

Foucault Retires to the Gym: Understanding Embodied Aging in the Third Age

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RÉSUMÉ

Des pressions sociales récentes ont amené une nouvelle conception du « troisième âge », qui est maintenant vu comme une période d'activité constante, et non de repos ou de relaxation. Cet article explore les pressions exercées sur les individus, qui sont poussés vers le vieillissement « réussi » à travers la pratique d'activités physiques, malgré leur avancée en âge. Il examine, par l'intermédiaire d'entretiens semi-directifs avec 15 personnes à la retraite ou en préretraite fréquentant les gyms (8 femmes, 7 hommes), comment cet appel à une activité accrue influence la perception que des adultes d'âge moyen et avancé ont d'eux-mêmes et des autres. En prenant appui sur la nature productive du pouvoir, tel que conçu par Foucault, cet article fait valoir que les individus qui se perçoivent comme des adeptes du vieillissement actif et réussi se considèrent en opposition à leurs pairs inactifs. Dans un cadre néolibéral, ces participants se définissent comme des citoyens moralement responsables qui, par leur engagement dans des activités de mise en forme physique, sont autorisés à juger et à discipliner les corps de ces « autres » qui ne peuvent pratiquer ou qui ne pratiqueront pas une activité physique régulière.

ABSTRACT

In light of recent social pressures leading to a reimagining of the “Third Age” as a time of constant activity rather than repose and relaxation, this article explores the pressure on individuals to age “successfully” by engaging in physical activity in later life. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 retired or semi-retired gym-goers (eight women and seven men), the article examines how this call to increased activity impacts the ways active mid-life and older adults understand themselves and others. Drawing on Foucault's understandings of the productive nature of power, we argue that those who perceive themselves as successfully heeding the call to active aging position themselves in contrast to inactive peers. Within a neoliberal framework, these participants self-identify as morally responsible citizens who, as a result of engagement in fitness activities, are authorized to survey and discipline the bodies of those “others” who will not or cannot engage in regular exercise.

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The headline of a recent article in one of Canada's national newspapers, “physical activity pays off in golden years” (Sharratt, 2015), summarizes what has now become doxa in affluent Western nations with aging populations. Indeed, for some of the older people the reporter interviews, exercise regimes are the equivalent of a job in retirement. Although the article recounts the now-familiar rewards that exercise might hold for aging individuals – from fall prevention to staving off

dementia – an equally important message is the cost of *not* being physically active. “Inactivity”, claims one researcher interviewed, “is like smoking – it creates lack of function and lack of function becomes a barrier to quality of life” (Sharratt, 2015, p. B1).

Against this backdrop, we examine the pressure on individuals to enact a dedication to physical activity in later life as they aspire to age “successfully”, specifically

in light of recent cultural shifts that led to a reimagining of late mid-life and beyond as a time of constant activity, as opposed to a time of repose and relaxation (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013; Katz, 2005; Pike, 2015; Tulle, 2015). Through semi-structured interviews with active “Third Agers”¹ (defined in the next section), we explore the effects of these calls to increased activity. Drawing on Foucault’s understandings of the productive nature of power (Foucault, 1990a), we argue that those who successfully heed that call position themselves as morally responsible “good citizens” in contrast to those who do not exercise, and thus become part of a disciplinary regime focused on the bodies of others.

We begin by contextualizing the call to “active aging” as the “right” way to age and explore its connection to certain forms of exercise and physical activity (Higgs, Leontowitsch, Stevenson & Jones, 2009; Gilleard & Higgs, 2011b; Katz, 2005; Tulle & Phoenix, 2015). We then suggest that Foucault’s (1995) work on disciplinary regimes of power can explain the experiences of those in later life. We use this theoretical frame to explore what our participants say about physical activity, aging, their bodies, and the bodies of others. As the exercise and fitness regimes of Third Agers in Canada and elsewhere garner increased attention from the media and the health care industry, we argue that they are an example of what Foucault termed “small scale models of power” (p. 138) or power that operates through diverse social relations present in the everyday lives of people.

The Third Age and the Call to Active Living

British historian Peter Laslett coined the term “Third Age” to capture the emergence of a cohort of relatively healthy and financially secure older people in wealthy Western nations, who were entering “the age of personal achievement and fulfillment” (Laslett, 1989, p. 135). Reflecting both economic and demographic shifts, Laslett pointed out that the emphasis on the Third Age – or in Neugarten’s (1974) terms, the “young old” – as a period mainly characterized by independence and healthy lifestyles intensifies the spectre of the “Fourth Age”, or “old old age” as a period of decline, disease, and finality. Subsequently, sociologists of aging have taken up the Third Age less as a chronological stage than as a “cultural field” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011b) marked by activity and consumption (Higgs et al., 2009). We can understand much of this activity as boundary work, used to defer decline into the Fourth Age. As Laslett (1989) said of the Fourth Age: “its onset, and hence its duration, should be put off for as long as possible by appropriate behaviour during the Third Age” (p. 154). Higgs and Jones (2009) introduced the concept of the “arc of acquiescence” (pp. 85–87) to reference the social context in which those in later life experience “decline associated with a

gradual withdrawal from successful body maintenance and the greater acceptance of bodily limits” (p. 86). Like Laslett (1989), they argued that there is an imperative to elongate the arc through various activities. Just what those activities or behaviours should be, and how to encourage them, is the focus of much interest in a neoliberal age.

