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Winter of our contentment: Examining risk, pleasure, and emplacement in later-life physical activity



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ABSTRACT

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.

Introduction

Senior men's ice hockey sits at the intersection of important contradictions in common-sense discourses about successful aging. A myriad of public and state actors prescribe near constant physical activity as a marker of appropriate aging (Allain and Marshall, 2017). The axiom “move it or lose it” has become the defining imperative of aging well, as common-sense ideology suggests that exercise keeps those in later life both physically and cognitively fit, and notably staves off the so-called care burdens associated with demographic aging or “apocalyptic demography” (Calasanti, 2020). It is not hard to find popular and scholarly publications singing the praises of later-life physical activity (Maula et al., 2019; Rea, 2017; Vaida, 2015). However, these same actors and institutions, including the press, the public, and health officials, also express concerns about the potential risk of injuries in later life — particularly those injuries caused by falls.

Popular publications and government health promotion literature cite risk of falling as an important concern for those in later life. The Canadian government, for example, encouragingly advises those in later life to “take action,” asserting that:

You can prevent falls by making the needed adjustments to your

home and lifestyle, and by making sure you eat well, stay fit, and use whatever devices will facilitate your daily life while keeping you safe. Your independence and well-being are at stake. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005/2015, para. 7)

And although most popular and academic publications devoted to health and aging list physical activity as an important measure in preventing falls (e.g., Delisle, 2017; Mayo Clinic, 2019; Pereira et al., 2008), some later-life activities, particularly those practiced on ice, appear to be antithetical to strategies aimed at this avoidance. Therefore, while numerous articles describe how seniors can avoid winter slips and falls and their related healthcare costs (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005/2015; Veterans Affairs Canada, 2015; Weeks, 2011), others suggest an ever-increasing number of outdoor winter activities for seniors to pursue, including Nordic skiing, skating, hockey, and curling (Hutchinson, 2013; New Oldtimers, 2016; Oldtimers Hockey, 2003). 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.

In this paper, I will examine how old(er) men understand the contradictions between physical activity as both a risky and pleasurable exercise. Discussing the hockey arena as a site of risky pleasure, I will

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investigate how older men navigate these contradictions in their social positions as hockey players. I will also explore how the place and materiality associated with physical activity mediate the men's understanding of themselves and their later-life physical activity, asking how their participation in the physical space of 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 will 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.

Risk and the active ager

Critical age scholars such as Emmanuelle Tulle (2008), Stephen Katz (2005), Shir Shimoni (2018), and Allain and Marshall (2017) have documented the ways that a diverse number of institutions and actors in the West have prescribed staying fit and active in later life. The public, press, state, medical professionals, and various health organizations extoll the virtues of keeping fit and active, especially as one enters later life, describing it as the common-sense way to age well. For example, a discussion brief prepared for the Canadian government lists “self-care” as the third most important factor in “healthy aging.” For the Canadian government, self-care includes exercise and physical activity. The report's authors further link exercise to social connectedness and fall prevention (Healthy aging in Canada, 2020). The Government of Canada (2014) lists physical activity, along with healthy eating, injury prevention, oral health, and smoking cessation, as “an important way for you to keep your independence.” Similarly, the popular American magazine *Real Simple* finds “exercising regularly” fourth on a list of “7 Habits of People who Age Well” (Wise, 2020). UK Active (2017) nicely sums up this common-sense perception regarding the benefits of staying active:

Maintaining an active lifestyle is vital to both living and aging well. While taking part in any amount of physical activity, at any stage in life, can have a powerful positive impact on an individual's health — amongst older people, it is key to maintaining a healthy, independent life for longer, and it is crucial in preventing the onset of many lifestyle- and age-related long-term health conditions. (p. 6)

Directives to stay fit and active in later life are implicitly connected to neoliberal strategies of self-care. When focused on the old, these strategies are often connected to cost-saving measures that view aging populations as risky financial burdens on the state. In the words of former *Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wentz (2012):

Now, our biggest social problem is not how to redistribute more money to the needy old. It's how to protect everyone else from the tsunami of geezers that's about to crash on our shores and suck the wealth of future generations out to sea. (para. 4)

Importantly, Toni Calasanti (2020) has contextualized the apocalyptic demography described by Wentz. While calling for sociologists to take age inequality seriously, she demonstrates that apocalyptic demography, although operating as common-sense, is based on distorted understandings steeped in ageism. Specifically, Calasanti shows that dependency ratios in the United States, which “are meant to show the proportion of those in the population who are dependent per 100 working-age population members” (p. 7), have stayed roughly the same or fallen over the last century (due to lower birth rates). She also highlights how dependency ratios ignore the important labor of those in later life, which includes providing childcare service for grandchildren, volunteering, and working in paid employment.

