

## Systematic Literature Review

## Exploring the quality of life for baby boomers using a systematic literature review

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**ABSTRACT**

Within the next decade, the largest cohort in the world, the Baby Boomers, will be transitioning into aging and retirement. By the year 2030, 74 million Americans will be aged 65 and older. While the currently available literature provides insight into the unique characteristics of Baby Boomers as well as the factors that affect their quality of life, there is limited material that presents this in a cohesive manner. The aim of this literature review is to determine how many articles illustrate how physical health; psychological health; functional health; social health; and financial wellbeing affect the quality of life of Baby Boomers. A systematic literature review (SLR) was utilized to identify relevant information and key research materials relating to the factors that affect the quality of life of the largest aging population in the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Baby boomers; Quality of life.

**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW**

The Baby Boomer generation presents unique challenges in the area of gerontology. It is anticipated that this large cohort will have unique demands and expectations with regard to service provisions as they age.<sup>1</sup> By 2030, it is estimated that the number of adults aged 65 years and older will reach 74 million, with the major shift beginning in 2020 when the population of this group begins to steadily increase from 18 million. According to current U.S. Census estimates, by 2030, 1 in 5 Americans will be over the age of 65.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the upcoming mass retirement/aging of the Baby Boomers will produce a sizable impact on many aspects of society. It is crucial that those in the helping professions recognize the needs of this population based on their unique characteristics to help them age successfully and achieve a better quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

During the period following World War II, high levels of immigration and rapid economic recovery spurred an explosion in population, which produced the cohort now known as the baby boomers. This cohort grew up during the 1960s and adopted very different attitudes and goals compared to their parents' generation. As a group, they have influenced many social movements and have been distinctive in their persistence to advocate for justice and fairness, whether on a large or small scale. Therefore, compared to other generations, Baby Boomers are unique in their characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

A strong sense of individualism can be observed in the Baby Boomers in their high expectations and demands as consumers of services. Williamson et al states that, they are "better educated, more technologically literate, generally wealthier than any previous generation and has high expectations of quality services and products".<sup>3(p. 54)</sup> Despite their strong drive for self-advocacy, the Baby Boomers are also known for their belief in egalitarianism as defined by the radical politics of the '60s, which focused on ending discrimination and fighting for equal recognition and rights.<sup>1</sup> Boomers are also known as a cohort who wants to remain youthful and active through their later years. They will redefine the meaning of retirement and aging as many continue to lead

very active lifestyles, stay involved in their communities, and remain employed past the age of 65.<sup>4</sup> They, most likely, will be better prepared for retirement than generations before them and most of them are willing to pay for a better quality of life and to maintain their independence.<sup>5</sup>

Theories of successful aging emphasize remaining mentally and physically healthy in order to maintain independent functioning.<sup>6</sup> Rowe and Kahn (1997) defined successful aging as: (1) the reduction of disease and disability; (2) the maintenance of high cognitive and physical functioning; and (3) active engagement in life. A successfully aged person, therefore, would be in very good health, cognitively intact, physically active, and socially engaged in life. While this is an ideal view of aging, the reality is that most elderly persons will encounter many barriers to meeting these criteria. In response to this, aging research has considerably broadened to include deeper dimensions of aging such as life satisfaction, happiness, perceived control, quality of life, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and emotional self-regulation.<sup>7</sup>

According to the literature, the main factors that affect Baby Boomers' quality of life are physical health, functional health, psychological health, social health, and financial wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> While prior research provides insight into these factors, there appears to be limited data in the area of this generation's current quality of life, especially with regard to financial wellbeing and financial readiness for retirement. Furthermore, there is a need to present research findings in a cohesive and holistic manner with the purpose of identifying key areas of need that need to be addressed within the next decade. Research shows that community-based programs and policies can successfully improve the quality of life of aging adults through carefully designed intervention methods.<sup>8</sup>

The aim of this literature review is to determine how many articles are available that explore the quality of life of Baby Boomers. A systematic literature review was utilized to identify relevant information and key research materials and to provide an unbiased and replicable representation of current knowledge with regard to this important topic.

