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## A Senior Water Aerobics Class as a Subculture

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*University of Central Florida*



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A SENIOR WATER AEROBICS CLASS AS A SUBCULTURE

by

SARAH ANNE HALBERT  
B.A. Alma College, 2004  
M.S. Miami University (Ohio), 2007

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Major Professor: Elizabeth Grauerholz

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although previous research has focused on subcultures among deviant groups, very little research has been conducted on older adults' subcultures or subcultures within exercise settings. Given the lack of research on older and non-deviant groups, the current research study was designed to reveal how a senior water aerobics exercise class is indeed a subculture and provide a rich description of this understudied and unappreciated subculture. Data collection took place at a water aerobics exercise class at a health club in Central Florida. In the first phase of data collection, ethnographic observations were utilized to identify the social processes in the pool setting. In the second phase of data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 seniors to provide a rich description of a water aerobics subculture. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, the results revealed that the water aerobics class resembles a subculture with distinctive norms, social roles and rituals. Based on these findings, this study concludes that groups such as water aerobics classes may influence seniors' self-esteem, wellbeing and transition into late adulthood.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Martha: It's a great bunch 'cause I think we are all very like minded. We come here to exercise, to have some social contact, to start our day....And if you're with people... you have a common interest ...it's always a better experience than trying to be with people that your interests and theirs are not the same (interview).*

According to Downes (1966), subcultures evolve out of a collective response to a problem given that no resolution exists for a particular group of people. Older adults experience a number of common problems in late adulthood such as a lowered status based on their changing physical capabilities, the loss of income and diminished social interaction (Rose 1962). These common problems can lead to a positive affinity for fellow group members based on common interests, role changes and cohort experiences, leading to the development of an aging subculture (Rose 1962). In addition to a positive affinity for each other, an aging subculture is characterized by increased interaction with group members as opposed to those outside of the group (Rose 1962).

In the quote above, Martha illustrates that a positive affinity exists among group members based on the common interests of physical activity and social interaction. These common interests may be a mechanism to bind the group together, while at the same time creating distance among those not associated with the group. In a similar vein, Williams (2006) notes that subcultures construct boundaries that position some individuals on the inside while others are located outside. Group membership exists when individuals demonstrate similarity with peers while separating themselves from the mainstream culture (Williams 2006).

Subculture research studies tend to focus on deviant groups that invert norms established by the mainstream culture, such as gangs (e.g. Cohen 1955; Lucas 1998) drug users (e.g. Wilson



2006) and strippers (Forsyth and Deshotel 1997; Spivey 2005). Moreover, research studies emphasize the formation of subcultures based on ethnic group, social class or gender (e.g. Whyte 1943; Mendoza-Denton 2008) and have disproportionately examined subcultures among young people (e.g. Brake 1985; Willis 1977). These research studies may provide a basis of the functions and characteristics of subcultures, but may not be applicable to older and “non-deviant” groups. Indeed, very little research has been conducted among aging individuals that may be identified as a subculture within an exercise setting. A subculture within an exercise setting may serve different functions and illustrate characteristics not previously established by the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to reveal how a senior water aerobics exercise class is indeed a subculture and provide a rich description of this understudied and unappreciated subculture.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Subculture Characteristics

Subcultures provide a space where individuals are not judged and reveal information about group members' circumstances (Brake 1974). Circumstances are conveyed through a number of subculture characteristics that distinguish the group from the mainstream culture. Collectively, these characteristics are recognized as subculture style, which consists of the extent individuals are affiliated to a particular group (Brake 1985). Brake (1974) solidifies subculture style into three characteristics: image (dress, hairstyle, artifacts), demeanor (expression, gait, posture) and argot (jargon and delivery). Groups actively present and re-create these elements through the interaction with others and the subculture's public persona (Williams 2011). In order for a subculture's style to sustain over time, Hebdige (1979) notes, it must "say the right things in the right way at the right time" (141-142) and illustrate the sentiment of a particular moment. A group's style can identify a subculture, but norms, values and rituals are also elements that can distinguish a subculture from the dominant culture. Together, subculture style, norms, values and beliefs create boundaries between those within the group or insiders and those outside of the group known as outsiders (Brake 1985; Williams 2006).

#### *Image*

Subcultures adopt different clothing and hairstyles and utilize artifacts (i.e. objects) distinguishing themselves from society. A prime example of a subculture's image is with the Skinheads, a group of lower class young males in Great Britain. The Skinheads' hairstyle consisted of short hair or shaved heads, while their clothing resembled their working class

background. Particularly, Skinheads wore boots, Levi jeans and suspenders. Their Levi jeans were “rolled up” to make their boots more visible (Brake 1974:188). Skinheads’ clothing and hairstyle became meaningful to members in a sense that it conveyed the values of masculinity and working-classness. Thus, Skinhead’s displayed an image of working class pride to the dominant culture (Brake 1974; Williams 2011).

However, clothing can also be a mechanism to display a higher status illustrated by the Teddy Boys or Teds, a group of lower class young males. The Teds wore previously owned Edwardian suits, a former style of the upper class, in an effort to elevate their status (Jefferson 1976). The image of the Teddy Boys and Skinheads exemplify contention between their parents’ working class background and the middle class society (Williams 2011). In both these cases, material culture, or artifacts represented a hidden struggle between social classes (Williams 2011).

The image of gangs can also be representative of struggles members face within society. Mendoza-Denton (2008) discovered female gang members utilized poetry notebooks, which are passed around to other gang members. In these notebooks, poems depicted challenges that impacted their lives, such as love, romance, imprisonment and the death of family and friends. Therefore, poetry notebooks become a way to identify group members from non-group members. Like poetry notebooks, BMW motorcycles become a method of recognizing fellow group members. Among motorcyclists, insiders view the BMW brand as more significant than the age, price or visual condition of the motorcycle, whereas outsiders are not concerned with those aspects of the motorcycle (Austin 2009).

### *Argot*

A group's argot, or hidden language, is designed to communicate with fellow group members, convey status and allegiance to a particular group, and conceal illegal activities from non-group members. Argot can include phrases, acronyms, established words with alternative meanings and new words. Using argot to conceal illegal activities is demonstrated among Johns, or clients of sex workers (Blevins and Holt 2009). The group's argot consists of acronyms to describe the sex workers' location, attractiveness and performance and cost of their services. Argot in this context is utilized to prevent legal actions, stigma and convey that individuals' involvement in the sex trade is not immoral (Blevins and Holt 2009).

### *Norms and Values*

Norms are recognized as rules and expectations that guide human behavior, while values are defined as internalized behavior that group members evaluate their own and others' behaviors (McPherson 1983). Subcultures develop when norms and values differ in their significance from the larger society (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1970). For example, working class boys value street smarts over the middle class norm of education and book smarts (Willis 1977). When norms and values are accepted by group members and persist over time, they become a mechanism to regulate behavior within the group (Arnold 1970). Group members emphasize compliance to norms and values in order for the group to exist and continue over time (Muir and Seitz 2004).

Subcultures may establish group norms and values pertaining to behavior within the group such as drug and alcohol consumption and hostility or violence directed towards others.

Drug and alcohol consumption is prevalent within the prostitution subculture. Specifically, nude dancers utilized drugs to perform the job and consumed alcohol to increase their earning potential. However, nude dancers worked more to sustain their drug addiction and were expected to hold their alcohol (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997). This example exhibits the contradictory nature of group values and norms in some cases. On the one hand, nude dancers are expected to use drugs and alcohol, but not in excessive amounts (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997).

Violence and hostility towards others is another distinguishing element among subcultures. The thief subculture maintains hostility towards the police, where criminals are expected to convey their loyalty to fellow criminals by refusing to disclose information to the police (Irwin and Cressey 1970). Moreover, the Skinheads enacted violence towards fans of rival football teams, immigrants and homosexuals. The violence towards immigrants, particularly Paki-bashing (i.e. Pakistanis), was carried out because of the belief that immigrants were unmotivated and living on welfare. Thus, Skinheads valued violence, Puritan work ethic and ethnocentrism (Brake 1974). Like the Skinheads, gangs are directed towards the norms and values of violence. The gang subculture itself requires violence and fighting capabilities are valued within the group (Brown 1977; Harris 1994).

A group's artifacts can also illustrate the norms and values accepted by its members. In particular, the biker subculture values individual freedom which is demonstrated through individuals' relation to their Harley Davidson motorcycles. First of all, motorcycles are categorized by the members as representations of freedom, while automobiles signify confinement. Secondly, the action of riding motorcycles display freedom in a sense that individuals can construct a façade for themselves. Therefore, motorcycle riding allows bikers to

behave in ways that may be inappropriate in other situations, which is closely tied to the value of machismo. Harleys are known as the manliest motorcycles given that they are the nosiest and biggest bikes. Therefore, aggressive, manly behavior is considered normal on a Harley. The physical appearance of bikers, tattoos, long hair and beards also convey freedom in a sense that members are free from dominant values concerning attractiveness (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995).

Not all group members follow the norms and values of a subculture. Groups may implement a number of sanctions or forms of punishment to encourage conformity to norms. Sorority members who do not conform to group norms may be fined or required to do volunteer work. Some members may be “campused,” which means that they must stay in and complete homework instead of going out with friends or on dates (Gerson 1969: 391). Although these methods can encourage conformity, dissatisfaction among other members can be an effective strategy given that a majority of friends are fellow sorority members (Gerson 1969). Like sororities, college rugby teams implement strategies to encourage conformity. Particularly, rugby teammates or opponents who do not comply with the standard of machismo are labeled as “fags” or “sissies” and become victims of physical violence (Muir and Seitz 2004: 317). Consistent with the norm of machismo, rugby players who do not engage in sexual relations with a female or become sick because of too much alcohol consumption are publicly criticized by teammates (Muir and Seitz 2004).

### *Rituals*

Rituals tend to emerge during moments of ambiguity and are found in a variety of contexts, including, family, sport and primitive tribes (Watson and Kando 1976). Sport rituals consist of behaviors before, during and after competition, such as shaking hands, pep talks, chants, medal ceremonies and wearing uniforms. For example, a pre-game ritual among college rugby players is to chug a beer to find out who would be the first to vomit on the field (Muir and Seitz 2004). Likewise, Little League baseball teams implement a number of rituals such as warm-up rituals (i.e. throwing, catching routines), home-run rituals (i.e. high fiving teammates) and after game rituals (i.e. parents buying ice cream for winning team) (Watson and Kando 1976). No matter when rituals occur during the sport event, rituals serve the purpose of reaffirming their shared identity, statuses and allegiance towards the group thereby maintaining cohesion within the group (Goodger 1986; Watson and Kando 1976), which create divisions among group members and non-members (Goodger 1986).

Given that the rules of Little League baseball can lead to ambiguity (e.g. umpire calls), rituals are utilized to demonstrate ability and tactics. Thus, the rituals within the Little League baseball context are directed towards accomplishment such as preparing for accomplishment (e.g. warm-up rituals) and sharing accomplishments with fellow teammates (e.g. after game rituals). Thus, these rituals facilitate group solidarity during an unpredictable sporting event (Watson and Kando 1976). Even though Little League baseball teams utilize a number of rituals oriented towards the same purpose (i.e. accomplishment), college sororities create formal rituals focused on socialization and solidarity.

To formally become members, sororities implement rituals known as pledging ceremonies. Pledging is a rite of passage where new members become socialized into the group. Anticipatory socialization takes place, where new members learn about the subculture through an older member in the group, identified as a big sister (Gerson 1969). In addition, this practice is designed to inform new members about becoming big sisters and socialize new members into the subculture. In the pledging period, new members are educated about the norms, values, beliefs and history of the group and are expected to pass a test in order to become a member. If new members successfully pass the requirements during the pledging period, they will receive an invitation to become an active member of the group, known as initiation. After new members are initiated into the group, they participate in weekly chapter meetings. Behavior is ritualized during chapter meetings, which includes taking attendance and singing songs. These actions reaffirm solidarity among group members (Gerson 1969).

### Group Membership

Group members demonstrate different levels of commitment to a particular subculture. Regulars, or highly involved participants, are deeply engaged in group activities and have a high level of dedication to the subculture through enjoyable and challenging times (Unruh 1980). Likewise, some members of youth subcultures display commitment given that their lives revolve around their involvement in the group (Hebdige 1979). As insiders, regulars are concentrated on organizing and maintaining activities for group members (Unruh 1980), drafting new members (Arnold 1970) and know about confidential information related to group activities (Unruh 1980). For example, motorcyclists display high levels of commitment through tattoos, clothing and sew



on patches demonstrating achievements and involvement in rallies and events (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995).

Insiders are important in creating and maintaining a particular subculture, but also demonstrate opposition towards outsiders (Cohen 1972). This opposition creates group boundaries and maintains solidarity within the group (Becker 1963). In particular, jazz musicians become hostile towards outsiders or squares for a number of reasons. First, the groups' boundaries are inflexible, given that squares can never become insiders. Becoming a musician requires innate artistic talent that cannot be obtained through education. Thus, musicians maintain group cohesion through their common artistic talent. Secondly, musicians believe that squares can influence their performance causing them to play inartistically (Becker 1963). Because of this belief, musicians tend to avoid squares at all costs during their performances. They tend to avoid eye-contact with squares and segregate themselves, associating only with fellow musicians (Becker 1963). Sorority members also tend to segregate themselves from college students not involved in the Greek system. Sorority members primarily interact with fellow group members or at least other Greek members (i.e. from other sororities and fraternities) because they do not have time to associate with non-Greeks. The segregation of sorority members creates a boundary from the larger college population (Gerson 1969).

