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## SCHOLARLY REVIEWS

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# Expanding the Agenda for Research on the Physically Active Aging Body

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In this article, the authors consider the different approaches that can be used to examine the relationship between physical activity and aging. They propose that much is to be gained in our awareness of this dynamic relationship by drawing on multiple forms of knowledge that can generate diverse understandings regarding the impact of physical activity on physiological, psychological, and social aspects of aging. Accordingly, 3 different approaches to understanding the older physically (in)active body are presented. These are categorized as (a) the objective truth about the aging, physically active body; (b) the subjective truth about the aging, physically active body; and (c) “tales” about the aging, physically active body. The key underpinnings, strengths, and weaknesses of each approach are outlined. A number of examples from the literature are also offered to demonstrate where and how each approach has been used to contribute to our understanding about older people and physical activity. The more thorough, multidisciplinary, and wide spanning our knowledge of the aging, active body is, the more informed we might become in every dimension of its existence.

**Keywords:** physical activity, theoretical perspectives, objective truths, subjective truths, narrative

Over the past couple of decades, many health-promoting organizations (e.g., NCCDP, 1996; World Health Organization, 1998, 2002) have provided guidelines outlining the potential benefits of physical activity in later life. More recent have been the recommendations from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association (see Nelson et al., 2007). It has been stated in such documents that being physically active can reduce the risk of diseases commonly associated with the aging process and in doing so maintain functional ability, health, and quality of life. Given this rather poignant message it is unsurprising that the past 15 years have witnessed an outpouring of literature including a journal dedicated solely to this emerging area of scholarly endeavor: the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*. There is an acceptance by the scientific community that maintaining a physically active lifestyle in later life has an important role to play in helping people maintain independence and good quality of life. Furthermore, engaging in a physically active lifestyle is a plausible way to address the relationship between illness and a sedentary existence.

Because the study of physical activity is multidisciplinary, our understanding about how it is experienced in relation to growing older has the potential to be wide

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ranging (e.g., physiology, sociology, exercise sciences, psychology, leisure). We would suggest, however, that despite such potential, how we come to *know* the physically (in)active aging body continues to remain at risk of being dominated by certain forms of knowledge, often at the expense of others. In this case, much of what is reported in the literature about the physically active aging body derives primarily from measurement and observation that favor quantitative inquiry and its resultant empirical “truths” (Dionigi, 2006; Grant & Kluge, 2007). However, important distinctions can be made between objective measures of physical activity on the one hand and subjective accounts or the meaning of physical activity to the individual on the other. There are other body(s) of knowledge that can help unpack the complexities and ambiguities of the aging experience in relation to physical activity. By *other body(s)*, we mean the many dimensions of people, including their sense of self; their psychological and emotional makeup; their previous life experiences, beliefs, and values; and the effects of the environment on their lives.

Living *in* and *through* an aging, physically (in)active body is more than a technical, unidimensional process. It is interwoven with all aspects of day-to-day living. As such, we feel that much is to be gained by taking seriously forms of knowledge that might generate different and multiple understandings of the aging, physically (in)active body. There is a belief that our understanding of aging and the way older people live their lives could be enhanced “if the humanities play a larger role in shaping our common awareness of late life, and if they can balance biomedicine and social science, new ways of knowing aging may be possible” (Cruikshank, 2003, p. 205). That said, fully incorporating new visions and new voices into a research agenda and situating the not-so-objectified older person nearer to center stage is no easy task. Difficulties can arise when scholars are unfamiliar with, and at worst unreceptive to, theoretical assumptions, goals, values, and procedures alternative to their own. We believe, however, that such differences should be viewed as opportunities for debate, celebration of difference, and a positive step in ensuring that our understanding of aging and physical activity has breadth, as well as depth.

In this article, we attempt to illuminate how some of the different ways of knowing contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the physically active aging body. The contribution of this article to the current body of gerontology literature is twofold. First, it amalgamates a range of literature, spanning an array of disciplines to assist in untangling a number of theoretical threads that currently make up this particular web of knowledge. Second, it synthesizes current research in the specific field of aging and physical activity to demonstrate *where* different theoretical perspectives have and can be used and *how* they contribute to our knowledge of the aging, physically active body. Before discussing this in more detail, however, we consider why the body should matter to those interested in the study of aging and physical activity.

