

Guest Editorial

Driving While Aging: A Global Instrumental Activity for the 21st Century

Darryl Wieland

Division of Geriatrics, School of Medicine, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Address correspondence to Darryl Wieland, PhD, MPH, Division of Geriatrics, School of Medicine, University of South Carolina, 3010 Farrow Road, #300A, Columbia, SC 29203. Email: darryl.wieland@palmettohealth.org

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THREE articles in the present issue of *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences* (1–3) contribute to the growing literature on aging and driving, represented both in these pages and in kindred publications. From an anthropological perspective, driving can be understood as an instrumental activity of daily living, whose performance (unlike basic activities of daily living) is in fact conditional on material culture, social environment, and customary (usually domestic) exchange relationships that may allow someone other than a subject to perform the activity. This is in contrast to basic activities of daily living, which tend to be regarded as more private, universal activities almost always self-performed by capable individuals. Behind “driving” lies the more general need to navigate outside one’s own home, into a larger irreducible social environment—conceptualized and operationalized by gerontologists as life space (4), to enable other necessary instrumental activities—shopping, banking, accessing health care, doing laundry. (Here, too, those necessary “outside” activities have their own social and cultural contingencies.) Driving is only one way to move in this outside life space—an option bound to specific societies, times, and places.

Yet it is difficult for many of us American baby boomers to conceive of getting around outside without driving our cars. It may be even more difficult to envision life in past societies, present exotic, or future communities in which driving was not, is not, or will not be “a la mode,” for example, the life spaces of hunter–gatherer societies, walkable European villages or city centers, contiguous areas well connected by public transportation, sustainably navigable retirement communities, naturally occurring or otherwise. The social, economic, and behavioral commitment to driving in aging Western countries has been overwhelming. Thus, much of the research on aging and mobility outside the home focuses on the specific characteristics of aging

drivers that are required for safe vehicular operation, or self-regulatory, behavioral adaptations to aging and driving (or driving cessation). For example, Owsley and colleagues (1) parse the specific visual impairments of older licensed drivers (aged ≥ 70) in northcentral Alabama, reporting that population-based rates of central vision impairments (visual acuity or contrast sensitivity) are low, but that slowed visual processing speed is quite common. In turn, Wood and colleagues (3) provide a study of older Australian drivers’ on-road performance and self-rated driving abilities in relation to their recent crash histories; older drivers whose self-rated abilities were most disparate with (ie, most exceeded) their on-road performance were more likely to have reported recent crashes, implying that self-awareness cannot be assumed to affect driving cessation or reduction in this population. Others focus on education and rehabilitation programs for older drivers aimed at extending driving activities safely and effectively. Michelle Porter reports the results of a randomized controlled trial of adding video and global positioning system feedback to a classroom-based driving course for older drivers in Manitoba (2). The additional feedback appeared to significantly reduce driving errors in the video and global positioning system group compared with classroom-only and untreated controls, although the total sample was small ($n = 54$) and confirmatory research is clearly indicated. These are only a few of the issues addressed in the developing literature.

Should we continue to view research on driving abilities and their loss, restoration and maintenance in aging individuals as a Western preoccupation, arising with the aging of these populations? Can we Westerners (and others) look to Panglossian futures in which our extra-domestic life space will not be automobile dependent, either replaced by improved life-space design or extended by high-tech innovations such as “smart” personal conveyances? In fact,

we have much reason to see the present research themes focusing on cars and older drivers played out on a global stage. In 2010, the number of motorized vehicles in the world passed 1 billion (5). The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development predicts the number will rise to 2.5 billion by 2050 (6). Global public policy arising from this impressive increase is already focusing primarily on the enormous problems of how to afford, sustainably power, and mitigate the environmental impacts of all these conveyances (6). We fear that much less thought is being given to the fact that the rising middle classes that largely “drive” the growth of the car population are also drivers of population aging in these emerging industrialized states. Between 2009 and 2010, the greatest rates of growth in vehicle registrations were in China (+27.5%) and India (+9%): the most highly populated countries that are expected to lead vehicular growth to midcentury (5). During the same time, the Chinese population aged 65 and older will increase 209% (2008–2040) (7); the Indian population aged 60 and older is projected to increase 3.3 times (2011–2050), from 96 million to more than 316 million (8). As such, the public safety, policy, and quality of life issues with which aging/automobility researchers have been grappling with in a smaller set of Western industrialized nations will seem ubiquitous. We can only hope that public policy will appropriately prioritize research on aging, driving, and related issues. Driving while aging is becoming common,

but also something rare—a *global* instrumental activity of daily living.

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