Likewise, Shimoni (2018) has documented the ways that the popular press has produced neoliberal discourse related to the term “third age” and how this has changed over time. She argues that from the mid-1980s until the early 90s, the press described aging populations,

particularly the young-old (or third agers), as a risky population, presenting them as a potential social burden on the state. Beginning in the mid-1990s, this discourse changed, re-centering the third age as a more liberatory time and seemingly disrupting ageist assumptions about growing old. Instead, reporters placed “an emphasis on the here and now” (p. 47). However, these new attitudes about aging aligned with the neoliberal rationalization of the individual, as this discourse prescribed an investment in the self “in order to reduce later risks” and “dramatically invest in the present” (p. 44).

Pleasure forgotten

Neo-liberal active aging discourse disregards pleasure for its own sake and positions appropriate aging as either risk avoidant or self-invested, especially when it intersects with the discourses of apocalyptic demography (Shimoni, 2018). The disavowal of pleasure not only happens within public discourse, but also, remarkably, within scholarly discourse (for example, see Fincham, 2017). However, as Phoenix and Orr, 2014 have pointed out, pleasure is an important tool for rethinking and resisting neoliberal aging strategies. They argue that pleasure can take several unique forms, and can be sensual (pertaining to one's senses), documented (arising from keeping track of one's activities), habitual (generated through the act of regular participation), and immersive (produced through focus that provides escape from one's everyday lives). For Phoenix and Orr (2014), being attentive to the varied forms of pleasure helps researchers understand the important ways that those in later life both engage with and resist neoliberal health strategies associated with active aging. Drawing from the work of Whitehead, they contended that “pleasure seeking can form part of the reasoned, rationalized act of resistance against authority, including health promoters” (p. 94). Thus, pleasure is an important tool of neoliberal disruption and one that critical aging scholars should be particularly attentive to when examining the lives of old(er) people.

Unsurprisingly, to date scholars have paid little attention to the importance of pleasure, both generally (Booth, 2009; Pringle, 2010) and in connection to the activities of the old (Phoenix and Orr, 2014). The limited scholarship on pleasure has frequently centered on health promotion, and how risky behaviours (e.g., smoking, recreational drug use, unsafe sex, poor diet) and those linked to pain (e.g., body-building) are often connected to feelings of pleasure (Conveny and Bunton, 2003; Monaghan, 2001). Health promotion scholars have linked pleasure with opposition to the very activities that are thought to be healthy, ignoring the importance of studying pleasure in its own right. One notable exception to this is work by Jallinoja et al., 2010, who examined how middle-aged Finnish participants connected notions of pleasure to their eating habits and physical activity. They found that research participants privileged pleasure, especially the pleasure associated with eating, as an essential part of their lived experiences. They concluded that health promoters need to consider pleasure as an essential component of any attempts at lifestyle change.

And yet, pleasure still exists at the margins of scholarly work. Conveny and Bunton, 2003 have argued that health promoters and scholars have largely ignored pleasure and fun because they have viewed them as trivial in the context of other seemingly more important health concerns (also see Fincham, 2017). In Richard Pringle's (2010) examination of the importance of addressing pleasure in physical education (PE), he argues that scholars may have overlooked pleasure because scientific rigor provides a seemingly more acceptable or rationalized way of understanding the importance of movement. Specifically:

Perhaps our long-felt insecurities about the place of PE in the school curriculum and belief that the study of reason and science is superior to human emotion, has obscured what initially inspired our interest in PE—our love of movement. (p. 131)

Given pleasure's link to the body, it is not surprising that many

understand physical activity and bodily movements as pleasurable. Ian Wellard (2012) argues that scholars too often dismiss pleasure in the body and emphasize what he calls a “disembodied” focus on health improvements (p. 23). Wellard's work asks academics to bring the study of pleasure back to the body in order to enhance our reflexive understanding of the social body.

In this regard, the limited work on aging and pleasure has produced a few notable examples of Wellard's (2012) suggestion. Karen Throsby's (2013) autoethnographic work on marathon swimming in middle age illuminates how pleasure informs the process of later-life physical activity. Her recuperation of pleasure — particularly kinaesthetic pleasure (or pleasure connected to the senses and to being in the world) — allows for “feelings of power and entitlement to space” (p. 17). She explains that these feelings are important because “they [are] at odds with conventional female embodiment — in particular, [her] own large, middle-aged body that is more likely to be overlooked or problematised (as overweight, and hormonally deficient) than celebrated” (p. 17).