## Considering All Older Body(s)

The body, as a topic of investigation in the social sciences, is certainly not new, and many argue that it “is central to the establishment and maintenance of social life” (Howson, 2004, p. 1). Accordingly, there has been an “explosion of interest” (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, p. 1) and a “massive proliferation of writing” (Shilling,

2003, p. viii) on the subject. However, despite this interest in the body, Faircloth (2003) reminds us that the *aging body* remains a missing piece in social theory. Although there have been more recent efforts to address this issue (e.g., see Twigg, 2004, 2006; Katz, 2000; Katz & Marshall, 2004; Laz, 2003; Marshall & Katz, 2002; and others as detailed in later sections of this article), there is certainly room to extend the theorizing of the aging body. This is especially so given what some refer to as the “centrality of aging” in contemporary Western society (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Williams, 2006), which has a number of implications for the aging body. For example, at present, more people than ever before are living as an *older body*, and by 2050 they will constitute approximately a quarter of the Western world’s population (Victor, 2005a; World Health Organization, 2001). Simultaneously, more people in this cohort have access to a disposable income, allowing them to engage through their body with a contemporary lifestyle consumer culture. This has enabled and encouraged increasing numbers of older people to use their bodies as a sign of the self and the site of discipline and release through health-related behaviors such as physical activity.

It is clear to us, at least, that *every body’s* story needs to be considered and developed if we are to realize how various aspects of aging and physical activity—physiological, psychological, and sociological—can be best represented in the literature. For Holstein and Waymack (2006), this becomes significant at a personal level, because if our old age is to have meaning and be worthy to self and others, they argue that we must not distance ourselves from old age itself. Rather, we must become acquainted with all its ambiguity and mystery and learn to see and value its reality. To that end, we have divided the content of this article into three broad categories to illuminate the different ways of knowing about the physically active aging body. We have labeled these categories (a) the objective truth about the aging, physically active body; (b) the subjective truth about the aging, physically active body; and (c) “tales” about the aging, physically active body.

We outline the key underpinnings of each approach to understanding, but we stress that it is impossible to include all the examples of research that we found useful and illuminative. The studies we cite have been chosen based on our interpretation of them, and this might not necessarily be in accordance with the intention of the authors. Furthermore, locating a study in one category does not imply that it could not be equally suited to another. This is especially the case for the latter two categories. Rather than act as definitive devices, these categories are used as a heuristic tool to help expand the range of approaches that are available when studying the older physically active body. In the final part of this article we advocate for more varied body(s) of knowledge and call for a more holistic understanding of the relationship between physical activity and the aging body.

## **The Objective Truth About the Aging, Physically Active Body**

Because we know that physical activity makes a positive contribution to healthy aging, interest in its effects on the aging body has been extensive. The focus of such studies has primarily been organized around the physical responses of the body to various exercise regimens. Consequently, they are constructed mostly in

the language of biomedicine, which is still “the most prevalent and powerful discourse of the body” (Faircloth, 2003, p. 5). In essence, we have come to understand the older physically active body through the language of science. Such research is incredibly useful, for it demonstrates how regular exercise in later life can, for example, positively contribute to improvements in strength (Dean, Farrell, Kelley, Taylor, & Rhodes, 2007), balance (Perrin, Gauchard, Perrot, & Jeandel, 1999), functional capacity (Fahlman, Morgan, McNevin, Topp, & Boardley, 2007), recovery from injury (Jones, Jakobi, Taylor, Petrella, & Vandervoort, 2006), aerobic fitness (Kallinen, 2005), bone density (Augestad, Schei, Forsmo, Langhammer, & Flanders, 2006), and cholesterol levels (Knight, Bermingham, & Mahajan, 1999). Furthermore, as a result of such research, we are also aware of the *types* and *amount* of exercise needed to address these issues. In this sense, scientific knowledge based on the biological dimensions of aging and physical activity has been enlightening, valuable, and life changing for many. It is not our intention to either discount or discredit the huge contribution of this research. Rather, we applaud what has occurred but acknowledge there is also more to learn.

