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Josefin Eman

Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes

Abstract

This article focuses on the issue of old-age masculinities by exploring if and how the process of growing old affects the gendered self-images of Swedish old male athletes. It follows the grounded theory research design of Kathy Charmaz and is based on interviews with nine athletes aged 68 to 90. The findings in this article indicate that the athletes withdraw from the masculine practice of competitive sports because it is not considered to be age-appropriate. The men seem to reconstruct their self-images in accordance with four old-age masculinity themes: being physically active, being a leader, being a busy senior, and being a family man. The concept of successful aging is found to be particularly significant in reshaping the men's self-images. Therefore, this article proposes a combination of the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and successful aging in order to increase the understanding of old-age masculinities.

Key words: old athletes, successful aging, old-age masculinities

Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes

Josefin Eman

joselin.eman@soc.umu.se

Introduction

One of the main questions of studies regarding aging and masculinities appears to be whether or not men are able to maintain hegemonic masculinity¹ as they grow old. The answers to this question undoubtedly vary. For instance, Thompson (2006, 643) concludes that old men, when not evaluated in relation to younger men, can be perceived as 'successful in whatever they do as men'. Meadows and Davidson (2006) conclude that even the most privileged men will lose masculine status when they are considered old. Aléx (2007) studies both old men who have succeeded in remaining in 'the male centre' and those who have not. Nevertheless, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on youthfulness (Whitehead 2002). Therefore, if old-age masculinities are exclusively understood in terms of hegemonic masculinity then the process of growing old will automatically translate to a process of decline.

As the concept of hegemonic masculinity is temporally (Spector-Mersel 2006) and culturally diverse (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994), its meanings must be pluralized if they are to remain valuable in relation to old men. In fact, Spector-Mersel (2006) argues that age is a key definer of masculinity and that the models of manhood consequently shift with life phases. When men grow older they are not merely affected by norms of masculinity, but also by norms of aging (Smith et al. 2007, Spector-Mersel 2006). Consequently, norms of aging must also be considered when studying old men. Ideals of aging, such as successful aging, often emphasize the pursuit of an active and healthy lifestyle in old age (Franklin and Tate 2009, Rowe and Kahn 1997). One group of men who, from the outside, appear to fulfil both ideals of masculinity and aging is old athletes. Athletes are regarded as powerful symbols of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) and their active lifestyle seems to correspond well with ideals of aging. But participation in sports is also considered to be a highly age-sensitive masculine practice, which indicates that as male athletes grow old they will undergo a process of rise and fall in terms of hegemonic masculinity.

Studies of aging and sports have not included gender as a central part of the analysis (Dionigi 2007, Grant 2001, Tulle 2008). But by focusing simultaneously on gender, aging, and sports in a study of old athletes the construction and negotiation of both masculine and old-age self-images could be emphasized. Therefore, this study aims to explore whether and how the process of growing old affects the gendered self-images of Swedish male athletes. Moreover, it is hoped that the study will contribute to the understanding of old-age masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity and sports

Connell (1995) argues that competitive athletes are contemporary symbols of hegemonic masculinity, although they are not necessarily the most powerful of men. However, the concept of sports incorporates more than the competitive aspect; for instance, it includes physical training, aesthetic activities, play, and recreation (Engström 1999), and not all forms of athletic practices are connected to masculinity (Koivula 2001). Sports connected to health, fitness, and aesthetics are instead often considered to be connected to femininity whereas some athletic activities, like cycling, orienteering, and swimming, are even perceived to be gender-neutral (Koivula 2001). In fact, masculinity could also be constructed by engagement

in unhealthy behaviours and by expressing disregard for one's bodily health (Courtenay 2000).

Nevertheless, sports and hegemonic masculinity are often described as intimately connected (Andreasson 2007, Connell 1995, Fundberg 2003). Messner (2002) views sport as an institution characterized by gender relations and highlights the inconspicuous, yet systematic, exclusion of athletically active girls and women in the field of sports. In particular, Messner (1992) presents team sports as significant arenas for the construction of masculinity and male dominance. Connell (1983) distinguishes four bodily practices, which are central to the construction of hegemonic masculinity: work, sexuality, fatherhood, and sports. Sports are seen as especially important. For instance, Connell writes:

The institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realized and symbolized in the bodily performances (Connell 1995, 54).

