Performance Discourses and Old Age: 
What Does It Mean To Be an Older Athlete?

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Physical performance discourses are concerned with improving fitness and competing to win or achieve a personal best. Older people are commonly not recognized as acceptable or normal subjects of performance discourses because they are traditionally positioned as weak and less able. Yet the number of older people participating in physically demanding competitive sports is increasing. The purpose of this paper is to use a poststructural framework to explore how Masters athletes use performance discourses to define their participation. Interviews and observations were conducted with 138 participants (ages 55–94) of the 8th Australian Masters Games. The findings indicate that performance discourses work both as a medium for redefining what it means to be an older athlete and for re-inscribing normalized constructs of the acceptable older athlete.

Les discours de performance physique sont centrés sur l’amélioration de la condition physique et la compétition dans le but de gagner ou d’obtenir une meilleure performance à vie. Les personnes âgées ne sont pas ordinairement reconnues comme des sujets normaux au sein des discours de performance puisqu’elles sont traditionnellement vues comme faibles et moins capables. Toutefois, le nombre de personnes âgées participant à des sports compétitifs exigeants est en croissance. Le but de cet article est d’utiliser un cadre poststructuraliste pour explorer la façon dont les athlètes sénior utilisent les discours de performance pour définir leur participation. Des entrevues et de l’observation ont été réalisées auprès de 138 participants de 55 à 94 ans lors des 8èmes Jeux sénior australiens. Les résultats indiquent que les discours de performance fonctionnent en tant que médium pour redéfinir « l’athlète sénior » et pour réinscrire des construits normalisés de ce qu’est un athlète âgé acceptable.

In contemporary Western societies, performance discourses provide a pervasive set of meanings through which physical activity, and sport, have become defined and practiced. According to Tinning (1997), the main consideration of “performance orientated discourses is how can performance be improved or enhanced” (p. 102).
Such discourses are concerned with the imperatives of being better, faster, stronger, and fitter. They are concerned with competing to win and pushing the formidable boundaries of one’s personal best. Through the imperatives of enhancing and improving performance, physical activity and sport participation become understood in terms of a means (Tinning). For example, physical activity is understood as a means to improving one’s fitness or skills, and the body is experienced as a machine (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). That is, the body is something to be worked on, trained, compartmentalized, and continuously monitored and managed. For Tinning, “the language of performance discourses is about selection, training, thresholds, workloads, progressive overload, and so forth, implicitly supporting competition, survival of the fittest, and the exclusion of the less fit or able” (p. 102). Discourses about performance are associated with symbols of youth, competitiveness, and athleticism. For example, notions of competitiveness, achievement, masculinity, independence, strength, aggressiveness, and “winning-at-all-costs” frame understandings of mainstream sport in Australia (Cashman, 1995; Lawrence & Rowe, 1986; McKay, 1991; McKay, Hughson, Lawrence, & Rowe, 2000; Vamplew, Moore, O’Hara, Cashman, & Jobling, 1994).

The intelligible subjects of performance discourses are young, strong, and capable (male) athletes. Older people (usually seen as those over the age of 55 years), on the other hand, are traditionally characterized as weak, less able, and less powerful and tend not to be recognized as the “normal” subjects of these discourses. Although the same could be said for women and people with disabilities, our focus is on men and women who are 55 years of age and older. In the past, competitive sports were not commonly available to these older people, but recently there has been a rise in the number of older athletes participating in competitive sports (Dionigi, 2006a). In particular, thousands of older people now compete in physically demanding sports (e.g., basketball, soccer, track and field athletics, swimming, cycling, triathlon, marathon, ice hockey, field hockey, and tennis) at events such as the Masters Games, Veterans competitions, and the Senior Olympics (Dionigi, 2006a, O’Brien Cousins & Burgess, 1992; Olson, 2001; Spirduso, 1995). Although it is assumed that older people participate in a range of competitive activities, such as lawn bowls, golf, bridge, and shuffleboard, we explore how older athletes involved in physically intense sports engage with performance discourses concerned with pushing or working on the body and maximizing physical performance. Our focus, therefore, is on physically demanding sports because such sports are not typically associated with older people; and, when their involvement is recognized, it is commonly defined in terms of fun and friendly participation rather than performance and winning (Dionigi, 2005).

To analyze the talk and actions of these older athletes, we use a poststructural understanding of knowledge and the self. Broadly, we draw on Foucauldian conceptualizations of the self as formed by, and constituted in relation to, discourse (Foucault, 1982). Discourses, as defined by Foucault (1978), are the building blocks or strategies that engender specific disciplines of knowledge and beliefs. These building blocks establish and regulate possibilities for thinking, speaking, and writing and form possibilities for practice. As Wright (2000, p. 153) stated, “It is through discourse that meanings, objects and subjectivities are formed.”
In this article we analyze how older athletes engage with performance discourses to define their participation in competitive sport. In addition, we explore how these discourses make possible, as well as and delimit, particular ways of knowing the older athlete and older people in general. In doing so, this article contributes to sociological work in the area of sport and physical activity concerned with understanding how subjectivities are shaped and formed in relation to discourse. To achieve these aims, we must first explore how performance discourses interconnect with, and are formed in relation to, discourses of aging and physical activity.

