

Examining Layers of Community in Leisure Contexts: A Case Analysis of Older Adults in an Exercise Intervention

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Abstract

This paper explores the dimensions of community that feature in the lives of older people involved in an exercise intervention. It uses McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of psychological sense of community as a sensitizing construct (Ragin, 1994). The results show that participants experienced a sense of community on different levels. They felt a sense of belonging and emotional connection to the gym environment, the University (including the researchers and students), and the broader community of 'active' older people. Influence and fulfilment of needs were not explicitly experienced in the exercise context, but on a broader community level. Therefore, the exercise context was a medium through which 'active' older people could feel a psychological sense of community within a 'healthy aging' culture.

KEYWORDS: Psychological sense of community, qualitative research, aging

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This study is based on a conference paper: Dionigi, R.A. & Lyons, K. (2008). Meanings of older adult's involvement in a community exercise intervention. Paper presented at the 8th ANZALS Biennial Conference, 9–11 January, 2008, Melbourne, Australia.

Acknowledgement: This study was supported by a Charles Sturt University Small Grant

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Healthy Aging and Community

The aging of populations across the developed world is being accompanied by an emergent healthy aging discourse (also called active, successful, or positive aging) in the fields of gerontology and health care (Bevan & Jeeawody, 1998; Davis, 1994; Peel, Bartlett & McClure, 2004; Rowe & Kahn, 1998), exercise promotion (Laura & Johnston, 1997; O'Brien Cousins, 1998; van Norman, 1995), and leisure studies (Dupuis, 2002; Fontane & Hurd, 1992). Consistently, the social and economic concerns of an aging population have prompted governments, businesses, and organizations to provide opportunities for older people to maintain their health and thus reduce the strain on health and welfare systems (Dionigi, 2008). In Australia, healthy aging has been identified as a key area for policy development and health promotion since the late 1990s (Bishop, 1999). This healthy aging discourse is comprised in part of multiple messages about autonomy for older people, alternative ways of viewing aging, community engagement, advice on leisure and lifestyle, the health benefits of physical activity, and exercise program development (Grant & Stothart, 1999). In particular, physically active leisure pursuits have been identified as key ingredients to healthy aging (Dupuis, 2002; Fontane, 1996; Grant, 2002; Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

According to Grant (2002, p. 285), "[o]lder adults can live vital, independent, and active lives, and a leisure renaissance is seen as playing a positive part in this process." Specifically, there are a range of leisure services and physical activity programs aimed at encouraging older individuals to enhance and take responsibility for their health through exercise (Clark, 1992; Fiatarone Singh, 2000; Laura & Johnston, 1997; O'Brien Cousins, 1998; van Norman, 1995). However, the research that examines these programs, or exercise interventions, is typically quantitative and focuses upon the physical and psychological outcomes of participation through pre and post-test measures (Dionigi, 2007, Hurley & Roth, 2000; Hunter et al., 1995; Winett & Carpinelli, 2001). Little research exists on what such interventions actually mean to the older people who participate in them. More specifically, little is known about how older people make sense of their experiences in a program which clearly invests in the healthy aging discourse and its associated practices.

The healthy aging discourse not only emphasizes the importance of physical activity and leisure in later life, but also involvement in the community. Community involvement is viewed as part of the antidote to both mental and physical illness because it is believed to provide older adults with opportunities to experience social interaction, enjoyment, a sense of belonging, and a broader sense of well-being (Biggs, 1993; Kleiber, 1999; Peterson, Speer & McMillan, 2008). In postmodern society traditional contexts for communal experiences, such as church groups and neighbourhoods, are beginning to loosen and be replaced by leisure activities where feelings of community can be created (Gergen 1991; Poole, 2001). Some researchers have criticized leisure as an alternative site for community because it is believed that feelings and experiences of community in these contexts are periodic, short-lived, and superficial (Bauman, 2001). On the other hand, many leisure researchers argue that leisure activities can be vital in providing more than a brief escape from loneliness (Putnam, 2000). They can actually promote social ties and

enduring relationships (Kelly & Goodbey, 1992) that enrich people's quality of life and a community's stability (Edginton et al., 2006; Kraus, 1990). Despite these claims, there is little empirical evidence to support the idea of community as an experience or feeling that transcends leisure contexts and affects people's lives.

One major reason for this limitation is that in social research, and amongst policy makers and leisure services providers, the term 'community' is often used as a discrete construct to describe a context (i.e., a place, or space, or social institution) and the groups of people within those contexts, rather than their experiences (Glover & Stewart, 2006). However, individuals typically belong to more than one community; for example they may be a member of a sporting club and a church group. Little is understood about how or to what extent a person engages with these multiple communities simultaneously. When community is primarily understood as a context or location, other ways of interpreting 'community' become overshadowed; for instance, community as a psychological condition (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

A psychological sense of community describes individual perceptions regarding community and how community behavior is internalized and experienced (McMillan & Chavis). Research into this dimension of community is rare in leisure studies despite arguments that leisure contexts may develop unique experiences of community (Lyons, 2003). In particular, past research indicates that for many older people, involvement in leisure activities provides an alternative to social and emotional disengagement and opportunities for interaction and fulfilment (Dionigi 2002, 2007; Dionigi & Cannon, 2009; Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; Kleiber, 1999). Therefore, leisure in later life presents a fruitful and pertinent context to explore notions of community. However, little is known about how community is perceived, experienced and developed among older people who participate in leisure activities, including exercise programs. Knowledge of this kind is important for leisure programmers and policy makers who endeavour to meet the desires and needs of the growing number of 'active' older people in western cultures (Dionigi, 2008).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the psychological dimensions of community that feature in the lives of older people who demonstrate patterns of behavior that are consistent with healthy aging. That is, how do 'active' older adults (who are already engaged in church groups, volunteer work, gardening clubs and the like) interpret their participation in an exercise program that was designed to reinforce and promote healthy aging? How does a sense of community manifest in this context and how is it perceived and experienced by the participants? To address these questions, this study uses McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of psychological sense of community as a sensitizing construct (Ragin, 1994).

