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‘The boots will be on the coffin!’: multiple meanings of ageing for older people playing walking football

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Abstract

A narrative of decline dominates the ageing process in the Global North. At the same time, older people have shared more positive stories of ageing, particularly with respect to their leisure practices. I explore this tension by drawing on an interview-based study with people playing walking football in the United Kingdom. My contention is that older people express multiple meanings of ageing that disturb deficit-focused cultural scripts of later-life, albeit in ways that can be fraught with tensions and contradictions. First, I explore how older people cultivate an alternate identity departing from assumptions of loneliness and degradation, with walking football providing an opportunity to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. Second, older people emphasise their own (good) health and the embodied demands of walking football, yet in doing so, can reinforce ageist discourses by distinguishing themselves from the inactive and isolated (older) other. Third, older people reflect on their current and future involvement in walking football in positive ways. However, through attending to the temporal character of their experiences, I show how, whilst older people express a desire to continue participation, this is threatened by the realities of their ageing bodies in ways that align with deficit framings of later-life. I conclude by calling for recognising the multiplicity of older people’s experiences and exercising caution about reproducing over-simplistic and sweeping celebrations of ageing.

Keywords: ageing; leisure; older people; physical activity; sport; third age; walking football

Introduction

Ageing is frequently perceived as a phase of cognitive and physical decline, fuelled by a medicalisation of ageing bodies and dominant stereotypes associating old age with frailty, illness, loss, dependency and disengagement (Dionigi, 2006, 2015; Tulle, 2008; Phoenix and Smith, 2011; Tulle and Phoenix, 2015; Gard *et al.*, 2017). Fears of an ageing population – particularly around how declining bodies are costly for the State to maintain – have fueled myriad policies and imperatives

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for older people to be more physically active (Phoenix and Orr, 2014). This appears driven by ageing being framed as something to avoid, and how exercise is seen as counteracting its physical effects (Phoenix and Smith, 2011; Dionigi *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, physical activity rates are reported as low/declining among older populations (Stenner *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, despite their prevalence, policy gains from promotional efforts have been modest, thereby ‘demonstrating the limits to decontextualised health messages that encourage people to “sit less”, “move more” or “move faster”’ (Phoenix and Bell, 2019: 47). Barriers to physical activity are viewed as physiological *and* social, including ageist and deficit-focused cultural representations of ageing (Wiersma and Chesser, 2011). Ageing, in the Global North, is frequently seen as ‘a time of inevitable and progressive infirmity, dependence, immobility, senility, social exclusion, obsolescence, and loss of productivity and physical appeal’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2020: 127).

Yet, more nuanced and positive stories of ageing from older people have emerged in recent years (Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Dionigi and Son, 2017). This relates to the notion of ‘successful ageing’ (Rowe and Kahn, 1997). Successful ageing has conventionally been seen as a period within which older people are in good health, independent, happy, physically and mentally active, and self-reliant, albeit with close interpersonal relationships and a strong sense of community, connection and belonging (Dionigi, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2008; Cheng *et al.*, 2017; Heo *et al.*, 2018; Joseph and Southcott, 2019). Moreover, older age is perceived as a time for creative and playful self-development, where knowledge and skills are cultivated through (leisure) activities. The successful ageing process, then, is perceived as empowering and participatory. The expansion of the population aged 65 and above led Laslett (1987) to outline his theory of the ‘third age’, which endorses later-life as time of consumerist leisure, self-fulfilment and active engagement (Johnson *et al.*, 2020).

Laslett’s concept of the third age is valuable for considering how older people maintain their dignity and sense of self in later-life. However, it – alongside claims of ‘successful ageing’ – is contested and criticised, especially for aligning with conceptions of *good health* that disregard structural barriers together with framing health as a moral necessity. Claims around exercise are key to this. Driven by neo-liberal ideologies that shift ideas of health from being a ‘public issue’ to a ‘personal trouble’ (Wright-Mills, 1950), exercise is pushed as a panacea, a magic bullet fuelled by assumptions that it guarantees physical, social and emotional wellbeing. The successful ageing agenda – understood as a universal good that acts as an ‘antidote to dependency and decline’ (Katz, 2000: 135) – is imagined and marketed as a moral imperative; it is the duty of older citizens to remain active and ‘well’ (Dionigi, 2006; Katz and Calasanti, 2015). Such imperatives, too, emerge within a context replete with deep-seated ageist ideologies and healthy bodies being perceived as slim, abled, productive and young.

In this article, I explore these tensions in ways that, I contend, remain rarely examined in scholarship on older people’s leisure experiences. Drawing upon an interview-based project with men and women who play walking football, I argue that they express multiple meanings of later-life that often, and not without contention, disturb deficit-focused cultural scripts of ageing. First, I describe how older people cultivate an alternate identity departing from assumptions of loneliness

and degradation. Walking football offers an opportunity to develop friendships and a sense of belonging. Second, I recognise how older people emphasise both their own (good) health and the physically taxing demands of walking football, yet in so doing, can concurrently reinforce ageist discourses by distinguishing themselves from the inactive and isolated (older) other. Third, older people reflect on both their current and future involvement in walking football in positive ways, yet in considering the temporal character of their involvement, I show how their desire to continue is haunted by their own perceived bodily vulnerabilities. Such reflections, in turn, align with deficit understandings of later-life. I conclude by urging for recognising the multiplicity of older people's experiences and, in so doing, exercise caution about reproducing over-simplistic celebrations of ageing.

