



# Older adults' lifelong embodied experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom

Adam B. Evans<sup>1</sup> & Mike Sleaf<sup>2</sup>

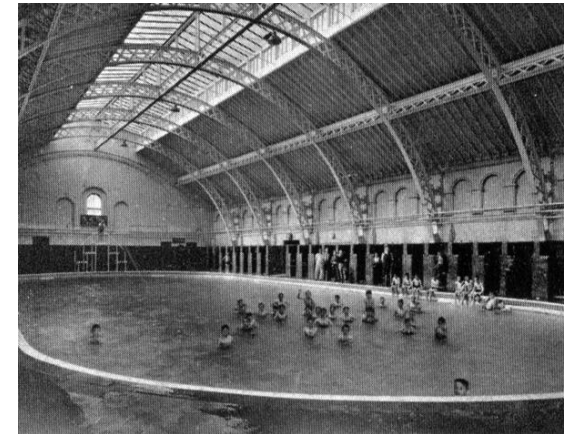
1 – University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

2- University of Hull, United Kingdom



# Presentation Outline

- Background: Physical activity, older adults and the potential of aquatic physical activity
- Study Methods
- Results and Discussion:
  - Aquatic Activity as public hygiene
  - Aquatic Activity to teach ‘water safety’
  - Aquatic Activity as ‘Leisure’ and for ‘Fitness’
- Conclusions:
  - Blending of past and present perceptions



# Physical activity & older adults

- Participation in physical activity is of importance for older adults (55+) in terms of health and wellbeing (Taylor et al, 2004)
- Participation rates in physical activity (PA) remain low among older adults in the United Kingdom (Sport England 2010)
- Growing recognition that older adults' experiences of sport and physical activity are subjective, lived and embodied (Evans and Sleaf 2012, Phoenix and Grant 2009)
- Embodied experiences are accrued throughout a lifetime; older adults as not always 'old'! (Markula et al 2001, Vincent 2005)

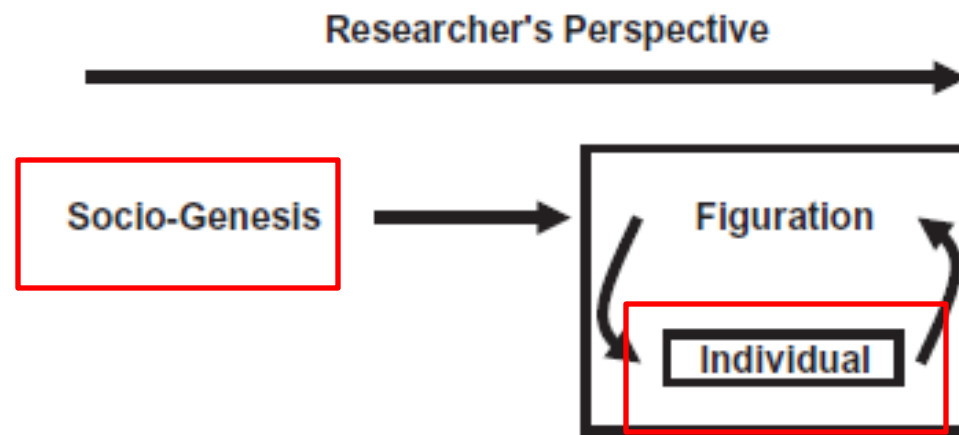
# The potential of aquatic activity

- Aquatic physical activity is the second most popular form of activity in the UK after walking
- However, participation rates are falling in swimming and aquatic activity since the 1990s (Sport England 2010)
- Past studies have demonstrated that older bodies can be marginalised in aquatic activity provision (Evans and Sleap 2013)
- Perceptions of risk and exclusion can be internalised by older participants in aquatic activity (Evans and Sleap 2012)
- However, these perceptions are not only grounded in the present...

# Study Aims

- **Figurational** (longitudinal, processual) approach to

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*Figure 1: Aspects to be considered in process-oriented methodology.*

Baur and Ernst 2011

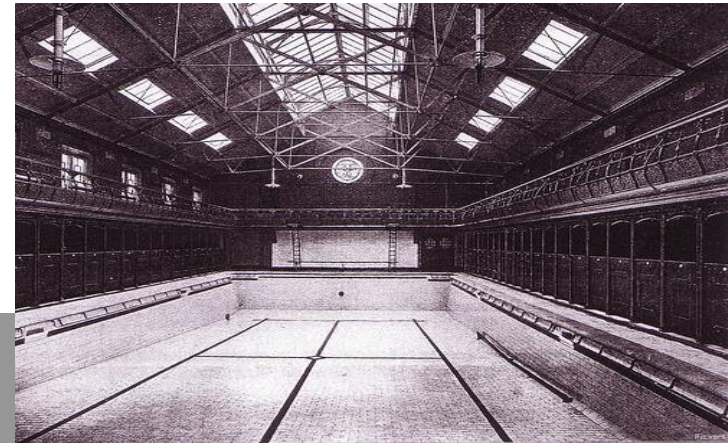
development indicative of present perceptions?

