

Abstract

Older people, leisure places, and wellbeing Older Scuba divers, Hill Walkers & Sea Swimmers in Ireland

Introduction

Humans have a longstanding desire to live longer and healthier lives (Ekerdt *et al.*, 2017). Medical advancements, immunisation and knowledge regarding lifestyle choices have contributed to rising life expectancy (WHO, 2011). While adding years to life is important, equally important is to add life to years. Historically, Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model for successful ageing proposes avoidance of disease and disability, high cognitive and physical function, and engagement with life as important domains for successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn, 1997). Yet, as people age disengagement with aspects of life, and increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases, such as some cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis, and dementia among older people become greater challenges to healthy ageing (European Commission, 2014).

Many of these challenges may be mitigated through engagement in appropriate leisure based physical activity, and there is a broad body of research supporting this view. Consequently, the promotion of leisure activities which facilitate wellbeing is needed to encourage healthy and active ageing (World Health Organisation, 2020). Ideologically, increased longevity is an important achievement and something which humans pursue in and of itself. However, there are real challenges regarding healthy and active ageing, specifically with regard to quality of life (QoL) as a person ages.

Adventure leisure providers are ideally positioned to facilitate active ageing for older people of differing abilities, contributing to physical, mental and social wellbeing (Vega-Vázquez *et al.*, 2020). However, more alacrity on the part of the adventure tourism sector to engage this growing market is needed (Hickman and Stokes, 2017). We need to dispel pre-conceived, negative socially constructed notions about ageing and adventure through positive promotion (Freeman *et al.*, 2016). Reimagining active ageing through the lens of older adventurers, specifically scuba divers, hill walkers and sea swimmers sheds light on their motivations, interests and gives them a voice.

Method

This research applies a qualitative methodology in order to understand the participants' motivations, perceived benefits, and to explore why older adventurers engage in their respective activities. The approach is ethnographic and observational in principle. Over the past four years, the lead researcher has engaged with participants, n=32 ranging in age from 50 to 84, in their leisure activities on at least three separate occasions. In

addition to active participation, this also involved taking comprehensive notes, images and video. This was followed up with an in-depth semi-structured interview.

Findings/Discussion

The evidence is irrefutable regarding wellbeing and positive impact on QoL for older adventurers through engagement with their chosen leisure activity. Connectedness with likeminded people and the natural environment is vital (Boyes, 2016). Interestingly, many participants took up their activity in later life and intend to continue as long as they are physically capable. While not explicitly understood or recognised by the participants, most apply selective optimisation and compensation to some degree (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). The motivation to continue is not the physical activity per se, but the passion for their leisure activity. Participants embrace opportunities to travel, develop skills, set goals, or simply just have fun. Democratic and inclusive leadership is important and many leaders evolve naturally within the groups. There is an impact on resilience, autonomy, QoL for all participants.

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