To be clear, my intention is not to herald sport as a vehicle for successful ageing. I intend to move beyond bland and sweeping statements about how physical activity has benefits for older people's wellbeing, reduces the risk of chronic disease and poor health, and proffers an opportunity for active/healthy ageing. Instead, I attend to older people's everyday leisure activities and the mundane ways in which assumptions of decline are avoided and a more affirmative account of ageing is fostered, albeit in ways that can be fraught with tensions and contradictions. Moreover, by departing from analyses that frame ageing as resulting in a curtailment of physical activities and social involvement, I consider how walking football is one way to explore the embodied experience of older age (Minello and Nixon, 2017).

Ageing and leisure

There is a wealth of literature on the physical, social and mental health benefits of physical activity for older people and how they reflect on participation, their self-perceptions of health and how behaviour change is encouraged resulting from public health initiatives (e.g. Kirby and Kluge, 2013; Stenner *et al.*, 2016; Liechty *et al.*, 2017; Minello and Nixon, 2017; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Joseph and Southcott, 2019; Clarke *et al.*, 2020). Physical activity, it is frequently claimed, mitigates the decline associated with biological ageing. Such analyses frequently frame ageing through a biomedical lens, a period of inevitable physiological decline and deterioration that requires intervention (Deneau *et al.*, 2022). Various scholars, through their studies of leisure/physical activity, show how older people are complicit in repeating dominant deficit, biomedical discourses of ageing. In her study of older surfers, Wheaton (2017) describes how participants define ageing as a 'state of mind' counteracted through participation in physical activity. In Wiersma and Chesser's (2011) study of older men's leisure experiences, participants describe how understanding themselves as older, coupled with a popular cultural narrative of decline, meant leisure becomes a site that reproduces undesirable norms of ageing. Physical exercise, then, can be perceived as an attempt to postpone and counter the effects of ageing (Liechty *et al.*, 2017), with prospective disease seen as being caused by (poor) lifestyle choices (Lenneis and Pfister, 2017; Joseph and Southcott, 2019).

Positioning physical activity as a panacea to ageing bridges 'bad ageing' with 'good ageing'. The latter is part of 'the third age', characterised by agency, health, self-reliance, social networks and active leisure (Laslett, 1987; Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). The third age represents new possibilities for personal identity

development through expanded consumption and choice (Jones and Higgs, 2010). This deviates from a unilinear notion of ‘natural’ ageing typified by ‘disengagement, dysfunction, and disease’ (Phoenix and Smith, 2011: 629). In contrast, the fourth age is associated with dependency, frailty, and little agency or pleasure – a feared status that individuals attempt to avoid via, for instance, physical activity. The third and fourth ages act as cultural guidelines for un/desirable pathways in later-life, with the ‘problem’ of ageing partially addressed through physical activity.

Nonetheless, other scholars explore how physically active leisure practices – such as cycling (Minello and Nixon, 2017) and Masters sports (Dionigi, 2006; Dionigi *et al.*, 2013) – provide a vehicle for embracing ageing and/or resisting and reconceptualising society’s tragedy discourses surrounding ageing. Taking part in leisure, it is claimed, can help to challenge social attitudes to ageing (Wearing, 1995; Liechty *et al.*, 2017; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019). In a study with older bodybuilders, for example, Phoenix and Smith (2011) explore how older people tell counter-stories of ageing via different resistance narratives that tell alternative and creative versions of the ageing process. Sport, Phoenix and Smith (2011: 628) contend, helps to ‘create possibilities for people to age positively and reconstruct what ageing “normally” means’. However, this can also reinforce the ideas that ageing is something to work against, and risks glossing over the reality that fleshy bodily limitations may not be easily, if at all, overcome. Similarly, Dionigi *et al.* (2013) explore how sport allows older people to negotiate – and ultimately resist, redefine or accept – the ageing process. Stories of a ‘sporting later-life’ help older people to craft alternate configurations to the ‘dominant “declining body” narrative of ageing’ (Dionigi *et al.*, 2013: 370).

Such stories fit within the narrative frame of ‘successful’ (or healthy/active) ageing (Rowe and Kahn, 1997), as outlined earlier in this article. A body of scholarship has focused on how successful ageing is accomplished, or not, via leisure (Minello and Nixon, 2017; Joseph and Southcott, 2019; Clarke *et al.*, 2020; Deneau *et al.*, 2022), and especially what Stebbins (1992) calls ‘serious leisure’ (Siegenthaler and O’Dell, 2003; Cheng *et al.*, 2016; Heo *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2020). In a study of older gardeners in Australia, Cheng *et al.* (2017) identified gardening as a serious leisure pursuit which contributes to a more active, sociable and mobile life for older people. Similarly, in a study with older rock climbers and sea kayakers, Hickman *et al.* (2018) claim that participants framed ageing as an area of potential, strength and capacity, rather than as a deficit and problem to be eliminated. In their study of shag dancing, Brown *et al.* (2008: 86) discuss how participants age ‘successfully’ relating to Stebbins’ six qualities of serious leisure, and how shag dancing offers opportunities for ‘self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self image, lasting physical products, renewal of self, self-gratification or fun, and a sense of social interaction and belongingness’. In such analyses, serious leisure was viewed as contributing to the cultivation of a positive sense of wellbeing that produces counter-stories to dominant, deficit-focused narratives of ageing.