Non-group members also fall into specific categories that create distance among insiders. For example, female group members within the snowboarding subculture are known as Fast Girls who experience inclusivity within a male dominated subculture (Sisjord 2009). Outsiders consist of Babes and Invisible Girls. Babes stayed at resorts and searched for snowboarders as a group, but spent time smoking and snowboarding occasionally. Invisible Girls remain distant

from serious snowboarders because they only snowboard on the weekends and are not involved in competition (Sisjord 2009). Thus, Fast Girls separate themselves from outsiders (i.e. Invisible Girls and Babes) by their commitment to the snowboarding subculture. Further, posers are known within the biker subculture as those who are more worried about their appearance and the look of their motorcycle, which creates distance among insiders who are not concerned about appearance (Austin 2009)

In order for a group to continue, recruiting new members is essential. College sororities utilize the process of rushing to recruit new members, where current members interact with potential new members (Gerson 1969). In particular, Gamma Sigma has implemented a number of strategies to attract new members. During rush, Gamma Sigma members express their likeness for each other smiling continuously. This strategy is designed to make the potential members feel at ease with the group (Gerson 1969). Another strategy is eye-contact, which becomes evident during the last day of rush when emotional sorority songs are sung. The current member becomes emotional during the song where her eyes begin to water. As she makes eye-contact with the potential member, the potential member becomes so emotional that she wishes to become a member of the Gamma Sigma sorority. In addition, current members are socialized to sit at the same level as potential members to avoid feelings of discomfort and persuade membership into the group (Gerson 1969).

### *Social Roles and Status*

Within subcultures, group members possess various social roles and statuses. Social statuses are tied to specific group member behaviors, which coincide with the group's norms and

values. Generally, members who fully conform to group norms and values tend to have a higher status compared to those who do not (Harris 1994; Muir and Seitz 2004; Scoutan and McAlexander 1995). Among gang subcultures, leaders are considered the most violent fighters, which is associated with valued behaviors related to violence and toughness (Harris 1994). Similarly, young gangsters who have been incarcerated in adult jail have higher status compared to those who have not (Bengtsson 2012). Like the gang subculture, college rugby players adopt a status hierarchy. More specifically, college rugby players who have a large number of sexual conquests and hold their alcohol possess higher status among fellow group members (Muir and Seitz 2004). Thus, these behaviors are related to group values of masculinity (Muir and Seitz 2004).

Given the differences in status among group members, the biker subculture demonstrates the dynamics within the group. Particularly, motorcyclists who have more status exhibit a high degree of involvement in group activities, are knowledgeable about Harley Davidson motorcycles and are dedicated to group values (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995). During riding excursions, the president or director and road captain are located at the front of the group, while inexperienced riders or non-members are located at the back. Thus, individuals with more status lead the group during riding excursions, while those with less status follow the group leaders (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995). When passing fellow bikers, individuals typically salute one another. However, bikers who hold higher statuses than the saluter do not return the salute (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995). Thus, individuals within the group serve different roles, such as leaders who guide the group during excursions.

Roles are defined as tasks and privileges related to a particular position. Social roles are acknowledged by those who are involved in a particular subculture (Yinger 1970). A typical social role among subcultures consists of new group members. For example, new female gang members are known as “young girls,” until they are educated about the gang and become street smart through group interactions (Brown 1977: 225). Through this process of socialization, the young girl forms a new identity as part of the gang and internalizes group norms and values (Brown 1977). Thus, potential group members begin to demonstrate commitment to the group (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Group members are socialized through formal group interaction (i.e. policy discussions and planning sessions) and informal group interaction (i.e. hanging around) (Harris 1994). In some cases, potential gang members are mentored by insiders related to viewing the world as a gangster (Bengtsson 2012). However, the socialization process of gang members also consists of adopting the dress and behaviors of insiders. That is, young girls imitate the dress and actions of gang members becoming periphery members before formal membership into the group. Formal group membership illustrates support for group norms and values (Harris 1994). As gang members become more experienced with the group, they hold higher status and become known as “old heads” (Brown 1994: 225).

Some roles within groups pertain to certain types of behavior among insiders. Taxi dancers (i.e. dancers for hire who attend taxi dance halls) engage in different behaviors to increase their business of male clients (Cressey 1932). The “nice girl” consists of dancers with the most status who holds charisma, an attractive physical appearance and energy to obtain dances. However, the “smart girl” allows abuse from male clients and uses her physical appearance for profit. The “never miss girl” is recognized by clients as being friendly, but her

fellow dancers view her as searching out her male clients (Cressey 1932). Cressey's (1932) research identifies the different approaches among taxi-dancers to successfully securing male clients.

However, some group roles become distinguishable at public events. Young male British football fans of Oxford United possess several different roles (Marsh, Rosser and Harre 1997). Specifically, the "chant leader" consists of individuals who guide fellow insiders into chants and songs and also formulate new chants and songs. In contrast, the "aggro leader" is distinguished by wearing boots, is equipped with weapons and consists of individuals who are the first in line when a conflict arises. "Nutters" are violent fighters, but they are known to fellow group members as being crazy (Marsh, Rosser and Harre 1997). However, "nutters" are accepted within the group because they inform others what they should not do. "Hooligans" consist of individuals who engage in behaviors that are admired by the group such as destructing property whereas "organizers" deal with the business components of the group and bargain with non-group members. Heavy drinkers are individuals who would attend games drunk and were asked to leave the premises by the police, but provided amusement to other group members (Marsh, Rosser and Harre 1997).

Like male football fans, female prisoners enact different roles. Snitching, as a role in the prison subculture, provide knowledge about other prisoners to staff members (Giallombardo 1966). Prisoners understand that snitching is not accepted within the group, but some will snitch to benefit themselves. Thus, snitching violates a norm, but those who deviate from the norm are not punished by violence. Instead, group members deal with norm violators through panning and signifying. Panning consists of criticism or gossip that takes place when the offender is not there.

In contrast, signifying occurs when the prisoner is present. In this case, prisoners will talk about the individual who violated the no snitching norm without mentioning the person's name, but there is no doubt about the person's identity (Giallombardo 1966). The deviant behavior is discussed with disdain. Both panning and signifying are successful ways to regulate behavior. The snitcher is criticized by other prisoners because she prevents solidarity within the group. In addition to the snitcher, the inmate cop is another role criticized by other group members because these individuals identify with prison staff. The inmate cop is an individual in a position of power, who gives instructions and reports rule violations, which creates inequality among group members (Giallombardo 1966).

In addition to these roles, some female prisoners are known as squares or individuals who do not plan to become criminals (Giallombardo 1966). Squares have a tendency to remain trustworthy to prison staff. Squares include "cube squares," which are individuals who adopt societal values and align with prison staff whereas "hip squares" consist of individuals who identify with prison values and comply with some of the norms of the subculture (Giallombardo 1966: 277). The "hip square" may act as a lookout and remains tolerant concerning prison activities (Giallombardo 1966: 277). The square may be considered deviant given that they do not comply entirely with prison norms and values and align themselves with prison staff (Giallombardo 1966). Like the square, the jive bitch is another deviant role that creates conflict within the subculture. The jive bitch is known for misrepresenting information and cannot be trusted by other group members, which threatens group solidarity (Giallombardo 1966).

Although female prisoners cannot fully confide in each other, the homey role is the only role that resembles friendship. Homies are individuals with whom prisoners are comfortable

talking with and the conversations between homies are understood as confidential (Giallombardo 1966). Homies typically come from the same area geographically, although homies may not have known each other prior to their imprisonment. Homies may rely on each other for material needs. Like homies who can be trusted, pinnerers are individuals who act as a lookout to prevent the presence of other prisoners or staff during illegal activities. Pinnerers are not delegated to novices or individuals whose trustworthiness is questionable. Thus, pinnerers are individuals who are trustworthy and can work well under pressure (Giallombardo 1966).

In summary, the literature reviewed in the previous pages identifies the subculture characteristics that distinguish a particular group from the mainstream culture, which includes image, argot, norms, values and rituals. A group's image (i.e. clothing and artifacts) and argot (i.e. language) remains central to group identification and represents conflict between the group and the larger society. Moreover, norms and values are important to the operation of a subculture given that these elements manage behavior within the group and encourage conformity. However, group members do not always follow group norms and values and are subjected to sanctions or punishment to ensure conformity. In addition to norms and values, rituals socialize new members, enhance group cohesion and are utilized during times of uncertainty. Within each subculture, there exists a process of group membership, where regulars or insiders demonstrate higher levels of commitment compared to other group members. Members hold various roles and statuses within the group, which consists of specific tasks or duties pertaining to a position. As evidenced by the literature review, previous research has explored subcultures among young deviant groups. However, it is unknown whether subcultures develop among older individuals

and how these may differ from those among younger individuals. A subculture is the focus of this study.

### Subculture of Aging

Age, as a social category, can influence the development of a subculture. Characteristics of subcultures begin to form when individuals are physically separated from the dominant culture or group members initiate isolation based on unique beliefs or actions. Rose (1962) notes that older adults become isolated based on their retired work status and lack of interaction with younger people. Isolation leads to group cohesion based on argot, image, actions and relations with outsiders (McPherson 1983). Rose (1962) argues that individuals are more likely to experience solidarity based on age compared to other social categories (e.g. social class, geographic location). In fact, the subculture of aging has been recognized in retirement communities (Messer 1967) and age-segregated apartments (Hochschild 1973).

Seniors form a subculture because they establish norms different from the dominant culture; however, some norms may also coincide with mainstream society (Barrett, Pai and Redmond 2012). A norm prevalent in the subculture of aging is related to positive conceptions of old age. In fact, the subculture of aging provides older adults with opportunities to actively resist the stereotypical notions of aging (e.g. disease and decline) through the involvement of social activity. Moreover, individuals living in retirement communities tended to view themselves in a positive light (e.g. warm, alert, active) (Longino 1980) and experienced higher levels of self-esteem (Ward 1977). Thus, subculture involvement allows individuals to preserve their self-concept (Rose 1962; Eytsemitan and Gire 2003).



Subcultures also provide an environment to preserve collective interests, but it also creates divisions within the group (Eyetsemitan and Gire 2003). The Red Hat Society, as a subculture, provides opportunities for older women to build relationships with others within the same life phase (Cooper 2004; Barrett et al. 2012). Specifically, women discussed that their collective aging experiences, such as experiencing invisibility in society, influenced their association with the group and feelings of camaraderie (Barrett et al. 2012). To increase their visibility, group members demonstrate their affiliation within the group (e.g. purple dress, red hat). Red Hat group members enhance solidarity due to their perceptions of being socially and physically active. Even though group members experience solidarity, subcultures create divisions within the group. In the Red Hat Society, group members make comparisons based on health, attractiveness or level of social activity. That is, women view themselves more favorably compared to other group members (Barrett et al. 2012).

Although the Red Hat Society may challenge ageist stereotypes, the group may also reinforce these negative stereotypes. In fact, a majority of the women within the group described themselves in youthful terms, which is not associated with subculture development. Given that group members perceived themselves as young, conversation about aging was prohibited. This conversation norm is designed to avoid group conflict and establish a cheerful and positive group environment (Barrett et al. 2012). This conversational norm is in line with Rosow's (1974) research concerning the absence of the aging subculture. Particularly, Rosow (1974) recognized that the shame associated with aging is an obstacle for association with the group. Further, Rose (1962) argues that the aging subculture is less likely to develop when individuals are physically and mentally healthy, indicating that they are younger physically.

Nonetheless, leisure activities may facilitate the development of the aging subculture. However, the type of leisure activities can influence whether or not a subculture develops. Solitary leisure activities do not facilitate connections with others and may result in deeper isolation from society. Group leisure activities may provide social contacts for seniors, but these contacts may not be an effective alternative compared to work related contacts. Likewise, leisure groups may be associated with individuals' identity, but this identity may only be displayed within the leisure group. In order for leisure activities to influence identity development outside of the group, older adults must be involved in activities that are meaningful to them (Miller 1976).

As a leisure activity, card playing groups allow older adults to build relationships and interact with others. Older women described their relationships with other participants as a safe space, where individuals validated their self-concept. Moreover, card players interact with other players outside of the activity and attend religious services, community meetings and volunteer together (Outley and McKenzie 2006). This may suggest that older adults interact more with their age peers than individuals outside of their age group (Rose 1962). In addition to playing cards, shuffleboard provides older adults with an opportunity to interact with others within their age group. Group members demonstrated positive affinity towards one another and commented on their longevity and energy (Snyder 1986).

However, divisions exist among older adults who participate in shuffleboard. In particular, shuffleboard consists of social players and serious players (Snyder 1986). Social players consist of individuals who participate for social reasons and are involved in other leisure activities (e.g. checkers, card games). However, serious players play shuffleboard for several

hours everyday, compete in tournaments and maintain friendships exclusively with other serious players. Given that serious players tend to associate with other serious players, a number of rituals exist to preserve these friendships. Specifically, tournament etiquette is associated with concern for opponents, such as praising other players, shaking hands and not showing negative emotion during competition (Snyder 1986).

Given that leisure groups can develop into subcultures, participants may take on different roles to maintain the group. One of the most important roles includes “recruiter and socializer,” which consists of individuals who recruit and socialize new members (Miller: 1976: 281). This role assists new members in becoming part of the group and allows the group to continue. Additional roles include “the learned elder” and “keeper of tradition” (Miller: 1976: 281). These roles are assigned to individuals who are identified as competent, expert or “resource person” (Miller: 1976: 281). In leisure groups, members encourage others to take on roles, decreasing the possibility of humiliation. These roles are designed to decrease time and energy among other members and have some kind of internal reward (e.g. enjoyment) (Miller 1976).

#### Subculture Characteristics within the Swimming Pool Setting

Scott (2009) provides insight into the norms and rituals of the pool setting for those who take part in swimming. First of all, swimmers utilize changing rooms, which is a symbolic space where individuals become removed from their outside identities that could impede with exercising the body. Individuals concentrate on exercising and disregard other social roles (Sassatelli 1999). The swimming pool is distinguished by an implicit system of rules, norms and rituals that must be regulated in order for the pool as a social setting to continue and operate

(Scott 2009). Scott (2009) recognizes three norms within the pool setting including “respect for personal space, respect for disciplinary regimes and de-sexualization of encounters” (128).

Personal space is controlled by encouraging individuals to reduce eye contact with other swimmers during the activity, as they gaze straight ahead or down in the water. In addition, physical contact with others is considered a taboo and individuals try to stay away from touching others. Individuals who lightly touch others are humiliated, which usually results in apologies from both people. Personal space norms are usually unintentional violations where individuals misread distances (Scott 2009).

The norms surrounding personal space are designed to create deception that individuals exist separately from others and are not related to a group. However, the personal space norms are nonexistent within the “free area,” or the space absent of lane markers (Scott 2009: 129). Specifically, this area is described as disorganized where individuals often collide with others and “change direction.” (Scott 2009: 130). Individuals located in this space give up the privileged not to be bothered or interrupted (Scott 2009).