Psychological Sense of Community

McMillan and Chavis (1986) have suggested that a sense of community is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of four elements: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to "... a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore

has a right to belong” (McMillan & Chavis, p. 9). It follows therefore, that older adults who become invested in an exercise intervention will experience a sense of belonging. But belonging to what? McMillan (1996) argues that research is needed that examines the meanings assigned to community. In this study we consider what investment means to older adults involved in an exercise intervention and how this helps determine to which community they perceive they belong.

Influence, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986), is the degree to which individuals feel they have some control over a group of which they are members. Influence also refers to the perception that the group exerts some control over individual members. A sense of community is therefore a balanced distribution of control between the individual and the group (McMillan & Chavis). For participants in an exercise program, the degree to which they influence the community in which they perceive they belong, and how that community influences them is unclear, partly because it is unknown what constitutes community for them.

Fulfillment of needs describes the processes of reinforcement. Reinforcers symbolically represent status, success, and competence and they enable members to feel close to a group because that group rewards its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). To understand what community means for older adults participating in an exercise program, it is important to consider what constitutes status, success, and competence for participants and how these aspects are reinforced by others in the community.

Shared emotional connection refers to shared “... history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). This element resembles member attachment theory which suggests that connections with others coalesce around a common purpose and perceived common backgrounds (Turner, Sachdev & Hogg, 1983). Given the varied backgrounds of older people, in this study we seek to understand if a common purpose exists among people who choose to be involved in an exercise intervention and if a perceived collective history underpins their experiences. We also consider the extent and nature of the emotional connections forged between participants, and the community (or indeed communities) to which they perceive they belong.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed a psychometric instrument to measure each element of a psychological sense of community described above, which has been used in a number of studies (Glynn, 1986; Klein & D’Aunno, 1986; Royal & Rossi, 1996). More recent research has attempted to refine McMillan and Chavis’ four-factor model. Notably, studies by Proescholdbell, Roosa and Nemeroff (2006) and Tartaglia (2006) have suggested three-factor models, although using different dimensions and/or a combination of two dimensions. For example, the model developed by Proescholdbell and colleagues focussed upon sense of community among gay men and included the dimensions of influence, shared emotional connection, and a combined dimension of fulfillment of needs/belonging. However, as these authors admit, this three-factor model was developed based on a particular marginalized community and did not include measures of the potentially negative feelings of community (e.g., exclusivity) that the original four-factor model theorized.

Tartaglia’s (2006) study of sense of community suggested that the original

four-factor model did not capture place attachment as an important factor that emerged from Italian residents in particular towns and villages. Tartaglia acknowledged, however, that place attachment is less relevant for some communities that may unite primarily around common interests and values, rather than identify with a particular place. Recently, Peterson and colleagues (2008) asserted their confidence in the original model, suggesting that problems relate to measurement weaknesses rather than the theory itself and that these methodological issues are not sufficient reasons to abandon it. Indeed, Peterson and colleagues (2008) argued that the durability and strength of the original model lays in its multidimensionality and any effort to unify these dimensions limit its application to the study of diverse communities in unique contexts.

Despite the continued effectiveness of the four-factor model, there is growing recognition of measurement flaws in the Psychological Sense of Community Instrument (Peterson, et al., 2008; Lorion & Newburgh, 1996). This has led researchers to focus on the theoretical foundations of the dimensions that constitute a sense of community. Consequently, several researchers have sought alternative ways of understanding what community means to individuals while recognizing the broader parameters that previous empirical and largely quantitative work has produced. Lorion and Newbrough (1996) argued that a qualitative approach is likely to provide access to the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and understandings of community. Such an approach follows Maeher and Braskamp's (1986, p. 47) proposal that, "...whether or how people will invest themselves in particular activities or courses of action depends on what the activities or courses of action mean to them." Furthermore, Puddifoot (1996) suggested that qualitative methods were most suitable for understanding how a sense of community is developed through the sharing and negotiating of meanings. Hill (1996) also recognized the benefits of using qualitative approaches because of the context-specific nature of a sense of community. Hill felt that some contexts were more conducive to producing a sense of community and that qualitative research was effective in capturing this variability between settings.

Therefore, this study takes a qualitative approach to examine notions and experiences of community that emerged among older people involved in an exercise program. To guide data analysis, we used the original four-factor model of a psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986); that is, a model that Peterson and colleagues (2008) argue remains theoretically sound. In this way, the study moves beyond research that examines the physical and psychological changes associated with involvement in an exercise program (e.g., Hurley & Roth, 2000; Hunter et al., 1995; Winett & Carpinelli, 2001) and explores what involvement means to participants. By examining these meanings in terms of the participants' experiences and understandings of community, our paper provides a broader understanding of the importance of exercise activity on many levels (i.e., from personal to cultural). This knowledge is necessary given the increasing emphasis on health promotion and successful aging in contemporary society, as well as the ongoing concern of a breakdown in traditional community ties.

