

Winter of Our Contentment: Examining Risk, Pleasure, and Emplacement

In Later-Life Physical Activity

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INTRODUCTION

Senior men's ice hockey sits at the intersection of important contradictions in common-sense ideas of successful aging. Although the press, public, and state health officials prescribe near-constant physical activity as a marker of appropriate aging, these same actors and institutions also express concerns about the potential risk of injuries caused by falls in later life.

While Canadian public agencies describe how seniors can avoid winter slips and falls and their related healthcare costs (e.g., Public Health Agency of Canada; Veterans Affairs Canada), the press suggest an ever-increasing number of outdoor winter activities for seniors to pursue, including Nordic skiing, skating, hockey, and curling (Hutchinson, 2013; "New Oldtimers Stick Curling," 2016). In this regard, as neoliberal health discourse advises older people to avoid activities that will cause injuries, it simultaneously pressures them to exercise and stay active.

PURPOSE

This work examines how older men understand and navigate the contradictions between ice hockey as both a risky and pleasurable exercise. I ask how their participation on the hockey rink allows them to negotiate their own social positions in light of the aforementioned social pressures, pushing them to mitigate risk and invest in the present (Shimoni, 2018). I show that these later-life hockey-playing men focus on the pleasures associated with hockey, physical activity and relationships, eschewing discourses that position them and their activities as risky.

METHODS & PARTICIPANTS

I conducted 18 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with men who identified themselves as hockey players. The players ranged in age from 54 to 74, with a mean age of approximately 65 years. All participants were white and most were middle-class, with all but two having completed post-secondary education. Fifteen of the eighteen participants were anglophone, while three were francophone — two Acadians and one Québécois. All interview participants lived in Eastern Canada and played hockey in a small city in the region, noted for its aging population.



NAVIGATING RISK

The players, their families, and even some of their doctors were well aware of common-sense discourse asserting that playing hockey poses a particular health risk for those in later life. In fact, all players except one spontaneously raised the issue of risk during their interviews.

Most players acknowledged the abundance of popular discourse that framed hockey as a potentially dangerous activity for those in later life. However, they downplayed the risk to them personally. They also conceded that they often took extra care in order to continue playing, including being attentive to their bodies, receiving regular medical care, understanding their age, watching their weight, and "staying active."

Although the players understood common-sense discourse that conceptualized their behaviour as risky, risk, pain, serious injury, and even death were offset by the profound pleasure they found in the act of playing hockey, with two players even evoking on-ice death fantasies

"I sort of have this fantasy of you know, tearing down the ice and scoring a goal, losing my footing, and crashing into the boards, and banging my head and just gone like that. That's sort of a fantasy death for me, is to just score a goal and then die."

EXPERIENCING PLEASURE

Most participants did not conceptualize hockey as risky, but instead reimagined it as an activity associated with pleasure, youthful vitality, and later-life health. All players played hockey because the sport and its spaces brought them enjoyment and pleasure. Remarkably, participants explained that hockey played in later life, unmoored from the intense competition associated youthful forms of the sport, had an increased capacity to generate these forms of pleasure.

"Everybody's hurting, but for that one hour, you're 12 again."

Despite public, medical professional, and family concerns, all participants actively pursued hockey in later life, and framed this decision as one that evoked pleasure and produced health. However, they avoided neoliberal understandings that connected health to individual responsibility for the self. They instead framed hockey as "fun," "enjoyment," "joy," and "passion." Participants attributed feelings of pleasure to their good health and often ignored other benefits of physical activity, focusing instead on the comradery of their hockey league, its lack of competition, and the physical sensations associated with being on the ice.

CONCLUSIONS

1. It was not neoliberal pressures to stay fit and active in later life that kept men involved in hockey; rather, it was the pleasure they found there.
2. Playing hockey allowed the participants to resist narratives of aging and decline and instead understand later-life physical activity as enjoyable.
3. We should view those in later life as more than "risky subject[s]" and "human capital" (Shimoni, 2018). The lives of the old are complex, filled with desires, needs and wants. Viewing the old as fully human is especially important given the COVID-19 pandemic, where some have called to "cull" the old and "restart the economy."

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This work draws on research supported by funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and the Sport Participation Research Initiative. It would not have been possible without the research assistance of Stephanie Dotto and Madison Bird.

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