The literature associated with neoliberalism and its mobilization in the West is instrumental in understanding the relationships between state-supported notions of appropriate aging and their relationships to the various health and fitness practices of individuals. Although the term neoliberalism is amorphous and often ill-defined (Thorsen, 2010; Gilbert, 2013), for our purposes here we draw on the ways Foucault has addressed the term (Foucault, 2008; Dilts, 2011). Foucault (2008) argued that neoliberalism, as a break with traditional liberalism, creates social pressures for all (moral) human activity to be directed towards rational economic ends, or the production of “human capital”. Foucault (2008) noted that from the perspective of health, this means that individuals are responsible to stay healthy and keep good hygiene in order “to improve human capital” (p. 230). As state funding and responsibility shrink under neoliberal regimes, the association of aging well with “active aging” chimes with neoliberal individualization of care as it takes some of the responsibility for Third Agers’ health off the state and places it in the hands of the individuals themselves. In this vein, Katz (2005) argued that appropriate aging is tied to being busy, with constant activity acting as a moral imperative. Earlier work by Ekerdt (1986) supports this claim. Focusing on individuals in retirement, he stated that a “busy ethic has moral force because it participates in two great strong value complexes ... the work ethic [and] the profound importance placed on good health” (p. 242).

Katz and Laliberte-Rudman (2005) expanded this analysis to the study of later life, examining the consequences of failing to live up to neoliberal notions of appropriate aging:

The “new aging” is built on the ethics and responsibility of self-care, creating a contradictory culture of aging in the process. While middle-aged and older people are encouraged to develop active and healthy lifestyles to protect them against dependency, where they fail to do so they fall prey to being socially stigmatized as vulnerable and dependency-prone. (p. 140)

One of the ways that aging individuals may respond to this pressure, and demonstrate responsibility for their health and well-being, is through committing to physical fitness and exercise, specifically through their participation in various structured and unstructured sport and exercise activities.

Unsurprisingly, both popular and health promotion literature extol the virtues of exercise in later life. In the past few years in Canada alone, we have seen the celebration of a centenarian marathon runner (Ewing, 2011), a 95-year-old moose hunter (Rankin, 2012), and a nonagenarian track star, Olga Kotelko (Grierson, 2014). Mass-market books provide inspiration for the aspiring senior athlete (see Bergquist, 2009; Friel, 2014; Webb, 2014). The popular press promotes the benefits of a range of activities for older adults, including weightlifting (Beaudin, 2014), ballet workouts (Zoomer, 2014), and Zumba fitness (Gooden, 2013). One journalist even celebrates the edgy (and potentially risky) parkour² as a viable activity for the “septuagenarian set” (Cheng, 2014, p. L5). The World Health Organization (2010) lauds exercise as an important tool in successful aging. A Health Canada (n.d.) promotional brochure, complete with testimonials, warns that “(p)hysical inactivity makes your body age faster” (p. 2). A tip sheet suggests that adults over the age of 65 years participate in 2.5 hours a week of “moderate to vigorous” activity (Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d.). The Public Health Agency of Canada (2014) also encourages regular exercise as a way to decrease falls among seniors.

Tulle (2008) noted that although physical activity has been trumpeted as a “key tool in the fight against ageing” (p. 340), the evidence to support this claim is flawed, frequently drawing on small and unrepresentative samples. As various social actors and institutions circulate a common sense discourse linking exercise to successful aging, aging bodies are produced “as malleable, open to intervention” (Tulle, 2008, p. 342). More recently, Tulle (2015) has argued that the “regulatory potential of physical activity ... appears to have been strengthened” as a new “vital politics” of aging has emerged centred on the risks of sedentary behaviour (p. 9). As inactivity becomes framed as irresponsible (“sitting is the new smoking” [Hutchinson, 2014]), the ethical imperative for aging bodies to move becomes stronger. Yet those championing exercise as a prescription against aging pay little attention to social factors that limit an individual’s capacity for exercise, particularly in mid- and later-life. For example, not all people have the physical or financial competency to engage in fitness programs, a challenge that Tulle (2008) stated is particularly prevalent for older women. Scherger, Nazroo, and Higgs (2011), in a study of older British people, found that although the working classes still participated in leisure activities after retirement, they did so less frequently than they did during their working lives, whereas those with higher levels of education often maintained or increased their participation. Their research also suggests that workforce participation, health, and presence of disability are important considerations in influencing levels of leisure participation

among research participants. However, even when putting aside issues surrounding inequality of access, discourse linking fitness and exercise to anti-aging always begins from the problematic assumption that aging is a burden that each individual is responsible to overcome.

There is no question that exercise science, public health, and certain gerontological sciences are important biopolitical actors circulating “truths” about the relationship between physical activity and successful aging. Our interest in this study, however, is in exploring how Third Agers themselves take up this discourse in their understanding of their bodies and others’ bodies. As we will argue, those who are fit and active may position themselves as morally responsible and give themselves permission to subject others to critical scrutiny. To frame this analysis, we turn to Foucault’s work on the micro-politics of power.

