



MOVING STORIES:

Understanding the Impact of Physical Activity
on Experiences and Perceptions of (self) Ageing

Cassandra Phoenix and Noreen Orr

Key Findings



AIMS OF THE PROJECT

In this project, we investigated people's experiences of being physically active in older age. We also examined how physically active older adults are perceived by other people.

Like much of the population, many older adults live inactive lifestyles and this can have negative consequences for their health and wellbeing. Through this research we have learned 'what works' from a group of older adults who engage in regular physical activity.

By listening to their stories about moving, we have gained an understanding of how and why, at different points in their lives, they have been able to deal with the barriers and challenges to being active that we often face. We have also gained an insight into the role that they believe physical activity plays in ageing well.

A second aim of the project was to investigate how physically active older adults are perceived by others. We live in a youth orientated culture where growing older is often seen only as a period of physical decline. This can lead to stereotypes of ageing and assumptions being made about what behaviours are and are not appropriate for people as they age.

Physically active older adults can challenge stereotypes of ageing and broaden some of these assumptions, but only if their stories are engaged with by the listener. This was the focus of the second part of the project.



HOW WE COLLECTED THE DATA

We used a range of qualitative methods, including life history interviews, photography, film and focus groups. Life history interviews were carried out with 51 physically active men and women over the age of 60; 27 of these participants were then photographed doing their activity. A short film showing physically active older adults was also produced as part of the project and shown to people at different stages of the life course in focus group settings.

The images produced as part of the research have been exhibited in a range of public spaces including hospitals, cafés, libraries and local colleges. This exhibition ("Move") is one way of translating knowledge gained from the research to a wider audience while also encouraging that audience to reflect on their own perceptions of ageing and physical activity. This Key Findings leaflet provides another means of doing this.

FINDINGS

Findings from the Moving Stories project have relevance for policy and practice within the realms of healthy ageing and wellbeing. The following five key themes highlight what we can learn from older adults who are physically active.



THE PLEASURES OF PHYSICALITY

Older adults are generally aware of the health benefits associated with regular physical activity. These functional outcomes are not always what sustain this behavior. Instead, it is the various pleasures gained from participation. Pleasure can be experienced in different ways, in different places and at different times by different people.

The sensory pleasures experienced while exercising was discussed by many of our participants. For example, they recounted the pleasures of feeling the touch of wind in their hair and against their skin when walking outdoors. They described the excitement and satisfaction associated with the sound of a ball or shuttle hitting the sweet spot of a racquet. They also noted the joy of smelling a freshly mown golf course or park.

Other experienced pleasure from documenting or writing about their activities. This involved producing written accounts of walking routes, diaries of trekking adventures and the production of news items for

community magazines. This type of pleasure was generally experienced after doing the activity.

For some of our participants pleasure was experienced from the sense of purpose and structure that regular involvement in a chosen physical activity brought to their lives. This was particularly important for those who had recently retired.

A number of the research participants talked about the pleasures of being completely immersed in their activity. They explained that being physically active gave them a focus, which enabled them to escape (albeit temporarily) from the demands and decision-making embedded in their everyday lives. Often this was described as “me time”.

Recommendation: Messages aimed at encouraging older adults to be physical active should extend beyond an exclusive focus on health outcomes and instead, incorporate the various pleasures, which might be experienced via sport and physical activity.



I love to feel the water as I glide through it, cold at first then pleasantly cool as my body heats up from the exercise. There is a great sense of freedom and buoyancy when you can just float lazily in the deeper end... I don't really like my face in the water all of the time, but feel great when I do breathe correctly, and feel the increase in speed and efficiency as I glide through the water.

Martha, Swimming, Age 63

It's just a part of life. It's just what I do, like some people get up and clean their teeth and it's part of a routine... I think when you finish work you've got to get some sort of routine. So physical activity gives me a structure and I know exactly what happens through the week, which I like.

Jemima, Fitness Classes, Age 61

I've always had a tremendous interest in the footpaths... Amongst my greater pleasures is enabling others, whether they're on holiday, whether they live in the county, to enjoy and get to know their paths.

Rose, Walking, Age 77

It's just so good doing it, I just love it because it's totally committing. You're in the middle of nowhere and you're on your own... I like the feeling that you've got to do it right, you know, the navigation matters, it's a matter of survival really... It keeps you incredibly focused. I like that, I like having something I can really focus on. I really enjoy just getting away completely from everything.

Colin, Hill walking, Age 69

CONSIDERING RELATIONSHIPS

Participation in physical activity is embedded within various relationships. Some older adults exercise with their partner. Others take time away from their partners to exercise alone or with friends.

Time away from partners can cause feelings of guilt, especially when the partnership involves care giving. Older women are often sandwiched between caring for partners and caring for grandchildren, which can limit the time and energy available for physical activity.