Constructions of Aging and Physical Activity

There are numerous understandings and stereotypes of aging and physical activity in Western cultures. This discussion points to two contrasting discourses: first, a traditional medicalized view of aging, and second, a more contemporary (or healthy) discourse about aging. We will discuss how these discourses intersect with performance discourses to influence the conditions of possibility for imagining appropriate physical activity in later life. This discussion provides a foundation for interpreting the multiple meanings made available to older athletes to define their participation in sport.

Aging was perceived as a medical and social problem for most of the 20th century. During this period, images and meanings of aging and older people were predominantly related to notions of ill health, frailty, loss, disability, disengagement, and dependency on the health care system (Blaikie, 1999; Butler, 1969; Bytheway, 1995; Cumming & Henry, 1961). Within the traditional field of gerontology, aging was based on a medicalized model of biological decline. Such medicalized views of aging are deeply embedded in Western societies (Johnson, 1995; Wearing, 1995) and work to position older people as weak, less able, and less powerful.

These negative attitudes toward older people and stereotypes about their inability or ill health were reflected in the types of physical activities and leisure pursuits usually prescribed and promoted for older people (Grant, 2001; Shephard, 1994; Spirduso, 1995). Older people were expected to rest or partake in gentle exercise for therapeutic reasons. Sports and other strenuous activities were allegedly inappropriate or not enjoyable for older people because overexertion was perceived as being life threatening or placing too many demands on the aging body (Grant, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994; Kluge, 2002; Vertinsky, 1995). Subsequently, lawn bowls, gardening, watching television, Bingo, crafts, and bridge have been stereotyped as the appropriate or acceptable leisure activities for older people (Dionigi, 2005; Grant, 2001, 2002; O’Brien Cousins, 2000; Vertinsky). These activities are not readily aligned with the tenets of performance discourses, such as pushing one’s body and maximizing physical performance.

In the latter third of the 20th century, a counter discourse on healthy (or positive) aging emerged in the related fields of gerontology and health care (Bevan & Jeeawody, 1998; Davis, 1994; Rowe & Kahn, 1998), exercise promotion (Laura & Johnston, 1997; O’Brien Cousins, 1998; van Norman, 1995), and leisure (Dupuis, 2002; Fontane & Hurd, 1992). Research, theories, images, and attitudes that celebrate later life as a period for enjoyment, good health, exercise, leisure,
independence, vitality, exploration, challenge, productivity, creativity, growth, and development, rather than focus solely on decline, disengagement, and hopelessness, have contributed to this emerging discourse (Chodzko-Zajko, 2000; Davis; Friedan, 1993; Grant, 2002; Grant & Stothart, 1999; Johnson, 1995; Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; McPherson, 1998; Perls & Silver, 1999; Schulz & Salthouse, 1999).

Governments and private companies have used the knowledge base developed from positive aging research to validate health and fitness promotions for older people (McPherson, 1994). Today there is a push for older people to take preventative measures so that they can remain healthy and live independently for as long as possible. In particular, being physically active (e.g., through leisure and sport) is recognized as a key strategy for older people to enhance their physical, social, and psychological health (Chodzko-Zajko, 2000; Grant, 2002; O’Brien Cousins & Horne, 1999; Shephard, 1997), resist their aging bodies (Gillett & Higgs, 2002), and postpone deep old age (i.e., a period of life primarily characterized by ill health and dependency on others; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Keeping older people physically active is also one way to reduce the health care costs associated with aging populations (Hargreaves, 1994).

Although the encouragement of a physically active later life seems promising, it also raises concerns about ageism and self-responsibility. We argue that, ironically, the positive aging discourse actually contributes to the social oppression of older people and promotes the imperative of self-responsibility concerning health. For example, Rowe and Kahn (1998) argued that in order to age successfully one must: avoid disease and disease-related disability; maintain cognitive and physical function (e.g., through exercise and leisure); and actively engage in life for as long as possible (e.g., by maintaining close relationships and being involved in personally meaningful activities). Indeed, from this perspective, old age is considered undesirable and viewed as something to be delayed or evaded. Although it might not have been Rowe and Kahn’s intention to be ageist, it is well known that viewing the maintenance of physical activity in later life as self-responsibility ignores social constraints and assumes that all older people have the ability, desire, resources, opportunity, (and responsibility) to lead an active, healthy, productive, independent, and leisured lifestyle (Wearing & Wearing, 1990). This assumption of self-responsibility is potentially problematic for older people who might be poor, disabled, physically and/or mentally ill, or rely on the health care system. Therefore, healthy aging and active-living discourses have the potential to contribute to one’s denial of fear of deep old age (Blaikie, 1999), as well as one’s attempt to resist their aging body (Gillett & Higgs, 2000). In contemporary Western cultures, the desire to retain youthfulness, health, and fitness at all ages has become a common theme (Gillett & Higgs, 2000).

