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## **Abstract**

We are witnessing perhaps the most important shift in the history of mankind – the rapid ageing of the earth's population. This trend raises such issues as elderly care giving and living arrangements in old age. By virtue, the author suggests that managing service provision for elderly consumers within residential care homes is going to become an increasingly important issue as more consumers live longer and require residential care. Moreover, given the paucity of literature related to elderly consumers' understandings of such institutions this research aims to illuminate and distil this issue. Based on existential-phenomenological hermeneutic interpretive methods the author reveals that elderly consumers actively consume life and death related experiences in order to create a meaningful existence within residential care homes.

**Main areas of interest:** Gerontological consumption, identity, thanatology and terror management theory.

## **Understanding Consumption within a Residential Care Home: An Interpretation of George's Everyday Experiences of Life and Death**

*“We have been witnessing perhaps the most important demographic shift in the history of mankind – the rapid ageing of the earth’s population. Today there are approximately 600 million people over the age of 60 living on this planet. By the year 2050 this figure is expected to quadruple to 2 billion”* (United Nations, 2002: 1).

In one sense, population ageing represents a human success story as societies now have the luxury of ageing (Kinsella and Velkoff, 2001). However, the steady sustained growth of elderly populations affects just about everyone on the planet (Moschis, 2003) and brings myriad challenges to policy makers and service providers in many societies. As Kinsella and Velkoff (2001: 516) write, “[t]his trend is also affecting families and raises issues such as elderly care giving [and] living arrangements in old age.” To these ends, policy arrangements regarding the care of groups of elderly consumers in residential care homes is likely to become an increasingly contentious issue (see, for example Andrews and Phillips, 2000; Department of Health, 2000; Wagner, 1984) as more consumers live longer and require residential care in old age. Similarly, Oldman and Quilgars (1999) suggest that managing service provision for groups of elderly consumers within residential care homes is also going to become an increasingly important issue.

With the myriad challenges to gerontological service providers in mind, marketing and consumers researchers have illuminated issues related to an ageing population

through studies of the consumption of care services and living arrangements in old age. Such studies include, targeting the mature consumer market (Moschis, Bellenger, Kennett & Aab, 1996), exploring the intergenerational caregiver market (Mathur & Moschis, 1999) and influencing mature consumers (Moschis, Bellenger and Curasi (2003). However, critical review of such a body of literature reveals that no studies exist that relate to elderly consumers *understandings* of the consumption of care services (Wilson, 1997; 1991) within residential care homes. With the related issue of living arrangements in mind, this discussion now turns to the archives of marketing and consumer research to review this body of literature.

With studies of living arrangements in old age in mind, the notion can be forwarded wherein a small amount of scholarly insight is directed into the related archives of marketing and consumer research in the form of elderly consumers attitudes and decisions relating to the decision to move into retirement housing (Gibler, Lumpkin and Moschis, 1997; 1998; 1999), and the impact of senior citizens' lifestyle on the choices of elderly housing (Kim, Kim and Kim, 2003). However, whilst issues<sup>1</sup> surrounding the lived experiences of elderly consumers in residential care homes are debated within social gerontology (see, for example Oldman and Quilgars, 1999; Wilson, 1997; Means and Smith, 1994; Wilson, 1991) no such studies currently exist within the realms of marketing or interpretive consumer research.

Moreover, as Wilson (1997; 1991) comments groups of elderly peoples voices are muted in many academic analyses of social policies, and service provision is so often shaped by the assumptive worlds of policy makers and service providers. Returning

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Andrews and Phillips (2000) discuss the moral dilemmas associated with the management of private residential care homes in the United Kingdom.

to the related fields of marketing and interpretive consumer research a literature search of the leading academic journals will reveal that that there is a distinct absence of studies that attempt to provide elderly consumers with a voice on living arrangements and service provision in the form of elderly care giving (Kinsella and Velkoff, 2001). With these scholastic lacunas in mind the fundamental question that this paper addresses is: What aspects of elderly consumers understandings of their everyday lived experiences are important in the formulation of service provision within residential care homes?

