Birds of a Feather Stay Active Together: A Case Study of an All-Male Older Adult Exercise Program

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In this article, the authors report the results of a case study examining a group-based exercise program for older adult men. The purpose of the investigation was to identify the elements of this program responsible for its appeal. Interviews, conducted with a purposely sampled subset of program members, were subject to content-analytic procedures. Participants identified social connectedness (reflected by themes of demographic homogeneity, support and care, customs and traditions, and interpersonal comparisons) and supportive leadership behaviors (constituted by communication, the provision of choice, and individualized attention) as major attractions in the program. A few participants also noted the challenge that exists when a program is seen by some as being a social program that provides opportunities for exercise and by others as an exercise program that provides opportunities for socializing. Findings are discussed in relation to contextual factors associated with older adult men’s involvement in physical activity programs.

*Keywords*: group-based physical activity, older adulthood, social connectedness, leadership behaviors, identity

In recent years, researchers have exhibited an increased interest in the physical activity patterns of older adults (e.g., Conn, 1998; Lloyd & Little, 2010). These researchers have focused primarily on aging women’s experiences with physical activity (Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003), noting, among other things, that many women prefer to exercise outside of the company of men (e.g., Lloyd & Little, 2010). By way of contrast, few researchers have considered older adult men’s experiences with physical activity (Fennell & Davidson, 2003).

Older adult men represent one of the least active demographic groups (Kern, Reynolds, & Friedman, 2010). Identifying elements of exercises programs that older adult men consider appealing holds the potential to inform our understanding of the activity levels demonstrated by this demographic. In the current study, we report the results of a case study of a group-based exercise program for older adult men that had facilitated a high degree of program adherence. Our purpose in

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conducting this study was to identify the elements of this program that members believed responsible for its appeal.

**Physical Activity, Group-Based Exercise Contexts, and Personal Preferences**

Regular physical activity is associated with a number of physical and psychological benefits (Blumenthal et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2003). Unfortunately, the prevalence of physical activity is known to decrease over the course of adulthood (Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000). As a result, the elderly represent the least active age group (Kern et al., 2010), with fewer than 25% of individuals over the age of 65 engaging in 30 min of moderate physical activity on 5 or more days per week (Schoenborn & Adams, 2010).

Enrollment in group-based exercise programs represents a popular and potentially effective means of increasing levels of physical activity (Dishman & Buckworth, 1996). As such, engagement in these programs holds the potential to be instrumental in leading an active and healthy lifestyle. The results of prominent meta-analytic reviews suggest that individuals are more likely to sustain their involvement in physical activity programs if they are provided the opportunity to exercise with others in social, or group-based, settings rather than on their own (Carron, Hausenblas, & Mack, 1996; Dishman & Buckworth, 1996). In line with this body of evidence, group-based physical activity programs have been identified as a particularly effective means of promoting sustained physical activity involvement among older adults (Estabrooks & Carron, 1999).

Older adults have been found to prefer exercising in groups that are composed primarily of other older adults and dislike exercising in groups of people that are composed of younger individuals (Beauchamp, Carron, McCutcheon, & Harper, 2007). Consistent with the finding that older adults prefer to exercise with others of their own age, practitioners have come to recognize the value of offering exercise classes exclusively for older adults (Estabrooks & Carron, 1999).

In addition to highlighting age-congruent preferences among older adults, recently researchers have discovered that both men and women exhibit a relative preference for exercising within single-gender (i.e., gender-segregated) as opposed to mixed-gender (i.e., gender-integrated) physical activity groups (Dunlop & Beauchamp, 2011). Consistent with the finding that many people prefer to exercise in gender-segregated contexts, a number of programs now provide increased opportunities for women to exercise together, outside the company of men (Kerksick et al., 2009). Programs for older adult men who wish to exercise in gender-segregated contexts, however, remain relatively limited.

