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A qualitative study of a Sporting Memories program in South Australia: belonging, participation, and social connection

Robert John Laidlaw **Conclusion:**

The Sporting Memories program provides a group program for older people to come together and develop new friendships. The use of sports as a means of reminiscence was considered relatable for the participants who reported social benefits and plans to keep attending. They valued learning through the program which was enhanced by having a facilitator who was knowledgeable about sport.

KEYWORDS

aged, psychological wellbeing, quality of life, learning, loneliness, memory

Over the course of the past 30 years, there has been a remarkable increase in life expectancy across much of the developed world (). While increases in lifespan and decrease in mortality is a positive development for humanity (), it comes at a price. Australia, like much of the western world, confronts a growing aging population (). The population of people aged 65

or older in Australia has increased from 4.6% in 1922 to 16.2% in 2021 with growth to continue, with over 20% expected by 2066 (3). Between 2000 and 2050 alone, the global share of people 80 and older is estimated to be almost 5% (4). Catering to the aging population requires adequate resourcing of the aged care sector and workforce to manage complex health and social issues. However, declining fertility and shrinking size of the working age population compound these challenges (2).

In addition to the well-recognized physical impacts of aging (1), there are also socio-cultural challenges associated with aging (2). For example, as people get older, they may experience cognitive changes, bereavement (such as loss of a life partner) and drop in income. These experiences can all contribute to social isolation, loneliness, loss of independence and increased psychological distress (5). Research indicates that with increasing age, older people experience higher levels of psychological distress (6). A review of the literature identified that social isolation and loneliness can substantially increase the risk of dementia, coronary artery disease and all-cause mortality (7).

Different approaches have been trialed to address the negative health impacts of social isolation and loneliness in older people including at the community level (such as the Campaign to End Loneliness in United Kingdom),¹ directly (such as social prescribing, support groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness and pharmaceutical interventions) and indirectly (such as participation in exercises, and gym memberships to promote broader social engagement) (8).

Another direct approach to counter social isolation and loneliness (ent) (

2 Methods

2.1 Study design

As the purpose of the research was to gather perspectives of

horizons as well as promoting social interaction through staying connected to society (35). As such, providing older people the opportunity to learn as an element of the Sporting Memories program appears to be valued by participants meaning they continue to attend and consolidate their social connections and friendships.

5 Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study was the diversity across settings for the focus groups contributing to richness in the data collected. Having an interview guide that was informed by the literature also contributed to depth of data collected. Data were collected by an independent, experienced qualitative researcher who was able to note non-verbal communications, ask probing questions where needed and encourage participation. As with any research, there are limitations to consider. As this research involved participants from Sporting Memories reminiscence programs, with a small sample size, the findings may not transfer to other reminiscence programs. Having more male than female participants in the focus groups in the sample related to the people at the sites where the focus groups occurred rather than the Sporting Memories program being preferred by men. Data about ethnicity were not collected about the participants. Future research could aim for a balance of gender and reporting information about ethnic backgrounds of participants. The nature of the focus groups meant some participants may have been influenced by the contributions of others.

6 Conclusion

Exploring participant perspectives of three Sporting Memories programs in South Australia has provided important insights. The program is an innovative community-based initiative that can be tailored to participant interests, experiences with and memories of sport. While Sporting Memories appears to contribute to improved health and social connections, the positive effects extend to learning. Reminiscing about a universally accessible activity, such as sports, can foster opportunities for older individuals to connect and learn about, and from, each other.

These experiences were enhanced by a knowledgeable facilitator promoting positive group dynamics through inclusivity and flexible structure. Given these findings, it is recommended that facilitators of reminiscence programs be suitably skilled and trained to promote optimal experiences for participants. Similar research conducted with other community reminiscence programs, as well as longitudinal and quantitative research that compares outcomes from sports reminiscence with other types of reminiscence could strengthen the evidence base.

Data availability statement

Requests to access the dataset should be directed to the corresponding author. Any release of data would be subject to approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee that approved the project.

Ethics statement

All studies involving humans were approved by the University of South Australia, Human Research Ethics Committee. The studies were

conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants, or their next of kin where necessary, provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

RL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Writing – original draft. RM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. SK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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