

Transcending Emotional Community: A Qualitative Examination of Older Adults and Masters' Sports Participation

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This qualitative study examined meanings of community as they developed among older adults who participate in Master's sports. Four themes emerged through data analysis that described what a sense of community meant to study participants: a shared sporting interest, comrades in continued activity, relevant life purpose, and giving back. These themes each lend general support to the four elements that constitute McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community construct. The findings of this study counter the claims that leisure-related experiences of community are largely episodic, emotional and fleeting, and do little to provide sustained experiences of community. This paper concludes with recommendations for further research.

Keywords communitas, community, Master's sports, older adults, volunteering

Introduction

Social commentators have long argued that a range of social forces have led to a loss of opportunity to experience community in contemporary life (see Bellah et al., 1985; Lasch, 1979; Reisman, 1969; Slater, 1976). While it is evident that some communal experiences continue to develop through traditional contexts such as churches, neighborhoods, and schools, many of these traditional contexts are unraveling. Traditional sites for community are now being replaced by contexts such as leisure, where feelings of community are created through symbolic play (Gergen, 1991). These feelings are sought out as compensation for isolation and loneliness that is endemic (Bauman, 2001).

Sharpe (2005) has argued that community-enhancing experiences in leisure are indicative of "communitas" (Turner, 1974). Communitas has been described as an almost mystical condition that is characterized by a sense of equity, linkage, belonging, and group devotion to a transcendent goal (Arnould & Price, 1993). Several studies have examined how communitas has manifested itself in diverse leisure contexts, including whitewater rafting adventures (Sharpe, 2005), festivals, and events (Trammachi, 2000), organized tours (Neumann, 1993), and at summer camps (Lyons, 2003). A hallmark of communitas is that

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it typically emerges in contexts where individuals are able to step out of their everyday lives and into a world where connection to others develops spontaneously and temporarily (Turner, 1974). However, it has been posited that efforts to escape to moments of *communitas* in leisure is insufficient because fleeting and episodic nature of *communitas* renders the experience superficial (Bauman, 2001).

Warnings of the limitations of leisure as an alternative context for community are balanced by claims from a number of leisure researchers over the past few decades that suggest leisure can indeed be integral in providing community that is more than a respite and futile escape (Putnam, 2000). Kelly and Godbey (1992) argued that the most important aspect of leisure is its ability to promote social bonding through intense and ongoing relationships that leisure creates. Edginton et al. (2006) suggested that such relationships benefit and stabilize communities giving them common focus. Kraus (1990) argued that leisure plays an important functional role in enriching a community's quality of life. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the entire parks and recreation movement in countries such as the U.S. have long championed leisure-related services as being central in creating strong and stable communities (Glover & Stewart, 2006).

While these claims may have merit, Glover and Stewart (2006) argued there is a dearth of supporting empirical research because researchers, policy makers, and service providers have tended to treat community unproblematically as a construct that describes a context rather than an experience. These authors suggested that community as context does little to explain how community develops and is experienced within leisure and instead "reflects a corporate turn centred on users and aspects of their recreation . . . the implied value orientation of this dominant discourse is to advocate for management, assuming that if a policy is good for recreation management, then it must be good for the community" (Glover & Stewart, 2006, p. 5). Underlying this remark is the recognition that broad assumptions about what community means are problematic. The term community has been used in scholarly literature to describe a geographical place or space (Glynn, 1986), a social institution (Cronick, 2002), a political process (Dunham, 1986), and a psychological condition (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For the sake of clarity, it is this latter description of community that is at the heart of this study.

A psychological sense of community refers to individual perceptions and internalized processes associated with community behavior (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Examination of this dimension of community is common in community psychology literature but has been largely overlooked in leisure studies despite the fact that leisure contexts may create unique experiences of community (Lyons, 2003). When experiences of community are the focus of leisure research, they typically focus on the *communitas* of leisure where emotionally intense but typically episodic feelings of connectedness manifest within specific settings (Lyons, 2003; Sharpe, 2005). However, there is need to reach beyond examining how feelings of community are experienced as *communitas* and to consider how these experiences may carry other meanings more broadly and may have the potential to transcend life outside of particular leisure contexts in which community is experienced.