Foucault, Body Discipline, and Exercise in the Third Age

Foucauldian theory is no stranger to the gym; sociologists and other academics use it to analyse elite-level athletes (Shogan, 1999), aerobic exercisers (Markula, 1995), mindful fitness practices (Markula, 2004), expressions of masculinity in men’s rugby (Pringle & Markula, 2005), and fitness texts (Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998). Likewise, sociologists studying aging have drawn on Foucault’s work to understand the discourses that circulate around aging in the West (Katz & Green, 2005), the ways old bodies are subject to various disciplinary techniques and acts of resistance (Powell, 2009; Powell & Biggs, 2004; Garnham, 2014), and the birth of gerontology as a field of scientific inquiry (Katz, 1996). What makes Foucault’s work particularly helpful in unpacking the relationships between physical activity, the body, and aging is its understanding of the operations of power and the importance of micro-relations in mobilizing operations of power; a focus on the productive, rather than the repressive, ways that power operates; and an attentiveness to the circulation of power and its resistance in everyday life (Pringle & Markula, 2005).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) discussed the mobilization of power by documenting a shift in social understandings of disciplinary techniques as moving from grotesque and violent displays of punishment in the pre-modern era to forms of disciplinary power that work seamlessly on the bodies of individuals in the modern era. In this era, discipline becomes marked on the body in a more insidious way as the individual engages in a constant regime of self-monitoring, producing what Foucault (1995) called “docile bodies”. The operations of power in disciplinary society become imprinted on the body in a fashion that appears to

individualize the body while actually working towards homogenization. These processes of discipline are particularly evident in the micro-relations of gym culture. The normalizing gaze of fitness instructors (or even the gym mirror), the careful scheduling of time through programming timetables, and the separation of bodies through a variety of gym spaces and exercise classes all produce fitness centres as a disciplinary space (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

However, the individual never takes up ideas about the appropriate disciplining of the body wholly. In this regard, Foucault's later work (for example, see his three-volume *History of Sexuality* [Foucault, 1990a; Foucault, 1990b; Foucault, 1988a]), emphasizes power as operating through a web of innumerable discursive practices. He argued that omnipresence of power allows for various acts of resistance (Foucault, 1990a, p. 95). Dilts (2011) explained this shift, stating that Foucault developed an "interest in giving an account of the ways in which perhaps too much attention has been given to the ways in which subjects are formed by power, and are seemingly left without agency to respond to that power" (p. 141). In this study, we attempted to be mindful of the various and contradictory ways that exercisers in the Third Age both complied with and resisted dominant discourses associated with a fitness imperative that states that successful aging means being active.

Methods

In order to explore how pressures to be fit and active in later life shape the attitudes and understandings of Third Agers, we conducted interviews with eight women and seven men who responded to a call for participants over the age of 50 years who regularly engaged in fitness classes, workout sessions, and/or team sports at one of three community fitness centres in a mid-sized Canadian city known demographically for its aging population. Although there was no minimum requirement for participation beyond self-identification as a "regular" participant in organized fitness and exercise, most of the participants were quite active, attending the gym multiple times per week. We recruited participants through fitness centres, with interested participants signing up during fitness classes or contacting the researchers by telephone or email.

The first author conducted interviews, taking 1–2 hours to complete, at the participants' respective gyms. This author asked each participant about their general health, experiences with exercise over their life course, the ways exercise made them feel about themselves and their bodies, and the ways exercise impacted their feelings about other people in their lives. She also asked

participants if they felt that there were pressures on people in later life to be fit and active. Participants ranged in age from 59 to 88 (mean: 72.73). They were retired or semi-retired white,³ middle-class professionals,⁴ with all but one having some post-secondary education. During interviews, many of the participants described various health issues, including high blood pressure (two men and one woman), cancer (two men and one woman), stroke (one woman), metabolic disorder (one woman), blindness (one man), and heart disease (one man). However, when asked to characterize their health, all but two described their health as "good" or "great". The class, race, and gender positions of the participants in this study likely impacted both their experiences as active Third Agers and their decision to participate in gym-based physical activity in later life.

The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim and loaded them into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10. She used qualitative content analysis, a process described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as a "research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278), to analyse the interview transcripts. Specifically, she employed "conventional content analysis" where the researchers develop themes according to both their overarching research questions as well as the responses – anticipated or unanticipated – of the participants (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this regard, the first author read interview transcripts looking for common themes and ideas and coded them accordingly. In order to ensure consistency and avoid overlooking significant themes, she performed this task twice, identifying the following themes: (1) aging; (2) gender identity; (3) health; (4) gym experience; (5) pressures and motivations; and (6) the body and the self.

Once the first author performed this analysis, the second author reviewed the transcripts and the thematic framework, looking for inconsistencies and other potential analytical oversights and confirming the selection of the identified themes. In the following analysis, we first explore how the exercise programs of active Third Agers produce aging bodies as docile bodies. To do this, we examine the ways participants speak about activity and busyness in their lives. Next, we explore the ways they privilege exercise as an important form of busyness, examining how this leads to the disciplining of their bodies. We analyse the ways this disciplining is gendered, describing the various ways that gender differences inform our participants' understandings of themselves and others. We then investigate how participants, through their social position as active Third Agers, mobilize their fit and active bodies (or "useful" bodies [Foucault, 1995, p. 138])

to claim a subject position that they use to discipline the bodies of others. Finally, using Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, we analyse the ways participants understand fitness and exercise as an activity that provides access to spiritual and psychological enjoyment and to a like-minded community of exercisers.