My own contribution both aligns with and deviates from such accounts. First, I argue that walking football provides an outlet for embracing ageing and resisting popular deficit configurations of ageing. Equally, I show how older people attach multiple meanings to ageing. At times, older people position themselves as distinct

from, even superior to, other older people. At others, older people align themselves with common scripts of deficit and deterioration, at least in terms of its haunting presence when reflecting on future participation in walking football. In making these claims, I resist framing physical (leisure) activities as a solution to the 'problem' of ageing populations. Rather than testing out whether walking football allows people to age successfully, I instead examine how older people's experiences provide the necessary tools to foster a (mostly) affirmative and progressive account of the ageing process, albeit in ways that can be both problematic and inconsistent.

Methods

Single semi-structured interviews were carried out between July and October 2022 with 65 people who played walking football in the United Kingdom (UK). Walking football is a variation of running football targeted at people (and particularly men) aged 50 and above. Several ruling bodies have established different rules and regulations, though two common stipulations are that players must 'walk' instead of 'run' and that significant physical contact between players is prohibited. Teams can be mixed or segregated with respect to gender identity, but teams are often separated – particularly in competitions – according to age groups (e.g. 'over 50s', 'over 60s'). Players participate in small-sided games at a recreational or competitive level via established clubs and leagues. Walking football is advertised as a vehicle for physical exercise for older persons, along with offering opportunities to interact with other people. Outside the limited evidence on its professed physiological and psychological benefits (e.g. Lamont *et al.*, 2017; Reddy *et al.*, 2017; Cholerton *et al.*, 2019, 2021; MacRae *et al.*, 2022), there is little-to-no research on people's experiences of walking football (for an exception, see Sivaramakrishnan *et al.*, 2023).

Participants were recruited via social media and walking football websites. Interviews were conducted online with video capability. Of the participants, 53 were men and 12 were women. Here, I focus on the experiences of older men and women, defined as participants aged 60 and above (forty-three men and eight women). The remaining participants were under 60 (nine men were aged 50–59 and one male participant was aged under 50; three women were aged 50–59 and one female participant was aged under 50), and their experiences – with one exception – are not reported in this article. Participants were mixed with respect to their social and economic backgrounds, educational history and employment status, and they had a mixed background in relation to playing football. Most had previously played running football at some level (e.g. school, Sunday league, amateur, semi-professional, professional) prior to playing walking football. However, a small number of participants (though mostly women) had rarely, and sometimes never, played running football before joining a walking football club. Many of the participants played walking football several times a week and several others took part in organised tournaments. Costs to participate were viewed by all participants as minimal, usually around £5 per session (although sometimes it was less than this).

Interviews were conversational, audio-recorded and ranged from 30 minutes to over one hour in length. Questions invited participants to reflect on their involvement in walking football. They were asked (among other things) 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 and challenges. I sought participants' permission to audio-record interviews for transcription purposes, and they were told that they could refuse to answer questions, stop the tape recorder and/or withdraw from the interview at any time. They were told that their information would be kept confidential and safe (through established university measures around storing data) and I would attempt to preserve their anonymity by using pseudonyms.

My approach to data analysis involved a consistent conversation between collected data and wider theoretical and empirical contributions, rather than an early formulation of formal codes. This is in keeping with Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) 'abductive' approach to analysis. For Timmermans and Tavory (2012: 169), abductive analysis involves rethinking core ideas affiliated with a grounded theory approach, by cultivating 'anomalous and surprising empirical findings' against a background of 'multiple existing sociological theories' and 'systematic methodological analysis'. In this project, I attempted to spot patterns in the data and form prevalent themes that framed my analysis and, subsequently, I cross-checked conclusions with scholarship focusing on older people's leisure and related themes (e.g. masculinity, ageing). In this article, I report on the 'puzzle' of ageing that has emerged 'through careful data analysis against a background of cultivated theoretical expertise' (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 180).

Findings

Older people disturb problematic stereotypes of ageing in three primary ways. First, they highlight the benefits of walking football in ways that deviate from assumptions of loneliness and isolation, and that frames their 'sporting later-life' (Dionigi *et al.*, 2013: 370) as a source of pride. Second, I recognise how older people emphasise both their own (good) health and the physically taxing demands of walking football. However, in doing this, older people can simultaneously reinforce ageist discourses by separating themselves from inactive and isolated older people. Third, older people had a desire to continue playing football and to craft a positive, and physically and socially active, future. However, by attending to the temporal character of older people's experiences, I show how, whilst they express a desire to continue participation, this is threatened by the realities of ageing bodies in ways that align with deficit-focused and fourth-age understandings of later-life. Their accounts, in turn, could revitalise deficit-focused scripts of getting older.

