

Later-Life Masculinities: (Re)forming the Gendered Lives of Older Men

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Abstract

Older men are often treated as homogenous, a-gendered, and unmasculine. Drawing on 52 interviews with older men who play walking football in the UK, we explore how their experiences can be understood through a lens of masculinity. Men claimed that walking football offers an outlet for both competition and displaying physical prowess. Their embodied performances were crucial for cultivating a masculine identity which, whilst threatened by the ageing process, sustained their privilege and status. Yet, men also described how modes of care, friendship, and interdependence became central to their experiences. As men aged, the constraints around expressing feelings of intimacy, on account of hegemonic norms recognised in their youth, were loosened. Via the empirical analysis presented, the article contributes to both the study of the lives of older men and the continued absence of older men in masculinity theory.

Keywords

ageing, hegemonic masculinity, leisure, older men, physical activity, sport, walking football

Introduction

The experiences, identities, and practices of ageing men are under-researched. When scholarship does focus on older men, it too often suggests that masculine scripts,

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entrenched and enduring cultural framings of how men should behave, are diminished by critical events in the latter stages of the life-course, including divorce, widowhood, illness, and sexual dysfunction. Older men are subsequently figured as degendered and homogenous; masculinity is eroded in ways that produces ‘an implicitly androgynous experience of old age’ (Twigg 2020, 107). One field where older men’s everyday activities have been explored is leisure studies. However, such scholarship regularly overlooks masculinity as an organising theoretical framework (e.g., Clarke, Currie, and Bennett 2020; Minello and Nixon 2017; Liechty and Genoe 2013; Whitaker, 2005).

We intervene in these debates by arguing that many older men engage in a process of masculine negotiation as they age. To do so, we draw on 52 interviews with older men who play walking football (or walking soccer). Football, in its most common form known as the globally popular running or association football, possesses a strong and enduring connection with masculinity (Cleland 2018). Walking football is typically played by older adults (usually aged 50 and above) in small-sided games at a recreational or competitive level via established clubs and leagues. It is advertised as a mode of exercise for older people (and particularly men). As well as being designed to improve health outcomes for older people, walking football is viewed as offering social benefits, such as providing an opportunity to meet people, interact in groups, and avoid isolation and loneliness. Outside of a limited body of literature examining the physiological and psychological benefits of walking football, there is currently - to our knowledge - no substantive social scientific research exploring the experiences of people who participate in walking football.

We begin by drawing on several theoretical contributions on masculinity theory, and subsequently engage with recent scholarship on later-life masculinities. In contributing an original analysis of the meaning of walking football for older men who play it, our contention is that participation allows men to ‘do’ masculinity in older age. Walking football gave men competition and a chance to cultivate and display physical prowess. Their embodied performances were vital for cultivating a masculine identity which, whilst threatened by the ageing process, sustained their privilege and status. Yet, men also described how modes of care, friendship, and interdependence became central to their experiences. As men aged, the constraints around expressing feelings of intimacy, on account of hegemonic norms recognised in their youth, were loosened. Via the empirical analysis presented, the article contributes to both the study of the lives of older men and the continued absence of older men in masculinity theory.

Older Men, Later-Life Masculinities

There have been huge advances in understandings of masculinity in recent decades, with ‘hegemonic masculinity’ afforded considerable attention - and particularly so within the pages of this journal. According to Connell (1995), whilst few men can meet the standards of hegemonic principles, they are so culturally dominant that most men consent and conform, in some ways, to them. Hegemonic masculinity is ‘normative’, it embodies the most honoured way of being a ‘man’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005,

832), and it expresses ‘widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires’ (2005, 838). However, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that this is often at the expense of other gender identities and performances, including women and marginalised men (see also: Pascoe (2007)). Masculinity, in turn, is a set of embodied practices that bring men closer in association to power and privilege.

Certain cultural fields, such as sport, can be a site for creating and reaffirming masculine identities and for the exclusion and control of women and marginalised men (Grindstaff and West 2006; Messner 1992; Wheaton 2000). Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 833) suggest that sport, and especially body-contact sport, can ‘function as an endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity’. Masculine embodiment is key for identity and behaviour; in youth, they argue, ‘skilled bodily activity becomes a prime indicator of masculinity’ and as ‘a key way that heterosexuality and masculinity become linked’ (2005, 851). Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 841) posit that masculinity is contextual; ‘men can dodge among multiple meanings [of masculinity] according to their interactional needs’, as they move between different contexts and situations. This idea of context is reflected in alternative theorisations of masculinity, including ‘hybrid masculinities’ (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), ‘multiple mutating masculinities’ (Watson 2015), and ‘amalgamated masculinities’ (Gater 2023).