### **Methodological Approach**

Contemporary understandings of consumer research have identified that an increasing number of scholars have adopted interpretive research designs in order to shed new light on consumption<sup>2</sup>. As such, the archives of interpretive consumer research consist of studies that are designed upon, for example, existential-phenomenology (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) and hermeneutics (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994). To these ends, researching consumers has evolved beyond the need to explain consumption through psychological and/or economic theory and the search for managerial implications (Beckmann & Elliott, 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Early understandings of the concept of consumption were directed toward and throughout the notion of acquiring products (Cohen, 2003). As a consequence, this notion was the energetic driving force behind a multitude of studies within the scholastic field of marketing (see, for example, Kent, 1986; Box, 1983; Cannon, 1978; Schary and Becker, 1976; Cunningham and Clarke, 1975) until the mid 1980's when the concept of consumption was broadened to include three entities in the conceptual form of acquisition, usage and disposal (Shanker and Goulding, 2001; Holbrook, 1995). As such, legitimate scholastic thought embraced the joint notions of what consumers' did with their purchased products and how they disposed of them (Goulding and Shanker, 2001).

Existential Phenomenology<sup>3</sup>, as a methodological approach, has been frequently used in interpretive consumer research to explore and understand the complexities of consumption (see for example -- Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Thompson, 1996; Thompson and Haykto, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton, Eccles and Elliott, 2002; Eccles, 2002). These studies of marketing and consumer research have evolved to typically reveal how existential-phenomenology is used in the field. In line with the preceding authors, existential-phenomenology can be viewed as an appropriate interpretive methodological approach for illuminating and distilling understandings of residential care homes. Furthermore, it is argued that existential-phenomenology is an interpretive approach that can provide an empirically based and rigorous understanding of the underlying themes and structures of lived experience within residential care homes.

Existential-phenomenology is an interpretive methodological approach that enables the researcher to gain in-depth first person descriptions of consumption experiences (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) within residential care homes. In this case, the researcher, in line with Thompson (1998) invited a resident of a residential care home (named George) to give a relatively unrestricted account of his life within such an institution. By virtue, George was invited to talk about some of the things in his room with the goal of obtaining first person descriptions (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) of these things. With similar issues in mind, Saunders (1982) argues that “[t]he first crucial rule of the [existential] phenomenological researcher is: more

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<sup>3</sup> The term phenomenology is subject to considerable ambiguity. It can refer to a philosophy (Husserl, 1967), an inquiry paradigm (Lincoln, 1990), an interpretive theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) a social science analytical perspective or orientation (Harper, 2000; Schutz, 1970, 1967) a major qualitative tradition, (Creswell, 1998), or a research methods framework (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, according to Quinn Patton (2002:104), varying forms complicate the picture even more; transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic phenomenology offer different nuances of focus – the essential meaning of individual experience, the social construction of group reality, and the language and structure of communication, respectively.

subjects do not yield more information. Quantity should not be confused with quality. The phenomenologist must learn to engage in in-depth probing” (Ibid: 356).

As Saunders (Ibid.) suggests, within the context of existential-phenomenology, quantity should not be confused with quality, and that an existential-phenomenological researcher should not attempt to measure the truth by the statistical significance of the sample, or indeed, the length of the transcripts. Rather, the existential-phenomenological researcher engages in circular dialogue that facilitates individual participation in depth discussions pertaining to George’s lived experiences within a certain context (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). As such, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the quality of the subsequent interview text should enable the researcher to gain confidence in the resultant interpretive findings. With the goal of obtaining good quality interview text in mind, Creswell (1998) further suggests that existential-phenomenological researchers’ need clear criteria in mind when attempting to locate suitable people to interview. In terms of this particular study, the fundamental criterion was that any potential participants lived in a residential care home, were not suffering from dementia, and were fit and able to enter into discussions with the researcher. The rationale for this choice is based on the notion that to rigorously elucidate potential participant understandings of consumption within residential care homes necessitates that any potential participant have the necessary vital energies in order for their voices to be heard in a clear and meaningful way.

Furthermore, and with issues of analyzing the interview data in mind, it is of value to raise a fundamental question; how can the researcher rigorously analyse the interview

data? To answer this, it is necessary to forward yet another question; within the field of interpretive consumer research who has effectively applied existential-phenomenology to a range of research situations? Turning, to the archives of interpretive consumer research it is noted that examples of this type of study emanate from Thompson's (1996) exploration of gendered consumption and lifestyle, Thompson and Hirschman's (1995) analysis of self care practices and self conceptions, Thompson, Locander and Pollio's (1990) study of everyday consumption practices of married women, and Thompson and Haykto's (1997) deconstruction of the meaning of fashion discourses and the link to identity and self conceptions. Moreover, these studies form part of a scholastic lineage that dates back to Thompson, Locander and Pollio's (1989) theoretical meditations on consumer experience and the philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology.