## METHODS

### Framing Questions for Review

A systematic review (SLR) using the Cochrane Method was conducted to identify key professional literature on Baby Boomers' quality of life. Systematic reviews are carefully organized, comprehensive, and transparent studies of previous research on a particular topic. This literature review focused on two keywords: baby boomers and quality of life. A search was conducted on the databases of Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsychINFO, PsychArticles, Social Work Abstracts, and SociINDEX with Full Text. Based on these databases and the two keywords, the authors found 243 articles. Academic search engines

provided background information on generational characteristics, current population projections, and theories of successful aging. Upon extensive research, the authors found relevant articles that helped them address their research question: "How many articles are available to explore the quality of life of Baby Boomers?" within the context of the following attributes: physical health, functional health, psychological health, social health, and financial wellbeing.

### Identifying Relevant Work

Table 1 shows the process of narrowing the list of articles from N=243 to N=20 by omitting books, magazines, and dissertations. As shown in Table 2, limiters were applied to develop the search parameters. Both U.S. and international scholarly, peer-reviewed articles were included, as the scope of this social issue is global. Articles published from 2005-2015 were chosen for review based on the time-dependent nature of this population in the context of aging. Articles prior to 2005 were not included in order to keep the literature review as current as possible. In order to study the variables that affect the quality of life for Baby Boomers, articles relating to physical health, functional health, psychological health, social health, and financial wellbeing were used. The authors collected the data and compiled it into the matrix.

### Assessing the Quality of Studies

Articles reviewed by the authors of this research. As shown in Table 2, the authors began with articles (n=109) that met the criteria. These articles identify research using the key terms: quality of life and baby boomers. There were articles (n=89) that were eliminated following a face validity test. Each article was reviewed and assessed for relevance to the research question. Three MSW students assessed the qualities of the papers using the systematic approach. Papers were only included if published in English due to time and convenience, were scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, published on or after 2005, and primarily related to the quality of life of Baby Boomers. The authors developed a checklist based on the attributes relating to the quality of life of Baby Boomers and used it to assess the suitability of articles for inclusion in the literature review.

### Summarizing the Evidence

As illustrated in Table 2, there is still very limited research with regard to the quality of life of Baby Boomers, not just in the United States but worldwide. Only 20 articles were found to be relevant to this review after a face validity test was conducted (as outlined above), indicating that there exists a need for more research on this topic. The synthesis of key articles (Table 1) was developed to provide a summary of each individual paper, to gain understanding of the content of the articles, and to identify emerging themes in the research. While there is limited research as to the factors that affect the quality of life for Baby Boomers, clear themes emerged as outlined underneath each study listing.

