

Centenarians and Super-Centenarians Via Their Families and Friends



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Inspiration For The Project



- ◆ Working with Lincoln Council on Aging in identifying environmental/energy needs of the elderly.
- ◆ Using a senior citizen as a Passport to the door of seniors.
- ◆ Observing persons in rural black communities living to be 90+.



Objectives

- ◆ To make contributions to research on Health and Longevity and Grambling State University's Social Research Club ongoing project, "In Search of the Ingredients for Longevity: Voices of the Black Elderly"
- ◆ To further explore the original question posed by the club "What contributes to your long life?"
- ◆ To look beyond religion - the number one findings of early GSU student researchers –in investigating the ingredients to longevity via the voices of black centenarians in the new millennium.



Defining Longevity and Centenarians

- ◆ Longevity is defined as long life. From a biblical perspective longevity is a long life or age promised by God in the Holy Bible: “The years of our life are three scores and ten, or even by reason of strength four-score” (Psalms 90:10)
- ◆ “A centenarian is a person who has attained the age of 100 years or more. The term is associated with longevity because the average life-expectancies across the world is far from 100” (Wikipedia).
- ◆ A recent survey report indicated over 50,000 centenarians in the United States as of the year 2005.



Relevant Review/Theory

- ◆ Physical activity contributes to longevity by allowing the individual to gain stronger muscles and flexibility (Optimal Aging, 2004).
- ◆ Proper nutrition is very important because it can prevent organ failure and difficulties with swallowing, and keep your overall health stabilized physically and mentally (Optimal Aging, 2004).
- ◆ Research on marriages have shown health benefits obtained by men who stay married or remarry have improved nutrition and healthy behaviors (Tucker, 2004).
- ◆ In early frontier days the vast majority of settlers were cut off from any kind of "formal" medical care and moreover, competent physicians long remained beyond the reach, both physically and financially, of a vast segment of the population. For residents deprived of these benefits, folk medicine derived from time-honored and age-old traditions (Fisher, 1997).



Relevant Review and Theory cont...

- ◆ The Activity Theory maintains that in order to be happy in the old age and stress free, the individuals need to be active. In other words, the higher the physical activity, the greater the happiness and the lower the stress.
- ◆ Researchers have also found lower level of stress to be associated with living a long healthy life.
- ◆ Social Support Theory holds individuals with a strong support network (formal and informal) tend to have a high quality of life.



Methods

- ◆ The personal interview approach was used to explore the perceptions beyond religion of the contributing factors to longevity among black centenarians residing in rural and urban north Louisiana.
- ◆ Snowball sampling technique was used to secure participants for the study.
- ◆ Informants, close friends and family members, were used to obtain additional information.
- ◆ The participants are centenarians (100 to 109) or super-centenarians (110+).
- ◆ Measure of Longevity: “What factors other than religion do you believe have enabled you to live a long life?”



Mr. Willie Davis was the first person interviewed at the age of 98, lived to be 102.

He resided in Simsboro, LA





Case Study of a Centenarian Ms. Emma Brown



Special guest at Miss South Sociological Association

- ◆ Case Study of a Pre- Centenarian, Emma Brown, who participates in Phase I and lived to be 105.
- ◆ Ms. E.B. was interviewed in her farm home at the age of ninety- two; she attributed her longevity to the will of God, read her Bible every night and attend church regularly.



Case Study of a Super Centenarian Mr. Bo Carter

- ◆ Case Study of a Super Centenarian, Bo Carter, who participated in Phase 1 and lived to 113
- ◆ Mr. B.C. was interviewed at age 104 and revisited several times before his death at the age of 113. Until the age of 107, Mr. B.C. was found regularly attending and participating in various social and physical functions, including church services, family gatherings, senior citizen activities, birthday celebrations in his honor and other centenarians.





Findings

Case Study I: Married Centenarian Couple Mr. Theo Jordon born January 2, 1907 and Mrs. Izola Jordan born February 18, 1907

◆ Ingredients to Longevity

◆ Hers:

- Proper nutrition
- Physical activities

◆ His:

- Less stress
- Hard work



Case Study II: Mrs. Ophelia Burks

Born October 25, 1903

◆ Ingredients to Longevity

- “God and being obedient to his will”
- Frequent interaction with family and friends
- Working on the Plantation – picking cotton and plowing the fields
- Being physically active – playing tambourine, yard and house work



Case Study III: Mrs. Gertrude Hill

Born January 7, 1907

- ◆ Ingredients to longevity
 - “The Good Lord”
 - “Devilment” -Folk Remedy consisting of a mixture of green rubbing alcohol, turpentine, Watkins liniment, and vinegar



Case Study IV: The Thornton Sisters

Carrie Thornton 102 Yrs.

- ◆ Ingredients to longevity -“I have looked to the hills from which cometh my help. I treat people like I wish to be treated.”

Mrs. Rosie Thornton Warren 104 Yrs.

- ◆ Ingredients to longevity -“I didn’t do anything bad I can remember. I stayed with my children and raised them.”

Mrs. Maggie Thornton Renfro 114 Yrs.

- ◆ Ingredients to longevity -“I serve God and do like he wants me to do.”



Case Study IV: The Thornton Sisters

Mrs. Rosie Thornton Warren 104 Yrs.

- ◆ Ingredients to longevity

-“I didn’t do anything bad I can remember. I stayed with my children and raised them.”



Case Study IV: The Thornton Sisters

Mrs. Maggie Thornton Renfro 114 Yrs.

◆ Ingredients to longevity

-“I serve God and do like he wants me to do.”



Case Study V: James Haskin

Born April 16, 1903

- ◆ Ingredients to Longevity
 - Nutrition Eating the Right Food
 - Staying Physically Active



Case Study VI: William Riley

Age: 101

- ◆ Ingredients to Longevity
 - Living a Christian Life
 - Strong Family Support
 - Land Ownership



Case Study VII: Betty Wilson

Died at Age: 115, 2006

◆ Ingredients to Longevity

- “Live a Christian life that is pleasing and be appreciative”
- Live right and live long





Preliminary Findings

- ◆ Case studies render support to previous research and the activity theory in social gerontology as well as the social support theory.
- ◆ Mrs. Ophelia Burks, after the death of her spouse continued to be very active in the church, community, and continued to have high levels of family and friends interaction.
- ◆ The husband/wife centenarians are physically active, happily married, and have a strong social support network.
- ◆ The most valuable contribution to GSU's Social Research Club ongoing project, "In Search of the Ingredients for Longevity: Voices of the Black Elderly" was the acquisition of information on the secret of a long life from the voices of a married centenarian couple. Since the inception of The Longevity Project in 1993 there has never been a married centenarian couple.
- ◆ Another contribution of worthy is the attempt to search **beyond religion** for the ingredients to longevity, the number one ingredient reported in early studies of The Longevity Project .



Future Direction of the Research

- ◆ To continue to search for ingredients for longevity “beyond religion”
- ◆ To continue to use snowball sampling and informants to identify centenarians in the marital and family system: husband and wife, sisters and brothers, children and grandchildren of centenarians
- ◆ To publish a book on findings on centenarians in black families / marriages



Special Thanks

- ◆ Centenarian and Super-Centenarian Participants
- ◆ Student Research Training Program
- ◆ President and Executive Committee of Pi Gamma MU International Honor Society

GSU Social Research Club and Pi Gamma MU (Longevity Researchers)