With the emergence of these positive aging discourses, the related health- and fitness-promotion movements, and the aging of populations, opportunities for older people to participate in sport have increased. Despite the growing number of older people competing in physically demanding sports, older people are not recognized as acceptable subjects of competitive sport discourses or performance discourses (Tinning, 1997). Historically, competitive sport has been organized for and promoted to young people, especially males (Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Cashman, 1995).

Although physical activity and sport are now encouraged for older people, these positive aging discourses do not promote extremely intense exercise, high
performance, or serious competition. Instead, participation discourses (Tinning, 1997) are being used to describe and legitimize older peoples’ involvement in sport. The language of these participation discourses, according to Tinning, emphasizes fun, involvement, fair play, inclusion, and movement. Participation discourses are also aligned with the underlying philosophies of the Olympic movement and some recreational/social leagues, and they are commonly used to describe other marginalized sporting groups, such as women’s leagues, the Special Olympics, and the Gay Games (Dionigi, 2004).

Participation discourses, with their focus on involvement and enjoyment in contrast to winning and performing, have been taken up by event organizers and promoters to define the involvement of older athletes in sport. For example, the original intention of Masters and Veterans sporting competitions “was to encourage mature-age people to be physically active and make friends through sport” (Adair & Vamplew, 1997, p. 87). Such perspectives of sport have echoed through themes used to promote different events. For instance, the organizers of the 2001 Australian Masters Games used the slogan “Serious Fun” to describe the event, and the 2002 New South Wales Masters Games were called the “The Fun Games.” Similarly, Pepe and Gandee (1992) claimed that the key idea behind the Senior Olympic movement in the United States was “simply to encourage people to participate and share camaraderie” (p. 192). Several researchers of older athletes (e.g., Gill, Williams, Dowd, Beaudoin, & Martin, 1996; Pepe & Gandee, 1992) and past event organizers (e.g., Hurley, 2001) have argued that winning is not the most important aspect of sport when older people are involved. In other words, the dominant discourses about sport for older people emphasize fun and friendship, participation, or friendly competition, rather than serious competition, peak performance and fitness, or winning. Given that performance discourses are traditionally not readily associated with older individuals, our aim is to explore how older athletes negotiate these meanings and with what consequences.

Methods

This article is part of a larger study in which the first author explored the multiple meanings that older adults attached to their experiences in physically demanding, competitive sport (Dionigi, 2004). Four key themes emerged from this larger study: friendship and fun (including a subtheme about fitness), competition, youthfulness, and the aging body (see Dionigi, 2004). Dionigi (2005) used data from the in-depth interviews to examine the broad theme of competition. Specifically, the first author explored the significance of competition to these older athletes as a form of resistance to dominant notions of aging, competition, and, more broadly, leisure in later life. Dionigi (2006b) used data from the in-depth interviews to examine the ways the participants discussed youthfulness and the aging body. She found that older athletes participating in the study expressed a sense of personal empowerment and negotiated their aging identity through their involvement in physically demanding, competitive sport. The ways the talk and actions of these athletes simultaneously reproduced traditional notions of aging, especially how they related to ideas about fitness, were not explored in the earlier studies. In the current article, therefore, we focus specifically on the emergence of themes around improving fitness and competing to win. We elaborate on the uses
and consequences of performance discourses as they are taken up in the talk and actions of older Masters athletes.

The data presented in this article emerged from two stages of data collection. First, the first author conducted field observations and short semi-structured interviews with 110 athletes (an even gender split), ages 55–94, at the 8th Australian Masters Games (AMG). Second, in-depth interviews were held approximately five months after the Games with 28 athletes (15 women and 13 men) ages 60–89. Theoretical sampling, including purposive, convenient, and snowball sampling (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to select groups, settings, and individuals relevant to the aims of the study. The participants were White, English speaking, and middle class—a cohort largely determined and shaped by the demographic of the athletes competing at the Games.

The short semi-structured interviews (see Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and observations (see Adler & Adler, 1998) were conducted on site at various times and locations over the duration of the AMG. The AMG were held over 11 days, offered 61 different sports, and hosted a total of 11,225 athletes, including 2,633 over the age of 55 years (Newcastle & Hunter Events Corporation, 2001). Each interview lasted between 5 and 30 minutes; interviewees were interviewed once only. Interviews were guided by open-ended topics related to meanings of competing in sport, reasons for sports participation, outcomes of involvement, and history of sports participation. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were also observed, with particular attention given to participants over the age of 55 who were competing in physically demanding sports, such as running, triathlon, cycling, swimming, ice hockey, field hockey, soccer, netball, basketball, tennis, squash, badminton, gymnastics, baseball, touch football, and the like. Field notes were recorded at the time of observation and later transcribed.

