

FRIENDSHIPS FORGED IN FITNESS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF OLDER WOMEN'S SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AT A COMMUNITY FITNESS CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Gerontological research demonstrates that the social relationships forged by older women at community and fitness centers can be long-lasting and provide a variety of supportive functions. Research shows that participants, especially older women, are more likely to adhere to a fitness program when they have social supports. Older adults enjoy and respond well to pool- or water-based aerobic exercises that are safe on the joints and provide a comfortable environment away from the gym's intimidating nature. Therefore, water-based classes provided at community fitness centers are well positioned to provide ample social opportunities to further reinforce continued physical activity for older women, resulting in health and quality-of-life improvements. However, anthropological and ethnographic research into friendship formation and maintenance among older American women is lacking in the literature. This project was a three-month ethnographic exploration of the social relationships created and maintained in the context of water-based fitness classes (water aerobics) at a local community center attended primarily by white older adults (aged 50+). The friendships forged by women in the pool provide a variety of social supports that help to maintain healthy-aging outcomes among participants. Using a Grounded Theory approach, this study utilized participant observation, semistructured key-informant interviews, and survey questionnaires to provide a holistic anthropological investigation of the important physical, social, and mental health benefits that fitness center friendships can have on the daily lives of older women in urban Alaska.

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity tends to decline as we age (Sallis 2000), which is related to increased risk of poor health outcomes (Warburton et al. 2006). Research shows that older adults, especially women, are more likely to adhere to a fitness program when they have social supports (Cress et al. 2005; Howell and Bardach 2018). Likewise, gerontological re-

search demonstrates that the social relationships forged by older women at community and fitness centers can be long-lasting and provide a variety of supportive functions (Aday et al. 2006). Social supports not only increase physical activity among older adults but also have other significant health benefits. Research shows that social isolation and

loneliness is linked to all-cause mortality risk and a range of disease morbidities (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2017).

Anthropological research shows that friendships among adults may take a variety of forms, depending on cultural context (see Bell and Coleman 1999). For example, Western middle-class ideas of friendship tend to involve personal and spontaneous relationships between individuals, who may decide to form new relationships or break old ones as they see fit. Such a definition of friendship may imply a degree of autonomy that constitutes a “sociological luxury” (Paine 1969:513) not afforded to people in other societies, where formalized or ritually sanctioned relationships may predominate (Cohen 1961; Desai 2010). Although friendships are an important aspect of social life, research about the role of friendships among older adults is largely lacking in the anthropological literature (Blieszner et al. 2019), with the notable exception of Sarah Lamb’s work (1997, 2000, 2002, 2009). This is a concerning knowledge gap in the research because older adults’ experiences of health and quality of life are strongly associated with the quality of their social relationships (Holt-Lunstad 2017), and anthropological methods and analysis are well suited to fill this gap in our understanding of this important issue.

This is ethnographic exploration of the social relationships created and maintained in the context of water-based fitness classes (water aerobics) at a local community center attended primarily by older adults aims to fill this gap in the anthropological literature. This project looks at the impact of these classes on friendship formation and physical and mental health among women. In this paper, we utilize a Western definition of “friendship,” held largely by the white urban research participants, as a relationship based on mutual respect, appreciation, and liking (Bryan et al. 2013). The definition goes beyond mere acquaintances with peers, where people spend time with those of the same age and maturity level, and includes relationships that provide informational, tangible, and emotional support and belonging.

We focus on women because research shows that white American men and women define friendships differently and report distinctions in the social benefits of their friendships. For example, white women in the U.S. report friendships that are closer, more supportive, and more cooperative than those of men, possibly due to differing cultural constructions of gender and an unequal position in the social structure (Felmlee and Muraco 2009; Rubin 1985). Older women also have higher expectations from their

friends and place greater emphasis on intimacy than older men (Felmlee and Muraco 2009), resulting in friendship structures that may look and feel very different.

to be popular among older adults (Amireault et al. 2018; Hale et al. 2012; Howell and Bardach 2018). Research also shows that water-based fitness classes, such as water aerobics, are often attended primarily by older women (Bocalini et al. 2008; Rezaeipour et al. 2021). Considering the potential health benefits from water-based fitness coupled with the social benefits of attending group classes,

protective equipment (PPE, i.e., face masks) before vaccines were widely available. However, this unprecedented experience further demonstrates how important social relationships are for older women in Anchorage.