Author/Citation	Type of Study	Purpose	General Comments	Strengths and Limitations
Anderson et al <sup>8</sup>	Editorial	Suggest opportunities to improve the health and functioning of older adults and enhance intergenerational programs and policies that may enrich all of society.	Community-based programs and policies can successfully improve function and quality of life among older adults through interventions designed to increase physical activity, prevent falls, and improve functioning.	A lens is presented to sharpen our collective focus on the aging population as a resource rather than a burden to enrich our society.  To fully address the potential opportunities and challenges of improving the live of older adults, the public health community must consider the full spectrum of function within this population.
Bardo and Yamashita <sup>10</sup>	Quantitative	To examine the psychometric properties of domain satisfaction measures with regard to subjective well-being in different aspects of life across several cohorts.	The study revealed that the later cohorts (the Baby Boomers) appeared to have better health satisfaction as compared to the earlier cohorts (the Oldest and Young Progressives). On the other hand, they had lower satisfaction ratings for place of residence than the aforementioned cohort.	Very few cohort analyses of SWB have been done. While many SWB indicators are highly correlated, they should not be used interchangeably.
Black et al <sup>9</sup>	Qualitative, survey	To investigate the social, physical, psychological and financial impact of Alzheimer's disease (AD) and/or dementia-related conditions on caregivers' quality of life.	It is clear that caregivers of patients with dementia experiences significant burdens on many levels which include; emotional financial and workplace related situations.	This was a self-selected sample and reached those participants who were interest in participating in the survey research. Internet connection may have biased the sample collection. Most respondents had a high level of income and education, which could affect generalizability.
Blanchard <sup>15</sup>	Commentary	To educate on the concept of a communitarian approach to living and the "aging in community paradigm."	A communitarian approach emphasizes that friends and neighbors should help each other as they age.  Top retirement concerns of baby boomers include their ability to afford long-term care closely followed by their ability to afford health insurance in the future. These considerations affect their retirement decisions	To date, aging-in-community models remain on the fringe.  The circumstances of where, how, and with whom we grow old are changing.  Baby boomers are redefining their lives and are breaking down the old stereotypes and rules, and building new visions of great places to grow old by doing it better, together.
Buckley et al <sup>18</sup>	Qualitative, Longitudinal analysis	To understand the impact of employment status and chronic health conditions on baby boomers' health-related quality of life.	Changes in employment status impacted health status.  Sedentary behavior decreased QoL over time.  Preventive health programs critical to maintain HRQoL of baby boomers.	Emphasis on preventative health programs and on making work environments aging friendly will be critical to maintain the HRQoL of baby boomers.  Sample size is small.  Short 4-year follow-up.
Byles et al <sup>19</sup>	Quantitative, survey	To identify the retirement intentions of Baby Boomers and to examine the different models of retirement as related to their experiences.	Baby boomer women have different retirement experiences and intentions compared to those from generations before them	There are very few studies that focus on the retirement experiences of women, especially those who were born post World War II.  Due to the shift in family demographics beginning with the Baby Boomer generation, retirement experiences have also changed. Flexible retirement models are generally more acceptable as most women in this generation see retirement as a continuation of their career rather than the end.
Chattaraman et al <sup>20</sup>	Qualitative interviews	To identify and describe first-degree constructs on how Internet use impacts quality of life among older adults.	The study identified trends in older adults' engagement in a wide array of internet activities and demonstrated how this impacts their quality of life	Further research is needed to delve into specific Internet activities that may be linked to the positive and negative impacts on quality of life.
deVries et al <sup>21</sup>	Qualitative, Logit-Log-linear	Shows differences in the way lesbians and gay baby boomers plan for and fears end of life decisions. This research suggested several different ways that lesbian and gay baby boomers can ensure that their late-life wishes will be carried out.	Preferences for end-of-life care and the nature and extent of preparations for death were the aim.  Preparations for later life care is not well understood, however the legal status of same-sex couples is presently a contested issue.	An online survey limits the study to only those who have access to the Internet and have the inclination to spend time online answering a web-based questionnaire.  The use of self-identified LGBT people limits the results to that same Population.