Older Adults, Community, and Sport

A lack of opportunity to experience community is particularly prevalent among individuals marginalized in society (Bellah et al., 1985). The shifting demographics of the past 50 years, which have led to an increasingly aging population in developed countries such as Australia, have been accompanied by a social trend that isolates many older people (Everingham, 2003). Kleiber (1999) remarked that some older people can be subject to a socially imposed form of disengagement that strips them of feelings of connectedness.

The reconfiguring of family life away from the traditional extended family model, where aging parents would have once lived with their adult children, has resulted in some older people finding themselves either living alone or in aged care communities where, ironically, experiences of community are few and far between (Borowski, Encel, & Ozanne, 1997).

However, not all older people experience disengagement from community ties. More importantly, any attempt to broadly cast a descriptive net over older people is fraught with problems. For a growing number of older people, leisure provides an alternative to a life of feeling isolated and lonely. Being a member of a leisure-based group or club can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment (see Biggs, 1993; Dionigi, 2002; Kleiber, 1999).

One such leisure context that has rapidly grown in popularity among older people over the past decade is sport participation (Dionigi, 2002). This is particularly evident in the proliferation of Masters' levels in sport clubs and the explosive growth of sporting events, such as Regional, State, National, and World Masters' Games, Veteran's Titles, and Senior Sports. In this paper, these sporting opportunities for older adults will be referred to collectively as Masters' sports. While Masters' sports can include athletes from as young as 30 with no upper age limit, the fastest growing cohort are people in their early 60s to their late 70s who are swelling the ranks of Masters' sports (Dionigi, 2004). Moreover, it is expected that the baby-boomer generation population bubble will expand the number of older adults who participate in Masters' sports over the next few decades (Dionigi, 2004).

The phenomenon of older adult involvement in competitive sport has become the focus of a growing body of research that primarily examines motivation for participation. A host of studies has identified an equally wide array of motives for older adults participating in sport, including the desire to actively resist the dominant negative stereotypes associated with aging (Flatten, 1991), the need to feel empowered to live a fulfilled and healthy life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000), and a desire to delay as long as possible the negative effects of old age (McIntyre et al., 1992). Ample research has been published over the past two decades that suggests that a desire to experience community is also a key motivator for older adults who participate in sports (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Biddle & Smith, 1991; Cuskelly & Boag, 1996). Yet this body of research that explores motivation has been criticized by Dionigi (2004), who has suggested "the phenomenon of older people competing in sport may be more complex than either resistance, feelings of personal empowerment, or an expression of the undesirability of deep old age. This participation may instead represent a simultaneous interaction and negotiation of all these dimensions" (p. 184).

Rather than teasing out specific motives, it is important to undertake research that captures this complexity. One useful way forward is to examine the meanings behind particular motives. Maerher and Braskamp (1986) suggest "... 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" (p. 47). These meanings are, to a large degree, a product of the particular context in which they manifest (Puddifoot, 1996). Roper, Molner, and Wisberg (2003) commented that "few studies have specifically explored the experience and meaning of sport involvement" (p. 371). Rather than submitting yet another reason for participation, this paper approaches older adults participating in competitive sport not to test whether community is a significant motivator for their participation but rather to understand how community is experienced and what it means to older athletes.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine what community means to older people as it manifests in and through the context of Masters' sports participation. As a foundation for exploring these meanings, this study draws upon the community psychology literature, particularly the psychological sense of community construct developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). This construct provides a means by which a deeper understanding of

community can be drawn and is used as a sensitizing concept (Ragin, 1994) to examine the meanings individuals assign to community.