However, many of these masculinities theories are conceptualised around adolescent boys and young adult men. Whilst Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 852) acknowledge that ‘masculinities are configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold, and change through time’, there remains a dearth of insight into how dominant ideals and scripts of masculinity carry on, or not, into later-life. With others (e.g., Bartholomeus and Tarrant 2016; Jackson 2016; Tarrant and Watts 2014; Twigg 2020), we contend that most masculinities scholarship has ignored older men through its preoccupation with adolescent boys and young adult men, and their pursuit of masculine status through, for example, sport and sexual conquests. Owing to an ‘un-gendered image attributed to older persons’ and the framing of older men as ‘an invisible, paradoxical and unmasculine social category’, masculinity scripts, in the Global North, are seen as ‘[concluding] at middle-age’ (Spector-Mersel 2006, 68). Indeed, figurations of older men as invisible and *unmasculine* make it ‘culturally unfeasible to be both a “true” man and an old[er] person’ (2006, 78). Despite other contributions recognising how men’s masculinity remains stable across the life-course (Kincaid 2022), and how some older men feel secure in their masculinity as they age (Clarke and Lefkovich 2018), we argue that accounts of masculinity are, more often than not, rarely extended to old age.

Even if ‘the blueprints of older men’s masculinities remain hazy’ (Thompson 2006, 634), there is a small body of work which examines the intersections of age, sexuality, and masculinity (Jackson 2016), and representations of older men in mainstream media (O’Neill and Leime 2022). For example, Clarke, Bennett, and Liu (2014) claim that advertisements commonly idealise ageing masculinity according to values of affluence, competition, health, youth, sexual activity, and independence. This arguably demonstrates a mode of ‘successful ageing’ (Rowe and Kahn 1997), where individuals

forestall frailty via continued adherence to idealised masculine scripts that preserves their (gendered) position and advantage. Other scholarship examines the meanings and experiences of leisure for older men as allowing them to maintain masculine identities (Genoe and Singleton 2006; Liechty and Genoe 2013; Minello and Nixon 2017), such as through activities like Men's Sheds (Milligan et al. 2015). Focusing on sport, Drummond (2008, 34) claims that sport and physical activity offer older men an 'opportunity to affirm their masculinity'.

Outside of this work, analyses of later-life masculinities, as minimal as they might be, identify ageing as a threat to hegemonic masculine status. In a study with older men, Clarke and Lefkowich's (2018, 18) argue that men defined masculinity 'relationally with femininity and homosexuality', and identified physical strength, leadership, and virility as hallmarks of masculinity. As such, ageing jeopardised their masculine status, and exercise was subsequently heralded as an intervention to slow down or redress bodily changes that diminished masculinity. Similarly, other scholars have sketched out how life-events associated with ageing disrupt, or at least force a reimagining of, masculine scripts (Tarrant and Watts 2014). So too does 'economic dependency, loss of status, declining health, isolation, and increasing invisibility', all of which prove detrimental to the maintenance of masculine status established in youth (King and Calasanti 2013, 699).

Older men are seen, then, to represent a subordinate masculine identity, and ageing is viewed as igniting decline and a weakening of meaningful relationships, autonomy, and physical/mental capacities (Willis and Vickery 2022). Men can retain privileged gender advantages (Thompson 2006), yet hegemonic masculine scripts become tougher to follow as men age (O'Neill and Leime 2022). Equally, whilst some remain critical of the concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse older men's lives (Jackson 2016), others have shown how older men reshape hegemonic masculinity into traits associated with responsibility and caring for others (Ratcliffe, Wigfield, and Alden 2021). Notably, grand-fatherhood offers older men opportunities to reconnect with elements of hegemonic masculinity whilst, simultaneously, exploring opportunities for intimacy and expressiveness that were closed off to them in their youth (Mann, Tarrant, and Leeson 2016).

Following these latter studies, and drawing on the empirical analysis presented below, we argue that older men continue to construct their lives through the lens of gender (Twigg 2020). This feeds into recent theoretical contributions on 'doing' and 'redoing' gender (West and Zimmermann 2009). Gender is accomplished in mundane, taken-for-granted routines; it is 'a kind of a doing', a 'practice of improvisation' negotiable with others (Butler 2004, 1). Based on interviews with college women in the US, for example, Kincaid, Sennott, and Kelly (2022, 307) explore how women 'reshape the boundaries of emphasized femininity to accommodate the norms associated with college nightlife'; they selectively maintain elements of emphasised femininity during interactions with un/desirable men, and expand the boundaries of this by incorporating 'masculine' behaviours into gendered performances. Redoing gender, though, can be regulated; gendered identities are performed within constraints that limit the notion of

gender elasticity. In a study of cheerleading, for example, [Grindstaff and West \(2006\)](#) claim that cheerleading men distance themselves from feminine elements of this activity, yet the contestation of cheerleading as a 'sport' (since sport is ordinarily a men's preserve) means gendered boundaries are (re)drawn. Influenced by this body of work, we also recognise how gender in later-life is similarly performed, regulated, contested, and malleable.