'I want to stay engaged in life' (Angela): Third Agers and Exercise

Staying Active, Staying Young

As we begin to unpack the stories told by Third Agers about their exercise habits, it is instructive to revisit the shift in gerontological thought towards active living in later life. As Katz (2005) recounted, this move was neither universal nor unopposed within the field. In the 1950s, gerontologists positioned theories linking activity and busyness to successful aging against those who argued just the opposite – that is, that later life should be linked to “disengagement” (p. 124). By the 1970s, support for the latter had declined, and active aging was the dominant paradigm (Katz, 2005). As Katz (2005) summarized the outcome, “the aged subject becomes encased in a social matrix where moral, disciplinary conventions around activity, health, and independence appear to represent an idealized old age” (p. 127). Despite the often poorly defined nature of the ubiquitous concept of “activity”, Katz (2005) argued that it has proliferated as a prescription due to its fit with neoliberal social concerns about “so-called risky populations” (p. 136).

It is within this discursive framework that our research participants (such as those we quote here) understood their relationships to exercise and physical activity in later life. They endorsed the assumption that being active was the appropriate way to age well – or a way to “keep you young” (Grace), thin (Bernadette), “engaged” (Sarah), and “feeling good” (Grace). More importantly, almost all framed their activity as boundary work – a way to resist decline into the Fourth Age. Bernadette summed up the attitudes of several participants when she asserted, “Growing into your nineties is great, but if you're sickly, why?” The declarations of not “wanting to age like that” (Marg) or to become “atrophied and fade away” (Peter) in old age express what Gilleard and Higgs (2011a) have called the “abjection” of the Fourth Age.

The participants' understandings about exercise and aging ran parallel to the findings in a study by Phoenix and Smith (2011). In their examination of the stories told by later-life bodybuilders, they found that these participants used their social position as masters-level athletes to challenge popular understandings of aging as tied to physical decline. However, they caution that although these resistant counterstories of aging are

important, they can privilege one particular way of aging well. They stressed that analyses of aging and resistance needed to take into account the complex social forces of the day, arguing that “counterstories of resistance are likely to better flourish in certain social environments that place a high value on healthy behaviors and have the financial resources to promote them” (p. 636).

Participants identified “keeping busy” as their primary strategy for successful aging, and exercise was only one – albeit an important one – of many activities that filled their time. During our interviews, Tom, a retired entrepreneur, detailed his hectic schedule, which included dinner with friends, cribbage, attending local semi-professional hockey practices and games, trips to the racetrack to watch stock car and horse racing, and, of course, working out at his local gym. After producing an exhaustive list of these various activities, he emphatically boasted, “So everyday I'm busy, except for Sunday. Every day! Every night! Full!” Malcolm expressed a similar attitude: “[My wife and I] are still trying to come [to the gym] three times a week ... but we both garden and are very, very active with many things. Um, volunteering and grandchildren – they keep you busy!”

Working out Old Age

For most research participants, working out at the gym was a point of pride – a kind of busyness that was morally superior to other forms of activity. Many of those interviewed spoke with reverence about their gym time, boasting about the number of days they visited and the hours logged in each session. Participants who attended the gym regularly took satisfaction in their ability to spend the entire morning there. Several began their day by first exercising, some for two or three hours, and then socializing with friends or family at on-site coffee shops or other nearby locales. Only three characterized their engagement with physical activity (often understood as attendance at the gym) as sporadic or lapsed, and they claimed that this condition caused them some anxiety or stress. George, who had reduced his activity as a result of health concerns, asserted that not being able to get to the gym made him feel as though his “body was deserting [him]”. Although George's failing health concerned both him and his wife, when asked what he meant by that remark, he explained that he was “incapable of providing extra muscle [through working out at the gym]”. Other sporadic attendees also expressed concern around their limited engagement in exercise. Sarah, who participated in many activities away from the gym, including gardening and sailing, observed that participation in formal exercise had been a lifelong challenge for her, and one she worked to overcome

in retirement. The remaining 12 participants attended the gym frequently, with most (eight participants) stating that they aimed to work out five days a week.

Participants not only attended the gym regularly, but while at the gym, their fitness and exercise time was remarkably organized. They carefully divided their time into blocks devoted to particular activities – for instance, lifting weights or free gym time, cardio or aquafit time, stretching and yoga time, and social time. When participants described their workout schedules, they were, for the most part, complex and detailed, with only one participant (Grace) claiming that she didn't "have a routine". Many participants strictly organized their gym time, as Sarah demonstrated. After detailing an exhaustive list of activities organized by season, type, instructor, and time, she described her typical week: "So basically two yoga, two strength, two stretch, a couple of strength things, aquafit, [and] walking".

