

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study is based upon in-depth interviews with 15 individuals, 9 men and 6 women who participate in a regular exercise program at a Wellness Center in Southwest Virginia. Gaining perspectives from the older individuals enabled me to listen and interpret both unique and collective understandings of life course participation in physical exercise. Each interview revealed individual meanings, definitions, and stories of participation in exercise. By asking participants to recall physical involvement in play and sport in early childhood, and physical exercise during young, middle and late adulthood, I am able to speculate about how participation in exercise has changed or remained the same across each person's life.

The findings are organized around four major themes: life course influences; meanings, definitions, and perceptions of physical exercise; barriers and motivators; and quality of life issues. Quotes from interviews are clustered around themes to illustrate the findings in this chapter. The chapter highlights group similarities and differences.

The primary question guiding this study is, "How does participation in physical exercise change or remain continuous as individuals move through the life course?" A series of subquestions expanded the content question.

1. What is the meaning of physical exercise at specific stages in the life course?
2. Do older adults' report that their views of exercise (their motivation for exercising, their amount of exercise) differed at other stages of the life course as compared to the present?
3. Is there a relationship between perceived participation in physical exercise during adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late life?
4. In what type of physical activities have adults participated to remain active throughout their lives?
5. Do older adults perceive their participation in physical exercise as changing or remaining the same due to specific life course transitions?
6. Do older adults report that social roles and family responsibilities influence participation in physical exercise?
7. Are earlier socialization processes (e.g., organized sport participation) associated with individuals' participation in physical exercise?

The four assumptions of the life course perspective served as an organizing framework for the data on physical exercise in terms of life roles or transitions, stages of the life course, processes and influential events of the life cycle, cultural influences, and social context. I introduced each section of this chapter (i.e., early childhood, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood) with the older adults' definitions, meanings, and perceptions of physical exercise. In this chapter I discuss older adults' participation in physical exercise during early childhood, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. Throughout each section, information from several coding categories is explained.

Life Course Influences in Adolescence and Childhood

The elderly persons interviewed showed a tremendous amount of appreciation and understanding for physical activity and hard work. I realized that these older adults grew up in an era where work came before play, and play was "just something that you did." In the following sections, I will discuss what the older individuals did to accomplish physical activities and exercise. I will show that games and play were important aspects of children's socialization process for physical exercise.

Childhood Experiences of Play and Games

I asked the older adults to define physical exercise during early childhood. There was a great deal of variation in their responses. Five of the participants defined physical exercise as "games," five defined it as "work-farm work, housework and yardwork," three believed that it was "organized sports," and two said exercise was the things that children did during "physical education class." For example, Jerry (75 years old) defined exercise in early childhood as "playing games and having fun." Jerry explained how he carried these benefits with him throughout his life:

Well, physical exercise to me as a child was having fun and along with that came the extra benefit of keeping in shape. I didn't think of it as a way of keeping my muscles built up or anything like that, we just did things because we enjoyed them and the main effects were what we were getting then that we carried with us throughout our lives.

Mary (75 years old) defined physical exercise as work. She said that back then [1930s and 1940s] she would have thought of exercise as "Work, it was all kinds of work." Shirley (66 years old) believed that exercise during early childhood was "calisthenics type things that I did in gym class." Lastly, Willy (72 years old) defined exercise during his childhood to be play,

games, and work on the farm. More specifically he said, “I would have thought of exercise as pick-up games and farm work, yah know, not organized type things.”

Living arrangements of the participants also appeared to influence their definition of physical exercise. Eight of the 15 older adults grew up on farms in which they described as “rural, rural, rural” areas. For many of them, their closest neighbor was two to three miles away. Two of them were only children, though not one of them ever claimed a sense of boredom throughout their childhood years. A point reiterated in many of the interviews was that there was “always” something to do, and when there was not, they found something to do.

As I reflect upon each interview session, these older adults were creative, imaginative, and regretless. At least three of the participants described how they made their own basketball goals, nets, courts, and tennis courts. The following descriptions illustrate the imagination and creativity of the participants.

There was always a pick up basketball game and we used a basket, a wicker basket ring, which is what we used for a basketball net. That is the only thing that we had. There wasn't much money and that's all they had. I guess later we probably had a regular basketball goal, but not then [during adolescence], not in those days, we used to do it in a bushel basket. (Velma, 71 years old)

When we played tennis when I was a kid we would stretch a rope from one side to the other, there was no net and our backyards weren't big enough for a tennis court so we would have a revised size court. (Jerry, 75 years old)

All fifteen participants shared similar memories of their childhood experiences. They frequently engaged in neighborhood games and play when they were not working at home or going to school. When I asked the participants if they thought of themselves as being physically active during their childhood years, 14 said “yes.” Beth (67 years old), the only woman who said “no,” went to an all-girl Catholic school and explained that the nuns in her school encouraged them to “drink tea and not to sweat or build muscle.”

Early Childhood Socialization Processes

“The family is the foundation of the socialization process, representing one of the most fundamental institutions in human society” (Greendorfer, 1984, p. 136). Past research suggests that the family is the most influential social institution in a child's life, and that it is very likely that involvement in sport has a great deal to do with how much reinforcement children receive from their family members (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1979). I asked all of the participants if anyone encouraged them to be physically active or to participate in sports during their childhood years,

and the common response was “no.” The older adults indicated that no one really encouraged them to be physically active, “it just came naturally.” The older adults said that they did not need any encouragement from their family members to be physically active, “it was just understood or learned that you needed to be active.”

Well no one really encouraged it, friends just suggested that we go to give us something to do. (Alex, 72 years old)

We didn't need any encouragement to play any of the games; we just went out and did it. (Shirley, 66 years old)

I don't recall anyone saying that it is good for you or that you should do it. I think it was probably something that was understood or learned that you needed to be active. (June, 66 years old)

Thus, contrary to the findings of earlier studies, the older adults in this research responded that they were not “socialized into sport” at an early age by family members. All 15 participants said that they were never encouraged to be physically active, nor were they discouraged. The common response was, “it was just something that you did.”

According to O'Brien Cousins (1993), women of this generation were discouraged from participating in all types of physical activities, sports, or play. She concluded from her research, “Women of this generation were indeed physically limited and helpless. They were socialized into a particular feminine role – that of mother and caregiver for her family” (p. 25). Yet, five of the six female participants in this study shared childhood stories of games, play, and physical activity as children. They even went so far as to say that they were never discouraged from this type of play by parents, siblings, or any other persons. With the exception of Beth, the woman who went to an all-girls Catholic school, none of the other women talked about society's expectations of them as females. There was no discussion that they were looked down upon or called “tomboys” or “bicycle faces” for playing with the boys or for engaging in such physical activities as sports (Heisch, 1988). Even Beth, who believed she was not encouraged or “socialized into sport” by the nuns in her school, played field hockey. She was adamant in saying that “back then” [1930's] little girls were not brought up to play sports or to play with the boys, but she was playing field hockey in grade school and tennis in college. She said that there were no opportunities for girls to participate in organized sports. Girls were not encouraged to be physically active. Beth remarked, “You didn't break a sweat as a young women, and you

certainly didn't build muscle. Field hockey and tennis were acceptable for women, but other things were just not accepted." Although Beth played field hockey and tennis, she still felt that society determined what was deemed as "acceptable" and "unacceptable" for women to participate in. I perceived Beth's negative attitude regarding women's participation in physical exercise during childhood to be a result of her attending a private "all girls" Catholic school. Beth repeatedly spoke of how the nuns in her school reinforced their societal beliefs about how "little girls and young women" were supposed to behave. Although Beth said that she was not socialized into sport or physical activities, the examples she gave suggested that she was socialized into sport in early childhood.

Thirteen of the participants told me that these childhood games were played by both boys and girls together, with an exception of some of the "rougher" [as they defined it] games like football and wrestling. Two male participants told me that girls were not involved in their games and play, but were quick to tell me that this was not because they were forbidden or were not allowed. The idea that little girls in the 1930s and 1940s were not physically engaging in sports was not supported within this group of individuals. The women in this study stated very strongly that opportunities that were available to the boys were available to them as well. Despite this strong belief, both men and women were very quick to say that their opportunities were limited compared to those of today's adolescent generation. Even with these limited childhood opportunities for formal exercise, the older adults did not express regrets. They indicated that they never paid much attention to, or dwelled on the things that they did not have (e.g., basketball courts and nets, tennis courts), but rather enjoyed and made the best of what they did have.

Both the men and women talked about playing childhood games such as Kick the Can, Hide and Seek, tag, Annie Over the Coal House, Cowboys and Indians, war games (imitated WWII soldiers in battle fields), Ring Around the Rosie, and tug of war. Some of the common activities in which they participated included swimming, tree climbing, ice skating (without skates), roller skating, pick up games (e.g., basketball, softball, baseball), Ping- Pong, fishing, and gymnastics. The amount of time devoted to play and games such as these varied according to the individual. Twelve participants stated that they participated in some form of physical activity on a daily basis whereas the three remaining participants said play and games took place mainly on the weekends. During the school week, play was allowed only after the completion of both

homework and chores. I sensed from the older adults that Sundays were very traditional—they went to church with their family, ate a large noon meal, and then had the rest of the day free for play. Mary (75 years old) stressed Sunday as being a “play day.”

