This attitude coincides with a sense of disappointment, a perception that this lack of opportunity stems from society’s failure to recognise their talents or create appropriate means through which they can invest their skills. Griet’s (63) complaint typifies this belief: ‘I think society does not sufficiently consider what people have developed as skills and experiences throughout their professional lives and what they are proud of’.

Motivation

This group’s motivations for participation were predominantly relational, such as connectedness and the need to help others or play a meaningful social role. In Griet’s words, ‘I am looking for an engagement that is socially valuable and benefits people’. They also expressed a need for recognition in statements about receiving respect and positive feedback from others. As Roza put it, ‘I want to do something so that people are satisfied with me, and getting positive feedback is pleasant’. They also mentioned the pursuit of self-fulfilment, a wish to invest their relational strengths and personality traits. Griet characterized her own relational abilities as follows: ‘I can come very close to

someone, I understand what he or she wants, and I can keep track of where that person is. I am aware of my own interpretations but I can put my own thoughts aside to remain close to the other person’s story’.

Expectations for civil society organisations

The respondents in this inhibited engagement group referred to more traditional, first modern civil society organisations that offer leisure activities and opportunities for personal development, such as flower arranging, cooking or sewing workshops. Their commitment to the organisation appeared conditional; for example, in Guillaume’s (65) case, on it having ‘... fair and attainable goals that fit in with my beliefs’. Hence, when looking for leisure activities, they expected a friendly, undemanding organisational culture with opportunities for contact. They also expressed a preference for organisations that draw together people of various ages, as reflected in the friendly, respectful relations in the small-scale context described by Gemma (65): ‘They should especially support people with ideas and provide opportunities for people to meet on a small scale and with informal methods.’ The main expectation of these respondents was that organisations have an active policy for finding suitable people, a policy that would make them hope for an invitation to participate.

Social consumerist pattern

Activity characteristics

The four Third Age adults who exhibited a social consumerist pattern of engagement showed no commitment to either formal or informal societal participation; rather, they were engaging in a broad range of leisure activities (e.g. sports, travel, cultural activities, gardening, photography) and personal development activities (e.g. language courses, ICT, creative techniques). They also tended to be (passive) members of organisations for the elderly or informal social groups, such as card or billiard clubs, and sometimes organised their own leisure activities. Ines (65), for example, being retired from a company maintenance staff but with no children or grandchildren to care for, enjoyed meeting friends, attending cultural activities and traveling with her husband. Once a month she attended the meetings of an association for the elderly. The three remaining respondents also mentioned being open to occasionally helping others with what are colloquially known as ‘small kindnesses’.

Two of these respondents, who after intense societal participation had (perhaps temporarily) withdrawn their engagement because of life events, disappointments and/or changing needs or capabilities, form a subgroup within this pattern. After withdrawal, their goals became self-oriented and unbounded; for example, enjoying life, pursuing an inner life and/or staying physically active. Jos (67) typifies this shift from societal engagement to social consumerism. After a professional life as a technician engaged in the management of many associations, including the municipal cultural board, he continued his societal participation after retirement but then terminated his memberships one after the other. His justification was that he needed more time for himself and wished to enjoy a leisurely life and cultural activities without being responsible for an association.

Motivation

The main goal of respondents in the social consumerist group was to live a good life, whether alone or with others. They also placed a high value on autonomy, which Ines expressed as the importance of being able to ‘... choose what you want to do in our society’. Nonetheless, as Lowie (68) made clear, they were aware of no longer being able to use their professional strengths: ‘I was specialised in public procurement legislation. That was my strength. However, everything has changed. I tell you, I cannot use my former knowledge any more. That’s over’. The strengths of this group, therefore, were mostly the specific capabilities developed during their working lives, which ranged from cooking, sewing, and being a good storyteller to directing a play or solving

others' practical problems.

This shift from other-oriented to self-oriented activities and a desire to make life more also occurred among the respondents who had withdrawn from intense societal participation, although this group additionally expressed a deep dissatisfaction with their earlier societal involvement and/or how it ended. Whereas some of these “withdrawers” only expressed a need to be occupied – for instance, with sports, others indicated that they had engaged enough and wanted to enjoy life. Still others, like Jos, wanted new experiences: ‘I try to read a new book at least every month, listen to a new album, meet a new person, add a new idea, a new destination, something totally new I did not have till now’.