According to Powell and Longino (2001), biologically driven knowledge has consistently spoken “truths” regarding the decline element of adult aging. They argue that this has led us to understand the aging body as an ill body that needs to be “treated.” As such, much research originating in this framework has set out to address the apparent need for a “cure” by investigating methods that might “fix the problem” and “postpone” aging (Eichberg, 2000). Inevitably, these methods include the use of exercise programs to improve the body’s functional capacity and thereby delay physical dependency. In the process, however, Eichberg asserts that growing old itself can become hailed as “a problem,” with physical activity viewed and potentially promoted as “the solution.” After all, the scientific research postulates that the better our physical fitness, the better our predicted health will be (Markula & Pringle, 2006). But as Holstein and Waymack (2006) remind us, even if the consequences of biomedicine allow us to live in relatively good health for longer, the older body will still be filled with “ambiguities and intricacies guaranteeing there will be no permanent answers” (p. 179).

A number of scholars (e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Grant & Kluge, 2007; Rikli, 2005) have expressed some disquiet regarding the dominance of biological knowledge. One concern is the tendency to detach the body and mind from one another, something that fuels the philosophical dualism between body and mind. To that end, it is interesting to also note the growing interest in older populations in the sport and exercise psychology and health psychology literature (e.g., see Biddle, Fox, & Boutcher, 2000; Fox, 1999; Weiss, 2003). Although offering important insight into the role of physical activity in, for example, perceptual skills (Caserta, Young, & Janell, 2007), attention (Sparrow, Bradshaw, Lamoureux, & Tirosh, 2002), self-efficacy (McAuley, Blissmer, Katula, Duncan, & Mihalko, 2000), and memory (Whitbourne, Neupert, & Lachman, 2008), along with motivation and barriers to exercise in older age (Cohen-Mansfield, Marx, & Guralnik, 2003), such research is often characterized by quantitative, objective measurements that can in some instances seem distant and disembodied.

Treating the body and mind as separate entities has consequences for the ways in which the aging body is understood. For example, Howson (2004) warns that one outcome is for the body to be seen as something that can be manipulated,

mapped, measured, and treated in various ways that lead to further isolation from the self.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, knowing the body only in terms of its biological process can lead to bodily changes' being interpreted as a biological disorder, a pathological matter. These assertions support Frank's (1990) claims that the dominance of the biomedical model can reinforce the cyclical way in which the body is conceptualized, represented, and responded to and that knowledge informed exclusively by biological discourse also limits our capability to experience the body directly or theorize it indirectly.

Exploring the impact of physical activity on aging as an objective truth alone has also been problematized in relation to reinforcing notions of individualism that are characteristic of consumer society (Featherstone, 1991; McElroy, 2002; Smith Maguire, 2007). With this in mind, and given the resources and effort put into trying to entice older adults to embrace an active lifestyle even of mild intensity, it is worth considering some of the inherent messages in the "get active" promotional campaigns and programs (e.g., *National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity in Adults Age 50 and Over*; see Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2005; *Get Active for Your Heart*, British Heart Foundation, 2007). At a pragmatic level, the underlying intent of these initiatives is to promote quality of life by ensuring independence and preventing illness. And certainly, placing greater emphasis on individuals' being responsible for their own health via physical activity has merit. However, care should be taken to ensure that "get active" messages do not inadvertently place responsibility for being physically active and healthy throughout old age solely on the individual. Doing so, suggest Markula and Pringle (2006), might "divert surveillance of health risks to the deficiencies of individual bodies" (p. 70). It might also deflect the attention of policy makers away from the social and cultural conditions that shape and constrain health (White, Young, & Gillett, 1995).

It would seem, therefore, that examining the impact of physical activity on the aging biological body is important. However, on its own it reveals only a part of the picture and limits our appreciation of the meanings associated with being "old" and physically active. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that what is currently known about the relationship between aging and physical activity is both advanced and possibly restrained by scientific empiricism. As Markula, Grant, and Denison (2001) remind us, there are myriad ways to research how aging shapes our experiences of physical activity. Similar sentiments have been suggested by Polivka and Longino (2006), who claim that the time has come to move beyond an overreliance on scientific notions and begin exploring more seriously the diversity, difference, and indeterminacy inherently embedded in the experiences of growing older. The point is, the older body is more than a stimulus-response machine, and there are a variety of ways to research how aging shapes our experiences of physical activity.