Yah know when you are in the country the neighborhood kids would come every Sunday afternoon, because we had girls that attracted the boys, and we had what we called a meadow that was out across from our house, it was just a hay meadow, and that is where they used to gather to have these ball games. We used to play softball and basketball. Sunday was a big play day in our neighborhood.

The life course perspective supports the notion that it is important to understand older adults’ earlier socialization processes and experiences along with physical activity and exercise in order to understand the context for their late life activity patterns (O’Brien Cousins & Keating, 1995). As I will later describe, their activities over the life course can help to explain the meaningfulness of physical exercise in their later years of life.

Recess, Physical Education, and Organized Sports

These older adults did a great deal of what today’s children do during school hours in both recess and in physical education class. The length of recess varied for participants from 30 to 60 minutes. Some shared stories of participation in informal games and unstructured play. Others told me that during recess they could do as they pleased, for there was no mandatory participation. During recess, popular games or play activities included swinging and teeter-tottering on the playground (only a few participants conveyed that they had access to playgrounds during their adolescent years), kick- ball, tag, pick up games such as basketball, softball, and baseball, marbles, and Annie Over the Coal House. They were engaging in many of the same activities during recess that they were at home with neighborhood friends. Being part of Generation X and growing up in a time of such structured and organized activities, I could not possibly fathom the intent or purpose of Annie Over the Coal House. I asked June, a 66-year-old semi-retired schoolteacher to explain the game.

It [Annie Over the Coal House] is where we stored the coal for the fires and the wood. So half of us got on one side and the other half on the other side and then you would throw the ball over and yell Annie Over. So the kids that were on one side had to run around to the other side and catch the ball while we ran to the other side. Therefore, who ever got around there on the other side to catch the ball before it hit the ground would score a point.

The participants informed me that in their pre-adolescence (i.e., grade school) they did not have what we know today as soccer. It was not invented yet, nor did they have basketball hoops, bats, or softballs. However, the older adults explained that when they got into junior high and high school they had more opportunities to participate in physical activities, such as basketball, softball, and baseball.

In high school, both boys and girls participated in physical education classes two to three times a week. They did not participate in the physical education classes together; the girls and boys had separate classes from one another. During physical education class, or “gym” as many of them referred to it, the boys participated in basketball, football, baseball, wrestling, calisthenics, Ping-Pong, softball, running on the track or in a field, dodge ball, and boxing. Bob (71 years old) said that during his senior year of high school he had to learn how to swim in order to graduate. He explained that during gym class, he and his classmates used to run a mile to the YMCA and swim some laps. Then they would have to run the mile back to the school when they were finished. The women participated in tennis, volleyball, softball, field hockey, modern dance, square dancing, and calisthenics.

Eight of the nine men had opportunities to participate in organized sports in high school; however, only six of the eight men actually participated. They played such organized sports as basketball, football, baseball, wrestling, and track. One of the men said that his school did not provide students with any opportunities to participate in organized sports. The other two men said that they had opportunities to participate in organized sports but chose not to participate. Three of the six women said that they had opportunities to participate in organized sports in high school, however only two of the three women actually participated. The remaining three women said that they did not really have any opportunities to participate in organized sports. Two of these three women had the opportunity to participate in organized sports when they entered college. During college, one woman played on an organized volleyball team, and the other two women played organized tennis.

I asked several of the men who went to college about physical education classes and found that men who were in the military prior to their college entrance were exempt from physical education classes due to their military training, and the men who went to business and two-year colleges did not have physical education classes offered to them. Three of the six women were required to take physical education classes three times a week during their college

years because there were no organized athletic teams for girls. The three women played tennis and volleyball, and one woman took dance, archery, and riflery in their college physical education class.

I also asked the participants if they had any structured after-school activities such as intramurals (i.e., unorganized sports or activities played for fun). Two of the six women and three of the nine men said that they had some type of after school program available to them. The two women who participated in intramural activities had a great deal of support and encouragement from their female teachers. For example, Velma was one of three cheerleaders in her small high school. One of her teachers recognized that the girls lived too far away from the school to stay after school and practice so she made time during the day for the girls to meet and practice. Velma (71 years old) explained:

Well we had a sponsor, a female teacher that kind of encouraged it and helped with it. We just practiced our cheers wherever we could. We would try to work up different routines. There were just three of us and our teacher allowed us to practice during school hours.

June (66 years old) also discussed how her teachers organized free time during the day for those kids who could not participate in organized sports after school because they lived so far away from the school.

I didn't play any organized sports. We had them but I didn't play on any of those. I lived out in the country and had to catch the bus to get home and all the organized sports were after school. Generally, the only kids who played the organized sports were the children who lived close enough to the school and who walked and were able to play. There were opportunities it is just that I couldn't participate in them because of where I lived. I loved to play volleyball. Oh, we did have intramurals within our classes, like the freshman, sophomores, juniors and seniors. Our teachers organized it so that during the day we could play on that, and I played on the volleyball team. We did this about two or three times a week.

Six of the men had after school activities, such as intramurals, which involved playing on basketball and baseball teams. The men all lived in rural areas and had to walk or run as far as eight miles to get home if they chose to stay after school. As the older adults looked back on their adolescent and teenage years, transportation and geographical locations were two tremendous barriers to their involvement in organized sport participation. Ironically, they did not think of transportation and geographical location as a barrier forty years ago, but they do

now. I further discuss barriers to sport involvement in the later part of this chapter in the section titled “barriers and motivators.”

Childhood Farm Work as Exercise

During the interview process, I reflected on my own childhood. I realized that my daily chores were insignificant exercise compared to the hours worth of work the older adults spent laboring on farms when they were young. Eight of the 15 participants lived on a farm; four lived in rural areas but not on a farm; two men, Ralph and Fred, did not live on a farm but worked on one. Only one individual [Beth], lived in an urban area. I quickly began to appreciate the tremendous sense of loyalty and dedication these individuals had to their families. As children, they felt devoted to helping their parents with the daily farm and housework. Lee’s (67 years-old) expression of his childhood familial dedication is representative of this entire group of older individuals.

Well the problem that I had when I was little was finding enough time in between the work to play. I was not looking for time because my mom and dad worked very hard and I knew that. You don’t think about playing when everyone around you is working.

Whether they lived on a farm or not, there was always work to be done both inside and outside the house and they were expected to do their share of work. Many of the participants had chores to do both before school and after school. Morning chores got one woman up as early as 3:00 a.m. I asked Annette, a 74 year-old woman to describe her childhood work on the farm.

We had to carry in the wood, and you had to get the eggs, and work in the garden. We use to have to hoe the garden and in those days, you just used the old hoe for weeding and that kind of thing. We used to help with the farm like at harvest time, now they don’t shock the wheat and oats, but in those days they did. That was our job to go out and put them into piles so that they could be picked up later. Our mother died when we were 14, so we always had to get up, do the housework, and do the laundry. In those days, you didn’t have the automatic washing machines, you had the kind that you had to run through a machine or you boiled the water on the stove. We used to get up at 3:00 in the morning to have the wash done and out on the line so we could catch the school bus to go to school at 7:15.

June, a 66-year-old women who grew up on a farm described her childhood work experiences. She said by the time all the work was done, there was not much time left in the day for play.

I grew up on a farm and we had to help plant the garden, hoe the garden, and weed and harvest. We prepared the food for the winter by helping with the canning and we dug holes and buried the apples, the cabbages, the turnips, and the watermelons, and all those

sorts of things. My father worked the thrash machines and had horses and we participated in all those sorts of activities, grinding the wheat and the corn into cornmeal or flour. About 5:00 a.m. or 5:30 a.m. we went out and did the milking and brought the milk in. We swept and we mopped. We didn't have a vacuum cleaner; in fact, until I was in the fifth grade we didn't have electricity so we had to carry in the wood. Our job was to carry in the wood after our grandfather or our dad would cut it and split it. After we got big enough shucks, I could split wood just as good as a man could. By the time you got home from school then you had to go to the far end of the fields to get the cows and bring them in cause you had to milk the cows in the afternoons too as well as in the mornings. We had a lot of chores that we had to do. The other thing is that we had to go to the springs and carry the water and fill up the tank on the stove yah know so you could have hot water. Or you had to fill up the water buckets and all that cause we just didn't have running water in the house so you had to carry the water from the spring. There wasn't much time for play.

Willy, a 72 year old man described his hard work and manual labor on the farm as, "that just the way that it was."

I learned to milk cows and yah know everything was by hand in those days and kids were brought up to work. And when you got old enough to you just kind of fell in place. When I got home from school most of the time or a lot of the time my dad would have the horses harnessed for me and all I had to do was hook them to something and go to work, I mean that is the way it was. Yah know we plowed, we planted corn, we shocked hay, everything was done by hand without the benefit of machinery, other than well the thrashing machine when it came along for the grain and so on. But yeah, I have milked a whole lot of cows and planted a whole lot of fields. We milked every morning before we went to school. Usually about 6:00 a.m. And of course I raised pigs and you always had those to take care of before and after school, yah know.

Ralph (68 years old) and Fred (66 years old) both worked for farmers during their childhood years but did not live on farms.

