



# Victoria Longitudinal Study

Edmonton • Victoria  
Canada



## VLS Newsletter

## Issue 1: 2004-2005



VLS Labs: Edmonton, AB (above) and Victoria, BC (below)

### Welcome to the “VLS Newsletter”

This is the first "newsletter" from the VLS, and it is addressed to readers near and far. The VLS has grown immensely in the past decade: It now has research sites in Edmonton and Victoria, alumni scattered around Canada and elsewhere, and affiliated researchers in several countries. We hope that this Newsletter will help us keep in touch with our valued participants, current and past research staff, and our colleagues throughout the world. Please feel free to offer suggestions for articles in future editions. Our contact information is on page 4. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy our inaugural VLS Newsletter!

**Dr. Roger A. Dixon**

VLS Director

Canada Research Chair in Cognition and Aging (University of Alberta)

Adjunct Professor of Psychology (University of Victoria)



### New Research from the VLS

*Research on aging is the main purpose of the VLS. With each issue of the VLS Newsletter, we will highlight some actual research projects conducted with the ever-growing VLS database. These projects are published as research articles in the scientific literature (see citations). In this edition of the newsletter, we present summaries of two recent projects. We selected these two, for they represent the broad continuum of VLS research topics, ranging from biological health to psychosocial changes.*

#### Research Question 1: Does “biological age” influence changes in cognition?

Although age is usually represented chronologically (years since birth), it can also be represented biologically (biological vitality). We asked the question, which is the better predictor of older adults’ cognitive change? To answer this question, we examined 12-year cognitive change in VLS participants. Biological age markers included visual and auditory acuity, grip strength, peak expiratory flow, blood pressure, and body mass index. The cognitive domains tested included episodic memory and semantic memory. It was found that biological age predicted actual cognitive change independent of chronological age. This supports the view that cognitive decline is not due to aging per se, but rather is likely due to other factors that operate along the age continuum.

*Citation: MacDonald, S.W.S., Dixon, R.A., Cohen, A.-L., & Hazlitt, J.E. (2004). Biological age and 12-year cognitive change in older adults. *Gerontology*, 50, 64-81.*

#### Research Question 2: Is adult personality characterized by stability or change?

Much debate exists as to whether personality becomes stable once adulthood is reached. Some theorists argue that personality is a plastic attribute that remains malleable throughout the lifespan, while others contend that personality is essentially developed in, and constant after, young adulthood. In this study, we examined longitudinal evidence for 6-year stability and change in personality among a group of older adults. Personality was measured using the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985) which consists of 181 statements designed to measure 5 global domains of personality: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. We found that although 6-year personality trends in older adults are highly stable, there is substantial evidence for individual differences in change (variability). The individual differences in personality were sometimes related to age and gender.

*Citation: Small, B.J., Hertzog, C., Hultsch, D. F., & Dixon, R.A. (2003). Stability and change in adult personality over 6 years. *Journal of Gerontology*, 58, 166-176.*

#### Inside this issue:

Recent Research Activities	2
From Participants to Publications	2
Congratulations!	2
VLS Alumni: Where are they now?	3
Transitions in the VLS	3
The VLS Graduate Student Experience	3
The VLS Charts “New Frontiers”	4
Contact the VLS	4

## Recent Research Activities

VLS researchers often present their latest information at national and international conferences. For example, various members have attended such conferences as "Cognitive Aging Conference" and "International Neuropsychological Society". Here are some topics of the presentations we have made at several recent conferences.

de Frias, C.M., & Dixon, R.A. Memory Compensation.

Dixon, R.A., MacDonald, S.W.S., & Hultsch, D.F. Terminal Decline.

Hertzog, C., Dixon, R.A., Hultsch, D. F., & Maitland, S.B. Memory Beliefs and Memory Change.

Mansueti, L., Westbury, C.F., & Dixon, R.A. Cognitive Functioning Following Mild Stroke.

Wahlin, Å., MacDonald, S.W.S., de Frias, C.M., Nilsson, L.-G., & Dixon, R.A. How Health and Biological Age Influence Cognitive Changes.

Hopp, G., Dixon, R.A., Strauss, E., & Moll, A. Executive Functioning.

MacDonald, S.W.S., Garrett, D.D., Hultsch, D.F., & Dixon, R.A. Intraindividual Variability.

Dixon, R.A., de Frias, C.M., Strauss, E., & MacDonald, S.W.S. Structure of Executive Functioning Tests.

de Frias, C.M., Dixon, R.A., & Strauss, E. Executive Functioning Relates to Memory Compensation.