The in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author in the participants’ homes using the general interview guide approach (see Patton, 1990). The open-ended topics for discussion were sporting history, meanings of competing in sport, reasons for sports participation, current experiences, outcomes of involvement, and plans for future participation. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted; three of the interviews were carried out in pairs (one husband and wife and two pairs of friends). Each participant was initially interviewed once, face-to-face for between 50 and 150 minutes; follow-up phone discussions with five participants, however, provided additional insight into the information given by in-depth interviewees. The data were interpreted using coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and constant comparative (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and thematic analyses (van Manen, 1990).

**Older Masters Athletes’ Engagement With Performance Discourses**

Points of emergence of performance discourses became apparent when the older Masters athletes talked about their participation in competitive sport. Performance discourses emerged from the data in the form of two topics: fitness and competition. The emergence of such themes must be understood in relation to the broader context from which the majority of the participants were drawn. As already
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mentioned, because of the demographic of competitors at the AMG, the majority of older athletes interviewed and observed were English speaking, White, and middle class. We recognize that such a cohort is not representative of all older athletes, for instance, those from working-class backgrounds or non-English speaking cultural contexts. Furthermore, this cohort does not represent older people who might not have the desire, means, finances, or ability to compete in physically demanding sports (Grant, 2002). The middle-class backgrounds of the participants possibly engenders a particular context in which an investment in the imperatives of competition and fitness are the norm (Cashman, 1995), and in which the finances to participate in sports are readily available. It is in relation to such a context of middle-class imperatives and financial privilege that we discuss and examine the participants’ words and actions.

Fitness

Performance discourses emerged in the form of notions of “fitness.” All of the participants talked about being health conscious and believed that their involvement in sport contributed to their physical fitness and psychological health. When asked why they competed in sport, they typically responded: “it keeps me fit,” “it keeps me healthy,” “it keeps you socially, mentally, and physically alive,” “it keeps your mind and body active,” “it’s good for me,” “the longer you keep playing, the fitter and healthier you can stay,” and “the more active you are, the better your health is.” Therefore, the participants spoke about their participation in competitive sport as a means (Tinning, 1997). That is, they perceived sports participation as a means to improving one’s fitness and health. Furthermore, the participants mobilized contemporary health-promotion discourses about the physical-, social-, and mental-health benefits of physical activity, as well as the importance of self-responsibility in maintaining health.

As an extension of notions of fitness, many participants took up performance discourses about improving and working on the body. This finding was common across the talk of both male and female, and young-old (55–69 years) and older-old (70–90+ years) participants. The participants believed that if they lost their physical ability, they would also lose their independence, health, a sense of control over their life, and a sense of self. In other words, participants were motivated by the concern that if they stopped being active through sport they would become “old,” “rusty,” “dependent on others,” “age badly,” or “end up in a nursing home.” For instance, a 71-year-old badminton player highlighted the common catch phrase, “use it, or lose it”:

Well, I’ll tell you what [playing badminton] is all about. If you don’t use it, you lose it. It’s not mine, it’s a well known one. . . . You have really got to keep your body going, because if you don’t, you just rust up.

An 85-year-old male long distance runner, who is also a part-time masseuse, regularly swims in his backyard pool, and works out in his home-based gym, agreed:

If you don’t use . . . your body as a whole . . . all the components in your body, your heart, your lungs, your liver, your kidneys, the lot, and externally your muscles . . . well, you’re losing, I suppose, the best part of your life, really.
... If your muscles don’t work and you don’t exercise, your knees start to go, arthritis sets in, and it all builds up. You’ve got to keep things moving, that’s why I do a lot of flexibility exercises to keep my joints free. ... I just want to keep going as long as I can.

Similarly, many other participants expressed a desire to fight the aging body and continue competing in sport until they were no longer physically capable. They defined participation and performance in their sport as an indicator for avoiding fragility, ill health, or disease. The following quote from a 76-year-old female swimmer clearly expresses this viewpoint. Like most of the participants, the female swimmer recognized that dependency and illness were eventual outcomes of long life. She also expressed, however, the undesirability of these possibilities and believed that one should attempt to delay their onset for as long as possible—with competitive sport being one practice to avoid or delay such outcomes:

I suppose the main thing is to keep it up as long as you can because the alternative of just sitting ... it wouldn’t be a healthy situation. ... I think your body’s like a machine in one way, you’ve got to keep it well oiled and running. ... I have no medical knowledge whatsoever, it’s just a sense of well-being, that when ... you’ve got it you want to hang on ... as long as you can [slight laugh], because some people have strokes and things like that, and that must be ghastly ... just to be dependent, that would be terrible! But still and all, that comes to most of us, doesn’t it? But you put it off as long as you can.