I worked on a farm. During the summer, we practically lived there. We were cutting hay, pitching hay, building fences, spreading fertilizer all over the mountain top. The farm machinery that I checked on the checklist was horse drawn, hay racks, mowing machines, that sort of thing, plows. (Ralph)

Well one of the chores that we had, it wasn't a chore necessarily, it was a job that we had was bringing in the cows, they were somebody else's cows. They hired me and my two brothers to go down and round up the cows and drive them up the road up to the barn and get them into the barn. We put kickers on those that needed kickers to be milked. I also helped clean the separator every now and then. (Fred)

All of the participants, whether they lived on a farm or not, expressed that there was always work to do, and they did their part to help. They did not question parents when they were told one time to do something. Farm work proved both strenuous and exhilarating. The older adults stressed that if the work did not get done, they did not eat, if the water did not get carried in from the wells, they did not have fresh drinking or cooking water for the day, and if the coal did not get carried in from the coal house, they would freeze and could not cook. Almost all of the work that these older adults did as children was done in order to survive.

Perceptions of Childhood Activities

During their childhood years, the older adults were getting exercise almost on a daily basis whether it was from walking to and from school, playing pick up games with friends, or doing work on the farm or in the house. All of these activities required them to do both cardiovascular and weight training types of exercise. Nevertheless, they all agreed that at that time (1930s and 1940s) they would not have identified nor defined such activities as “exercise.” The older adults said that the difference between exercise now (1990s) and exercise then (1930s and 1940s) is that the word “exercise “ was nonexistent. Therefore, these activities were thought of as work, a means for survival, and play, but never as exercise. This notion compelled me to ask the older adults if they had ever thought of the physical activities that they were doing during their childhood years as a form of exercise. There was no variation in their responses to this question, they all said “no.” Those who elaborated on their responses further reinforced this idea.

No, well it was just something that you did. If you were going to get the work done you had to do it. It was just part of life as far as I am concerned. (Willy, 72 years old)

No I thought of that [play and work] as life, that was the way that we lived, that was important, that was survival skills. If you didn't plant the garden then you didn't have any food. Yah know that is just the way that it was. (June, 66 years old)

I didn't really consider it [the games, play, and work] to be vital to my life in any way back then [adolescence], where now [late adulthood] I think exercise is definitely vital to my life. (Jerry, 75 years old)

After hearing twelve other very similar responses, I proceeded to ask each of the fifteen individuals, if looking back on their childhood “play” and “work” if they **now** (in later years of life) consider what they did then to be exercise or a form of exercise. All of the participants agreed that when they look back on their childhood years, they would consider all that they did to be a form of exercise. Several of the older adults conveyed personal “reasoning” for thinking

of their adolescent activities as exercise in their later years of life. The older adults elaborated on their thinking in several different ways.

Oh yeah. It was exercise, it was hard work. You gotta remember that this was back in the late 1930's and 1940's and things were not as organized then as they are now. (Henry, 76 years old)

Well I guess if I were to look back now and think about it I would say that it was [exercise] but then I didn't think so. It was work, it was what you had to do to survive and take care of your family. (Lee, 67 years old)

Yes, [it was exercise] but I didn't realize it then. None of our instruction in school ever got down to the basics of what exercise does for you. We were just told that we were going to have a team in the gym and it was not something that you were told would be beneficial, they didn't emphasize that. They just said that it was good for you to get out there and play. (Bob, 71 years old)

The time that I gave individuals to reflect on their lives brought them to the conclusion that yes, what they did in their childhood years was definitely exercise. Many of them said that in those days (1930s and 1940s) nobody told them that what they were doing (e.g., playing, participating in physical education classes) was good for them or as one man put it, "vital to my health." Again, "it was just something that they did."

As a final perception-based question I asked, "Why do you suppose at this point in your life that you can reflect back on your childhood years and think of the work and play that you did as a form of exercise?" Reasons varied: respondents indicated that with age they became wiser, education helped them to understand what exercise really is, and being actively engaged in a regimented exercise program in their later years of life has helped them to look at childhood activities as exercise. These particular reasons forced the older adults to look at their life activities in a new and different way, as exercise.

Well I have probably read more and internalized what exercise really is and so I think back on the things I did and say well that was physical activity, that was building of the body, it was fine tuning the muscles. I think of all the times that my mother let me sew and work with my hands and when I worked in the woodworking shop and did all the sanding of the cradle fingers and all things like that for my grandfather, it was developing the hands and the arms and so forth. But back then I didn't think of it, I didn't know anything about the fine motor skills but now I understand more about it. (June, 66 years old)

Well I realize that now even talking is exercise, moving your fingers is exercise, yah know it is all a continuum and now I see how active and how much exercise I really did

that I was not aware of when I was younger and all through life. It is a reflective type of definition I suppose. (Bob, 71 years old)

Well you just think in terms of the importance of maintaining your body and mental health and things that you did that were just second nature to you when you were younger become very important because you know that they were building blocks for the future and you regret a lot of the time when you didn't go ahead and do things you should have. (Jerry, 75 years old)

Throughout the interviews, the older adults often stated that if it had not been for all the hard work that they did as children, they might not have been so inclined to remain active throughout their lives. According to the life course perspective, societal context can have a profound impact on individuals and can help explain change and continuity over time (Bengston & Allen, 1993). When the older adults were children, their families and teachers influenced them "to be productive and not to be lazy." Thus, socialization and introduction into physical activities at an early age influenced their activities for the rest of their lives (Morris, 1991).

In concluding the early childhood opportunities, experiences, and socialization processes portion of the interviews, I began to think about one of my research questions, "Do socialization processes influence older individuals' participation in physical exercise?" These older adults were not telling me that they were necessarily socialized into exercise and sports as children, but that they were in fact socialized into physical activity through manual labor. In turn, they believe their childhood experience is responsible for their lifetime involvement in both physical activity and exercise.

Life Course Influences in Young Adulthood

The older individuals' involvement in physical exercise during young adulthood fluctuated depending on their particular life course roles and transitions (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1979; Whaley & Ebbeck, 1997). Specific roles and transitions during this time period helped to explain opportunities and barriers that existed in the older adults' lives that have influenced their lifetime participation in physical exercise. Men and women differed in their definition of exercise. The women's definitions of physical exercise in young adulthood fit into two categories: being involved in a structured activity or sport or taking care of the children and doing housework. The men defined physical exercise as organized or structured physical training in the military. There were differences in men's and women's participation level at

specific stages of the life course. Many of the roles and transitions that affected the older adults' participation in physical exercise during young adulthood carried through to middle adulthood.

Men's Participation in Exercise during Young Adulthood

Young adulthood brought a variety of new and different experiences for the older adults. After high school, eight of the nine men enlisted in the military (i.e., army, navy). Seven of the men served approximately four years, one man was enlisted as a doctor with the Army Airborne for seven years, and another man had a 20-year career in the military. This experience forced them to be physically fit and active. When I asked the men to describe their physical training and exercise regimen during their military years, they went into great depth.

Henry (76 years-old) described his experience in the infantry during his young adult years:

I was in the infantry and gosh yes did we do a lot of walking. We had to go through the obstacle course and do those types of activities, and those were regimented. Some weeks we did them everyday and other weeks we only did them one to three times. It varied, but we walked everyday. We did what you call close order drill, marching in formation on a parade ground or out in the country on a hike. The hikes were on a stipulated length, they started real short to begin with and then you got up to about 26, 28 miles with a pack that had your tent and your rifle in it.

Willy (72 years-old) enthusiastically discussed his physical training experience while in the military:

Oh you had better believe your life I was doing physical conditioning. I took entry to basic training and you don't get it much rougher than that. I spent 16 weeks in what was known as Camp Blanding Florida, and yeah we did physical exercise from daylight to dark. We did everything! Ah, we did just plain old physical exercise. We used to have this thing called log exercise, we literally had to walk a log about 12, 14 foot long and put about 8 guys and you just straddled that log and you just walked your way up and when you got to the front and walked your way up you went back to the back and came back again. Ah, we climbed over top of walls, for instance using a rope net to go over. We did obstacle courses, oh yes, Lord have mercy yes! Night and day, we had to crawl under those suckers. Yeah you got a lot of exercise in the military. We did all kinds of running and marching.

When I asked 71 year-old Bob if he was involved in any physical training when he was a doctor in the Army Airborne, he told me:

Oh Lord, tell me about it! I was 28 years old and all these 19 and 20 year olds were running me into the ground. The technical part about how to get your shoes on, that was nothing to me and they had a little trouble with that and I would have to help them, but

boy would they run me into the ground. Depending on the whims of our commanding officer, he used to want everyone including himself out for morning road runs and oh man! I was pretty active. I was jumping out of planes during my first four years in the Airborne and I thought what kind of idiot are you, sweating to become a doctor and now you are jumping out of an airplane.

These men were encouraged to do physical exercise and to be physically fit during their young adulthood years. Many of them also told me that they were still playing pick up games like basketball and softball while in the military. One man said that he was actively involved in a bowling league, and another man frequented the base gym daily to do weight training. The intense physical conditioning that these men underwent in the military was another example of how society influenced their participation in physical exercise. The military was hard work, but their childhood experiences prepared them for it. At this early life stage, hard work was all that some of them knew, and so the military was not a rude awakening for them.