Gender-segregated exercise contexts may be preferable to gender-integrated contexts for a number of reasons. When examining women’s reasons for engaging in physical activity in gender-segregated contexts, Lloyd and Little (2010) reported that their participants believed that such women-only environments contributed to their sense of security and ease, even claiming that camaraderie was something that did not happen “in the midst of men” (p. 378). It is possible that men hold similar perceptions of gender-segregated contexts. In addition, it is possible that older adult men hold a particularly strong desire to exercise in gender-segregated
contexts. As Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, and Warin (2007) noted, the reduction in physical prowess evident in older adulthood raises several challenges for men striving to identify with the hegemonic masculine ideal. For these older adult men, threats to their sense of physical ability may come from many sources, one of the most potent being the perceptions held by, and comparisons made to, their female peers. Indeed, if an older adult man has come to rely on physical ability as a constituent of his identity, few events would be more threatening to his masculinity than the belief of parity or even inferiority in physical functioning between himself and the women around him.

**Study Overview**

In light of the potential for group-based exercise programs to contribute to the physical and psychological health of older adults (Estabrooks & Carron, 1999), a general preference for age-congruent (Beauchamp et al., 2007) and gender-segregated (Dunlop & Beauchamp, 2011), exercise contexts and the relative dearth of all-male older adult exercise groups, research designed to examine the beneficial elements of group-based physical activity programs for older adult men is clearly warranted. Such efforts stand to provide a window into the health and lives of older adult men while also informing future intervention-based initiatives. We were, however, unaware of any published studies that had examined group-based exercise programs designed for this population. As a result, we sought to examine the beneficial elements of an all-male older adult exercise program by conducting a case study of the Lively Lads fitness program. (All names reported in this manuscript, including the name of the Lively Lads program, as well as participants’ names, are pseudonyms.)

At the time that this case study was conducted, 45% of the Lively Lads membership had been regularly active in the program for 10 years or longer, and approximately 70% of the group had been active in the program for at least 5 years. As such, we felt that we could gain important insights into the success of this program by assessing members’ perceptions of its most attractive features. In conducting this case study, we adopted a social-constructionist perspective to allow for an understanding of the salient features in this program from the point of view of its members (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Social constructionism is a particularly appropriate approach when examining a topic on which little is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)—in this case all-male older adult exercise programs. Before presenting the results of our study, we first provide a brief history of the Lively Lads program.

**The Lively Lads Fitness Program**

Located in a moderately affluent municipality in western Canada, the Lively Lads fitness program began in the mid-1980s. The formation of this program was due largely to the efforts of Richard, who, having grown tired of traditional exercise programs, sought to establish a fitness program that catered to his own demographic. With this in mind, Richard recruited several of his acquaintances to form a running group for older adult men. At the time of its conception, there were approximately 10 members in this program.
In the years that followed, the Lively Lads program grew steadily in size. Along with this increase in size came a greater diversity in members’ physical abilities and preferences. During the mid-1990s, when this increased diversity became coupled with the decreased mobility of its founding members, the Lively Lads transitioned from a running group into a program of stationary aerobic and strength-training activities. This shift roughly coincided with the emergence of a new leader, Phillip, and Richard’s recession from a leadership role in the program. Acting as both the program coordinator and an instructor, Phillip emphasized building and maintaining group cohesion. Members were encouraged to arrive before the class to converse with one another and stay after class for further socialization. The Lively Lads also adopted a greater philanthropic presence in the community as Philip encouraged members to volunteer for various causes throughout the area.

At the time this study was conducted, Lively Lads had 132 members. The program was restricted to men of 60 years of age or older. Members were relatively ethnically homogeneous, with the vast majority being of European descent. Aside from one class per week that was delivered by a paid instructor otherwise unaffiliated with the program, classes were led by volunteer members of the Lively Lads. The classes themselves ranged in size from approximately 30 to 70 people and were 50–60 min in length.

Method

Participants and Procedure

In 2008, Phillip, after reading a newspaper article related to the second author’s research on exercise groups, contacted our laboratory and expressed an interest in meeting. Subsequently, the first author was invited to meet Phillip and observe a Lively Lads class. Recognizing the uniqueness of this sample and its potential to advance understanding of older adult men’s experiences with physical activity, we subsequently proposed conducting a case study on Phillip’s program.