Methods

Research Approach

We took a qualitative approach to explore the meanings a group of older people attached to their experiences of community through an exercise intervention program. This intervention was designed to reinforce and promote healthy aging. Broadly, qualitative research acknowledges the subjective nature of human experiences and argues that it is the meanings that people attach to these experiences that constitute their reality (Hemingway, 1995; Prus, 1996). Therefore, from this perspective, it is posited that “the study of human behavior is the study of human lived experiences and that human experience is rooted in people’s meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions” (Prus, 1996, p. 9). When taking a qualitative approach, the findings emerge out of the data. The focus is on illuminating and representing the multiple viewpoints of participants, and then making sense of their experiences through the application of theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Giddens, 1976). Hence, although we were familiar with concepts of community prior to the study, these theories acted as sensitizing concepts (Ragin, 1994). That is, participants were not asked specific questions about their sense of community, rather experiences and meanings of community emerged as salient from the interview data. The emergent themes were then compared to the four dimensions of McMillian & Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory.

The Participants

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 older people (aged 65-72 years; 6 women, 4 men) about their involvement in an exercise intervention (Dionigi, 2007). Participants for the exercise intervention lived in Bathurst (or its surrounds), which is situated inland NSW, Australia and has a population of approximately 35,000. Participants were recruited by advertising on local radio and distributing flyers at community centres, Veterans’ clubs, and the University of the Third Age (U3A, i.e., educational and cultural programs for Seniors). Purposive sampling techniques were used (see ‘typical case sampling’ as explained by Patton (1990)) and participants were selected based on age (65 years and over), health status (no major illnesses or injuries and moderately active), and gender (men and women). Participants recruited for this study were ‘white’ and considered themselves ‘middle class’, which is compatible with to whom (and of whom) the healthy aging discourses speak (Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). Participants were actively involved in a number of community activities (see Table 1) and by agreeing to participate in this program they demonstrate behavior that is consistent with ‘healthy aging’. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the investigation. The study gained ethics approval from the first authors’ University.

The Exercise Intervention

Participants engaged in a 12 week exercise intervention that involved two whole body resistance training sessions per week. A more detailed description of the exercise intervention has been published elsewhere (Dionigi, 2007). The program was conducted at a university gym and each exercise participant was as-

signed a student volunteer who supervised each training session. The students were trained in correct exercise techniques, ethical considerations, and safety procedures. The responsibilities of the student supervisor were to ensure the participants followed the program instructions, motivate the participants during each exercise session, lead warm-up and cool-down activities, provide assistance with the use of the exercise machines, and keep a log of each participant's progress.

In addition, three Information Sessions were conducted for all exercise participants and all students at different times throughout the program. These meetings allowed participants to discuss with the researchers how the exercise program was going and to raise any concerns or questions they had about their involvement. An Introduction Meeting was held prior to the commencement of training. This involved each student being paired with an older exercise participant and all were given a tour of the gym. A Recognition Luncheon was held in the middle of the program to thank the students and exercise participants for volunteering in the program. This free lunch was hosted by a local community organization and the students and study participants socialized together outside the gym context. A Presentation Evening was held at the end of the intervention. All exercise participants and students had refreshments and were given a certificate of appreciation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed three times (with each interview lasting from 45 minutes to 2 hours) to establish change over time and build rapport between the first author and the interviewee. They were interviewed one week before the intervention commenced, one month after its commencement and one week after the completion of the 12-week exercise program. The interviews were relaxed, conversational and conducted face-to-face, one-on-one (either in the first author's office or the participant's home), except for two married couples (Keith and Betty; Jake and Jan) who preferred to be interviewed simultaneously. The interviews with the couples involved more participant interaction and discussion and less questioning from the researcher when compared to the single interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). See Dionigi (2007) for an extended discussion on data collection processes used in this investigation.

In-depth interviews rely extensively on verbal accounts of participants' experiences, beliefs, feelings, meanings, actions, attitudes, intentions, and opinions (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The general interview guide approach was used. This involves outlining the topics to be discussed in advance but deciding upon the exact ordering and wording of questions during the course of the interview based on issues raised by the respondent and how the conversation was unfolding (Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The topics discussed included participant exercise history, reasons and motives for participation in the program, expectations of the program, experiences during the exercise training, perceived physical and mental changes associated with the exercise program, general perceived outcomes of their involvement in the program, and relationship with the student trainer (see Dionigi, 2007 for the complete interview guide). Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and preliminary analysis was conducted after each stage of interviews so that tentative themes were

followed up in subsequent interviews. This process of allowing preceding data to give direction to subsequent data collection is consistent with constant comparative analysis (a process whereby data collected from each stage is continually contrasted throughout ongoing analysis in order to develop concepts grounded in the data) and it leads to theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Furthermore, participants were observed in the gym at different times throughout the program, and at the Introduction Meeting, Information Sessions, Recognition Luncheon, and Presentation Evening. Participant interactions, conversations, and actions were left to unfold 'naturally' with participants being uninterrupted and often unaware of the researcher's presence or observations (Adler & Adler, 1998). Observations were recorded as field notes in a notebook at the first available private moment. The observations were non-intrusive and only used for the purpose of describing the context of the investigation (Patton, 1990).

The interview and observational data were analysed through the use of coding, and constant comparative and thematic analyses. After listening to the audiotapes and reading the transcripts and field notes repeatedly, the data were systematically coded by assigning a word or phrase that represented units of meaning to a block of quoted text (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Initially, the data were coded and grouped into common topics for each interviewee across their three interviews to get a sense of the person's background and unique experiences. The next phase of analysis involved linking the coded text into topics (or raw data themes) that were common across the complete interview data set at each stage. This process is called cross-case analysis and it recognizes that while each person's story is unique, there are common topics, patterns, and themes among participants (Huberman & Miles, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Further analysis involved linking similar raw data themes (from all interviews and field notes) together to generate higher order themes (i.e., more refined concepts) (van Manen, 1998) that best explained how the participants experienced and perceived a sense of community. These themes were then compared to and interpreted in terms of the four dimensions comprising McMillian and Chavis's (1986) sense of community theory. That is, the theory was used as a sensitizing concept (Ragin, 1994) in the final stage of analysis. This whole approach was consistent with constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

The four themes to emerge from data analysis indicated that involvement in an exercise program resulted in a sense of belonging, a sense of connection, mutual fulfillment, and broader influence for the study participants. Each theme will be described in turn; however due to their interrelatedness, there is some overlap and interaction between themes.

