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Winter of Our Contentment: Examining Risk, Pleasure, and Emplacement in Later-Life Physical Activity

In the West, many in the media and the health sector emphasize physical activity as important for the old, so that they can circumvent the impacts of aging and the associated costs. At the same time, neoliberal health discourse advises older people to avoid activities that may cause injuries, such as slips and falls, creating contradictions for older people who participate in sports on ice. In light of these mixed messages, this paper explores how older men understand their bodies through their participation in the seemingly risky sport of ice hockey. I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with older Canadian men who played hockey, identifying common themes related to aging, embodiment, risk and pleasure. Participants were aware that common-sense discourse produced hockey as risky for the old, but often downplayed this risk, privileging pleasure. Discourses associated with pleasure acted as an important way for older men to examine their bodies and contemplate the significance of hockey in their lives. Through the comradery players developed with each other, their interactions with the material objects of hockey, and their emplacement on hockey rinks and arenas, they found ways to celebrate their bodies as both aging and capable of experiencing pleasure — implicitly challenging neoliberal discourses of old age in the process.