Foucault (1995) described the rational organization of time as a key feature of disciplinary society and the production of docile bodies. Indeed, participants divided their time at the gym by exercise and muscle group, even during the time they spent working out on their own away from formally scheduled activities. Fred explained:

I come in and I do dumbbell stuff for probably ten minutes or so and I walk the track between events. I go on an elevated bench and I do 25 to 30 sit-ups ... And then I turn around and do 80 leg-ups. Walk the track some more. Go on the machine where you do this with your legs [opens and closes thighs]. And I vary between the rowing machine and the elliptical thing or the treadmill, and I'm here for about an hour.

Fred's workout demonstrated a surprising level of efficiency with no movement extraneous to the goals of a complete and effective workout. Even Fred's rest time is spent in activity – a practice those in exercise circles increasingly term "active recovery" (see Quinn, 2017).

Foucault (1995) also cited the importance of "enclosure" (p. 141), or physical spaces that lend themselves to particular disciplinary techniques, as a method of disciplinary society, arguing that it, along with other disciplinary strategies, works to render the body visible and subject to discipline. Indeed, although participants were active in a multitude of ways, they spoke with more detail and complexity about formal activities (such as going to the gym and attending classes) than less structured ones (such as walking the dog, gardening, and spending time with family and friends).⁵

Although the gym works to produce disciplined bodies in very specific ways, all participants seemed to laud

organized physical activity as the right way to engage in healthy aging practices. However, this celebration of organized physical activity was not without contradiction, as many resisted common gym conventions that suggest working out correctly means pushing oneself to one's physical limits. Strategically mobilizing their social positions as elderly, several participants stated that old age freed them from a drive towards greater-and-greater achievement in their workouts. Angela stated: "I worked for 44 years. ... It was constant striving to achieve. ... Now I'm in a period of my life where I don't want to strive for the 20-pound weight." Occupying the social space of an elder meant the ability to give up on a more traditional "sports ethic" that stresses rational acceptance of risks and pain in the pursuit of increasingly greater achievement (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Disciplining Those Other Bodies

Although many participants found in later life a release from the "sports ethic", they often did not exercise the same dispassion when observing the bodies of other elderly exercisers. More than one participant remarked that they took note of friends who abstained from organized exercise and of lapses in the participation of other gym members. Some even commented that they noticed when others were not participating with the prescribed level of enthusiasm. They dealt with these transgressions in various ways. For example, an unexpected hiatus from the gym might warrant a phone call to check on the well-being of a fellow gym-goer (Sarah). Carol and Malcolm used supportive encouragement to inspire their friends to join the gym. Recognizing the challenges associated with taking up a new fitness class, they described how they encouraged new members to "stick with it" and not get "discouraged". Tom expressed profound concern with those who failed to exercise, at one point during the interview yelling that no student should graduate high school if they cannot run. When he spoke about his late wife's resistance to exercise he explained, "I wanted her to try. I encouraged her but she didn't want to do it." However, not all "encouragement" to be an active participant in gym life was positive and supportive – some participants reacted to the failures of others to work out correctly (or consistently) with disapproval. Bernadette, for example, described her astonishment when a fellow class member asked the instructor how long she would have to participate in exercise classes. For Bernadette it was obvious that an organized exercise program was a lifelong commitment. Curiously, several participants were openly critical of those who, in later life, engaged in physical activities that they understood to be too rigorous. More than one individual claimed that long-distance running was not an activity they would take

up or enjoy, claiming that it was for “much younger people” (Sarah).

Participants expressed a contradictory and sometimes ambivalent relationship with new moral imperatives that state growing old successfully means being physically active. As already discussed, some participants refused to push themselves in ways that aligned with the sport ethic. Work by Tulle and Dorrer (2011) helps explain this contradiction. In their study, they examined both the experiences of older gym participants and younger instructors, finding that these groups often bring competing understandings of appropriate gym comportment. As in our study, they found that when instructors pushed a model of exercise based on “sporting excellence” (p. 15), older exercisers were resistant, content to just participate while not pushing themselves for greater physical accomplishment. They explained this contradiction by citing the competing expectations of exercise programs based on health (as taken up by older exercisers) and those based on a sports model (adopted by younger gym instructors). They argued

that the expansion of the sub-field of sport and exercise in which exercise is recast as prescription for health has made manifest, rather than eliminated, divergent constructions of what counts as physical capital in later life. Neither has it fully overturned the low social and cultural positions of old people and old age in contemporary society because it continues to rely on a narrow interpretation of sport and exercise, in which alternative physicalities ... have not yet significantly colonised the dominant discourse of ageing embodiment. (p. 1123)

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Markula and Pringle (2006) reminded us, “disciplinary techniques do not always succeed in producing the desired outcome” (p. 69).

Exercising Masculinities, Exercising Femininities

Both male and female research participants in our study found that dominant understandings of appropriate masculine and feminine expressions facilitated as well as restricted their participation in appropriate fitness regimes. Although our study did not specifically focus on gender differences in later-life exercisers, we did find that to some extent, these differences appeared to impact the ways that participants understood their bodies, the forms of discipline that acted upon them, and the ways they disciplined other people’s bodies. Gender differences were most visible when participants discussed their life course and the various breaks they had taken from fitness and exercise during their adult lives. Notably, several retired women contrasted the activities of their lives as younger adults to their post-retirement lives, finding that exercise was a luxury that they could take up seriously only in later life, when, of course,

they could find the time. Maggie, a retired social worker, provided a pertinent example of the gender differences associated with access to fitness and exercise during one’s working life:

I said to myself, “You’re my priority” ... “You’ve got to be.” And why didn’t I do it before? Life seemed to be busy. And my husband’s a perfect example of someone who said, “I need to do this. I’m going to do this” ... whereas [previously] I probably put everyone else before [myself].

