

HORTON, SEAN

University of Windsor

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Promoting Healthy Aging

Project summary

An area of increasing importance and urgency in Canadian society is the health of our senior citizens. Current research on seniors provides important evidence linking regular exercise to general health, yet according to the Canadian Community Health Survey, only a small minority of senior men and women have sufficient physical activity to maintain optimal health benefits. The problem appears to be one of action rather than one of knowledge. While 98% of people over the age of 50 are aware that physical activity is important to maintaining their health, only a minority of senior women and men get sufficient physical activity to maintain optimal health benefits. One potential barrier to seniors' participation in sport and physical activity is prevailing cultural attitudes and stereotypes, which in North America tend to be predominantly negative towards seniors. My interest in this study was in exploring attitudes towards both aging and physical activity that seniors hold in the hope of further elucidating this gap between knowledge and action. In addition, I examined seniors' notions of 'successful aging' and their role models of the aging process. While work on role models for young people is well established, very little research has examined the individuals that seniors look to as role models of their own aging.

Research methods

Forty-five adults 60 years of age and older were recruited for in-depth qualitative interviews. All of the interviews took place in a private room with one interviewer and lasted from 1-2 hours. All of the interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

An interview guide provided the basic themes to be investigated, although any new topics that emerged during the discussion were explored. While the exact sequence and wording of questions varied, questions were aimed at:

1. identifying stereotypes of aging that seniors themselves hold,
2. seniors' perceptions of ageism in society, and
3. seniors' conceptions of what it means to age successfully.

In addition, questions probed participants' exercise patterns and their attitudes towards physical activity. Related to this, participants were shown pictures of elite male and female athletes, all of whom were still active, training intensely, and over 75 years of age. Participants were told of their accomplishments and asked their opinions of both their athletic exploits and their exercise regime. Our objective was to gain further understanding and more in-depth knowledge of how participants reacted to an exercise 'role model'.

Research results

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

Our results provide support for these assertions, as they suggest that seniors often have someone in their lives who represents what it means to age successfully. Generally, this is an individual older than themselves, active, vigorous, and illustrative of the high quality of life that is possible into a very late age. Importantly, these individuals provide a direct contrast to the most negative stereotypes of aging. These individuals often served to motivate our participants to engage in various forms of exercise and physical activity. Importantly, notions of successful aging varied considerably amongst the participants. These differences related to physical health and well-being, but also social, psychological, and spiritual success, the definitions of which did not always conform to academic or biomedical descriptions of aging successfully.

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

Key stakeholders and benefits

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

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

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

Policy implications

Policy implications of this work in the health and aging field include: (a) guiding the design of information for seniors about the various ways later life can be experienced and perceived; (b) informing health promotion practices for older people, and; (c) expanding the interpretation of the ‘successful aging’ concept to include a more expansive perspective.

Senior is obviously not a monolithic term. Participants who were asked to describe a 'typical senior' had widely varying descriptions, ranging from very positive to somewhat negative. Health promotion messages and/or interventions need to account for the complexity with which older people view successful aging and healthy living. Seniors will respond to promotional initiatives in multi-faceted ways. For example, while a number of seniors will find images of elite older athletes inspirational, others will find such images intimidating, which may turn them off exercise. Often seniors' reactions will be influenced by their own level of physical activity, and what they deem to be possible in later life.

This undoubtedly makes health interventions more challenging, as they need to account for significant diversity within the population. However, the more those messages are tailored to meet the needs of this diverse group, the more success such interventions are likely to have.

Next steps

One of the intriguing themes to emerge from the research was the variety of responses seniors provided to the notions of 'typical senior', 'successful aging' as well as their varied reactions to elite older athletes. My next phase is to recruit 3 distinct groups of seniors who vary in their levels of physical activity involvement (1-master's athletes, 2-active seniors, and 3-sedentary seniors) and to examine their role models of aging. Specifically, it will be important to investigate 3 areas

- the relevance of role models and the extent to which they vary with age and activity level.
- whether masters athletes can serve as viable role models to decrease barriers to participation in sport and physical activity.
- to what extent participants use predominantly prevention versus promotion orientations (i.e., upward or downward social comparisons) and how that may differ depending on age and activity level.

This last point is particularly relevant for those working in policy and health promotion, as understanding seniors' motivations for exercise is paramount to designing effective interventions. Preventing negative outcomes (i.e., a downward social comparison) may be equally as important/effective as pursuing positive outcomes (an upward social comparison).