The norm of “respect for disciplinary regimes” is connected to the idea that swimming is a type of exercise even though it is perceived as a calming activity (Scott 2009: 132). It is understood that each swimmer will focus on exercising and other intensions, activities and identities are expected to be absent from this setting. Individuals who hinder swimmers from following a swimming routine are considered rude. Minimal conversation is expected in this setting, such as talking about the weather whereas deep conversations are a violation of this norm. When this norm is violated, individuals tend to socialize with others in the pool and presume others participate to socialize as well (Scott 2009).

The “de-sexualization of encounters” occurs when individuals fail to mention their lack of attire, as semi-naked bodies participating in the setting (Scott 2009: 133). Bringing attention to the nudity would lead to individuals’ feelings of discomfort, making swimming as an exercise difficult. The de-sexualization of encounters is closely tied with the taboo of eye contact and touch. When the “de-sexualization of encounters” is violated, it takes away individuals’ anonymity (Scott 2009: 133). Specifically, flirting and gazing at the body recognizes the body as a sexual object, which clarifies the situation as sexualized interaction (Scott 2009).

Swimming attire also desexualizes the body since it is seen as a tool for exercise, used beside goggles, flippers, and floats that dehumanize the body (Scott 2010). In this perspective, bodies are viewed as machines, rather than people, desexualizing the body and discouraging interaction that may result in sexualized implications (Scott 2010). Further, the water itself detaches the swimmer’s head from his/her body creating difficulties in criticizing the body (Scott 2010). Swimmers seem to be fixated on their own swimming routine and do not notice other people’s bodies. This is connected with the taboo of physical touch that may be misinterpreted as sexual (Scott 2009; Scott 2010).

### The Current Study

Previous research provides insight into the development of subcultures as a response to a common struggle shared by individuals (Downes 1966). As a subculture develops, the group becomes identified by their image, argot, norms, values and rituals. Subculture researchers have extensively studied subcultures among younger, deviant individuals, but have not typically explored subcultures among seniors. Previous literature suggests that the swimming pool context

may be associated with subculture characteristics, particularly group norms. Further, research indicates that leisure groups among older adults may facilitate the development of a subculture. The current study describes the subculture of a water aerobics class.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The current study is based on a constructivist grounded theory approach and is designed to provide a sociological analysis of a senior water aerobics exercise class. According to Charmaz (2006), constructivist grounded theory explores individuals' perspectives within a particular environment. This study investigated older adults' experiences from their point of view. In addition, constructivist grounded theorists approach the research process with reflexivity, exploring how they affect their understanding of the data (Charmaz 2006). Moreover, grounded theorists follow broad research ideas at the initial stages of their investigation, but these ideas become more focused through deeper levels of data analysis. Codes begin to emerge from the data as opposed to predetermined categories that are tested from deductive hypotheses.

Thus, grounded theory is a flexible approach, where researchers can redirect their focus and follow-up on concepts that emerge from the data (Charmaz 2006). This shift occurred in the current study. Originally, the study was designed to explore the themes of body image and surveillance, which emerged through the first phase of data collection (i.e. participant observation). However, these themes failed to emerge in the second phase of data collection (i.e. interviews) and the direction of data coding and analysis changed. Through the data collection and analysis process, subculture emerged as a pertinent theme to describe the social setting in the pool.

### The Setting

The setting of the current study took place at a health club in Central Florida. The health club offers a wide variety of exercise equipment (e.g. treadmills, elliptical, weights) and group

exercise classes including Latin Cardio, yoga, Master's swimming and water aerobics. These group exercise classes accommodate exercisers at different skill levels, from beginner to advanced. Membership at this particular health club includes approximately 4,000 families.

### Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases. In the first phase, I utilized ethnographic observations to explore the interactions among individuals involved in water aerobics exercise classes. After obtaining IRB approval, I contacted the Senior Aquatics Director via email to explain the purpose of the research study and ask for permission to participate in the water aerobics exercise classes. After gaining permission, the Senior Aquatics Director introduced me to the water aerobics instructor before participating in the class.

I explained to the instructor the purpose of the study and my role as a participant in the class. Before the class, the water aerobics instructor introduced me to the participants. I explained the purpose of the study to participants and mentioned that they can pick up an informed consent form at the conclusion of the class (see Appendix A for copy). If the class participants verbally agreed to the study, I engaged in informal conversations with them before, during and after class. To build rapport with participants, I began conversations asking individuals about their birthplace, college attended and their involvement with the water aerobics class. My conversations with participations also took place in the lobby after class, where some would meet for coffee. These conversations lasted 15 to 30 minutes.

I also engaged in one-on-one conversations with participants as well, which ranged from 5 to 30 minutes. Some conversations were spontaneous, during my personal exercise time, while



others were scheduled intentionally. All of my conversations took place at the health club and were not audio recorded. I asked questions pertaining to participants' involvement in the class such as "How did you become interested in water exercise" and "What do you enjoy about water exercise?" Participants were assigned pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed (e.g. birthplace, college attended).

As a participant, I took part in 6 hour long water fitness classes, which included 2 deep water fitness classes and 4 shallow water fitness classes during the month of March 2013. I continued involvement in the water aerobics class through August of 2013. Water fitness, commonly known as water aerobics, is described as an intermediate fitness class designed to enhance limberness, strength and coordination where both swimmers and non-swimmers are welcome to participate. I composed fieldnotes of my observations immediately following the class. Specifically, I would write down a few keywords in my car before leaving the health club. After traveling 5 minutes to my home, I immediately typed the fieldnotes. Using the keywords as a guide, I filled in the observations that first came to mind, which did not necessarily follow a temporal order. Then, I would read through those observations and fill in additional observations in the exact order that they occurred. Data obtained from the first data collection procedure comprised of 61 single spaced pages of fieldnotes.

Based on the insights gained through participant-observation, I utilized semi-structured interviews to explore these themes further after obtaining IRB approval. Intensive interviewing allows the researcher to obtain rich data from the participants' point of view (Charmaz 2006). In addition, interviewing allows the researcher to guide data collection more so than ethnographic research methods (Charmaz 2006). Because this study utilized ethnographic observations, the

data offered a limited look into a wide range of social processes in the pool setting. Thus, intensive interviewing allowed me to focus my data collection on specific themes obtained through participant-observation.

I contacted the same participants about engaging in face-to-face interviews in the second data collection procedure. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants for this study. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions pertained to how participants felt about their body. Example questions included “Tell me how you feel when you participate in the water aerobics class” and “How do you feel about your body in the pool?” (see Appendix B for copy). The interviews took place at participants’ homes or any location where the participant felt comfortable. At the conclusion of the interview, I composed a memo of my thoughts about the interview. This memo included observations, theory and methodical considerations. The memo also offered possible themes which could be pursued further. Then, interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data collection took place during September through November 2013.

### Study Participants

The sample included a total of 13 seniors, 5 men and 8 women, who participate in a water aerobics exercise class at a health club in Central Florida. The participants ranged in age from 60 – 90 years and a majority are Caucasian. Some participants had experienced injuries such as stroke, arthritis and dislocated disk that prevented them from engaging in other types of exercise. In Table 1 listed below, the names and ages of the core study participants in the class. Some of the ages are approximate given that some participants did not reveal their age in the interview.

Table 1: Names and Ages of Study Participants.

Name	Age
Ruth	81
Mark	81
Sally	70
Cindy	70s
John	70s
Brett	70s
Patti	73
Fiona	73
Gail	63
Martha	66
Mike	80s
Anna	60s
Jackie	70

## Data Coding and Analysis

Data coding procedures utilized initial, in vivo and focused coding techniques. I utilized line-by-line coding to focus on the participants' responses. I reviewed each line in the interview transcript to record action verbs or gerunds (Charmaz 2006). These action verbs or gerunds resembled in vivo codes, or words used in the participants' language to capture the participants' understanding of the setting. For example, some of the in vivo codes during the initial coding phase included needing the exercise and developing good friendships. After the initial coding phase, I compared data obtained from ethnographic observations and interview transcripts. That is, I looked for similar codes or themes mentioned in both the interview transcripts and observations. For example, group members discussed the conversation in the class during the interviews, which also coincided with my observations. Specifically, my observations revealed that conversation occurs throughout the class, but the interviews revealed the norm violations related to the conversation in the class (e.g. talking about politics, complaining). Therefore, the interviews allowed me to further develop the code related to conversation. Following the initial coding phase, I moved into focused coding. Focused coding consisted of the most frequent codes that emerged from the data (Charmaz 2006). One of my most frequent codes that emerged was related to how participants became involved in the class, which was categorized as being an insider, such as their experiences with other exercise classes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Being a Member and Insider

Members within the group share similar experiences with physical activity that guides them towards the water aerobics exercise class. Their experiences reflect difficulty and frustration with other types exercise (e.g. yoga, running) because of their physical limitations (e.g. hip and knee replacements). Anna describes her frustration with her inability to take part in yoga:

I used to do yoga. In that instance, I was mostly aware of my inability. I couldn't stretch or do the same poses that the instructors did and the pool partly because you're concealed by the water. I just do it the best I can and it's ...empowering and feel good is the result. Because when you're in yoga class, you're looking at the mirror and I knew I wasn't doing what the instructor was doing beside the fact that it hurt....There's just everything positive about the water exercise... The stretching in the pool is what we were doing in yoga and I recognize that I do it better in the water... I'm not self-conscious that I may not be doing the way the instructor is.

Group members talked about being unable to take part in other types of exercise because of the deterioration of the body. John notes that your "body wears out" as you get older, while Mike notes that his "body won't respond. I'm past the age of doing those things" (i.e. football, basketball). Thus, group members all experience a common problem. Many talked about "needing to exercise," but the exercise available did not allow them to adjust to their changing physical conditions. Therefore, water aerobics became a solution in a sense that it provides group

members with an exercise that they are capable of doing. For example, Charles comments on how the class influences his physical condition:

I was born with problem feet to begin with and now the darn podiatrist that looked at me 20 years ago said well you got about 20 years before they start breaking down. Well, they're breaking down. I have ankle pain. I have arch area pain. I'd love to be able to go out and walk and do half marathons if not marathons and things like that but I can't....There's that kind of pain involved which is why I like the water aerobics because the low impact on the feet. It's just that they [feet] don't get any worse from the pounding. There's no pounding involved.

The water aerobics class allows individuals to “do their own thing” due to their physical capabilities. That is, some individuals cannot perform the exercise like the instructor suggests, but do not feel awkward in doing so. Unlike other exercise classes where individuals are expected to perform the exercise under the instructor's guidance, individuals are encouraged to perform the exercise as well as they can. Patti comments on the physical problems of other group members:

I do get tickled at them sometimes and we all have different problems. Some people have shoulders and they can't do this and some people have hips and that's an issue, some people have the knees and can't do much or don't feel like doing much....You have to go at your own pace and I think that happens a lot....I know that when I use those dumbbells, I can't use the heavy ones and I've tried and I already know it's just not worth it. So I don't do it. I think it's a lot of levels you know, capability.

Some individuals are more than members and become insiders to the group. The insiders of the group are known as regulars or die-hards who are responsible for maintaining group norms and establishing the class environment. In particular, the water aerobics class provides a social outlet for insiders who share similar challenges with social interaction given their isolation from others. Rose (1962) suggests that a subculture is more likely to develop when older adults are isolated from others and interact more with fellow group members. This appears to be the case in the water aerobics group. Sally comments on her need for interaction with others: “I like to be around people and I said if I didn’t go to water aerobics some days I’d just go for days without seeing anybody but Angie [her daughter]...and I need my fix of people....And that’s just an easy way to get it [doing water aerobics] and comfortable and I think it’s good for me.”

Group members discussed interacting with other group members outside of the class, such as going to lunch or happy hours. Further, their close relationships with co-workers, family and friends seem to disappear as they enter late adulthood. Martha comments on how her relationships have changed: “for the most part nobody works so you don’t have that work contact that you used to have and kids are grown and live out of state and you don’t have that. So this is like a nice camaraderie. It’s really a nice thing to have in your life.”

Thus, the water aerobics group provides members with opportunities to build relationships with others, which diminishes the likelihood of isolation within society. Martha notes that: “I just found that the people here that you come in contact with and we’re very just like friends in the pool. There’s a couple of people that I know socially as a result, but for the most part, it’s just you see them....We don’t know each other’s last names. It’s kind of like a work environment kind of thing but it’s just you have laughs.” Martha indicates that the contact

with fellow water aerobics exercisers allow them to build relationships with each other. In contrast, when these individuals participate in other exercise classes, they feel invisible. Jane comments on the lack of interaction in another exercise class:

Well in (other exercise class) everybody is very serious and they're very young. They're younger and I'm pretty invisible at my age to a young person. They don't want to have interaction, but in the water aerobics everybody is friendly and wants to talk and there is a lot of talking that goes on....Most of the people have become friends, the people that have done it a long time. They've all become friends and friendly. You hear them talking about going to the movies together, go have a lunch together or go do this together.

Group members prefer to have social contact during exercise as opposed to more solitary forms of exercise (e.g. running). The water aerobics class allows them to engage in conversation during the class compared to other types of exercise classes (e.g. yoga) where conversation is considered deviant and rude. Thus, the water aerobics class is a solution to their desire to socialize during the class and interact with others. During one of my conversations with Michelle, the shallow water aerobics instructor, she comments on the need for social interaction:

Michelle talks about the "high rate of depression" among older adults. She says she used to be "miffed at all the conversation" but now it doesn't bother her anymore. She realizes that this class may be the only conversation they may get in a whole day. She says that some people are "moving their jaws more than their limbs." The woman next to her says, for some people the social part is more important than the exercise (fieldnotes 3-4-13).

Likewise, Martha comments on her preference for the social aspect of the class:



I think it's the social aspect of the class [draws her to the class]. I mean when you work on the machines (e.g. treadmill, elliptical, weight machines) and do that kind of thing, it's a solitary type thing. People don't chit-chat in the gym and I understand that. I mean I wouldn't expect them to. But it's that, it's both sides and it doesn't hurt my body like working on [the] machines. I can feel badly afterwards and I never feel badly after swimming.