Methods

This article draws on an interview-based study carried out by GT between July 2022 and October 2022. Participants were recruited via social media and walking football websites with permission for recruiting potential participants given by group/website administrators. This proved an effective strategy. As well as recruiting participants from several local walking football groups, a post on one forum by GT led to over two-hundred responses in 2 days, with the respective individuals indicating a willingness to take part in an interview. In deciding who he would invite for interview following this post, GT recruited all women who volunteered (as most respondents were men) and recruited the first 40 men to respond, which meant that he recruited 65 people altogether for interviews. Of the 65 participants, 53 were men and 12 were women. Of the men, 9 were aged 50-59, 28 were aged 60-69, and 15 were aged 70 or above; one male participant was under the age of 50 and, with the focus here on later-life masculinities, his experiences are not included in this article. Participants had mixed backgrounds, educational history, and employment status. Most had previously played running football at some level (e.g. school; Sunday league; amateur; semi-professional; professional) prior to walking football, although a small number of participants had never or rarely played football before, making that walking football was their first experience of any form of the sport.

All interviews were conducted online using Zoom. Although interviewing online may introduce various problems, such as struggling to establish rapport and pragmatic problems relating to connectivity and accessibility, online interviews were a productive approach in this study. Importantly, any geographical restrictions that would have otherwise affected the study were removed, allowing for a wide geographical spread across the UK. The study received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, with all interviewees granting informed consent and interviews being anonymised by using pseudonyms at the transcription stage prior to analysis and publication.

To allow for the probing of responses for expansion if required, a semi-structured interview schedule was followed. Questions invited participants to reflect on their involvement in walking football, focusing on how they explain and understand their own experiences and their interactions with others. Participants were asked about why they initially became involved in walking football, what its major benefits are, how it feels to play, and what are its possible drawbacks, among other matters. Rather than being a direct line of questioning, masculinity as a topic emerged organically during

conversations, with references and allusions to manhood and masculinity identified during data analysis. Interviews were conversational, audio-recorded, and ranged from approximately 30 minutes to over 1 hour in length. Participants were made aware that they would be recorded for transcription purposes, they could refuse to answer questions, and they could stop the recording and withdraw at any time.

Data analysis was undertaken by GT. However, both GT and TTR talked through the findings on several occasions, with the latter offering thoughts and recommendations – such as theoretical and empirical literature to frame the analysis – that significantly improved it. GT's initial approach to data analysis involved a consistent conversation between collected data and wider theoretical and empirical work, rather than an early formulation of formal 'codes' that may have limited subsequent analysis. This iterative process is consistent with [Timmermans and Tavory's \(2012\)](#) 'abductive' approach to qualitative data analysis. As analysis continued throughout the data collection period, GT attempted to spot patterns (along with inconsistencies) in the data and formulated several prevalent 'themes', or 'ideas', that framed the analysis (doing this also helped to guide questions and prompts for later interviews). Recognising data analysis as a creative and ongoing (rather than a standalone) process, GT consistently crosschecked his conclusions with theoretical and empirical contributions from afar on topics including, but not limited to, masculinity (the focus in this article), ageing, social relationships, care, and modes of inclusion/exclusion. Rather than dismissing all preconceived theoretical ideas (e.g., grounded theory), both GT and TTR began analysis with broad interests and prior conceptual familiarities informed by other theoretical and empirical material; 'it is through the engagement of data with a multiplicity of theorizations that we can make the most of the possibility of generative abduction' ([Timmermans and Tavory 2012](#), 181). Our discussion of later-life masculinities, in turn, is a product of both the collected empirical data and repeated substantiations with scholarship on ageing, masculinities, and their intersections.

Findings

Based on the narratives presented during interviews, we contend that older men's participation in walking football can be analysed through a lens of masculinity. Findings are presented as four sub-sections which, whilst distinct, are interrelated. The first two relate to the ways in which men sustained their privileged position by emphasising the opportunity to both play competitive sport and to develop and display their physicality. This seemingly departs from scholarship suggesting that age threatens (and often successfully dismantles) masculine scripts, 'swamps' gender, and ignites a process of homogenisation ([Twigg 2020](#), 107). The third and fourth subthemes identify how men construct their lives through the lens of gender, but do so with reference to feelings and practices that were discouraged, if not suppressed, in their youth. Participants recognised how being older men, and reflecting on the process of ageing, appeared to afford opportunities to enact caring and emotive expressions of manhood

that were not previously possible. In both instances, men actively work on their bodies and perform masculine embodiment as part of their (gender) identity.