A Sense of Belonging

This theme explores the feeling of membership that participants experienced in relation to three perceived levels of community by being involved in the exercise program. Many participants expressed a sense of belonging to (1) the gym en-

vironment, specifically (2) the University (at which the gym was located), and (3) other 'active' older people, in general. The participants committed to the exercise program for 12 weeks and over that time felt comfortable in the 'gym' environment and expressed a right to belong. This feeling of being 'rightful' members of the gym emerged over time as the participants invested in the accepted practices of that environment. Like all the gym users (i.e., students, staff), the study participants were there to complete their exercise program with the shared interest of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Participants said they found, overall, the other gym users to be "friendly," "helpful," "accommodating," "obliging," "pleasant," and "considerate," and that they didn't "interfere" or "weren't patronizing." For example, Caroline (age 65 years) was "most impressed" that "the students not involved [in the research] will get off machines for you," and Donna (age 71 years) said:

... all the people, not only the students that you had... were all very considerate and very nice to us. I think maybe they thought it was fun, but they all smile at us and, any of them, if you asked them, would do anything they could to help.

Joe (age 68 years) provided a typical participant description of the gym atmosphere:

... the experience at the gym, 'cause it's a new experience for us, you know, with the business of the gym and people looking very fit and doing all sorts of strenuous things. It's an interesting place to be... I thought it was great! Really positive... It was heartening to see a lot of young people... A really positive sort of atmosphere to be in. And meeting the other oldies... there's some joy, meeting the same sort of group of people in the gym, meeting Warwick [his student assistant].

Donna agreed:

I'm enjoying it... I think it makes you feel as though you're part of the world. And... it's nice to come up onto the University campus and see all these students doing all "studenty" things and it's good. You get out of the house.

Donna's comment highlights the sense of belonging participants also felt to the University environment. Investing their time and energy into a university research program made participants feel an important and contributing part (or member) of this vibrant learning environment.

Specifically, involvement in the exercise program not only included sessions in the gym, but meetings throughout the duration of the program. These meetings provided opportunities for the participants to talk to each other and the researchers about factors that interested them, outside of the gym context. In their interviews, all of the participants provided positive comments about these meetings, such as "the openness has been... excellent" and "very useful, very helpful." For example, Barbara (age 69 years) explained:

... very friendly atmosphere, at any of those occasions when we met, yes...

And listening... there were lots of good questions... and good discussion around diet and exercise and things like that. But it was useful... And there would be a few more people in town I'll smile at and speak to now 'cause I met them in the gym.

It is here that participants were expressing a sense of belonging to a group of 'active', 'engaged' older people. Their discussions revolved around aspects of healthy aging and the participants perceived a shared common interest in these issues with other members of the group. The participants seemed to understand themselves as an 'exclusive' group of 'healthy' older people. For example, Sophie (age 65 years) disclosed, rather apprehensively (i.e., without trying to offend anyone) that:

I get stimulation from people who are actively involved in the community, who are doing something constructive, who have an average to above average intelligence and they [slight pause] influence me and encourage me to look after my health and to do something positive. And I find the people that are not in that category, tend to [slight pause] sit around, stay at home, have their families as their only faithfuls... if they're not actively involved in the community, I often find they're not very [physically] active at all... I have some friends who... expect the doctor to look after them instead of taking that responsibility personally themselves.

Evidently, the participants expressed a sense of emotional connection with 'other' older people who they believed were like them. For the participants in this study, feelings of belonging and membership meant having a common interest in exercise, keeping fit and healthy, and being actively involved in the community (i.e., the broader context in which they lived). They have invested their time and energy into the program and therefore feel 'rightful' members of the gym, the University and the community of active older adults. This sense of membership to multiple communities appears interrelated with a sense of connection, with the increase of one feeling tending to enhance the other.

A Sense of Connection

The above theme demonstrates that a perceived common purpose and background among the exercise participants forged a sense of emotional connection between the study participants, specifically, and with the broader community of active older people. This theme highlights the extent and nature of these identified connections, as well as the unique sense of emotional connection developed between the older exerciser and the younger student.

Throughout the intervention participants were seen and heard talking to each other between exercises about their "favorite" and most "hated" exercise machines and comparing what weight they lifted to others in the program or gym. They were observed laughing at themselves and with one another, assisting each other with setting up the machines, and smiling or waving across the room. Donna (age 71 years) explained:

... we all sort of got to know each other a bit, but some of them I never saw at

all until we—'cause the times were so different. But a lot of them we sort of got to talk to each other. And we'd help each other out.

At the end of the program, Sophie (age 65 years) said the following in regard to the effectiveness of the intervention:

... it's a preventative program, not only physically but it sort of maintains your energy and your interest in the community and gets you meeting people and communicating and learning. So it has a lot of assets to enable older people to stay healthy and to stay involved in the community... It's amazing what you can achieve, both personally and for the community. So it's certainly been a great success, I think for each individual, but it's been a successful community project.

What is evident in the above comment is the perceived sense of connection that developed among participants as a result of the intervention, as well as how the intervention acted as a means through which participants could experience a sense of emotional connection with the broader community.