# Study Methods

- Semi-structured oral history interviews completed with 14 participants aged over 55 years (mean age 61)
- Northern industrial city in the UK with 5 public pools, including three renovated 19<sup>th</sup> century facilities
- Review of literature relating to the development of leisure-time aquatic activity provision
- 3 libraries and 8 online databases
- Sparse!

# Aquatic Activity as Public Hygiene

- Initially a private enterprise, provision of public swimming pools in the UK focused upon public hygiene
- Low-tech facilities with poor hygiene
  - ‘We had **no showers**, the water either had too much chlorine in or very little **the changing rooms were yuk, some pools you needed a bath when you got home.**’ Paul, 75 year old



Swimming Bath.

‘It was **dingy, cold**, the toilets were ‘loppy,’ [filthy], very cold. They had slipper baths that **had grey water** which you should have got into before entering the pool, and you got into them to wash your feet and whatever and you would come out muckier [dirtier] than when you got in and then you would go straight in to the chlorine baths – **eyes began to sting** after 10 minutes, it was like swimming through treacle. **There was a scum along the gutter all the way round.**’ Bob, 61 year old



# Gender, class and age segregation

- Early pools had segregated times according to class, gender and age.

“The **changing rooms were basic, females on one side, males on the other** with cupboard doors probably to cover about 2 or 3 feet [1 metre] and it was out of the Ark [very old fashioned].” Bob, 61 year old

“We were never taken swimming. There was nowhere to take us and besides there were nuns, I was in a convent [as a child], and **Ladies weren't supposed to be baring their body.**” Ruth, 80 year old

# Aquatic Activity as a 'life-skill'

- 20<sup>th</sup> Century pool design and promotion of aquatic activity increasingly focused upon water 'safety' for children
- For some, learning was unremarkable, particularly if guided by familiar/trusted individuals
- For others, learning created apprehension, fear and recollections of loss of control. Teaching methods were not always subtle!

“Oh I remember [my first swimming lesson].... I remember crouching down in the deep end – you started in the deep end to do your length, and **he [the instructor] pushed me in, and I remember being fished out by him...** I just remember the water going over my head. He had this broom handle thing and hooked me out.... **It stayed with me all my life.** I still hate the water being on my face....’ Mary, 60 year old

# Aquatic Activity as (family) 'Leisure' and (personal) 'Fitness'

- In the latter 20th century, 'leisure pools' meant family swimming became most common (particularly among women)

“Oh yes [in the past it was] not like today. When I take my grandson, **there are so many pools, all shapes and sizes...Much more interesting and lighter...** I think there are far more things to do now than back then. Most people just swam, or not... But now there **are lots of activities, leisure and things, aqua aerobics.** It's made it more fun than it used to be.” Mary, 60 year old

# Conclusions

- Changing perceived purpose associated with a single activity
  - Hygiene, Fitness, Leisure, Gendered spaces
- Not a replacement of past ideas, but a blending of (contested) embodied perceptions of past and present about the pool space
  - Aquatic activity as ‘dirty’ or ‘cold’
  - Aquatic activity as ‘feminine’ or ‘family oriented’
  - Aquatic activity as ‘risky’

# Conclusions Cont.

- Embodied sensations of specific moments played a part in contouring perceptions
  - Cold, smells, water overwhelming the body, fear, ‘dirt’
- Messages associated with promoting physical activity must account for perceptions grounded in past problems:
  - Older adults not always old!

‘Even if you can’t swim, you can still go and muck about in the water with your family and I’ve done that. I know I don’t like water on my face but of all the sports I can think of, that’s the one which is best for all ages, families, friends, all age groups, all sexes, definitely.’ Josie, 63 year old

Thank you for your time....

Any questions?



# Selected References

- Evans, A. B. and Sleaf, M. (2013). 'Older adults' lifelong embodied experiences of leisure time aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom.' Leisure Studies (in press).
- Evans, A. B. and Sleaf, M. (2013) "Swim for Health:" Program evaluation of a multi-agency aquatic activity intervention in the United Kingdom. International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education 7 (1). pp. 24-38. ISSN: 1932-9997
- Evans, A.B. and Sleaf, M. (2012) "You feel like people are looking at you and laughing": older adults' perceptions of aquatic physical activity. Journal of Aging Studies, 26 (4). pp. 515-526. ISSN: 0890-4065