Throsby's (2013) work also highlights how pleasure intersects (or plays within) physical space. For her, it is the unique sensory experience of being an embodied self in water that produces pleasure. In this regard, Phoenix and Orr (2014) find that research participants' sensual pleasure was deeply connected not only to their embodied positions but to their sensorial environments. Gilleard and Higgs (2013) describe embodiment as the ways the physical body is made meaningful in social life, a process that is deeply attached to social identity. Moreover, Phoenix and Orr (2014) argue that the pleasure of physical activity might be better conceptualized as a process that is not only embodied but also emplaced, as Throsby is emplaced in water. In this regard, they ask if it might be important to “take seriously the sensuous interrelationships between body-mind-environment” (p. 97).

Emplacement

The concept of emplacement joins together the corporeal body, its social production (or embodiment), and the ways that sentence is produced in concert with the physical world. Work by Sarah Pink (2011) demonstrates that emplacement allows scholars to not only understand the means by which bodies are socially constructed and thus create meaning, but to appreciate that the sentient body is connected to the physical world in which human action takes place. In this regard, Pink (2011) calls for a sociology that “bring[s] the biological body into the analysis”; “examine[s] the relationship between the sensing body, movement and human perception”; and “attend[s] to a theory of place as means of comprehending the environments in which the sporting/performing body engages through his/her/[their] participation in training and in public events” (p. 347).

Pink's (2011) work highlights emplacement through her examination of women bullfighters. Here she demonstrates that to understand the bullfighter's position, one must “understand how the competing body is situated in any sport/performative event .. [as a] part of a material, sensory and affective ecology that includes interrelated processes” (p. 353). Likewise, work by Humberstone and Cutler-Riddick, 2015 demonstrates the importance of examining the intersections of environment, embodiment and sensorial feeling. Through a phenomenological examination of older women's yoga practice, they found that the yoga mat itself produced a place of interruption about the potentialities associated with the bodies of older women.

Emplacement proves to be a useful concept for examining the lives of aging athletes, allowing for a nuanced examination of the intersections of aging embodiment and their related sensorial and affectual (dis)positions as they form within particular sporting spaces. The use of emplacement allows this research to be attentive to the ways that the hockey arena and its associated material objects shape embodied aging. It is through these particular emplaced practices that later-life hockey players reject the hockey arena as a place of risk and fear and embrace it as a space of pleasure.

Methods

In order to examine how late(r)-life hockey players navigate both risk and pleasure through their participation in men's hockey, I conducted 18 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with men who identified themselves as hockey players. These narrative-based interviews centered around research participants' engagement with hockey over their life course and how it shaped their understandings of themselves and their aging bodies. The interviews were conducted at a time and place selected by each research participant and were in line with the protocols of the St. Thomas University Research Ethics Board. I initially anticipated that all players would be over the age of 60 years. However, one player, Mark, requested to be included in this work, despite being 54. 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 (Jean-Charles and Raymond) and one Québécois (François). All interview participants lived in Eastern Canada and played hockey in a small city in the region, noted for its aging population.¹ Although most of the men lived within the city limits, several lived in small rural communities outside the city. Because some of the hockey leagues that these men played in included rural teams, many players regularly commuted up to 45 min to play.

All the players, except Henry (66 years), had played hockey from a young age, with most (at least 14 participants) beginning at or before 10 years of age. In spite of this, several had taken time off during early or middle adulthood to focus on their careers and their families. These disruptions were usually short-lived and most returned to play hockey during their 30s or 40s. The research participants had played at various levels throughout their life, including recreational, semi-professional, and professional hockey. Today, most of the men participated in old-timers hockey. In this community, old-timers hockey was marked by two leagues: one for men 35 years and older, and the other for those 45 years and older. Aside from these leagues, some players participated in drop-in or pickup hockey offered during the daytime at a few local arenas. One league, “The Nooners,” was open to men and women of all ages, while another daytime game was specifically for players over 55 years. The latter had a limited number of players (26–36) and selected teams based on the players who arrived at the rink that day. Some players participated in more than one league.