Connell (1995) also recognizes that if the bodily practices cannot be upheld, the constitution of masculinity becomes unstable and gender must be renegotiated. As the process of growing old entails bodily decline it is reasonable to assume that old male athletes undergo renegotiations of both masculinity and sport practices. In fact, Tulle (2008) shows how veteran athletes apply strategies, such as age groups and age-adjusted tables, in order to manage bodily decline and maintain participation in competitions. Still, it has been argued that physical activity is a means for old men to preserve a masculine self-image since it helps them maintain a strong physique and sense of continuity (Drummond 2008). The maintenance of the archetypical youthful, muscular male body seems to be less important for physically active old men than is the functional dimension of their bodies (Drummond 2003).

Successful aging

In order to understand old-age masculinities, ideals of aging must be examined. It has been shown that old men's striving for autonomy must be understood in terms of both masculinity and the concept of successful aging, as the two are intertwined (Smith et al. 2007).

The concept of successful aging has recently become one of the predominant ideals of aging by influencing the manner in which individuals perceive and relate to aging (Franklin and Tate 2009, Torres 2006). Except for the emphasis on success (Torres 2001), no commonly recognized definition of successful aging exists (Marquez et al. 2009). However, gerontologists have interpreted success in terms of, for instance, an active lifestyle (Havighurst, Neugarten and Torbin 1968) and creativity (Fisher and Specht 1999). Baltes and Baltes (1990) have defined successful aging as a general process of adaptation, which is based on three components: selection, optimization, and compensation. Together these three components form the model of *selective optimization with compensation*, which, according to Baltes and Baltes (1990, 21) 'takes on a new significance and dynamic in old age because of the loss of biological, mental, and social reserves'. The element of selection refers to the process by which the aging individual re-evaluates his/her domains of functioning in order to best utilize his/her diminishing resources. The selection process often results in the reduction of domains but may also bring forth involvement with transformed or new domains of life (Baltes and Baltes 1990). The element of optimization signifies how people endeavour to maximize their remaining resources as a way of getting the most out of their chosen domains. Lastly, the element of compensation refers to the efforts individuals make as a way of compensating for loss of functional and behavioural capacities. Compensation is particularly

applied in high-level performance situations such as competitive sports, and often involves the use of psychological and technological devices or social adaptations (Baltes and Baltes 1990).

Successful aging has been severely critiqued for its emphasis of the maintenance of youthfulness and the continuance of economic productivity (Calasanti 2003). In fact, Torres and Hammarström (2009) argue that successful aging could be understood as an oxymoron as it signifies not aging at all. All in all, successful aging appears to be a problematic and quite unattainable ideal of aging.

Research design

The study follows the grounded theory research design of Kathy Charmaz. Charmaz (2006, 3) defines grounded theory methods as ‘systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in the data themselves’. Furthermore, Charmaz separates her approach from the classical framework of Glaser and Strauss (1967) by claiming that grounded theories are constructed rather than discovered. Characteristic features of Charmaz’s research design are the oscillation between data and theory, the emphasis on memo writing, and the two-part coding process of initial and focused coding. All in all, Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory research design provides a systematic way of constructing theory from data.

Informants were selected and data collected in two rounds: the first in the autumn of 2008, and the second in the autumn of 2009. The first round of sampling was based on a basic criterion – that the men be old former or active athletes. In this study the age of 65 is considered to be the old age threshold.² As a result of the first round of sampling five old male athletes were selected and interviewed. In the second round of sampling I sought to broaden the selection of athletes. More specifically, I wanted to interview men who had been active on a middle-range level and/or men who had been involved with team sports, as the men in the first round of sampling were primarily elite or amateur athletes engaged in individual sports. An additional four men were chosen and interviewed in the second round of sampling.

