ABSTRACT. Ethnicity can be a facilitating resource throughout the life course for those who recognize and exploit its potential to be so. Ethnicity is multidimensional, its elements experienced at differing levels of intensity across the life span. Life history trajectories of American Indians who lived in urban centers most of their adult lives and, upon retirement, returned to their tribal homelands underscore the positive contributions ethnic group membership makes to well-being in old age. Ethnographic research methods including: long-term, personal relationships with the participants, immersion in both their urban and rural cultural milieux, life history elicitation and observation of the participant's social and decision-making processes over time allow for an exploration of these theoretical assertions. Processual analysis of an exemplar life trajectory broadly representative of the sample group is presented here to illustrate the analytical process and its power to identify those ethnically-inflected statuses and roles which sustain well-being into old age and generate theoretical frameworks that account for cultural continuity, situationality, intensity and dimensionality in the interaction of ethnicity and aging and the structure of a social process — ethnic community reincorporation.

Key Words: ethnicity, well-being, American Indians, status, roles, return migration

INTRODUCTION

The field of cross-cultural gerontology continues to be the forum for a lively dialogue concerning the interaction of ethnicity and aging and the current status of research methodologies for the study of aging among ethnic minorities (Holzberg 1982 a and b, Markides 1982, Rosenthal 1986). The above authors point to landmark studies which have contributed to an understanding of the interaction of ethnicity, culture (with both a small and capital C) and aging (Bengtson 1979, Cool 1979, Cuellar 1978, Dowd and Bengston 1978, Hendell-Sebestyen 1979, Moore 1971, Myerhoff 1978, Schweitzer 1983). They, nonetheless, conclude that not enough is known about the influence of cultural factors on patterns of aging and that the anthropology of aging has yet to come to terms with major and unresolved theoretical and methodological issues.

Holzberg asserts that much of the existing ethnicity and aging literature suffers from a narrowness of focus and confounding concepts. "The problem of conducting research only among the 'deprived minorities'... is that the investigator often fails to distinguish between ethnicity and social class, treating as cultural those situational responses that, in reality, may be more the result of socioeconomic exigencies and racial discrimina-
tion" (1982a: 254). Both Holzberg and Markides, however, allow that the focus on minority status is largely the result of the availability of funding [for research on] minority groups which began emerging as political entities to be reckoned with over the last two decades.

More recently Rosenthal (1986: 19) asserts that ethnicity and aging research has suffered from "a lack of conceptual clarity." She presents three models of ethnicity as: culture, inequality, and traditional ways of thinking and behaving and argues that these three dimensions are and should be kept discrete for analytical purposes.

Echoed in these current concerns about determining the relative influence of ethnicity versus class to determine behavior and well-being in old age are the earlier notions of marginality and loss in ethnic old age. Dowd and Bengtson (1978), their theory building fostered by interpretations of various quantified and usually economic measures, were among the first to describe the interaction between ethnic group membership and old age as constituting a double jeopardy.

Anthropologist Holzberg (1982b) defends the continued use of the standard ethnographic field techniques (extended field work, participant observation and case history interviews) as most effective data gathering strategies for this type of research. Markides, however, claims that "methodological shortcomings in our approach to the subject matter, and not the focus on the minority aged" is a major problem of the existing ethnicity and aging literature (1982: 467).

This article addresses both the theoretical and methodological issues outlined above. First and foremost and as a response to discussed theoretical concerns, findings are presented which illustrate positive contributions ethnic group identification makes to well-being in old age. Ethnicity can be a facilitating factor in old age for those who recognize and exploit its potential to do so. Rather than constituting double jeopardy, ethnic group membership in old age can be viewed as a resource to which elder members have privileged access.

Secondly, the contributions which ethnographic research methods and, in particular, the combination of retrospective life history and contemporaneous longitudinal participant observation make to the study of ethnicity and aging are underscored. Both strategies were used to elicit life histories of the twenty-eight American Indians in the study who had "gone home again". While both time and labor extensive I am convinced the multi-methods approach has strengthened the eventual findings and model development.

Life histories as narratives of prescriptive social process and constructions of the ideal self provide for the development of a theoretical framework which includes the notions of cultural continuity, situationality, intensity and dimensionality of ethnic experience of the individual as well as the group. Of particular interest is the influence of these factors on the