Within the aforementioned study, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (Ibid.) argue that the philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology enables consumer researchers to focus on *consumer experience* within a particular context. By virtue of this atheoretical descriptive aim, the interpretive objective is to describe experiential patterns emerging from a context (Pollio, Henley and Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). With similar issues in mind, Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997) in line with Merleau-Ponty (1945) Gadamer (1960), Giorgi (1983) and Polkinghorne (1989) claim that "atheoretical interpretation does not imply that a neutral view is adopted; on the contrary, all interpretation is rendered from some perspective. Descriptive approaches, while atheoretical, require their own assumptions, and their goal is not to support an apriori theory not to coerce phenomena into categories that conform to theory" (Pollio, Henley and Thompson,

1997: 36). To these interpretive ends, this research project also adopts the foundational interpretive process of Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) in order to illuminate Georges understandings of his lived experiences within residential care homes.

### **The Case of George**

Given the exploratory nature of this piece of research, and in line with Thompson (1998), a single case-study description will be presented in an attempt to provide an emic account of the consumption experiences that shape George's everyday consumption experiences. To this end, the text derived from the interview with George is presented in such a form that uses George's own terms and category systems (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). As such, these pages do not contain any external verifications, inferences, and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript. Furthermore, the entire interview transcript has been read on many occasions, and individual passages have been related to those preceding and proceeding in order to improve interpretive vision<sup>4</sup>. At the time of the interview 'George' (name changed) was a 94-year old man who lived in Cedar View<sup>5</sup> (name changed). The interview lasted for about one hour and fifteen minutes. Extracts from this interview will now be revealed along with resultant interpretations.

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<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to illuminate the hermeneutic process beyond this characterisation because "the process is more a matter of tacit knowledge than explicit application. The process has a fundamental ambiguity to it in that the researcher must "know" how to interpret" (Pollio, Henley and Thompson, 1997: 50). Moreover, the actual practice of hermeneutics "may also be a nonrepresentable form of knowledge" (Ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> Cedar View is located within the United Kingdom.

**Interviewer:** Why don't we start by talking about some of the things in your room?

*G: Although I am severely incapacitated now, I still read my Telegraph from cover to cover. I try to keep up to date with business, sport, and all the rest of it, you see. You've got too. The trouble is old people tend to relax and not do anything, which is a tragedy. I try to stimulate these old boys but I can't get anywhere. There are one or two ladies that I talk to, and I stimulate them a bit, and I get a bit out of it, I get a response.*

*Interviewer: How often do you read The Telegraph?*

*G: Seven days a week. I like the Telegraph because I can cover the sport, I can cover the markets, I check the markets everyday. This is the way you keep alive isn't it?*

*Interviewer: Have you been following the movements of the markets recently?*

*G: They are stabilising you know. I think, I think, erm, taking a broad view, our economy is fairly stable. People don't realise the millions upon millions involved in the markets and all the rest of it. It's a very complicated thing.*

*Interviewer: It's certainly not something that I can claim to fully understand.*

*G: Although I was a YMCA secretary, I was in Manchester where I had four assistants you know. My senior assistant was a qualified accountant and so I have had a pretty big business experience. That's all helped to stimulate one's interest in life. I've had a wonderful life and I am very thankful. I am very sorry for people who have no outside interest, that's a great pity. I would just fold up. That's what happens. Don't misunderstand me, I'm enjoying my life as much as is possible under these conditions. I'm so grateful for the wonderful support you get here. They are a wonderful crowd. It's loving care, it's not, you know, and of course there are over thirty people involved here in one way or another.*