Therefore, the water aerobics class provides individuals with opportunities to engage in exercise that coincides with their physical capabilities and allows them to feel competent. Further, the class allows individuals to modify the exercises according to their physical needs without feeling uncomfortable or awkward. In addition to the exercise component, the social aspect of the class provides individuals with the necessary social interaction both within and outside of the class. That is, group members are allowed to converse with each other during the class, but also enjoy their company outside of the class. Moreover, many group members did not have much interaction with others before starting the class. Thus, the class provides them with social contact that they may not have gained any other way. As the quotes above illustrate, the water aerobics group offers individuals' the chance to exercise and socialize with fellow group members, which results in being an insider to the group.

### Social Roles

Like other subcultures, the group has established a number of social roles that are crucial to the existence and perpetuation of the group. These social roles are held by individuals who remain committed and involved with the daily functions of the group. In particular, the group has

developed the roles of die-hards/regulars, newcomers, the mayor, men and Mike-buoy as important positions to the operations of the group. Each role within the group pertains to specific behaviors and is acknowledged by others as a position within the group.

### *Die-hards/Regulars*

A few participants (Sally, Anna) have labeled the “regulars” as those who attend the class consistently. As one of the regulars, Patti instantly felt comfortable in the class: “I just started coming and people were outgoing and friendly and made me feel welcomed and it was enjoyable. I looked forward to coming back. I didn’t miss a single day the first year...I look forward to it every moment....You go home, you feel good, you think you’ve done something for the day” (interview).

In contrast, Martha labeled the “die-hards” as individuals who attend the class despite the cold weather. Nonetheless, both labels describe consistent attendance in the class. Anna identifies “30 regulars” in the class, although there are as many as “80 people” who attend the class (interview). In contrast, Martha notes that: “when Samantha [instructor] started the class there were maybe 10 of us tops...But what was great is we were die-hards. We used to come and it’d be so cold...I’d have heavy sweats on and heavy sweatshirt oh my God, running you know, but wouldn’t miss that class for anything.”

Die-hards and regulars describe a high level of commitment to the class and at times may re-arrange their schedule to make sure they attend the class. Mark describes his commitment level: “I enjoy coming....I look forward to coming.... For the exercise part of it and basically for the people that’s there so...I look forward to it. It’s a part of my day. And occasionally I have

things to do and I can't make it but for the most part I try and I put it into my schedule that I have to do this so anything that I have to do between 8 and 11, I arrange to have it done at a later time during the day if I can" (interview).

Gail also talked about refusing other responsibilities so that she could attend the class: "I'll be doing this [the class] until as far as I can. Everyday when I can. You know as much as I can. That's why I don't even want to get a job anymore. It's going to prevent me from coming to my swimming class and I don't want to do that...I know they have classes at like a 6 o'clock, but it's not the same thing because I know everybody here" (interview). The friendly disposition of the regulars or die-hards attracts participants to the group, which encourages new participants to become consistent group members in the future.

### *Newcomers*

Newcomers enter into a new social setting, the water aerobics class, without prior knowledge about the organization of the group, including the norms, rituals and roles. Due to the cohesiveness of the group, newcomers are easily recognized by other group members. Seasoned group members may acknowledge a newcomer by saying "I haven't met you" or "I haven't seen you before" (fieldnotes 3-6-13). Thus, newcomers stand out based on the fact that they do not know the members of the group. Further, the instructor and fellow group members approach newcomers by asking their name. Jane explains the interaction between instructor and newcomer:

One of the instructors, Alice, is so good when she sees somebody new. She'll ask them their names....She automatically does it, 'cause her class is a little smaller and she only

has what 25 [people] or 30 as opposed to somebody who has 40 or 50. But she recognizes a new person and she'll say, 'oh you're new, what's your name?'...But she wants to learn everybody's name....She's very good at that.

Because a majority of the group members attend the class on a regular basis, Alice is able to recognize new class participants. This personal contact seeks to minimize discomfort of being in an unfamiliar social environment and continue the group's existence. That is, individuals who become comfortable in a new environment may be more likely to continue the class. Fellow group members also engage in personal contact with newcomers, which Patti describes: "It doesn't take but one or two [people] to make you feel like you're welcomed and then your attitude reflects that with the others that are already there. So you know you got to come with your own attitude in wanting to be there. They see that. I think that makes a difference..." Therefore, the initial contact with fellow group members is crucial to newcomers continued involvement in the class.

Moreover, newcomers behave differently than seasoned group members and aren't familiar with the artifacts (e.g. pool noodles and barbells), which causes them to be identified as newcomers. For example, in the deep water aerobics class, group members utilize a buoyancy belt, which allows them to exercise while staying afloat. Newcomers may be unaware of how the buoyancy belt should be worn around the body.

During an exercise, Alice asks a participant if this is the first time she has been to class. She tells Alice that she hasn't been to class in a year. Alice tells her that her belt needs to be tightened. She tells the new participant to come over to the shallow end so that Alice can fix it for her (fieldnotes 8-1-13).

A loose buoyancy belt is one of the indicators that an individual is a newcomer to the group. Even though this particular individual has attended the class before, she may have forgotten the artifacts of the group, particularly, how to use the buoyancy belts. The instructor recognizes the newcomer and becomes an agent of socialization as she assists her with her belt. Fellow group members also become agents of socialization related to using a buoyancy belt, “Brett tells me to make sure that my belt is tight or it will ride up to my armpits” (fieldnotes 3-7-13). Thus, both the instructor and members of the class socialize newcomers in regards to how to use the buoyancy belt.

The group socializes newcomers in terms of how to perform the exercises in the class. Patti describes her experience of being new to the class: “I felt a little stupid [being new to the class] sometimes because I didn’t know exactly what they were saying and how to do that, but it didn’t take very long. And people are always willing to show you and help you.” Group members exhibit altruistic behavior to allow newcomers to benefit from exercise and engage in the activities of the group. Patti’s quote suggests that the group doesn’t allow an individual to be a newcomer very long. Thus, the newcomer is quickly socialized into the group, enhancing the individual’s comfort level in a new setting. However, Gail notes that veteran group members also inquire about the exercises implying that this behavior is not only exhibited by newcomers:

We had a new lady today and she asked me what should I...be doing? I said well the teacher’s not here yet, Michelle... she’ll tell you what to do. It was her first time here and she liked it... She said she was coming back. She [new participant was] introduced to everybody... When she didn’t know what to do or you don’t hear Michelle, you explain it to her or somebody else would. There’s always somebody that you know, even me if I

don't hear Michelle, 'cause sometimes everybody's talking and there's so many and I [ask] 'what are we doing now? Oh, we're mountain climbing' [name of exercise]... everybody like help each other if you don't know, which is great.

Gail explains the group interactions with a newcomer. The newcomer approached a veteran group member, Gail, who explained the organization of the class. Fellow group members became involved with the newcomers socialization by describing the exercise. Although veteran group members also inquire about the exercises, the difference is related to socialization. Veteran group members have been socialized previously regarding the exercises, whereas newcomers aren't familiar with the exercises. The socialization process regarding how to perform the exercises appears to be effective in minimizing discomfort. In the example above, the newcomer enjoyed the class enough to continue her involvement. Thus, socialization processes are important to continue the group's existence given that individuals attend more regularly.

Further, newcomers are invited to engage in social activities with fellow group members, illustrated by Gail's quote:

...They [people in the class] invite you places. The first time, the ladies, say Cindy, 'oh we're going out to lunch if you care to join us.' That make[s] me feel good because I don't know these ladies... I met them here [in the class]. And this is like a week after I [attended the class], which is really nice.

Unlike other groups where newcomers are excluded from the activities of veteran group members, the water aerobics group demonstrates inclusive group boundaries. That is, newcomers are quickly invited to socialize with fellow group members outside of the class. Through these social activities, newcomers become acclimated to the group, which eases their discomfort in a

new social setting. Further, these social activities build solidarity among newcomers and veteran group members. In addition to building cohesiveness in the group, social activities may allow newcomers to learn the operations of the group (e.g. norms, roles). Therefore, these activities may be associated with socialization processes.

### *The Mayor*

The mayor emerges as a social role with a number of responsibilities including greeting newcomers, maintaining the hugging ritual and managing the class environment. One group member holds the position of the mayor, Ruth, who is an 11 year veteran of the shallow water aerobics class. Ruth has experienced a number of health conditions including a stroke, cancer and two knee replacements (interview). Unlike some groups where health problems may be associated with lowered status, individuals with health problems possess more status within the group. Thus, Ruth experiences higher status within the group compared to other group members, which Martha describes:

...I'm in very good health for someone my age [66 years old]... and Ruth is just the sweetest soul on the face of the Earth and she's been through really bad stuff and other people too and so you just have to admire that. They're very good role models and it's nice to have them around. Very lovely people.

Given Ruth's elevated status within the group, she plays an important role in the organization of the group. She is instrumental in welcoming newcomers to the group. Ruth notes, "...any new person who comes to the pool, I try to go over to them, introduce myself and welcome them to the pool....I think they call me the mayor....I didn't realize it, but I heard

Elizabeth talking one time and she said that I was the first one that welcomed them (Elizabeth and Brett, husband and wife) to the class and they felt accepted. And so they continued...” Thus, Ruth becomes a public figure in a sense that she is the first to greet the newcomers and contributes to their feelings of acceptance within the group. In addition, her contact with the newcomers influences their continued involvement with the class. Therefore, Ruth’s role as the mayor is associated with the perpetuation of the group. That is, the group exists because of Ruth’s contact with newcomers. Her interactions with newcomers contribute to the possibility of adding more members to the group. In the example above, Ruth’s interactions with Elizabeth and Brett led to their increased attendance in the class.

Many of the other group members commented on Ruth’s role in the class including Martha: “Well, first of all Ruth comes right up to you and wants to know your name and what your deal is, you know. She makes sure everybody else knows and that’s lovely...” Therefore, Ruth is a gatekeeper to the group. She makes the initial contact with newcomers, but also informs veteran group members about the newcomers in the group. Ruth begins to initiate contact between newcomers and veteran group members, contributing to the overall cohesiveness of the group. That is, newcomers and veteran group members become more familiar with each other, which may also lead to closer relationships within the group.

In addition to greeting newcomers, Ruth maintains a hugging ritual within the group, which is described in the section about social rituals. To explain the hugging ritual briefly, it occurs at the beginning of each class as a way to welcome group members in the pool.

In addition to the hugging ritual, Ruth manages the class environment by minimizing the conversation in the class. Ruth describes how she manages the class:



I tell them [group members] they're very rude and that they should be quiet and listen to Michelle. I said because Michelle is here on her own time. She doesn't get paid much. She's trying to work with you and you ought to have the respect to work right with her....Sometimes I just say, 'shut up!' I don't know whether my voice doesn't carry very far and so some of them on other side of the pool still yap away.

Ruth takes the role of an authoritative figure as she attempts to manage the class environment. She sympathizes with the instructor, Michelle, who is trying to work with group members and improve their fitness level. In some cases, Ruth takes a more aggressive approach, yelling at the class to minimize the talking. From Ruth's perspective, she is somewhat unsuccessful in managing the class environment considering some group members continue their conversations. However, Martha, another group member, feels that Ruth's approach is successful in managing the class environment:

Ruth will yell at everybody, 'Michelle's trying to teach here,' 'cause Ruth used to be a teacher. [There are] a lot of ex-teachers in there [the class]. You know they got a certain attitude... There's something about teachers. It never goes away...But here's the thing the people that say it, they can say it. They can yell at us and they can get away with it. They don't yell, but Ruth will be very stern with us. And if Ruth tells us to be quiet, be quiet.

Martha describes Ruth's elevated status in the group as a former teacher who has the authority to enforce the rules of the class. Ruth's stern approach is designed to encourage conformity to the rule of listening to the instructor. In the pool, Ruth takes on a role similar to an

instructor, who communicates the expectations of the class. Therefore, Ruth's identity as a former teacher carries into the pool, which becomes a basis of her interactions with others.

### *Men*

The water aerobics subculture remains a group dominated by women, even though men do participate in the class. As one of the few men in the class, Mark recalled:

This morning there were only two men and about thirty women. We used to have...Andrew but he passed, Scott and we have a few men that come and go, but John is always there and I'm always there and we had Brett, but Brett got injured... We have Mike and Mike has been sick lately so he hasn't been there for what a month and a half... We've basically only have about four men usually. And all of us are on the side closest to the deep end.

Mark describes the disproportionate number of men who attend the class. To navigate a new setting where they are the minority, the men remain physically close with one another, staying at one end of the pool. Therefore, the pool setting appears to be segregated according to gender, where the men remain close to the deep end and the women are located towards the shallow end. In addition, the male group members tend to be transient as they come and go within this setting due to health issues. The lack of men in the class appears to be a barrier to increasing the number of male participants. David notes, "I would like to see more [men in the class]... Do you feel comfortable being in there with all the ladies and the conversation? No I don't. And there's a lot of men that kind of stick with the men." David suggests that the men

experience discomfort being in a female dominated environment. To minimize their discomfort, the men tend to associate with other men in the pool.

Even though the male group members interact with one another, the women will interact with the men in some situations. Martha describes these interactions: "... We kid them [the men] a lot. Well, when there's like 25 women and 5 guys they're going to pay the price. I mean they're going to get nailed on anything... It's like you're here, that's reason enough to give you a shot. You're going to get it and they know it..." Martha's quote suggests that the women control interactions between the men and women in the pool. As women initiate the teasing, they begin to display power within a female dominated setting. Teasing is an attempt to regulate how men and women interact with one another in the pool. Specifically, teasing controls what the men say to the women in the pool to make sure it is in line with the norms of the group. Martha describes an example of how the women control the men in the pool:

The guys are outnumbered and they know it so they're not going to be stupid. Or if they are, they're going to pay the price. We'll tell them what an idiot they are. We don't pull any punches. There's enough of us who are very vocal. They [the men] try to make a sarcastic remark or make fun of some [thing]... And then they just open up the door and it all comes at them. I'm not the only [one], every woman in the class will just go... 'oh yeah you're Robert Redford' or something like that. They'll just give it right back... They [men] don't mess with us [women] too much 'cause you know we've all been around the block...