With the help of two colleagues I contacted ten men; all but one agreed to participate in the study. In total, nine men between the ages of 68 and 90 were interviewed. The majority of the respondents are married and living with their wives in the northern part of Sweden; two of the men reside in the countryside and the others in the cities. The following aliases have been used in this study to ensure anonymity: Roland, Erik, Gunnar, Ove, Oscar, Per, Klas, Bosse, and Levi. Per and Oscar were former elite athletes who had distinguished themselves athletically on an international level. Gunnar, Bosse, Klas, and Erik had been middle-range athletes, active mostly at national level. Ove, Roland, and Levi had been amateur athletes with more modest accomplishments. Most of the men had been involved in different sports that are performed individually, such as skiing or running, whilst a few had been engaged in team sports, like football. The men are still physically active and engage in exercise, but only a few participate in competitions.

The interviews, which were tape-recorded, lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the athletes, with the exception of two: one took place at a cafeteria and the other at an athletic arena. An open-ended questionnaire based on the sports career theme was used to guide the interviews. Directly after the interviews, impressions and ideas were documented. Memos were constantly written throughout the process of analysis. The analysis followed Charmaz’s (2006) coding process of initial coding and focused coding. In the phase of initial coding, codes such as *comparisons* and *leadership* were identified and proved important for the coming analysis. During focused coding the codes were organized into the categories *abandoning competitiveness*, *being good at sports*, *being a leader*, *being a busy senior*, and *being a family man*. This set of categories was linked to a core category, *construction of successful old-age masculinities*. During the focused

coding process theoretical concepts such as *successful aging* were identified from data. The theoretical frameworks were further developed in a last step when comparable research was reviewed. The quotations used in this study have been translated from Swedish to English.

Constructing new pathways

Abandoning competitiveness?

When talking about their lives in general the men tended to use terms such as ‘pride’ and ‘privilege’, often in association with their athletic achievements but also in relation to their families and careers. Even if the men described distinct transitions in their lives they generally presented their lives as coherent in terms of continuity in success. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the process of aging also changed the men’s lives – in both positive and negative respects. Primarily, growing old affected a fundamental part of the men’s identities – their athletic competitiveness. The majority of men had stopped competing in old age and now referred to athletic competitiveness as ‘uninteresting’. Besides financial constraints and physical fragility, reasons for this change were explained in terms of age-appropriateness, as a majority of the men both encountered and expressed the opinion that athletic competitiveness is for young people. For instance, Oscar ended his long athletic career partly because he started hearing sneers from people who suggested that he was ‘acting childishly’.³ As previously shown, being athletically competitive is intimately connected to hegemonic masculinity amongst younger men (Connell 1983, 1995). In fact, the few men who still participated in competitions chose to emphasize the significance of good fellowship above the competitive element.

Whilst the men disaffiliated themselves from athletic competitiveness, they did in fact admit to engaging in competitive behaviour. For example, amateur athlete Ove declared that he did not care about placements, but at the same time he stated: ‘As soon as you put on a number bib the competitive spirit emerges. You want to be ahead. There is competition in my body all right; it can’t be helped.’ Dionigi and O’Flynn (2007) had similar findings of older athletes who display competitiveness but claim not to be competitive. Older people, they argue, are not perceived ‘as acceptable or normal subjects of performance discourses [...]’ (Dionigi and O’Flynn 2007, 359). This highlights the time constraint of hegemonic masculinity, confirming the belief that hegemonic masculinities are dependent on ‘social clocks’ that assign various forms of masculinity to different life stages (Spector-Mersel 2006). For the old men in this study, being athletically competitive seems to be a less age-appropriate masculine path compared with when they were young. However, it is important to note that other studies have indicated gains in competitive participation amongst old male and female athletes (Dionigi 2007, Tulle 2008).

The withdrawal from competitive sports could also be understood in terms of successful aging, or more precisely within the model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes and Baltes 1990). Abandoning the domain of competitiveness could be understood as a process of selection. Baltes and Baltes (1990) argue that it is common for old individuals to select among their functional domains and withdraw from some of them as a result of diminishing resources. However, the men’s withdrawal from competitive sports appears to be primarily related to norms of age-appropriateness as opposed to biological decline.

