Understanding the young at heart: seeing older adult climbers the way they see themselves

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Abstract
Currently, there are in excess of 10 million people in the United Kingdom aged over 65 with this number predicted to rise to 19 million by 2050; over this period the USA will see an increase from 70 to 80 million, and in the Czech Republic the population aged 60+ is forecast to rise from 23.7% to 40.1%. The past decade has seen the rapid development of scholarship into active ageing, yet research into how older adults perceive adventure sports has been lacking and indicates a need for investigation in this direction. The aim of this study was to discover how outdoor sport, specifically climbing, is conceptualized by older adults aged 65-74 and used a purposive sample that was able to offer a meaningful perspective of what it means to be an active climber in ‘young-old’ age. This pilot study used interview questionnaires with climbers (n=8) with an average age of 70.2 climbing regularly in the north of England. Themes were identified through manual data handling and internal and external checking carried out. Initially, four main themes emerged: the maintenance of physical and mental health and fitness; maintaining social contact; enjoying the natural environment; and, generating a meaningful identity.

Key words: Ageing, Population, Climbing, Perceptions, Benefits.

Introduction
To describe the wave-like movement through developed western societies of the baby boomer generation, or those born between 1945 and 1970, Dytchwald and Flower coined the term ‘age wave’ (1989). Returning to the theme ten years later, Dytchwald (1999) predicted that those at the wave front would reshape the concept of the life course and transform healthcare, technology, financial services, work, education, leisure and retirement (Green, 2010). At the time of writing there are in excess of ten million people aged 65+ in the UK with the number predicted to rise to 19 million by 2050; currently, one-in-six of the UK population is aged 65+, a figure ex-
pected to be one-in-four by 2050 (www.parliament.uk). However, whilst longevity has increased, healthy life expectancy has not kept pace all around resulting in proportionately greater demands on the public services, health and welfare. Significantly, it has also been recognized that within the age wave itself there are vastly differing concepts of what it means to grow older (Kluge, 2005; Boksberger and Laesser, 2009). Scholars around the world are united in agreement that active ageing impacts positively on well being, fitness and health (Grant and Kluge, 2012), thus there is scope to challenge to the hitherto previously dominant discourse about ageing based on stereotypes and myths associated with inevitable decline and morbidity (Levine, 2008). Perrault’s observation that “there is substantial evidence to support the notion that exercise may be an effective way to delay the effects of ageing” (1983: 3) is now reinforced by a critical mass of unambiguous evidence that shows that many of the ailments associated with ageing are positively influenced by regular physical activity. However, rather than physical activity taking the form of continuous exercise of a repetitive nature, such as running, cycling or swimming, what is more attractive to those of ‘retirement age’ is physical activity taking the form of a ‘project’ (Stebbins, 2006; Elkington and Stebbins, 2014). The aim of this pilot project was to gain an insight into the ways in which ‘young-old’ adults, aged between 65 and 74 perceived that rock climbing contributed to health and well-being.

**Methods**

In the mid-1990s, Barrett and Greenaway argued that the majority of the research on adventure education was influenced by a quantitative approach, or what they termed a “scientific research paradigm” (1995: 52), and went on to suggest that qualitative approaches were necessary to reveal the subjective nature of adventure experiences. In doing so they drew attention to the ‘failure’ of ‘objective’ approaches, a malaise that Sparkes identified as common to sport in general (2002; 2003). Alison and Pomeroy (2001) endorsed the call for investigations that would document and examine the individual’s experience in outdoor adventure, and despite support from other scholars (Barrett and Greenaway, 1995; Davidson, 2001) there has still been a tendency to focus on young people at the expense of other age groups, particularly the elderly. It can be a mistake for researchers to be drawn too quickly into lengthy critiques of ontology and epistemology, but used skillfully these help steer the researcher towards the methods best suited to generate the type of data they seek (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). This project focused on individuals’ perceptions, that by their very nature were likely to be characterized by differences, with data consisting of meanings articulated through words: therefore a qualitative approach was considered most suitable to explore the relationship between older adults and adventure sport (Hoepfl, 1997; Patterson and Pegg, 2012).