A notable aspect of these opening passages is that George's descriptions reveal that his experiences within 'Cedar House' can be seen to include; loving care, a severely incapacitated body, memories of being a YMCA secretary and a Telegraph newspaper which is used to "stimulate" both George and other residents in an attempt to keep alive. These latter experiences can be seen to play a figural role within George's lived experiences and can be clearly seen in the preceding and proceeding sections of interview text. To this end, the dialogue indicates that George read the Telegraph newspaper on a daily basis with particular attention directed toward the business and sport sections amongst others. These experiences enabled George to forward the comment "[t]his is the way you keep alive isn't it?" Seen in this light, reading the Telegraph newspaper could be interpreted as an important element of lived experience

that directs George's thoughts away from feeling mortal. This interpretation is strengthened in the light of the interview text wherein George appears to attempt to direct other residents' attention toward life affirming issues by discussing reports of business, the movement of the markets and sport that are contained within his newspaper. For example, when describing fellow residents who do not appear to regularly read newspapers and/or have no outside interests George used phrases like "*I feel sorry for people with no outside interests, that's a great pity. I would just fold up.*" As such, the interview text reveals that George was dependent on his Telegraph newspaper to construct meaning within and throughout his everyday lived experiences within a residential care home. Furthermore, the text also highlights that George, despite being "*severely incapacitated*", attempted to use the Telegraph newspaper as a means to "*stimulate*" his fellow residents' to help them avoid experiencing mortal thoughts. By virtue, George's experiences of this "*loving care*" can be seen to form a pattern that enables him to "*enjoy his life*" and be "*stimulated*" by the discussions of sport, the economy and the movements of the markets reported within the Telegraph newspaper.

The foreground of George's lived experience then changed to include discussions of memories relating to some of his pre-care experiences as a rector as the following passages reveal:

*Interviewer: So what other things do you do to keep in contact with the outside world?*

*G: I've worked with a lot of very interesting people. I was a rector for over forty years. I used to take my services and even bury people. I always remember my great nephew at the christening, he said "Uncle George can bury people but he can't christen them [laughter]." I couldn't perform a sacrament you see, but I buried quite a lot of people.*

*Interviewer: Did you bury people for many years?*

*G: I retired a sixty-five you see, and I was heavily involved with the church, and, erm, and very often when one of our old people died the vicar said "George, this is one yours, you've been their minister, I haven't, and so you must bury them" [laughter].*

*Interviewer: How did you feel when you buried people?*

*G: I was so happy. I rendered their last service, you see. I had one chappy that I visited for nearly a year. Some people take bereavement terribly, and Bill just couldn't get over it, and I am certain that he eventually died of a broken heart. I was convinced of that. Now, others, you can stimulate them and encourage them to do things. Oh, one rather interesting case I had, he was in his forties and lost his wife, tragically you see and he couldn't do anything. I said, "Bill I think you remember from our early days when you and your wife decided to change your car?" He said "yes." "Well" I said, "why haven't you done so?" "Well" he said, "there is no point is there?" I said, "Bill, you and your wife were*

*going to have a new car”. “Now” I said, “you go and change and get the car that you and your wife were going to buy,” and do you know that lifted the latch. It sounds stupid but it just broke the bereavement. It’s a difficult job dealing with bereavement, isn’t it? The vicar, we had had a burial and the vicar said “go and visit this old chap,” so I did this for two or three times, eventually I received a letter saying “thank you, I’ve decided that I don’t want you to come again, I’m not interested in religion”. He died a week after [laughter]. Oh dear, yes, yes. I’ve enjoyed working with other people very much, but I miss them very much. It’s so rewarding working with other people.*

The preceding passages highlight that the George’s life experiences at this point in the interview can be seen to include “*happy*” or “*stimulating*” memories of conducting burial services and bereavement counselling. To these mortal ends, George described his memories of burial services and bereavement counselling using phrases like “*I’ve enjoyed working with other people very much*” and “*It’s so rewarding working with other people.*” Seen in this “*rewarding*” light, the interview text subsequently reveals that George’s memories consisted of attempts to “*stimulate*” the grieving “*and encourage them to do things*” to help them through the experience of bereavement. As such, the interview text under examination brings to the fore an example whereby George encouraged a parishioner (named Bill) to purchase a car in order to come to terms with the bereavement associated with the tragic death of his wife. With this automotive experience in mind, George thought that, in general terms, it was very difficult job to mentally and/or emotionally “*stimulate*” the grieving, and that while some people responded to George’s bereavement counselling, others did not. For

example, the text reveals that George's memories of this time in his life consisted of an offer to help someone through the grieving process that was rejected, and that this person, coincidentally, died a week later. By virtue, these death related memories could be interpreted as a source of comfort within and throughout his everyday lived experiences within a residential care home.