Dickerson et al <sup>14</sup>	Systematic Review	To identify what research shows about older adult driving and mobility needs and to describe the key areas in which further research needs to be conducted.	Mobility is very important for baby boomers and other aging adults	Research shows that vehicle modifications such as panoramic rear view and side mirrors, pedal extenders, etc. show promise in helping older drivers and disabled driver compensate for functional impairments. While the article highlights broad suggestions for possible solutions to older adult mobility, it does not cover other issues that impact mobility such as family, community, and other social issues.
Hilton et al <sup>7</sup>	Qualitative interviews, Quantitative data	To address the issues of what elderly individuals and caregivers have to say about their own experiences with successful aging.	Healthy behaviors need to be promoted early in life to minimize chronic disease and disability in later life. As well as quality of life in the later years depends, in part on, the cumulative effects of choices made earlier in life.	The sample was small and lacked diversity among the respondents. Scheduling interviews were hard due to no coverage and it was not safe to leave the patients home alone. Majority of the caregivers were women due to most caregivers are daughters or granddaughters. Needed more diverse samples of older adults.
Johnson et al <sup>12</sup>	Qualitative	To assess the activity level of older adults and the correlation of activity to quality of life with a particular emphasis on the role of cognitive ability.	It is obvious that staying active is very beneficial for older adults. Therefore, programs that engage older adults regardless of cognitive loss, range of abilities, or geographic location is of high importance.	The sample was mostly homogeneous in regard to social class, race, and religion. Participants were drawn from a single retirement community in Southern California. The measures for activity were single-item ordinal level questions that measured the frequency of different activities, such as interaction with friends and neighbors or participation in organizations.
Kennedy <sup>16</sup>	Systematic Review	Article explores different housing choices for the elderly population. Details the importance of age friendly communities and having as much as a "normal life" as possible for elderly populations.	Components of age-friendly City: Transportation, Housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support and health services, outdoor spaces and building.	City planners as well as providers of aging services have begun to focus on holistic approaches that welcome people to stay in the same community for their lifetime. Barriers to innovation include current funding policies, zoning ordinances, and individual organizational agendas.
Li-Korotky <sup>22</sup>	Systematic review	To raise awareness of Age-Related Hearing Loss in order to improve the quality of hearing health care and overall quality of life of the Baby Boomer Generation.	Early detection via hearing screening can lead to the proper interventions to improve quality of life. This should ideally be done within the primary care setting.	Early prevention and treatment are very important in lessening the detrimental effects of age related hearing loss (ARHL) on the aging population. ARHL also negatively impacts social relationships due to the communication deficits that arise as a result of this condition
Potkanowicz et al <sup>4</sup>	Systematic Review	To examine the recommendations for physical activity and psychological elements related to healthy aging of the Baby Boomer generation.	Endurance plays an important role in independent living. Recommendations for moderate-intensity aerobic activity is a minimum of 30 minutes 5 days a week.	Baby Boomers can enjoy satisfying lives not hindered by physiological issues if they maintain a high level of health-related fitness. This can be achieved by including physical activities in their lives on a regular basis.
Schulz et al <sup>5</sup>	Qualitative survey	To report the results of a study designed to assess how much potential individual end users are willing to pay for QoLT.	Study was done to research the number of individuals willing to pay the cost of technologies for the elderly population that can assist in managing and improving their health and cognitive fitness.	Same size was too small. Several of priori predictions were not supported by the data.

Sellon <sup>13</sup>	Systematic Review	To provide a synthesis of recommended best practices for volunteer recruitment and retention drawn from the research literature on formal volunteering, supplement this set of best practices with additional best practices suggested by the Strengths Perspective, and discuss how the combined best practices might be adapted or modified to increase volunteering by those minority groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in volunteer activities.	A review of the literature identifies seven best practices for engaging older adults in formal volunteer activities: personal invitation, role flexibility, stipends, social interaction, support from staff, meaningfulness, and recognition.	Practices may need modifications to increase volunteer participation. The Strengths Perspective may be particularly valuable in helping to recruit and retain diverse older adults.
Stephen et al (2014)	Systematic Review	Suggests future directions for program development and applied research aimed at addressing these critical challenges in healthcare today. This research defined ways to assist older adults with mental health disorders and substance abuse through social services supports, Medicaid, ACA( Affordable Care Act), and research done in other countries.	Ways to transform mental health to meet needs could be through social services groups, capitalizing on the emerging role of Web-based and mobile health technologies. ACA allows supportive services to meet mental health care needs for older adults.	A possible silver lining in this cloud is an increasing public awareness of the importance of mental health as intrinsic to physical health as we age, in conjunction with new mechanisms under the ACA for adopting innovative models of care.
Wilhelm et al <sup>123</sup>	Qualitative interviews, Quantitative data	To understand the strategies that the baby boomers engage in to maintain their well-being as well as facilitating the transition to later life.	Satisfied participants focused on appropriate achievable goals and were proactively planning for retirement. Dissatisfied participants hold back from adopting strategies and were not proactive in planning for retirement. Resilient participants adopted strategies to counter a history of multiple depressive episodes.	Identified as an important phase in the ageing process, successful ageing must be prepared long in advance when transitioning from late, middle to early old-age.
Williamson et al <sup>3</sup>	Qualitative interviews	To identify key characteristics of Baby Boomers and how these will relate to the construction and methods of service delivery of the libraries of the future.	Baby Boomers are predicted to spearhead a new trend in retirement where they are more likely to continue working based on their own terms or being only semi-retired. Hobbies, continuing education, etc. will be one of their main pursuits following retirement, which will require access to information.	Strengths: very unique pilot study on an under researched and often-overlooked retirement resource. Limitations: very small and homogenous sample size. There is a need for representative samples from rural areas. In addition, this study was conducted in Australia, which is culturally different from the United States.
Williamson <sup>1</sup>	Qualitative survey	To describe the findings from a research project that explored the mental health experiences and expectations of the so-called baby boomers population born between 1946 and 1955 that are now moving into later life.	Average life expectancy continues to increase for both men and women for this group, average healthy life expectancy is falling behind, meaning that more people are expected to live for longer in poor health	The baby boomer cohort is extremely large but in order to get definitive findings on such a wide range of aspects that influences their mental health requires an even larger study than the one that was conducted as well as one that focuses on particular sub-groups of this cohort.