MacDonald, S.W.S., Garrett, D.D., Dixon, R.A., & Hultsch, D.F. Stability and Change in Mild Cognitive Impairment.

## From Participants to Publications: The Mechanics of the VLS

From start to finish, the project is dependent on the participation of our dedicated volunteers. Therefore, at the inception of each sample, it is necessary to find these volunteers. We place advertisements in local papers and magazines directed at the senior population. Many volunteers come to us through word of mouth as well.

We start planning for a sample to return for subsequent waves of testing by sending individual contact letters. Once the letters go out, we follow up with phone calls to schedule testing sessions with our very

busy participants. These sessions include the longer memory tasks and homework (Sessions 1 & 2) and individual computer and paper-and-pencil tasks (Sessions 3 & 4). The research assistants administering the tasks go through extensive training to ensure that there is consistency throughout the testing phase.

The information gathered in the sessions is strictly confidential. It is scored and processed "blindly" with nothing to identify an individual par-

ticipant. Some scoring is simple, requiring only a standardized answer key or computer. Other scoring is more complex and requires in-depth training and reliability checks. All scoring is checked for accuracy prior to being entered on the computer. Once in the computer, it is also necessary to check that the data have been entered correctly. The data are analyzed through various statistical programs that produce group-level results for interpretation. Ultimately, this information is presented in various publications and at conferences around the world.

## Congratulations!

Former VLS graduate student **Dr. Anna-Lisa Cohen** (Ph.D., 2002) received a SSHRC postdoctoral fellowship award. She is now a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology at New York University.

Former VLS graduate student **Dr. Cindy de Frias** recently received a postdoctoral fellowship award from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The award recognizes excellence in health related research. Cindy is spending this year at Stockholm University.

Former VLS graduate student **Dr. Stuart MacDonald** recently received the "Margaret M. Baltes Doctoral Dissertation Award in the Psychology of Aging" from

the American Psychological Association. This prestigious award is given to a single candidate each year for outstanding dissertation research.

**Dr. Brent Small** was recently awarded the "Margaret M. Baltes Early Investigator Award in Behavioral and Social Gerontology" by the Gerontological Society of America.

**Dr. Lisa M. Gagnon**, who has been working in a postdoctoral research capacity in the Edmonton VLS lab, has a new baby girl. Lisa and her husband, Jeff, welcomed Jillian into the world in May 2004. Lisa resumes her third-year psychiatry residence training in November 2004.



Top Left: A.-L. Cohen; Centre: C. de Frias; Top Right: S. MacDonald; Bottom Left: B. Small; Bottom Right: L. Gagnon and baby

## VLS Alumni: Where are they now?

*In each edition of this newsletter, we will be catching up with an individual who was formerly involved with the VLS. In this edition, we feature Dr. Leslie McDonald-Miszczak, who was a VLS graduate student and research assistant in the early 1990s.*

Dr. McDonald-Miszczak received her Ph.D. from the University of Victoria in 1995. She is now an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Western Washington University in Bellingham,

Washington. She is also a Research Associate/Adjunct Professor at the Gerontology Research Centre at Simon Fraser University.

Dr. McDonald-Miszczak's research focuses on older adults' memory for medications and factors that predict self-care participation. She is presently conducting a study in Victoria that examines medication adherence in independent older adults with mild cogni-

tive impairment.

She currently lives in Birch Bay, Washington, with her husband and 2 children.



Dr. Leslie McDonald-Miszczak

## Transitions in the VLS

*It is only fitting that a project studying development and change in adults should experience transitions of its own. We find that, just as in middle age and late adulthood, there is both stability and change in our project. One interesting feature of the transitions in the VLS is that they are usually only partial: many former colleagues continue to be in contact with the ongoing activities of the VLS.*

Many members of the VLS staff have been affiliated with us for a decade or more. For example, researchers and co-investigators **Drs. Roger Dixon** (Alberta), **David Hultsch** (Victoria), and **Christopher Hertzog** (Georgia Tech) continue their collaboration with the VLS, an involvement that extends back to the initial conceptuali-

zation of the project.

Many VLS staff members and participants will remember **Maureen Pugh**, who coordinated our recruitment and scheduling for over a decade. Maureen retired in 2002, but she still visits the Victoria research site with the occasional offering of her fine cookies.