In addition to these interviews, I conducted ethnographic research at old-timers hockey games in the same community. I also participated in a further six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork at a senior men's hockey league in a different community in central Canada. Although I will not draw directly from these observations here, this fieldwork helped to shape my interviews and data analysis, contributing to the trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

I conducted this work using thematic analysis in line with the methodological criteria outlined by Lorelli. The work aimed for trustworthiness by meeting Lincoln and Guba's criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, audit trails and reflexivity (cited in Nowell et al., 2017). To meet these criteria, I first familiarized myself with the research field, conducting observational analysis at the hockey rink and participating in informal conversation with older hockey players. Next, I conducted participant interviews. My research assistant (RA) transcribed these interviews verbatim. I met regularly with my RA to discuss her initial impressions of the work. My RA participated in a preliminary coding exercise, making notes for me on the transcripts about her early thoughts for coding categories. I then coded all the interviews by hand before transferring them to the

¹ Due in part to economic depression, low fertility rates, and large out-migration, this area is aging at a much steeper rate than the rest of the Canadian nation (Statistics Canada, 2014).

qualitative data analysis program NVivo. I coded the data there and looked for broad research themes. According to Nowell et al. (2017), “A theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 8). I reviewed these themes and revised them according to my perception of their importance to this research. The important themes for this work centered around perceptions of risk and injury, pleasure and friendship, and materiality and emplacement.

“I always thought of hockey as a risky sport” (Jim): Navigating risk

An examination of ice hockey and its play at the hockey rink provides important social context for the ways that neoliberal aging discourse is applied to the activities of later-life men, and how they understand and resist this discourse. As a popular Canadian pastime, particularly amongst mid- and later-life men,² ice hockey appears, at least on the surface, to satisfy social pressures to stay fit and active in later life. However, the sport is played on ice, at high speeds, with sharp blades strapped to a player's feet. Given the physical intensity of the game, the potential for incidental contact at high speed with other players, and the likelihood of players falling down, many view the sport as risky, citing its capacity to lead to injury, disability, and even death, with various actors citing the risk of heart attacks as the most troubling aspect of later-life hockey.

Popular culture circulates stories about the health risks associated with middle-aged and older men playing hockey. Headlines in the Canadian press frequently warn of the impending danger of taking up hockey, especially in later life. These headlines announce the potential perils posed by hockey to aging bodies: “Physicians Warn Rec Hockey Players to Get in Shape” (Day, 2015); “Heart Attack Risk Increased for Middle Aged Hockey Players” (CBC News, 2013); and “Skate at Your Own Risk” (Petersen, n.d.). Wikipedia devotes a page to a “List of Hockey Players who Died During Their Playing Careers” (n.d.). Likewise, work by Allain and Marshall, 2019 found that many older curlers³ had retired from hockey in mid-life due to fear of injuries and death, with one research participant stating, “Well, I don't want to go .. to hockey heaven” (p. 10).

The players interviewed here, as well as their families, and even some of their doctors, were well aware of the common-sense discourse, asserting that playing hockey posed a particular health risk for those in later life. In fact, all players, except for Raymond (74 years), spontaneously raised the issue of risk during their interviews. Most players acknowledged the abundance of popular discourse, sometimes including discussions in their own homes, that framed hockey as a potentially dangerous activity for those in later life. Greg (68), a retired counsellor, commented that when people learned that older men were playing hockey, they responded with concern and shock. He stated, “I think that a lot of people, (pause) they have a misconception that you're going to (pause) die on the ice.” Some participants explained that their doctors and wives shared similar preconceptions about hockey and risk.⁴ For example, Reg (62), a retired information technology (IT) worker, asserted that he wasn't worried about a heart attack, but “my

² CARHA Hockey, a program dedicated to providing resources for adult hockey in Canada (including facilitating tournaments, leagues, and insurance), reports that 35% of their members are over 50, and that over 10% are over 70 (T. Broderick, personal communication, April 14, 2020). Although CARHA provides no data on the gender of their participants, there were no women participating in the old-timers hockey league, nor were there any participating in the 55+ day-time league.

³ Like hockey, curling is also played on ice, but it is less physically intense and generally celebrated within popular parlance as a sport for those in later life (See Allain, 2020).

⁴ All participants in this work were married to women or had been married to women. None of these participants identified as gay or queer.

wife always says, ‘don't get hurt’ every time I go out the door [to play hockey].” Reg's doctor also expressed concern about his later-life hockey playing. Reg recalled, “I know when I hit 50, the first thing the doctor told me was, ‘You better stop playing hockey.’”

Aligned with hegemonic or normative expressions of masculinity, which work to defy risk, pain and injury (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Kidd, 2013),⁵ the participants themselves downplayed the risk of hockey, despite popular discourse that might have suggested otherwise. They asserted that many other mundane activities were risky. Stacy (64), a humanities professor, poetically opined, “By the time you get to into your sixties, the warranty on everything is almost off.” Jim (65) reasoned, “I think it's risky, but people can hurt themselves in curling too.” For some participants, public fear about later-life hockey players was the result of too much publicity. Greg explained:

It's like a plane goes down in the world and people are scared to fly. .. And one guy dies on the ice in Calgary of a heart attack, and it's, “Oh my God, you shouldn't be playing hockey!” So when people are [asking] .. “You're still playing hockey?” Uh, yeah. Why not if you can?