ANALYSIS

All field notes were recorded by the lead author immediately after participation in water aerobics class or related community activities. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a low-cost, automatic, online transcription service (www.temi.com). These transcriptions were downloaded, quality checked, and edited against the audio files by the third author (Wanner). Field notes and interview transcripts were coded by the first and third authors using line-by-line textual coding of the materials in NVivo v. 12 Pro (QSR International, 2018). Using deductive analysis and a Grounded theory approach, the authors attached low-inference codes to text segments consisting of a sentence or paragraph (Card 2015). Grounded theory approaches encourage researchers to create reciprocal relationships with research participants to facili-

employed (17 were retired). Half of the participants reported having attended the community fitness center for

to Beverly's desire to "not overthink the situation" since older adults were frequently being told that they were at risk for this virus due to advanced age, possibly leading to a depressed mood among water aerobics participants during the shutdown (Armitage and Nellums 2020). Clearly there were many positive effects of water aerobics participation because once the pool opened back up (with reduced capacity), many of "the regulars" were back in the pool, according to Beverly. The research team did not return to fieldwork as the university transitioned to on-line classes alone, and it closed many research projects that required in-person data collection, for the safety of participants and researchers.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Closely related to mental health benefits is the social value of participation in water aerobics classes to these older women. Bob shared this example of how friendships are forged and reinforced both inside and out of the pool,

You know how Barbara is 96 [years old]? She turns 97 the first part of March. I always buy a hockey jersey with [her age] on the back so she doesn't forget how old she is. She really likes that. And she's from Canada and we talk hockey. But I go, I check on people. I've got the time, and they're my friends. Betty's checked on me before [when I missed class]. She tries to be my friend, you know, and she's done some things for me. (Bob, 77-year-old participant)

Although Bob joked around a lot about being "the hardest worker in this class," he truly did care about the other class participants as friends. Friendships were most often demonstrated to the research team in terms of who has each other's cell phone numbers. The exchange of phone numbers for calls or texts was an indicator that

also mediating the consequences of life stressors (Kumar 2016; Potts 1985). As reported in this study, those with more social supports reported greater health benefits from their water aerobics participation than those with fewer social relationships. Friendship is an iterative and interactive process by which older adults report benefits to their well-being both from receiving social support as well as providing social support to others (Hupcey 1998; Thomas 2009), as demonstrated by our participants' interview responses.

For the abovementioned reasons, older adults with more social supports, both in this study and in the research literature, demonstrate a variety of better outcomes than those who are isolated. Such health outcomes range from better physical, functional, and cognitive health to lower rates of obesity and depression, and increased rates of physical activity and engagement in the community (de Leon 2005; Everard et al. 2000; Golden et al. 2009; Potts 1997; Seeman et al. 2001). As Betsy's mother demonstrated in this study, water aerobics can result in greater upper body strength along with a greater sense of physical balance and energy. Specifically, research on older female participation in water aerobics has shown a positive effect on cardiovascular health, metabolic response, and cognitive performance, such as improved executive functioning,

this may be viewed as a desirable response (Van de Mortel 2008). We engaged in best practices to reduce this tendency, in how we introduced the study, established rapport with participants, and asked questions during informal conversations as part of our participant observation (Bergen and Labonté 2020).

Last, the ethnographic investigation provided in this study can provide important contributions to our understanding of broader theoretical issues in anthropology. For example, this work not only elucidates the lived experience of older women in the urban Subarctic, but also the nature of making and sustaining friendships throughout the lifecourse in this time and place for older urban women. Ethnographic and mixed methods contribute to our understanding of health as a holistic experience that

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