## **The Subjective Truth About the Aging, Physically Active Body**

According to Turner (1995), we need to "understand the body in the process of action and interaction at the level of everyday reciprocities and exchange" (p. 237). One way in which the process of action and interaction can be examined relative to physical activity and aging is through the study of embodiment. The

term *embodiment*, according to Howson (2004), is used in a variety of ways but generally signals attention to lived experiences, that is, the subjective experiences of *being* and *having* a body (Leder, 1990). Consequently, recent years have witnessed a growing commitment to “bring the body back.” This has certainly been so in the wider field of gerontology (e.g., Dumas, Laberge & Straka, 2005; Gil-learn & Higgs, 2000; Grenier, 2005; Hurd, 2000; Paulson & Willig, 2008; Twigg, 2000) and also the sport and health sciences literature (e.g., Cox & Thompson, 2000; Hockey & Allen Collinson, 2007; Monaghan, 2001; Sparkes, Partington, & Brown, 2007). Curiously, what appears to be lagging is a perspective that spans both of these fields—that is, the embodiment of aging and physical activity. Elaborating on the notion of embodiment further, Crossley (2007) explains:

My body is not merely the perceptible material that you can see, smell and touch, nor even the internal organs that medical science can measure, weigh and monitor. It has another “inside” that surgeons and neuroscientists cannot access; an inside comprising lived sensations which form the coherent and meaningful gestalt structures that are my consciousness of the world. (p. 82)

Considering the subjective, what is often referred to as the lived body, through a phenomenological approach requires the “systematic study of experience and subjectivity, an approach that will enable us to investigate the way in which the aging body is experienced” (Bullington, 2006, p. 70). This raises our awareness of the body’s own inside-out perspective, the way in which the aging body is experienced. For many older people this is important because the body has become the literal grounding of societal identity. In this sense, Crossley (2007) notes, “human bodies, for the phenomenologist, are both perceptible and perceiving, sensible and sentient” (p. 82). It is a useful way to examine the various cultures of aging and the subsequent variety in meaning that elderly individuals give to events in their lives such as (non)involvement in physical activity.

The importance of taking phenomenology seriously when studying the aging body was noted by Langley and Knight (1999) after their study on the role of sport participation throughout men’s life course. This has since been echoed by Laz (2003), who insists, “the phenomenology of the body matters; it matters to a theoretical understanding of age and embodiment and it certainly matters to respondents who told me in detail about hair, eyesight, internal organs, weight, energy, legs, wrinkles, hearing, and arthritis” (p. 507). It would seem, therefore, that if we are to equip ourselves with different forms of knowledge regarding the embodied experiences of being old and physically active, such an approach should be part of the research agenda.

Despite its apparent importance, however, phenomenology has been largely neglected in research exploring the aging body (Bullington, 2006). This is even more the case in relation to our knowledge of the physically active, aging body. That said, there are some notable exceptions offered by a small number of authors.<sup>2</sup> For example, in their study of aging ballet dancers, Wainwright and Turner (2003) explored the intersection between the aging body, narratives of aging, and the structural constraints of ballet as an occupation. By exploring the meaning given by the ballet dancers to their experiences of dancing through an aging body, this study provided a useful and enlightening reflection on the reciprocal relationships between an aging body, culture, and society.

Also drawing on phenomenology, Kluge (2002) explored the subjective experiences of women 65 years of age and older who had committed to lifelong physical activity. She wanted to explicate the essence of the women's physically active lifestyles: what constituted their experiences over the life course and how this transcended sociocultural constraints. It was evident that continuity of a physically active lifestyle was not always a luxury, for it was affected by gender socialization, enduring multiple roles, ageist attitudes, and physical challenges. The study offered an insightful tale of how the women learned to negotiate the sociocultural context of their day-to-day experiences to keep control of their lives. The ways in which the women maintained a sense of internal continuity and held on to values about being physically active were also illustrated.

When studying different cultures of exercise, Paulson (2005) focused on the experiences of older women who engage in regular physical activity. Specifically, she compared the cultures of a "fitness exercise" versus a "dance exercise" group for the over 50s and considered the ways that participants gave meaning to living in and through an aging body in a particular context (i.e., a fitness- or dance-focused exercise class environment). It was proposed that "fitness exercise" was framed and subsequently interpreted through embodied experiences as exercising to full capacity to achieve maximum physiologically and psychologically based health benefits. Meanwhile, the "dance fitness" provided a context in which living in an aging body was experienced as something that was graceful.