Doing exercise alone or with a partner and or friends can be extremely rewarding. However, the loss of an exercise partner can occur for many reasons (e.g. bereavement, illness, lack of interest, changes in living arrangements) and can impact negatively on the desire and ability to continue with that activity. In these circumstances, it is easy to see how involvement in physical activity might cease altogether. Many of our participants overcame this by either changing the activity that there were involved to one that facilitated new or existing relationships to prosper.

Alternatively, they sought to introduce a friend to their existing activity.

For some people, joining a physical activity club can help them to build new friendships and relationships. In our research, this seemed especially important in instances where people had suffered bereavement or perhaps moved to a new area.

Recommendation: The promotion of physical activity is often targeted at individuals. Most people do not live their lives as individual units. Consideration should be given to the ways in which physical activity participation can impact both positively and negatively on the relationships that older adults are part of. Providers might encourage older adults to discuss the relational aspect of their involvement and identify how this might shape any recommendation made. For example, is time spent exercising viewed as an extension of existing relationships, a means of building new relationships, or perhaps the opportunity to have time alone away from an existing relationship?



I find that going out on my own is a stress reliever for me. The only thing then that I'm responsible for is myself, nobody else, and I think that makes a big difference, because in my daily life I'm basically responsible for keeping things going and taking care of my husband, because his health isn't particularly good.

June, Tai chi, Age 65

It's not just the weekly exercise class either. As a result of meeting people there, five or six of us now also meet to go swimming once a week. We've got up to eight of us in a little scrabble club, we meet once a week and play scrabble, so it's all additional social contact.

Timothy, Fitness Classes, Age 71

I still go out surfing if one of my sons comes down to stay and says 'let's go out Mum'. One of them has got a lovely fiancée and she's learning, and so we go out together, and that's fun. But you know, if I go out surfing now, I'm going out on my own because all my children have flown the nest and I don't get the enjoyment I had from it before. I'd rather go and play tennis with my husband – who dislikes going in the sea!

Sheila, Surfing, Age 63



THE EXERCISE BANDWAGON

Nearly all of our participants recalled an “active childhood” (“walking everywhere”, “playing in the street with friends”, “riding our bikes all day”), even if they disliked Physical Education at school and had avoided participation in sport.

However, following this active childhood, many participants reported midlife as a time in their lives when they had been largely inactive due to work and parenting duties. It was often retirement from employment that opened up opportunities for beginning or renewing an interest in regular physical activity.

While experiences of illness generally hampered activity levels, they could also act as a stimulus to start and / or continue participating in regular physical activity. Some participants spoke of their shock at being diagnosed with an illness by their Doctor and how that moment had caused them to embark upon a regular exercise regime. Others spoke of how a serious illness had prevented

any degree of activity for extended periods of time. For them, returning to a physically active lifestyle following their illness was a constant reminder of how fortunate they were to be well again or at least able to manage their illness on a day to day basis.

Our research demonstrated that people find themselves on and off the exercise bandwagon throughout their life. Knowing that it is possible and normal to climb back on – even if it is for the first time – is important for healthy ageing.

Recommendation: Promoting physical activity in older age should be tailored to people’s life histories. It is common for people to believe they are “not the sporty type”, yet this identity does not need to dictate their future too. People will always fall off the exercise bandwagon at various points in their life. Emphasising the ‘normality’ of this and providing numerous examples of where people have climbed back would be a positive step forwards.



I did no physical activity until recently... I was the child that stood in the school playground looking at other people doing activity.

Lesley, Lawn Bowls, Age 64

When I was about 50 (years of age), my right hip gave way and I had to have a hip replacement. That put a huge block on my activities and was a huge demotivational factor, and for the next 10 years...I did hardly anything at all and then in the last two or three years, I've made a more conscious effort to regain the fitness.

Morrie, Walking, Age 61

I then started a very strict exercise regime of getting up every morning and going out and doing a brisk walk for about 30 to 40 minutes.

Rupert, Walking, Age 68



THE MINDSET

Perhaps contrary to popular belief, physically active older adults do not always find it easy to sustain their exercise habit. All of our participants were well aware of the ease of slipping into 'bad' habits and explained how at times, they also 'eased off' their exercise regime.

Aside from external factors such as access, time, and so forth, when asked why they were active in older age when others were not, a common response referred to the importance of "mindset". This referred to an intrinsic ability that they believed ensured that some degree of physical activity was undertaken even on days when they did not feel like it.

The "mindset" used to motivate participation in activity on these 'difficult days' involved combining a sense of determination with their (pre-existing) knowledge about physical activity.

This knowledge involved medical knowledge – i.e. that doing physical activity on a regular basis was good for their health. This knowledge was generally gathered from their Doctor

and health promotion initiatives. It also involved experiential knowledge – i.e. that they would indeed feel better once they had done their exercise. This type of knowledge had accumulated as a result of previous experiences of being active.

Adopting the 'mindset' was not about putting one's mind over matter to the extent that one stopped listening to their body. Sometimes there would be good reasons for 'not feeling like it' that were associated with ongoing illnesses. Many of our participants recognised the need for a positive outlook and mental attitude towards regular involvement in physical activity, but also the need to exercise within their capabilities and adjust as required.