Work by Thompson (2001) documents “women’s labour in the service of sport” (p. 111), finding that wives devote much of their own leisure time to the leisure (and specifically sports) pursuits of their husbands and children. Although work by Spowart, Burrows, and Shaw (2010) found that when women actually did take time for themselves, in this case to surf, they often had to justify their actions in terms of their positions as mothers (see Offer, 2016). In this study, several female participants, who found in retirement a lessening of responsibilities for work and childcare, expressed this sense that time was now more their own – a sentiment not expressed by the men who participated in this research. As Craig and Mullan (2013) found, “masculine gender norms make it easier for men to claim adult-only leisure, and difficult for mothers to negotiate leisure equality with their partners” (p. 333).

Participants’ perceptions of their current fitness practices also suggested that gender played a significant role in their self-understanding in later life. For example, although both men and women documented times when they resisted pressures to push themselves beyond their own comfort levels at the gym, women participants tended to reference (and often reject) norms of gender appearance that suggest that women should strive for beautiful bodies. For Sarah, the reason for this resistance was because at this stage in her life she was “not trying to get a beautiful body”. Bernadette also refused to engage in exercise that was geared towards increasing intensity, despite the fact that she was interested in losing weight and outspoken about the importance of her looks:

I think when you’re younger, and a lot of times men, they think that you have to go harder and stronger all the time. And that’s fine! But I don’t think with seniors, I don’t think that’s what we’re interested in at all.

However, some participants had replaced excessive exercise and a focus on the achievement of beautiful bodies with a different understanding of what makes an appropriately feminized body in later life. Bernadette, for example, asserted that working out to “excess” marked aging bodies as gendered in inappropriate ways. For her, her twin sister’s commitment to fitness, which

saw her engaging in rigorous daily workouts, distinguished her sister's body as inappropriately feminine in its disregard for more appropriate anti-aging strategies focused on less demanding exercise, which might more successfully allow her to maintain some degree of culturally revered youthful beauty. Bernadette stated, "she's been working out every day and ... she looks old. ... I don't think there is an ounce of fat on her but she's drawn." Likewise, Sarah discussed cultural conventions that constrained her engagement with arduous physical activity: "I was raised in an era where women didn't sweat. ... It was considered unladylike and unfeminine ... so I didn't like it." Similarly, Maggie asserted, "Everything in moderation."

As demonstrated thus far, many female participants found in later life some degree of resistance to the "pervasiveness of youthful ideals of beauty" (Dumas, Laberge, & Straka, 2005, p. 899), although they could not fight these ideals entirely. This finding aligns with the work of several scholars who examine women's relationships to their bodies in later life, discovering that although many women are still aware of beauty standards, they feel less compelled to comply with them (Poole, 2001; Dumas, Laberge, & Straka, 2005; Liechty, 2012). Poole's (2001) work on older women's exercise and embodiment argues that as society understands the body as a marker of identity, women seek to conform to bodily ideals through their participation in fitness instruction. Many of the women in this study appeared to take up these gendered understandings of their body, but with less intensity than they did during their youth. In this regard, Dumas, Laberge, and Straka (2005) argued that older women's shift away from popularly circulated beauty standards stems from "their increased agency, gained through a reflexive process as they aged" (p. 899). However, for some of the women in this study this disavowal of beauty norms was easier to adopt than for others.

The men in our study also expressed gendered understandings of later-life exercise. In contrast to the women, the men often viewed this freedom from the most strenuous forms of exercise as a challenging feature of growing old. Tom, for example, struggled with the fact that he was no longer bothered by missed gym time, stating, "I'm taking that attitude which is not good." Some male research participants also found that gender constrained even those kinds of activities popular culture portrays as appropriately masculine. For example, Fred claimed that he viewed the bodies of men who were serious weightlifters as problematic, saying, "The guys that do all the weightlifting and stuff and end up with breasts and things, that's not a fit body for me." Fred's comments might be explained by Gill, Henwood, and McLean's (2005) study of embodied masculinity in young British

men, where they argued that certain men consider obsessiveness about one's body and vanity to be decidedly unmasculine.

When taken as a whole, our older male research participants had ambivalent relationships with other dominant expressions of masculinity, specifically those that linked appropriate expressions of manliness to strength (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and to the avoidance of bodywork that focuses on aesthetic features such as flexibility and grace (Adams, 2005). Although many of the men in this study participated in yoga and stretch classes, their understandings of these practices often aligned with other leading expressions of masculinity, namely those that linked being appropriately masculine with being independent. This allowed them to enjoy activities that under different conditions might seem, according to some popular conventions, inappropriately gendered. Frank explained, "When I first started [yoga], I thought it was going to be one step above a snooze. I didn't realize that it could be as physical as it is. And [it] just helped with flexibility."

