

HORTON, SEAN

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SRG 2010

Promoting sports participation: Exploring physical activity patterns and role models of aging amongst older persons

Project Summary

Sport involvement in Canada drops precipitously as we age. Recent Canadian data indicate that participation rates are highest in young Canadians, with 54% between the ages of 15 and 19 taking part in sporting activity. By age 55, however, only 17% of individuals are engaging in sport (Statistics Canada, 2013). Participation rates in more general physical activity decline in a similar fashion. Considering the myriad of diverse benefits associated with participation in sport and physical activity, this rate of decline is of concern.

One barrier to seniors' participation in sport is prevailing cultural attitudes and stereotypes, which in North America tend to be predominantly negative towards seniors (Levy & Banaji, 2002). The prevalence of these negative stereotypes often work to prevent older adults from engaging in sport and physical activity (O'Brien Cousins, 2003). By challenging those negative stereotypes we may be able to encourage increased participation among the senior population. 'Role models' of aging have the potential to play an important part in this endeavour.

While there has been extensive research into role models for youth and young adults, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the value of role models for older adults. Levy and Banaji (2002) noted that exemplary individuals (i.e., role models) have the potential to change attitudes of group members themselves, as well as societal stereotypes of that group. Our research illustrates both the potential, but also the complexity of establishing appropriate role models for seniors' sport participation.

Research methods

The objectives of this project were to examine the importance of role models for older adults. In particular, we investigated three related areas: 1) the relevance of role models and the extent to which they vary with age and activity level, 2) whether masters athletes can serve as viable role models to decrease barriers to participation in sport and physical activity, and 3) to what extent participants use predominantly prevention versus promotion orientations (i.e., upward or downward social comparisons) and how that may differ depending on age and activity level.

Adults 60 years of age and older were recruited for in-depth qualitative interviews. All of the interviews took place in a private room with one interviewer and lasted from 1-2 hours. All interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. An interview guide provided the basic themes to be investigated, although any new topics that emerged during the discussion were explored.

Questions probed participants' exercise patterns and their attitudes towards sport and physical activity. Related to this, participants were shown pictures of elite male and female athletes, all of whom were still active, training intensely, and over 75 years of age. Participants were told of their accomplishments

and asked their opinions of both their athletic exploits and their exercise regime. Our objective was to gain further understanding and more in-depth knowledge of how participants reacted to an exercise 'role model'.

Research results

Previous researchers (i.e., Lockwood et al., 2005) have maintained that designing more effective interventions for seniors revolves around gaining a greater understanding of how health-related exemplars (or 'role models') can motivate this population.

Our results suggest that seniors often have someone in their lives who represents what it means to age successfully. Generally, this is an individual older than themselves, active, vigorous, and illustrative of the high quality of life that is possible into a very late age. Importantly, these individuals provide a direct contrast to the most negative stereotypes of aging.

While participants had distinct role models of successful aging, their reaction to the photos of elite older athletes was more equivocal, and depended in part on their current physical activity level. Those who were already active in their daily lives were more likely to see elite older athletes as an inspiration and as viable role models. Those who were less active, however, found these elite athletes less appealing as role models. While there were exceptions to this general trend (i.e., inactive seniors who found the elite senior athletes inspirational, and active seniors who did not) the general trend indicated that elite athletes may only provide inspiration for those who are already active.

Of interest is the fact that masters athletes often see themselves as role models, for those their own age and/or younger generations. At the same time, when discussing the lack of sport or exercise involvement of so many in their peer group, there is a moralizing component, in which a sedentary existence is denigrated to a certain extent.

Importantly, notions of 'successful aging' varied considerably amongst all the participants. These included physical health and well-being, but also social, psychological, and spiritual success, the definitions of which did not always conform to academic or biomedical descriptions of aging successfully. Seniors are not a monolithic group, and policymakers may need varying strategies to promote sport participation in this cohort.

Policy implications

Policy implications of this work in the sport and aging field include: (a) guiding the design of information for seniors about the various ways later life can be experienced and perceived, and (b) informing sport and health promotion practices for older people, *Senior* is not a monolithic term. Sport and more general health promotion messages and/or interventions need to account for the complexity with which older people view successful aging and healthy living. Seniors will respond to promotional initiatives in multi-faceted ways. For example, while a number of seniors will find images of elite older athletes inspirational, others will find such images intimidating, which may turn them off sport. Often seniors' reactions will be influenced by their own level of physical activity, and what they deem to be possible in later life. This undoubtedly makes interventions more challenging, as they need to account for significant diversity within this particular cohort. However, the more those messages are tailored to meet the needs of this diverse group, the more success such interventions are likely to have.

Next steps

Our work on older athletes has found that participation in sport during later life can be simultaneously a sign of personal empowerment, a desperate resistance to aging, a challenge to stereotypes and a reproduction of dominant sport and aging discourses. Further research is needed to examine what sport means to older people who do not currently partake in it, despite being encouraged to by promotional messages. Our preliminary work on the opinions of older people who do not compete in sport has found mixed views on Master athletes and the value of sport.

While the biomedical focus of sport science and gerontology literatures will remain essential, much more research with a biographical and ethnographic dimension is needed in order to build a more complex picture of the role that sport participation plays in resisting and reinforcing cultural understandings of sport and aging. In this regard, listening to the voices of older people from a diverse range of contexts will be crucial.

Key stakeholders and benefits

The results will be of potential value to policy makers in the development of social marketing initiatives that target specific audiences and will hopefully serve to encourage and enhance participation in sport/physical activity. More specifically, this may be relevant with the Division of Aging and Seniors within the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Seniors organizations promoting sport may also find these results of interest. For example, the International Masters Games Association, the Canadian Masters Athletic Association, along with provincial organizations (i.e., the Ontario Senior Games Association, Ontario Masters Athletics) all promote sports participation by seniors.

Finally, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) specifically targets women aged 55 and over for participation in sport and physical activity.