

# Research notes: Sport and the (Re)Production of Knowledge and Power Relations within a Global 'Agequake'

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## Abstract

One of the greatest demographic challenges facing most nations is how to respond to increasing populations of older people. This is perhaps nowhere more relevant than in the 'Four Asian Tigers' of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, regions that have witnessed inspirational economic growth and health-care advances which, in turn, have provided the basis for some of the most rapidly ageing populations on the planet. The proposal that has come to dominate local, national, and international policy agendas is that the world's increasing population of older people should engage in 'active ageing' (European Commission, 1999; World Health Organization, 2002, 2005). Findings are presented from an analysis of policy documents, reports and media articles which promote the perceived benefits of physical activity in later life, along with data from interviews with older persons and an examination of fictional representations of the ageing process. A consistent theme throughout this

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study is an anti-ageing rhetoric, that ageing is something individuals should attempt to slow, stop or reverse. Recommendations are made for improved understanding of the benefits and appropriate provision for active ageing, to better serve the needs and aspirations of older persons.

Keywords: ageing, physical activity, representation



## Introduction

This paper will argue that one of the greatest demographic challenges facing most nations is how to respond to increasing populations of older people. This is perhaps nowhere more relevant than in the 'Four Asian Tigers' of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, regions that have witnessed inspirational economic growth and health-care advances which, in turn, have provided the basis for some of the most rapidly ageing populations on the planet. At the time of writing, overall life expectancy is approximately 82 in Hong Kong and Singapore, 79 in South Korea and 78 in Taiwan. It is estimated that by the middle of the twenty-first century, approximately one-third of the population in these regions will be aged over 65. The United Nations (UN) (2001) defines regions as 'aging' if more than 7 percent of the population is over 65, 'aged' if the fraction exceeds 14, and super-aged if it is greater than 20 percent. The Asian Tigers look likely to reach a level of agedness that is beyond any definition provided by the UN, and will become among the oldest regions on earth. While countries such as Japan, and many in Europe and North America, are witnessing similar age waves, the difference for the Asian Tigers is that they need to deal with their rapidly ageing populations while still in the midst of modernisation. A particular feature of this demographic shift is that the growing numbers of older people is combined with a declining birth-rate, which means that there is a decreasing workforce in these regions. This has resulted in a rise in immigration rates of foreign workers and increasingly multicultural societies which need to be embraced alongside the other demographic changes (Kim, 2009; Tsai, 2009). Various policies have been implemented in the regions, such as the South Korean Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy which was issued in 2006 laying out a five-year aging plan with suggestions for best provision for this demographic shift (Howe et al., 2007); and in Taiwan in the same year, the Big Warm Social Welfare Package was announced to improve care for the ageing population (Lee and Yang, 2007).

Celebrations of the global 'age of aging' (Magnus, 2009) are tinged by concerns regarding the impact of an ageing population on the economy

and the likelihood that they will make ever-growing demands on social and health care services (Bytheway, 1995; Stephens and Flick, 2010; Vincent, 2003). This is largely grounded in perceptions that the ageing body is diseased and consequently that older people do not contribute to, and will be a burden on society. Many have argued that there is an implicit ageism in societies and widespread acceptance of negative beliefs about older people (Stephens and Flick, 2010), with the result that age discrimination is reported more than any other form of prejudice (Age Concern, 2006). The proposal that has come to dominate local, national, and international policy agendas is that the world's increasing population of older people should engage in 'active ageing' (European Commission, 1999; World Health Organization, 2002, 2005). This embraces a variety of ways that older persons might continue to make a positive contribution to citizenship, society and the economy, incorporating the perceived health and social benefits of physical activity and exercise. Official policy documents, public health campaigns and increasingly business enterprises have extended messages to the ageing population with frequent claims that physical activity will enable morbidity compression and even the ability to delay and/or reverse the ageing process (see Clarke and Warren, 2007; Higgs et al., 2009; Neilson, 2006; Pike, 2011a).

However, there is growing criticism of a tendency toward significant over-generalisation of research findings which indicate the physical, psychological and social benefits of being active (see, for example, Clements, 2006; Dionigi, 2006; Dionigi and O'Flynn, 2007; Grant and Kluge, 2007; Higgs et al., 2009; Phoenix and Grant, 2009; Pike, 2011a; Tulle, 2008). This paper will examine the ways in which the active ageing agenda constructs ageing as problematic, and will revisit claims regarding the benefits of exercise.