'You've got like-minded people around you'

Older people, particularly men, are frequently reported to be at risk of social isolation and dislocation, especially after retirement or bereavement (Phoenix and Orr, 2014; Willis *et al.*, 2022; Foley *et al.*, 2023). This constitutes a primary justification for promoting programme interventions, like Men's Sheds (Milligan *et al.*, 2015), to 'combat isolation resulting from changed life circumstances' (Joseph and Southcott, 2019: 83). Participants in my project, like those discussed elsewhere albeit in different leisure contexts (Lyons and Dionigi, 2007; Litchfield and Dionigi, 2012; Minello and Nixon, 2017), identified developing friendships and relationships as a major benefit of participation in walking football, where they 'don't feel nearly so isolated as I used to' (Angela, 68):

The benefits to me have been immense. It gave me something to focus on [after] my wife died ... It's given me life after death. I didn't come into it through a health issue. I came into it because my wife's death forced me to redirect my lifestyle ... I am competitive and I love football, but the social interaction that has come with it exceeds anything I could have expected. It's almost like getting married again. (Edward, 76)

Almost all participants highlighted the value of friendships and a sense of belonging in older age, but this was identified as particularly crucial for older men who are single and/or living alone. Edgar (62) felt, for example, that 'as we get older, our friendship circles tend to diminish'. Walking football offers to 'reverse that polarity and have a wider group again', where men can boost their 'social wellbeing and mental health' by engaging in 'football talk, TV talk, politics talk, whatever talk'. Likewise, Evan (65) said 'a lot of blokes' feel 'dumped' after retirement, and walking football offers a chance for men to 'find someone to talk to'. Frank (62) claimed that his 'negligence' of male friendships was corrected by taking part in walking football; it is a 'safe, soft way' to allow men to be part of a 'social experience' and 'to talk to loads of people'. Benjamin (69) claimed:

When I first retired, I found it a very difficult transition from being full on 100 per cent working going to nothing. I was a bit of a loss as to how to fill my time. It was quite a challenge, because you've got a lot of colleagues, people you're used to seeing all the time, you go from seeing them to not seeing them ... Walking football was great because you're meeting a lot of other people and making connections and forming friendships.

Being among other people of a similar age was a positive feature of walking football. This was clear when participants talked about exercise more broadly. Many of them expressed their dislike for the gym. First, they felt *people like them* did not belong in youth-centred spaces like gyms (Evans and Sleep, 2012; Clarke *et al.*, 2020). Second, participants felt that gyms were 'solitary' (Jason, 74) and 'lonely' (Charlie, 56), whereas walking football provided a chance for 'interaction with other people and camaraderie' (Raymond, 66) among 'very similar people to you' (Ernest, 62). Participants often described a sense of belonging that came with playing walking football:

The gym is boring. What appeals to me about football ... is the team element, the banter. I never thought at 62 I'd be playing football or sat in a changing room, with the smell of Ralgex [a product providing relief for muscular aches and pains], people taking the piss out of each other the whole time. That is part of the appeal. You've got like-minded people around you, and I've made so many friends. There's been quite a bit in the press recently about how men don't make friends, which is true. We're not naturally that way inclined. But I think, where you've got the common bond of football, that helps enormously. (Zachary, 62)

It was clear that 'friendships', 'connections', 'camaraderie', 'bantering', and a sense of 'belonging' and 'community' (all words were regularly used by participants) were drivers for participation in walking football. Its health benefits were tangible and

appreciated, yet the physical benefits of participation often seemed secondary to the joy and camaraderie afforded by playing the game and the possibility for interaction with (similar) others. Interestingly, whilst players liked it when games had a competitive edge, fostering a feeling of conviviality and sustaining social relationships was equally (if not more) valued. Far from experiencing a social death, older people enjoyed connections afforded by walking football, both on and off the pitch. Several clubs organised social outings amongst players, with participants describing – with considerable excitement – their experiences of frequenting pubs, ‘nights out’ and undertaking walking football tours in other countries.

As well as the ‘banter’ and ‘camaraderie’, older people valued the opportunity that walking football gave them to discuss more ‘serious’ matters, including relationships, health troubles and care responsibilities. Like other leisure spaces for older people (Milligan *et al.*, 2015), participants could discuss personal issues without fear of reprimand or ridicule. Speaking about receiving a diagnosis of two major health conditions in the same week, Elliot (70) said:

I lost my confidence. I was just completely drained and felt quite isolated ... But my head’s in the right place now and a lot of that is down to walking football. Because a lot of the boys at the walking football have health issues ... So, there can be a bit of an exchange ... It’s the building blocks, you’re rebuilding your life basically. And walking football has been a huge part of that because it’s brought all those elements of social contact, exercise, being outdoors, playing a sport that I love.

