Sport Competition in Later Life and its Psycho-social Influences on Aging Well

Research Area (Sports Sociology)

Prof. Yvonne Harahousou

Democritus University of Thrace
Educational Opportunities for Young Researchers

Title of the PhD program offered by your University
- PhD in Physical Education & Sports

Number of years:
- no less than three (3) years (fiscal years)
- no more than six (6) years (fiscal years)

ECTS dedicated to research work

Main research in the area of sport
- Maximizing sports performance
- Prevention, intervention & rehabilitation
- Physical activity & Recreation
- Any discipline including in the program
• **Inter-University Cooperation**
• Joint Master of Sciences & PhD Program on “Exercise & Quality of Life”
• Annual International Conference on PE & Sport
• Participation in EU research program “PASEO” Physical Activity for Sedentary older adults (EAHC)
• Socrates/Erasmus-Leonardo da Vinci A
• **Future plans / developments**
  (Participation in EU projects in the area of Leisure, physical activity, women, management, sociology)
Participation in Erasmus &
Demographics of Older Adults

- The shifting demographics of the past 50 years, have lead to an increasingly aging population in developed countries. This increased life expectancy however, is not always accompanied with aging well.
- Although a decline in health problems and disease rate is evidenced today in the older population, this does not seem essential to aging well (Montross et al., 2006; Reichstadt et al., 2007).
- People age differently within their personal life contexts and histories, & therefore issues of heterogeneity and diversity should be considered in reference to aging well (Calasanti, 1996).
Abstract

- The shifting demographics of the past 50 years, have lead to an increasingly aging population in developed countries. Many older people feel isolated and participation in competitive sports provide an alternative to feelings of isolation, while keep them interested and engaged in life. Sports may also fulfil other cognitive or psycho-social needs. Older athletes perhaps present an ideal model for aging well, as a result of their ability to maintain high levels of physical, cognitive & social skills. The lifespan developmental theory of selective optimization with compensation seems to apply to the competitive sports participation of older adults. Findings from a Greek study comparing senior athletes to non-athletes are also presented that reveal the important role of being an athlete versus non-athlete on aging well.
Sports Participation in Older Adults

- For many older people the shifting demographics are accompanied by a social trend that isolates them from other people (Everingham, 2003).

- For a growing number of older adults, sports provide an alternative to feelings of isolation & keep them interested and engaged in life.

- Being a member of a sports club can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction & enjoyment.
Who are the older athletes?

• Older athletes can be highly experienced veterans of a specific sport (Smith & Storandt, 1997) or recreational athletes or people returning to a sport after many years of absence.

• Older Athletes are “the physically elite elderly”, and although constitute an atypical life choice most would agree that it is a sign of “successful aging”
Are older athletes aging well?

• Older athletes have been presented as an *ideal model for aging well*, as a result of their ability to maintain high levels of physical & cognitive skills (Hawkings et al., 2003).

• Senior athletes perhaps are the *best examples* of the many positive effects of exercise on healthy aging, who continue to exhibit high levels of mobility and independence, as well as improved *quality of life*.
Motives for sport participation

- A desire to actively *resist the dominant negative stereotypes* associated with aging (Flatten, 1991)

- The need to *feel empowered* to live a fulfilled and healthy life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000)

- A desire to *delay as long as possible the negative effects* of old age (McIntyre et al., 1992)

- A desire to *experience community* (Adair & Vamplew, 1997)
Continues...

- An *interaction & negotiation of all* these motives (Dionigi, 2004)
- Community experiences (Lyons & Dionigi, 2007) such as:
  - A *shared sporting interest*,
  - *Comrades* in continued activity,
  - *Relevant life purpose*,
  - *Giving back*
- Other motives found by (Jones, 2009) are:
  - *Camaraderie* (Shared purpose)
  - *Recognition* (Public recognition of accomplishments)
  - *Physical benefits* (Cardiovascular benefits & low risk of dying)
  - *Travel* (incidental benefit of competition)
Perspectives of Aging well

• Aging well is more than the mere absence of disease or infirmity and is defined by all aspects of personal well-being, including mental well-being, maintenance of an active lifestyle, good supportive relationships, and life satisfaction (Ng et al., 2009).