Others understood that although hockey might be associated with risk, all human life had a finite end. They believed that lifestyle decisions were of minimal importance. Les, a former car dealer who also copped to eating poorly and consuming too much alcohol, frankly stated, “The way I look at it is if I drop dead on the ice, I was going to drop dead somewhere anyway.” Fred, who had retired from technical sales, remarked, “If you're going to have a heart attack, you can have a heart attack doing just about anything.” Even Denis (60), a retired biologist who had suffered a hockey-related heart attack in his 40s, rationalized his return to hockey, stating, “I think it was just a freak accident.”

Even as interview participants explained their seemingly risky hockey-playing behaviour as no more risky than other physical activities associated with regular life, such as shovelling snow, they also frequently spoke of the concessions they made in order to continue playing. Many spoke about being attentive to their bodies, receiving regular medical care, understanding their age, watching their weight, and staying active as ways of mitigating hockey risk. For example, Andrew (67), whose wife was a nurse, stated, “I get a medical every year.” Frank (71) told me that “the trick is, don't put yourself into dangerous situations. Don't play recklessly.” Reg allayed risk by watching his weight, explaining, “I'm not really overweight .. so I'm not that concerned.” Norm believed that “listen[ing] to your body” was key. François (61) trusted that “if you're in sort of decent shape, you can sort of go and not fear getting a heart attack or something.”

So even as players understood common-sense discourse that conceptualized their behaviour as potentially risky, the notions of risk, pain, serious injury, and even death were offset by the profound pleasure they found in the act of playing hockey. Jim described the balance between pleasure and the risk of pain, saying, “Even though it [hurts], I don't mean pain. .. It's more like a dull ache and it doesn't last. .. but I'm really pleased I can still do this.” Lee Monaghan's (2001) finding that “non-injurious, self-inflicted and self-controlled ‘pain’ is embraced and re-interpreted as enjoyable” (p. 345) was also echoed by participants here. For Frank, a lifetime recreational hockey player, the risk of painful injury was ever-present in later-life hockey, but it was “enjoyment” that kept him playing:

You catch a foot, catch .. a blade in a little groove .. and down they

⁵ Although issues associated with gender and specifically expressions of masculinity help to frame the participants' understandings of pleasure and risk, I have bracketed a deeper discussion of this in this paper in order to examine it in a more fulsome way with another group of participants in another publication.

go and their leg is broken or that sort of thing. So we do see some pretty serious injuries. The first year I played [old-timers hockey] there were concussions, broken legs, broken arms and ah, and anyway .. it's just done for enjoyment.

For at least three players, the intersection of risk and pleasure conjured on-ice death fantasies. For example, Sandy (61), a professional artist, used this death fantasy to do boundary work, expressing that the “social imaginary of the fourth age,” or a time of dependency and decline (Higgs and Giljeard, 2019), was far riskier than dying on the ice:

Intellectually, I know [the risk] is still .. there, but I am not worried about it now. .. I am going to die someday and I don't want to be one of those (*pause*) a person that's in an old folks' home sort of sitting in a comatose state in a chair. .. 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.

Monaghan's (2001) work has found that within bodybuilding communities, medical discourse used the language of risk to make transgressive bodies visible and impose normalizing judgements on them. In spite of this, the bodybuilders in his study, much like the older hockey players here, reframed these judgements, viewing their own bodies and actions in some ways as “healthy,” although the bodybuilders discussed health as an external body marker, while the hockey players privileged notions of health as internal. Specifically, some of the hockey-playing participants downplayed notions of risk, arguing instead that they themselves were not risky subjects, or they had taken the necessary precautions and self-care to mitigate some potential risks associated with playing hockey in later life. For most others, however, hockey was not conceptualized as a risky activity at all, but instead reimagined as an activity associated with pleasure, youthful vitality, and later-life health.

“I just love it, that's the bottom line” (Jean-Charles): Experiencing pleasure

Given the associated risks of playing hockey in later life and its status as a leisure activity, all players played hockey because the sport, and its spaces, were tied to feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. Like the participants in Phoenix and Orr's (2014) work, the participants framed this pleasure in various ways. Drawing from their categorizations of pleasure (described above), the participants found that hockey in later life produced both sensual and immersive forms of pleasure. Specifically, these included being physically engaged and healthy, generating physical competencies, developing comradery, and increasing their vitality. Remarkably, participants explained that hockey played in later life, unmoored from the intense competition associated with boys' and men's youthful sport, had the increased capacity to generate these forms of pleasure.