This study also responds to critiques of the dominance of survey-style research in social gerontology which attempts to locate older people into identifiable categories according to, for example, age and lifestyle rather than understanding the lived experience of growing old (Blaikie, 1999; Grant and O'Brien Cousins, 2001; Markula et al., 2001; Pike, 2011b). The research for this paper, therefore, adopted a multi-method approach, initially drawing on a semiotic analysis of policy documents,

reports and media articles that promote a relationship between exercise and health in later life. In addition, unstructured conversational interviews (Andrews et al., 2005) were undertaken with people aged over 60 whose participation in sport ranged from elite masters athletes, through those referred to exercise for health benefits, to the completely sedentary. Finally, I undertook an analysis of fictional representations of older people in order to explore how fiction might perpetuate and/or challenge stereotypes of ageing and influence active lifestyles in later life (see Dahmen and Cozma, 2009; Hepworth, 2000).

### **Ageing Populations: A Reason to Panic?**

'The body, it crumbles, grace and vigor depart,  
There is now a stone where I once had a heart.  
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,  
And now and again my battered heart swells.  
I'm now an old woman ... and nature is cruel;

'This jest to make old age look like a fool' (Anon, An Old Lady's Poem)



The anonymous 'old lady' in the poem illustrates how the ageing process is problematized in many societies, with the ageing body viewed as something that needs to be negotiated and addressed. I have argued elsewhere (Pike, 2011a) that this may be understood through the notion of folk devils and moral panics, an idea which entered common vernacular following the publication in 1972 of the first edition of Stan Cohen's book of the same title. The concept of a moral panic is generally accepted as a heuristic device: it does not have to fit all cases, or to be a full explanation, but rather is an 'ideal type' which is relevant if it identifies similar trends (and also contrasts) in a given issue. Cohen (2002) has argued that there are several elements necessary for a successful moral panic, and these will form the basis of this paper. First, is the need for a suitable enemy who embodies a perceived social problem and evokes strong feelings of concern: this, I argue, may be the growing number of older persons who are widely viewed as an increasing burden on societies. Second, there is the perceived victim, in this case, the societies who are having to support

this burgeoning ageing population. Finally, there needs to be a consensus that the threat is serious and needs to be addressed: in this case, through the proposals of various active ageing style agendas (see Pike, 2011a). Even in regions such as Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, where traditional culture ensured honour and respect for the older population, industrial developments have created new cultural themes of independence and individualism within which filial piety has been eroded, and older people are subject to policy and media messages that they should age actively in order to maintain independence and avoid becoming a social burden (see Han, 1996).

### **Fools and Worthless Fellows?**

‘I am forty years old now, and you know forty years is a whole lifetime; you know it is extreme old age. To live longer than forty years is bad manners, is vulgar, immoral. Who does live beyond forty? Answer that, sincerely and honestly I will tell you who do: fools and worthless fellows’ (first written in 1864; quoted from Dostoyevsky, 1986, p.7).

Dostoyevsky’s perception that forty was an acceptable life expectancy illustrates the complexity in defining what is regarded as ‘old’, and the perceptions that ageing and old people are commonly viewed as a threat to social values. Stephens and Flick (2010) suggest that such attitudes are perpetuated in the media which either ignores older people, or celebrates them only if they are represented acting in youthful ways. As Brennan (2005, p.18) argues, despite rapidly expanding ageing populations ‘the same relatively unvaried and unrealistic stereotypes appear’ from fictional representations, through news reports to political messages. This includes the portrayal of older people as ‘dependent, frail, vulnerable, poor, worthless, asexual, isolated, grumpy, behind the times, stupid, miserable, ga-ga, pathetic and a drain on society’ (Healey and Ross, 2002, p.110). This influences social opinion and government advice and, in turn, exacerbates many of the difficulties that older people encounter in making active lifestyle choices in later life. For example, in South Korea, researchers describe the rapid ageing of the population as an ‘agequake’ (Kim, 2009) and ‘the spectre now haunting Korea’ (Howe et

al., 2007, p.9), with a need for the country to 'escape the tyranny of its own demography' (Howe et al., 2007, p.5).