Getting Stuck In: Pursuing Competitiveness

Competitiveness was a central theme in many interviews, with older men frequently drawing a distinction between what was commonly called ‘competitive’ and ‘social’ (or ‘recreational’) walking football. Despite this distinction, it was clear that, for many men, competition was a primary driver for participation:

I didn’t want to take part in something that was comparable to indoor carpet bowls. I actually like that it is competitive...I still feel like I’m engaging in physical activity. At the end of it, I’ve got a sweat on and I’m quite drained as I’ve given what I can...The more competitive it is, the better quality it is. I want to take part in the best quality walking football I could, like I did when I was younger...If it hasn’t got that edge, for me, there’s no point in it. If somebody else wants to play and it’s not competitive, and it’s more the Tiddlywinks end of it, I think that’s fantastic for them. But it’s just not for me. (Charles, 65 years old)

As Charles identifies, there is a sense that taking walking football seriously provided a competitive edge that older men sought, particularly if this was something that they valued in their youth; ‘guys are 75 plus but you can’t take away that competitive nature out of someone who’s played football all their life competitively’ (Edward, 76). A competitive spirit was seen by men as inevitable:

It does get competitive. At the end of the day, it’s still football. You’ve still got that competitive edge, that will to win, that will to succeed in it and it comes out. Players still have standoffs with each other on opposite teams in competition games, little pushes and shoves and that. And I think it has to be there...I think that’s inbred in us...In my opinion, you can’t play sport without wanting to win. (Wayne, 51)

Participating in walking football allowed older men, particularly those who played running football when they were younger, to fulfil a desire to compete, and gave them a sense of accomplishment when they performed well. Indeed, there was commonly a sense of pride among men who were able to ‘be competitive at our age’ (Alexander, 69). The experiences of men suggest a direct link between ageing and maintaining masculine pride and status through competition.

Competition was central to many men, yet they tempered celebrations of this by noting the need to balance competition with the joy of playing football and feeling part of a team. A vital component of this was organising players into teams according to age categories (e.g., ‘over 50s’, ‘over 60s’). Players highlighted the necessity to play among their allocated age groups to increase competition and ensure fairness. Moreover, a competitive match between older players was desired, but could easily be threatened

when a player was perceived as being ‘too competitive’ or as treating it ‘too seriously’ (this led some players to avoid competitions altogether):

One of the guys, he was taking it far too serious. He shouted at one of his own players, including me, which he shouldn't. If you keep doing that mate, it'll ruin my experience. I won't stop coming, but I'll make sure you can't come again because that's the objective of our club. He will be spoken to. (Bruce, 68)

Bruce, here, identifies a fine line between being competitive and being *overly* competitive. Players and organisers in walking football tempered the *extent* of competitiveness to ensure that friendships and a sense of inclusivity were sustained. Indeed, players who were ‘a bit more aggressive’ (Raymond, 66) were often branded as ‘thugs’ (Bruce, 68) who prioritised winning over wellbeing, and as behaving (inappropriately) in ways associated with youth, where young men strive for status through overt and occasionally hostile displays of dominance over others:

My own experiences of competitive walking football in games, tournaments, leagues, cups, is you can come across some idiots who are out to hurt and take out other players. And who have no control of their tempers or sheer reckless combative nature. The fact is a lot of players who play are over 65 years old and a lot have had knee and hip replacements. It makes this type of reckless and unnecessary behaviour spoil our game. It also puts potential new players off joining and has resulted in lots giving up the game sadly. (Larry, 67)

Players heralded its competitive elements, but the worst excesses of masculine forms of competition were often reprimanded. Relatedly, competition was not viewed as negating interpersonal relationships. Being ‘competitive’ and supportive to others were not mutually exclusive:

We're all competitive. We all want to win. But after the game, we'll have a coffee or a beer or wine or whatever, and it's all that camaraderie because lots of the people who come to play, because of our age, sometimes people are living alone because partners have died...That camaraderie and just talking about things, having a good laugh, it's incredible. That, for me, is one of the biggest things in walking football. (Jacob, 63)

Even as players strived to compete, they also ‘placed great importance on the feelings of and goodwill among teammates’ (Choi et al., 2022, 190). Nonetheless, it was clear that men's involvement in sport, and desire for competition, allowed them to foster a competitive, instrumental masculinity (Messner 1990). The distinction drawn by men between ‘competitive’ sport and ‘not-competitive’ activities (e.g., Charles' extract above relating to Tiddlywinks and indoor carpet bowls) meant that men emboldened their own masculine status, arguably, by positioning themselves as different to other men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). To be competitive is to retain power and

privilege aligned with earlier expressions of hegemonic masculinity (i.e., when participants were younger). Even so, such attestations were softened by claiming that (over) aggressive expressions of competition could be held in check by the structure, codes, and shared values of the sport and its participants. Men's competitive drive, nonetheless, counters the notion that 'there is currently no discourse available that legitimises older people as competitive athletes' (Dionigi, 2005, 14).

Going Strong: Displaying Rigour and Physical Prowess

Older men playing walking football emphasised its benefits to their physical and mental health. This was often case in contrast to a script of older men as isolated, lonely, and in physical decline:

It does boost your mental wellbeing. It's not just the exercise. It's everything that goes with it. Before I was doing my walking football, I was a bit down. I was a bit in a rut. I was wanting something else to do...It gave me a big lift. My wife will know when it's an hour to go before I go because I'm buzzing! (Ernest, 62)

Finn (65), likewise, referred to walking football as 'saving my life, my physical health, my mental health'. An open acknowledgement about the mental health benefits of walking football was common in interviews. Men's acknowledgement of mental health issues, and efforts to improve them, indicates an emotional vulnerability, which runs contrary to attributes often associated with youthful masculine performance. Even so, their involvement in football meant that this acknowledgement was expressed through a reliance on embodied modes of body capital. Several men, for instance, took considerable pride in sharing their health status (e.g., biometrics) during their interviews. Moreover, they described taking pleasure in the physicality of leisure activities and appreciated the resilience of their physical capacities.