Research assistants **Debbie Ball**, **Terry Perkins** and **Dianne Wolcott** have completed almost a decade with the VLS. Their dedication and many years of excellent contributions are much appreciated by everyone.

**Dr. David Hultsch**, long-time co-investigator with the VLS, recently

assumed the challenging role of Director of the Centre on Aging at the University of Victoria.

Project director, **Dr. Roger Dixon** accepted a position as Canada Research Chair in Cognition and Aging at the University of Alberta. He remains affiliated with the University of Victoria and continues his role as Director of the VLS.

Some VLS staff members have recently moved on to other activities. Former Research Assistant **Laura Van Wielingen** accepted the opportunity to pursue graduate studies in psychology at the University of Calgary. Research Assistant **Sonia Kang** leaves the Edmonton VLS research site for new opportunities.

## The VLS Graduate Student Experience

When I moved to Victoria from Winnipeg in 2002, I found a wealth of knowledge, great people, and an appreciation for the complexities in studying aging. My research assistant position at the VLS is a nice break from the stresses of graduate school, and the atmosphere in the lab is very positive and family-like. The more time I spend working here and learning the ins and outs of the research process, the more I become amazed that I am able to be a part of such a large, world-class, long-running, and diverse longitudinal study of aging.

Dr. David Hultsch is my academic advisor, and I have worked on a research project with Drs. Esther Strauss and Roger Dixon. I truly feel that the amount of information we gather through the countless hours of volunteer effort by our participants is priceless. We will be mining this wealth of information for years and years to come.

Being a part of the VLS is a positive experience that I would not trade for anything. The friendships and support

I have developed, and the experience and training I have learned, are invaluable and will help me in my future research. I want to sincerely thank all of you for contributing to our understanding of the aging process, and I look forward to meeting more of you the next time you visit the lab. Finishing a Ph.D. takes a few years, so I will be around for a while!



Allison Bielak

# VLS

Edmonton - Victoria

VLS NEWSLETTER

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Editor: Sonia Kang (Edmonton)



Some members of the VLS staff from both sites meeting in Victoria (June, 2004)

*The Victoria Longitudinal Study (VLS) is a large-scale and multi-faceted investigation of human aging. The VLS began modestly in the 1980s at the University of Victoria. In 2002, the headquarters of the VLS moved to the University of Alberta. Today, VLS labs operate on both campuses.*

*The initial goal of the VLS was to examine profiles and predictors of cognitive changes in healthy, community-dwelling, middle-aged and older adults. The ambitious research design called for a series of three large samples of adults (initially ranging in age from 55 to 85 years) to be repeatedly interviewed and tested over a long period of time.*

*Now over 15 years old, the VLS has grown dramatically in recent years. New participants, collaborators, and measures have been added. The latest battery of measures reflects the goal of further understanding interrelated aspects of human aging. Our cognitive measures include numerous indicators of memory, neurocognitive processes and resources, and other cognitive functions. In addition, we have a broad swath of measures of related constructs such as medication and illness information, health beliefs and reports, health risks, physiological capacities, sensory status, personality and affect, activities and lifestyle, neuropsychological indicators, and metacognitive knowledge and beliefs.*

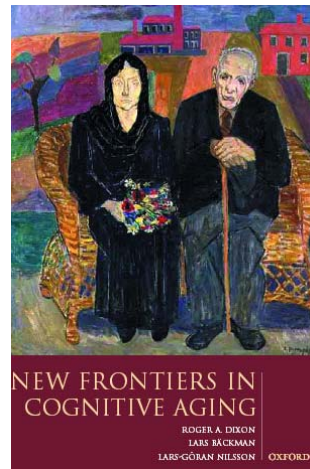
*The VLS has been continuously funded by the U.S. National Institute on Aging, one of the National Institutes of Health. Roger Dixon is the Principal Investigator for the NIA grant supporting the VLS and both labs.*

**WE'RE ON THE WEB!**

[www.ualberta.ca/~vlslab/](http://www.ualberta.ca/~vlslab/)

## The VLS Charts "New Frontiers"

Together with colleagues from Canada, Sweden, USA, Australia, and Germany, we have recently published a book on the "New Frontiers in Cognitive Aging" (Oxford University Press, 2004). The new frontiers covered include perspectives on neuroscience, health, genetic, and biological aspects of cognitive aging. The editors are **Roger A. Dixon, Lars Bäckman, and Lars-Göran Nilsson.**



### HELP KEEP US UP TO DATE

**If you have moved or changed your name or phone number, please contact one of our offices.**

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