In addition to the above findings, the majority of participants developed a uniquely positive relationship and emotional connection with their much younger student assistant. They believed that "intergenerational" contact or "the social side" with the student was an important part of the intervention because it forged a genuine relationship between people of different ages, mindsets and backgrounds. For instance, Caroline (age 65 years) said:

... there's quite a good rapport between the students and the older person. And older people need young people around them. Because old people are boring and old... they're set in their ways, they're dull... this is a generalization of course, they're negative, they put confines on themselves, and young people get them away from that... I personally thought the joking bit [among the students and participants at the Presentation Evening] was the best bit 'cause that proves the relationship is there... See, I just think that is excellent.

All of the participants said that they appreciated the time and effort the students put into the program. Many said that they felt "very lucky" to have the student they were paired up with for the intervention. To describe their particular student different participants used words such as "delightful," "fabulous," "excellent," "so nice," or "enthusiastic." The attitudes and performances of the students were often praised during interviews. For example, Barbara (age 69 years) said:

... on the whole I just think that the students are really very good... They're friendly and respectful... they don't fool around or anything... you couldn't do it if you didn't have someone with you to encourage you and just be there.

Not only did the students offer the participants encouragement, instruction, feedback, and leadership, but, perhaps more importantly, friendships developed. Throughout their interviews, many participants told stories about the unique relationship they had developed with their student. For example, several participants described how knowledgeable, helpful, reassuring, and motivating their student

was with the training and several participants (of their volition) gave their student a “thank you” gift at the end of the program for helping them reach their exercise goals. Others spoke of how they enjoyed learning about the student’s interests, family, aspirations, and career plans because the student’s circumstances were different to their current life experiences. Not only did they get to know their student in the gym, but some participants had their student over for dinner or they went out for lunch together. A couple of female participants described the novel experience of visiting their student’s dormitory and meeting their peers, because they had not experienced life as a university student when they were younger. These findings demonstrated the strength of the rapport that developed because of the intervention and showed that it went beyond the context of the exercise program.

The exercise program was also perceived by some participants as allowing them to develop an emotional connection with young people in general. Sophie said:

... the other thing too that I enjoyed was the contact with the young people... Get to know what they do and what they think and yeah. That was good contact. Intergenerational meeting... I thought that was one of the plusses...

Therefore, the participants experienced a sense of emotional connection with their student, specifically, and with the younger generation more broadly. Interestingly, although this relationship was forged partly out of the common interest in exercise and successfully completing the program, it was the difference in backgrounds and the opportunity to learn new things from one another that strengthened the emotional connection between the participant and their student.

Mutual Fulfillment

This theme describes the processes of reciprocal reinforcement that enabled the exercise participants to feel a part of multiple communities. It discusses what constitutes status, success and competence in each of these perceived communities and how these aspects are reinforced by others in those communities. Interestingly, many participants viewed their involvement in the exercise program as providing a “community service” to the researchers of the University and, more broadly, to society. In this sense, they understood ‘community’ on two levels (1) the University or research community and (2) the broader community or society in which they lived.

In the University community, status and competency are typically defined in terms of advancing knowledge and research. Consequently, by being involved in the exercise intervention participants felt valued by the University community because they could offer knowledge and insight on ‘healthy aging’ and, simultaneously, fulfill the needs of the University. For instance, Betty (age 65 years) said in her interview after the exercise intervention had ended:

... what I like about [this town] is that you can get in to do things community-wise, that you feel that you’re doing something worthwhile... It’s helping you people [the researchers] isn’t it? Because if we don’t do it you can’t do it. And it’s helping us, since we’re going to be fitter.

Furthermore, Barbara (age 69 years) said:

Another thing is I am very happy to be contributing to research in this area because we are an aging population and, you know, we are living longer as I said earlier if we're only living longer without feeling really alive, well then it questions your quality. So, you know, I feel good to be contributing to learning about aging, the rate of it, whether we can halt it, if the muscles get to a point where you can't improve it, because I really thought that earlier.

Being a research participant was therefore perceived as mutually fulfilling, because it also met the health needs of individuals involved. In other words, the participants perceived the University community to be of individual benefit to them and, in turn, the University benefited from them.

On a broader level, Jake (age 72 years) saw being involved in the research as one way to "help other people", such as the researchers and other older people in general:

I feel that it's [the research/exercise program] got a lot going for it actually, as far as what it can do to help other people, and I think that through the research... that there is something that can be set, set in place for those, most people over 60... an avenue they can explore... I don't mind [being a research participant]. I think it's a good idea, actually, because it's also helping as far as it's helping you personally, and those that are doing it, in so far as they can pass it on, and then continue with it, and if there's a way you can help in that regard, definitely, it's a good idea, and it should be encouraged.

Clearly, community is also understood as the broader society in which one lives and being involved in the program meant contributing to research and society in general. When talking about what quality of life means, Jake said:

That's what we're looking for – quality of life... It [quality of life] means becoming involved in the community and being able to do things to help or be a part of a community and not just sit in your chair and do nothing. Now that's very important that [Jan, his wife, agreed in the background: 'to be helping others who haven't got that quality of life' she added] and that's my main concern really, is to be able to be while ever I'm walking around and what have you that I should be able to provide something to the community generally because in my working life and that, that was part and parcel of it and just to help the community and I hope that I can continue to do that.

His wife, Jan (age 69 years) agreed:

I think it is also important... to be available to do things to help people, you know, if they need something done. Whether it be within your church or out there within the community in other ways. I think that's terribly important and while you're well enough to do that I think that we should be doing that.

