

Experiencing the ageing body in aquatic physical activity: Participants' experiences of the 'Swim for Health' aquatic activity programme in the North of England.

Evans, A. B.¹ and Sleap, M.²

Affiliations

¹*School of Sport, Coaching and Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, United Kingdom,* ²*Department of Sport, Health and Exercise Science, University of Hull, Kingston upon Hull, United Kingdom*

The social conceptualisation of ageing as a costly health problem can marginalise older adults from physical activity and health practices (Vertinsky 1991, Elias 1982). 'Swim for Health' was a four year aquatic activity (AA) intervention completed in the North of England with the primary aim to reduce health inequalities in four target-groups, three of which included older adults. The present study investigated older adults' perceptions and lived experiences of AA during 'Swim for Health.'

22 older adults (>50years) completed semi-structured individual interviews that focussed upon their perceptions and lived experiences of AA. Participants were recruited during 'Swim for Health,' although not all participated in AA. Findings were thematically analysed using a figurational framework.

Results suggested that participants' experiences were linked to their perceived 'aged' status. Participation in AA brought participants' awareness of the ageing body to the fore as an object of display, risk and of stigmatisation. Some perceptions of physical or emotional risk were interdependent with past experiences, such as learning to swim. Others originated in the experience of being stigmatised as old and at risk, such as diagnosis of chronic illness, obesity, or self-monitoring the visible signs of ageing. This study indicates older adults understood their ability to participate in AA in relation to physical decline, increasingly limited physiological capacity, and in terms of their aged appearance being put on public display. Therefore, physical activity interventions should consider the preferences of older adults and shift away from considering older adults as patients, moving instead towards a culture of enablement.

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