Sense of Community

In the early 1970s, community psychology emerged as a field of psychology (McMillan, 1996). A significant catalyst that led to the development of this field was a seminal text written by Seymour Sarason (1974). This work was the first attempt to identify and define what Sarason labeled a “psychological sense of community” (1974, p. 3). Sarason’s work challenged traditional objective approaches to group interaction, arguing instead that a sense of community was essentially a subjective experience associated with a feeling of belonging. Although Sarason (1974) introduced the concept of a sense of community, he did not identify and isolate its components. A more empirical examination of a sense of community was later undertaken by McMillan and Chavis (1986) that culminated in the development of a stable sense of community construct. According to these investigators, a sense of community comprised four elements: membership, shared emotional connection, fulfillment of needs, and influence. The following discussion elaborates on each of these elements and raises key questions relevant to understanding the meanings of community experienced by older adults who participate in Masters’ sports.

Membership

Membership refers to “. . . a feeling that results from investing part of oneself to become a member and therefore feeling a right to belong” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). The attraction between members focuses upon a shared investment in a common interest that allows individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Moreover, McMillan and Chavis (1986) reasoned that this feeling of belonging produces an element of exclusiveness when feeling a sense of community. In the case of older adults who participate in Masters’ sports, it would be valuable to understand what being a member means within the diverse range of formal and informal groups that constitute Masters’ sports. Specifically this raises the questions: What constitutes the common interest that creates feelings of belonging?

Shared Emotional Connection

Shared emotional connection is the product of “shared history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). This element of a sense of community resembles what some investigators have described as member attachment. Member attachment involves connecting with others not only for a common purpose but because of perceived common backgrounds (Turner, Sachdev, & Hogg, 1983). Given the episodic nature of the Masters’ sports participation and the varied backgrounds of the participants, what are the shared experiences that underpin a collective history for these individuals? Is the spatial and temporal disjuncture of Masters’ sport an impediment to community?

Fulfillment of Needs

Fulfillment of needs refers to the process of reinforcement. Reinforcers are symbolic indicators associated with status, success, and competence that allow individuals to feel close to a group because that group offers [them] rewards (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). To understand what community means for older adults participating in Masters’ sport, it is important to

determine what constitutes status, success, and competence for participants and how this is then reinforced by others.

Influence

Influence refers to the feeling that individuals have some control over a group to which they belong. Likewise, influence is the recognition that the group also controls individual members. A sense of community is the product of a balanced distribution of control between the individual and the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Within the context of Masters' sports, how do participants influence the community of which they perceive they belong, and how does that community influence them?

McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed a discrete psychometric scale designed to measure each of the four elements described above. The resulting survey instrument has been used in and adapted to studies that have explored a sense of community as it manifests in a range of settings including city neighborhoods (Glynn, 1986), schools (Royal & Rossi, 1996), and work environments (Klein & D'Aunno, 1986). However, there is a growing belief among some researchers that the psychometric scale developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) has limitations. It has been argued that survey methods are unlikely to provide access to the meanings individuals assign to their experiences of community as it plays out in specific settings and that a more qualitative approach is suitable for such purposes as Lorion and Newbrough (1996) suggest:

We may need to shift our direction to move ourselves closer to our subject matter, i.e., real people in real settings dealing with real circumstances. That shift requires sufficient faith in our science to allow the subject matter and our understanding of it to determine, in part, the methods appropriate to its study and change (p. 314).

The inductivity embedded in qualitative research, particularly grounded theory, involves an iterative process that leads to new and more focused questions over time (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data for this present study were drawn from a larger study conducted by the second author. The original study focused broadly upon the meanings assigned by older adults to their experiences as athletes in Master's games. In this current study, the analysis and findings capture a later stage of iterative process. Previously the second author had conducted an analysis of the data and had identified feelings of connectedness, friendship, and belonging as carrying significant meaning for participants. The broader findings of this research have been published elsewhere (Dionigi, 2002). However, those published findings do not specifically elaborate upon the meanings of community that were expressed by the research participants. This present study approached the data using the psychological sense of community construct (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) as a sensitizing concept that allows the analysis to focus specifically upon community as it manifested within the this particular leisure phenomenon.