As previously stated, all participants were already active in their local community in various ways and many saw their participation in the exercise program as an

extension of their enduring involvement and commitment to this community. The participants saw this community involvement as mutually reinforcing. By being actively engaged in community activities, the participants felt valued and accepted by the community in which they lived because they were making a positive and productive contribution to that community. In other words, when community is perceived as the broader society in which one lives (and when that society values and encourages active involvement in later life) older people who are physically, socially, and mentally engaged members are accepted, celebrated, and reinforced by that community.

The above findings demonstrate the interacting and overlapping nature of mutual fulfilment and influence. However, these dimensions appear to cut across the multiple communities to which participants feel they belong and operate on different levels of community simultaneously.

Broader Influence on Society

The above theme revealed that the participants perceived themselves as productive and contributing members of society whose actions could positively influence that society. This theme describes the degree to which they saw their involvement in the exercise program as one way to make a broader influence on the wider community. It also discusses the perceived distribution of control between the exercise participant and broader society.

Sophie (age 65 years) said, when asked how she felt about being a participant in the study:

I'm certainly happy to do it! I know it'll all be sort of blended into a huge barage of information, so there's nothing personally for me in being involved in the research. It's just participating in something that's bigger than me and I'm just one link... I hope it will have long term effects ...

Clarification was sought by the interviewer in regard to whether these 'effects' were for her, and Sophie responded:

No! For the community. I would hope that the research you end up with, or the results of your research, will be used by the community, health clinics, and community health facilities across the state, to provide, or encourage at least, older people to do the resistance training and to see the benefits of it. That it doesn't remain local, and doesn't remain in the close little group. But it... encourages a wider involvement. So, I'm quite happy, from that point of view, to be involved.

Sophie hoped that her involvement in this exercise program would influence other older members in society to get actively involved in the community. She also believes that active older people influence her to keep active and maintain her health in later life (as her quote that was presented at the end of the first theme indicated). When asked why she became involved in the program, Sophie said:

Basically because I think older people have a lot to offer, but they can only offer that while they stay healthy. There's a lot of wisdom, a lot of experience,

a lot of, oh stories they can tell and a lot of skills they have. But as we get older, you tend to withdraw from the community and often it's because of our health, and as long as we can stay healthy we can contribute...

And in response to a question about the importance of community, Sophie added:

Yes, well without community, who are you? You need a community to be involved with, to relate to, to have an identity...

The above quote shows how the community to which Sophie perceives she belongs helps define who she is and how she identifies with and understands herself.

In particular, the participants viewed their involvement in the exercise intervention as a strategy for reducing the likelihood that they would become a burden to the community. For example, Jake (age 72 years) stated in his final interview:

You get a lot of benefits from it [being involved in the resistance training program and the research]... Particularly getting into that age bracket over 70... I feel that's a big plus, a big necessity. And it's got to be an advantage in the long-term particularly on things generally... Must help the community, because the whole thing is you're not a burden on the community.

Similarly, in her final interview, Barbara (age 69 years) stated:

... I believe if you strengthen your muscles it must improve your ability to be mobile for longer... And in an aging population it would probably make a big difference. To the health bills! If you can keep people healthy and mobile.

The participants were mindful of the concerns of an aging population and the emphasis society places on 'self-responsibility' for maintaining health in later life. Also, they appeared proud to be making what they deemed to be a financial, productive, and social contribution to their local community and society as a whole. These findings show that the community exerts influence or control over its members by making these older people feel they should take responsibility for their health for the 'good' of society. Evidently, the participants are responding to and are influenced by the healthy aging discourse and its associated practices. However, the sense of community that was developed and experienced appears to indicate a balanced distribution of control between the individual participants and the broader community to which they perceived they belonged.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how a sense of community manifests through older people's participation in an exercise intervention and how dimensions of community are perceived and experienced by them. The findings demonstrated that the exercise context was a medium through which 'active' older people could feel a psychological sense of community on a number of levels (ranging from micro/personal to macro/social) and feel a part of multiple communities simultaneously (e.g., the gym/training environment, the University community (including the student trainers), the community of active older adults and the broader community/society in which the participants lived).

The four dimensions of a sense of community reflected in the findings were not perceived or experienced in isolation of each other and were not all experienced in the exercise context. Each dimension, however, was accessible through the exercise program and therefore experienced on different levels or layers of community. For example, the 'mutual fulfillment' and 'broader influence' notions of community were not experienced by participants in the immediate training environment, but, because of their involvement in the exercise intervention, the participants perceived and experienced a sense of mutual fulfillment and broader influence at the more macro-level (e.g., in relation to the University community, the community of 'active older adults', and/or the society in which one lived).

Our findings reveal that the four elements of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory on psychological sense of community (i.e., membership, shared emotional connection, fulfillment of needs, and influence) were important in making sense of how the participants experienced and understood community. This outcome supports the idea that a four-factor model remains useful (Peterson et al., 2008). Our results extend the sense of community model developed by McMillan and Chavis by providing empirical evidence of the dynamic nature of the elements of a psychological sense of community and by demonstrating how these dimensions can concurrently work across different layers of community.

The finding of 'a sense of belonging' showed how participants perceived themselves as 'rightful members' of the exercise environment, the University, the community of active older adults, and broader society. This theme supported the definition of membership as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986), but it also showed that aspects of this dimension of the theory interrelate with the notion of 'shared emotional connection'. For instance, both of these dimensions appeared to emerge from similar contexts and experiences, such as exercising in a gym or involvement in a University's activities, and an increase of one feeling tended to increase the other. Therefore, our findings showed that the dimensions in McMillan and Chavis' theory are not as discrete as quantitative (psychometric) measures of this theory have indicated (e.g., Glynn, 1986; Klein & D'Aunno, 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

The overlap, interrelatedness, and slippage between the four dimensions evident in our results supports past qualitative research by illuminating how a sense of community is manifested through the sharing and negotiating of multiple meanings (Pudifoot, 1996) and how it is context-specific (Hill, 1996). In particular, the qualitative approach to the current study allowed the complexity and interacting nature of each dimension to be revealed. For example, the theme coalescing around mutual fulfillment of needs showed that this feeling was to some degree based on the participants' belief that their actions would have a broader influence on the society in which they lived. Also, the sense of belonging/membership to the gym, University, and wider active aging culture was in part forged by a sense of shared emotional connection experienced between the exercise participants, with other 'active older adults' in general, and with their student trainer and the younger generation as a whole.