The final example of how a subjective truth can extend our knowledge of physical activity and aging is found in the work of Tulle (2007; 2008). She examined the intersection between narrative practices and phenomenological accounts of the body in a comprehensive study of embodiment, structure, and agency among veteran elite runners. In this study, Tulle demonstrated how aging elite athletes exposed the ways in which broader discourses might operate to constrain action and habits. She argued that age-appropriate expectations and experiences of the physically active body are largely created and reinforced by knowledge and practices informed by the biomedical model and the narrative of decline. However, Tulle showed how, by having some degree of control over the discourse on veteran sport, the elite athletes were able to challenge this dominant discourse. They did this by deliberately and reflexively reconstructing their aging bodies, along with the meanings given to fluctuations in physical performance. Thus, these older elite athletes demonstrated some ability to control their aging identity by embodying themselves as *both* ageful and competent.

An increasing number of writers are becoming enthusiastic about the insights that the phenomenology of embodiment can offer. Just as for other ways of researching the physically active aging body, however, there remain some unresolved problems to consider. For example, Bauman (cited in Harvey, 1990) argues that the emergence of phenomenologically informed sociology does little to challenge the preoccupation of society as being seen as "second nature" and organized organically. Indeed, for him, such approaches have deepened and strengthened the "naturelike" perspective by focusing on the way common sense is sustained and embedded in the routines and assumptions of everyday life. More recently, Turner (2008) has suggested that phenomenology methodology seeks to bracket out the question of existence to focus on the subject of meaning. The problem here, he argues, is that such bracketing can block out too much by isolating *being* a body

from the *meaning* associated with it when the two are indeed inextricably linked. For Turner, understanding embodiment should start with asking the question, what is a person? The reason for this, he asserts, is that “the problem of the body in philosophical debate cannot be separated from the related issues of personhood, individuation and identity” (p. 52).

Other critiques to be leveled against some of the traditional forms of phenomenology have also highlighted its focus on the “universal person” while overlooking issues of race, class, and gender. This limitation is elaborated on further by Howson (2004), who notes that the assertion of individuals developing a sense of self and comprehending the world via physical action has failed to take account of differentiation among bodies. Gender differences have not always been examined or even considered despite the broad acceptance that there are gender issues to be considered in relation to body and self. Furthermore, Howson points out that traditionally phenomenology has had too little to say about power relations surrounding sport and exercise participation. Thus, although attempts to address some of these issues have been made in recent years (e.g., see Ahmed, 2007), sensitivity to these criticisms is needed before researchers uphold phenomenology as a “sure fire” solution to addressing the potential problems associated with the other ways of knowing we outline in this article.

### “Tales” About the Aging, Physically Active Body

If someone is alive, he or she is engaged in creating his or her story and has a story to tell. It is not surprising that the telling of stories about how we experience our selves and life episodes in relation to aging is considered a salient part of human life (Denison & Markula, 2003; Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001; Rowles & Schoenberg, 2002; Sparkes, 2002). The relationship between storytelling and the body has been noted by a number of narrative scholars. For example, Miller and Penz (1991) propose that “the body, despite its apparent immediacy, is never knowable in direct, unmediated ways. Instead, we know it through its discourses, the many meanings and senses that have accrued with it” (p. 48). Likewise, Becker (1997) argued that “bodily experience and bodily concerns are deeply embedded in various elements of narrative” (p. 93).

Highlighting the complex but mutual relation between the body, culture, and storytelling, Frank (1995) refers to the work of medical anthropologists Arthur and Joan Kleinman on the notion of “in folding” and “out folding.” Culture, Frank suggests, infolds into the body, and reciprocally, bodily processes unfold into social space. The issue, therefore, becomes what language is imposed on aging bodies to show how bodily processes unfold through their stories, as well as how in these stories of aging, culture infolds into the body. In this way, Frank notes that while making sense of our actions and experiences, we not only tell stories *about* our aging bodies but also tell stories *out of* and *through* our aging bodies. Consequently, the body is simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument of whatever story is told. The stories we are told and the stories we learn to tell about ourselves and our bodies are important in terms of how we come to impose order on our experiences and make sense of actions in our lives (Faircloth, 2003; Sparkes, 1999).