### *Discussion*

An insightful account of the findings and interpretations of the interview with George has been offered. Beginning with a discussion of the role of how George made himself meaningful within the context of Cedar View, it emerged that meaning was embedded within and around his Telegraph newspaper which enabled George to direct his attention to life affirming issues rather than allowing his mind to focus on mortal thoughts. Viewed through this lens, George's understandings reveal that the foreground of his lived experiences (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) can be seen to include a Telegraph newspaper which is used to buffer (Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1991) both George and other his fellow residents from death related thoughts. As Bauman (1992) argues, "[t]here is hardly a thought more offensive than that of death; or, rather, of the inevitability of dying; of the transience of our being in the world" (Ibid: 12). With the notion of the 'offensive thought of death in mind', one theoretical position that supports this is the concept of 'terror management theory' (Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1991) which posits that the purpose of culture is to minimise the anxiety associated with the awareness of mortality. Viewed through the lens of terror management theory (Ibid.) we can perhaps infer that George finds the thought of his own death to be traumatic (Bauman, 1992) and subsequently

consumes his Telegraph newspaper to minimise the anxiety associated with his own death related thoughts, and those of his fellow residents.

The interpretations also reveal that the everyday objects that George used within his room in Cedar View (such as a Telegraph newspaper) enabled him to sustain his meaningful existence through their flexibility and manoeuvrability despite his increasing frailty. Or, in the words of Hebdige (1979) and Hawkes (1977) these objects are “improvised or made up as ad hoc responses to an environment, that serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily explain the world and make it able to be lived in” (Hawkes, 1977 in Hebdige, 1979: 103). Such material artefacts can perhaps be theorised as a social sense making device (Grafton-Small, 1993; 1987) and act as landmarks around which social culture is structured (Grafton-Small, 1993).

The findings and interpretations also shed light on meaningful experiences that contain memories of his pre care experiences of life as a church rector, with particular focus devoted to burial services and bereavement care. In the light of these experiences, it can be seen that George appears to be comforted by positive memories of bereavement counselling. Moreover, the text reveals that whilst these recollections seem to ‘buffer’ (Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1991) George from thoughts of his own mortality such a device could be, as Bauman (2003) suggests, uncannily frail. As Willmott (2000: 651) notes, “the prospect of mortality and the certainty of death can radically disrupt the meaning with which everyday practices are endowed.” Despite this, these passages of text are interesting in that they seem to indicate that George used to encourage his parishioners to purchase consumer goods in order to

come to terms with an encounter with death. Considering that, “a major threat to a person’s identity is the death of a loved one” (Bonsu and Belk, 2003: 42), and that “consumption has become an effective vehicle for refining identities through social symbolic dialogue” (Ibid.) perhaps George can be thought of as a kind of social marketer who helps vulnerable consumers (such as Bill) who are trying to re-establish a sense of identity at a time when the “experiences and sufferings associated with death shape the social identities of those persons living through the process that surrounds dying” (Laviolette, 2003: 216). From this perspective, George’s everyday lived experiences within a residential care home seem to be motivated by an inclination to buffer death related thoughts so that a meaningful sense of what is real can be sustained (Willmott, 2000) through the selective use of memories of consumption experiences, or actual consumption experiences. Such strategic consumption can be seen to comprise of such existential buffers as a Telegraph newspaper and memories of bereavement counselling.

In conclusion, although this research paper is exploratory in nature, it raises some interesting questions pertaining to living arrangements (Gibler, Lumpkin & Moschis, 1997; Gibler, Lumpkin & Moschis, 1998; Gibler, Moschis & Lee, 1999; Kim, Kim & Kim, 2003) and the provision of services (Moschis et al, 1996; Mathur & Moschis, 1999; Moschis, Bellenger & Curasi, 2003) within residential care homes. For instance, should elderly consumers, such as George, be viewed as relatively inactive consumers who find it difficult to create meaningful everyday lived experiences and rely on the residential care home to provide care services? Or, should such elderly people be thought of as active consumers who address themselves to whatever is to hand (Levi-Strauss, 1966) (such as memories and consumption experiences) to create

their own meaningful everyday lived experiences within residential care homes? In the light of such gerontological questions, future study within the realms of interpretive consumer research would derive value from focussing on such issues to shed further light into the realms of understanding the phenomena of consumption within residential care homes.

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