Furthermore, whether or not the men selected domains seems to be dependent on their access to close social relationships, in particular marriage. Only one man, Klas, was a widower, and he and his late wife did not have any children. He had been quite athletically successful in his youth and throughout his middle age. Unlike his age peers, Klas was still very much involved in the context of competitive sports, even though he had actually experienced severe physical setbacks in old age. Klas was quite aware of his unusual decision

and said that, 'I have had a dominant position, so to say, in the Swedish elite [of his sport] but I have lost it; still I have continued. And the reason for that is that you need something to do.' Klas argued that training and participating in competitions had become more 'serious' for him after his wife's death 'as it was a way of getting in touch with people and avoiding sitting home alone'.

However, most of the men were privileged in having a social network outside the domain of competitive sports and were able to withdraw from sports without severe social losses. They needed to change their lifestyle of athletic competitiveness, but to shift from young masculinity to the role of old man was not an agreeable alternative. Old people in general are said to lose power as a result of the cultural devaluation of old age (Calasanti and Slevin 2006). The men denied feeling old on the basis that they still were 'useful' and 'active', which implies that they connected uselessness and passiveness with old age. In fact, the men explicitly identified themselves as old and expressed likeness with their age peers only when addressing delicate issues such as physical decay and embarrassing experiences. From these standpoints it seems understandable that the men had to construct new successful ways of being an old man. In fact, the following four pathways have been noted in the men's stories: being physically active, being a leader, being a busy senior, and being a family man.

Being physically active

Physical activity and athletic achievements were of importance for the men, and they stressed the significance of both previous and current athletic accomplishments. The past was literally present in most of the men's homes, which were decorated with mementos of their athletic careers, such as medals and diplomas. Some men even stated that they did not feel sad about not being active athletes as they 'had the memories of previous achievements to comfort them'. But merely living on the memory of past triumphs was not seen as sufficient. Although competitive sports no longer seemed to be a valid pathway for the men, they still emphasized the importance of remaining physically active. For instance, former middle-range athlete Bosse stated firmly that one ought to lower the intensity of workouts when one reached the age of 65, but he stressed the importance of regular low-intensity exercise. Still, most of the men were engaged with the same type of sport in old age which they had practised during previous life phases. Only a few men, primarily those who had been active within team sports, exchanged their athletic activities when growing older. This is in line with Engström's (1999) findings, which show that athletes are less likely to remain involved with contact sports as they grow older. He argues that sports associated with the working class, such as football, are more focused upon youth and vitality than the athletic activities of the middle class. As a result, middle-class sports, such as golf, are considered to be more age-sustainable than sports traditionally more associated with the working class (Engström 1999).

Moreover, being physically active appeared to be a source of pride, in particular when comparing with other old individuals. In fact, some men talked a great deal about how they transcended physical barriers that hindered their age peers. For instance, Ove stated: 'I have cousins of the same age as me who can't even touch the floor, whilst I am able to ski 20 miles'.

Being a leader

Another way to retain the identity of a successful athletic man was by being an athletic leader. Levi, who was both an athletic leader and an athlete, felt that younger sportsmen might disdain him as an athlete but respect him as a coach. Messner (1992) has shown the powerful position athletic coaches often hold. All of the men in the study were or had been some form of athletic leader. For instance, the men could function as chairmen of organizations or coaches for junior or elite athletes. Some of the men had been or were formal leaders outside

the world of sports as well, for instance, through their former professions, in politics, or in different organizations. The men could also be informal, often self-appointed, coaches to family members and/or up-and-coming athletic talents.

Athletic leadership was usually initiated after ending a career as an active athlete, and it functioned as an alternative to prolonging a deteriorating career. Growing old appears to have altered the forms of leadership, both *how* the men employed it and to some extent *why*. For instance, the amateur athlete Roland felt more at ease in his leadership position as an old man. Erik, by contrast, felt the limitations of leadership that aging conveyed. Although declaring that both he and his wife are aware of how much he values his position as a chairman, Erik has set a date for his departure:

Because by then I will be too old, and it will be time to let somebody else take over. [...] Right now nobody insists on my departure but one can't go on forever, you know; there is an age limit.