Research Approach

This study is embedded in an interpretive paradigm that recognizes the subjectivity of lived experience and posits that it is the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences that constitutes their reality (Prus, 1996). The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by phenomenology, which has been traditionally used as a "pure" description of lived experience (van Manen, 1990). However, interpretive phenomenologists argue that such a pure description is impossible because interpretive bias is inevitable. Instead, they recognize the value

in embracing interpretation as it provides access to what a phenomenon means to those who are part of it (Prus, 1996). The phenomenon of interest in this study is older adults participating in competitive sport.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws upon data collected at the 8th Australian Masters' Games (AMGs) 2001, in Newcastle and the Hunter, New South Wales, Australia. The AMGs are a ten-day major multi-sport event for amateur athletes, with age being the only qualifier for participation. Data were collected through field observations and informal interviews (Patton, 1990) with a purposive sample of 110 competitors (an even gender split) from the 8th AMGs. To gain access to this sample and to undertake field observations, the second author participated as a volunteer during the Games and adopted a "peripheral membership role" (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85) in which she observed and interacted with the participants while circulating as a volunteer. This enabled her to get close enough to the participants under study to establish an "insider's identity" without undertaking the activities constituting the core of their group participation (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85). Involvement as a volunteer afforded the researcher an "invaluable vantage points for appreciating certain aspects of [the older adults'] particular life-worlds" (Prus, 1996, p. 19). This also enabled the researcher access to large number of participants who were invited to participate in informal interviews.

The overall sample ($n = 110$) was predominately white, middle class and appeared to be in good health. They were also quite diverse in age, geographical location, and sport interests. The interviewees ranged in age from 55 to 94, with 23.6 % ($n = 26$) of the sample 55–59 years, 50 % ($n = 55$) 60–69 years, 18.2% ($n = 20$) 70–79 years, 0.7 % ($n = 8$) 80–89 years, and one 94-year-old man from the 90–95 cohort. The majority of participants were from various states and territories across Australia, while seven participants were from New Zealand. Each participant competes in one or more of the following individual or team sports on, at least, a weekly basis: long distance running and walking, triathlon, cycling, track and field athletics, archery, canoeing, swimming, gymnastics, indoor rowing, netball, tennis, baseball, ice hockey, squash, soccer, badminton, field hockey, softball, cricket (indoor and outdoor), basketball, and touch football.

Interviews with participants were held at various times and locations over the duration of the Games. Interviews lasted 5–30 minutes and involved open-ended conversations about: their demographic profile (age, gender, and ethnicity), what it meant to be competing in sport at this point in their lives, reasons and motivations for their participation, outcomes of their experiences in competitive sport, and a brief history of their involvement in sport. Participants for these interviews were approached during the games and were asked if they could spare some time to be interviewed. If the individuals agreed, the researcher invited them to a suitable space nearby (typically a café, or a suitable place to sit down that was quiet) and the interview was conducted. This meant that only limited information regarding their backgrounds and experience was gathered. This limitation is addressed in the conclusion of this paper. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes pertinent to the interviews were also recorded.