Lancashire is geologically and geographically well situated for climbing and afforded access to highly active clubs and climbers (Ainsworth and Cronshaw, 2006) from which a purposive sample was recruited (Arthur, Waring, Coe and Hedges, 2012; Flick, 2014). The primary investigator acted as an opportunistic researcher making it likely that as a climbing ‘insider’ participants would be willing to share their perceptions without reservation. Whilst this gave access to the subtleties and nuances of the responses it was not without risks, particularly that it could make the researcher liable to ignore or misinterpret data due to habituated ways of ‘seeing’ the climbing world (Greenleaf, 2002; Lawler, 2008). Therefore, internal checkers were used to authenticate meanings, whilst two critical friends (CFs) acted as critical support for the project.

A brief consideration of the strengths and weaknesses the CFs brought to this study is pertinent here. To avoid gender bias, a male and a female were chosen (Oakley, 1998); to avoid outdoor sector bias, CF1 had no outdoor experience whilst CF2 had been an internationally recognized outdoor practitioner with a number of professional publications to his credit. At the age of 67, CF2 could empathize with the sample group, whereas CF1 was a decade younger but had professional experience of gerontology. There were no social ties that could influence criticality but by presenting the work to CFs for challenge there was a transparent effort to show that each step was taken prudently. Furthermore, whilst the outcomes of the project could not easily be generalized its processes were designed for transparency (Whitehead and McNiff, 2012).

CF1 generated critical discussion around how to define a climber and what inclusions or exclusions might be made. These considerations were:

- Would it include or exclude indoor wall only climbers? Were these intrinsically different to outdoor climbers? Were those with experience of both environments preferable?
- Would this include use of a rope, or would soloists (free climbing without the safety of a rope) be
included (Richardson, 2007; Roberts, 2008)?

• How would ‘experience’ be conceptualized? Would this include or exclude climbing neonates?

It was agreed that participants needed to be currently active and climbing at French Grade 4, which, whilst relatively accessible, would exclude those without sufficient experience to make them accepted as a climber. Climbers with indoor experience were welcomed, although future research is likely to separate groups, but soloists were excluded due to the ethical problems associated with this activity. The result was that 11 individuals were approached with eight eventually participating. Whilst recognizing that a larger sample size is usually beneficial (Bowling, 2009) it was acknowledged that that this was not necessary to achieve a rich data source (O’Reilly and Parker, 2012). Indeed, Hektner, Schmidt and Csikszentmihalyi (2007) argue that sample sizes as small as five can produce sufficiently rich and reliable data.

The original research design envisaged the use of a focus group as a pilot mechanism to generate themes for targeted investigation using interviews. However, the planned start date in the autumn of 2013 coincided with a season of cheap flights, a glut of overseas accommodation, a strong pound sterling and importantly good weather in southern Europe; ideal conditions for older travelers to exploit their freedom and affluence (Fernandez-Morales and Manyorga-Toledano, 2008; Paxon, 2009). Participants quite literally dispersed to climbing venues in Italy, Morocco and Spain for between 21-60 days forcing a tactical review of methods and cautioning against too strict adherence to linear research projects (Bell and Newby, 1977; Maxwell, 2013). Subsequently, the research design was altered to use questionnaires followed by targeted interviews with participants acting as internal checkers. CFs functioned as external checkers and critical backgrounds against which themes could be drawn out, and this initial layer of data provides the background to this paper.

The original questions for the focus group were converted for use in an open-ended questionnaire that was then emailed to participants for completion irrespective of their location overseas. Although this meant that prompts could not be used to steer the conversation (Curtis and Curtis, 2011), it did mean that responses were not time-sensitive, likely to be more considered and more appropriate to the needs of older participants (Wenger, 2002). This conferred practical advantages on the project in terms of cost, effectiveness, accessibility and ease of analysis (Gray, 2014; Kumar, 2014) but, of course, there were also potential disadvantages. Questionnaires can be inadequate for the collection of subjective data so care was taken to design appropriately open-ended questions and in reviewing these in advance with CFs. Despite criticisms over subjectivity these were offset by the potential insights afforded through an opportunistic approach (Sapsford and Jupp, 2006; Olsen, 2012).