Seeking or accepting a leadership position was certainly connected to a sense of duty or a desire to be of assistance to others, and it was described as taking a responsibility that others shunned. Nevertheless, leadership seemed to serve multiple purposes for the men. The coach position in particular offered a way to be respected by the youth and to stay young. For instance, when talking about being a coach, Ove said:

I guess I stay a little younger only by spending time with them [the junior athletes], since I hear and see and get to know so much about what it's like being young now.

The coach position was described as special, giving the men a youthful edge compared with other old men who were seen as 'old geezers' by the youth. Being a leader also functioned as a means to prolong the men's sense of identity as an athlete as they could share in the successes of their protégées, which is notable in Per's statement:

I know that the ones who are competing now like it when I say hello and talk with them. They think it's nice. I know it helps them to ski a little faster, too; no doubt about it.

Leadership was also seen to provide ways of turning defeat into success, in the manner of Levi: 'My wife gets better results than I do. But that's nice, you know, because I train her. And then I simply say: "Gosh, what a talented coach she has" (laughs)'. All in all, aging, or at least retirement, seems to have enhanced the value of the formal and informal leadership positions for the men. They became more involved with the leadership role in old age, which could be interpreted as an element of optimization (Baltes and Baltes 1990). By further investing resources in the leadership role, the men maximized the functioning domain of leadership. Only one man, Gunnar, was not involved with optimizing the leadership domain. In fact, Gunnar stated that he had developed distaste for leadership of group activities when growing older.

Being a busy senior

Being a leader took up a considerable amount of time for some of the men and less time for others. Many of the men had interests that were not at all related to sports or leadership, but these activities appeared no less significant. Regardless of their present occupation, it seemed most important for them to keep busy. Keeping busy has been distinguished as a common strategy of dealing with an aging body (Katz 2000). In fact, it has been argued that the leisure of retirement is justified by an ethic, the 'busy ethic', which values occupied and active lifestyles and is coherent with the ethic of work in the labour market (Ekerdt 1986).

The findings suggest that the men in this study embraced the busy ethic, at least when describing their lifestyles. Although they were retired, they still referred to their daily tasks as work or jobs, using expressions like 'it's a full-time job'. For instance, Ove emphasized his busyness by talking about his schedule: 'It has been five, six years since I retired and it's almost gotten to the point where I have to check my journal to see if I haven't booked in too much'. At the end of the interview he picked up his mobile phone and expressed his astonishment that nobody had tried to reach him during the last hour. Without being approached on the subject other men made similar assuring statements, such as: 'I don't lack leisure-time activities'. Moreover, the men often listed their activities, which could consist of writing a book, taking care of their weekend cottages, or doing genealogy. Ekerdt (1986) states that it is common for retirees to attest to their busyness, either in blanket terms or by a descriptive list of activities, in order to follow the busy ethic.

Generally, the men described themselves as busy and privileged in that manner. It is important to note that keeping busy was not only a privilege, but also a gendered privilege, at least in Roland's family:

She [his wife] has supported me in everything that I have done. If she hadn't, I would not have been able to do as much as I did and still be married to her. She has not had any sports activity of her own. So when I retired I had a lot to do anyway; my own training, athletic leadership, and lots of other stuff. She, however, did not have that. So when she retired, two years early, all was suddenly empty.

Being busy was clearly important for the men, not least since they connected idleness with old age and often presented their high activity rate as evidence of their continued youthfulness. Similarly, Ekerdt (1986) notes that retirees often employ the busy ethic as a means of protecting themselves from the stigma associated with retreat and aging. Just as being busy was considered important, admitting the opposite seemed problematic. One of the men, Erik, expressed a wish for more activities:

We miss our jobs. We both [he and his wife] miss the fellowship with our co-workers. [...] When you quit – you quit, then it's over. Period. It can be a problem from time to time, finding a reasonable occupation. We work a lot with our summer cottage, dealing with lawns, flowers, and repairs, but it doesn't fill up all your time; it doesn't.