Before we commenced data collection, we obtained ethical approval for this study from our institutional review board. The data collected from this study consisted of 19 semistructured interviews conducted with a purposively sampled selection of Lively Lads program members (M ± SD age 77.12 ± 8.19 years). The current study’s sample size is characteristic of other work exploring perceptions in exercise contexts (e.g., Lloyd & Little, 2010). In addition, the size of the current sample accords with the guidelines for purposeful sampling presented by Guest, Bruce, and Johnson (2006). The first author (who collected all data) was introduced to the group as a student pursuing a degree in health and exercise psychology. This group was told by Phillip that he was “doing a project” on the program. He attended Lively Lads exercise classes two or three times per week for approximately 2 months. Although a young adult male (i.e., in his 20s), he was invited to participate in classes and did so, making field notes after each session. Through the course of this participation and the informal conversations that occurred before, during, and after classes, he formed a semistructured interview guide.

Each member provided informed consent before being interviewed. Rapport was established with each participant before the interview began through informal conversations that took place during the earlier fieldwork component of the study.
and immediately before conducting the interview (Henderson, 1991). Interviews were conducted at the fitness center in which the Lively Lads classes were held. The average length of these interviews was approximately 40 min. In these interviews, a series of open-ended questions were asked regarding members’ personal history and involvement in the program, their interactions with other group members, and their personal beliefs and attitudes related to physical activity in general and with regard to the Lively Lads program in particular. Interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after they had been completed. After data collection, each participant was provided with a copy of his interview transcript and given the opportunity to verify its content.

**Data Analysis**

Data obtained were analyzed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), allowing salient themes to emerge inductively from the data. The first author classified these data into meaning units representing the independent thoughts, evaluations, or statements given by participants (Tesch, 1990). Next, he reviewed these meaning units and derived a coding manual to capture emerging categories in these data (the coding manual is available from the first author on request, wdunlop@psych.ubc.ca). This manual was used by a trained secondary coder, otherwise unconnected with the study, who coded the entire sample of meaning units. After this independent coding (these coders identified the same theme in 87% of meaning units during this stage), the first author and the secondary coder engaged in dialogue with one another to come to consensus regarding the themes inherent in the remaining 13% of meaning units. Meaning units were then compared within and between categories to ensure that the resulting categories were conceptually distinct (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Results**

In total, the 19 interviews conducted produced 189 pages of double-spaced transcribed text. Within these data, seven themes were identified that reflected the appealing elements of the Lively Lads program. These themes resided within two higher-order categories related to social connectedness and leadership behaviors. The relationships between these themes and categories are depicted visually in Figure 1. In addition to highlighting the attractive features of the program, a few participants noted a potential tension or challenge that exists when the program is seen by some as being a social program that provides opportunities for exercise and by others as an exercise program that provides opportunities for socializing. Following, we summarize each of the themes that emerged from the data, as well as providing a synopsis of the aforementioned perception of divergence in the program’s objective. The number in parentheses immediately following the title of each theme represents the total number of meaning units associated with that theme.

**Social Connectedness (202)**

**Demographic Homogeneity (42).** The majority of members interviewed credited demographic homogeneity as responsible for the program’s appeal. These
members felt most at ease exercising with others on a “man’s level.” For many, this segregated fitness environment was liberating, allowing for an interpersonal dynamic reminiscent of their youth. Individuals of a similar age were preferred because they understood the “aches and pains of the older person.” Furthermore, men were preferred to women in the interest of personal comfort. As one member remarked,

I just think that maybe there’s a male ego thing involved a little bit, but the guys like to be with the guys. Not that they don’t love women but they’d rather be in an all-male class. . . . You can get away with anything that you want. If you make a mistake or if you do something that’s a little embarrassing, it’s not embarrassing when you’re with other men because the same things happen to them, whereas in a mixed class they would probably feel uncomfortable.