The outspoken women band together in the pool exhibiting solidarity among one another. That is, the women identify with each other and are willing to speak up on other group members'

behalf. They are quick to verbalize a norm violation, which is utilized as a sanction to manage the male behavior in the pool. The remarks from several women are an attempt to discourage norm violations, such as making a sarcastic remark. This appears to be an effective strategy given that men refrain from these remarks. Thus, women's behaviors (e.g. verbal remarks, teasing) are a mechanism of social control within the pool. That is, women have the power to make the men look foolish. Therefore, the men are put in an unfamiliar position in the pool, as inferior, stripping them of their masculinity.

Even though women attempt to control men's behaviors towards them, they fall short in managing men's behaviors towards other men. Sally described an incident among two male group members in the class:

...Sometimes they're [men] just funny. They're just like little boys and they like the pretty girls and you can tell they're looking at [them]. So, I get a kick out of them. Well, they don't try to show it, but you can tell...Like Gail, she's got such a nice figure and Brett and John like to look at her... Oh, they'll say something to each other. They don't think you can hear them, but sometimes you can... I think maybe some women might think that that's sexual harassment, but I don't...

Sally normalizes male behavior within the pool as they gaze at the women. Because men "naturally" look at attractive women, their behavior is deemed as acceptable. Sally endorses the idea that "boys will be boys," which validates that this behavior does not need to be controlled. Even though some women may identify this behavior as inappropriate the men avoid sanctions by engaging in conversations with one another. The men regain their masculinity and power in a

female dominated space by objectifying women. That is, women are referred to as objects, which is in line with the traditional patriarchal view of women in society.

Within this social environment, Martha identifies different types of men that interact with the women:

Some of them love the ladies you know and they're kind of smoosy and that kind of Romeo kind of guy and then there's just guys that are very pleasant and want to talk.

They'll talk sports with you if you have that interest or they like to make jokes... They like to tell you jokes... but they're very respectful and there's nothing off-putting about them.

The different types of men hold different positions within the class. The "Romeo kind of guy" seizes the opportunity to impress the female group members. They may be boisterous in their efforts, offering compliments to women. David may be considered a "Romeo kind of guy," illustrated by his comment: "I'm always talking to a lady or to a guy, probably my teacher background, done all my life... I feel comfortable. And compliment. People like compliments... [Example of a compliment]... 'ooh you got that new bathing suit on today'... Make things fun..." David, along with the other "Romeos," is friendly with the women in order to gain their approval.

The men who like to talk sports or make jokes contribute to the upbeat, cheerful atmosphere of the class. John and Charles can be categorized as this type of men in the class. As a professional football fan, John notes, "there are a few [women] that are into sports and my team (name of professional football team). We'll talk a lot about that." The women learn that talking about sports facilitate their conversation with the men. As Jane explains, "I grew up with

four big brothers so I was always into sports... I can carry on my side of the conversation with most men.” Thus, women’s knowledge about sports allows them to build a relationship with the men in the class.

Charles describes himself as a “born kidder” and mentions: “I kid around with the ones [women] I can kid around with.” Charles, along with other men who make jokes, contributes to the cheerful environment in the pool. However, Charles indicates that his interactions with both men and women in the pool remains centered on humor: “Now, I wouldn’t object to socializing but then again [I’ve] kind of been an anti-social individual after my comedy.” Charles indicates that his comedy is the basis for his interactions with others.

Despite these different types of men, Martha suggests that the men have similar reasons for attending the class:

My thoughts is for the most part they come for the social aspect of the (health club)... They have coffee before they come in [to the class]. They have coffee when they get out. I think it’s part of their social life to be honest with you... ‘Cause they don’t take what we do serious you know they’re not like killing themselves in there [the pool] for the most part.

This quote illustrates that the male role within the group is to socialize with other group members and build cohesiveness by engaging in coffee and conversation before and after the class. In addition, the men converse within the pool, rather than pushing their physical limits as Martha suggests. Further, older men may not have a large social network outside of their spouse and the class provides them with much needed social interaction. However, socializing is considered a female activity. That is, women are perceived as engaging in conversation and

focus on building relationships rather than improving their fitness level. In contrast, men tend to be focused on adhering to their fitness routines. Therefore, the men take on a female role within the class, fitting into the social environment. Given that the water aerobics class is a female dominated environment, the men may socialize to conform to the expectations of the female group members. They may not take the exercise seriously because of the belief that women engage in exercise for the social aspect.

### *Mike-buoy*

Mike-buoy remains a controversial figure in some respects, but his main role within the group pertains to social contact with fellow group members. He earned his name, Mike-buoy, because of his behavior within the pool as Ruth describes: “We call him Mike –buoy because he stands like a buoy and we have to run around [him].” Ruth suggests that Mike engages in conversation instead of exercising, which could be irritating to fellow group members. Further, standing and talking may be a norm violation considering the class is directed towards improving physical fitness.

Nonetheless, Mike continues to talk in the class: “I pretty much talk in all the classes to the consternation of the deep water instructors. It [talking] helps pass the time if anything and plus usually [I] talk to people that have the same view that I have and that...is informative.” Mike appears to challenge the norm related to the conversation in the class given that his behavior is disruptive to the class environment according to the instructors. However, he views conversation in a positive light particularly to pass the time and educate himself and others. Further, Mike-buoy’s conversation may hinder Ruth’s efforts to decrease the talking in the class.

Mike-buoy encourages social interaction among group members, but at the same time, his interaction with others may be considered disruptive in the class.

Mike-buoy is known by other group members as creating political divisions within the group. As a liberal, Anna notes that he has “bumped heads with the other real conservative members of the class.” Mike-buoy comments on the conflict among group members, particularly the men in the class:

One [man] is a complete ass hole. Make that two [men] are complete ass holes. I'm sorry. Make it three. And I talk with the other one. Two of them are completely brain-dead. It's a waste of time talking to them...They don't think. They get all their news from Fox News. That...to me is a disgrace. They probably don't read a book, barely read a newspaper and get all their news from Fox News and just repeat what Fox News tells them and I can't handle that.

Mike-buoy suggests that he experiences strained relationships with the men in the class. These strained relationships disrupt the cohesiveness of the group and create divisions among members based on their political views. His quote suggests that the liberal members prefer not to interact with the conservative members of the class. Moreover, group members' political views become a basis to stereotype others in the group. In this case, Mike-buoy stereotypes the conservative men as misinformed, receiving their news from one news source, Fox News. Therefore, Mike remains deviant in a sense that he threatens the group's existence by creating political divisions and stereotyping members. That is, stereotyping members and creating political divisions may cause individuals to discontinue the class. Without members, the group ceases to exist. In contrast, Ruth's role as the mayor enhances cohesiveness among all group



members. Ruth binds the group together by integrating new members and assisting their transition into the group. Other group members also assist their transition by inviting newcomers to social activities.

Despite Mike's strained relationships with the men, he maintains good relationships with the women. Jane and Patti commented on their conservative viewpoints, but they both remain friends with Mike-buoy. Patti mentioned: "I've become good friends with Mike... He's an interesting character, you know; had a varied background; intelligent man and totally different from me in the political aspect of life." Therefore, the female group members maintain closer relations with Mike compared to the men in the class. While the men appear to be divided based on their political views, the women are able to set aside their political differences encouraging cohesion among the group. Martha comments on her relationship with Mike:

It's funny like big Mike, he's a cantankerous old man, but I adore him because I know a lot of guys like him... He likes to...intellectually poke you and he usually has the question of the day and he wants to see what I have to say about the question of the day. And inevitably we don't agree at all. But, we agree to disagree. Every once in a while I can get him kind of pissed off at me, but hey you asked. I'm telling you and I think that's why Mike and I get along is 'cause I am always honest with him in what I feel...

Martha's quote suggests that Mike creates tension among the group despite her close relationship with him. The question of the day may be a way to create tension, but may also improve relations among group members with similar viewpoints. Martha indicates that her close relationship with Mike stems from her honesty with him.

Although the women tend to have better relationships with Mike-buoy compared to the men, David maintains a close relationship with Mike. David describes an incident with Mike in the locker room:

...There's always people spinning it off [bathing suits to dry them] so I saw the opportunity. I grabbed my bathing suit for the first time went out put it in. I came back and he [Mike] yelled at me for defying mother nature leaving that shower on for the 30 seconds I was gone... Even when I shower, I don't like to shower on me while I soap up 'cause it just washes it off. I like to lather and soap up good then put the shower [on me], anybody that's a water saver it's me. And I went out that time and Mike, instead of getting angry with him I said, 'I don't do this all the time, honest.' I said, 'I just forgot... I was wrong. I'll make sure I shut it off now.' The next day he looked at me he said, 'gee, I see you shut it off...' I could have got angry at him and I laughed it off. So we're still very good friends...

According to Goffman (1959), individuals engage in impression management where they attempt to influence others' perceptions of themselves through their behaviors. David engages in impression management during this incident with Mike. First of all, David identifies himself as a water saver and explains that he does not always leave the water on in the shower. David seeks to change Mike's negative perception of him being wasteful. Further, David saves face by admitting that he was wrong to leave the water on.

In some respects, the locker room may be considered a back region considering that it is separated from the exercise performance (Goffman 1959). The locker room is a location where an audience is not present and group members can engage in interaction that may not be

acceptable during the exercise performance. In this case, Mike's confrontational behavior may not be an acceptable form of interaction in the pool. Moreover, Mike exhibits social control as he influences David's behavior in the locker room (i.e. turning the water off in the shower). Despite this incident, David suggests that he remains good friends with Mike, illustrating the strength of their relationship. Moreover, David appears to be one of the few men who remain close with Mike, considering most men do not agree with him politically.

In summary, individuals within the water aerobics group hold different positions that are acknowledged by fellow group members. Newcomers are socialized by veteran group members who encourage their consistent attendance in the class. The die-hards or regulars display a higher level of commitment to the group compared to other members and contribute to the perpetuation of the group. Ruth, as the mayor, is instrumental in welcoming group members, maintaining the hugging ritual and managing the class environment. Mike-buoy socializes with group members as do the other men in the class. In addition, the men contribute to the upbeat atmosphere of the group even though they are the targets of teasing by the women. Like other subcultures, the water aerobics group allocates different responsibilities to members of the group. These different responsibilities are known by fellow group members who ensure the daily functioning of the group.

### Creating an Image

Like other subcultures, the water aerobics group creates an image that is displayed to both group members and non-members alike. The group's image entails each member's choice of dress as well as the artifacts or equipment utilized within the pool. These two elements (i.e.

dress and equipment) become central to interactions with group members, while creating distance with non-group members. That is, group members identify group members by their dress, like Fiona suggests: "...There's two ladies there...I call them the wrong name. It's Beverly or Martha. Martha told me this morning she always has a hat with the visor white or black...." (interview).

Further, group members tend to wear swimsuits, "hats, sunglasses, shirts and visors" (fieldnotes 1-16-13), as well as water shoes and swim tights (Anna interview). The attire worn by water aerobics group members distances themselves from other exercisers at the health club. Exercisers are not seen in swimsuits, while swimmers do not wear sunglasses, hats or shirts when they engage in exercise. Their attire becomes a symbol to maintain group boundaries. That is, individuals wearing the typical attire (i.e. swimsuits, hats, sunglasses) are identified as members of the group by insiders and outsiders at the health club.

Bathing suits become symbolic extensions of the self and are often the focus of attention: "I stand up waiting for the class to start. Jackie arrives with a warm-up jacket on...She tells me she has her suit on, a green swimsuit and opens her jacket to show me" (fieldnotes 5-1-13). In this case, the bathing suit is symbolic in a sense that it represents a public identity that is displayed to others to indicate membership into the water aerobics group. Jackie indicates that her bathing suit is a source of pride as she presents herself a certain way, as a member of the group. Similarly, Sally describes wearing bathing suits:

I think we all wear one piece bathing suits. They're the most comfortable...We all try to... look as nice as we possibly can...If you've got something new on, they'll say 'oh that's cute, where'd you get that' and if you got to cover up, 'oh that's cute'...It's a place

to dress up not fancy and try to look your best...But, I don't think anybody really looks very sloppy. I think they're a nice group of women that look real nice

Sally suggests that all group members wear similar outfits, particularly, one piece bathing suits that identify members of the group. Further, bathing suits enhance one's self presentation, given that it is associated with an attractive appearance. Group members' attractive appearance is validated through compliments by fellow members, making them visible within the setting. Thus, group members interact with one another based on their attire in the pool, while challenging the invisibility of older adults within society. Further, Sally's quote demonstrates a favorable perception of fellow group members in relation to their appearance. Thus, water aerobics group members exhibit in-group bias where they view themselves as superior to non-group members.

According to Simmel (1957), fashion allows individuals' to adapt to the social environment and imitate those around them. Individuals imitate the dress of other group members, wearing bathing suits, hats and visors. Sally notes: "You see the other women what they've got on and you think well, I can't look any worser or any better than them... We're all in the same boat, so no I feel absolutely not self-conscious at all...I'd feel more self-conscious...if I was at a pool party with a bunch of pretty people." Because women wear the same clothing, they feel comfortable in this environment. However, this quote also suggests that they feel out of place due to their aging appearance. That is, beauty may be associated with youthfulness, while aging people remain out of place due to the decline of their physical appearance.

Given that women tend to wear one piece bathing suits, Gail takes into account the audience at the pool: "...I have bikinis at home. I don't wear them here... I feel self-conscious

wearing them here because there's a lot of older people too around me." Thus, individuals conform to the dress code of the pool wearing one piece bathing suits. Gail modifies her dress because of the setting, a public pool and the reference group, older adults. However, in the privacy of her own pool, she modifies her dress, wearing bikinis.

Although group members tend to dress the same, wearing bathing suits, hats and t-shirts, they also exercise individuality. For example, Sally notes: "I think we try to wear different swimsuits different days just for a little change and some of the women wear cute flowers in their hats." Thus, the colors and patterns on their clothing express their uniqueness, allowing them to stand out in the group, but still express group identity.