There was also the freedom to observe some interesting dynamics in the climbing environment but it cannot be said that these are truly informative of the actions of climbers aged 65+. However, observations can act as a secondary source of evidence and allow for the matching of responses to behaviour (Stake, 1995; Dawson, 2009). Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson and McSpadden (2011) provide an interesting, yet cautionary, insight into data analysis. Using five different analytical approaches to one set of data they show that very different interpretations can emerge. Thus, even though it was important that the analytical tool for this work was identified in advance it was likely that there would be criticism and support in equal measure regarding its choice. Data analysis used constant comparison (Silverman, 2013), “an iterative process of reading and re-reading data, looking for similarities and differences between accounts” (Djordjevic and Cotton, 2011: p386) complemented by colour coding and organization into higher and lower order themes (Bolton, 2010).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. Maintenance of physical well-being.
3. Avoiding social isolation.

These will now briefly be considered in turn; consistent with research ethics, data cleansing has been carried out in order to ensure confidentiality, and responses have been anonymized (Tolich, 2004).

**Maintenance of physical well-being**

It was significant that climbing was acknowledged for its central role in either getting, or more importantly, remaining fit. However, physical fitness and health were loosely understood concepts in this sample group and focused primarily on preventing the loss of strength and flexibility needed to climb. Leo maintained that “if I can get into the shapes I need to get to the top that means I’m staying strong and keeping my flexibility”, a thought process en-
endorsed by climbing partners Bruce and Cate who valued the maintenance of strength, “I’m now, what 67, and he’s over 70, so making sure we’ve got strong muscles is important…neither of us want to go to a gym, so pulling up, getting a bit of a strain is good for us…we just can’t cope with as much as we could when we were younger” (Cate). For Bruce, who reminisced about his working days as a diesel engine fitter first in the military and then as a civilian, being strong was a link to his past and ‘looking fit’ was as important as being functional. He was also concerned about the effect that ageing was having on his flexibility and that ‘stiffening up’ was a natural process that regular climbing might offset. However, whilst Cate practiced yoga, Bruce just relied on climbing without an appreciation that supplementary exercise, particularly focused on suppleness, could increase his range of motion and make a valuable contribution to his strength. Neither Cate nor Bruce was aware of the role that suppleness and elasticity played in the power potential of muscle but expressed a motivation to discover more when the subject was explored.

Bone density was another subject of interest, especially to Cate, who was mindful of the osteoporosis that her mother had suffered from, and to Colin and Bobby, who partnered regularly as club members. However, the impact of stress on connective tissue and subsequently bone density remained unknown. Colin had been a climber for some 50 years whilst Bobby had ‘converted’ to climbing in his late fifties and now had some ten years’ experience. During their working lives getting to the ‘crag’ and then maximizing time on the rock had been a priority, the journey to and from the venue merely a means to an end. However, currently more was being made of the walk-in and walk-out as impact exercise was recognized as good for agility and contributing to skeletal health, or ‘strong bones’, particularly when carrying a rucksack laden with kit and equipment. As Colin explained:

“Walking to the climbs gives me a sense of strength and is good for my bone density. When I’d got kids and a career to look after I wanted to get in and out (of the climbing venue) as quick as possible. I wanted to be on the rock and get my routes in and I’d travel ‘Colorado Style’, high, dry and fast, with as little in my rucksack as possible. Now, though, I pack a bit extra, and know that the walk in is like a run, good for my bones. However, it is also a bit of a joint wrecker so I guess it’s a compromise”.

Christophe, whose career had been in medicine, and who had a much better than average grasp of fitness and health, identified the walk to and from the venue as good for agility and explained, “the heavy rucksack…the uneven path, the up and down, the side to side, it’s all good…they all aid in (the) gymnastic struggles”.

This point was endorsed by Don, also a sea kayaker, who suggested that agility helped with his balance both on the rock and in his boat, and that it helped maintain his fitness for using his boat’s rudder (a sea kayak rudder is operated through plantar flexion).