Instead of hockey being conceptualized as a risky activity in old age, participants imagined it as a sport tied to vitality, frequently claiming that hockey produced a nostalgic engagement with their youth, and perpetuated feelings of being young. Peter (66), a retired civil servant, described the joy of playing hockey with children:

There's still a passion there, that little boy in me, you know? .. The passion, you know, to see a little kid smile or put their arms up when they score. That's the Canadian way and — at least I grew up that way.

Stacy described it pithily: “Everybody's hurting, but for that one hour, you're 12 again.” Reg claimed, “It makes you feel younger that you can still play hockey.” Significantly, this celebration of youthful vitality was not a longing to actually be young, but an embodiment of freedom, fun, and friendship popularly connected to youth.

Thus, in spite of public, medical professional, and family concerns, all participants actively pursued hockey in later life, and framed this decision as one that evoked pleasure due to its capacity to produce health. Jim, a retired mine worker, summed up this attitude, stating, “I feel good for myself. .. It makes you feel young. .. I feel good that I've taken care of myself well enough that I, I can go out there and still skate and play.” Jean-Charles (63) echoed this, remarking, “It's actual[ly] a physical exercise. .. It's basically important to me. .. It keep[s] me active and I just love it, that's the bottom line.” Fred (68) reiterated this, claiming that hockey “get[s] your heartrate going. .. You enjoy and get satisfaction from [it], [and that] will help you live longer. And be happier!”

Although popular discourse frequently finds hockey to be a potentially risky activity in later life, the players did not think of the pleasure of exercise and staying active that they found in hockey as (a) neoliberal exercise. They did not tie these activities to their own performances of healthy later-life activity. That is, they did not aim to demonstrate their individual responsibility to care for themselves. Nor did they understand hockey as an activity that might contribute to later-life dependency (Katz and Laliberte-Rudman, 2005). Instead, they framed hockey as “fun,” “enjoyment,” “joy,” and “passion.” Even Fred, who attributed hockey to extending his life, claimed that it was the pleasure he found in hockey itself that would result in this extended life, not the physical activity. Other hockey players focused on the bodily sensations of staying active and the achievements associated with pushing yourself. Stacy stated, “It's an adrenaline rush, endorphins and all that stuff. .. It's just great! I feel purged afterward.” Norman (66), a politician and retired retail store worker, also cited chemical changes in the body to explain his own joyful experience as a hockey player: “It's an endorphin. It's just like, after you get off the ice you get this high because. .. you're pushing your system, sometimes to its full extent.” Reg put it simply, “It just makes you feel good that you know, you're working hard.”

Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009 examination of “positive ageing identity” documented the ways that Fred, their research participant, produced an identity as an older man that contrasted representations of older age involving “negative images of deterioration and emptiness” (p. 232). Instead, Fred found that by presenting a narrative of self that was “fit and healthy” and “leisurely,” he was able to resist ageist assumptions about later life and present himself in a positive way. Likewise, the interview participants here found that part of the pleasure associated with later-life hockey came from their ability to reimagine later life as a positive time, where the release from early-life sports competition allowed them to develop new skills and identities and take pleasurable satisfaction in sport. Norman explained:

You focus more on the exercise and the fun, and the social end of it instead of competitiveness. .. That was a relief! .. It's your time and .. you can take it easy, but we're still going to have fun, and you're going to play to the best of your ability at times and when .. [you] see someone that doesn't have a lot of experience, they don't have a lot of skating skills, but they're playing, and they make a great play, you celebrate that.

Similarly, archivist Jean-Charles opined, “I got to take satisfaction in other ways [than physical prowess].” He expanded, “Just making smart plays .. setting up another player. Just preventing a goal, making a good defensive play. [It's] the small things now.” Or as Reg succinctly stated, “It's definitely less competitive now. .. We're just there for fun!”

The freedom from competition allowed these men to enjoy the pleasure of watching others succeed and develop friendships. All the participants spent time discussing the importance of building friendships and the love and joy they gave and received as a result. Greg, a retired educational counsellor, explained the relationship between competition, achievement and friendship. Calling the game “buddyship and bullshit,” he explained, “It's just so enjoyable .. the speed of the game, the way you can move on the ice. .. I think the joy I get out of it

now is setting up someone who hasn't played a lot of hockey." Many understood that in later life there was pleasure in helping others realize their goals. This was a decided shift from the individualistic sports environment often associated with their early lives.

