“You feel like people are looking at you and laughing”: Older adults’ perceptions of aquatic physical activity in the ‘Swim for Health’ aquatic activity programme.

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Presentation Outline

• Theoretical discourses of ageing
  – Biomedicine, The subjective ageing body, Tales of the ageing body, sociology
  – Figurational approach to understanding the ageing process

• Background: Swim for Health

• Study Methods: Interviews

• Results and Discussion: Enabling and Constraining networks

• Conclusions
Presentation Aims

• To provide insights into study participants’ perceptions and experiences of aquatic physical activity as older adults

• To demonstrate older adults awareness of their position in the wider figuration of aquatic physical activity in terms of established and outsider groups
Understanding the Ageing process: Previous Paradigms

- **Biomedical knowledge: Objectifying the ageing body**
  - Valuable: But ageing can be portrayed as the ‘problem,’ physical activity etc. the ‘solution’

- **‘Subjective’ understanding: including sociology**
  - Phenomenology: The subjective experiences of *being* and *having* a body - but not often ageing bodies (Phoenix and Grant 2009)

- **‘Tales’ of the ageing body: telling stories *out of* and *through* the ageing body**

- **What about social context?**
Figurational approach to ageing  (Elias 1985)

• Increasing biomedical science, increasing physiological and medical control

• However, control of part-processes
  – Body is objectified, rationalised, problematised
  – Unintended consequences: reduction of care for older adults to maintenance of physical processes
  – Grouping of older adults in physical activity

• Civilising of ageing; removed from ‘public’ gaze

• Habitus of exclusion

• Networks within figurations both **enabling and constraining**: Not withdrawal from society, but changing power balances in networks of relationships
STUDY CONTEXT
Background:
Swim for Heath

- National pilot project
- Funded by Department of Health, Managed by the Amateur Swimming Association
- Four ‘Gateway groups’:
  - Adults aged 50 and over
  - Pre-school aged children and their families
  - Local employers
  - People with a range of health problems
Study methods

- 22 individuals (7 men and 15 women) >50 years.
- Groups included GP referrals aquacise, AgeUK aquacise.
- Semi-structured interviews: 45-90 minutes
- Themes included:
  - Perceptions of potential barriers to participation in aquatic physical activity and
  - The experiential elements of participation,
  - Awareness of their position in the wider figuration of aquatic activity and health

- Thematically analysed using a deductive approach
RESULTS/DISCUSSION
The Ageing body: Losing ‘The Look’

- Participants expected fit individuals to be attractive, lithe, slim, often male, and ‘younger’
- None considered themselves to fit within this bodily ideal of fitness.

- These perceptions were often underpinned by diagnosis of health problems/chronic illness
Perceptions of Physical Activity during old age

• Study participants were well aware of the benefits of Physical Activity, including aquatic activity

• Interdependence of physiology, psychology and aesthetics
  – “[physical activity] would probably help with my figure. [We] would probably feel better and be stronger. [We] would also be more confident.”

• However, not all were regular participants. Why?
Uncivilized ageing bodies

- The risks associated with ageing ‘uncivilized bodies’ were disempowering
- Loss of control, beset with increasing ‘problems,’ monitored by health professionals

- However, development of new networks of relationships
- In aquatic activity, these relationships were both enabling and constraining
Enabling: Age-appropriate Aquatic Activity

• “Well I’ve been to an aqua aerobics session and there’s like 50 year old women, 55 year old women – it’s very rare you would see 55 year old women in a gym running on a treadmill….. it’s not as straining on their body as it is on a treadmill – it’s a lot better for them.”
Enabling: ‘We’re all the same here’

- **Not** disengagement with Physical activity
- *Changing relationship networks*
- Creation of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ Groups

- ‘Us’ group of older adults
  - Support and a sense of identity: ‘We’re all the same here!’
  - Empowerment: ‘If they can do it, so can I’
  - Resistance: Attending despite ‘them’!
Constraining: Still outsiders

- ‘Us’ group *an outsider group in the wider social figuration* of physical activity and health
- ‘Them’ groups dominant in contemporary context
  - The young, fit and healthy
  - Producers, fitness professionals, sportspeople.
- Group of older adults empowered and supportive – but *in isolation*.
- Fear of exposing the ageing body in front of ‘them’
- Danger of exposing the ageing body to physical risks
Fear of ‘Others’ in Aquatic Activity: Uncivilized bodies?

• “I make jokes about my weight, but I judge myself against everyone else’s. I know people say you shouldn’t but I do.... I know I joke about my weight, but I think I can be like that. It doesn’t mean to say I’m not hurting or upset about it.”

• “It might not be true, but you feel like people are looking at you and laughing. Here we’re all the same and it’s not like that, like it is on a beach or something. It’s all enclosed and no-one can see you.”
Concluding thoughts

• The constraints of physical decline were rationalised; they were perceived as logical.
• Consequences both enabling and constraining
• Networks of support, identification and resistance
• The exposed ageing body being put on public display was problematical. It was also at risk of visible and invisible threats
Take-home message...

- Suggests careful management of enabling and constraining networks of power relations in physical activity for older adults is required.

- The ‘double bind’ of participation for older adults:
  - Support and empowerment from within
  - Exclusion from without

- Without support, participation was unlikely.
Acknowledgements

• Mike Sleap, Phil Marshall and Paul Potrac (Department of sport, health and exercise science University of Hull)
• Amateur Swimming Association and its partners.
• Department of Health

Thanks!