The ways in which later life is storied can have profound effects on the way individuals view their own aging (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006b). For example,



labeling the aging body as being “over the hill,” “too old,” a “social problem,” and “financial burden” can incite prejudice, hinder personal development, and place older bodies on the margins of society (Grant & Kluge, 2007). In addition to being intricately related to the body, life stories are also socially shaped. What at first might seem a personal matter, stories told by individuals about their experiences of physical activity in older age are the result of this culturally informed process of infolding onto the body.

This relationship between society, narrative, and the body has led some scholars to describe the body as being socially constructed.<sup>3</sup> From a social-constructivist stance the physical body is essentially storied and eminently social (Sparkes, 1997). Thus, the word *body* represents very different realities and perceptions of realities because societies create meanings of their own, something that varies over time. The various and constantly changing constructions of the body are indicative of the language used to describe it. Whether we describe the older body as decrepit, frail, uncontrollable, wise, or beautiful has implications for how we lead our lives and treat our bodies. Furthermore, these constructions do not exist in a social or political vacuum but within systems of meanings that are imbued with power. As Sparkes (1997) points out, “some constructions come to be more equal than others, some come to be more legitimate than others, and some get to be promoted above others” (p. 88). For example, nondisabled bodies are promoted over disabled bodies, thin bodies are promoted over fat bodies, and youthful bodies are promoted over those that are old in many Western societies. However, there is a gap between the physical presentation of aging on the external body and the subjective experience that lies beneath the surface (Faircloth, 2003).

This point is especially relevant to researchers exploring the social and cultural narratives that operate to shape experiences of physical activity across the life course. Vertinsky’s (2002) work on sporting women in the public gaze tracks the control and surveillance of elderly women in sport over time. She demonstrates how discursive practices surrounding menopause (e.g., the use of metaphors with a particular and persistent stigma of decline), along with the medical preoccupation with “overexertion in old age,” can be instrumental in shaping women’s participation in sporting events such as the marathon. Furthermore, the language used to constitute “normal aging” and “appropriate physical activity” during this life period has been elaborated on in what she believes to be a patriarchal medicalized culture. Consequently, she argues, through this culture, aging men and women have been taught deeply gendered, role-based practices and sets of knowledge about suitable exercise and health practices for a given age.

Using Masters Games as the context, Dionigi and O’Flynn (2007) studied the storied body of older athletes (55–94 years) to illustrate the ways older athletes simultaneously mobilized and resisted contradictory discourses of aging and physical activity through their words and their actions. The participants of their study were fully aware of living in a society that currently idealizes health, ability, and independence while devaluing aging. They were also conscious of growing up during a cultural period when sport was considered inappropriate and dangerous for old people—particularly women. Despite this, these older sportsmen and sportswomen were able to negotiate these conflicting discourses when they described themselves and their experiences of competitive sport.

Other research that has highlighted the dominant narratives circulating in society relating to aging and involvement in sport and physical activity includes studies by Partington, Partington, Fishwick, and Allin (2005) and Phoenix and Sparkes (2006b). These researchers have drawn attention to the key narratives constructed in the subculture of sport and subsequently drawn on by athletes to give meaning to their aging, changing performing body. For example, “age is a state of mind,” “life begins at 40,” and “growing old gracefully” were stories that acted as narrative maps, guiding the athletes through the unknown as they approached midlife (Partington et al., 2005). Meanwhile, reminding us that aging is not the sole prerogative of people in midlife and old age, Phoenix and Sparkes (2006a) illuminated how narrative maps projected by older team members can also act to frame young athletes’ perceptions of their own aging process.

Focusing on an exercise rather than sport context, Poole (1999) studied how individual older women participating in a fitness class experienced their activity. The interview data revealed how these exercise sessions were often experienced as contradictory. Although the women exercised to conform to Western ideals of feminine beauty they also exercised to gain strength and mobility for independent living. Poole concluded that healthy aging should be viewed as a process of continual deconstruction and reconstruction and that exercisers often attach multiple and contradictory meanings to their exercise experience.