Walking football, for participants, has become a way to ‘get into conversations with a lot of guys on a deeper level than I imagine was ever possible’ (Jason, 74). There was also a strong sense of looking out for others, particularly due to health and mobility concerns. This translated to matches, where players made allowances for certain (old/er) players, such as not tackling them or stopping the game at particular moments:

Our oldest player passed away a couple of years ago. The last time he played, he was 89. If he ever fell down, the whole game stopped, and everybody rushed over to see if he was OK. (Kenneth, 73)

Such affordances were not only a way to give ‘respect’ (Jason, 74) and avoid harm to other players, but ‘unwritten rules’ also recognise the myriad abilities of other players and help to ‘build a sense of community’ (Alfie, 66). This sense of ‘supporting and helping others’ (Linda, 64) was also evident off the pitch. Alongside practical measures, such as ensuring that clubs had access to defibrillators and data on players’ health ailments, players felt walking football has allowed for informal practices of care and support:

No man would ever dream of going to our best friend and saying, ‘I’m feeling a bit down’. But we’re very aware that if people aren’t perhaps responding very well, you’d have a quiet word with them if they haven’t turned up ... When somebody may have been away and they’ve been down in the dumps, the first thing everyone will do [on their return] is put their arm around them, rough their hair, ‘where

have you been, you bugger?!', 'We've missed you missing goals and your lousy passing!' It's just so good to see. (Jack, 67)

Participants said that, as they and others age, modes of care were enacted in ways that involve 'looking out for each other probably a bit more' than when playing football in their youth (Ernest, 62). The value of interdependence and connecting with other older people (Thomas and Thurnell-Read, [in press](#)) was recognised by almost all participants, deviating from (fourth-age) representations of ageing which emphasise experiences of isolation, dislocation and disengagement. Equally, older people's claims counter assertions within third-age understandings of ageing that emphasise independence and self-reliance. Whilst older people describe ageing in ways that align with some aspects of the third age – of having 'a leisurely, active and autonomous period of life' (Johnson *et al.*, 2020: 2713) – they concurrently recognised the connections and interdependence with other older people in ways that, I argue, allow them to cultivate an alternative, and more positive, account of later-life. In what follows, I continue to consider these tensions by discussing how older people can avoid ageist stereotypes by asserting the physically taxing demands of walking football.

'It gives me a reason to be alive'

One way that older people resisted popular, deficit-focused understandings of ageing was by describing walking football as a dynamic endeavour which kept them physically and mentally active:

It's a big fitness thing. I was really overweight. You look in the mirror and you don't like what you see ... But walking football really did help my mental health because it got me out of the house. (Finn, 65)

Likewise, Alfie (66) said:

I find [walking football] quite life affirming. It's the old thing about seize the day and do what you can for as long as you can. It's something that makes you feel good ... Because as you get older, different things become more important. And for me, personally, walking football and keeping fit makes me more able to do my babysitting duties better. You have to be pretty fit to keep up with them ... And also mentally, it keeps me sharp.

Such reflections on health were common in interviews, particularly when prompted by life events where others, including family members and friends, were ill or had died. Taking part in walking football was an attempt to stay active and avoid a similar fate. Indeed, many interviewees talked with pride about their 'good health'. There was a sense that taking part in physical activity made them 'feel alive, happy, and well' (Whitaker, 2005: 22), and was preferable to the lassitude and inactiveness assumed of older people:

I'm a great believer that sport and physical exercise is good for you. I'm also a bit of a believer when we start to get to our age, you use it or lose it ... In the long term, it keeps you healthier. (Barbara, 60)

Walking football, Theodore (68) claimed, is a ‘healthy option [compared] to sitting on the sofa, watching some mind-numbing TV programme’:

If I didn’t do it, I’d be stuck in a chair and pottering around the garden and probably not meeting anybody or going anywhere ... It encourages the older generation to get out and participate, mix, and get your body in a state where you’re physically and psychologically healthier. I always use the term ‘we’ve put the black suit on too many times’ because we know people that have retired and then, a couple of years later, they’re no longer with us.

Older people praised walking football, then, as an activity that allows them to ‘get the best mileage out of the machine with the time you’ve got left’ (Jeremy, 72). It also gave participants a ‘sense of purpose’ (Vincent, 65) and ‘structure to my life’ (Otto, 71). Older people had ‘something to get up for’ (Theodore, 68), especially ‘men who would normally just sit around or retire and go to the pub’ (Larry, 67). Evan (65) said:

It’s given me my sense of worth back. I’ve got something to get up for in the mornings ... It gives me a reason to be alive.

Having a ‘purpose’ was seen as vital for participants, particularly those who retired. Retirement ‘created a hole’ and ‘if that’s not filled with something, it’s detrimental to your health and psychological wellbeing’ (Theodore, 68). Walking football, for Jeremy (72), plugged this gap:

It is a real bonus because it comes at a stage of life when you didn’t think this would happen. The traditional model among my male friends is that your life was over at 65 and you had no purpose anymore ... But you can reinvent yourself through involvement in a social sport like walking football ... It is such a big part of filling the void and giving you a whole new purpose, which has no ending.

Older people highlighted the value of gaining a ‘purpose’ and ‘filling the void’ following retirement with an activity, particularly one that was competitive. The competitive drive of older people, and particularly men, was satisfied by playing walking football. The prospect of competition was highlighted as a key driver and benefit of participation (Thomas and Thurnell-Read, [in press](#)). Competitive activities allowed for reimagining ageing in more progressive terms, expressing a powerful, vital and active configuration of an older person which challenges passive, weak and dependent depictions circulating in popular culture (Dionigi, 2006).