**Support and Care (111).** Although many of the interviewees identified demographic homogeneity as the bedrock of the Lively Lads program, arguably the most distinctive element of this program was the degree to which support was proffered among members inside and outside of the class. As one member noted,

But the pleasure is . . . that the guys here, there’s, there’s such a wealth of information, just like a library. You don’t know something, you know so and so knows and there’s a guy here who’s been in business, you know, whatever you want it’s always here and that’s, that’s beautiful.
The provision of information was not the only manner in which support and care were imparted. With older adulthood comes an increased risk of physical illness and injury (e.g., Cattan, White, Bond, & Learmonth, 2005). Ill or injured members would often receive help from ad hoc support groups composed of other members, formed in the interest of helping this individual back to health. This seemed to be a deliberate objective in the program. As one member stated,

You care for the other guys if one of them gets sick... so that brings you closer together, it’s almost like Medicine 101 because we do share that aspect of our lives. If you’ve got a problem and someone asks you to talk about it you say “yeah.”... I think these things lead into these tributaries because of the class.

**Customs and Traditions (27).** Approximately a quarter of members interviewed identified the customs and traditions in the Lively Lads program as an important constituent of its social atmosphere. The most frequent of these customs was intragroup banter. Recognizing this practice, while also highlighting the presumed differences between men and women, Philip said the following:

Men tease the hell out of one another and we’re not offended by it. One woman said, “I can’t believe that some remark was said to somebody [who] then stood up and came back with something that was even worse.” She said that would never happen in a women's class [laughs]. But it’s fun and nobody takes anything seriously, and if we do, we go and talk about it and get it straightened out.

Beyond the banter, arguably the most distinguishing practice of this group occurred after classes. During Philip’s tenure as program coordinator, he implemented a postworkout coffee break. As this practice evolved, a tradition emerged whereby members celebrating a birthday bought the rest of the group cinnamon buns. Approximately half of the members interviewed recognized that this practice had come to reaffirm belongingness within the group while also providing a channel to express gratitude toward other members. Commenting on the significance of this practice, one member remarked,

You know I’ve seen guys when they’ve had a birthday and they’d had to buy the cinnamon buns, we give them the raspberries, and he has to get up and give a little talk. I’ve seen guys with tears rolling down their cheek because they feel so good about the group.

**Interpersonal Comparisons (22).** Several of the Lively Lads members interviewed spoke of the importance of extended interpersonal comparisons among program members. These comparisons were often used as a source of inspiration, providing a guideline for successful aging. Displaying this emphasis, one group member noted,

The younger ones look to the older ones. You know, they look to them as models on how to behave. You know, we’ve got one in class who’s 90, you’ve probably met him. Well the reason he got to 90 is because he’s a sunny guy, you know, he goes to jazz concerts with his wife and all, this is interesting.
Leadership Behaviors (85)

**Leader Communication (30).** As one participant remarked during the course of his interview, “successful programs are normally successful because of the people that run them.” This sentiment was shared by the majority of members. The program coordinator and instructors were often praised for their effectiveness in the program. This effectiveness was perceived to result in part due to their ability to communicate with the membership body. This communication, in turn, was exhibited as instructors tended to serve as fitness and social coordinators, disseminating information among program members, thereby laying the groundwork for the support groups described earlier to form. One program instructor stated,

> It’s kind of neat when they come to me and tell me that they have a problem and they’re going to have to have surgery for something, I can say, well you might want to go and talk to Jacob, or go and talk to somebody else because they went through the same thing.

**Provision of Choice (13)** Several participants recognized the importance of respecting, and attending to, the personal choices of the membership body. Among instructors, Philip was particularly noteworthy for the emphasis he placed on ensuring that members felt their choices and preferences were being recognized. While commenting on a recent initiative he introduced in the program, Philip’s concern for the personal choices and preferences of program members became apparent. He stated that,

> I try and do a questionnaire with the guys every couple of years on things, maybe a specific issue, we try and elicit feedback one way or another. . . . Then you take that feedback and try and do something about it if you’re able to and attempt to contribute to the success of the class.

**Individualized Attention (42).** Approximately three quarters of interviewees stressed the importance of making sure that each program member was provided with a repertoire of activities he was capable of performing. This helped members maintain a sense of physical competence. The provision of exercises was most commonly tailored toward the composition of the class such that, if a certain member were ailing in some regard, an appropriately modified version of the exercise would be offered. The focus on individualized attention was exemplified by the comment provided by one of the instructors. Recognizing the importance of personal improvement as opposed to the attainment of an objective standard, he stated that “it’s not how difficult or what level you can get to, to me the major thing is improvement. As far as the class I teach, that’s my reward, if I can see somebody improve that’s good enough for me.”