Expectations for organisations

These social consumerist respondents were participating only reluctantly in organisations, not really wanting to but seeing it as a social obligation. As a result, they often expressed no commitment to the organisation as such, and their attitudes tended to be detached. What counted for them is whether the activities were worthwhile. For instance, Ines, when discussing her membership in a traditional organisation for the elderly that hosts such leisure activities as bingo or card games, admitted, ‘I cannot play cards. But the people are so nice. They are all very sweet. I limit myself to once a month. Really, to me it is more of an obligation. But it is not that bad’. The two respondents who had withdrawn their involvement, on the other hand, tended to be rather demanding and sceptical of the first modern organisations with which their earlier participation had familiarised them. As with their peers, it was not the type of organisation that interested them but rather the range of activities.

Discussion

In recognition that the general theory of Third Age (Laslett, 1989) depicted an important transition in the meaning of later life in society this study explores the extent to which Laslett's theory is still relevant for understanding the participation practices of current Third Age adults. The analysis of the personal narratives of 23 Third Age adults in Flanders, Belgium, reveals three primary patterns of participatory activities, motivations and expectations. Respondents in the holistic participation pattern engage in all three participatory types (social, formal societal and informal societal). Those showing an inhibited engagement pattern participate only in informal societal and social activities. Those exhibiting a social consumerist pattern engage exclusively passively in social activities.

Our key finding is that the significance that Laslett gave to the notion of Third Age is relevant for current older people. This becomes clear in the participation practices of respondents showing holistic activity and inhibited engagement patterns. Their practices focus on benefiting others and (usual) locus in a formal organisational context. Their motivational rationale is expressed by a sense of duty, however, with an emphasis on their autonomy. Likewise, some respondents ascribed many of their values to their education and family, but at the same time they value their self-expression and development. Respondents exhibiting the inhibited engagement pattern were engaged intensively in informal care, and reported a lack of time or opportunity to also invest in formal societal participation. This finding may indicate overburdening, however, it may also signal that the way organisations recruit volunteers is not in keeping with the expectations, objectives or capabilities of these Third Age adults.

The pattern most in keeping with indolence and disengagement, against which Laslett resists, is the social consumerist. That is most in line with the traditional and passive attendance of ageing adults to social clubs, as elderly clubs. Liberated from external restrictions and free to pursue their own projects and plan their own lives, ageing adults in this stage do not engage in societal participation but rather socialise and enjoy life and find satisfaction in their social contacts and leisure

activities. Laslett on the contrary promoted fairness between age groups and generations, for instance in the distribution of wealth and national resources, as a responsibility of those in the Third Age (1989). The social consumerist participation pattern among Third Age adults is depicted as a thorn in the eye of younger age groups. The claim is that the current ageing adults are absorbing a disproportionate share of the public resources (Macnicol, 2016). Some authors relate social consumerist behaviour to selfishness on the part of older adults (Beckett, 2010; Howker & Malik, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). However, in finding both the holistic activity and inhibited engagement patterns, our study do not support this general conclusion.

Several authors caution that civil society organisations may lose their attraction for Third Agers, claiming that they prefer a different kind of engagement than is offered by many of these organisations (de Hart, 2005; Duyvendak & Hurenkamp, 2004; Hustinx, 2009). In particular, people expect organisations to offer them an opportunity to engage in a specific theme rather than demanding total commitment. They want to be free to decide how much time to invest and hope to meet people interested in the same topic.

All 23 respondents saw participation in organisations as an opportunity to meet other people or engage in leisure activities. Respondents in the holistic activity and inhibited engagement groups also perceived organisations as an opportunity for societal engagement. In line with Carr and Komp (2011), the respondents objected to being identified as ‘old’ just because they participated in an organisation focussing on older adults.

Admittedly, one methodological concern merits attention. Caution should be taken in generalizing our findings across all Third Age adults. There is notable diversity among older adults (Seltzer & Yahirun, 2013), including those in the Flemish region of Belgium (Verté & De Witte, 2015). We consciously searched for sample diversity in terms of gender, age and education. Our analysis explores participation issues and themes that are relevant to relatively young, white, well-educated and predominantly male adults. It could therefore not address gender and class differences sufficiently.

The aim of this study was to review the relevance of Laslett's theory of Third Age. We studied how current Third Age adults shape their role in society by participating societally and socially, and whether participation was within or outside the frame of civil society organisations. In particular, we noted that the participation practices unite characteristics of self-oriented and other-oriented activities within one individual. Moreover, this diversity is equally apparent across our entire sample of Third Age adults. These findings have important implications for civil society organisations. They suggest that these agencies serve as societal cornerstones by offering ageing adults opportunities to meet and facilities in which to invest their skills. In doing so, they facilitate the fulfilling the needs of older adults who viewed societal participation as a way to make life meaningful. Our findings similarly make clear that current Third Age adults expect civil social organisations to innovate by rethinking their goals, activities and procedures. Policy-makers can facilitate such innovation by promoting asset-based communities, including civil society organisations, thereby supporting ageing adults in their pursuit of meaning.

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