It could be argued that most sports athletes, despite their age, talk about fitness as an important reason for their participation. What is interesting here, however, are the ways these older athletes formed meanings of fitness in relation to notions of aging. Presumably, like younger or elite sports people, these older athletes talked about the body in terms of something to be trained, compartmentalized, and continuously monitored and managed. In this case, however, the focus of this training, monitoring, and management is on maintaining performance in a sport to avoid old age or the consequences of aging. The body is viewed as a machine (to be worked on and maintained; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Tinning, 1997, Williams & Bendelow, 1998), but it is a particular machine. It is a machine that needs working on not to reach peak performance but to maintain performance and, hence, a sense of youthfulness. In other words, the monitoring of the body and one’s performance are tied to the risks of a weakening body, the loss of independence, and great fears of aging. Such measurements of performance are very different from the monitoring of peak times, competitor rankings, and drops in performance often associated with elite or youth sports.

The fitness imperative in the older athletes’ talk gives rise to what seems like a highly relentless and merciless self-monitoring and a set of risks. These risks are related to the individualized expectation of maintaining one’s youthfulness and avoiding ill health in old age. Such imperatives seem to echo Rowe and Kahn’s (1998) notion of successful aging. The participants want to continue physical, mental, and social engagement in later life, and postpone the onset and duration of deep old age—with competitive sport as a means of (and marker for) achieving these desires.
Although we acknowledge that older athletes are not a homogenous group, it is interesting that the theme of fitness was common across all participants regardless of age, gender, sporting history, and type of sport played. This commonality in participants’ talk demonstrates how compelling performance discourses that relate to fitness and the body as a machine are in shaping how these middle-class, White, older people define their participation in competitive sport.

**Competition**

Performance discourses also emerged in the form of notions of competition. Many participants said that when they compete they try to win, and/or aim to achieve a personal best. However, because performance discourses are at odds with traditional constructions of aging (i.e., older people are stereotypically positioned as noncompetitive, less able, or less powerful), several participants expressed feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or avoidance about being competitive. For instance, some participants said that they were not competitive and then displayed competitiveness on the field. When participants disclosed that they were competitive, several of them immediately rationalized it by dismissing their behavior as supporting mainstream understandings of competition or high performance. Some participants, for example, attempted to justify their competitiveness by claiming that their actions were not overly aggressive, violent, or about winning at all costs. This finding was common across both men and women of varying ages and sports. For example:

I am [a competitive person] when I play, but I’m not aggressively competitive, but I like to win, but . . . I don’t do it at all costs. . . . If I lose, that’s the end of it. . . . I don’t brood over it, and I don’t make excuses. (60-year-old female squash player)

I like competing. I’m a competitor, there’s no two ways about that. . . . You don’t go out to lose, you go out to try and win anyhow. . . . If you don’t go out there trying to win, there’s no point in going out there is there? . . . I’m not aggressive, I’m competitive, always have been. (60-year-old male badminton player)

Other participants expressed embarrassment when discussing their competitiveness. For example, a 65-year-old male beach volleyball player talked about how competition made him “feel good,” but at the same time, he expressed uncertainty about whether he should be competitive:

Maybe I don’t want to admit it that I am still competitive, and maybe that’s pulled apart by playing in these things [competitive beach volleyball and bridge]. . . . It makes me feel good. . . . I don’t know, maybe because I think I should be retired I shouldn’t be like I am.

In this sense, these athletes used performance discourses, related to competition, to construct their sports participation in relation to their age and physical ability. Another example is provided in the quote below from a 71-year-old woman who had competed in racquet sports since the age of 12 and currently played badminton.
In the quote, she quite decisively ruled out the importance of competition because of her age:

No competition [at her local centre], it’s purely social. We just play for laughs. You can’t get too serious at our age. . . . Because at [nearly] 72 . . . I think that’s the main thing . . . to enjoy what you are doing, not worrying about going out to win. . . .You can’t play to what you used to be able to play. You can’t move as quick, you haven’t got the strength, so you can’t take yourself too seriously. You are just happy that you are able to do that at our age. . . . I haven’t got the great killer instinct. . . . Well, some of my opponents might think it. I mean, if I find a hole, I’ll hit the shuttle there. I don’t always hit it to them . . . but no, I’m not real competitive. I just enjoy sport. I’ve thought sport should be fun.

The woman quoted above initially discussed her involvement using notions of age-appropriate participation discourses, but towards the end of her story she admitted that, “if I find a hole, I’ll hit the shuttle there.” This statement revealed that she still enjoyed playing at her best and trying to win. Nevertheless, she believed that due to her age, and because her body was not as “capable” as it was in her youth, she did not have the physical ability, and therefore the “right,” to be seriously competitive. A 76-year-old woman (quoted below), who competed in swimming and tennis, also talked about competition as something not as important to older people as it was to younger people. Interestingly, by the end of her statement, she acknowledged that she was somewhat competitive:

I think it comes, mainly because of age and aspiration. I think when you’re young, you want to be the best, that means a lot, or to win . . . is what you are really striving for, but, in the latter years, as long as you’re enjoying it. I mean you still like to win the game of tennis, but it’s not paramount . . . but then, I suppose I’m competitive in [tennis], to a degree.