One way that men 'did' masculinity, here, is by emphasising the physically demanding nature of walking football. Several participants noted their frustration at walking football being dismissed as a slow-paced and sedate activity (although some players noted that this was *their* initial perception of it). Instead, many interviewees emphasised how walking football was 'strenuous and hard work' (Hugh, 74), 'draining' (Theodore, 68), 'full-on exercise' (Benjamin, 69), and 'a lot more than a stroll in the park' (Evan, 65):

It looks like a lot of oldish men shuffling around a pitch. But what it actually is well, really, a lot of oldish men shuffling around a pitch [laughs]. But, actually, playing is quite demanding and exhausting. (Bob, 73)

Men's comments poking fun at themselves (e.g., 'shuffling around a pitch') seemingly imply a vulnerability, yet men concurrently conveyed their own strength and physical prowess as part of such statements. Walking football, rather than being 'a load of old

men falling over each other' (Finn, 65), constituted a strenuous activity; 'you sweat buckets and you ache the next day thereafter' (Charlie, 56). Claims to the physical rigours of, and pain caused by, walking football perform two functions. First, men resist negative preconceptions of it as a leisurely activity befitting of negative preconceptions of older people as sluggish and lacking vitality. Second, men can reestablish their hegemonic masculine status. Rather than acting as a deterrent, pains and injuries were viewed as 'inevitable' (Vincent, 65) 'a topic of conversation...a binding thing' (Alfie, 66), and 'a virtuous result' (Jeremy, 72):

[Pain] is a badge of honour. [Players] all put their knee braces on and whatever they've got. When they've had an injury, they come along and watch. Everybody's talking to the person 'How's your injury?' "Yeah, I can't wait to come back". (Jasper, 70)

The admission of pain and suffering deviates from research documenting how older men remain in poor health, deny pain, and do not seek medical attention when perhaps necessary, owing to a fear of ridicule and scrutiny relating to their masculine identity (Willis and Vickery 2022). For older men playing walking football, pains and aches defined participation, but rarely in ways that deter them from returning to the pitch. Equally, their capacities to 'manage' physical pain and suffering highlights the imperative for men to perform stoicism and strength.

There was also a sense that being able to physically participate in a strenuous leisure activity allowed many of the men to reflect on their personal histories, both in terms of sports participation and the life-course more generally. Whilst a few men in this study had never played running football in their youth, many of them had. Some explicitly cited walking football as 'taking me back' (Gale, 60), that is, as allowing men to 'relive my youth' (Elliot, 70), 'bringing back a lot of good feelings' (Harold, 58), and 'keep [ing] you feel pretty young' (Kenneth, 73). Sean (72) reflected on his first day of playing walking football:

It was the first time I'd sat in a football dressing room for over 30 years. There was this smell that you get like liniment, and the banter, it was just amazing. I actually said to the guys "I've got to tell you guys, this is incredible after all this time to be back". It's almost like going back to your childhood. It just brings memories flooding back.

A common sentiment among men was that playing walking football offered a gateway to their younger selves. Oscar (63), who played five times a week, said walking football – as 'the centre of my life now' – means that he 'live[s] like I did when I was a teenager'. This continuity in leisure activities, rather than activities considered 'more appropriate' for older people, was animated by a nostalgia for the sensory immersion of playing football, and a pride in a continued affinity with sporting culture.

It is too straightforward to read these men's statements as a denial of ageing or as a valorisation of youth. Rather, with youth, sport, and hegemonic masculinity intimately

entwined (Messner 1992), we can read the narratives of older men who play football – and who foreground physical rigour in their descriptions of it – as attempting to reaffirm their hegemonic masculine status associated with their youth. Equally, we must recognise the possibility that the men’s pursuit of competitiveness and physical prowess both can mitigate the decline of ageing and can have some normative power over them. Indeed, men may feel that, as they age, they *should* behave in this way, and sense the expectations that they must be active in later-life. In making this claim, we can identify masculinity as operating as a prescriptive norm, providing guidelines for how men *should* do gender in later-life.