Relatedly, participants discussed how walking football was physically demanding. A low-level physical demand of some leisure activities is often heralded as appropriate for older people (Brown *et al.*, 2008; Stenner *et al.*, 2016). However, in this study, the physically demanding nature of walking football was a major draw. Many felt others did not take it seriously and that wider perceptions of the game are informed by ageist stereotypes (participants often said they had a similar impression themselves prior to playing). Indeed, participants sensed that people were often ‘totally dismissive’ (Charles, 65) of walking football and did not treat

it as 'a serious game' (Oscar, 62). Whilst many participants initially thought themselves that walking football would be 'really old men literally doddering about on a pitch' (Gale, 60), they claimed not only is it 'graceful and highly skilful' (Jeremy, 72), but also it is 'very strenuous and hard work' (Hugh, 74) and 'a lot more than a stroll in the park' (Evan, 65); 'it's still pretty full-on exercise, it belies the name walking football' (Benjamin, 69).

Players also frequently described the aches and pains that followed participation in walking football. Yet, despite constraints imposed by the body's corporeality, many felt that these were both inevitable and manageable. Whilst pain could be a deterrent for some older people, damage to older bodies were viewed by several others as a 'topic of conversation' (Alfie, 66), a 'virtuous result' (Jeremy, 72) and a 'badge of honour' (Jasper, 70). Participation gains were worth any bodily injury or discomfort (Liechty *et al.*, 2017), contrasting to other work which shows how older people saw their physical capabilities to be limited by the changes in their ageing bodies (Evans and Sleaf, 2012). In this study, bodily discomfort was seen as 'the price you have to pay' (Charles, 65).

It appears, then, that older people dismantle ageist assumptions and ideas by emphasising their own physical/mental wellbeing and the physical demands of walking football. However, similar to research by Gard *et al.* (2017) and Dionigi (2006), participants reinforced, subtly and occasionally more forcefully, ageist assumptions when differentiating themselves from other older people who were not physically and mentally active. A few participants were implicitly and explicitly critical of others who were not active in old age, with some discussing how their engagement contrasted with their own fathers/grandfathers:

I like to treat my body well. My body's done me proud over the years, so I thought, why abuse it now when you're over 60? Keep it in good nick. I always think back to my granddad. When he was 60, he'd be hunched over the table coughing and spluttering, he couldn't walk. And I'm thinking, I don't want to end up like that. You should grasp every chance you can now to play ... because you never know what's around the corner. (Michael, 66)

People are staying active for much longer than in my father's generation. I can't envisage my father going out and doing anything like this. He was pretty much just at home watching TV. I may be stereotyping, but years ago, that's the perception. Whereas now, there seems to be a real groundswell of people that want to stay physically active. (Henry, 75)

Performing 'good health' involved making comparisons with real and/or imagined others who remained inactive in old age or who had become ill (or even died) because of their perceived lack of physical activity. Like participants in Phoenix and Smith's (2011) study, walking footballers seemed, at times, less concerned with changing the master narrative of ageing, and more concerned with distinguishing themselves from others more readily conforming to assumptions of physical stagnation. The mantra of 'use it or lose it' (Barbara) appeared to shape many older people's involvement in walking football. Several of them formed distinctions, often subtly and without malice, between themselves and those who were 'stuck in a

chair and pottering around the garden' (Theodore) or who 'normally just sit around or retire and go to the pub' (Larry). As such, and even if without intention, I argue participants occasionally cultivated an affirmative account of later-life in ways that classified other (inactive) older people as those unwilling to 'pay the price' (Charles). From here, I discuss how an alternate account of later-life is cultivated with reference to older people's discussions of the future, namely around intentions to continue remaining physically and mentally active via participation in walking football.

'The boots will be on the coffin!'

For many older people, walking football rarely amounted to simply being a calculative or instrumental activity for staying fit. An 'intoxication of immersion' (Wacquant, 2004: 4) was clear when participants were asked to describe playing the game, it gave them: 'a high ... an adrenaline rush' (Larry, 67); 'instant endorphins' (Gale, 60); 'a buzz' (Brenda, 61; Susan, 67). It was seen as 'exhilarating' (Theodore, 68), as making them 'feel alive' (Jack, 67), as 'revitalising' (Hugh, 74), as 'my happy place' (Zachary, 62). Such discourses of pleasure (Phoenix and Orr, 2014) included sensual pleasure, such as 'the buzz of scoring a goal or making the right pass' (Edgar, 62). Vincent (65) described how such sensations reminded him of his past: 'the changing room banter, the pre-match camaraderie, the smell of the Deep Heat, you can hear the studs on the shower floors ... it takes you back'.

I argue that possibilities for pleasure co-exist with the cultivation of an ageing identity that is knowing, capable and valuable (Phoenix and Orr, 2014; Litchfield *et al.*, 2022). Rather than assuming discredited identities in later-life, many participants felt walking football allowed them to redefine their self. Taking part in the game was 'very much part of who I am ... I'm very proud to be a walking footballer' (Linda, 64). There was a strong 'sense of pride' (Vincent, 65) for their achievements in the game. This was especially so for players who had won competitions and had the 'honour' (Bob, 73) of playing for their country (i.e., had received international honours in walking football) 'at an age when some people might think it's surprising that I do any sort of physical activity at all' (Henry, 75). Susan (67) claimed:

[Walking football] is more than a jolly. It is part of how I see myself now. It's boosted me up. I'm not just an old lady who's retired and doing a bit of knitting and sewing for her grandchildren. I feel like I've got something a bit special about me ... I feel like I'm waving a banner as well for women's football just by playing at my age.