However, he sums up the subject by saying: 'But...yeah, we'll manage all right; it is not a problem in any way; filling time, it's going fine.' By first declaring his need for more activities and the next moment denying that such a need ever existed, Erik highlights the desirability of maintaining a busy lifestyle in old age, as well as the stigma of failing to acquire the same. The men had quitted the domain of paid labour but the social emphasis on work made it difficult to withdraw from the work domain completely. Unable to select other domains the men instead sought ways of substituting paid labour with other activities. Therefore it is reasonable to describe the men's involvement with busyness as a strategy of compensation (Baltes and Baltes 1990).

Being a family man

Being a family man appeared to be of great importance for the men, both emotionally and athletically. Many of the men expressed the emotional significance of their families; they talked with more explicit pride about their family members than they did about themselves. In particular, the men presented their wives and grandchildren as infinitely important, and as a

source of joy and strength. The men described their wives as social companions and supportive spouses. Furthermore, there are also reasons to believe that marriage is of particular importance in the construction of masculinity. In the 19th century marriage was the threshold from youngster to man in the north of Sweden (Johansson 1994). Still, it has been argued that unmarried men are perceived to be incomplete men in the northern part of Sweden (Nilsson 1999). The men in this study also talked a great deal about the time spent with grandchildren. Ove proudly declared that he had spent so much time at his grandchildren's day-care centre that all the children there started calling him 'grandpa'.

A number of researchers have argued how old men, through the grandfather role, express a different form of masculinity by caring for their grandchildren (Thompson et al. 1990; Waldrop et al. 1999). This nurturing masculinity has been attributed mostly to old grandfathers, while younger grandfathers, through their continued connection with the labour market, are still said to reproduce hegemonic masculinity (Mann 2007).

Besides the emotional aspect, being a family man also seemed to have an impact on the way the men related to sports. First of all, it affected the approach to competitive sports. When growing old, many of the men started competing along with their families. Levi mentioned such arrangements: 'We have an annual family battle in which we compete against another family, where several generations participate. A multi-generation struggle.' The focus was not on the individual performance but rather on the strength of the collective. Since many of the men exercised with their wives and families it was also possible to withdraw from the competitive context and still maintain social companionship. Secondly, the men contrasted the physical abilities they needed to be family men in old age with the abilities of their age peers. For instance, Roland said: 'I need to stay fit because I am going out skating with my grandchildren. There are not a whole lot of 73-year-olds on that skating rink (laughs).' Thirdly, being a veteran athlete was intimately connected with being a family man. Erik stated that 'almost every veteran athlete' brought their wives, children, and grandchildren with them to a competition, making the arrangement an extended 'family party'.

Combining old-age masculinities with successful aging

The results of this study indicate that growing old affects the way Swedish male former athletes perceive and present themselves in terms of masculinity.⁴ The men generally presented their lives as continuous in success. However, growing old did bring forth changes, both positive and negative. The men withdrew from the context of athletic competitiveness, partly because it was regarded as 'childish' to be competitive in old age. Not all men abandoned competitiveness altogether, but by denying the significance of the competitive element in sports; it seems as if they could to some extent continue with the competitive behavioural patterns whilst minimizing the risk of social sanctions.⁵ For instance, some men continued to participate in competitions but put emphasis on the aspect of comradeship rather than competitiveness when talking about their motives for competing. Seeing that comradeship and team spirit are considered to be central features in the athletic context of Sweden, such explanations were surely valid for the men (Schoug 1997; Stier 2009). In short, the men were expected to disaffiliate themselves from competitiveness and instead adopt an age-appropriate masculine identity, where the pathways of young hegemonic masculinity became less passable for the old men in this study. Instead they followed the pathways of being physically active, being a leader, being a busy senior, and being a family man.