The relationships formed under these conditions contributed to the pleasure men found in the hockey arena. The notion of comradery pervaded most conversations and was almost always linked to joy and pleasure. As François pointed out, "The beers you have after the game, and chatting with the guys. .. It's fun." Norman described the importance of having hockey leagues that could accommodate the unique needs of the baby boomers,⁶ including not playing at night, decreasing competition, and requiring less travel. He stated, "So I think the main thing is [comradery]. ... Just [to] play with some guys .. that you get to know, the stories, you know, exercise and you know, having fun." Although most players did not describe their on-ice friendships as particularly deep, they all valued connecting and having fun with other men the same age. As Henry, a player who didn't even learn to skate until his late teens, explained:

It makes a community for us older people. .. When you get older you start to lose friends and you have to constantly make new ones, and sometimes it's hard to find that group with your own interests. .. You can build those relationships.

In this regard, later-life bonds of friendship were a valuable resource and one of the sources of pleasure for later-life hockey players. The love of hockey as an exercise was intimately connected to the material conditions in which it was played. The dressing room, the cold, the ice, the post-match beer, the team, and even ice skates and pucks facilitated the unique understandings and meanings of pleasure associated with later-life hockey.

"The hockey part is the joy" (Sandy): Pleasured emplacement

The concept of emplacement helps critical scholars of aging to be attentive to the unique conditions in which pleasure develops and its impact on the body. Importantly, the pleasure associated with playing hockey is not just produced internally, but is the result of hockey's connection with material objects (e.g., skates, pucks, sticks, jerseys, etc.) and the physical spaces associated with the game (e.g., the rink, the ice, and the dressing room). Players were better able to understand their own bodies, engaging notions of embodied pleasure, when they were attentive to the material and spatial conditions that facilitated their hockey playing. As Pink (2011) argues, "The body is part of a wider whole, rather than an isolate" (p. 346). She asserts that we come "to know *in relation to* the other elements of the environment" (emphasis in original, p. 348). In this regard, the material conditions and spaces in which the game is played mediate a player's experience of pleasure.

For example, the men routinely spoke about the act of skating as tied to joyful embodiment. Skating provided freedom and speed for older men who often did not experience these things in their everyday lives. Frank described skating as being in a "flow" state,⁷ while Fred explained, "The thrill for me was when I was skating, it was .. just like I was flying. And now that I'm older, I don't have the speed, I got to take satisfaction [in being able to do this]." Sandy stated, "Because of the ice, and the skates, and the speed that you can move, and the gliding, and it's almost like a dance out there. .. This being (*pause*) like after ...

fifty years of skating." Or as Reg said:

It just feels good to be out there and get out to skate around first and loosen up .. it just feels good. And to work up a sweat .. when you get off the ice and look at your shirt and it's just drenched and you say, "Well you worked pretty hard out there, that's good!" And so I say it just makes you feel good that you know you're working hard.

Finally, Greg declared, "What attracted me to play hockey .. it's the skating moreso than anything else. The fact that you have a few hockey skills that get you out skating makes it more enjoyable." Greg went on to describe the delight he found in skating on a lake near his cottage: "The freedom to go anywhere. It was amazing. And .. the ice .. not a ripple. Fresh air. You feel so good after something like that .. even the coolness in the arena [is enjoyable]."

The findings here in many ways parallel those found by Davis et al. (2016). Davis et al. examined the experiences of aging equestrians, finding that horse and rider together helped to create stories that countered aging decline. They stated, "We emphasize how the horse and rider in older equestrians can actually become a form of social capital to counter the medicalization of and be repositioned as a programme for physically active and successful ageing" (p. 339). In my research, it became clear that the material objects associated with hockey came together with the hockey player to create joyful embodiment. Frank aptly expressed this idea, saying, "If it's flowing good, I'm turning better .. You need to keep your equipment in shape too. Keep those skates sharp." He explained, "When you do get them sharpened you notice a real difference — 'Hey! I'm turning better, my balance is better.' I don't worry about getting injured." Likewise, for Sandy the fun of hockey lay in the hockey puck. He admitted, "It's strange, but this you know this—this little black disk, it's forcing me to skate hard and to get my heart pumping and to start sweating, just you know just chasing that thing, and that part of the game, that part of that activity." He thoughtfully concluded, "You know, if that wasn't there, I wouldn't get my heart rate up. I wouldn't."