The participants cited above considered their age and ability as the main reasons why they could not (and should not) take competing in sport or winning seriously. They believe that they are “past it,” and should acknowledge that they are too old to be competitive. These participants appear to have internalized an age-related performance discourse, positioning themselves as subjects outside of and other to the so-called acceptable, youthful, competitive, athletic subject of this discourse. They seem purposely to play down their competitiveness and to mobilize the prevailing attitude that it is not age appropriate for them to be competitive. These older athletes appeared to be apologetic about their reasons for participation and for enjoying being competitive. It is important to point out that although these older athletes apologized in one sense for their involvement in competitive sport, they often simultaneously admitted that they were competitive; and they were, after all, out there competing in sport.

In contrast, the majority of the participants were quite unapologetic and candid in discussing performance and competition. Indeed, many participants talked about: enjoying winning and breaking records; appreciating the medals, recognition, and status that accompanied competition; and constantly monitoring their performance
levels in comparison to their own previous standards and/or others of a similar or a significantly younger age. Our findings indicate that men and women of varying ages and sporting histories, as well as participants of both individual and team sports, engaged equally with performance discourses to define themselves as competitive. This finding highlights that discourses about competition are persuasive in shaping these older people’s meanings of their participation in sport, regardless of individual differences. For instance, a 76-year-old tennis player said that she had a “doggedness to win” when she was younger, and that eagerness remains with her now. “You’re out there to outwit your opposition, and if you can do it by powerful play, or clever play, or just good luck [laughs], that’s what you do,” she explained. Other participants said, “I like to see how well I measure up to others” or “I love the exercise and the competition against each other.” An 82-year-old female track and field athlete, who participated in her first competitive long distance run at age 60, said:

Competitiveness, I suppose, that’s . . . one thing that keeps you going too, because you’re always trying to better something. . . . If anyone’s against me . . . I’ll do . . . my best to sort of beat them. It’s still there, I’ve got that little bit of streak still there [laughs]. . . . I suppose it’s just the competitiveness in me is why I do it anyway . . . I suppose my nature makes me keep pushing.

And, an 81-year-old male cyclist, who began cycling at age 66 as a health precaution after he had a minor brain hemorrhage, said:

Oh, at the Masters Games it’s everything. Oh, my word. I mean I want the lot! I’m greedy . . . when I go into, say, events like in a Masters Games, it is competitive—extremely. . . . I want to win. . . . I want to be better than the chaps who are with me, right. I know then that, “Ok I have trained right.”. . . Oh well [if I lose] I can shake their hand off because they’re better than what I am.

The man quoted above regularly competes in overseas Veterans cycling tournaments and has bike equipment in his home in order to adhere to a stringent training program. A significant number of participants also spoke about the regular training they undertook for their sport in order to be at their physical and mental peak for upcoming competitions and to have a better chance of success. Furthermore, competing against oneself to achieve a personal best was a particular notion of competition that emerged in the athletes’ talk. For instance, several participants said that they kept accounts of their times, competition rankings, or past performance standards so that they could monitor their physical improvements or decrements. When the participants used the fitness component of performance discourses, they spoke about working on the body to prevent or avoid the onset of old age. Therefore, the majority of older athletes in this study monitored their body to simultaneously (a) achieve their best performance and (b) curb the onset of old age.
During observations of the AMG, the first author also noted the importance and seriousness that the participants placed on competition, winning, and performance. For instance, many older athletes exerted intense effort and adopted tactics to enhance their performance, such as the use of state-of-the-art sporting equipment. In particular, cyclists were seen wearing Lycra outfits and clip-in shoes, and track and field athletes wore spiked shoes and used starting blocks for sprints. Furthermore, during a game or event break, the first author observed many participants warming up and getting themselves mentally and physically prepared for their performance. In addition, when teams or individuals won their game or event, they were jubilant. Most of the participants considered winning a national medal an immense triumph. Many medal winners wore their medals proudly throughout the Games, even at the nightly social activities. These participants said that they valued winning over merely partaking in sport for “fun and friendship.”

The data highlight the value of competition and winning to the majority of these older people—possibly a symptom of the White, middle-class positioning of the participants. This finding disrupts the common notion that sport in later life is merely about participation and fun. It appears that these participants were shifting the definition of what it means to be an intelligible older athlete, as well as challenging traditional notions of old age.