Rather than embodying a diminished sense of self, walking footballers used leisure as a resource to reinforce a positive sense of self (Heo *et al.*, 2018). This rescripting of older age was often informed by a continuity in leisure; many participants, particularly men, played running football in their youth. As such, their involvement in walking football might be read as a 'revitalisation' of their youth. Indeed, many men talked in such terms; walking football offered 'the chance to 'relive my youth' (Elliot, 70). Rekindling 'memories of what we used to do' (Barbara, 60), participants described, 'keeps you feeling pretty young' (Kenneth, 73). Jack (67) said:

It's like being back at school. My missus says to me, 'God, you're 67 going on 15 ... When it's football mornings, you're up, you're happy, you're getting your kitbag,

everything clean, your boots are polished' ... We're all the same, we get there early, we're all excited and the mickey taking starts as soon as you get out of the car. So, you feel at home. Mentally, it's such a stimulating thing to be playing football at a pensionable age.

Being 'taken back to my youth' was not only related to the physical act of playing, but also 'that team spirit ... camaraderie, being part of a club' (Margaret, 60). This, I argue, is part of older men and women's attempts to rescript ageing, with a continuation in leisure activities being animated by a nostalgia for the sensory immersion of playing football and pride in a continued affinity with sporting culture (and particularly so *at this age*). Indeed, age was frequently mentioned, not denied, in their celebratory accounts of walking football, namely when describing their 'disbelief that people our age can be playing football' (Henry, 75) and that they can be 'competitive at our age' (Alexander, 69):

All those I play with say they cannot believe they're ever playing football again ... There is a reliving your youth in an activity. Nearly everything you do after you reach a certain age reminds you that you're older ... But for the time that you're on the pitch, you lose yourself and you're back to being 16 again. (Jeremy, 72)

Players felt 'lucky' (Jasper, 70) to be playing football at their age; 'it's opened up a whole new world at a stage in my life that I didn't really expect it to happen' (Jack, 67). An 'astonishment' (Gregory, 72) of playing at their age, however, was supplemented with fears about not being able to participate due to injury or growing older; 'I worry about when I get to an age when I can no longer do it' (Otto, 71). This feeling related to an awareness of bodily vulnerabilities as they grew older:

When you're in your teens, twenties, thirties, you take stuff for granted. So, to be able to get out on the field and kick a ball about, it becomes more valuable, more precious at this age. And you realise it could end tomorrow. You're on a limited timeframe. (Sean, 72)

Similarly, Linda (64) said, 'I should take these opportunities because they're not going to come along for much longer', whilst William (72) claimed, 'I would hate the day when I can't play it but it's got to come soon'. Players often feared stopping, worrying it would 'leave a hole in my life' (Michael, 66). Among many of the participants, there was a 'recognition that the inevitability of old age brings illness and more limitations' (Vincent, 65). A few participants also discussed how family members, spouses and others had expressed concerns about their involvement:

Some of the guys said they don't mention walking football [to others] because people have said to them, 'Oh you daft old biddy, what are you doing playing football at your age?' That sort of attitude that, when you retire, you shouldn't be doing daft things. (Alfie, 66)

Such ‘attitudes’ seem to be fuelled by assumptions that there are more appropriate (i.e., not ‘daft’) leisure activities for older people (Dionigi, 2006). Players themselves also reflected on how they were confronted with the realities of ageing through the injuries and/or deaths of other players whilst playing the game, the latter reminding them of their own mortality. Older people, then, identified the haunting threat of non-participation due to bodily vulnerabilities. Here, positive accounts of ageing were saturated with fears, and sometimes abrupt realisations, that arguably re-energise more negative configurations of ageing (i.e. of inactivity, frailty and little pleasure or agency). Nonetheless, other participants continued playing in later-life and felt that they would ‘never pack it in because it means so much’ (Betty, 67). Jeremy (72) said:

I’m eight and a half years into it, and I can’t see an end to it. The boots will be on the coffin! ... The physical benefits are clear as are the mental ones. It has become a big part of my life. It forms an anchor point in a sea of change as you get older. It’s an anchor for all the troubles that you have in your later-life. And your troubles don’t go away ... You’re quite aware when you’re older and retired that you’re on the conveyor belt, your parents are gone and you’re moving in one direction. It’s relatively depressing. So, to have an activity like this which is associated with your youthful period, something that’s socially bonding ... I lose myself on the pitch, but I also find myself on the pitch.