Women's Participation in Exercise

Although none of the women were involved in military training, they too participated in several types of exercises. Before entering their motherhood roles, the majority of the women were getting their exercise in very informal ways. All of the women emphasized that during their young adulthood years they did not own cars. During the post WWII period most people could not afford cars. Walking was their main means of transportation. Mary's (75 years old) description of her participation in exercise during young adulthood illustrates this point. She worked as a secretary for a large corporation and exercised in a number of different capacities.

During our lunchtime at work, we would get out in the afternoons and roller skate and walk. We had to walk everywhere, nobody had a car; you walked everywhere you went. We always had to walk at least 2 miles to eat anywhere. We also took dancing lessons and we bowled a lot. We just stayed busy. I used to get on the floor and do all kinds of exercises by myself and then when I was rooming some of the girls that I roomed with, we would exercise together. Yah know I did all kinds of floor exercises.

After listening to each of the six women discuss their participation in exercise during their young adulthood years, I realized that their involvement in physical activity or exercise was not always intentional. For example, in order to get places they had to be active because they had to walk or ride a bike to get to a destination. Also, in the latter part of their young adulthood (and through their middle adulthood years) when they became parents, housekeeping and taking care of the children became a form of daily exercise. They women did not vacuum, dust, wash

windows, or do yardwork with the intent to get their daily exercise, they did it because it needed to be done. Only now, in late adulthood, do they consider housework and yardwork to be a form of physical exercise.

Roles and Transitions in Middle Adulthood

Although many of the older adults' roles continued into their middle adulthood years, middle adulthood also brought several "new" opportunities to participate in physical exercise. Middle adulthood brought, for many of the participants, the opportunity to participate in "organized or structured" exercise as they so defined it. Several of the older adults defined exercise during middle adulthood as "structured aerobics classes," "organized bowling leagues," "organized basketball and baseball," and "organized exercise at recreation centers or wellness centers." They included in their definitions of exercise informal indoor and outdoor activities, such as walking, riding a bike, jogging, hiking, swimming, gardening and yardwork, housework and taking care of the children.

Family and Career Responsibilities in Middle Adulthood

When the men discussed exercise during middle adulthood, they very adamantly expressed that when persons have families, they have to think first about survival issues such as keeping a roof over their heads and food on the table. I asked Lee, a 67-year-old man about his career in long haul trucking, which kept him on the road away from his family for weeks at a time.

No it wasn't tough on me that was the way it was suppose to be. I was a truck driver and if you are going to make any money, you have to stay on the road. I drove about 80 to 90,000 miles a year. That is part of life yah know. You gear your family up for what you have to do and you accept the fate of life no matter what it is. You have to be responsible and if you are responsible at supporting your family then you have done your job well.

Lee and the other men explained that when their work was done for the day, they spent what little time was left playing with the children or taking them for activities and errands.

Conversely, the majority of the women devoted much of their young and middle adulthood years to caregiving for their children, husbands, and even parents. Their days were spent working both in and outside the house: cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and playing taxi driver. However, during young and middle adulthood, five of the six women were working outside of the home by the time their last child went to school.

Many of the men and women referred to their housework, yardwork, and chauffeuring the children as exercise. They indicated that by the time their work was done at their respected jobs and things were done around the house, there was no need to go elsewhere to get exercise. Attending a fitness facility during this time in their lives only entered the minds of a few. The majority of the men and women believed that they were getting plenty of exercise in their daily routines. Shirley (66 years old), a mother of two, expressed her feelings about motherhood and exercise outside the home, “With them [the children] I stayed very very active anyway and didn’t feel the need of any other outside activity.”

The interview process provided these individuals with an opportunity to reflect on parts of their lives that they have not spoken about or thought about in years. I believe that my questions prompted them to think about their life activities in very different ways than ever before. Again, throughout the interviews, the women expressed their daily exercise through housework, yardwork, and play with the children. It was very informal, but nonetheless, it was exercise. I asked the women if it was difficult to participate in formal exercise when they had small children at home, and a few women distinctly told me that they were involved in formalized exercise programs during either young or middle adulthood or both.

Shirley (66 years old) a mother of two:

It was difficult to do things when the children were little because my husband was away a lot, but I walked with them, I would take them out to walk.

Velma, (71 years old) mother of two boys:

I think having children influenced my participation, mainly because you took your children if they were involved in anything. You spent all your time keeping up with the children. Really!

Annette (74 years old), mother of 4 children described her involvement in a tennis group during young and middle adulthood and her regular exercise with her children.

When my children were small, I was playing tennis in a group. I also played some racquetball after they went to school. I did not start playing tennis until they were in grade school, but I walked when they were at home with me. We had four children over a ten-year period so that kept me pretty busy. I was very active, I mean when my children were small I never sat down except to eat and to go to bed. We went to the lake with them every weekend, I took them swimming everyday, and I saw that they learned how to swim. I took swimming lessons several times at the pool when they were taking them. I was always taking the children here or there and doing something with them. We spent a lot of time outdoors.

June (66 years old) did not have any biological children. She was an elementary school teacher and taught physical education to her class on a regular basis. She spoke about how she got her daily exercise by participating and teaching the children:

Oh I did all sorts of things. I did the regular routine exercises, we did running, we did sprinting, we did relays, and we did softball, kickball. We did something physical everyday. We did that stuff outside, that is when we didn't have a gym, and then in the wintertime when we were inside we always had 30 minutes of some kind of physical activity. We could do like balloon relays in the classroom or something like that, but most of the time we pushed the chairs back and we did rhythms, we did square dancing. We were wonderful square dancers.

Contrary to the other women, Mary (75 years old) had one son and was involved in a formalized exercise program at the YMCA during her young and middle adulthood years. Mary explained how she was still able to participate in exercise while taking care of her children.

When I had my child and we (her and her husband) had exercise classes at the Y and we exercised. I mean hard exercise three days a week. I walked when I was pregnant that was the only thing that I was suppose to do. I walked everyday. After I had my first child I was going to the YMCA. We (her and her husband) went three times a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday and we were there for at least an hour and sometimes longer. We belonged there (YMCA) for maybe 10 or 15 years.

Beth, (67 years old) a mother of two, was involved in a lot of physical activities with her children and was also involved in a formal aerobics program.

I always brought the children with me. From the time that they were little until just before we moved here I was skiing, biking, walking, skating, I did everything with them and when they were younger and when they reached the teenage years and wanted to go off with their friends I continued these activities with my own friends. I also did aerobics in the gym when the children were small, I went there sometimes in the evenings and sometimes in the morning. I usually went three times a week.

Only one of the six women believed that family responsibilities negatively influenced her participation in exercise. Shirley indicated her family responsibilities did not permit any "extra" time for her to participate in any other form of exercise other than the exercise that she was already getting with the children and her housework. The remaining five women reported just the opposite. They believed that their family responsibilities and their children positively influenced their participation in physical exercise. Their responsibilities kept them physically active all the time.

The men expressed that their middle adulthood participation in exercise included manual labor related to their careers, yardwork, housework, and, for some, golf, basketball, and softball leagues. The men also shared their parenting responsibilities in such ways that led me to believe that children did not only keep their mothers busy, but also kept their fathers involved in their activities. Many of the men believed that their involvement with the children was sometimes all the exercise that they needed. Two of the men, Willy (72 years old) and Ralph (68 years old), were both involved in little league coaching when their children were small and also did a great deal of high school basketball refereeing. Coaching and refereeing was an opportunity for them to stay involved in their children's sports and lives. Ralph, an industrial engineer, drove the athletic bus at night for the children. This enabled him to see all of the kids' games and to travel with them. In Ralph's own words:

We chased after the kids wherever they went. That is how I got to drive the school bus. When I drove the bus I would get out and walk through the parking lot until the game started. Usually my wife was with me. I would say other than walking, I couldn't do much else when the kids were small, there was no time. When you have kids, you have to quit worrying about yourself so much and try to start taking care of them.

Willy was also the leader of his children's 4-H club, and Don (69 years old) and Fred (65 years old) were the leaders of their sons' Boy Scout troops. Don and Fred both stressed that one of the points of the scout law is to be physically fit, and they tried their best to abide by that. They went on a number of long mountain hikes and did a great deal of camping with the boys' troops.

Five of the men who indicated that they were "extremely involved" in their children's lives participated in family outings involving physical activities. These men referred to such family involvement as swimming at the beach, skating, walking, hunting, tossing the ball around, hiking, and canoeing. One man indicated that he was "pretty active" in his children's lives and two of the men said they were "not really involved" in their children's lives. These three men participated in family outings when they could get time off from work. They appeared regretful of their lack of involvement in their children activities and lives. One man said that he wished he could go back in time because he would have done more and been a better father to his children. He also said that he would have taken more time away from work to be more actively involved in his family.

Five of the men participated in regular exercise while working full-time. Since not all of their careers required them to be physically active, they found time during the day to get out and walk either in the morning before work, at lunch or in the evening. Two of the men lifted weights, and three jogged on a regular basis. They were participating in very informal types of exercise. They walked and ran outdoors in their neighborhood and nearby parks. The men who lifted weights were exercising in their basement, not at a fitness facility. Ralph (68 years old) was one of the men who used to walk during his lunch break at work, and sometimes in the mornings and in the evenings as well.