These findings could be interpreted both in terms of Spector-Mersels's (2006) concept of social clocks and Baltes and Baltes's (1990) selective optimization with compensation model. During youth and middle age, athletic competitiveness was a successful masculine pathway for the men, but it was clearly not so in old age, which indicates that masculinity is dependent on social clocks tied to age. When the men continued to compete in old age,

tensions arose, as norms of masculinity clashed with norms of aging. In an effort to dissolve these tensions the men employed the adaptive strategies of successful aging: selection, optimization, and compensation. But unlike Baltes and Baltes's (1990) reasoning, the model of selective optimization with compensation was not primarily applied by the men as a result of biological decline, but rather as a response to societal norms. The men abandoned previous, less functional domains, like competitive sports, and selected new or transformed domains as a consequence of norms of age-appropriate behaviour. Within these domains they compensated for loss of former resources, for instance, paid labour, and optimized remaining assets within the domains of, for example, leadership. However, the practices of hegemonic masculinity were not entirely abandoned. In fact, the bodily practices that Connell (1983) views as central in the construction of hegemonic masculinity – work, sexuality, fatherhood, and sports – are, with the exception of sexuality,⁶ recognizable in the findings. The central themes of hegemonic masculinity were modified in accordance with the concept of successful aging, which offered the men a way of preserving relative masculine success in old age. The theme of family man could be understood as the widened role of fatherhood, with emphasis on generational strength. Furthermore, the men still valued the dimension of work and even described their activities in terms of jobs or employment. In line with the busy ethic (Ekerdt 1986) it was important for the men to highlight their busy and active lifestyles. Sports were also still an important part of the men's lives. However, in keeping with the ideals of successful aging the men emphasized the importance of exercise (Franklin and Tate 2009) above the competitive element. This is in line with Engström's (1999) findings, which show that adolescent male athletes are primarily interested in competitive sports whereas middle-aged male (and female) athletes instead engage in athletic activities in order to benefit from physical training.

However, the self-image of successful aging was ultimately achieved at the expense of other old individuals. As success is relative, 'successful aging' must be constructed in contrast to 'usual aging'. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the men made constant comparisons, which could be stretched over time and include various individuals and/or groups. The significance of comparisons amongst old adults has been previously recognized in studies regarding the maintenance of masculinity (Meadows and Davidson 2006). The men in this study used two main categories of comparisons: inclusive and exclusive comparisons. When they talked about their physical setbacks they *included* themselves in the old population and interpreted the physical deterioration as a sign of old age. But when exceeding physical boundaries the old male athletes *excluded* themselves from the old population by interpreting the achievements in individual terms, not at all connected to their age. As the men shifted between including and excluding themselves among the elderly, they also shifted between presenting their past and present achievements. Their masculine self-images were not only products of today but of yesterday and tomorrow as well, which accentuates the constant construction of masculinity.

Conclusions

The men in this study are abandoning the competitive ideal of young hegemonic masculinity, which indicates that masculine ideals shift over time and depend on the life phases, as Spector-Mersel (2006) argues. Hence, continuity in masculinity seems to demand change. The men are reconstructing themselves in accordance with, and through the adaptive strategies of, successful aging. But the pathways to successful aging are strenuous, as they require access to many privileges, such as a healthy body, a social network and a busy lifestyle. Furthermore, by presenting themselves as successful agers, the men might reinforce the dualism of successful and ordinary agers.

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Notes

- 1 Connell (1995, 77) has defined hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’.
- 2 Old age should be considered a multi-dimensional concept, both a material reality and a social construction (Calasanti and King 2005).
- 3 The attitudes towards veteran athletes varied between the sports. One of the men stated that within his sport veterans used to be considered ‘ridiculous’, but since former athletic stars had become veterans themselves, the old athletes were now ‘treated with respect’.
- 4 No major differences were found between the team athletes and the athletes involved with individual sports.
- 5 Similarly, Fairhurst (1998) has displayed the fine line between what is regarded as age-appropriate and what is not. The older women in her study found it age-inappropriate to dye one’s hair but age-appropriate to rinse it with colour.
- 6 The topic of sexuality was not addressed by the men or the researcher.

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Josefin Eman is a doctoral student in Sociology at Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden. She works within the research project Welfare and Work in an Ageing Society, founded by the Swedish Research Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS). Her dissertation focuses on old athletes, sports and the gendered process of aging.