Despite injuries to – and particularly the death of – some players acting as a deterrent, or at least a warning, about future participation in walking football, others emphasised that this was ‘the best way to die ... doing the thing you enjoy, the last thing you remember in this world’ (Otto, 71); ‘every time I see it happen, it makes me want to enjoy it all the more’ (Samuel, 66). This stated intention to continue playing was also clear when participants referenced the presence of fellow players who were older than them and still engaged with the sport. This offered them a positively imagined future, that is, of continued participation:

While I’m only 51, there was this guy 24 years my senior knocking the ball around with me like he’s in his fifties. I’m thinking, this is great. This is what you want to be able to do: to keep exercising, keep moving ... which, when you think about it, is sort of brilliant for you mental wise to go, yes, I can still do this. (Patrick, 51)

Older people, then, crafted positive accounts of later-life through their reflections on the future. Like Wheaton’s (2017) surfers and the Masters athletes in the study of Dionigi *et al.* (2013), walking footballers frequently could not see a point at which they would stop playing. It is in such descriptions that walking footballers resist deficit understandings of ageing. Yet, older people also held an embodied awareness of bodily precariousness that, for some of them, haunted their involvement in walking football. Their participation was life-changing, but temporal. Such tensions highlight the temporality of older people’s experiences in ways that deviate from analyses which regularly treat older people as *stuck in time*. Equally, it recognises the variation of experiences across older people, together

with the junctures and interruptions that fracture or at least complicate overly positive assessments of ageing.

Discussion

I have sketched out how older people, in reflection on their participation in walking football, resist deficit framings of ageing and describe their lives in more progressive ways. They described the benefits of participation including, but not limited to, developing friendships and a sense of community, care and collectivity – along with how walking football was crucial for their sense of self in later-life. Moreover, they discussed how this leisure pursuit, as strenuous and demanding, kept them physically and mentally active. Older people highlighted the benefits of participation, including its competitiveness and the need for a ‘purpose’ in the absence of one (e.g. due to retirement). Finally, I explored how older people spoke of their desire to continue playing football and imagined a positive future. Participants redefined their lives in ways that avoid common discourses of deficit, decline and dependency, with leisure offering an outlet for explicitly challenging ‘gerontophobic norms and ageist ideologies’ (Evans and Sleep, 2012: 515).

The claims of walking footballers might be perceived as sitting in understandings of the ‘third age’, as a leisurely and active period of life. Indeed, football players might be described as ‘third agers’, contrasted with ‘fourth agers’ who are seen as having little agency, dignity or independence (Laslett, 1987; Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). Yet, I am reluctant to categorise them in this way, given the porousness of such boundaries (Johnson *et al.*, 2020). Equally, aligning with sanguine descriptions of the third age relies on sequestering the ‘negatives’ of ageing and (disingenuously) representing their experiences in only positive and sentimental ways. Here, I show how there are a multitude of experiences within older people’s leisure activities; for instance, some older people were more worried about future participation and bodily vulnerabilities than others, and some older people felt that walking football was not a key identity resource for them. Older people, indeed, are too often treated as homogeneous. Intersections of experience and inequity (e.g. gender, class, race, disability) are important, yet neglected, in recent scholarship, including at times within this article (I explore the role of gender in walking football elsewhere; Thomas and Thurnell-Read, *in press*). Intersectional experiences can be organising and limiting attributes in the drive to abide by the principles of successful ageing. Older people are not a homogenous group; their diversity is shaped by background, experiences, preferences and structural factors (Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Johnson, *in press*). Future empirical work must attend to this and think critically about using a unilateral category that potentially masks diversity in ageing experiences.

Moreover, the development of positive (third age) understandings of ageing risks subjecting others to the category of decline and of poor choices, suggesting simply and problematically that people *choose to age* even as some will struggle to surmount fleshy bodily limitations. As I show in this article, for example, some participants criticised real and/or imagined older others who did not engage in physical activity. One charge might be, then, that older people symbolically slaughtered the other to avoid their own social death; they define themselves in positive terms, like *healthy* and *active*, which constitutes the epitome of moral success and

differentiates them from (*unhealthy* and *inactive*) others. We must be attuned, then, to how older people tell counter stories in ways that can both resist and align with ageist discourses.

My analysis resists pushing physical activity as a cure to ageing population concerns. Some scholars demonstrate how these ideas permeate into older people's reflections on physical activity (Deneau *et al.*, 2022), and where they denigrate less-active peers for laziness 'without regard to possible alternative experiences and meanings' (Minello and Nixon, 2017: 89). My concern is that my claims here are interpreted as promoting exercise as assuring socially approved modes of successful ageing, in ways that mask structural and cultural barriers to participation (e.g. Raisborough *et al.*, 2014; Dionigi and Son, 2017) and dismiss the important acknowledgement that what successful ageing means varies in different contexts (Minello and Nixon, 2017). Such a position overemphasises individual action and choice, and ignores the influence of social forces and cultural constraints on health outcomes (Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Dionigi and Son, 2017). Walking football is not exclusively a demonstration of the 'will to health' (Higgs *et al.*, 2009: 687) and personal responsibility in attempts to enact self-care, in which the individual is seen as completely and totally atomised.

Equally, despite the caveats outlined above, we must remain aware of, and gain access to, a multiplicity of experiences of later-life. Indeed, for many older people in this study, exercise *did* allow them to remain physically and socially active in later-life, in ways that *did* align with third-age understandings (though, as I have shown, not always without tensions and complications). Given that leisure seemingly plays a role in the increasingly 'acceptable' ways for people to grow old (Dionigi and Son, 2017), we must continue to subject it to critical attention.

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