In 1969 concern with the 'World's Ageing Population' first appeared as a supplementary item on the agenda of the General Assembly of the UN. At the UN's Second World Assembly in 2002, the World Health Organisation produced the *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework* document and identified that approximately 2 million deaths per year are caused by insufficient levels of activity. Such statements are problematic, given that there is no universally accepted definition of 'sufficient' levels of activity, and no comprehensive survey of population activity levels to support such statements (see Donnelly, 2009; Grant and Kluge, 2007; Pike, 2011a). However, the presentation of these kinds of statistics enables the stigmatisation of the older population as having poor attitudes toward active lifestyles which need to be addressed. For example, in North America, the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA, 2005) suggests that older people need to adopt a more positive attitude toward exercising; in the UK, the British Heart Foundation (2007) argues that some older people just make excuses for not being sufficiently active; and the World Health Organisation (1998) have argued that older people need to be convinced to be more active.

In this way, the ageing population starts to become defined in ways akin to Cohen's folk devils, seen as a group who are violating social norms and in need of regulation. These recommendations often appear to define physical activity from the perspectives of younger generations, focusing more on what they believe older people need rather than on what older people themselves desire, and so are an imprecise fit with the circumstances of later life (Cavanagh, 2007; Clarke and Warren, 2007; Howarth, 1998; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2004; Reed et al., 2003). Magnus (2009) has described this as a response of the boomerang generation, or the group known in South Korea as Generation 386, the descendants of the baby boomers who face supporting large numbers of ageing relatives, while dealing with their own debts, pension constraints and other challenges. In the next section I will turn attention to these powerful experts who, it is argued, act as moral entrepreneurs and claim the knowledge to be able to translate social concerns into an 'appropriate'

response (Cavanagh, 2007; Pike, 2011a; Ungar, 2001).

## **We're Going to Fight Aging**

'All right, I'm just going to come out and say it. Aging sucks. As my generation of women hits 40, 50, 60, we are for the first time discovering things about our faces and bodies that we never noticed before. Icky things like age spots, crow's-feet, gray hair, chin hair, marionette lines, saggy boobs, spider veins, bunions — need I go on? I don't think so. You know what I'm talking about. The question is: What are you — what are we — going to do about it? We're going to fight aging — and we're going to have a blast while doing it ... We're not going to grow old gracefully (or gratefully)' (Krupp 2009, 1).

Krupp's (2009) book entitled 'How Not To Look Old' is indicative of the ways in which the older population may be regulated by a complex network of interest groups, who draw on the acceptance of their folk devil status, claim to have ownership of the problem of 'icky things', state expertise and then offer a solution to 'fight ageing'. These groups may include official policy makers through to those working in the media, but a consistent feature of the moral panic is that these groups generally support anxiety regarding the identified social group (see Pike, 2011a). This is particularly significant for ageing populations, given Kirkwood's (2001) argument that as we get older, choice seems to be taken away. This is reflected in some national policies, which emphasise active ageing as a requirement rather than a choice (see Hutchison et al., 2006; Pike, 2011a). Take for example, the Taiwanese, 2007 'Policy White Paper in the Aging Society' which outlined two goals of 'active aging' and 'productive aging' with a vision that older members of the population should be 'active, independent, hopeful, participating and dignified' (Council of Labour Affairs, 2010). As these groups make knowledge claims on the nature and scale of the problem, and then proposals for its resolution, so it becomes clear that these moral entrepreneurs also exacerbate differential power relations particularly in neoliberal societies.

A consistent theme of the neoliberal governance which predominates in most developed societies, is the logic of maximising an active and



productive 'third age', and minimising the period of later-life decline and dependency. Neoliberalism is a form of governance which promotes market-based solutions to perceived social problems – in this case, the pressure for older persons to assume personal responsibility for minimising the signs and consequences of their own ageing. In suggesting the benefits and necessity of exercise and claims about the extent and ramifications of sedentary lifestyles, so the moral panic uses social anxiety to impose a moral order. My interviewees also explained how they gained pleasure from physical activity only if it enabled them to feel younger, rather than expressing any pleasure in the ageing process itself. As a result, one woman claimed to 'Enjoy keeping slim and 'defying old age' (age 63), while another described how she was 'in tears now thinking about the things I can't do any more' (age 71) (see Pike, 2010; 2011b).