Opening Up: Friendships, Openness, and Disclosure

So far, we have demonstrated how older men playing walking football emphasise its competitiveness and physically taxing demands as part of their gendered identities. At the same time, men valued the camaraderie, friendship, and sense of community and belonging on offer when participating in group-based leisure activities:

I just started playing, kicking a ball round, having a laugh, doing what blokes do when they get together...It’s blokes being able to be blokes...The male thing, the banter, having a laugh, being able to meet people of the same mindset as you, while you’re basically playing football. That’s what it’s been all about for me. (Eugene, 51)

Almost all interviewees heralded the experience of ‘playing [walking football] and being with a crowd a blokes and having a laugh’ (Evan 65). Men often contextualised such statements with two observations, namely, that many men disliked exercising alone and that many men found it difficult to maintain friendships in later-life:

I joined a gym and I found it to be soul destroying. It was socially isolating. None of the men would chat to you in the changing rooms...For blokes, I think there was a definite gender issue. (Jeremy, 72)

As we get older, our friendship circles tend to diminish. You’ve got a smaller orbit, and I think a lot of people suffer from that. [Walking football] is a way of almost reversing that and having a wider group again...A lot of blokes just want a bit of small talk, to talk football, TV, politics, whatever...It’s important for their social wellbeing and mental health. (Edgar, 62)

Retirement was referenced by many men as disruptive to existing social connections, and particularly so in contrast to women. Walking football offered an opportunity for men to meet, which included organising social events beyond the game itself:

We have a laugh, we’re sarcastic, we do normal men things. We have a social life afterwards. We’ll go to the pub. We’ve gone out for a curry and things like that...As you get

older, you're not sociable. You tend to become very introvert. And now...I've got a massive, massive audience of friends. (Desmond, 68)

The importance of homosociality – seeking and enjoying the company of people who identify as the same gender – has been identified in many settings, including sport, and among different populations, including adolescents and young men (Messner 1992). Men's friendships were important as men are frequently reported to find it hard to maintain social connections in later-life (Willis and Vickery 2022). Participation in a group setting that increased social opportunities and interaction, and facilitated emotional and social ties with other men, was highly valued. Even fleeting or mundane moments of social connection hold significance for older men's sense of social participation and wellbeing (Thurnell-Read 2021); they welcomed being with men of a similar age and with shared interests (including football), which helps foster connections.

Men's enjoyment of homosociality somewhat sits within conventional understandings of hegemonic masculinity. Men welcomed a 'bounded intimacy' (Messner 1992) with other men, and lamented this once their initial sport participation ceased (i.e., as they grew older). Zachary (62) highlighted the appeal of being with 'like-minded people' who are 'taking the piss out of each other the whole time'. Participating in 'men's banter' was highly prized by many men in this study:

It's all that, I call it old bloke banter that you can get away with amongst other old blokes...Because society now is so woke, you have to be so careful about what you're saying in and around other people nowadays. But because we're people of a certain age, those sort of things aren't on our radar when we're together. Because most of us are overweight these days...little things like saying "how many footballs have you got tucked under that jersey?" We can say things like that to one another and nobody gets offended. (Lawrence, 58)

Lawrence continued that for men, this 'man banter that only blokes can get away with' is important for their 'mental health' and, for him, is 'one of the things that I look forward to the most'. Whilst this suggests an idealisation of hegemonic masculine norms, there is equally a sense that whilst young men are seen to avoid emotional intimacy (Kimmel 2008; Messner 1990), older men were given a licence to express the benefits of connection and intimacy. Leisure activities have been heralded as spaces for men to talk about health ailments, emotions, and to offer advice and reassurance without the presence of women and younger men (Milligan et al. 2015). For men playing walking football, there was an emphasis on togetherness and emotional openness. Personal issues – health troubles, concerns about family members, bereavement, and so on – could be shared among men of a similar age and disposition without fear of reprimand:

There is a serious side where someone will say "Oh, I've been to the doctors for this." And someone's always there who's done it and says "I did this for that". So, it's like a health

centre as well. Because obviously you're getting older... It can go serious, but serious with laughter as well. So they'll give you advice, but they'll take the mickey out of you. And that for me helps because it breaks up that seriousness. (Wayne, 51)

Men were perceived as 'not very good at expressing our feelings' (Evan 65). However, walking football's 'pastoral side' meant men could have a 'sensible conversation' with 'mature men' (Eugene, 51). Football, in particular, was perceived as 'a way to open conversations and get into conversations with a lot of guys on a deeper level than I imagine was ever possible' (Jason, 74). Football was a 'language for men to connect with each other... a easy, safe way to have banter and a bit of a chat about things' (Frank 62).

Understanding how men relate to each other in such ways is a vital task considering the pressing concerns relating to men's mental health and wellbeing. A need for mutuality and friendship is recognised by the men in this study, and resonates with suggestions that *both* verbal and non-verbal expressions of intimacy and friendship are central to men's social wellbeing (Drummond 2008; Thurnell-Read 2012). Spaces where older men can congregate and simply dwell alongside one another, whilst performing an activity, allows for expressions of vulnerability and social closeness, which conventionally threaten the (hegemonic) masculine self.