### *Artifacts*

Pool noodles are commonly used in the shallow water aerobics class as a flotation device. Noodles are made of foam, vary in diameter and color. They are utilized before the class begins as participants engage in conversation with one another: "the water exercise participants stream in one by one grabbing a noodle or a barbell as they get into the water. Many floating with noodles making small talk" (fieldnotes 1-16-13). During the exercise, noodles are placed between the legs or across the stomach (fieldnotes). Even though noodles are primarily used as a flotation device, Ruth describes her fear when using a noodle: "The only time I'm afraid is when I get on a noodle and somebody jostles me or something and I start to lose my balance and I have to overcompensate..." (interview). In contrast, Gail, a non-swimmer, describes noodles as contributing to her feelings of safety: "As long as I have the belt or I have a noodle I feel pretty safe...Like in my pool at home if I'm by myself I don't go in the deep water 'cause I'm afraid

the noodle might break in half or something... You think all kinds of... weird things I guess. But over here, there's always so many people around. I don't have any fear in here" (interview).

Therefore, individuals attach different meanings to pool noodles. For Ruth who has fallen several times, the noodle is a reminder about her balance instability. However, Gail perceives that the noodle negates her limitations of being a non-swimmer, allowing her to move anywhere in the pool.

Barbells are another device commonly used in the pool, which are similar to barbells used in other exercise regimes (e.g. weight lifting). Barbells, also known as dumbbells, are made of foam and vary in resistance. Michelle, the shallow water fitness instructor describes this:

"Michelle tells the class to grab dumbbells. Michelle tells me that there are three types of dumbbells according to resistance... The dumbbells with the lowest resistance are in the shape of triangles, the circular dumbbells with moderate resistance are white and the highest resistance are blue..." (fieldnotes 3-4-13).

Barbells are used in both the shallow and deep water classes, but one participant, Mark, is distinguished by his barbells. Mark explains that he brings his own barbells: "the yellow and the blue weights that I have are mine and they're the heaviest that I could buy" (interview).

According to Mark, barbells become representative of pushing his physical limits, which separates him from the group:

They [other exercise participants] do the weights, but it's a little too easy. A lot of the ladies generally aren't strong enough to push those water weights under water, see and I have the very heaviest water weights that you can get. And so most of the people, even

men can't push my water weights down. So, so it's more of a emphasis on you kind of pushing yourself a little bit...That's what they want to just keep a certain level, fine.

Mark appears to stereotype those who lift lighter weights as limiting themselves physically or not pushing their physical limits. Thus, a division appears to exist between those with more physical capabilities (i.e. strength) and those with less physical abilities. Mark appears to view himself more favorably compared to other participants based on his superior physical capabilities and exercise intensity.

Group members utilize pool noodles and barbells, which distinguish them from other individuals in the pool, who do not utilize these items. Thus, these items become central to group membership. Further, pool noodles provide added meaning to members. In Ruth's case, pool noodles provide discomfort because of her physical challenges of falling. However, Gail notes that pool noodles allow her to move throughout the pool without restriction. These examples illustrate that members attach different meanings to the group's material culture (i.e. pool noodles and barbells). Further, barbells are utilized in a way that creates divisions within the group, separating individuals by their physical capabilities. Even though group members can engage in the exercise to the best of their ability and modify the exercise, Mark's example suggests that individuals with more physical strength are valued within the group.

## Group Norms and Norm Violations

### *Physical Contact*

The pool remains an intimate environment where bodily contact is likely to occur. Class members exercise in close proximity and frequently pass back and forth during the activity.



Given that group members do not stay stationary throughout the class, they will likely touch others and as Jane describes:

You hear a lot of ‘excuse me’ when we’re moving around a lot and somebody bumps hands. The thing about it is bumping into each other in the water doesn’t hurt ‘cause...there’s no impact so it’s more you know invading your space. I’ve kicked them [other class members], brushed against them, that kind of thing...Everybody has. If you do it very long... it’s bound to happen.

Like Jane, Anna commented on the likelihood of physical contact:

I think we’re like human dodge cars or bumper cars or a pinball game where you bump into each other. There is no such thing as physical space...You’re gonna elbow somebody or kick ‘em and say ‘oops sorry’ and no problem. Michelle [instructor] says forward movers are responsible for all collisions...It makes it a more relaxed atmosphere instead of people being protective of their private space. There’s just no way to be protective of private space in a crowded pool where everybody’s kicking at a different rhythm.

As these two quotes illustrate, physical contact is inevitable during the water aerobics class. Personal space is non-existent, but group members are not bothered by this reality. They acknowledge the invasion of personal space (e.g. oops sorry, excuse me), but this does not hinder the exercise routine or to their relations with fellow group members. Physical contact in the water does not cause pain as members continue to exercise after their space has been invaded. Further, none of the group members have expressed harsh feelings related to frequent physical contact in the pool. Therefore, group members accept the frequent norm violation of the invasion

of personal space. Further, the instructor downplays physical contact in the pool minimizing potential embarrassment for those who violate the norm. Therefore, the group does not implement negative sanctions to encourage the avoidance of physical contact (e.g. criticism, ostracism). Instead, the invasion of personal space is viewed as an everyday occurrence.

Martha illustrates a specific incident related to physical contact in the pool:

Like today we were...two of the girls we go to the middle and back [in the pool]... Well, they kept going all the way [to the other side of the pool] and then Mark got pushed into my lane and I'm pushing him back 'cause it's Mark. And then Samantha's [the instructor] like what is going on here and we're like they're going back and forth and we don't have enough room. We're like little kids. I mean it's ridiculous...

This type of physical contact violates a norm because group members did not follow the directions of the instructor. Thus, these individuals challenge the instructor's authority, similar to those who try to take over the teaching aspect of the class, which is another norm violation. This norm violation inhibits group members' ability to follow the exercise routine and improve their physical fitness. Because the women did not follow the directions, Mark becomes caught in this norm violation and invades Martha's personal space. In a sense, Mark is an innocent bystander who is influenced by the behaviors of other group members. Despite this, Martha responds by retaliating, pushing Mark back into his lane. The women who were not following directions were not sanctioned in any way. Martha may not respond this way if the individual pushed in her lane was another female group member. Thus, this quote seems to illustrate the interesting gender dynamics regarding norm violations.

### *Social Contact*

As previously mentioned, many of the group members participate in the water aerobics class to socialize and interact with others. Group members engage in conversation during the exercise, which is tolerated by the instructors. The class is a social outlet for individuals who become insiders to the group. Thus, conversation during exercise is considered normative behavior, illustrated by Jane's quote: "I think it's good that everybody talks." Unlike other exercise classes, where talking to others is considered disruptive, socializing in water aerobics is encouraged. Mark prefers to engage in conversation in the pool:

I don't have any objection to it [talking]. It's a good opportunity for people to have a very good relationship... I think that's what makes the class a lot friendlier. I see the people work out in workout rooms and they don't have anything to say. All they're doing is just working out with their body and I think that this is why the people who do go to water aerobics is...because they like that [talking]. And the instructors don't have any problem as long as you're pretty much working out and doing the things. Michelle never says anything very much...

The water aerobics group experiences solidarity based on their interaction with other members in the pool. They approach exercise in similar ways, as an opportunity to improve physical fitness and build relationships with fellow group members. However, this also distances themselves from those who exercise in the workout rooms. More specifically, water aerobic members seek to engage in exercise and conversation, whereas other individuals prefer only to exercise their bodies. This different approach to exercise distinguishes the water aerobics group from other exercisers at the health club. Mark appears to stereotype individuals in the workout

rooms as “not having anything to say,” which may be an attempt to create distance between water aerobics group members and other exercisers. Many of the group members do not associate with other exercisers given that they only take part in water aerobics.

Mark alludes to the norm violations that may occur related to the conversation in the class. Particularly, if individuals are exercising while they engage in conversation, the instructors will tolerate the behavior. However, many group members recognize that norm violations do occur. For example, Patti expresses her dissatisfaction when people talk during the class:

The only time it [talking] bothers me is if I can't hear the instructor... As long as you hear them [instructor]...you can do what you want. I don't care. Everybody wants to chat a little bit. That's part of life. If they get loud, you might wish that they tone it down, but that's not normally the case...I don't like when somebody tries to take over the class. But, I don't mind somebody that's funny and makes comments and things like that. It's just part of enjoyment, life....

Even though conversation is welcomed in the class, conversation can hinder the exercise routine given that some members cannot hear the instructor. In this case, conversational norms are violated. When conversation occurs in this situation, group members are deprived of their ability to exercise and improve their physical fitness. Group members prefer to socialize while exercising, rather than only engaging in conversation. Thus, this norm violation deviates from group members' reasons for participating in the class. Further, Patti mentions that group members who try to teach the class also violate conversational norms. Particularly, these individuals overstep their boundaries and take on the identity of an instructor rather than a group

member. A few humorous comments are considered acceptable, but too much commentary related to teaching the class is not.

Given that norm violations occur related to the conversation in the class, the group is forced to deal with those who deviate from the norm. In most cases, group members tend to ignore individuals who deviate from the norm after failed attempted to change their behavior.

Jane commented:

And then you got one person at the other end of the pool [Jackie] and for some reason thinks the instructor does not know how to count... And that bothers me. That bothers me more than the chatter... At least they're talking to each other. But the other end is going so loud and is always a beat ahead... I want to drown her. At that moment. I don't mean I really want to drown her, but I mean at that moment I'd like to say something. And I have turned and said 'stop it'... She hasn't heard me, but everybody else has and said 'yeah.' But then I decided if I ignore her, it'll go away. But, it has not gone away. I mean she's been doing that since I've been in there.

According to Jane, conversation among other group members is acceptable. However, Jackie does not engage in conversation with others, which results in a norm violation. Jackie resists the norms of the pool by taking on the role as an instructor role and counting during the exercises. Her behavior is not in line with her responsibilities as a group member, which results contention among other members in the class. Jane attempted to address this issue to encourage compliance to conversational norms. Other group members agree with this norm violation, but Jane's efforts fall short in changing Jackie's behavior. Because of these failed attempts, Jane

resorts to ignoring Jackie's behavior. Ignoring this norm violation appears to be ineffective given that Jackie continues to count throughout the class.

### *Complaining*

Group members discussed their dissatisfaction with group members who complain or hold a negative attitude, which is categorized as a norm violation. Particularly, some group members complain during the summer months when a swimming program for young children occurs at the same time as the water aerobics class. Gail recalls a conversation with another group member:

...There's a lady that used to come here and she doesn't come here anymore because of the kids. She just can't stand the kids...One day I told her I said, 'oh my God... kids bother you that much?' She said 'yeah. They bother me. They shouldn't have these kids.' I said 'they're trying to survive' [by learning how to swim]. She said, 'why can't they use the little pool'... I said that's not big enough to teach them I guess. I don't know. And she hasn't come anymore. When the kids start, she don't come. She comes back once in a while....She knows there's no kids around... She'll come back and she'll do a couple weeks and then when the kids start coming again, she won't come back again. Either that or if she comes and the kids are here, she'll go all the way at the end at the deep water, all the way over there. She'll stay over there by herself. I said to each its own right I guess.

Group members who complain challenge the positive atmosphere of the class. They tend to attend the class less frequently and display lower levels of commitment compared to the regulars. In this example, the group member does not attend the class when the kids are learning

how to swim. However, the regulars continue to attend the class and are not bothered by the kids screaming in the pool. Further, this particular group member appears to ostracize herself by separating physically from the group. That is, she remains in the deep end, the farthest point from the kids, while the class occurs in the shallow end of the pool.

Martha also talked about group members who hold a negative attitude in the class:

There's just people that have a positive attitude and there's people that have a negative attitude and it's just how they approach life and I prefer the positive... I find the negative ...wears you down. But that's kind of how people are and at our age group they're not going to change...Just because they have a negative approach doesn't make them a bad person or not somebody you can have a conversation with...It gets tedious after a while... You know, 'oh it's [the water] cold,' ... 'I don't like the kids screaming.' Geez, you know, just get in the water. Do your thing and go home. I mean this isn't rocket science here, but I know for people this is just how they approach things. And I've learned so many things are just out of your control. Just let it go. Let's just move on.

Martha identifies two different groups in the class, group members who have a positive attitude and members who have a negative attitude. She identifies herself as being positive, but does not seem to exclude these people from the group. She implies that she does have conversations with negative people in the class, even though she mentions that it can be tedious. Although she doesn't appear to exclude these group members, she does generalize older people. As one of the younger group members at 66, she views older people as being slow to change their ideas, but appears to accept this.

### *Talking about Politics*

Of all the topics discussed in the pool, politics is considered taboo, especially since the last political election. The men were more likely to violate this norm in the pool, as Anna described:

The last election about did in that group though. ‘Cause they [the men] couldn’t not talk politics. They didn’t have enough common issues. Women do, I think, you know whether you’re talking about your kids or your family situations or whatever. But men... don’t like the same sports, so they couldn’t relate as well...

The last political election created divisions within the group, particularly among the men in the class. Anna indicates that the men struggled to relate to each other based on their different political views and interests in sports. According to Anna, the women do not struggle connecting with others because of their common family experiences. Anna suggests that the women tend to be a cohesive unit because of their shared experiences, while the men remain distant because of their lack of common interests. Even though very few men occupy the class, their distant relationships interfere with the cohesiveness of the entire group. Anna indicates that the political differences among group members may have escalated to a point where social interaction became non-existent. For example, Anna explains an incident with Brett, who is identified as holding conservative political views:

We have some [men] who are politically passionate mindset that is not compatible with mine. And one of them [Brett] wouldn’t talk to anybody after the last election. He was so angry and he knew from my previous involvement that I was not on the same page he was and... even though he kept coming to class he ...avoided talking to anybody...



Brett refuses to engage in social interaction with the group because of their different political views. Like some of the men in the class, Brett relied on talking about politics to connect with fellow group members. When he couldn't talk about politics, he responded by segregating himself from the group. Although he was physically present in the class, he did not engage in conversation, which is an expected form of behavior. Group members did not necessarily exclude him from the group, but Brett chose to separate himself because of group members different political views.