Some men relinquished weightlifting and other activities associated with dominant expressions of masculinity in the pursuit of other goals such as independence, a lack of pain, and the ability to play with their grandchildren. Liechty, Ribeiro, Sveinson, and Dahlstrom's (2014) examination of body image in aging men finds that later-life men adjust their idealized standards of masculinity away from hegemonic ideals, highlighting what they can "do with their bodies and how they felt in their bodies" (p. 11) (see Calasanti, Pietilä, Ojala, & King, 2013). Some of our participants, however, found the bodily expressions congruent with dominant youthful masculinity harder to give up. These men experienced diminishing strength, decreasing muscle mass, and their inability to compete with younger athletes as painful challenges to their social positions as appropriately masculine men (see Clarke & Bennett, 2013). Peter, a semi-retired electrical engineer, expressed concern that one day soon he would no longer be able to "keep up" with the 35-year-olds on his men's soccer team. Similarly, James, a fitness instructor at a local community centre, expressed concern about his declining strength, while Fred complained that his workouts no longer resulted in a burly physique.

For men and women in this study, gender provided a platform for both the production of docile bodies as well as various forms of resistance to these pressures, or "technologies of the self". Foucault (1988b) described "technologies of the self" as ways that individuals "produce", "transform", or "manipulate" their social environments. Foucault (1988b) reminded us that these actions are oftentimes contradictory,

representing a partial mobilization of power and break with common-sense understandings. Technologies of the self are also evident in the various ways participants engaged with exercise and mobilized their various self-understandings – in fact, for most participants exercise was a source of both pleasure and community.

'I wouldn't say pressures, I'd say opportunities' (Carol): Negotiating Successful Aging

Various neoliberal conventions circulated by health discourse, popular culture, and the State support activities such as structured exercise programs, framing activity and care for oneself and one's health as a moral imperative, particularly in mid-life and old age. In spite of this, participants often expressed great satisfaction and joy arising from the time they spent at the gym. They generally undertook these activities on their own terms, framed by social conventions about age and gender (and likely other social positions such as race, class, and sexuality as well, although such considerations are beyond the scope of this work). Foucault explained that people might use technologies of the self to obtain happiness for themselves. In this regard, individuals take up commonly circulated understandings about fitness and exercise in ways that support but also break with disciplining discourse that produce their bodies as docile bodies. Participants here engaged in ethics of self-care, particularly as they used recreational fitness practices to connect with others at a similar stage in life in meaningful ways.

When asked what they enjoyed most about their recreational fitness habits, participants spoke at length and with passion about how exercise made them feel about themselves and their bodies and how it worked to build a vibrant social community. Grace, a retired nurse, explained that exercise was not "an important thing. It's a social thing. It makes you feel good," while Sarah explained that she liked yoga because "It does my spirit good as well as my body." Similarly, Marg, also a retired nurse, told us, "I find [walking] just peaceful." Maggie enjoyed "the physical movement, tied with the fun with the other women", while James enjoyed "getting wound up" in the energy from his fellow fitness class members, saying, "it makes you feel good". Only one participant claimed that she would give up exercise entirely if she didn't think it would be harmful to her health (Angela). All others appeared to find pleasure and joy in these activities. As Phoenix and Orr (2015) suggested, this is an aspect of sport and exercise in later life that current research underemphasizes.

Given that fitness and exercise are disciplinary practices linked to discourses around activity in later life,

it is interesting to note that most participants did not experience their own fitness activities this way. They often mentioned cultural demands to attend the gym frequently and to exercise with the appropriate level of intensity, but overlooked these demands as forms of social pressure to age successfully. Instead, participants framed their activities as autonomous actions directed at doing something good for their bodies. Frank, a semi-retired forester, stated, "I think that it's a kind of an individual decision and if someone decided to [work out] they are going to but I don't think that there is pressure, so to speak." Similarly, Maggie claimed that there was not social pressure but "more support" from peers to exercise. Malcolm and Carol, a married couple and a retired school principal and secretary respectively, reinforced this idea, as Carol stated, "I wouldn't say pressure. I would say opportunity," and Malcolm echoed, "Opportunity!"

During the interviews, almost all participants denied that they experienced social pressures from medical professionals, popular culture, and others to be active in order to age well and avoid the risks (and no doubt costs) associated with age-related decline. They instead understood their acts as the actions of morally responsible individuals who wanted to live long, healthy, active, and engaged lives and who did so by taking their health into their own hands. Fred, whose son was also very active, competing in Iron Man competitions in his mid-50s, associated his drive to stay active in later life as something hereditary, stating, "I think we all have that obsessiveness!" Similarly, Betty claimed, "I think it's just [part of a person's] personality to be fit." And Bernadette stated, "I guess, I think the only pressure a person really puts on ... is what they put on themselves." One participant (Tom) even claimed that the obesity epidemic was proof that there was not enough pressure on people to exercise. Given the growing volume and diversity of publications urging Third Agers to be active, our research participants' disavowals of pressure to take up exercise in later life are likely linked to their social positions as successfully active Third Agers. As Durkheim (1982) explained, pressure to conform to social forces is not experienced with any intensity if an individual's actions already align with these pressures.