Connections with men remains a centrally important factor to participation in football, as it was when they were younger. We might understand older men's references here to gender and homosociality – in the form of having 'man banter' – as expressing their interest in bonding and facilitating intimacy, but in conventionally masculine ways. Yet, as older men, the constraints around feeling and expressing intimacy with other men have loosened since their youth. Walking football allowed for the unfolding of feelings and practices that were perhaps already there but previously muted, owing to youthful competition, heterosexual norms, and fears of homophobic taunts (Messner 1992). For the men in this study, competition as a source of pride is central to their masculine self, yet it no longer stands in the way of emotional vulnerability that is necessary for intimacy and for, in some cases, receiving support and advice from other men. There appears, in turn, to be few limitations on the expression of empathy, connection, and care. We continue with this theme in the next subsection.

'Emotional Intelligence': Care and Interdependence

Older men playing walking football, often with reference to the age of them and fellow players, highlight the need to care for others. Men and their relations with other men are often characterised by emotional detachment and competitiveness. In this study, participants described modes of care and inter-dependence that stressed the importance of looking out for others and remaining attached to other men:

In [town], there's quite a tough macho culture... It's got a strong macho ethos. But what I'm finding now is people, at this age, can afford to show some emotional intelligence. So,

there's quite a lot of support, people looking after each other. Everyone's got aches and pains and [the club have] even taken someone on who's got early onset alzheimer's. There's a nice caring side to it where people look out for each other's welfare in a way that you wouldn't get in your 20s and 30s. (Edgar, 62)

Edgar also described an instance in which he was ill and other players 'reached out directly' to him; 'just that act of people reaching out and asking after your welfare was nice'. This 'heightened empathy and awareness of people's vulnerabilities', as Edgar put it, relates to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of fellow players. Walking football had, many men said, a 'different ethos from what I've experienced playing football before' (Alfie, 66). This included making allowances for particular players; examples included not tackling some men (e.g., if they were seen as slower and/or much older than other players) and not making in-game changes (e.g., switching ends at half-time [as is customary in football]) to accommodate players with dementia. Ernest (62) gave another example:

We've got one guy who's had issues with his heart. Sometimes he'll stop and say "I need a breather." And we'll stop the whole game. You're always looking out for someone else, more so than when I was in my 20s playing, when you just cracked on with the game. When you get older, you're looking out for each other a bit more.

Caring for other men extended beyond the football pitch too. Men talked about the need to look out for other players, particularly older players, who may need assistance outside of the game (and particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns):

One of our guys had cancer and his garden was getting too much for him. All of a sudden, he had six or eight people there with their spades and forks. And we transformed his garden to something he could grow his vegetables in again. We do look out for each other...The broader network is invaluable. (Vincent, 65)

Scholars have noted the isolation typically experienced by older men. In this context, 'keeping tabs' (Elliot, 70) and maintaining regular social contact with fellow players, with simple everyday modes of communication (WhatsApp was commonly discussed in this respect), was crucial for men as they grew older:

It was one of the players' birthday yesterday and on the WhatsApp group, you had over 40 people saying happy birthday and taking the mickey out of him...It keeps everybody in contact, especially those who are single with not a lot to do. It's definitely supplementary to the actual playing the football one day a week. It's the six other days of being in touch...If somebody gets injured, there's best wishes and emojis of someone in a wheelchair [laughs]...Banter, all really good friendly stuff. (Raymond, 66)

Rather than striving towards hegemonic masculine norms of independence and self-reliance, older men in this study – through robust same-gender social

connections – arguably ‘(re)learn to become interdependent’ (Minello and Nixon 2017, 84). Extreme examples of this were evident when some participants described others’ reactions to acute and serious health problems. Patrick (51) described the aftermath of him having a heart attack whilst playing walking football:

Joseph, who was stood next to me when it happened, said [to teammates], “we’re all learning CPR and how to use the defib[rillator] machine”...I think that was great for me because, yes, it happened to me, but it could have been any one of us. There’s a whole sense of belonging and responsibility for the team ethic. It doesn’t matter who it is. We’re all responsible for making sure the team is OK.

Men’s experiences, as documented here, could be viewed as aligning with hegemonic norms. By positioning other men as ‘vulnerable’ and in need of support and protection, for example, men might be seen as reinforcing their own (privileged) status. However, our interpretation is that men identified the value (and, sometimes, the necessity) of interdependence with other men. This was particularly true when life-course events, such as retirement and widowhood, meant that social networks had dissipated. Caring for/with others appears close to the notion of ‘inclusive masculinity’ (Anderson 2008) or ‘caring masculinities’ (Elliott 2016). Elliott (2016, 252) reworks masculinity into identities of care rather than domination, with ‘positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality at its core’. Several men in this study explicitly recognised the value of there being ‘less male bravado’ (Wayne, 51) in walking football (compared to running football played in their youth), devoid of ‘hegemonic characteristics of ego, machismo, aggression or the performance of leadership’ (Falconer 2022).