Further data were gathered through participant observation over the ten days (approximately four hours per day) of the Games and were recorded in a journal (see Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Observations were made in informal nonsport participation-related contexts such as cafes and in the grandstands. However, "on-field" observations were also made including pre- and post-event preparations and celebrations. Observations focused upon general behaviors of the athletes and their interactions with others. This included observing the nature of interactions between participants (e.g., interaction between athletes

from different sports, the degree to which local club members interacted with members from other clubs, etc.). The journal was used to note the nature and intensity of interactions, researchers own influence upon observations made, and potential biases that the researcher may have brought to the field. The researcher (i.e., second author) used various techniques during observation and interviews to verify the accuracy of the findings: covert observation (where the organizers of the 8th AMG's were aware that research was being conducted, but the competitors themselves were unaware they were being observed them); participant observation (where participants were asked questions about their observed behaviors); active listening during interviews; paraphrasing participants' words to check for understanding; and probing for elaboration or clarification when necessary. This use of methodological triangulation (interviews, observation, and researcher's journal) strengthened the study's design and addresses the potential problems of construct validity (Yin, 1994).

Content analysis was used to initially identify, code and categorise the primary patterns that initially emerged from the data (Patton, 1990). After coding, all the data were grouped into themes in part informed by the literature, in particular, the sense of community elements described by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Themes are expressions that attempt to capture the essence of a whole range of similar or related problems and categories that emerged through analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Constant comparative techniques (Strauss, 1987) were used to further inductively analyze the data collected across each method (i.e., interviews, field notes, and observations) for maximum credibility. Through combining constant comparative analysis with thematic analysis (Patton, 1990; Van Manen, 1990), recurring words, phrases, meaning, and participants' ways of thinking were identified across all data, regardless of the collection technique. This repetition in the data established inductive patterns and coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Meanings of Community

The four themes presented here emerged through the analysis of the data that best describe what a sense of community meant to the participants in this study and were guided by the sensitizing concept of a psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The themes were a shared sporting interest, comrades in continued activity, relevant life purpose, and giving back. Each of these themes is presented below.

A Shared Sporting Interest

This theme was posited by McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of "membership," which describes how feelings of community derive from a shared common interest. For the participants in this study, feelings of belonging and membership meant having a common interest in a particular sport. Lucy, age 64, who competes in swimming along with her husband, Jack, 66, summarized: "You're with people who have the same interest, so it's good." For Brett, a 55-year-old tennis player, competing was all about "mixing with people and talking about a sport we like."

For many participants, the feelings of belonging were formalized by becoming team members of local Masters' sporting clubs. Competitors wearing the same club uniforms were observed gathered in informal groups at various venues and were often seen mingling together. Moreover, the group bonding was evident among those who shared a particular sporting interest from within a particular "team." Fred, a 68-year-old basketball player from Victoria, explained, "... basketball... has a social aspect... coming away with our large

team of men . . . there's an awful lot of bonding going on . . . It's highly competitive, highly friendly, very social."

Being a member of a local club helped older adults maintain friendships and social contacts throughout the year, not just at major competitions. Sally, 59-year-old cyclist, also emphasized the camaraderie associated with being a member of a particular club:

Well our club . . . it's a Veterans Club, so a Sunday morning . . . is just like a social gathering, you know. We all have coffee afterwards or we have drinks afterwards . . . at 10:30 in the morning the guys will have beer and we'll all have a chat, and all that sort of thing . . . I think it is something you do need when you are retired.

Christine, a 60-year-old hockey player from Sydney, emphasized how the diversity among participants was reconciled through a common interest in particular sport:

. . . they're from all walks of life, they're different ages, different interests, different stages in their life . . . you get out and play hockey with all these different people and go away and have a good time with people who have a similar interest, which is hockey.

Comrades in Continued Activity

For participants in this study, shared emotional connection (see McMillan & Chavis, 1986) was forged around shared desires to remain competitive, healthy, and active. Throughout this study, and as the following responses suggest, participants were focused on the importance of keeping fit healthy and active: "I want to remain fit and I would like to run a half-marathon under 100 minutes" (Trevor, a 67-year-old runner). According to Joan, an 81-year-old tennis player, "It's a way of life when you get to 81 like me . . . to wear out not rust out [laughs] . . . you just have to keep going and keep on keeping on." The focus on continuing to be healthy and active provided the symbolic foundation for a sense of emotional connectedness to a unique community of active and healthy older people. As the following remarks indicate, these older adults felt they were the antithesis of the stereotypical older person whose lives are dominated by ". . . disease, disability, and deterioration . . ." (Thompson, Itzin, & Abendstern 1990, p. 117).