So what is the appeal for this alternative way of knowing? How can an awareness of narratives and discursive practices surrounding the older physically active body advance our understanding of how physical activity affects the experiences of growing older? By shedding light on the multiple meanings and senses accumulated through the physically active aging body, it is possible to illuminate the reciprocal processes of infolding and unfolding between body and society. Indeed, Gare (2001) asserts that understanding our lives as narratively constructed might enable us to appreciate how personal narratives are related to broader social narratives shaped by institutions such as sport, fitness, and medicine. With this, an appreciation for what kinds of narratives people have been socialized into and what kinds of narratives could replace or accompany them might be achieved. This could potentially allow a more meaningful aging process to be envisaged and provide an insight into what older people themselves desire, especially in relation to physical activity.

For all its promise and potential, however, there are concerns with viewing the body as storied. First, it should be recognized that instigating change—especially in terms of social narratives—is no easy task. Rather, the promise of change can be misleading, and narratives of physical endeavor and achievement, such as bodybuilding pensioners, marathon-running grandparents, surfing octogenarians, and so forth (see Clark, 1995), although intended to resist dominant deficit narratives, can inadvertently reinforce ageist attitudes. Second, Plummer (2001) draws attention to what he terms “the commodification effect” of storytelling. For him, “We start to live our lives through the stories of others, repeating and rehearsing others’ stories as if they were our own, turning them along the way into commodities—literally stories that may be exchanged or sold” (p. 100). A consequence of this is that stories start to get a tired, outdated feel about them—we have heard them all before. Thus, certain stories can become endlessly recycled, retold, and clichéd, rendering them boring to be listened to. Clearly this is a concern and

would need careful consideration if we are to effectively project positive stories of aging and physical activity. A third limitation of viewing the body as storied is emphasized by Williams (2006), who notes that overly focusing on how the body is storied can potentially downplay the reality of the biological aspects of the body. At times the biological body is forgotten or bypassed entirely. Here, our knowledge of the older, physically active body risks being reduced to the social, to narratives, to power-knowledge relationships. In the process, the biological aspects risk at best being rendered unimportant and at worst being lost altogether.

## Future Directions

Older people live in complex, dynamic, and continually changing societal settings that strongly influence their biography (e.g., Blaikie, 1999; Featherstone & Hepworth, 2004; Kenyon et al., 2001; Victor, 2005b), and, clearly, aging and physical activity cannot be reduced to just one way of knowing. Our understanding of the relationship between aging and physical activity continues to be led (and driven) by research focusing on the objective body. However, older people have passed through various life stages, and these influence every part of their identity. It is therefore imperative for the realities of their lives as defined and told by them not to be dismissed (Chapman 2005; George, 2007; Rose, 2008). They are not bodies without stories but individuals whose stories are as mysterious as their bodies and whose biographical aging is as intricate as their biological aging, as worthy of study and, in the end, as pertinent to their health (Gubrium, 2001). As gerontologists, or *gerokinesiologists*, a term coined by Jones and Rose (2005) in their book *Physical Activity Instruction of Older Adults*, we need to understand that growing old cannot be understood apart from its subjective experience. Although it is unlikely we will ever be able to produce truly embodied accounts of people's experiences (Denison & Markula, 2003), it is possible to access a more enriched understanding of what it means to grow older and be older with regard to incorporating regular physical activity into one's lifestyle.

In a move to encourage such understanding, in this article we have shown that there are a variety of ways in which the physically active aging body might be explored. Although the approaches are intricately related, each offers insight into a slightly different dimension by emphasizing different aspects of the aging, physically active body (i.e., what we have loosely referred to as biological, phenomenological, and storied). Of course, we do not suggest that researchers should become experts in and users of each approach. We do, however, advocate being *receptive* to the variety of approaches and draw on a range of theoretical discourses. If we are to better understand the aging and physically active body in its entirety, then as this article has demonstrated, embracing a research field that is rich in diversity is surely a useful way forward. Such a position was reinforced by Rose (2008), who stated, "Although it is unlikely that any single physical activity theory will be able to account for all the anomalous data currently emerging, it is clear that many of the current theories used to understand physical activity behavior are inadequate" (p. 112).