Nonetheless, we must not rule out the possibility that men, in their acts of care, are equally reformulating their own privileged masculine status. Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 247) recognise, for instance, how men selectively incorporate performances and identities associated with marginalised masculinities and femininities ‘in ways that not only reproduce contemporary systems of gendered, raced, and sexual inequalities, but also obscure this process as it is happening’. Changing expressions of masculinity, in turn, can shore up power and privilege. Cultivating interdependence might be seen, for instance, as a way for older men in this study to collectively reaffirm their privileged status as men – in fact, as White, heterosexual men – in ways that shape, reflect, and mask inequalities. Whilst recognising this possibility, we also are keen to highlight how such performances can be construed as both reconnecting with hegemonic masculine norms and exploring opportunities for intimacy and expressiveness closed off to men in their youth (Kimmel 2008; Mann, Tarrant, and Leeson 2016; Messner 1990).

Discussion

Our primary contention is that older men – often rendered homogenous, ungendered, and unmasculine – *do* masculinity as they age. We have demonstrated how the pursuit of competition and their celebration of physical prowess suggests a partial, embodied

alignment with hegemonic norms. This reaffirms their privilege within a context where ageing is posited as having a *potentially*, albeit not guaranteed, attritional impact on masculine identity. However, men simultaneously incorporate practices and emotions of care, interdependence, friendship, and intimacy into this performance. Whilst these were possible to feel and recognise when younger, restrictions around conveying this to other men have considerably slackened since their youth. Rather than reading such statements as contradictory or inconsistent, we interpret this as an essential process of negotiation as attempts to maintain masculine self-identity are put into dialogue with the realities of ageing.

Our claims, at different points, seemingly feature in recent theorisations of masculinity, whether that be hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2008), multiple mutating masculinities (Watson 2015), or caring masculinities (Elliott 2016). Our intention, however, is not to confine our arguments into a neat typology of masculinity. As Pascoe (2007, 8) notes, it is difficult to use such classifications ‘analytically without lapsing into a simplistic categorical analysis’. Rather, we claim that older men can do masculinity and gender through their embodied engagement with walking football. Moreover, we demonstrate the value of analysing later-life masculinities, within and outside of leisure studies, as a worthwhile analytic pursuit. A common argument is that an absence of cultural guidelines for being an older man means some men may struggle to build acceptable identities in later life (Spector-Mersel 2006). Yet, this study counters such framings, along with social scientific analyses that indicate – implicitly or explicitly – an inverse correlation between ageing and masculinity (although others, such as Kincaid (2022), suggest that ageing does not affect men’s perceived masculinity).

The findings also add to understandings of how men’s physical and mental health in older age is bound up with ageing masculinities, and a nuanced dialogue with their younger selves and other men. Sport and leisure are spaces in which established masculinities can be defended and maintained, but also where new expressions can be articulated. By offering a close analysis of how older men sustain and negotiate their performances of masculinity into later-life, we can advance understandings of the interplay of gender subjectivities with physical and mental wellbeing both in specific contexts (e.g., sport and leisure) and beyond (e.g., health settings and family life). We also think of such performances as operating above the individual level. Rather than this being individual narratives about how specific men explain their ageing, we argue that displaying strength and physical prowess, and establishing social connections, are common resources that men can draw on to mitigate the decline with age, as well as having some normative power over them (i.e., men feel they *ought* to do things this way, and sense the expectations).

We end by exercising some caution when emphasising the positive impact of walking football for older men. First, our analysis concurs in many ways to ideals of successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1997) that risk promoting individualised neoliberal conceptions of health and wellbeing and that overlook structural barriers to maintaining

‘good health’. Second, the diversity and intersections within the category of older men (race, class, disability) make it crucial to avoid framing all older men as a monolithic category. Third, the relational nature of masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) means that glorifying elements of masculinity risks exacerbating marginalising other men. As alluded to in this article, masculinities – as ‘configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836) – are performed in the context of patriarchal gender systems. With respect to walking football, competitiveness and men’s bantering may deter some players and may lead to feelings of subordination and marginalisation. As such, seeing walking football as unilaterally representing elements of ‘inclusive masculinity’ (Anderson 2008) – on account of the enactment of care and cultivation of friendships – is a flawed logic. Romanticising ‘softer’ masculinity on display, in an uncritical way, potentially obscures the continued potency of gender power relations (Falconer 2022; Thompson 2006), and how some women and men in walking football might feel marginalised within these spaces. Equally, we must recognise that whilst the tenets of traditional masculinities are rightly critiqued and challenged as they condone and encourage behaviour harmful to men themselves and deleterious to their relationships with women and other men, the persistence of hegemonic masculine norms into older age is experienced as beneficial for many older men in this study.

Our article, then, highlights the value of attending to older men’s masculinities. Future research must not strip older people of their identities as gendered agents. Masculinity is ‘not one pole of a binary but a shifting formation’ (Watson 2015, 107). We must explore further multiple masculinities as they emerge in older men’s lives, recognising it not as a homogenous category possessed by being men, but rather as a process and a field through which power is articulated (Pascoe 2007). Later-life masculinities is worthy of our analytical attention.

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