"When you get to geriatric stage like us, instead of sitting around wondering what day it is, we like to keep active"(Bill, a 70-year-old touch footballer); "When you get to our age, it's a wonderful thing [competing in sport], . . . too many people our age sit in a chair and watch T.V., don't they?" (Sally, a 59-year-old cyclist); "Once you get to our age most slow down, but we continue" (Elaine, a 64-year-old netballer).

A sense of connectedness dominated a range of comments that emphasized the "friendships" and "camaraderie" participants felt with other active older adults. Establishing friendships with other like-minded older people was valuable and highly cherished as it was perceived to be rare. Tim, 60, a touch player from Sydney, exemplifies this: "I don't sort of mix with every type of people, it might sound a little strange, but you know they're [people you play sport with and against] a great bunch of people that you normally wouldn't come across."

The family metaphor was commonly used to describe the feelings of bonding and connectedness to this unique community of active older adults that extended around the globe. The following comment from Barbara, an 82-year-old runner and swimmer from New Zealand, exemplifies this: ". . . if you see somebody else that's competing. . . anywhere in the world, they are like your brother and sister, so it's good."

Many participants explained they felt very close to others who they saw only at Annual events such as the National Masters' Games. As George, a 62-year-old basketball player, explained: "I just enjoy the sport and I enjoy playing with all the guys I used to play with back in the old days." Likewise Donna, a 58-year-old hockey player, remarked:

the friendships you make over the years that you just pick up... every time you go to a tournament. It's just something that you can't replace with anything else. It doesn't matter whether it's your work mates or anything else, it's not quite the same as the people that you meet here . . .

Betty a 73-year-old triathlete, commented that the distance was not a deterrent for feeling connected: "Like I came up here on my own, but of course I've met a whole lot of runners and swimmers and cyclists that I've met before, you see, at other games, and it's like a big reunion really."

These comments illustrate how the episodic nature of interactions did not detract from the feelings of connectedness participants felt. Indeed it seemed that the sense of community transcended the episodic and was easily reignited. For example, Tod, a 66-year-old badminton player from New Zealand, explained that he travels so far to compete because of a shared history with others. "I've made so many friendships and this is one of the reasons I come back each year or every two years and you meet the people again and you renew your friendships and you get together and have a bit of a good time."

The ability to keep community alive during temporal absences was further enhanced by the commitment participants felt toward their involvement in sport outside of the Master's games events. This commitment forged a central life interest for many participants.

Relevant Life Purpose

For participants in this study, feeling a sense of community meant being identified as a sports person whose very participation in sport was seen as an achievement and, consistent with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of fulfillment of needs, reinforced a feeling of relevance and life purpose. As Gary, the oldest touch football player at the 8th AMGs, exclaimed: "I'm 65 and I'm still running around here with fellows 15 years younger than me. I'm proud of it!" Likewise, Alice, a 73-year-old runner, said, "It is just satisfying to know you can run a half marathon or swim 1,500 meters, which I do, and that makes you feel as though you are actually still here." A sense of purpose was further reinforced by the status and recognition that these participants received from others. As Sue, the 75-year-old runner and swimmer, commented: "Everyone says, 'Oh you're an inspiration' . . .". Matt, a 64-year-old badminton player, elaborated:

. . . the wife's over 65 and I'm just under and you know, she's a bit of an icon in the area . . . they all admire her and they come up to her and say 'Man, if we can get around like you can at your age, it would be marvelous . . . you're a'—now the word they used was, ah, 'an inspiration to us' and so ah we enjoy it.