Interestingly, the intergenerational connection that emerged from this study contradicts member attachment theory (Turner et al., 1983) because the source of

emotional connection and friendship between the older person and the younger student trainer was primarily based upon difference in background and life experiences, rather than similar histories. This finding of difference underpinning their connection extends and contradicts previous research into sense of community where it has been argued that 'shared emotional connection' is strongest among people with common histories, backgrounds and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Turner et al.). Although they may have connected over differences, the participants and students also shared a common interest in exercise and training.

Furthermore, the finding of a balanced distribution of control between participants and the wider community discussed in the 'broader influence on society' theme lends support to the 'influence' dimension in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory. Influence was experienced by participants as members of the active older community and as part of a broader 'healthy aging' culture. Therefore, this theme added complexity to past findings by demonstrating that the perceived balanced distribution of control was not between individual exercisers and the exercise group, but was evident on a much broader scale (i.e., between individual and society).

The finding of 'mutual fulfillment' contributes to and extends understandings of 'fulfillment of needs' as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) by demonstrating that people can experience mutual fulfillment in multiple communities simultaneously. Mutual fulfillment was experienced and understood at the University community level and as part of the broader society in which participants lived. This finding supports research suggesting that experiences of community in leisure contexts are not fleeting, but can carry ongoing meaning that transcends the leisure context and contributes to an individual's and community's quality of life (Edginton et al., 2006; Kraus, 1990). Furthermore, the findings concerning mutual fulfillment reinforced the overlapping nature of the dimensions within McMillan and Chavis' theory, in this case between 'fulfillment of needs' and 'influence'. While this overlap has been identified in other research, such as Tartaglia (2006), in the current study the overlap cuts across the layers of community to which participants felt they belonged.

Therefore, despite the slippage between themes, the findings did not support the idea of a three-factor model as suggested by Tartaglia (2006) and Proescholdbell et al. (2006). In contrast to Proescholdbell and colleagues' combined dimension of fulfillment of needs and membership/belonging in the context of gay men, the present study showed that these two dimensions were experienced quite differently by exercise participants and on different levels. Fulfillment of needs was experienced primarily on a macro-level (i.e., linked to broader society), whereas a sense of belonging was experienced on many levels (i.e., among participants and students within the micro community of the gym, at the University level, and among active older people more broadly). Rather than collapsing these elements of community into one, our study suggests that each element may operate on different levels of community simultaneously because these older people felt a part of multiple communities.

Although McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 19) theorize that community is layered and recognize that individuals belong to multiple communities, they lack

empirical evidence to support these claims. More recently, the notion of different layers or levels of community has been subject to empirically based research (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007). For example, Brodsky and Marx have attempted to explore this phenomenon, but much more broadly than the focussed approach of the current study. In their study of students and staff at a job-readiness training centre for low-income women they discovered that "... people participate in any number of distinct communities at any one time" (Brodsky & Marx, 2001, p.175). They argue that "[e]ach of these distinct communities is also comprised of multiple, nested subcommunities, defined by individual and group roles, experiences and identities" (Brodsky & Marx, 2001, pp.175-76). This notion of 'nested subcommunities' is in keeping with what McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 19) refer to as "[t]he layering of communities."

A common premise in this research on community layers, however, is that each level of community is treated as distinct. As Maya-Jariego and Armitage note, "Time participating in one community is time not spent participating in another" (2007, p. 743). In contrast, in the current study, the experiences of the exercise participants demonstrated far more fluidity and interaction between communities. The findings showed how participants experienced a psychological sense of community on multiple levels and in multiple communities simultaneously. Therefore, the study highlights that it is important to explore the complex and flowing operation of a person's sense of community in a layered and multiple way because people "... can and do find a sense of community in the many and varied groups to which [they] belong" (Obst & White, 2007, p.88).

Moreover, unlike research by Tartaglia (2006), place attachment did not emerge as significant in the present study. Instead, it was found that a participant's sense of community coalesced primarily around a common interest in healthy aging, rather than a particular place.

Therefore, a sense of community was not only experienced in a multiple and layered way, it was also interest-based. Similarly, Obst and White (2007, p.86) argued that the strongest sense of belonging to a community is found in "self-selected interest groups" (Obst & White, 2007, p.86). That is, in such groups where membership was self-chosen, as would be expected, a greater sense of needs fulfillment, mutual influence, and connection with other members was experienced. Hence, in the context of current research on the experience of community, it should be noted that contemporary social relationships, having been influenced by developments in communication technology and the increasing mobility of humans, means that community is no longer defined simply by location. For this reason, Brodsky and Marx (2001) and Obst and White (2007), amongst others, acknowledge the increasing significance of relational or interest-based communities as opposed to territorial ones.

