

The Diversity of Qualitative Research Approaches and Foci on Aging and Physical Activity—Celebrating 20 Years!

Rylee A. Dionigi, Maria Horne, Anne-Marie Hill, and Mary Ann Kluge

Faculty of Science & Health, School of Allied Health, Exercise & Sports Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Port Macquarie, NSW, Australia

In the July 2001 issue (Vol. 9, No. 3), the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity (JAPA)* published a special issue on “The Promise of Qualitative Research.” This was the first special issue to include only qualitative research since the beginning of *JAPA* in 1993. Up until that point, *JAPA* was dominated by quantitative research. As argued by the guest editors, Grant and O’Brien Cousins (2001, p. 238),¹ such research makes valuable contributions to the field, however, “In the course of quantifying physical performance, functional capabilities, and psychological characteristics of the aged, the ineffable and less tangible are either suppressed or absent . . . and the central character (i.e., the older person) is hidden from the text.”

Qualitative research is a methodology in its own right. It includes a variety of approaches (e.g., phenomenology, critical ethnography, case study) and methods (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations), and begins from a different worldview than quantitative research. That is, “When engaging in a qualitative approach, the researcher starts from the premise that the personal experiences of each individual are legitimate sources of knowledge” (Grant & O’Brien Cousins, 2001, p. 240). The purpose of this special issue is to draw attention to and celebrate the diversity and growth in qualitative research on aging and physical activity that has been published in *JAPA* in the 20 years since Grant and O’Brien Cousin’s original issue on this topic. We hope it inspires readers to be bold and creative in their pursuit of qualitative knowledge on older people as well as act as a reminder that there are many ways to age and be physically active.

To represent the growth and diversity of qualitative research over the past two decades, we took a multifaceted approach in selecting articles for this special issue. First, a database search was conducted in PubMed and Scopus for all *JAPA* articles from July 2001 to October 2021 that had the word “qualitative” in the title, abstract, list of keywords, and/or text. The results from each database were merged and any duplicates were deleted. Initially, there were 89 studies included in our review; however, 10 were excluded because they were identified as mixed method or quantitative in nature. We created and shared a Google spreadsheet with the details of the remaining 79 articles to collaborate throughout the review process.

Second, the studies were divided between the guest editors and assigned according to their area of expertise, available time, and interest. Every article was closely read and reviewed between the guest editors over a 4-month period (August–November 2021) according to the following agreed upon characteristics of quality. The first three of these criteria align with the *JAPA* guidelines for qualitative studies²:

- The rigor and focus on discussing the qualitative methodology and methods;
- The use of theoretical frameworks to inform the study and/or its findings;

- The structure and style of the article as a whole and the parts within it;
 - The number of citations in Google Scholar at the time of our review, and/or;
 - The Scopus Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI)³ at the time of our review.
- To capture a diversity of disciplines, methodologies, and topics, we also noted the following about each article:
- The uniqueness of the topic area in aging and physical activity;
 - The focus on older participants who are not typically represented in physical activity research, and/or;
 - The impact of the findings on theory, policy, and/or practice.

As we read each article, we added notes about the above information to the spreadsheet and decided on its tiered ranking (T1 or T2). We each included a justification for our decision based on the above characteristics of quality and diversity in qualitative research.

Third, we moved all those ranked T1 (or, if deliberating, T1 or T2) to sheet two of the spreadsheet. There were 42 articles that were moved to sheet two. We analyzed each other’s notes in terms of the above criteria to determine the 20 articles for this issue.

Collectively, the selected articles contribute to theories of embodiment, intersectionality, gender, poststructuralism, socioecological models, positive aging, subjective well-being, planned behavior, social-cognition, and the theoretical domains framework as well as the disciplines of psychology, health promotion, public health, and sociology. In particular, a range of qualitative methodologies and population groups are represented, such as interpretive phenomenology with Canadian males 75 years and older (Deneau et al., 2020),⁴ an intrinsic case study on a U.S. 65+ women’s volleyball team (Kirby & Kluge, 2013), an exploratory study in resistance training with peers in a retirement village (Watkins et al., 2021), narrative inquiry, ethnography, and creative analytical practices on one woman’s story (Griffin & Phoenix, 2014), community-based participatory research with multicultural immigrant Muslims (Salma, 2020), and knowledge translation in falls prevention research with older exercisers and their physiotherapists (Meyer et al., 2016). The data collection methods across the selected studies were primarily focus groups, individual interviews, autophotography, photovoice, life histories, observational notes, and/or written reflections while data analysis often involved various forms of coding, thematic analysis, cross-case analysis, and theoretical and/or practical application.

In terms of metrics, three of the selected articles had a FWCI above 3. For example, Hawley-Hague et al. (2016; FWCI = 4.8), had the highest FWCI score among the articles in this issue. They explored White British instructors’ (mean age = 56.3 years) perspectives on older adults’ uptake and adherence to exercise classes.