I started getting up every morning at 5:30 a.m., like I do now most of the time and I would go out and walk around the neighborhood, 2 miles. I walked and walked and walked. At lunchtime when I was at work, I would leave, I would pack a lunch, leave, and take off walking. At one point, I was up to about 7 miles a day. I would walk two in the morning, and two at lunchtime and three in the evening. I stuck to the 7 miles for about a year. I did this five days a week. I did a lot of walking even at work. I was an environmental engineer for the Foundry and I had a land field to take care of which forced me to be outside a great deal, and there was always walking in order to get to where you had to go.

Fred (65 years old) talked about his daily exercise at work during his young and middle adulthood years.

When I was about 25 or so I was overweight and I tried to walk as much as I possibly could. Even in my job I would purposely go to a place in a plant where I was working that I would have to go from building to building and around buildings and this and I would take the long way around just to get exercise, to get walking in cause when I got home usually with the kids it was mostly playing with them and I didn't have time to do exercise as exercise. There were things going on in the family that kept me busy rather than exercising.

In the latter part of Fred's middle adulthood, the company that he worked for built an employee exercise room in the basement. After a few years of being inactive and being what Fred called, "a poster child for couch potatoes," he decided to take advantage of the exercise room and started working out regularly.

Alex (72 years old) was the only man who said that his job required a great deal of physical exercise. Through his career as a postal worker, he experienced a great deal of physical exercise via delivering the mail and working as a clerk.

I carried mail and helped other carriers on their routes. I walked the routes, we did more walking. We had some routes we would walk 10 miles a day carrying the mail. And as a clerk I was a mail distributor when I first started and then later I was a window clerk. The job involved a lot of lifting heavy packages and equipment.

Life course research suggests that many events and situations can affect participation in exercise. By middle adulthood individuals usually accumulate a number of roles, such as that of work, marriage, and parenthood. Their level of commitment to each of these roles affected their commitment to participation in physical exercise (Howell & McKenzie, 1987; McPherson, 1984; O'Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1995; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1979; Whaley & Ebbeck, 1997). My discussion with Bob (71 years old) exemplifies this finding. He revealed that he was extremely inactive during middle adulthood. He said that he was “tied up” with his career [he was a pediatrician] and that he had “diluted” himself into thinking that he was physically fit. However, he eventually concluded that he was far from being in any kind of “good physical shape.”

We were active and we were into all kinds of things, but day to day is where it really counts in your relationship with your children and essentially it was mother and children and dad was at the office. I had diluted myself to thinking that I was in good shape because I had been in the Army and in the Airborne and all that stuff and I really was not. It wasn't until I got involved in this program that I realized that I was not in any kind of decent physiological shape.

Life Course Influences in Late Adulthood

Late adulthood marked the transition to “formal exercise” for the older adults in this study. When I asked them to define physical exercise in their late adulthood years, they all defined it as, “exercise at the Wellness Center.” They also included “unstructured” type of exercise, such as walking outdoors, hunting, gardening, yardwork, and housework. Three of the older adults elaborated on their definitions and said, “everything that you do is exercise, both structured and unstructured activities; it does not matter as long as it is purposeful.” Beth (67 years old) was one of the participants who incorporated both structured and unstructured activities in her definition:

I guess it is just life. We live in a two story house where the washing is in the basement and everything you do in the house is physical and I guess that I forget about that. The women that I used to take classes from in Maine use to say that housework is warm-up, so I guess everything that I do now is physical exercise and part of it is structured and part of it isn't.

All fifteen participants were actively engaging in other informal physical activities such as yardwork and housework, some to a greater extent than others. Six of the men explained that their involvement in regular housework and cleaning has increased in their later years of life. Several of the men described helping with the laundry because their washer and dryer are in the basement and they do not want their wives taking a chance on falling down the stairs. Willy (72 years old) spoke about how much he helps his wife around the house.

I work around the house, ah in the last year I have helped my wife tremendously around the house. Our washer and dryer is in the basement and to keep her from going up and down the steps, in the last year I have probably done 75% of the laundry, but it keeps her off the steps.

Henry (76 years old) also talked about how much he helps his wife with the housework since she had her heart attack.

I do the regular things like clean the windows, and run the vacuum. Vacuuming is one of the things that my wife cannot do anymore since she had her heart attack. I help her out a lot. I would much rather do all the work around the house then to take the chance of her having a heart attack again.

Several of the participants said they spent a great deal of time gardening, both flower and vegetable. Parting from their earlier ways of thinking, the participants spoke about yardwork and housework as exercise. They went into great detail how much cardiovascular and muscle strengthening exercise they get by mowing the lawn, raking leaves, hoeing the garden, washing windows, shoveling the driveway, sweeping, and vacuuming just to name a few.

Late Adulthood Transitions and Exercise

Late adulthood brought several life transitions, such as the launching of children (i.e., empty nest), and retirement. These appeared to have a significant effect on the older adults' participation in physical exercise. Reduced responsibility and increased free time accompanied these later life changes. The older adults no longer had to hurry in the morning to get to an 8:00 a.m. job, nor do they have to rush home to take care of, feed, and taxi the children. Although four of them were currently working part-time, and others were doing volunteer work, they spend the majority of their day engaging in activities of choice. Atchley (1997) suggested that, continuity or the reoccurrence of earlier life activities is found by many to be the major life theme at this stage. This was the case with several of the older individuals who participated in this study.

One of the major research questions guiding this study was, “Do older adults perceive their participation in physical exercise as changing or remaining the same due to specific life course transitions?” After concluding the interview process, I estimated that four males and one female believed their participation in exercise remained the same. The other five males and five females believed their level of participation in exercise had changed during or after major life transitions. The older adults who believed their participation in exercise remained the same remarked that they were just as active before and after any major life transition (i.e., retirement, empty nest). Eight of the ten older adults who said their participation had changed indicated that such life transitions increased their participation in physical exercise. Only one man, Don, felt that he actually exercised less after he retired. Don (69 years old) was an avid runner all of his life and was involved in weight training throughout his younger and middle adulthood years. He said that when he retired he was bored with exercise and wanted to engage in other types of activities:

I think that when I retired I found other things to do and I got tired of the exercise, yah know what I mean. I got bored with it and started to do other things. I went to bridge tournaments or did project that I wanted to do around this house. I stayed active but just in a different way. I would get tied up doing things around the house. I got on this kick where I liked to work on cars and I always have liked doing that and then doing my own work you might say. My kids always called them therapy projects. I’d just do one thing after another and stay busy with that.

All fifteen of the older adults agreed that retirement and the empty nest were transitional times in their lives and provided them with more time and opportunities to do things they had always wanted to do but could not because of a career and family responsibilities. When I asked the older adults how life transitions affected their participation in exercise, their responses were very similar. Nine of the fifteen participants agreed the transition into retirement allowed more time to participate in exercise. Shirley (66 years old) said, her exercise is more “planned and specific, I can do it anytime that I want to.” Beth (67 years old) stated that there is more availability now to belong to fitness and wellness centers, whereas years ago they were unavailable. Fred, a retired engineer, had an interesting response to this question. He said, “When I retired I realized that in order to stay ahead of the aging process, I needed to engage in regular exercise.”

Bob, a 71-year-old retired pediatrician, found a whole new meaning to the word exercise in later life. When he was working, he was not able to devote a great deal of time to exercise or

to his family. He spent a good portion of his day in his office being sedentary. Considering Bob was a doctor, I made the assumption that he has been in good physical condition his entire life. My assumption was wrong: Bob was amazed at how much more active he became when he retired.

When I was active in practice [pediatrician], it was frustrating that I could not get away when I wanted to. Once I retired or cut back on my practice, it opened up a whole new avenue of other things for me. When I retired, I had a lot more time to exercise and do many other things too. Instead of sitting down at the office, although I was up and down all the time, now I am out in the yard all the time doing something. I come down here. I have definitely become more active and I definitely exercise more now than ever. I tell people it [retirement] is sort of a reincarnation even though that is not a very common expression. Anyhow, it is a whole new life.

After listening to Bob's reply, I asked myself "Does retirement just provide individuals with time to engage in things that they enjoyed doing at earlier life stages?"

This question led me to ask the participants if they believed there is a relationship between adolescent, young and middle adulthood, and late life participation in physical exercise. Three of the older adults, two males and one female, said "no" and the remaining twelve participants, seven males and five females said, "yes," there is a relationship between adolescent, young and middle adulthood, and late life participation in physical exercise. Several of the older adults talked about continuous participation in activities and exercise across the life course. Evident in the following responses, the older adults believed that persons have a tendency to remain active in the types of activities in which they have always engaged.