Recommendation: It is easy to assume that older adults who participate regularly in physical activity do not encounter difficulties in maintaining their participation and fitness levels. This is not the case and there is a need for those who promote physical activity in older age to understand how people who are usually active overcome dips

in enthusiasm. Knowing that regular physical activity is important for one's health can be a key motivator in this regard. However, promoting 'scare tactics' is not always helpful when attempting to sustain exercise behaviours. Assisting newcomers to exercise to reach the place where

they 'feel better' after being active (and emphasising that this does occur in time!) can be a useful venture in helping them to create their own 'motivational mindset'.



I feel reasonably contented in my life now. Not complacent though. I do feel I've actually got to work at in terms of fitness. I think it would be very easy to be lazy and not do much...It's a bit like that with diet as well. It's very easy to slip into bad habits with diet. I find it's very easy to anyway. So it does require a bit of self-discipline.

Doug, Swimming, Age 60

It really is the case that it makes you feel better. I mean, I do have to force myself to get out on the bike sometimes. Quite often I'll say 'oh, it's not very nice weather and it's blowing a bit', you know. But then I think 'there is no real excuse, you've got to'. So I get changed and I always come back feeling so much better and so glad that I did it.

Gilbert, Cycling, Age 71

I feel shaky sometimes so yes, there are constraints and sometimes I feel I can't go to keep fit, for example. I am not too bad in the open air, but bouncing around indoors, sometimes I don't feel quite fit enough to do that. When I'm swimming sometimes, instead of aiming at 20 lengths, I will just do 10 or 12, but it depends a lot on how I'm feeling because I don't feel fit all the time but I know that getting out more often than not makes me feel better.

Jocelyn, Golf, Age 69

PERCEPTIONS OF AGEING

In research literature elsewhere, it has been argued that being physically active is fast becoming a moral obligation that each 'good citizen' should engage with as they age. In some instances, this way of thinking can be problematic because it can ignore structural barriers (e.g. finance, accessibility, opportunity, etc.) that might prevent an individual's ability to be active should s/he wish. That aside, all of our participants believed that being physically active was a 'good way' to age healthily. This was also reinforced in the series of focus groups that we held with people from different age groups to find out about other people's perceptions of physically active older adults.

Many of our participants were aware that as they were growing older there were expectations about how they should behave. They reported feelings of being "put in a box" once people learned of their age and that because they were considered "old", it was assumed that they would not

be interested in certain things. For example, some of our participants sensed that other people felt they were no longer interested in learning new things and were only interested in the health benefits of physical activity having little or no concern for the other dimensions it can bring to one's life such as a sense of excitement, pleasure, competition, achievement and so on.

Recommendation: Promoters of sport and physical activity should consider increasing the visibility of a diverse group of older adults being active in order to challenge limited stereotypes concerning what it means to grow older. Highlighting a range of activities that can be undertaken at a range of intensities, along with the diverse experiences that being physically active might bring to people's lives over time is likely to connect with a wider audience while also depicting the lives of physically active older adults more accurately.



There is no reason to assume, just because you have reached a certain age, that you can't do something.

Richard, Cycling, Age 60

I don't want to be pigeon holed because I'm 61... I don't want people to tell me to grow old gracefully... I don't go and do things deliberately to try and maintain my youth but I like to do what I enjoy.

Anthony, Rowing, Age 61

There is no reason why anybody should think, 'I've got to the age of 60, I'm going to sit back and I'm going to do knitting'.

Jan, Fitness Classes, Age 74

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, see: www.ecehh.org/publication/moving-stories

Moving Stories: A Short Film is available to view at: <http://vimeo.com/42829169>

Please contact the primary investigator Dr Cassandra Phoenix if you require further information and / or intend to use this film or these key findings in any capacity.

c.phoenix@exeter.ac.uk



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/1009779/1)

We thank the research participants for their generosity in sharing stories of ageing and physical activity and also the numerous people who helped to connect us with relevant parties.

Thank you to members of the project advisory board for their guidance and critical commentary throughout this research:

Professor Molly Andrews (Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London)

Professor Tim Coles (ESRC Centre for Sport, Leisure & Tourism Research, University of Exeter)

Dr. Kitrina Douglas (University of Bristol)

Sue Howell-Richardson, Jan Howells (AgeUK)

Professor George Morris (Independent Health Policy Advisor)

Ron Spencer (Participant representative)

Mike Thomas (Cornwall Sports Partnership)

For assistance with the creation of visual material, our gratitude extends to Alex Smalley at the European Centre for Environment and Human Health, University of Exeter Medical School and Kate Bailey (professional photographer).

The European Centre for Environment and Human Health (part of the University of Exeter Medical School) is part financed by the European Regional Development Fund Programme 2007 to 2013 and European Social Fund Convergence Programme for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

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