It was interesting that of all the participants Bruce was the only one who did not engage in exercise to supplement climbing. All other participants were motivated to support their climbing through physical activity on non-climbing days. Paddy was typical in his approach:

“Climbing does require physical health and I think my other activities help this. They also contribute much more to strength and general conditioning, so I take a lot of (non-climbing) exercise”.

Baláš (2014) estimates that it requires approximately 80 vertical metres of climbing per week to maintain or increase upper body strength in males, and some 400-500 vertical metres for cardiovascular benefits to occur. It would be of great value to extend his research into the community of older adult climbers. However, irrespective of actual physiological benefits, remaining active seems to bring other psychological rewards that are consistent with a healthy lifestyle and it is to this that we will now turn.

**Maintenance of psychological well-being**

For older adult climbers psychological health is more complex than simply belonging to a community although this in itself does offer advantages. Interestingly, value is placed on keeping the knowledge of climbing venues and routes sharp and in having the skills to mediate risk. Returning to Christophe, with a degree of comedy he observed that “(r)isk assessment is paramount…you need a much higher level of judgment to climb outdoors and that forces you to stay alert and pay attention…at levels that most of my friends are not (with) gardening, crosswords, bridge, Spanish wines…(but) bridge can be very dangerous if your partner totes a handgun!” Paddy endorsed the idea that risk concentrated his mind, “the degree of risk/danger does play its part in kee-
ping me switched on and watchful” and continued that so did remaining proficient with the technical aspects of climbing. Regular exposure to setting up top and bottom rope systems, abseils (rappels), multi-pitch belays, and the use of kit and equipment upon which lives depend takes time and cognitive effort to develop and maintain skill and expertise; both of which are dependent on effective neural functioning and memory (Côté, Murphy-Mills and Abernathy, 2014; Wadden, Borich and Boyd, 2014). Being proficient was central to Don feeling comfortable and to his developmental journey through climbing:

“Like almost any male I find equipment of great interest that has to be tempered by income. (However) I...also hope to improve my gear placement abilities to enable me to climb into the E grades during the coming season...(so) staying comfortable with gear is important, yes”.

Within the close social networks that characterize climbing this allowed the older adult climbers in this group to feel valued, for both their current expertise and their history of ‘being climbers’, of having ‘gone before’ the current generation. Being able to offer advice and guidance to those who were discovering for themselves climbing sites well known to older adults brought a sense of self respect, of being valued for their knowledge, and in being able to contribute something back to the climbing community. Christophe argued that the reward was in being able to aspire younger climbers to:

“get out there, take responsibility for themselves and their climbing buddies, and learn to enjoy first assessing the risks, then taking the risks in a controlled and reasoned way...If just one of them one day says to his or her climbing partner, ‘Christophe taught me that’, I shall die happy”.

For Paddy the rewards were similar in that he felt that his legacy was worthwhile and that whilst his days of hard climbing were over it was still important to maintain local knowledge, “bringing excitement and adventure does it for me, being asked about good places to climb makes me feel like my time was worth it and it’s nice to know that I can pass it on...I do not aspire to new or hard routes any more, but I do enjoy the storytelling”. However, for Cate, the focus was not on being valued for building competence in others but in “bringing fun to those who come after me”: for her, grades and technicality were of relatively little consequence compared to maintaining her memories of good times and using those to transmit a sense of where was fun to climb. In common with others, this required her to stay involved with access issues and the range of ‘nice climbs’ at any one place.

Thus, in the maintenance of psychological health several lower order themes were apparent: being valued for expertise with kit and equipment, remaining proficient in the mechanics and systems for climbing, and being recognized as such, and being a reference point for the ‘history’ of crags, routes and venues. The psychological benefits these conferred seemed to be in the regular exercise of memory and routine and in the awareness of place and value in the climbing community. These issues also helped participants avoid feelings of social isolation, which we will now look at from a different although very complementary perspective.