• A more recent perspective that broadly encompasses the various cognitive, behavioral and motivational mechanisms for aging well is the life span developmental theory of **selective optimization with compensation (SOC)**.
Life span developmental theory

- During this process, older individuals select appropriate and achievable developmental pathways, & then optimize their personal and social resources. This is done in order to maximize opportunities for goal attainment and to compensate through substitutive processes to maintain functioning in a given domain (i.e. sports) in the face of declining resources (Freund & Baltes, 1998).
Mental efficacy & aging well

- Mental functioning entails a variety of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that determine the capacity for aging well.
- Among them, the availability of coping resources may influence the appraisal of older adults’ situation and enable them to deal adequately with the demands of their later life.
- Expertise can compensate for cognitive losses, as expertise remain intact with age & in some cases increases (Beisgen & Kraitchman, 2003).
- Coping resources such as control (Heckhausen & Schulz (1995), resilience (Bernhard & Werner, 2009) and self-esteem (Schieman & Campbell, 2001), have frequently been reported to affect aging well.
Coping strategies for aging well

• **Control**, according to lifespan theory, relates to the manner in which people perceive and strive to maintain as decreasing amounts of it are available to them in later life (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

• **Resilience** is also understood as a kind of plasticity influencing the ability to recover and achieve psychosocial balance after adverse experiences.

• **Self-esteem**, defined as self-assessment of one’s level of self-concept, is significantly correlated with life satisfaction (Choi & Paek, 2002) and its role as a determinant of subjective well-being is well-established (George, 2000).
Social Support for Aging well

• Social support evolves from interaction within a social network. Social network may be thought of in terms of structures, while social support is a form of functional behaviour taking place within the structure (Antonucci, 1990)

• A variety of social contacts & support were found to promote aging well, including telephone contact, visits with families and friends, participation in religious group & attendance at meetings of organization
• **Self-empowerment**, with the assistance of a peer group, is also an effective health promotion strategy for general physical and mental health. In contrast, social isolation or the lack of a strong social network places older people at risk of poor health (Haper, 1994).

• **A negative relationship between mental health and social support** suggests that those with reduced psychological functioning may withdraw from their normal social interactions Pachana, et al. (2008).
Findings of a Greek study on the effect of psychosocial parameters on aging well between veteran athletes (n=161) & older adults (n=259)

- All **Mental Efficacy** parameters but the **Spheres of Control** appeared to have significantly higher means in Veteran athletes than in older adults.
- In the composite **Spheres of Control** parameter, veterans outweighed significantly older adults only in the **personal control** variable.
- In the **Social Support parameters** significant differences appeared in the **social contact** and **network type** with veterans to outweigh older adults, while **availability of help & voluntary participation** appeared to have the reverse order.
- **Perceived Life Satisfaction & Life appraisal (Aging well)** appeared to have significant higher means in Veterans than in older adults.
• MANOVA analysis showed significant effects of veteran athletes versus older adults in mental efficacy, social support & aging well parameters.

• **Gender** showed significant main effects only on mental status, control & contact with others parameters.

• **Cohort** showed significant main effects on all mental parameters, but self esteem, all social support & aging well parameters.
LINEAR REGRESSION RESULTS

- **Perceived Life Satisfaction & Life appraisal** (Aging well) among older Greeks (veterans & non-veterans combined) is predicted to a level of 54% & 48 respectively by **Mental Efficacy Parameters** and 40% & 35% by **Social Support Parameters**. The strongest predictors are the mental status for the former and social contacts for the latter.

- **Mental Efficacy parameters** have greater predictive value of Life Satisfaction, Life Appraisal (Aging well) than Social Support parameters.
Open Questions

• What does aging well mean for different categories of sport involvement?
• Does aging well differ in older adults who have a primary sports involvement versus secondary sports, sport consumers, sport producers?
• Are motives of participation different in seniors who participate in different sports (i.e. athletics versus sport games and/or team sports versus individual ones)?
• Do motives of participation differ in female senior athletes versus male senior athletes?
• What kind of sports allow them to still compete as seniors. Does this apply to women as well?
Actual Forms of Interplay

Please, describe specific forms of interplay (qualities, aims, meanings, and effects) related to the topic of your presentation.
Enhancing Synergies

- Psychological & cognitive assessment of senior athletes across European countries: a comparative study (synergies among sports, gerontology, & psychology depts)
- Socio-cultural assessment of senior athletes across European countries: a comparative study (synergies among sports, gerontology, & sociology depts)
- Policies for competitive sports involvement of older adults across Europe. Comparing good-practices on policies.