Finally, it is within the material space of the hockey arena, complete with its dressing rooms, showers, bathrooms and ice pads, where older hockey-playing men find pleasure. This space, marked by cramped conditions, bawdiness, nudity, and the sour odor of sports gear, produced a convivial safety, where they carefully celebrated bodies (many players spoke about how important it was not to hurt someone's feelings), shared a beer, and told some stories. Mark, who explained that his team regularly produced an online report about both the game and the locker room, stated, "The dressing room environment is just as important as what you do on the ice." Later, he explained, "I can't tell you how many times I've heard guys say, 'If it wasn't for the half hour before and the hour afterward, I wouldn't be playing hockey.'" Although most players were careful to point out that there was little depth to their locker room relationships, the friendships forged there, through the participants' proximity and their shared experiences as aging hockey players, worked to facilitate this pleasure. Like the findings by Humberstone and Cutler-Riddick (2015) on older women's embodied experiences of yoga, the dressing room was a space where "the older athletes are not ignoring the onset of later life but rather are managing their identities through the pursuit of their sport" (p. 1235). Similarly, later-life hockey players didn't adopt a "mask of aging," as that would have been challenging in this space, but instead found ways of celebrating their bodies and locating them as sites of pleasure and fun.

Conclusion

In this work, I examined the experiences of older hockey-playing men. In spite of the fact that popular culture positions the sport of hockey as risky, potentially leading to disability and even death, this work explored the various ways that these men resisted this understanding. Hockey-playing men repositioned hockey as a healthy and fun

⁶ The baby boomers are the generation of children born directly following World War II (1946 to 1965) (Statistics Canada, 2015).

⁷ Sandy described a flow state as "being fearless and being 'loosey goosey,' as Don Cherry would say." The American Psychological Association (2020) calls flow "a state of optimal experience arising from intense involvement in an activity that is enjoyable, such as playing a sport, performing a musical passage, or writing a creative piece."

activity, suitably appropriate for those in later life. Within the sport of hockey, older men found fun, pleasure and enjoyment. Importantly, this pleasure was not just located in any form of physical activity, but was emplaced both in the material objects of hockey (its skates, pucks, etc.) and its material space (the ice rink, the dressing room).

This work importantly explicates four ideas. First, following from Phoenix and Orr (2014), it demonstrates the importance of pleasure in producing acts of resistance to neoliberal health strategies. Interestingly, it was not the increasing pressures placed on the old to stay fit and active (Katz, 2005) that kept them involved. Instead, it was their love of the activity, the feelings of vitality, the pleasure they found in pushing their bodies, and the relationships they formed through playing hockey that kept them coming back. Second, playing hockey allowed these men to further resist aging stories that focused on physical decline, and instead reposition their later-life physical activity as better and more enjoyable than the sports they played when they were younger. These participants consistently emphasized the benefits of later-life hockey practice, positioning it as superior to the games they played in their youth. Their age allowed them release from hegemonically masculine sports ideals focused on individuality, competition and winning at all costs. This release not only increased the pleasure that these men found in the game, but also produced a more communal and convivial relationship to the sport. Many men, for example, commented on the joy they found in aiding other men to succeed on the ice and reach hockey goals that they might have not been able to reach without the aid of their teammates. In this regard, later-life pleasure allows researchers to imagine new and more principled ways of doing sport, ones that break with the normative gender and sport practices associated with younger life stages. Third, this work highlights how the materiality of hockey — its objects and spaces — produces these pleasures. It is the objects and spaces of hockey that facilitate this pleasure. Whether gliding on the ice, chasing a black disk, or joking with friends, the pleasure of physical activity was deeply emplaced in the material culture and associated spaces. This emplacement allowed these men to capture the nuanced ways that hockey, both in its social and physical actions, was connected to bodily pleasure. In this regard, Tulle's (2008) assertion that “exercise should be reframed as a means of giving social actors the potential to renegotiate the meaning of physical competence, and particularly to bring out its more creative dimension” (p. 346) holds true.

Finally, it is imperative that we view those in later life as more than “risky subjects” and “human capital” (Shimoni, 2018). This is especially important during the COVID-19 global health pandemic, which sees some Western nations call to “cull” the old and “restart the economy” (e.g., Newman, 2020; Roberts, 2020). We need to examine the lives of the old — both the young-old and the old-old — as complex and dynamic, filled with needs, wants and desires. An examination that draws attention to the pleasure of being old disrupts neoliberal approaches to aging, especially those that see the old as a burden on the young (Calasanti, 2020). In this regard, the emplaced pleasures of the old force us to reconsider common-sense ideas that suggest the lives of the old have no future (Sandberg and Marshall, 2017), and instead generate aging futurities.

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Statement of ethical approval

This work was approved by the Research Ethics Board at St. Thomas University, 2019-08.

Statement of conflict of interest

The author listed above declares no conflict of interest financial or otherwise produced through this research.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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