**Avoiding social isolation**

Colin and Bobby came from an inland area of Lancashire whereas Don’s club was based farther north and west, hence its involvement in sea kayaking as well as climbing. For all three there was a strong sense of community through the ‘official’ roles they played within the club. Colin was very active in his capacity as ‘Meets Coordinator’ responsible for planning the evening and weekend climbing schedule each year, booking huts, arranging official overseas trips, and acting as a contact point for each week’s activities. Bobby played a complementary role as Newsletter Editor and published an e-newsletter on a monthly basis. Each of these roles demanded time and effort, which helped fill the space that working lives had once consumed, and allowed for the maintenance of skills that had once been integral to their careers in high level public administration and as the owner-manager of a successful small haulage company respectively. Don was equally active in his club as the New Members’ Officer with responsibility for dealing with initial enquiries, assessing inbound skill levels and interests, facilitating initial contact at a climbing session, and then coordinating with the club’s Membership Officer. His working life had been as an engineer with a multi-national energy generation company and like Colin and Bobby his skills were being utilized during ‘active retirement’. He commented that:

“...the first few months (into retirement) are novel, no getting up quite so early, not having to
pack lunch the night before, no regular drive into
the office, no weekly or monthly progress or per-
formance meetings. After a couple of weeks of
being able to sleep in (till nine o’clock – I felt like
a teenager again) the days are quite long. My wife
and I garden and cycle but just like being out on
the crag, you can’t do that all day everyday, so
being the NMO (New Members’ Officer) gives
me stuff to do and people to contact, keeps me
active, like”.

Colin’s and Bobby’s roles also involved adminis-
tration that could be expanded or contracted to
suit hours available. Colin observed that “I’d never
have thought about it (being Meets Coordinator)
when I was working - too much to do for voluntary
work – and I’m glad I never did. I could have rushed
through organizing schedules when I was working
but I can do so at a more leisurely pace now, and it
means I think about more carefully too”.

Thus, when the transition from work to retirement
had occurred all three had found their social con-
nexions reinforced as a result of skills transferred
from their professional lives.

Observations reinforced the highly social nature of
their voluntary positions in respective clubs. When
out on organized meets they would spend a consi-
derable amount of time circulating amongst other
climbers. Other members not yet of retirement
age seemed to prioritize climbing time (as Colin
confessed to earlier) whilst Colin, Bobby and Don
would network extensively on business associated
with their club roles. Therefore, both physically, at
the rock face, and virtually, when administrating at
a computer interface, social contact was being acti-
vely engineered, and the isolation that can charac-
terize withdrawal from the labour market avoided.

**Conclusion**

This short paper has suggests that rock climbing can
make a positive contribution to young-old adults’
health and well-being. Climbing seems to underpin
Stebbins (2006) and Elkington and Stebbins (2014)
notions that projects are useful in creating sustain-
able commitments to activities likely to support
health and well-being. Climbing as a project seem
to offer ‘odyssey goals’ or multiple achievement ori-
etations that allow older adults to create opportu-
nities in their lives once they have withdrawn from
the labour force.

It has been shown that there is a focus on physical ac-
tivities that whilst in need of order and clarification
helps maintain health and promotes exercise. Psy-
chological health and well-being is also supported
through the need to remain cognizant of climbing-
specific systems and when acting as reference po-
ints for younger climbers. In turn, this is articulated
in the roles that participants fulfill in their respective
clubs, and use social contact and the maintenance of
professional skills to avoid becoming isolated when
time is no longer governed by work.

This project points to many exciting opportunities
to extend research both amongst climbers aged 65+
and into the ways that older adults engage with ad-
venture sports and activities on a wider basis. Coun-
tries across the developed world recognize that the-
re is an ageing population and that this is likely to
influence society in many different ways for at least
another three decades. How older adults relate to the
outdoors is yet under researched but some in this
population appear to be rejecting earlier genera-
tional concepts of what it is to age and the commonly
held stereotypes that position older age as a period
of decline and inevitable loss of opportunity.

Hearing their voice and heeding their message is ne-
cessary if they are not to remain marginalized and
the outdoors is to become more responsive to their
needs. The small-scale nature of this project is ack-
nowledged, so findings should be treated with cau-
tion. However, the lack of previous research in this
area gives this interest as an exploratory study.
References


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