### Social Rituals

Social rituals provide an opportunity for group members to engage in social contact with each other outside of the pool. These rituals provide added meaning for group members who may not have any social contact outside of the water aerobics class. For example, Karen mentioned that "some people live alone" (fieldnotes 4-9-13). The water aerobics group engages in a daily ritual of meeting for coffee in the lobby of the health club before and after class. Karen identifies the group that meets for coffee before as herself, Brett and John (fieldnotes 4-9-13). After the class, most of the regulars (i.e. group members who attend daily) meet for coffee including Sally, Brett, John, Patti, Ruth, Mike, and Michelle, the shallow water fitness instructor. Patti described the social ritual of meeting for coffee after the class:

I think it [the class] keeps my spirits up. I mean if you get out of the house and don't mullygrab about yourself, all that's good. I got tired of going into a store. I used to be a real shopaholic. I could care less about it now. It's just not that important to me... You hear me say everyday, it's not good coffee, but the truth of the matter [is that] I enjoy

sitting in there... You get a lot of feedback from a lot of people that [are] not necessarily right in your line of thought and so it's good to hear other people's thoughts and the way they think about things... I think we help each other. I really do.

Group members like Patti attach a deeper meaning to the social ritual of having coffee with fellow class members; it's more than just socializing with friends. According to Patti, the direction of her life has changed after attending the class and participating in this social ritual. Instead of satisfying her shopping addiction, Patti remains committed to the group through her involvement in this social ritual. Her group involvement has replaced her need to shop, adding meaning to her life. She enjoys spending time with group members, which has enhanced her mental and emotional wellbeing. She comments on the supportive environment of the class as group members offer to help one another. Therefore, the group provides informational resources for fellow group members.

The lobby at the health club is located at the main entrance, increasing group members' visibility. Individuals who participate in this social ritual identify as group members of the water aerobics class, distancing themselves from other exercisers at the health club. However, not all group members participate in this social ritual. Martha is considered a regular in the class, but does not meet for coffee: "...I do not sit out and have coffee because that gets very political and I don't want to get involved in that.... That for me is not fun... For a lot of people, it's their social life to have contact with other people. Otherwise they'd be alone." Although Martha separates herself from group members who meet for coffee, she understands the purpose of this social ritual, to provide social interaction.

Social interaction among group members is also facilitated by monthly birthday celebrations as Anna described:

We have a couple of social events a year. We have birthday parties every month...like a potluck [to] celebrate the month's birthdays and again people feel...a sense of belonging and a sense of community and just generally caring and support for each other even if we aren't hour to hour friends or bosom buddies, we're part of a very nice community.

Birthday parties take place in the lobby of the health club following a shallow water fitness class usually in the middle of the month. Michelle, the shallow water fitness instructor, has a list of all the class members, their contact information and birthdays. At the birthday parties, group members emerge who have not attended the class as regularly as others. Thus, the birthday parties lead to more group involvement compared to having coffee before and after the class. Group members typically bring sweets, but they have also incorporated healthier options, such as fruit and vegetables. Some items are store bought, while others bake sweets for the group. Anna suggests that the birthday parties contribute to the sense of solidarity within the group. A community exists despite different levels of closeness with group members. This social ritual provides a supportive environment as individuals feel like part of the group. Like the ritual of having coffee, birthday parties display identification with the group. Individuals who participate in the ritual and bring food are recognized by group members and non-members as part of the water aerobics group. Further, individuals whose birthdays are recognized by the group are also perceived as group members.

Jane describes her first experience with this social ritual as a new member to the group:

...I had left sugar out of my diet and was so proud and I was doing very well and then they had a birthday.... But they asked me to stay and I thought, 'well I'll go have a cookie and a cup of coffee' but, they had all these desserts and things. And when you haven't had sugar for a while and then you eat a little, it's like you can't consume enough. By the time I left I felt that I was on a sugar high and I said, 'oh my God what have I gotten myself into with this group of people.' They're sugar feens.

Many of the group members (i.e. Jane, John, Charles, Gail, Martha) talked about the challenge of controlling their sugar intake during the birthday parties and some members do not participate for this reason. As a new member, Jane wanted to be part of the group and participate in the social ritual, but quickly learned that controlling her sugar intake was a challenge. As a seasoned group member, Jane does not attend the birthday parties anymore because "weight wise I can't afford to." Other group members have taken a similar approach. If they chose to participate in this ritual, they may eat healthier foods, like John: "They have an alternate now [at the birthdays]....They have some veggies there, like carrots... and celery and stuff. I don't mind that. I eat the veggies. No more flan cake...Before I usually eat too many sweets...They got fruit up there, like watermelon and stuff like that..." John's doctor recommended that he avoid eating sweets because of his diabetic health condition. The healthier options at the birthday parties allow group members like John to participate in the social ritual and feel like part of the group.

In addition to the monthly birthday parties, the group gets together each year to celebrate Christmas, as Martha described:

Every year they do a Christmas luncheon. Ruth and Lori they do this thing where they collect money for Michelle... 'cause she's a single mom with 3 kids. She had a rough year

with the broken wrists and everything and everybody donates money to thank Michelle for what she does for everybody... There's probably oh my gosh 50 of us... We have the best time. We do a gift raffle and it's a lot of laughs and giggles... And the best part of it is, everybody's dressed and in their full regalia and some people you don't even recognize 'cause you never see them outside the pool and it's like oh my God, you clean up nice... Gets you kind of in the Christmas spirit... And it's something to look forward to.

Like the other social rituals, the Christmas luncheon reaffirms bonds within the group. Given that the luncheon occurs once a year, this ritual becomes a major social event where group members eat, laugh and enjoy each other's company. Martha indicates that group members do not necessarily interact with each other outside of the pool. However, this ritual enhances group cohesion by creating an opportunity to interact with others outside of the pool setting. Further, the gift exchange is symbolic of the close relationships within the group and demonstrates reciprocity among group members. Like the gift exchange, collecting money for Michelle is symbolic of the group's intimate bond with their instructor and exhibits a reciprocal relationship. The group exhibits their appreciation of everything Michelle has done, such as organizing the birthday celebrations and field trips (fieldnotes 3-4-13). Out of this social ritual emerges a leadership role as a social organizer, held by Ruth and Lori. Ruth is very close with Michelle, according to my interview with Martha, and naturally takes on the role of collecting money for her.

In summary, social rituals consist of meeting for coffee before and after class, birthday parties and the Christmas luncheon. These events are categorized as rituals given that they reflect

patterned behaviors and occur during the same time frame. Individuals meet for coffee during the same time, before or after class and engage in the same behaviors, such as drinking coffee and socializing with one another in the lobby. Birthday parties also occur during the same time each month and individuals bring food and eat to celebrate fellow group members' birthdays. Finally, the Christmas luncheon occurs before the holiday at a local restaurant, where individuals eat, laugh and exchange gifts. Those who are involved in having coffee with the group tend to be regulars, however those who participate in the birthday parties and Christmas luncheon are not necessarily regular group members. Non-regular group members have the opportunity to experience the community aspect of the class without attending each day.

Together, these social rituals encourage interaction and conversation, strengthening the cohesiveness of the group. Group members involved in these rituals display their identification with the group to both group members and non-members alike. Like other subcultures, the function of these rituals may be to provide comfort during times of uncertainty. As individuals move into old age, they may be more likely to experience uncertainty related to health conditions, the death of family and friends, and financial stability. Therefore, these rituals may ease group members' distress as they move into late adulthood.

### *Greeting and Exiting Rituals*

The greeting rituals of the pool consist of the behaviors to acknowledge the presence of group members in the class, such as hellos, hugs, kisses and high fives. Naturally, group members are greeted by saying hello to one another as David describes:

Yeah we all say 'hi,' they [the women] say 'hi David.' I try to remember and learn their names. It's been my background all my life [as a teacher] you know, be friendly... They're... also feeling apprehensive and then when somebody shows a little bit of friendliness or willingness to say hello... so it's just fun coming in.

Saying hello contributes to the friendly atmosphere of the class and minimizes individuals' discomfort. Group members are friendly to each other even if they don't socialize during the class, which Mark illustrates: "I don't engage in the conversations to the people that stay on the other side [of the pool] except that I talk to them when I'm coming in and out of the pool... Then they'll ask how you're doing and I'll ask how they're doing and everything." Therefore, this greeting ritual adds to the cohesiveness of the group, allowing individuals an opportunity to interact with each other.

In addition to saying hello, hugs are a common behavior to greet individuals in the pool, as noted in my fieldnotes: "Brett arrives and moves towards the group of women and Martha says, 'you're scaring everyone without your shirt on.'" (Brett usually has a t-shirt on). Brett and Ruth embrace." (fieldnotes 3-11-13). When asked about hugging in the pool, Ruth said: "There must be something free-er about the pool... When you're out of the pool, it's [hugging] more intimate... because you're body to body. You still are in the pool, but there's water between you." Ruth indicates that the pool, as a social space, liberates group members in some way. They may feel liberated in a sense that they are not constrained by norms related to personal space and are free to engage in physical contact in the pool. However, Ruth suggests that hugging in the water is less intimate compared to outside the pool. This indicates that the water appears to be some kind of barrier or protection for group members.

Mark comments on the hugging ritual: “There are a few people that like to hug so Ruth... first she hugs everybody...and then if somebody’s been away for a long period of time and finally comes back then they go around hugging everybody so that just shows you how things are.” Ruth is the central figure in the hugging ritual given that she engages in physical contact with fellow group members. Group members naturally come to Ruth to engage in this ritual. Ruth attends the class daily, which allows this ritual to continue. Without her presence in the class, this ritual would be non-existent or be forced to change.

Mark continues to comment on Ruth’s role in the hugging ritual: “Ruth has that personality that she hugs everybody in the pool...so she hugs everybody in the pool. She gets along fine with everybody.” According to Mark’s comment, Ruth’s personality facilitates physical contact with group members in the pool. This hugging ritual occurs each day as a symbol of physical and emotional closeness between group members and reaffirms the cohesiveness within the group. Ruth describes the hugging ritual:

I think a lot of people there love to have me hug them and I usually don't go to anybody to hug them. If they come to me, I'll hug them. I don't want to force myself on anyone. And that makes me feel good to give some comfort to them. I know at the very beginning there was a lady there that was divorcing and she really felt sad. And she'd come to me and hug me and she'd cry [in the pool]. So I sat there and just hugged her you know. Try to comfort her. Maybe that started it.

Ruth’s quote describes the emotional comfort that she gives fellow group members by engaging in physical contact in the pool. She notes that group members initiate the physical contact with her and other group members follow their behavior. Without Ruth’s presence in the



pool, it is unknown if this ritual would continue. Therefore, Ruth remains central to the maintenance of the hugging ritual.

Although Ruth is instrumental in the hugging ritual, Mark indicates that group members who have been absent for some time also engage in this ritual. Hugs represent close relationships among group members, even those who have been away from the group for a while. Sally notes that the hugging ritual takes place after she adjusts to the water temperature: “then you...look your friends up. Run around and hug everybody. Find out what happened yesterday or what you need to know.” Hugging fellow group members occurs each day at the beginning of the class, which exhibits that this behavior is ritualized.

Other greeting rituals include kissing, high fives and arm wrestling. Ruth notes that she engages in these rituals with the men in the class:

There was a man who was almost 90 years old and he liked me for some reason...I jump those lane dividers [lane lines] and he would greet me. He'd hold down a lane divider and then he'd hug me and kiss me on the cheeks. And I loved him and he died. And Sam always comes up kisses me... And Brett, he always gives me a big hug and kiss. Mike I don't hug. But... we arm wrestle. And John I don't hug, but we go ‘wooo... High five’ but we miss each other.

Ruth suggests that greeting rituals can change when group members pass away or leave the group. In this case, Ruth is no longer greeted by this man with a hug and a kiss as she moved across the lane lines. However, other male group members do engage in this ritual, which is symbolic of their relationship with Ruth. Sam and Brett may have a more intimate relationship with Ruth compared to the other men. In contrast, Mike and John may have a more playful

relationship with Ruth given that they arm wrestle and high five with each other. Therefore, these greeting rituals exhibit the level of closeness with fellow group members.

Exiting rituals pertain to the behaviors after the class, which include saying goodbye and engaging in conversation. Some group members are acknowledged when they leave the class early, usually during the cool down (i.e. stretching), which David illustrates: “To be embarrassed a little bit if you leave early and they say ‘Bye David’ and everybody notices, [if you] try to sneak off, so it’s good out there.” This parting ritual conveys that David is a valued member of the group given that he is acknowledged when leaving the class.

Mark is another group member who typically leaves the class early. Mark describes how he is acknowledged when he leaves the class: “When I get ready to leave, everybody yells...that must have started with the fellow that we used to have but he passed now, Scott... We used to get out of the pool at the same time. He used to stop and sing to the group before he would leave and so they would say ‘goodbye Scott’ and then they’d say ‘goodbye Mark.’ And so they just carry it on.” Mark indicates that this exiting ritual has changed because Scott has passed away. That is, the group no longer hears Scott sing to the group, but still engages in saying goodbye to Mark as he leaves. Saying goodbye is intended for Mark, however, John attempts to engage in this exit ritual, which Ruth describes: “I love John. He’s so funny. When we say ‘goodbye, Mark’, he [John] always waves to us. He just stands back there and we’re waving to Mark and he’s waving to us...” Mark may hold a higher status given that he is acknowledged when he leaves the group. John attempts to make his exit known in the class, possibly challenging this ritual. More specifically, he challenges the idea that individuals who hold higher statuses are the only members who are acknowledged when they leave the class.

After the class is concluded, group members typically socialize with each other before leaving the pool. Jane describes this exit ritual: “After water aerobics you generally want to sit down for a couple of minutes and let the water drip off and you’re toweling off and...you’re not so out of breath[that], you can’t talk or don’t want to talk.” Jane suggests that group members tend to linger after the class where they converse with one another. The class facilitates this interaction given that group members are not too exhausted to socialize with each other. This exit ritual develops the community aspect of the class. That is, group members deepen their relations with each other by conversing after class.

In summary, greeting and exiting rituals are related to group member behaviors as they enter and leave the class. Greeting rituals consist of hellos, hugs, kisses and high fives and strengthen the cohesiveness of the group. These rituals welcome group members to the pool and display members’ allegiance to the group. That is, individuals who are committed to the group engage in this ritual and are identified as members of the class. Newcomers, snowbirds or individuals who attend less frequently typically do not engage in this ritual. Therefore, greeting rituals separate committed group members from those who are not as involved. Like greeting rituals, exiting rituals display group identification and enhance social solidarity. Exiting rituals consist of saying goodbye and socializing after the class. Members who are acknowledged when they leave the class are viewed as members of the group. However, this ritual appears to be carried out for members who hold high status within the group. In addition to saying goodbye, socializing with fellow group members demonstrates close ties within the group. Together greeting and exiting rituals distinguish the water aerobics group from other exercisers at the health club, a component of subcultures.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

When I began my fieldwork, the water aerobics class appeared to be a tight knit group. The class itself seemed to be a place where individuals developed connections with others. They seemed to be very familiar with the exercises, knowing how to perform them and anticipating the next exercise before the instructor's directions. In addition to their familiarity with the class, the group appeared to know each other as many socialized before, during and after the class. But upon further inspection, the closeness of the group influenced the development of a subculture. The components of a subculture began to emerge as a group with distinctive norms, roles and rituals.