Engine Searches: Social Work Abstracts, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full text

**Table 1:** Synthesis of key articles for baby boomers + quality of life + scholarly peer-reviewed + 2005-2015.

Years	Keywords	Limiters	Number of Articles
1988-2015	Baby boomers + quality of life	1988-2015	n=243
1997-2015	Baby boomers + quality of life	1997-2015 Omit Dissertations, Books and Magazines Scholarly peer reviewed journals	n=129
2005-2015	Baby boomers + quality of life	Omit Articles Not Current (within past 10 years) 2005-2015 Scholarly peer reviewed journals	n=109
2005-2015	Baby boomers + quality of life	2005-2015 Scholarly peer reviewed journals Face validity	n=20

Engine Searches: Academic Complete, ERIC, PsychINFO, PsychArticles, SociINDEX, Social Work Abstracts with Full Text.

**Table 2:** Synthesis of keywords for baby boomers + quality of life.

### Interpreting the Findings

The authors used literature review sheets to summarize the key findings in each article. These articles were then categorized according to the attributes related to the quality of life of Baby Boomers to determine whether research supported these variables. Upon interpretation of the findings, the authors found that strong evidence supports that the quality of life of Baby Boomers are affected by physical, functional, psychological and social health. Financial wellbeing was not discussed thoroughly for the purposes of this paper, as adequate research was not found to support this particular factor. Articles that were clearly favored were those published by social work and gerontology journals. The authors made an effort to include articles from medical, public health, psychology and nursing journals in order to lessen the bias towards research from a purely social work perspective.

## RESULTS

### Baby Boomers as an Aging Population

As reflected, key themes have emerged as a result of this literature review. While caring for the aging population is already a growing societal concern, the impact of the Baby Boomers as an aging generation will be a unique issue to tackle. People are living longer and helping them maintain a high quality of life is proving to be a big challenge.<sup>8</sup> The Boomers are expected to have a life expectancy of almost 80 years, almost 30 years longer than those born in the 1900s. Furthermore, this cohort presents a unique challenge in that, while they are known to have strong community involvement and are strong advocates for social justice, they are also heavily burdened with stress.<sup>4</sup> According to Hilton et al the Boomers are known as a “sandwich generation,” simultaneously caring for their aging parents and their children and/or grandchildren.<sup>7</sup> This causes a significant amount of social, physical, psychological, and financial strain on this cohort.<sup>9</sup> Further study is required to determine the unique needs of Boomers based on their characteristics to help them age successfully and achieve a better quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