Because if I hadn't been active as a child and when I had kids at home then I probably wouldn't be now. I think that if you're always active that you will stay active.
(Annette, 74 years old)

The things that you enjoy doing in life you are going to keep doing. (Ralph, 68 years old)

Well generally the things that you grow up with that have had meaning for you and that you enjoy, you do want to continue doing. (June, 66 years old)

I know that if I hadn't been fairly active I probably wouldn't be active now. By being active, I guess I am saying yes. (Fred, 65 years old)

Another frequent life course transition in middle age and later life is that of caregiver. The caregiving literature suggests that older caregivers frequently disregard their health and well-being as they fulfill their caregiver duties (Stanovik, 1990). Seven of the fifteen older

adults entered in the role of a caregiver as they entered their late adulthood years. The seven older adults reported taking care of mothers, fathers, in-laws, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Five of the seven individuals had care recipients living in their homes, while the other two caregivers frequented the care recipient's home several times a week. The time spent in the caregiver role varied for each individual ranging, from six months to 10 years. I asked all seven of these individuals if their role as caregiver ever interfered with their participation in physical exercise, and much to my surprise, six of them answered, "no." The one man who answered, "yes," had cared for his wife for three years.

Jerry explained that his wife was deathly ill with cancer, and he never left her side. He said that during the three years his wife was sick, he did not do anything of which she could not be a part and so he was unable to keep up with his daily exercises. The other six individuals said that they worked in their exercise "some how, some way" throughout the day. June cares for her 90-year-old mother, her 92-and 94-year-old aunts, and has an astonishing outlook on her role as a caregiver and the importance of exercise.

I will not let anything get in my way of taking care of myself however, I work around it because I know if I don't take care of myself and exercise then I will not be able to take care of other people or be able to help them. That is just the way it is. Yah know if you feel all disgruntle and have no energy and then you are no good to yourself or anyone else.

As demanding as the caregiver role can be, these individuals do not let their role stand in the way of their daily exercise.

Continuity theory (Atchley, 1993) supports the notion that with age we become more of what we already were when we were younger. After listening to the responses of the older adults, I concluded that the twelve older adults who thought there was a relationship between their life's involvement in physical activity also displayed a strong belief in the idea of continuity. This conclusion also suggests that familiarity and lifelong preferences are important components contributing to participation in exercise over time (Burch, 1969; Kelly, 1974, 1975).

Barriers and Motivators

Many factors throughout the life course influence one's level of participation in physical exercise (Harada, 1994; Keating, 1995; McPherson, 1984; O'Brien Cousins & Keating, 1995; O'Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1995). For the older adults in this study, the leading factors that created change in their exercise patterns were geographical influences, gender and opportunities,

health, relationship influences, and quality of life issues (physical, psychological, and social well-being). In the following sections, I further explain how and why some of these factors inhibited the older adults participation in physical exercise, whereas others prompted their participation.

Geographical Influences

I asked the 15 participants if they believed that their opportunities to participate in organized sports and after-school activities during childhood and adolescence were limited because of their geographical locations. Ten (5 men and 5 women) of the participants answered “yes” and 5 (4 men and 1 woman) answered “no.” Many of them indicated, however, that is only now, as they reflect upon their childhood years that they recognize that their opportunities were limited because they lived in rural areas. They never thought about living on a farm as being a barrier to their participation in sport and physical activities. Realizing the opportunities available to today’s children forced the older adults to reconsider their childhood. Many spoke about the various exercise opportunities of today’s children. Their parents bring them to school and pick them up, and if they stay after school, and miss the bus, their parents provide them with transportation home. This was not the case in the 1930s and 1940s. The older adults’ parents did not provide them with any transportation. Living in rural areas left them with no choice but to get on the bus and go home after school. If they had lived in an urban area they would have had more opportunities to participate in organized sports and activities. Living in an urban area would have placed them in closer proximity to the school and they would not have relied so much on public or parental transportation. Ralph’s (68 years old) comments illustrate the sentiment of the group.

Well in some ways living in rural area limited opportunities to participate in sports. Like I said you would have to walk or hitchhike. The bus, the commercial bus system that you paid to ride had a schedule, and I think the last bus ran about 4:30 towards Bluefield towards my home. So you either took that or your parent had to come and get you, which wasn’t one of the things that people did then. Parents didn’t come get you, you walked or you hitchhiked. We were too far from the school to really participate in a whole lot of things, unless it could be done during lunchtime or that sort of thing.

June (66 years old) also lived in a rural community and indicated that she could not play any organized sports because of her geographical location. She also believed that had she lived in an urban area she would have had more opportunities to participate in organized sports.

We had them [organized sports] but I didn't play on any of those. I lived out in the country, about eight miles from the school and had to catch the bus to get home and all the organized sports were after school. Generally, the only kids who played the organized sports were the children who lived close enough to the school and who were able to walk. So, yes I do feel that my opportunities were limited because I lived in a rural area. See my mother and father did not have transportation to carry us back and forth from the school. So you see there were opportunities it is just that I couldn't participate in them because of where I lived.

The comments of five participants who said that they did not believe that living in rural areas limited their opportunities to participate in organized sports suggested that as children they were content with the amount of activities afforded to them. For example, Lee (67 years old) said, "It [playing organized sports] didn't interest me because I knew I couldn't participate in the sports," and Alex (72 years old) said, "I never worried about things I couldn't do nothing about."

In late adulthood, proximity to and availability of the Wellness Center enhanced the older adults' opportunities to participate in exercise. The older adults emphasized that formal programs at the Wellness Center motivated them to continue or become reacquainted with physical exercise in their late adulthood years. Many of them believed that if they did not have a formal place to go to do their exercises that they probably would not exercise regularly.

Velma (71 years old) was bitten by a dog once when she was outdoors walking and is not at ease walking on the streets. She would much rather walk indoors on the treadmill where she feels safe. Beth (67 years old) who just recently moved to the Southwest Virginia area from Maine does not know what she would do for exercise if the Wellness Center were not available. She was used to exercising outdoors: skiing in the winter and biking and mountain climbing in the summer. Although Beth could do those things in Virginia, she has neither the time nor the desire to drive all over the state to participate in these specific activities. She believes that the opportunity of having a formal exercise facility (e.g., Wellness Center) so close to her house has motivated her to continue being physically active.

In addition to the Wellness Center, the older adults seek out other opportunities in their community to participate in physical exercise. Five of the men and five of the women said that they walk or ride their bikes at the park. The town park seems to be a very popular exercise spot for the older adults mainly because it has a walking and bike path, several sitting benches, a river running beside it, children playing on the playground, and people swimming in the Olympic-

sized public pool. Many of them said that they felt very “safe and secure” exercising in the park. They enjoyed being a part of all the activity that was going on around them while they were doing their exercises. They have made walking partners and friends at the park and truly enjoy the atmosphere. Many of them venture down for a stroll in the park in nice weather. They love being outdoors and enjoy the fresh air that they cannot get inside the Wellness Center.

Gender and Opportunities for Exercise

Often, social forces are responsible for determining participation in sports (Greendorfer, 1984; O’Brien Cousins, 1995; O’Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1995; Vertinsky, 1995).

Greendorfer (1984) suggested that:

Female interest and involvement in sport is not a chance occurrence that depends mainly on skill or motor talent. Rather, it is a consequence of social learning which directs women away from sport instead of predisposing them toward sport. Family members, usually parents, insure that children are exposed to activities more consonant with their gender role and reward them for behaving appropriately (pp. 136-137).

Fourteen of the older adults in this study, however, did not convey that there were “appropriate” and “inappropriate” activities for boys and girls. The men engaged in “traditional female” roles such as house cleaning, laundry, cooking, baby-sitting, and the women engaged in “masculine” activities such as, raking, mowing, milking cows, carrying in wood, hoeing the garden and planting fields, just to name a few. Nine men and five women believed that their opportunities were not limited because of their gender; they did not experience any type of negative reinforcement from family members or peers. Only Beth (67 years old), the woman who went to an all girls Catholic school, believed that opportunities were limited for girls in the 1930s and 1940s.

Health and Exercise

Maintaining health and postponing chronic disease is a high priority in our aging society (Spiriduso, 1994). I asked the older adults, “What (if any) health difficulties have you encountered in your life that have prevented or decreased your participation in physical exercise?” Although six of the men and three of the women participants reported having health problems (Table 5), none saw their health as limiting or decreasing their participation in physical exercise. Actually, their health problems were motivating factors that led to increased involvement in physical exercise in their later years.

All of the older adults who endured life threatening and damaging health problems were convinced that regular participation in physical exercise helped them to overcome their many health difficulties, or at the least minimized their pain and discomfort. For example, several of the older adults with heart problems expressed that they would not be alive if it were not for exercise. Ralph (68 years old) had a severe heart problem since he was in his early 50s. He had two heart attacks and underwent a triple bypass surgery in his mid 50s. Ralph strongly believed that if he had not been exercising prior to his two heart attacks, he would not have survived them.

Oh definitely, there is no doubt about it, I would not be alive if I had not been exercising. When I had that first heart attack, man if I hadn't have been doing all that walking before that, I still say that all that walking that I was doing made my heart strong enough to be able to withstand that attack. The doctor said that if I hadn't been in the physical condition that I was in prior to the attack that I probably wouldn't be alive to tell about it.

Ralph (68 years old) is currently participating in exercise five times a week at the Wellness Center. He often goes for a two-mile walk in the park after his workout at the Wellness Center in the nice weather. He said, "I would give up anything in this world except my exercise."

