

Editorial

Longevity's Purposes

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“The Purposes of Longer Lives” is the theme under which the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America will convene in November 2018 ([Gerontological Society of America, 2018](https://academic.oup.com/gsa)). Anticipating this event, the Editors-in-Chief of the GSA scientific journals, including the *Journals of Gerontology Series A*, *Journals of Gerontology Series B*, *The Gerontologist*, and *Innovation in Aging* have worked to assemble full issues, special sections, and collections related to the conference theme. These 45 articles appear in the current issues of the journals and also on the GSA Journals Page (<https://academic.oup.com/gsa>). The reports, of course, were not conceived to address the theme; each one, rather, arises from research questions integral to the authors' work, but they can be collectively viewed nonetheless in light of the “Purposes” theme. To read across these articles is to be impressed by the worldwide scope of that work and by the multidisciplinary vitality of the field—the projects, the trials, the surveys, the panel studies, and the pooling of data sources into multinational archives available for more powerful analyses. The research that flows into GSA's journals has no borders.

Longevity and life span have been a core focus for GSA ever since the very first issue of the *Journal of Gerontology* in 1946 came bannered with the slogan, “To add life to years, not just years to life.” Explicit here was the idea, dating deep into recorded history, that pro-longevity efforts should seek “not merely an increase in time *per se* but an extension of the healthy and productive period of life” ([Gruman, 1966](#), p. 8). Today, academic units concerned with gerontology have been adding the term longevity to their titles—a center for longevity, a longevity institute. This provides organizations with a measurable outcome in a way that aging by itself cannot. At the same time, credit for gains in life expectancy is due to mortality reductions at all stages of the life course.

Longevity's purpose is a teleological question about goals and ends, about the value of extended survival. Ironically, evolutionary theory about aging tells us that longer lives for organisms are pointless beyond the stage of reproduction and perhaps the rearing of offspring. If we are to find meaning in outliving this biological design, it will need to come from human and cultural aspirations for more time alive. And more time can be valuable in at least three ways: as a personal good available for any sort of individual pursuit; as a public good that benefits the larger group; and as a resource for the scientific and scholarly study of life span—research on aging thrives on more aging. All three of these longevity benefits are on view in the GSA article collections.

First, *more time is a personal good*, an affordance for one's individual activities and interests, whatever they may be. This is so even as there is a downward trajectory of activities in later years. The collections hold examples of research on the modifiable conditions that are conducive to healthy life spans or “health spans.” We see affirmed the role of physical activity, social support, diet, sleep, and the environmental conditions and amenities that facilitate social participation. A number of articles remind us that longer lives are not only a span of behaviors but also open up space for reflection. Long experience offers the opportunity to look back on adversity and difficult conditions to discover means of coping and resilience. Current journal issues also bring us research on the possibility of wisdom—what it is and how it can be measured. Wisdom is learning from life, and so longer life offers the potential but not necessarily the certainty of further development of this capacity.

Second, *more time is a public good*. This is the message of GSA's new publication on *Longevity Economics* (2018). Older adults provision their societies as producers, consumers, volunteers, taxpayers, and distributors of wealth.

In this vein, the just-noted wisdom research emphasizes the generativity and other-focused compassion of wise ones. Other articles observe that communities can create roles to channel elders' contributions, for example, in being peer educators for persons with depression and volunteering in the community. With more generations alive, the religious socialization of grandchildren—passing on values—is another instance of longer life enriching the culture.

Third, *more time is a resource for research*. Extended lives are a larger temporal space within which to observe the therapeutic benefits of exercise and physical activity, people's subjective processes of health evaluation, and the long tails of health trajectories. There is more scope for research on biomarkers and mechanisms of aging, and for devising recruitment methods that can involve very much older people in clinical trials. Extreme longevity stretches the endpoint for the genetic and biochemical studies reported in the journals.

When talking about longer lives, we assume that they occur within the confines of the known human life span. But could that limit be breached? Ben-Haim and colleagues (2018) analyzed the question for a report in the *Journals of Gerontology: Biological Sciences* by gathering results from targeted aging interventions in various organisms.

The authors posit, in conclusion, that if the genetic, nutritional, and pharmaceutical interventions used in animal models could be implemented in humans, it seems reasonable that, "in the foreseeable future," humans could break through the ceiling of a 115- or 120-year maximal life span.

If that came to pass, then the GSA meeting theme of 2018—"The Purposes of Longer Lives"—would have an even sharper focus.

References

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