### Baby Boomers’ Quality of Life

Having a clear understanding of the impact of physical, functional, psychological, social health, and financial wellbeing can increase the quality life of baby boomers. These themes were supported by the variables gleaned from the literature as outlined in Table 2. While current research provides some information on these factors, there is limited data on the current quality of life of Baby Boomers, especially in the areas of financial wellbeing and financial readiness for retirement. Previous theories of successful aging have indicated that physical health, functional health, psychological health, and social health are significant factors that affect the quality of life of older adults. Financial wellbeing was found to be an important variable, and spiritual wellbeing was also recognized as an important attribute of psychological health in a study conducted by Hilton et al.<sup>7</sup> The literature reveals various strategies of increasing the quality of life of Baby Boomers based on the attributes previously mentioned. These include various housing and community models, enhanced technology to deliver health care, transportation, and information services, volunteer programs, fitness strategies, social engagement, improvements in mental health and substance abuse services, health programs aimed at preventing and/or treating chronic health conditions, and positive coping strategies for ageing.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to illustrate the impact of the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, highlight the unique qualities and needs of Baby Boomers, and to determine the factors that make a difference in the quality of life of Baby Boomers in order for their needs to be identified. Only 20 articles were found to be relevant to this systematic literature review after a face validity test was conducted, indicating that there exists a need for more research on this particular topic. These articles revealed that five factors have been shown to affect the qual-

ity of life of Baby Boomers. Among the articles that were reviewed, 10 articles contained data related to physical health, 9 on psychological health, 12 on social health, and 7 on functional health. Two articles found in the course of this systematic review discussed the financial aspect of Baby Boomers' experience of aging. However, this was mainly in the contexts of the financial burden Baby Boomers experience when caring for their parents who have Alzheimer's Disease,<sup>9</sup> and why women in their sixties have not yet retired or have chosen to still work part-time.

## Interpretation of Findings

While there is limited research on the factors that affect the quality of life for Baby Boomers, clear themes did emerge during this review as outlined in Table 3 and as discussed below:

Maintaining physical health, according to Anderson et al,<sup>8</sup> will be a public health challenge in the near future. While Baby Boomers generally have better reported satisfaction with health than other cohorts,<sup>10</sup> their physical wellbeing may decline as they age. Therefore, it would be important for Baby Boomers to be in environments that encourage activity, socialization, and to have access to preventative health programs.<sup>11</sup> They will not only require, but will demand very high quality of care due to their high expectations as a cohort. In fact, since most Boomers are highly educated, they are more likely to take charge in ensuring that their health-related quality of life is optimal.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it will be paramount to make sure that Baby Boomers have the opportunity to remain physically active and engaged within their community.<sup>7,13</sup>

Baby Boomers place great value in maintaining their independence. The latest developments in technology as well as future improvements can be explored as a means for them to remain in their homes and still be able to care for themselves. Boomers, in particular, appear to be adamant about remaining in their homes for as long as possible, especially since they do not want to become a burden to their families.<sup>5</sup> Transportation assistance could also be explored to ensure the mobility of this generation when the time comes when driving is no longer an option. For those who are still able to drive their own vehicles, several programs have been proven effective to ensure safe mobility.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, alternative communities can be great means to support both functional health and social health.<sup>15,16</sup> Older adults desire to stay in their own communities. Ensuring that supports are in place for Baby Boomers within their communities contribute to increased quality of life.<sup>15</sup>

Mental health and substance abuse services will be an important need for Baby Boomers due to their relatively high stress levels and active lifestyles. Additionally, with this cohort, always being "on the go," a gradual transition into retirement rather than abrupt halt in employment would be ideal as it would allow them to remain socially and cognitively active.<sup>17</sup>

## LIMITATIONS

The systematic literature review revealed that spirituality was not highlighted as a factor. Gender differences were not explored by the studies included in this review. Retirement plans and expectations of Baby Boomers appear to be under-researched at this present time. Many of the studies were conducted in other countries such as Canada and Australia, which have different social services than does the United States.

## APPLICATION TO SOCIAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

The research and professional literature imply that Baby Boomers will require support not just at retirement age, but also during transition. Recognizing the unique characteristics of this cohort will be important both in clinical practice and social services provisions. Baby Boomers experience a unique "sandwich generation effect" of taking care of both their parents and their children, indicating that they will require counseling support at some point in their lives. As social workers, we need to consider unique approaches to gerontology such as alternative communities, technology, and be willing to think outside the box in order to support this aging cohort.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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