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Julia Twigg, Wendy Martin

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Cassandra Phoenix, Meridith Griffin
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The social and cultural context of sport and physical activity matters. It is a key arena for displaying, encountering and theorizing the ageing process. In light of this, scholarly work on sport, physical activity and ageing has dramatically increased in recent years to include books (e.g. Baker et al. 2010, Gibson & Singleton 2012, Tulle 2008a), journal special editions (e.g. Ageing & Society on Active Ageing 2012a, and Sport, Athleticism, and Physical Activity 2012b), specialist journals and a throng of journal papers devoted to the topic, which span a range of disciplines. This research has outlined the benefits of being physically active in older age (Chodzko-Zajko 2000), with less concern for understanding the experiences of older people themselves or their diverse and situated positions within society (Markula, Grant & Denison 2001, Phoenix & Grant 2009).

Yet individuals’ experiences and lifestyles can be diverse, shaped by a variety of socio-economic factors and lifestyle choices (Gilleard & Higgs 2000). These factors and choices cannot be separated from the wider context and culture within which they take place (Gullette 2004, Harper 1997). Accordingly, without locating research on ageing and physical activity in the broader socio-cultural contexts of ageing, and taking seriously the voices of older people, we cannot fully understand what being active in older age means to different people, nor can we hope to create good practices for healthy ageing (see Humberstone 2009, Walker & Hennessy 2004, Walker 2006).

The aim of this chapter is to summarize the extant literature connecting sport and physical activity in older age to its wider social and cultural context. The first section focuses on masters sport. In the second section, we examine leisure time physical activity. We are aware that leisure time physical activity represents only one component of leisure. Other aspects that fall into this category would include engagement with broadly defined ‘cultural practices’ (see Scherger 2009), heritage (see Orr 2006) or volunteering (see Rozario 2007). Finally, we consider a number of future research directions in this domain.

Masters sport

During the 1960s a new social movement emerged, the masters movement (previously referred to as the Veteran’s movement), which paved the way for adults who would otherwise be
disqualified from participation in sporting events. The first World Masters Games (WMG) took place in Toronto in 1985. They included 8,305 participants, involved 61 countries, and enabled 22 sports to be represented. Since then, the WMG has grown steadily in terms of countries represented and number of competitors. That said, masters sports continue to be dominated by the white and well educated, with women also being underrepresented (Weir et al. 2010).

The growth of masters sport reflects a change in how the ageing body is conceptualized and experienced. For the majority of the twentieth century, rest or gentle exercise for therapeutic reasons was the expected norm for older people and strenuous activities and overexertion were thought to be life threatening or too demanding for the ageing body (Coakley 2001, Grant 2001, Kluge 2002). The gender imbalance evident within masters sport participation, however, also points to persistent social stereotypes regarding the female body and physical exertion. Historical accounts of sport participation are dominated by traditional conceptions of the female body that are deeply rooted in reproductive biology and a philosophy condoning separate, gendered spheres (Tulle 2008a, Vertinsky 1994, 2002).

As we progress into the twenty-first century, many older women continue to report feeling physically and socially vulnerable when participating in exercise of mild to moderate intensity—worried about ‘wearing out’ their body and/or incurring sudden injury (Grossman & Stewart 2003, O’Brien Cousins 2000, Vertinsky 1995). That noted, more recently it has been argued that older women participating in sport profit from changing gender arrangements. For example, older sporting females can challenge the notion of the ‘weaker sex’ and are actively redefining traditional views on appropriate activities for women in later life (Hargreaves 1994, Pfister 2012).

Within a cultural context that constructs older bodies as feeble and incompatible with athletic dispositions, the social and cultural position of ageing athletes appears contradictory. Accordingly, a key theme to emerge from the literature concerned with masters sport focuses on its potential to resist dominant narratives of ageing, which pathologize bodily change and reinforce decline (see Gullette 1997, Tulle-Winton 2000). For example, Dionigi (2006a, 2006b) and Tulle (2007, 2008a) have conducted socio-cultural research with older athletes to examine how they engage with these contradictory narratives of ageing. Each has presented a complex picture of how older adults become aware of their own ageing and the strategies they put in place to manage it through sport. In particular, through a focus on embodiment, Tulle (2007) asserts that Veteran elite runners—whom she refers to as ‘atypical older social actors’—can ‘help us redefine how we might understand embodiment throughout the life course and in the later years’ (p. 330).