Therefore, our study reinforces the argument that it is problematic to assume that the term 'community' refers to a discrete context or location (i.e., a space, or social institution, and the groups of people within those places), rather than a shared feeling or experience (Glover & Stewart, 2006). Our findings revealed that community can be perceived as both a context and an experience—it is not one or the other. For example, the participants believed that they were contributing

to multiple community contexts (e.g., the University and broader society) and experiencing a sense of community with like-minded groups of people (e.g., other study participants, the younger students, and 'active older people' in general) simultaneously. This finding goes beyond an either/or understanding of community. Central to this reconciliation for these older people was the role of enduring involvement and commitment to an active and engaged lifestyle in many leisure domains. More importantly, however, the exercise intervention used for this study introduced participants to the gym environment and gave them an opportunity to connect with members of the younger generation and the University, consequently creating layers of community which were previously unavailable to them.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

The present study shows that initiatives that bring together younger and older people can be very positive; an aspect of healthy aging which has been identified as important at the level of policy. For instance, it was noted in a report by the former Federal Minister for Ageing in Australia that "... initiatives that encourage younger and older people to participate together in a variety of settings" were worth developing for the purpose of healthy aging and for building healthy communities in general (Andrews, 2003, p. 10). Further research along this line might, therefore, consider the meanings and experiences of the younger person where such programs are being trialled.

When designing and implementing interventions that reinforce and promote healthy aging, however, it is important for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike to find a balance between exerting control over the individual and allowing the individual to feel a sense of autonomy and ownership in regard to physically active leisure participation. Health promotion campaigns and healthy aging discourses circulating at the local and global community levels, despite being well-intended, can make older people feel they should (indeed must) take responsibility for their health to maintain their independence and reduce the social and health costs associated with an aging population. This sentiment can leave people feeling guilty if they do not exercise regularly and has the potential to make those who choose not to or are unable to exercise feel (or be positioned as) immoral, lazy and/or unproductive members of society (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Fullagar, 2001; Jolanki, 2004). In this study, participants felt a sense of connection and belonging to an 'active aging' community, but what about those who are not a part of this community?

While the notion of a sense of belonging is important to any community, the manifestation of community (and the belonging it infers) is by its very definition also an excluding process (Lyons, 2003). Indeed our findings demonstrated that the participants' feeling of belonging produced an element of exclusiveness. Many contrasted themselves to people who "sit around" or "are not actively involved in the community". The participants perceived themselves as a somewhat exclusive group of active, healthy older adults. Not everyone, however, can be a member of every community. In creating communities, policy makers, researchers and program providers can actually reinforce for some a feeling isolation (Lyons). The feeling that a person does not fit in, is reinforced by the informal or formal

rules of membership (e.g., I must be healthy; I must fight the aging process; I must keep active; I must not be a burden on society). Therefore, it is recommended that further research examines exclusionary practices that stop individuals from becoming members of communities. In line with this recommendation, it would be interesting to speak to older people from working-class and non-English-speaking backgrounds because the findings in the current study are specific to the white, predominantly middle-class sample. It would also be fruitful to interview older people from a range of backgrounds who *cannot* or *do not want to* regularly participate in exercise or physically active leisure pursuits to determine the extent to which they feel a sense of exclusion or guilt in a society which values 'active aging'.

Finally, this study nevertheless demonstrates the importance of exercise to older adults pursuing healthy aging activities, as well as the significance of a sense of community to their participation. The implications of these findings show that healthy aging was not experienced in isolation within a segregated community of older adults. It was woven through and reinforced by dynamic and overlapping social and community networks that straddled age and geographical contexts. Central to this process was the bonding characteristics of shared values and interests that are not omnipresent in all communities, but selectively emerge as a conduit between particular groups of individuals at a particular point in time and space. While this study suggests that the exercise intervention provided a central point of focus for this bonding to occur, it is unclear how such a process occurs in less contrived, more naturalistic settings. Further research is needed that considers how community networks are established and promoted in less formal leisure contexts among older adults.

Summary and Conclusion

This study extends past findings by analyzing community perceptions and experiences within a particular exercise context and showing how feelings of community transcend this leisure setting and affects people's lives. This study demonstrates that multiple understandings and experiences of community can manifest in leisure contexts. Community can be interpreted as both a feeling/experience and a location/context. It is not useful to separate these two meanings of community. In this way, a sense of community can be experienced on many levels, in various contexts and among various groups, thus linking the individual to broader society. In this particular study, the exercise context was a medium through which 'active' older people could feel a psychological sense of community within a 'healthy aging' culture. Therefore, this study gives strength to the idea that leisure can be effective in enriching people's lives and positively contributing to society.

APPENDIX: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Name	Age	Gender	Previous Involvement in Resistance Training	Other Current Activities	Living Arrangements
Sophie	65	Female	Tried resistance training, but received no supervision so stopped	Gardening, walking, volunteer work	Lives in own home with aging mother
Caroline	65	Female	Never been to a gym or tried resistance training	Gardening, U3A, walking dogs	Divorced, lives alone in own home
Betty	65	Female	Never been to a gym or tried resistance training	Golf, 'Lifeball', volunteer work, walking	Married to Keith, live together on a property/farm
Keith	68	Male	Never been to a gym or tried resistance training	Farming, walking	Married to Betty
Grant	67	Male	Never been to a gym or tried resistance training	Walking, cycling, restoring engines	Lives with wife on property
Joe	68	Male	Has an exercise bench with weights at home, but hasn't used it much	Field hockey, exercise bike, walking, various community groups	Lives with wife in own home
Barbara	69	Female	Never been to a gym or tried resistance training	Full-time work as a Nun	Lives at Convent
Donna	71	Female	Has utilized a fitness gym before, but never tried resistance training	Golf, U3A	Widowed, lives in own home
Jan	69	Female	Never tried resistance training	Walking, exercises at home, church group	Married to Jake, live together in own home
Jake	72	Male	Did resistance training when younger, but has not done it since	Walking, exercises at home, yard work, volunteer work	Married to Jan

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