**Consequences of Performance Discourses and Aging**

The data presented demonstrate that performance discourses are highly flexible. That is, different participants took up the discourses in many different ways. Some used the fitness aspect of performance discourses to talk about their involvement in sport in terms of remaining fit to avoid (or delay) old age, while others talked about sport as a means for working on their body to win and achieve a personal best. Many participants discussed their participation as a means to both achieve peak performance and curb the onset of old age. Some expressed embarrassment and guilt about being competitive in later life, but it did not stop them from competing or trying their hardest. Many were unapologetic in their take up of performance discourses. These participants spoke of enhancing their performance, competing to win, training, and pushing the formidable boundaries of their personal best. Regardless of how the participants engaged with performance discourses, the point is that they did use them and many were completely invested in the practices they promote. Furthermore, the results could not be differentiated based on age and gender because the broad themes of fitness and competition were common across all participants. This outcome draws attention to the significant role performance discourses played in shaping these older, White, middle-class athletes’ understandings of their involvement in physically demanding, competitive sport.

The above findings led us to think about the possible consequences, or effects, of older athletes’ engagement with performance discourses. We believe that although performance discourses work as a medium for redefining what it means to be an older athlete, these discourses simultaneously work to re-inscribe normalized constructs of the acceptable older athlete. In particular, the older Masters athletes’
engagement with performance discourses both challenged and reproduced dominant constructions of aging and old age.

It could be argued that, by engaging with performance discourses and the practices they promote, these participants are subverting or disrupting the traditional tenets of performance discourses. As outlined at the beginning of this paper, the intelligible subjects of dominant performance discourses are young, strong, and capable (male) athletes. Therefore, as subjects not usually characterized as the ideal, the participants in this study challenge the boundaries of the acceptable subject of performance discourses. This process opens up spaces for participating in physical activity in a way that is not usually legitimately or naturally associated with older athletes.

The participants also challenged participation discourses, as well as the health-promotion aspect of positive aging discourses. According to these discourses, the older person’s body is one that should not be pushed to the limit or overexerted to win. Instead, older people should participate in sport just to be involved and for enjoyment and health reasons. As mentioned above, however, the majority of these older athletes took competition very seriously. They were training and competing to win, or to achieve a personal best, and pushing their body to its limit.

Furthermore, they were resisting traditional notions of aging that define old age as a period of life primarily characterized by illness, disability, disengagement, and dependency. By mobilizing performance discourses, the participants were attempting to define older age in terms of these discourses. They were defining older age in terms of youthfulness, physical ability, power, strength, resilience, determination, and independence. Their actions demonstrated that the older body is capable of running marathons, playing competitive team sports, striving to achieve maximum results, and overexerting to score a goal, beat a personal best, break a record, or win a medal—pursuits and practices that were once considered dangerous and inappropriate for older people. As argued by Wearing (1995, p. 272), “When applied to older persons, leisure emphasizes what a person can do rather than what they are no longer physically capable of doing. Therefore it has distinct possibilities for resistance to ageism.”

In Foucauldian terms, and following Wearing (1995), the competitive older athletes in this study are refusing what the dominant view informs them that they are or should be. Thus, the actions of these participants have the potential to establish new normative boundaries, or sets of legitimizing discourses, about performance, competition, aging, and old age in Western societies. From a poststructural perspective, this highlights the possibility for change to, and disruption of, dominant power relations. It demonstrates the potential for discourse to be both the vehicle of power and a means of resisting or exposing it (Foucault, 1978). As Wearing (1998) claimed, there is always a chance for resistances to the power/knowledge relations through the development of counter-discourses that have the possibility to establish new truths and ways of understanding. In the case of these older athletes, many drew on performance discourses related to competition and training in order to counter traditional discourses of old age and older athletes. Their talk demonstrates that competition, and competing to win, can be as important to the old as it is to the young, and that some older athletes do have the desire and ability to push the limits of their performance.
These findings may not necessarily be (old) age-specific. As mentioned earlier, women and people with disabilities are also not traditionally recognized as the intelligible subjects of performance discourses. For example, the intent of Masters sport is comparable to the underlying philosophies associated with the Olympic movement, recreational leagues, and other marginalized groups in sport such as homosexuals (e.g., the Gay Games). Thus, in the same way that older people are resisting norms and establishing new sets of discourses in relation to fitness, performance, competition, and winning, other groups and/or individuals have the same potential. Further research is needed to explore how these other participants of sport engage with performance discourses and with what consequences.