Using in-depth semistructured interviews, they found that to enable older adults to have a positive outcome from exercise classes, it is important to focus on goal setting (informally or formally) and person-centered delivery. Also, to support older adults' confidence with exercise classes, they recommended that instructors use terms such as "movement" rather than "exercise" and, wherever possible, offer free sample sessions so that older adults can try the class before committing to it. The qualitative design and methods of this study (that was part of a wider study) are well detailed and provide an effective example of how theory (in this case, the theory of planned behavior) can be used to inform, but not dictate, the findings of research.

Stathi et al. (2002, FWCI = 3.73) deftly expressed the complexity of human experience and the interdependence and interrelatedness of engagement in physical activity with key dimensions of subjective well-being. Older adults who were regularly physically active indicated that physical activity influences all dimensions of well-being (with the exception of material well-being). Findings revealed the differential effects of involvement in different types of physical activity on mental health, including the maintenance of a busy and active life, mental alertness, positive attitude toward life, avoidance of stress, negative function, and isolation. This article also provided rationale for the value and opportunities offered by qualitative inquiry and rigorously described the procedures used to ensure credibility of their findings.

Gallagher et al. (2010, FWCI = 3.16) used focus groups and photovoice methods to tease out salient factors of the neighborhood environment that encouraged or discouraged walking in older, urban African Americans. Photographs taken by the participants themselves were used to facilitate focus group discussions that explicated the importance of the presence of other friendly or active people, attractive or peaceful neighborhood surroundings and/or statues with personal or historical meaning, access to convenient destinations and amenities (places to eat, rest, and use the bathroom), and safety from crime. Sidewalk and traffic conditions, animals, public walking tracks and trails, and weather were also influential. Readers who are interested in how to design a study using photovoice will benefit from this example.

Notably, the abovementioned articles of Gallagher et al and Stathi et al each have over 100 citations. The most cited article in this special issue at the time of selection was Dionigi (2006), a methodological paper with 121 citations (Google Scholar, 30th November, 2021). Dionigi drew from her findings on the experiences of older Australian athletes to highlight the strengths of and need for sociological qualitative research into the growing phenomenon of competitive sport in later life. She provided a critical overview of qualitative studies in the area and offered novel ways of interpreting older athletes' stories and practices in the context of sociocultural understandings of sport and aging. O'Brien Cousins (2001) had a high FWCI of 2.6 and is an example of a foundational study in the field of psychology that also helped make the case for the importance of qualitative research in aging and physical activity. O'Brien Cousins focused on the benefits of qualitative approaches and the importance of considering the social and cultural contexts affecting older adults' physical activity beliefs and exercise behaviors.

In addition, the studies in this issue focus on individuals and groups whose experiences and perspectives are rarely captured in research on aging and physical activity, such as older people with vision loss (Burton et al., 2018), older people from diverse socioeconomic areas in England (McGowan et al., 2019), Hong Kong Chinese older immigrants to Australia (Koo, 2011), rural versus urban older adult experiences in England (De Koning et al., 2015), rural older Canadians (Witcher, et al., 2007), older people with early dementia (Hobson et al., 2020), African American older women (Price et al., 2013), residents in assisted living facilities (Vos et al., 2019), and underserved communities (i.e., ethnic minority and lower income older adults; Stewart et al., 2006). A major contribution of qualitative research is its accessibility to the needs and experiences of diverse groups. However, a notable omission from our selection were the perspectives and voices of Indigenous/First Nations and LGBTQIA+⁵ older people. Therefore, *JAPA* welcomes more qualitative research on a range of individuals, groups, topics, theories, approaches, and disciplines to continue to grow the knowledge base and application in this area.

Overall, qualitative studies provide unique insights and knowledge about older people's perspectives, experiences, and values regarding aging and physical activity. Seeking older people's stories and wisdom informs theory as well as the design, relevance, and delivery of innovative physical activity-related policies and/or programming. Qualitative approaches can also show how personal experiences and identities shape (and are shaped by) sociocultural, environmental, and contextual factors, adding to the subjectivity and complexity of the phenomenon of aging and physical activity. *JAPA* is committed to bringing qualitative research that amplifies older people's voices and lived experiences to our readership because such research is a critical component of our mission to increase understandings about physical activity in aging.

Notes

1. See Grant, B., & O'Brien Cousins, S. (2001). Aging and physical activity: The promise of qualitative research. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 9(3), 237–244. <https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.9.3.237>.
2. See: <https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/japa/japa-overview.xml>.
3. Field-Weighted Citation Impact (FWCI) shows how well cited this document is when compared to similar documents. A value greater than 1.00 means the document is more cited than expected according to the average. It considers: The year of publication, document type, and disciplines associated with its source. The FWCI is the ratio of the document's citations to the average number of citations received by all similar documents over a 3-year window. Each discipline makes an equal contribution to the metric, which eliminates differences in researcher citation behavior (Source: Quoted from Scopus database).
4. The *JAPA* papers cited in-text are included in the virtual special issue.
5. See <https://www.csu.edu.au/division/people-culture/our-ethos/respect-equity-and-diversity/lgbtq> and <https://www.uts.edu.au/partners-and-community/initiatives/social-justice-uts/equity-and-diversity-uts/gender-sexuality-5>.