

UNDERSTANDING OLDER ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL EXERCISE: A LIFE COURSE APPROACH

by

Jennifer M. Scanlon

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APPROVED:

Karen A. Roberto, Chair

Rosemary Blieszner

Pamela B. Teaster

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(Abstract)

The purpose of this study was to explore older adults' perceptions of participation in physical exercise throughout the life course. Using a life course perspective as the theoretical framework for this study, I identified the factors in older adults' lives that may or may not lead to continuous participation in physical exercise throughout life. Through in-depth interviews with nine men and six women who are members of the Wellness Center in Southwest Virginia, I gained a precise understanding of how societal processes and opportunities, life course roles and transitions, and individual meanings of physical exercise influenced perceptions of participation in physical exercise.

Several conclusions were drawn from the findings of this research. First, the older adults' reported perceived changes in their perceptions and definitions of physical exercise in accordance with life stages and particular roles (i.e., parenthood and career) throughout their lives. Second, the older adults' believed that geographical location and societal influences and opportunities had a tremendous impact on their participation in physical activity as children. Third, the older adults' indicated that childhood involvement in physical activity was very influential to their participation in physical activities and exercise throughout life. Fourth, changing patterns of physical activity and exercise participation were associated with altered role transitions and altered opportunities during young and middle adulthood. Fifth, retirement provided the older adults with a great deal of freedom and opportunity to participate in physical exercise. Finally, the older adults' participation in physical exercise contributed to their quality of life.

Key Words: physical exercise, physical activities, older adults, life course perspective