Furthermore, these campaigns are, in many ways, prejudicial against ageing populations. They manipulate people into becoming part of what Neilson (2006, p.151) has called a 'blossoming consumer market'. This market is the increasing numbers of older persons who can expect to live for an extensive number of years post-retirement, often with a reasonable capacity to engage in consumer culture if supported by pensions and a welfare state. Thus this population is encouraged to buy products which they are led to believe will slow the ageing process, often by being scared by information of the consequences of not so-doing which is presented as 'factual' when it is often grounded in inconclusive research findings. Higgs et al. (2009) contend that there is a 'will to health', or social obligation to visibly engage with anti-ageing practices, including the proposed benefits of physical activity in later life. For example, one woman who was interviewed described how she was definitely more aware now about the benefits of regular exercise. The publicity is all around, and I am inundated with junk mail, charity begging letters, etc. all telling me the benefits (age 64) (see Pike, 2010). In reality, it is the case that we currently do not know enough about the ageing process to be certain of the benefits of specific forms of exercise for improving functional competence in later life (Clements, 2006; Fair, 2006; Tulle, 2008; Weinert and Timiras, 2003).

However, campaigns continue to promote 'evidence' in ways which

also privilege the pursuit of youthfulness as an absolutist and yet abortive ideology subsequently marginalising some sectors of the ageing population who may not have access to these opportunities and technologies and choose not, or are unable, to be physically active (see Gilleard and Higgs, 2000; Murray et al., 2007; Neilson, 2006; Pike, 2011a; Ungar, 2001). For example, research with Chinese immigrants in Australia found that inequalities from working life are carried over into retirement, where inequalities of income are compounded by, and interact with, gender and ethnicity to produce multiple levels of inequality which influence the ability to 'age successfully' (Tan, Ward and Zianan, 2010). Furthermore, research in South Korea identifies that many older people were inactive not because they necessarily chose this lifestyle, but due to a lack of appropriate facilities and opportunities for physical activity (Cho, 2000). Several interviewees in my study also described similar constraints on their lifestyles, explaining 'I can not afford private membership even if there were anything close at hand' (female, age 60), and one woman stated that she was 'Scared to leave the house at night' (age 74) (see Pike, 2010).



### **Do You Think, At Your Age, It is Right?**

The final stage of the moral panic is the process by which it gradually disappears from the public eye, with its legacy determined by its long-term effects and relationship to previous or subsequent issues. Moral panics often come to an end with a change in law which gives the impression that something has been done to address the perceived problem (Cricher, 2003; Rohloff and Wright, 2010). It is important to note that there have been gradual moves toward more inclusive policies, such as the South Korean 'wellaging' programme and 'elderly policy' of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. It is already clear that many older people are able to make positive active lifestyle choices with various older citizens groups. In South Korea there are moves toward community centres and 'elderly colleges' which enable exercise classes and social interaction to take place outside the traditional family unit as this erodes through processes of modernisation (Han, 1996). In Taiwan, there are regular physical exercise groups which take place in public venues for

older people, and in 2007 the first Graduate Institute of Gerontology was established at National Cheng-kung University to train and coordinate research activities in Taiwan on the study of ageing (Tsai, 2009). In addition, there are extensive Masters and Veterans sports competitions offering considerable physical and social benefits to participants (see Pike, 2011b). Blechman (2008) describes these and other such lifestyle choices as a form of 'Geritopia', or utopian way of growing old. Furthermore, the boomerangst or Generation 386 also have the likely benefits that they are able to inform social policy to ensure that greater provisions have been established for leisure and activity for their later life. Despite much of the anxious discourse related to increased life expectancies, we can not yet prevent or reverse ageing. We can, however, seek to increase the spectrum of choices of ways in which it is acceptable to grow old to reflect the variety of personal preferences, and work toward a genuine understanding of the lived experiences of, and improved provision for, active ageing (see Pike, 2011a). As a starting point for this journey, we might be inspired by the words of Lewis Carroll (1865) in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

'You are old, Father William,' the young man said,

--'And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head --

--Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

'In my youth,' Father William replied to his son,

--'I feared it might injure the brain;

But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,

--Why, I do it again and again.'

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