Participants also described a feeling of being relevant to others not only in terms of being an inspiration but also in terms of being an integral part of a group in which they were needed. Mary, a 62-year-old basketball player, elaborated:

. . . feeling that you are important or that you are needed, not necessarily important, but that you are needed by someone or another, be it only a basketball team, even

if only making up the numbers, whatever the situation is, it's fulfilling a role in my life that's ah, important to me.

This theme support suggestions that feelings of community develop and are strengthened when we can express unique aspects of ourselves and where we are accepted and valued because of those aspects (McMillan, 1996). Kleiber (1999) remarked that developing skills and mastery through the challenge of sports participation can play an important part in identity development and maintenance for older adults. Some authors (Biggs, 1993; Grant & Stothart, 1999) have argued that participation in meaningful leisure pursuits in later life can contribute to one's identity and individuality, assist one in adjusting to retirement, and improve one's physical and psychological health. The Masters' sport setting enabled these individuals to feel accepted and cherished by others who valued them for what they did and by extension for who they were. This is consistent with work by Prentice, Miller and Lightdale (1994) who found that attachment within groups takes place around identity markers that are collectively valued by group members.

Giving Back

The theme "Giving Back" describes what influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) meant to participants. The ability to have influence over a particular sport was important for many participants. Several individuals spoke of their experiences as coaches or volunteers in their respective sport. Julie, a 59-year-old hockey player, explained: "A lot of the older women get involved in coaching as well and all the association and administration and that side of stuff as well. So, it's something they can do with their families and it's a social outlet as well." This was also noted in observations made in the field as part of this study where participants were frequently observed moving from their involvement as participant to their volunteer role as referee, coach or administrator.

Participants often viewed coaching and volunteering as "giving something back" and "passing on knowledge" to youth. "Because it [the sport of touch] has given me so much, I just try and put something back into it as much as I can," explained John, a 60-year-old touch player. James, a 61-year-old basketball player, said, "I coach my grandchildren and because I am physically fit, I can show them how to do it at the same time." Ida, a 67-year-old hockey cyclist and swimmer, described how in her sporting club they become coaches to train each other: "I'm having lots of fun and again it's a F.I.T [Females In Training] group swimming, we give each other free coaching, everyone's trained and that's why I'm training to be a cyclist so I can coach."

This final theme showed that these older adults felt they had some influence and control in the sport they were playing by being able to "give back." McIntyre et al. (1992) also found in their study on Masters' athletes that many athletes became involved because of their aspiration to share what they have learned.

Beyond Emotional Community

The findings of this study demonstrate that McMillan and Chavis's (1986) work on sense of community can be used to examine feelings of community as they manifest in the context of Masters' sport participation. However, this study extends this work by demonstrating how the relatively episodic experiences of community associated with Master's sports transcended the lives of the individuals in this study and provided meaning that was far from episodic.

The shared sporting interest described in the first theme supports research by Poole (2001), who argued that "In a postmodern world in which social ties are loosened and the

old community structures are breaking down, belonging to a group with similar interests provides both a sense of community and social support” (p. 311). However, common interests alone have been criticized as the foundation for emotional communities (Maffessoli, 1996), where “membership involves no long-term obligations and can easily be revoked” (Choi, 2002, p. 8). This may leave participants with strong feelings of community while in a particular leisure setting but difficult to emulate in other parts of life (Lyons, 2003). However, this was not apparent among participants in this study who felt a close connection to other active older adults despite temporal and spatial distances.

Participants in this study were consciously aware of the normative expectations that associate older people with being sedentary rather than active (McPherson, 1994). Participants felt a sense of unity with other athletes who rejected these norms and considered themselves unique. The perceived shared uniqueness provided the symbolic glue that McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued is central to feelings of emotional connectedness. This connectedness transcended the sense of belonging felt between individuals within a particular team or club as well as the episodic nature of Masters’ sport participation.