Lee (67 years old) has severe arthritis and just recently had his left knee replaced. During his middle adulthood years he had bypass surgery at which time he developed a staph infection that later caused a sternum debridement. Lee had no chest bone or pectoral muscles and had to be extremely careful when he is exercising and using the nautilus machines so as not to cave in his chest. Lee's positive attitude was similar to Ralph's; exercise at the Wellness Center saved his life This place (WC) has been a lifesaver for me. You cannot tell anyone how important it is. If you could just talk them into coming down here for a week and get the soreness out then you can do anything you want too.

Jerry (75 years old) also believed that his participation in exercise at the Wellness Center has been a lifesaver for him; it saved him from the severe depression of widowhood.

This [exercising at the Wellness Center] has been good for me because I was going through a time of depression after my wife died. I had a hard time with that. Coming down here [Wellness Center] saved my life, it got me out and I was with other people. I was very active in this place here and very interested in it because I saw the good, it wasn't all together physical good but the dealings with people has been great for me. Coming down here has helped a great deal with the depression of loosing my wife.

Table 5

Participants' Health Problems

Participant	Known Health Problems	Life Stage of Problem	Physician Recommended ^a	Rehabilitation ^b
Velma	rheumatic fever	AD, YA	No	No
	heart abrasion & pacemaker	MA	Yes	No
Annette	scoliosis	AD, YA, MA, LA	No	No
	breast cancer	MA, LA	No	No
Don	blocked artery	MA	Yes	No
Willy	prostate cancer	LA	Yes	No
Ralph	heart attack, triple bypass	MA	Yes	Yes
Lee	sternum debridement, heart bypass	MA	Yes	Yes
	knee replacement	LA	Yes	Yes
Beth	osteoporosis	LA	Yes	No
Bob	tuberculosis	AD	Yes	No
	stroke	MA	Yes	No
Jerry	rheumatic fever	AD	No	No
	hypertension, stroke	MA, LA	Yes	Yes
	high blood pressure			
Fred	congestive heart failure pacemaker	LA	Yes	No

Note. AD = Adolescence; YA = Young Adulthood; MA = Middle Adulthood; LA = Late Adulthood.

^aExercise was recommended by a physician.

^bPhysical or cardiac rehabilitation program.

Four of the male participants were involved in the cardiac rehabilitation program at the Wellness Center and emphasized that this program positively influenced and motivated their participation in exercise. These four men formed unique and interesting relationships with the other members of the cardiac rehab program. Ralph (68 years old) spoke strongly about a “look out for one another” type of relationship between himself and the other members of the program. When I asked Ralph how he would define this group of individuals, he said that he would call them an “extended family.” They developed a type of camaraderie that he believes can only be developed by people who face the same trials and tribulations in life. If one of the participants did not attend rehabilitation, he said that they would “find out one way or another what was going on.” They were very good about informing one another when they were not going to be at rehabilitation. The cardiac rehabilitation instructor was also extremely motivating to the participants. Ralph, Jerry, and Lee spoke very highly about their instructor. They believed it was her “magnetism” that kept people going. She was smart enough to know that they all needed to keep active and she saw to it that they attended the program regularly.

Relationship Influences on Exercise

Snyder and Spreitzer (1973) reported that one spouse’s involvement in physical exercise tends to be related to the interests of the other spouse. They concluded that spouses mutually reinforce one another’s interest in leisure behavior. Nine of the older adults stated that their spouses influenced their participation in regular exercise. Six of the older adults said that their spouse positively influences their participation in exercise, and three said their spouse has negatively influenced their participation in exercise. Three of the men and one woman joined the Wellness Center after their spouses encouraged them.

Two of the three participants said their spouses negatively influenced their participation because they were no longer interested in participating in the spousal activities that they engaged in for quite some time. For example, two of the participants (one woman and one man) engaged in ballroom dancing and square dancing but quit when their respective spouse no longer wanted to participate in such activities. As Annette (74 years old) explained, she quit because if he [spouse] could not enjoy it then neither would she.

I would love to go [to ballroom dancing class] if he [husband] would like to dance, but if he is miserable then I can’t enjoy it. So I just don’t worry about it.

Jerry (75 years old) was a very devoted husband and father. He told me that he did not participate in anything without his first wife. This was very unfortunate for Jerry because his wife was not physically active and he enjoyed being outdoors and playing sports. For many years he only participated in exercise or physical activities “when he could.” However, Jerry stressed that it was his decision not to engage in physical activities.

My wife was not really athletically inclined so we didn't go out and get into things like Wellness Centers, we didn't even have Wellness Centers back when we were married, and I didn't play golf because I didn't want to go and leave my wife alone every weekend, yah know every Saturday and Sunday and everyday after work. I didn't go hunting anymore cause I knew that she wouldn't do that with me so I stopped a lot of my activities. My devotion to my wife and family prevented me from participating in a lot of the activities that I would have liked to have done. It was a chosen avenue for me to take. I had friends that got out and played golf every minute that they could on days that they were off from work, and I always thought that that was unfair to a marriage to do those things unless you did it with the person you were married to or unless your wife had something she was always having to do. Our marriage was never the sign of going in different directions.

Jerry's wife died approximately six years ago and he recently remarried at the age of 75. His new wife is “a live wire” and loves to exercise and be outdoors. Jerry and his new wife visit the Wellness Center five to seven times a week and participate in a number of outdoor activities.

I have a live wire here now [talking about new wife], I am having trouble keeping up with her. We don't even have discussions about it [exercising], we just get in the car and come down here [Wellness Center]. Like I said we [he and spouse] influence each other in all sorts of positive ways and if she didn't like coming down here I don't know if I could keep doing it. We support each other and we motivate each other. I don't know how anybody could have a wife or a husband that is living on these machines and they may be keeping them alive and the other spouse is thinking it is a waste of time.

Five of the older adults mentioned that their adult children motivated them to exercise. Their children supported and encouraged their participation in exercise. For example, Shirley (66 years old) said,

Now interestingly enough they (children) are two of the main motivators for our (her and her husband) exercising. They stay on us very very strongly. They ask us all the time on the telephone, did you exercise? And if we say no they get very upset and tell us how important it is that we exercise.

The older adults mentioned certain instructors or employees at the Wellness Center who motivate them to continue their regular exercise. The instructors and employees have “socialized them into ‘formalized’ sport.” They consider Wellness Center to be a place of formalized and

structured exercise. Many of the older adults never belonged to a formal exercise facility before, needed to be shown how to operate equipment, and had to be put on a special exercise program for health reasons. The instructors and employees at the Wellness Center took the older adults “under their wings,” showed them the correct way to use each of the machines, and got the older adults started on a regular exercise program. All of the participants felt that the employees have “looked out for them and have taken care of them.”

Peer motivation was another topic of discussion with the older adults. They discussed how as children they were motivated because of their friends. They always tried to run a little bit faster or hit the ball a little bit farther than their friends did. Although the older adults no longer see themselves as competing with their peers, watching other people their age lift weights or run on the treadmill motivates them to walk the extra mile or to do another repetition with the weight machines. For example, Bob (71 years old) said that he would not be motivated enough to do his exercises on his own; he needs to be around people who are exercising, it helps to motivate him. He has a “we are in this together” type of attitude.

I have not made bosom friends but people that I can joke with and talk to, yah know we are in this together. I couldn't do this, I don't believe, by myself. I believe I would be bored. In the sense that you have a group, you are all trying to do the same thing to be in the best possible shape.

Physical exercise is associated with improved health and good health maintenance. However, to achieve a level of physical fitness requires allocated time, a “get-up-and-go” mentality, a commitment to regular exercise, and motivation to that commitment. The older adults in this study have a variety of motivational factors influencing their regular participation in physical exercise. Whether it be the cardiac rehabilitation instructor, an employee of the Wellness Center, a spouse, friend or child, or a formal exercise facility, these older adults have a great deal of support and motivation in their lives to remain physically active and engaged in exercise. Being motivated to exercise may mean the difference between an active and a sedentary life in late adulthood. Although the older adults encountered several barriers that decreased or limited their participation in physical exercise at one life stage or another, they are extremely motivated to participate in exercise in late adulthood.

Quality of Life Issues

The last several questions that I posed dealt with the interrelatedness of the physical dimension of exercise with the psychological and social dimensions. I was curious as to whether they viewed exercise as enhancing their lives in ways other than physical health. Did exercise play a role in maintaining their mental and emotional functioning, thereby enhancing their overall well-being? In this final section, I examine the following issues related to quality of life: physical, psychological, and social well-being, where the older adults would be at this stage of their life without regular exercise, the older adults' outlook on future participation in physical exercise, and the advice they have for Baby Boomers and Generation Xers about lifelong participation in physical exercise.

Physical Well-Being

The older adults engage in some degree of regular exercise to “feel good” physically and to feel better about themselves. They were aware of claims that exercise will prolong their lives and delay the onset of disease and physical deterioration, as was evident in their often-repeated observation, “use it or lose it.” Willy is an avid hunter and expressed how exercise has made a tremendous difference in his ability to climb up a hill when he is hunting. He elaborated on the fact that he is in better physical condition at “the ripe old age of 72” as the men with whom he hunts who are half his age.