Tulle (2007) contends that sports participation in later life may reflect and can even instigate social change, by increasing embodied agency and widening the range of culturally available ageing identities beyond that of unitary, universal, and inevitable decline, or resistance of the same. For example, resistance is often presented as a uni-dimensional construct whereby the nuances and complexities inherent to resisting social norms are overlooked. Drawing from experiences of mature, natural bodybuilders, this was recently problematized by Phoenix and Smith (2011). These authors argued that what is resisted and how it is resisted differs within the context of physical culture depending on the message, intended audience and consistency of the new narrative (of ageing) being told. An awareness of these differences can contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of how resistance to the narrative of decline is storied in its everyday telling along with the nature of that resistance to dominant narratives of ageing that can potentially damage the identities of older adults.

Masters athletes have the ability to capture the social and individual imagination. The experiences of older adults involved in elite, competitive sport are now represented in diverse forms and communicated to a range of different audiences via public photography exhibitions (Rotas
collections point to a further theme that can be identified within the socio-cultural research on masters sport: the impact of masters athletes on others. Indeed, older individuals who achieve within the sphere of competitive sport are often profiled in the popular media, which may subsequently shape the way that society as a whole views older adults and the ageing process (for better or worse) (Levy & Banaji 2002). Thus, it seems feasible that examples of older adults using sports participation to fight negative stereotypes of ageing can be inspirational to others (Horton 2010, Ory et al., 2003).

Research in this domain has demonstrated that the impact of masters athletes on others is nuanced and situated within broader culturally defined views of ageing that have consequences for different sub-cultures. For example, Ory et al. (2003) explored the impact of athletic seniors on other older adults. These authors found that masters athletes were generally considered intimidating by this group and consequently discouraged older adults from engaging in sport and physical activity. Yet Horton et al. (2008) revealed that masters athletes also have the potential to evoke feelings of motivation, inspiration and admiration within their peer group. These authors observed how masters athletes generally act as appropriate role models for the already active older cohort as opposed to those who are sedentary and that it is often active family members or known others, rather than distant characters within the media, who have the greatest impact on how ageing is perceived.

These findings point to the significance of the audience being able to engage with the ‘exemplary’ stories of athletic pursuits that are being told if masters athletes are to maximize their potential for shaping how older adults and the ageing process is viewed, a topic further extended through the framework of socio-narratology by Phoenix and Griffin (2013). In a similar vein, informed by the approach of narrative gerontology (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer & Randall 2011), Phoenix and Sparkes (2006a, 2006b, 2007) focused on the impact that the stories of masters athletes had on young people’s perceptions of ageing. By spanning different generational groups to ascertain how stories of ageing intersect with the sporting sphere, these authors have demonstrated how perceptions and experiences of ageing are governed by existing body-self relationships, the sub-culture that individuals are immersed in (i.e., sport, where ‘old’ is understood as greater than 30 years) and dominant narratives of decline (see also Paulson 2005).

Leisure time physical activity

Older adults’ experiences of lifestyles can be very diverse as they (like all age cohorts) are shaped by a variety of socio-economic factors and lifestyle choices (Gilleard & Higgs 2000). These factors and choices, along with the consequences they have for leisure time physical activity in older age, cannot be separated from the wider context and culture within which they take place (Gullette 2004, Harper 1997). Leisure time physical activity refers to the physical activity that people choose to do in their free time (as opposed to the result of commuting or their occupation).

Although knowledge about the specific health benefits of physical activity tends to be comprehensive and widespread, the majority of older people do not actually achieve sufficient levels of activity to result in health gains (Blaxter 2010, Crombie et al. 2004). The reasons for this are many, and encompass ‘... both real and perceived barriers, situated in self and others, and may reflect the culture in which we live’ (Grant 2001, p. 779). Reflecting culture, perceptions and experiences of physical activity are shaped by one’s socialization into an activity (Griffin 2010, Scherger, Nazroo & Higgs 2011), gender (Drummond 2008, Howells & Grogan 2012), class (Dumas & Laberge 2005, Laberge & Sankoff 1988) and ethnicity (D’Alonzo & Sharma 2010,
Jette & Vertinsky 2011). They are also influenced by critical moments throughout the life course, including retirement and illness (see Berger et al. 2005, Grenier 2012, Tulle & Dorrer 2012).