The importance of such diversity is reinforced by a number of scholars. For example, Hendricks, Sheets, and Bradley (2006) argue that various theoretical perspectives should be used to inform each other. Progress in our understanding

occurs when boundaries are pushed between what we know and what remains less certain. Being aware and receptive to different ways of knowing is important when we remember that “the changing context of activity behaviours and the emergence of new forms of activity behaviours at later ages may give the same characteristic very different forms of expression and meaning” (Malina, 2001, p. 355). A full comprehension of changes in expression and meaning relative to physical activity in later life might be beyond what can be offered by one knowledge base alone—be it objective, subjective, or narratively informed. In other words, when it comes to gathering the larger story about these processes, one size fits all fits nobody. A variety of approaches, however, would enhance our knowledge of the body-self-society interface in the realm of aging and physical activity.

The challenge, therefore, is to hold the distinct and yet interrelated dimensions at the same time and resist the temptation to prematurely reduce aging and physical activity to one dimension or the other. For this task, we have personally found the work of Frank (1991, 1995) especially thought provoking because it encompasses in varying degrees the three dimensions that one might consider when aspiring to understand aging and physical activity. According to Frank (1991), “bodies, of course, do not emerge out of discourses and institutions; they emerge out of other bodies, specifically women’s bodies. . . . There is flesh which is formed in the womb . . . dies and decomposes” (p. 49). For that reason, it is impossible for one to escape the body’s biological reality. But Frank also draws on a phenomenological perspective by proposing that the body is an *experiential problem* for itself in relation to its objective and subjective existence. In other words, the body is a functional problem, not just for society (as Turner, 1984, previously suggested) but also for itself regarding the physical and social context in which it is located. Finally, Frank (2006) acknowledges the *storied element* to the body and the ways in which it can be framed through narratives circulating in society.

Stories about aging might be understood as examples of disrespect and disregard, yet these stories do refer to real bodies, real lives, and the real experiences of those who are aging. Thus, the process of being old and being physically active, for individuals and communities, becomes shaped by which stories are heard (physically active? decrepit and deteriorating?), which stories are taken seriously (bodybuilding pensioners? lawn bowls teams?), and what sense is made of these stories (enlightening? inappropriate?). By simultaneously considering these three dimensions of the body, it becomes apparent that each dimension has something to offer and can provide us with an example of how we might proceed with research on aging and physical activity in the future. After all, the more thorough, multidisciplinary, and wide spanning our knowledge of the aging, active body is, the more informed we might become in every dimension of its existence.

## Concluding Comment

In this article, we offer an overview of three different approaches inherent to understanding the physically active aging body. We have also provided a snapshot of the theoretical backdrop to each. Examples have been included to show how each contributes to our understanding of the relationship between being old and being active and the impact this has on individual lives. While illuminating the

strengths of each approach, we have also drawn attention to some of their potential limitations and common critiques. In so doing, we are reminded by Rose (2008; see also Kretchmar, 2008) that “it is only by conducting research that is truly integrative that more complete solutions to complex and substantive real-world problems can be found” (p. 116). This, however, cannot be achieved by simply *exchanging* one way of knowing or form of knowledge for another.

Our purpose throughout has not been to champion the use of one theoretical or research approach over and above another but to call for a more expansive view of aging and physical activity. The practical implication of synthesizing this information and demonstrating recent examples of each approach “in action” in the domain of aging and physical activity is that it might act as a resource for researchers and support them in making informed choices regarding the approach they wish to adopt. Hearing all sides of the story can be the most effective method for explicating the organization and dynamics of physical activity in context and discovering something about the diversity of meanings that older people give to their involvement. Without knowing these things, our programs and policies will seldom produce the results that either the older person or we aspire to achieve—a more physically active older population.

## Notes

1. Here we should point out that the manipulation, mapping, and measurement of the body is not necessarily problematic in itself but the process of categorizing and applying normative standards to such information. In other words, it is not the data per se, but what we *do* with them.

2. The web of phenomenology consists of many conceptual coils and threads. It is a term that generates considerable disagreement. It is also a philosophical movement in which scholars might shift their position over time. We are mindful of these points but feel it is beyond the scope and purpose of this particular article to address the complexities of phenomenology. Ehrich (1999), however, among others, has undertaken such a task.

3. As with phenomenology, we acknowledge that social constructionism is a complex domain for which a detailed overview is beyond the scope of this article. For a comprehensive coverage of social construction, see Sparkes and Smith (2008).

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