



“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.

Adam Evans¹ & Mike Sleaf²

1 – University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United
Kingdom

2 – University of Hull, Kingston upon Hull,
United Kingdom



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 Health

- 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

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