During hunting season, I spend most of my time in the woods or in the mountains somewhere. I enjoy hunting, and coming down here has made a difference for me in ability to, ah one place I hunt and park is behind an old house and you go straight up a hill and it must be a 10% or better grade. Before I started coming down here about half way up I had to stop and take a break, now I peel off up the hill. It makes a tremendous difference. Now, I see a lot of people a lot younger than I am and they can't do the things that I can physically. A lot of these younger people that I hunt with, they absolutely cannot keep up with me in the mountains because physically I am in pretty good shape.

I asked Willy how it made him feel to know that he is in better physical shape at his age as men half his age. He joyfully responded, “It feels real good!”

Ralph (68 years old) also talked about how exercise has improved his mobility, endurance, and strength. Before he joined the Wellness Center, he got out of his chair with a great deal of difficulty.

When I first started to come down here, and this is the honest to goodness facts, I could hardly get out of the chair because yah know all I had been doing was walking. Then I started to come down here and get on all these machines and exercising my legs, next

thing yah know I could bounce up out of the chair. And I thought man something happened somewhere. Honest to goodness truth! I guess I just hadn't been using my legs in the right way and walking wasn't enough. Really getting out of a chair had become a chore. It took arms, legs, and all kinds of twisting and turning. Even my wife noticed a difference she said my goodness it didn't use to be that easy for you.

Ralph and Willy's stories were typical of the older adults in this study. Exercise improved all aspects of their lives. They were more focused and had limited difficulty doing their housework, yardwork and other daily activities. Many of them commented that if they were not exercising they believed that they would not be as motivated to be physically active in their late adulthood years. Exercise provides them with the physical energy that they need to get through the day and to accomplish daily tasks. At least half the older adults believe that they are in the best physical condition of their lives. As Ralph so thoughtfully stated, "Normally things start to go down hill at my age, but it is just the opposite now, and I know it is because of exercise."

Psychological Well-Being

Research indicates that physical exercise improves the ability of the brain to function and process information (Fontane, 1996). Ballroom, square, or line dancing for example, are excellent choices of exercise because individuals must master and coordinate steps and patterns in so many moves. For example, June (66 years old) was participating in line dancing classes three nights a week at the Wellness Center. She agreed that line dancing helps and improves her psychological and physical well-being:

I think the line dancing makes me remember, it makes me organized, it makes me put things in the right sequence, it keeps my mind active. As well as working up the body and so on, now 15 years ago I might not have said that but one should get a little bit wiser as they get older and assimilate many of the things that you have done throughout the years and put it together.

The older adults' beliefs about the relationship between exercise and psychological well-being was not an anticipated finding in this study. However, when responding to the quality of life questions, nine of the fifteen older adults firmly stated that exercise helps them to mentally function and stay alert. They believed that exercise "gets their mind working," "helps to stimulate their mental thinking and thought process," and helps them "solve the world's problems." When I specifically asked Jerry (75 years old) what exercise does for his mental well being he said that exercise gives him a sense of accomplishment and usefulness.

I think for me it [exercising] gives me a sense of accomplishment that I am doing something worth while and that I am not allowing myself to just get so old that I will be useless, that is what I am trying to avoid, uselessness.

From the older adults' responses, I believe that many of them are trying to avoid the feeling of "uselessness and feeling old" that Jerry described. Exercise is rejuvenating their bodies, as well as their minds and spirits. Their daily exercise regimen provides them with a feeling of accomplishment, independence, and self worth.

Social Well-Being

Remaining active in a social environment is critical for most adults in their later years of life; many older adults involve themselves in formalized exercise programs strictly for socialization purposes (Keller & Woolley, 1994). The older adults in this study enjoyed the interactions they have with others at the Wellness Center, but it was not their only form of socialization. They are still very active in the community and with life in general. A few believed that being a member of the Wellness Center was an effective way to meet people. Others said that joining the Wellness Center provided them the opportunity to reacquaint themselves with old friends or co-workers. I asked each of the older adults, "How would you categorize the people with whom you interact here at the Wellness Center?" The participant's definitions varied from family, friends, and acquaintances to "nice people." I found it interesting that many of the older adults defined people with whom they exercised or with whom they simply spoke while they were exercising to be "like an extended family." However, when I asked them if they socialized with this "family" outside of the exercise facility, their response was "no." Velma elaborated on why she believed these people were like a part of her family:

Well this family stuff is true because you do kind of become a family, even though you may not know them. A lot of people I don't know by name, but you still feel like they are kind of your family because you see them just about everyday.

There also appeared to be a small group of "nonsocializers." Two of the men said they were not interested in meeting people or talking with people while at the Wellness Center. They were there to do their exercise and not to socialize. If people speak to them they speak back, but they did not willingly engage in friendly conversation while participating in exercise.

Where they would be Without Exercise

I asked the older adults where they believe they would be at this stage of their life if they were not participating in a regular exercise program. The responses were almost unanimous--

dead or in a wheel chair. They clearly believed in the benefits of exercise. Lee (67 years old) summarized the beliefs of the participants quite nicely, “Long haul on the fitness center is exactly what it means, long haul on your life.” This type of health and wellness mindset motivated the older adults to get out of bed in the morning and kept them actively engaged in life.

Future Outlook on Exercise Participation

One of the final questions I posed to the older adults was, “Do you foresee a time in the future when you will stop exercising?” The responses were a resounding, “no!” Common elaboration to this question included the following: Shirley (66 years old) “I will be exercising as long as I live, and am able to;” Mary (75 years old), “I am going to keep going until I can’t go no more;” Beth (67 years old), “I am going to exercise forever;” and Fred (66 years old), “I’ll quit when my hands are folded across my chest, and I am in one of those boxes and six feet in the ground.”

Advice to Baby Boomers and Generation Xers

My final question to the older adults was, “If you could offer any advice to the Baby Boomers or Generation Xers about continuous participation in exercise throughout the life course, what would it be?” All of them provided encouraging and positive words that reinforced their beliefs in exercise participation. Many of the older adults encouraged these two generations to “start exercising early and not to wait until they are old to begin regimented exercise programs.” Several of the older adults made mention of their familial beliefs regarding participation in exercise. They made responses such as, “get the whole family involved, even if you can only do it on the weekends,” and “make exercise a family activity.” Lee (67 years old) was one of the participants who believed that families should exercise together:

I would recommend that they joined a fitness center like this and if they can afford it bring their children along with them, even if it is only on one day during the weekend. It will not only keep their children occupied but also they will find out what really good people are like.

The older adults also felt strongly about maintaining and “sticking to” an exercise program. They recommended not getting into the habit of starting a program and stopping. As Alex (72 years old) advised, “get started, stick with it, and don’t ever give up!”

Don (69 years old) talked about how he tries to encourage his sons and daughter who are part of the Baby Boom generation to be more active and to get involved in exercise:

Exercise! I tell my sons and my daughter, in fact I get on this one son of mine and tell him that he has gotten too heavy. But the kids get interested in their careers and neglect their physical health. They play golf, but that is not all that much exercise, because they ride a cart when they play golf.

Mary (75 years old) said that she would advise the Baby Boomers and Generation X, “to do everything they can for as long as they can and to stay active and take care of their bodies. You only get one body in this life, and you must take care of it, 'cause when your body goes so do you.” Bob (71 years old) believed that through education and by imitating Japanese society we (as a society) can improve the knowledge and participation in physical exercise of persons of all ages. He explained:

Don't do as I did and wait too late to become truly active, to truly exercise because the benefits are there for you if you'll only take them. The impediment I see is there is an increasing distraction that begins in younger ages, and kids, teenagers and young adults are so stressed that they can't or just don't do any types of physical activities. It is a real tragedy yah know. Somehow, we have to put in our society like the Japanese do and get exercise into our daily lives. That is going to be a tough hurdle to accomplish, but through education, I believe we can do it.

Jerry (75 years old) believes that kids and adults are spending entirely too much time sitting in front of a computer or a television. He said that one should stimulate his or her mind with exercise:

Well I would say get rid of the television and the computers and just use the computers when ever it is necessary and do not play on it all day. Put your efforts into something useful that will add to your life, physical life as well as mental, like exercise for example. I just think that exercise is very important for everybody and that the older we get, that doesn't change things, exercise becomes even more important as you get older. It helps you to function, to stay alert, to think better, to physically be stronger and independent, it just all around makes you feel good about yourself. It is never that much fun to exert yourself an hour or more a day but it stimulates the heart and makes things work better. People need to become physically active at an early age, kids need to be more active and parents do to. I promise if people get started at an early age it will make for one happy, healthy and long life.

It is altogether appropriate to end this chapter with advice about participation in exercise from this extremely active, dedicated, hard-working and knowledgeable group of older individuals. I firmly believe that no other individuals, including health care professionals, can provide society with as much information about the benefits of lifelong continuous participation in physical exercise than older adults themselves. The older adults in this study have unique and

interesting life histories of their involvement and participation in physical exercise. They recognized that there were times in their lives, when for one reason or another, they were not as active as they would have liked to have been. Many of them have continuously remained active throughout their lives, and those who have not have “picked up where they left off” when they were physically active. They cope with a variety of health obstacles that lead many others to disengagement or sedentary lives. They have an extremely positive outlook on their lives and credit it with their participation in regular exercise.