As well as highlighting the use of performance discourses to disrupt dominant notions of old age, we wish to illuminate the ways that the mobilization of performance discourses reproduced ageist assumptions. In doing so, we draw attention to the contradictions and tensions that are embedded in an investment into performance discourses in relation to notions of old age. For instance, we found that many athletes competed seriously and pushed their bodies to achieve and win because they believed such practices to be beneficial for avoiding or preventing aging. Although challenging the stereotypic image of what it means to be an older athlete, as well as an older person in general, such engagements with performance discourses simultaneously work to construct youthfulness, independence, and ability as the ideal and aging or old age as undesirable. By “playing such a young person’s game,” the participants were expressing a desire for youthfulness (Dionigi, 2004)—a desire that positions the passive, disabled, and dependent older person as the abject-other or an abnormal individual. In addition, participants believed that by physically exerting themselves regularly through sport, they were increasing their chances of a prolonged enjoyable and healthy life. In other words, the notions of ability, strength, and independence that participants expressed resulted primarily from a fear of their opposites (i.e., the eventual physical decline and loss of independence associated with deep old age).

The fitness aspect of performance discourses seemed to work particularly to position old age as less valuable. Older athletes highlighted this positioning when they discussed their fears about their aging body, getting old, or ending up in a nursing home. Notions of fitness, with their close ties to positive aging discourses, seemed to be a legitimate set of meanings for the older athletes to draw on to make sense of their participation in competitive sport. This is not surprising given the dominance of health-promotion campaigns and individualized notions of health that currently operate. The participants’ words and actions reproduced health-promotion and positive aging discourses about regular exercise as a strategy for resisting the aging body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002) and delaying the onset of deep old age (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Therefore, in the same vein that positive aging discourses have the potential to (perhaps unintentionally) contribute to ageism (Blaikie, 1999; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000), these older athletes’ engagement with the fitness aspects of performance discourses also (unwittingly) reinforced the undesirability of old age.

Health-promotion perspectives of fitness construct physical activity as unanimously worthwhile and beneficial. Such discursive sets of meanings are tied to the production of particular moral subject positions that work to characterize those that participate in physical activity as good and those that do not participate in physical
activity as immoral or lazy (Fullagar, 2001; Lupton, 1995). As such, older people who do not or cannot live up to or live out the individualized rules of participating in regular physical activity and remaining active are positioned as deviant and as causing the social and economic problems associated with aging. Moreover, notions of fitness formed in relation to aging emphasize the importance of working on the body to avoid or curb the onset of old age. Such notions construct old age as a problem, once again reinforcing populist views of aging as something less valuable than youth.

We suggest that individualized notions of fitness and the imperatives of being “fit and fast” are just as problematic and pervasive for all individuals regardless of their age. In this case, however, the intersection of notions of fitness and old age heightens a moral contrast between those who age actively, or positively, and those who do not. This contrast produces a marginalizing context in which there is almost no excuse for aging poorly. In such a context, guilt and shame are possible effects for those who fall ill, become dependent on others, or require health care in old age.

Finally, it is important to stress that the findings from this study are specific to White, middle-class, older athletes. In this sense, it could be argued that the White, middle-class imperatives tied to fitness and competition that we spoke of earlier are not specific to sport, and that these older people invest in them in other aspects of their life, such as work, family, and leisure. Additional research is needed to explore to what extent these older people engage with performance, fitness, and competitive discourses in other aspects of their lives, and the possible effects of this engagement. It would also be useful to compare the talk of older people from a range of backgrounds, including working-class and non-English-speaking contexts, about their participation in or opinions of competitive, physically demanding sports. This comparison would allow for a discussion of the range of discourses taken up by different older athletes, as well as for an exploration of the extent to which fitness and competition performance discourses are privileged to older athletes from White, middle-class backgrounds.

Concluding Comments

Performance discourses provided one frame for mediating these White, middle-class, older athletes’ meanings of participation in physically demanding, competitive sports. We demonstrated that performance discourses are sometimes at odds with, and at other times intersect with, dominant notions of aging. Through the analysis we highlighted that the take up of such discourses was complex, contradictory, and problematic. Although this paper provides an in-depth analysis of older athletes’ engagement with performance discourses, further research is needed to determine the significance of these findings for policy makers who are responsible for older populations.

Notes

1. Ageism is a complex form of social oppression based on age; it is similar to prejudice based on race or gender (Bytheway, 1995). Ageism has been defined as, “a set of social relations that discriminate against older people and set them apart as being different by defining and
understanding them in an oversimplified, generalised way” (Minichiello, Brown, & Kendig, 2000, p. 253). Such negative typecasting affects what is expected of older people, contributes to the establishment of age-appropriate norms, and highlights the value of youthfulness over older age.

2. See Dionigi (2004; 2006a) for a more detailed explanation of the methodology, data collection, and analysis of the larger study on which this paper is based. The 110 participants from the first stage of data collection were representative across the different age cohorts in the following way: 55–59, n = 26; 60–69, n = 55; 70–79, n = 20; 80–89, n = 8; 90–95, n = 1. The 28 in-depth interviewees were representative across the different age cohorts in the following way: 60–69, n = 14; 70–79, n = 9; 80–89, n = 5.

3. This is a direct quote made by one of the participants.

Acknowledgment

The data used in this paper were collected as part of a doctoral dissertation by the first author (see Dionigi, 2004).

References