One participant, Angela, a former administrative manager at a post-secondary institution, both recognized the existence of social pressure to be fit and exercise and yet found it abhorrent. Although she argued, "because I'm older ... I understand the importance of [being active and fit]", she also asserted that these pressures were offensive to people who had worked hard and invested in Canadian pension plans and health care systems:

It really offends me. It really does because I think we've earned the right to be whoever we are now. So I think yeah, I don't want to be one of those statistics, where you're needing homecare long before others. I do think there is a negativity directed towards us as a group.

Angela's concern for the ways neoliberal discourse places the responsibility for successful aging on the bodies of Third Agers was unique among interview participants.

Although most interviewees may not have directly felt pressure to exercise, they frequently mobilized their social position as active Third Agers to comment on others. A striking example of this came from Bernadette, who claimed she did not experience social pressures to be active from her doctors because "both my cardiologist and my doctor are well over what they should weigh". Likewise, Peter claimed his doctor did not put pressure on him to work out because "I'm in much better shape than he is!" Participants sometimes harshly judged the activity (or inactivity) of others in their family and friendship circles. Sarah described her sisters as "a bunch of aches and pains", observing that "their lives are really constricted" and that "they seem much older ... than their years". Bernadette had similar concerns about her own daughter's lack of exercise: "She's tiny now but I keep telling her ... that when 50 hits, you're not going to know who's staring back at you in the mirror." James explained that there were tensions in his marriage erupting from both his wife's "stubbornness" and pressure he exerted on her to exercise.

Many of the participants understood themselves as exemplars of good health and moral respectability. White, Young, and Gillett (1995) reminded us that society increasingly views bodywork (including exercise) as a "moral imperative" (p. 159), where a beautiful body (i.e., a lean body) is broadly understood as a fit and healthy body. They argued that as bodywork becomes a moral imperative, society increasingly understands people as being responsible for their own failing health, so as to avoid putting an increased burden on the health care system with "preventable illness" (p. 160) – or in this case, preventable age-related decline.

'I Think Age Is Totally Different' (Carol): Conclusions

When rigorous physical activity as an anti-aging strategy becomes the centerpiece of both health promotion and popular wisdom, how does this affect older people's understandings of their engagement in exercise? We specifically sought to inquire about the impacts of the active aging discourse on the lives of those in the Third Age, examining, through semi-structured interviews, the insights that people in

mid-life and beyond bring to their exercise practices. We found that most participants understood their own exercise and fitness practices in ways that align with neoliberal ideas about avoiding illness and dependency and prolonging the Third Age for as long as possible. The narratives conveyed by these participants, which tended to privilege the Third Age as a time of constant activity and busyness, favoured fitness programs and exercise as the best way to age successfully.

If power is productive (Foucault, 1995), it is important to consider what it produces. As Katz (2005) stated, "(t)he production and celebration of an active body in old age is a disciplinary strategy of the greatest value" (p. 137). Our participants embodied the disciplinary potential of activity in old age in two important ways. First, they were cultural exemplars of successful aging, seemingly above critique and discipline. They understood their bodies and the social labels ascribed to them – that is, active bodies or "busy bodies" (Katz, 2005) – as morally good. Second, and maybe more importantly, through this social position they often mobilized a disciplinary gaze on their friends, family members, other gym-goers, and appropriate aging-at-large – readily offering chastisement to those bodies who failed to live up to the (increasingly unattainable) social standards of successful aging.

Despite the prevalence of this disciplinary discourse, almost all of our participants took great joy in their exercise programs. It was through these programs that they built supportive communities, increased bodily competency and found peace and enjoyment. Some participants reproduced dominant gender expressions (e.g., supported gender ideologies about beauty and strength) while others used their unique social positions to challenge and/or disrupt commonly circulated understandings of appropriate ways to be men and women. Although many aspects of the exercise programs that these Third Agers engaged in worked to produce docile bodies, the programs were also places of resistance where individuals could engage in self-care and deep pleasure. Although aging differently through exercise was a goal for all our participants, they also acknowledged their changing bodies and the impossibility of not-aging, despite the most disciplined exercise program.

Notes

1 We selected the term Third Age to speak to a sociological and analytical category; Third Age is not an identity adopted by members of this group. In fact, none of the participants identified themselves as members of the "Third Age". Although one participant (Bernadette) referred to herself as a "senior", most referred to themselves in relation to those whom they described as "old". For example, Sarah claimed that you "don't have to get old just because

you're getting older". Similarly, James said, "I don't think of myself as old". In this regard, participants tended to actively identify themselves as "not old".

- 2 Parkour involves moving through urban landscapes using only the body. It requires flexibility and strength and is usually marked by dramatic leaps and climbs.
- 3 It is likely that the ethnicity of the participants also impacted their life experiences. However, we did not attempt to gather information about this for our study.
- 4 Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1987), we determined that our participants were middle-class, based on our understanding of class as a flexible and subjective category, linking people together through their common social experiences. In this regard, our participants were neither rich nor poor, but, more importantly, they shared similar educational levels and had shared similar professional employment status during their working lives.
- 5 This finding may be the result of the participants' perception of our interest in these kinds of activities, especially given their participation in a study examining organized exercise. However, we believe that it is likely that participants privileged this kind of busyness due to the prestige associated with formal physical activity.

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