Social critics have suggested that emotional community lacks mutual obligation or instrumental “contract” of traditional community (Shields, 1992). However, contract community was clearly evident in the latter two themes described in the findings of this current study where participants’ experiences of community were closely connected to enduring involvement and commitment. These themes were also consistent with work by Tedrick (2004), who used serious leisure (see Stebbins, 1992) as a conceptual frame for understanding the enduring involvement of older athletes.

Tedrick’s (2004) application of serious leisure focused on older athletes as amateurs and found that they were highly committed devotees. As a result, they felt part of a sub-culture connected to their sport enabling them to identify strongly with it. However, Tedrick’s work does not capture the importance of giving back described by participants in this study. Feelings of community meant more than being devoted to and committed to a sport, although the previous themes acknowledge this was relevant to participants in this study. Community among participants was equally associated with being a committed volunteer. Stebbins (1982) has previously highlighted the difference between volunteering versus other forms of serious leisure:

Amateurs (and hobbyists) struggle through the difficult requirements of their leisure because they are expected to be devotees and because hard work engenders feelings of accomplishment. When volunteers labor, they do so with the conviction that they are needed and that to weaken in the face of adversity is to let down others.” (p. 263).

In this study, voluntary involvement provided participants with a way to give back and in so doing provided a sense of contractual obligation that was mutually reinforcing. This was evident in several observations noted where one’s voluntary capacity and involvement carried as much significance among participants as their actual sport participation and athletic achievements.

Conclusion

During early investigations into a psychological sense of community, there was some recognition that contextual factors were likely to influence and shape this experience. Rojek (1995) suggested that community in leisure contexts may actually be impossible to achieve in the de-differentiated contemporary world where the very leisure contexts in which we seek

“authentic” experiences such as community are co-opted by the processes of late capitalism. This results in leisure-related experiences providing little more than contrived episodes that offer a nostalgic glimpse of community-past to be consumed and, according to Giddens (1990), brings into stark relief the anomie and loneliness from which one had hoped to escape. The findings of this study suggest that this critique of leisure communities overlooks the way meanings associated with community may manifest in particular settings where emotional community is interwoven with enduring involvement.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study suggest that leisure can provide a context for ongoing feelings of community that link moments of *communitas* to broader life purposes. However, these findings were based on field observations and relatively short informal interviews. Further in-depth interviews that explicitly asked questions regarding feelings of community of these older athletes would provide further depth to these findings. Moreover, this study did not explicitly examine feelings of community away from the Master’s sport context specifically. Further research that examines perceptions of the older athletes in their homes and in other contexts would provide greater insights about the transcendent nature of leisure-derived community in light of other specific life circumstances that may render Master’s sport participation more significant for some individuals than others.

This study captures a broad age range, and while the sample was predominantly between 55 and 70 years old, the inclusion of a number of older athletes in their 80s and 90s calls into question whether this group of participants can be considered one cohort. Indeed, significant social changes over the past 50 years may have a profound impact upon what community means to individuals who are from different generations and who are “packaged” together in this study under the rubric of “older age.” This study did not tease out other differences between participants such as previous experience in sport or participation in other life interests. This finer grained and nuanced level of analysis would be valuable and would contribute to further understanding the manifestation of experiences of community among older athletes.

This study focused upon the experiences of community among Masters’ sports participants but did not consider the range of external influences that may act to shape these experiences. Sharpe (2005) suggested that the conscious manipulation of experiences by leisure service providers creates experiences of community that are lacking in other facets of society. Sharpe also argued that leisure itself is socially constructed and therefore creates a context where feelings of community are only likely if individuals in positions of power promote and develop a particular leisure context as being community conducive. Feelings of community, therefore, are likely to be affected by the programmatic and administrative structure that shapes the organization of a particular leisure activity. The clarity of goals and objectives associated with a particular leisure program is likely to affect the degree to which individuals can make a connection between their own personal needs and the collective purpose of the activity. Further research that explores the way feelings of community can be shaped and influenced by organizational decisions is warranted.

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