A key area of interest in relation to leisure time physical activity—which echoes aspects of the masters sport literature—concerns the role of physical activity in the provision of resources that facilitate resistance to stereotypical assumptions about the ageing body (Griffin & Phoenix, 2014). For example, Wearing (1995) presented specific case studies to demonstrate how leisure provides opportunities to challenge ageism and the self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the underuse of physical and mental abilities in old age. Similarly, although Shaw (2001, p. 186) was concerned with gender, she postulated a link between empowerment, political resistance and leisure, suggesting that, ‘leisure practices are linked to power and power relations in society.’ Much of the research focused on resistance and empowerment through leisure uses the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault to illustrate the ways in which power, ideology and discourse can be negotiated, challenged, altered, used or reinforced in everyday leisure settings (Poole 2001, Wearing 1995, 1998).

Scholars have alluded to the ways in which leisure time physical activity might contribute to the rise of ‘the new ageing.’ First emerging in the 1970s, this movement continues to transform our cultural narratives of ageing (Featherstone & Hepworth 1995, Katz 2001) by celebrating growing older as a period of growth, enjoyment, consumption and leisure. This ‘new’ model of ageing has entailed various descriptions, including ‘successful ageing’ (Rowe & Kahn 1998), ‘positive ageing’ (see Phoenix & Sparkes 2009), ‘healthy ageing’ (see Cardona 2008) and ‘ageing well’ (see Andrews 2009, Chapman 2005). While potentially empowering ageing social actors to move beyond the pathologized narrative of decline, these ‘new’ narratives of ageing have, to varying degrees, been criticized for placing responsibility for the health, financial and social quality and outcomes in later life directly on the individuals themselves (Minkler & Estes 1999, Powell 2001). Their impact on participation in leisure time physical activity has been to position it as a legitimate, morally obligated and expected way to grow older without a consideration of social positioning nor access to material resources.

As Tulle (2008b) noted, this has been accentuated by the attention of ‘sport and health sciences,’ wherein researchers have become increasingly concerned with the impact of increasing age on physical performance, the potential impact of physical activity on ageing processes, illness prevention and life extension. In doing so, she argued, it has positioned physical activity as a key tool in the anti-ageing project, and as such may perhaps be actively involved in the increased medicalisation of ageing by reconstructing the ageing body as malleable, open to intervention’ (pp. 341–2). The danger with this is that participation in physical activity becomes geared towards the elimination of ageing and reinforces the social construction of growing older only as a problem of decline and apprehend, which can be solved by ‘good’ science (Katz 1996, Tulle 2008b). This rhetoric of responsibility, self-governance and anti-ageing represents a key issue within socio-cultural understandings of leisure time physical activity in older age. Moreover, it has been embraced by social and political institutions, who use the knowledges around health, physical activity and the life course to justify the health and fitness promotion movement (McPherson 1994, Smith Maguire 2008).

The shift from modernity to late modernity saw relatively wealthy older generations become targets for a variety of services and products, many from the health promotion and leisure lifestyle industries (Blaikie 1999). Indeed, numerous scholars have argued that neo-liberal ideologies of health are being increasingly promoted, in which ‘good’ consumer-citizens take personal responsibility for their health and wellbeing not just through continually engaging in physical activity, but also through purchasing products from the health industry (Smith Maguire 2008, Vincent,
Tulle & Bond 2008, Wheaton 2009). This social transformation, characterized by mass marketing and consumerism, has significance for the emergence of what has been described as a 'third age' (Gilleard & Higgs 2002, Laslett 1996). That is, an ever-extending midlife enabled through continuities of choice, cultural capital and, generally speaking, the resultant good health. These ever-evolving public ideologies of ageing make a consideration of the intersection between leisure time physical activity and ageing increasingly ubiquitous within the cultural consciousness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented a selection of key issues emerging through the growing socio-cultural interest in sport, physical activity and ageing. From a field dominated by medical perspectives and quantitative research, the progress made in this domain has already greatly extended our understanding of the nature and experience of later life, specifically within the contexts of masters sport and leisure time physical activity. However, there remains much work to be done. For example, given the under-representation of older women in all spheres of sport and physical activity, along with the limited scope of current masculinity scripts for ageing men in Western society, a comprehensive theorizing of the intersections between gender, ageing and physical culture is required.

In addition, the field would benefit from a considered focus on ethnicity and cultural background as they pertain to (and influence) ageing and physical activity, perhaps through cross-cultural comparisons. Finally, cultural gerontologists are well positioned to respond to recent calls to 'rethink our approach to physical activity' (see Das & Horton 2012), by diluting the traditional tendency toward ‘prescription’ and ‘guidelines’ expanding the focus beyond the level of the individual. By continuing to explore the descriptions, meanings and (sensory) experiences of sport and physical activity in older age, along with the manner in which these are intrinsically linked to the wider social and cultural context in which we live, we shall be better placed to understand the relationship between sport, physical activity and ‘ageing well.’

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