Due in part to this emphasis, most members interviewed credited instructors with providing them the information necessary to enhance or maintain their health irrespective of their current physical abilities.

**Divergence in Program Objectives (7)**

Balanced against the attractive features of the Lively Lads program, as exemplified in the themes discussed herein, a few participants also noted the potential tension or challenge that exists when the program is seen by some as being a social
program that provides opportunities for exercise and by others as an exercise program that provides opportunities for socializing. Consistent with this observation, we noted a divergence in members’ perceptions of the program’s objectives. For some, the purpose of the program was to provide a challenging exercise routine. As one member stated, “I’m not coming to meet the guys, I’m coming to do the exercise.” For others, the purpose of the program was to provide an opportunity for socialization. This perspective was evident when a member stated emphatically that “the social element . . . is the most important aspect.” Finally, some adopted a more equitable orientation to these objectives, claiming that it was most appropriate to consider the program “50/50—50% is the exercise but the other 50% is the fraternizing afterwards.”

Discussion

Little is known about older adult men’s experiences with group-based physical activity programs. Efforts to understand the aspects of exercise programs that older adult men find appealing can inform the design of effective group-based exercise initiatives. In the current study, we attempted to identify the noteworthy elements of an all-male older adult exercise program in western Canada. To do this, we adopted a social-constructionist perspective (Gergen & Gergen, 2003), allowing members to identify these features in their own words. In turn, members identified social connectedness and leadership behaviors as particularly appealing elements of the Lively Lads program. In addition, a few members noted a tension between themes of social inclusion and a desire for a challenging exercise routine.

Members stressed being uncomfortable exercising in the company of women. As such, they frequently reported that the gender-segregated composition of Lively Lads afforded them an increased sense of camaraderie and security (cf. Lloyd & Little, 2010). Lively Lads members also valued the opportunity to socialize with older adult men inside and outside of the class. These members were conscious of the increased likelihood of social isolation accompanying older adulthood, and many viewed the program as an effective means of buffering themselves from this potential threat. Through these social connections, advice and health-based support were readily accessible. In addition, due to members’ stable and supportive intragroup relationships, positive role models in the program were easily identified.

Instructors were reported to communicate effectively, providing ample direction during class and aiding in the social communication process outside of class. These instructors also sought feedback from members and stressed the importance of addressing the needs of those in the program, thereby maintaining perceptions of physical competence in the membership body. These instructors thus exhibited behaviors that aligned with an autonomy-supportive leadership style (Black & Deci, 2000), characterized by the desire to consider the perspective and feelings of class members, the fostering of opportunities for personal choice, and the absence of coercive pressure and extrinsic rewards. This leadership style has been associated with increased adherence to exercise programs (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006).

The social and inclusive nature of the program was, however, not devoid of tension. A few participants spoke of the need to strike a balance between desires for social inclusion and physical activity standards. Diversity existed within the membership body regarding what form this balance should take. This divergence was viewed by members as being potentially problematic.
In summary, members noted several appealing elements in the Lively Lads program. The all-male environment contributed to the comfort of members, the socialization that occurred was supportive on multiple fronts, and the instruction style bolstered impressions of physical ability. Applied-health researchers seeking to create exercise programs for older men may wish to mirror these elements. Those doing so, however, should be cautious of the tension observed here between desires for social inclusion and standards for physical activity.

In future, researchers are encouraged to consider the influence of gender composition in exercise contexts (on program satisfaction and adherence) in less structured settings than those that exist in formalized exercise groups. These include typical exercise centers (i.e., gyms) where people exercise in the presence of others but, in essence, complete their exercise routine or program on their own (i.e., no interdependence, no shared source of instruction). In addition, future work should examine the perceptions of older adult men enrolled in gender-integrated programs. This work, when coupled with the current findings, will contribute to the study of an underrepresented group in the activity and aging literature, thereby offering new insights into the design of effective exercise programs for aging men.

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