The purpose of this study is to reveal how a senior water aerobics exercise class is indeed a subculture and provide a rich description of this understudied and unappreciated subculture. Previous literature focuses on subcultures related to ethnic group, social class or gender (e.g. Whyte 1943; Mendoza-Denton 2008) and have disproportionately examined subcultures among young people (e.g. Brake 1985; Willis 1977). However, previous research has not addressed subcultural characteristics among older and "non-deviant" groups. The current study addresses this gap in the literature. Consistent with previous research, the findings from this study indicate that the water aerobics group resembles a subculture (Brake 1985; Hebdige 1979; Williams 2006). The formation of the water aerobics group is similar to Downes (1966) given that the group has developed in response to members' physical and social challenges. Due to group members' changing physical capabilities, the class allows individuals to engage in exercise without experiencing pain or feeling incompetent. Further, group members experienced minimal social contact with others and the class provided social interaction inside and outside of the class.

The findings suggest that group members interact with each other outside of the class such as going to lunch or happy hours. According to Rose (1962), a subculture of aging is more likely to develop when individuals interact more with each other as opposed to individuals in other age groups. Although group members interact with each other outside of the class, it is unknown how often they interact with individuals in other age groups. Further, the water aerobics class is not an activity restricted by age. That is, individuals of all ages can participate in the class including pregnant mothers and individuals recovering from injury. Therefore, the findings suggest that the water aerobics group is not an aged subculture, but a group connected to a particular activity, water aerobics. Like other subcultures, water aerobics group members display positive affinity towards one another, a component of the subculture of aging (Rose 1962). Rose (1962) suggests that positive affinity develops through shared common interests. In the water aerobics group, members share the common interests of physical activity and social contact.

The dress of the water aerobics group remains a distinguishing element of the subculture, which is consistent with previous research (Brake 1974; Jefferson 1976; Williams 2011). The water aerobics group is distinguished from other exercisers at the health club by wearing bathing suits, hats, visors and sunglasses. Likewise, gangs (Harris 1994) and working class youth (Brake 1974; Williams 2011) are recognizable by their choice of dress. However, previous research of deviant subcultures suggests that dress conveys conflict related to social class or ethnicity (Brake 1974; Williams 2011). In contrast, the dress of the water aerobics group is associated with resistance to the invisibility of older adults in society. Group members draw attention to other members' bathing suits and receive compliments, making them visible in this social space. These

findings are similar to previous research about the clothing choices of older women. Red Hat society members are recognizable at social gatherings by their dress (Stalp, Radina and Lynch 2008), while older women's clothing choices dispute the invisibility of old age and provides recognition among others with a similar appearance (Francis 2011).

Artifacts remain another distinguishing element of the water aerobics subculture, which include noodles, barbells and buoyancy belts. Individuals who utilize these artifacts correctly are identified as members of the water aerobics group, which is similar to previous research studies. In particular, insiders within the biker subculture are identified by the BMW motorcycle brand rather than the age, cost or visual condition of the motorcycle (Austin 2009). Likewise, poetry notebooks are passed onto gang members, identifying fellow members (Mendoza-Denton 2008). Therefore, like these subcultures, water aerobics members are recognized by using these artifacts.

The findings from the current study suggest that group members attach different meanings to artifacts. Noodles are associated with freedom for non-swimmers, but are also a reminder of physical limitations to some group members. In contrast, Harley Davidson motorcycles, as an artifact, represent freedom among members in the biker subculture (Scoutan and McAlexander 1995), which suggests that group members attach similar meanings to the artifact. Therefore, this study adds to previous subculture research by offering insight into the diverse meanings of artifacts.

The water aerobics group establishes a norm related to social contact, whereas norm violations include physical contact, talking during instructions, talking about politics and complaining. The existence of norms and norm violations indicate that the water aerobics group

can be categorized as a subculture based on previous research (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1970; Arnold 1970; Muir and Seitz 2004). Previous research identifies norms and norm violations as distinguishing elements of subcultures, but emphasizes alcohol consumption, drug use and violence as norms among deviant subcultures (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997; Brown 1977; Harris 1994). Therefore, the water aerobics group is different from deviant subcultures because of the norms established by the group. The results suggest that the norm of social contact is more important to group members given that they experience less social interaction in late adulthood, which is in line with Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1970).

Further, the norm of social contact is different from previous research of norms within the pool. The results of the current study suggest that conversation is encouraged within the pool, whereas conversation is considered a norm violation among swimmers. According to Scott (2009), a norm among swimmers is “respect for disciplinary regimes” and conversation is to be kept at a minimum. Therefore, swimmers violate this norm when they engage in conversation in the pool. In contrast, conversation within the water aerobics group is considered normative behavior rather than a norm violation. Even though conversation occurs throughout the entire water aerobics class, group members are expected to “respect disciplinary regimes” on some level given that a norm violation is related to talking during the instructions. The results suggest that individuals who talk during instructions hinder group members’ ability to follow the exercise routine.

The norm of social contact exhibits social engagement among group members, a component of Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) Successful Aging Paradigm. As group members engage in social contact with each other, they begin to develop intimate relationships, which signify that

they are aging successfully. In contrast, the social contact norm is different from the Disengagement Theory, which emphasizes that older adults withdraw from society and interact less frequently with others (Cumming 1975). Water aerobic group members remain actively engaged in each others' lives given that they provide support for one another and interact outside of the class. Among a senior card playing group, members interact outside of the group attending religious services, volunteering and community gatherings (Outley and McKenzie 2006). Like this senior card playing group, the water aerobics group interacts with each other outside of the class, such as going to lunch or happy hours.

Physical contact, as a norm violation, is somewhat consistent with previous research about norms within the pool. According to Scott (2009), touching others should be avoided in the pool and individuals respond by apologizing. In the water aerobics group, touching others is a frequent occurrence and cannot be avoided, though members usually respond with by apologizing. Personal space in the water aerobics group is non-existent, which suggests that members do not "respect personal space," which is a norm identified by Scott (2009). The water aerobics instructors minimize discomfort when this norm is violated, which is different from the idea that individuals become embarrassed when engaging in physical contact in the pool (Scott 2009). The water aerobics group does not implement formal sanctions to ensure that physical contact is avoided as a norm violation, which is different from previous research of sororities (Gerson 1969) and rugby teams (Muir and Seitz 2004).

The water aerobics group engages in public criticism to encourage conformity to the norm of social contact, which is supported by previous research (Muir and Seitz 2004). Group members expressed their dissatisfaction with others who talk during the instructions and try to



teach the class. One of Ruth's responsibilities is to engage in public criticism to minimize talking during the instructions. She confronts fellow group members by yelling at them to stop talking. Jane also engages in public criticism to encourage Jackie to refrain from counting during the class. Unlike Ruth, Jane ignores Jackie's counting as an attempt to regulate her behavior. Although the water aerobics group engages in public criticism, there is no evidence that they create derogatory labels for those who violate this norm, which is different from previous research of rugby subcultures (Muir and Seitz 2004). Further, norm violators in the class are not victims of physical violence, which is different from previous research of deviant subcultures (Muir and Seitz 2004).

The results suggest that the norm of social contact is somewhat contradictory. Group members are expected to socialize with each other in the pool, but socializing during the instructions is discouraged. Further, talking should occur between people, rather than teaching the class. Therefore, individuals are expected to socialize, but not too much and should talk to each other, rather than direct the class. The contradictory nature of these norms is consistent with norms of nude dancers, who are expected to use drugs and alcohol, but not in excessive amounts (Forsyth and Deshotels 1997). Although individuals are expected to socialize with each other, they are not allowed to talk about politics in the pool. Similarly, members of the Red Hat society converse with each other, but are discouraged from talking about old age (Barrett et al. 2012). Like the Red Hat society, the topics discussed in the water aerobics group contribute to the upbeat, cheerful atmosphere of the class (Barrett et al. 2012).

The findings support the idea that the group's norms are accepted by members and become a means of regulating behavior (Arnold 1970). The norm violations of complaining and

talking about politics suggest that group members internalize the norm of social contact and regulate their own behavior. Given that the men could only talk about politics according to Anna, Brett avoided talking to anyone. In a sense, he regulates his own behavior as he separates himself from the conversation. Brett somewhat complies with the norm of social contact, which exhibits the contradictory nature of this norm. He accepts the norm violation of talking about politics given that he refrains from talking about this topic. However, he does not socialize with fellow group members in the pool, exhibiting resistance to the norm of social contact. Like Brett, the female group member who complains about the kids screaming in the pool segregates herself from the group as she regulates her behavior. She accepts that complaining is a norm violation, but challenges the norm of social contact by disengaging from the group.

The water aerobics group implements the social rituals of having coffee, monthly birthday parties and yearly Christmas luncheon as well as greeting and exiting rituals of hugs and goodbyes. Consistent with previous research, the purpose of these rituals is to collectively identify with the group and display their commitment (Goodger 1986; Watson and Kando 1976). Group members display their commitment and identify with the group by attending these social functions and engaging in greeting and exiting rituals. The rituals of the water aerobics group facilitate group cohesion and separate insiders from outsiders, which is consistent with Goodger (1986). Insiders in the group are invited to these social activities, whereas outsiders are not.

The rituals of the water aerobics group resemble sport rituals that take place before and after the competition (Muir and Seitz 2004; Watson and Kando 1976). Like Little League rituals, the water aerobics group implements rituals before and after class, meeting for coffee. While the rituals of the water aerobics group are directed towards social interaction among group members,

Little League rituals are directed towards accomplishment (Watson and Kando 1976). However, the water aerobics group also executes rituals each month and year with birthdays and Christmas. This may be different from sporting rituals that may only take place during the sport season. Nonetheless, each social ritual of the water aerobics group is characterized by consistent behavior, similar to sport rituals (Watson and Kando 1976) and rituals of sororities (Gerson 1969).

The water aerobics group is characterized by a number of social roles including die-hards/regulars, newcomers, the mayor, men and Mike-buoy. Each role pertains to specific responsibilities and is accepted by fellow group members, which is consistent with Yinger (1970). Even though the specific responsibilities of the roles of the water aerobics differ from other subcultures, the fact that they exist support the idea that the water aerobics group resembles a subculture (Cressey 1932; Giallombardo 1966; Marsh, Rosser and Harre 1997). Previous research of senior leisure groups suggests that social roles minimize discomfort and are designed to delegate the responsibilities of the group (McPherson 1983). The roles of the water aerobics group may have a similar purpose given that the roles are related to social interaction. Social interaction in the pool can in turn minimize discomfort and encourage continued participation.

Die-hards or regulars consist of individuals who attend the class regularly despite the cold weather and re-organize their schedule to participate in the class. Therefore, the die-hards display a high level of commitment to the group allowing the group to continue over time, which is in line with previous research of subcultures (Thorpe 2005; Snyder 1986; Unruh 1980). The die-hards or regulars are similar to female snowboarders who also re-organize their schedule to take part in the activity (Thorpe 2005). Additionally, the die-hards can be compared to seniors

who play shuffleboard. Serious shuffleboard players take part in the activity everyday and develop close relationships with other serious shuffleboard players (Snyder 1986). Like shuffleboard players, the die-hards attend the class regularly and maintain close relationships with other participants.

Given the close relationships among die-hards or regulars, newcomers are easily recognized by the group. Newcomers consist of individuals who have not attended the class before and are unfamiliar with the norms, rituals and roles of the subculture. Newcomers are socialized by veteran group members, who show them how to perform the exercises and utilize the artifacts of the group (e.g. buoyancy belts, noodles). Water aerobics group members are socialized during the class, rather than prior to joining the group, like gang members (Harris 1994). In addition, the results suggest that the water aerobics group implements informal socialization practices in the pool and during social functions (e.g. meeting for coffee, lunch), which is similar to gang members who implement informal socialization practices by interacting with each other (Harris 1994).

Given that the water aerobics group only implements informal socialization practices, this is different from other subcultures who utilize formal socialization practices. In particular, gangs utilize formal socialization practices, such as holding policy discussions (Harris 1994). Like gangs, sororities utilize formal socialization practices, which include a pledging period, where new members are informed about the sorority (Gerson 1969). The current study contributes to the literature of subcultures given that the water aerobics group does not utilize formal socialization practices. The results suggest that the group may engage in socialization processes during their social activities (e.g. birthday parties, going to happy hours). However, the main

purpose of these social activities is to engage in social contact with group members. Given that socialization may occur at these social functions, this appears to be a secondary or unintentional outcome rather than the main focus of the activity. This is different from gangs (Harris 1994) and sororities (Gerson 1969) given that individuals participate in activities for the purpose of socializing members.

Among female gangs, new members are labeled as “young girls,” who are socialized through experiences on the street and interactions with fellow group members (Brown 1977). Like female gangs, newcomers in the water aerobics group are socialized through their experiences within a new social environment (i.e. the pool) and interactions with veteran group members (e.g. showing them how to perform the exercises). However, the water aerobics group does not formally label newcomers in the class like female gangs. To be viewed as a member of the water aerobics group, individuals must attend the class and be invited to the social activities of the group. In contrast, new gang members are required to fight with the gang leader (Brown 1977), while new members of sororities are required to pass a test (Gerson 1969). Thus, the water aerobics group implements informal ways to recognize group membership, while gangs and sororities utilize formal practices to become a group member.

The results suggest that anyone who attends the class can be invited to the social activities of the group. This indicates that the group maintains inclusive group boundaries, allowing newcomers to become acclimated to the group quickly. In contrast, jazz musicians maintain exclusive group boundaries, where squares (i.e. outsiders) can never be part of the subculture of jazz musicians (Becker 1963). Jazz musicians refuse to interact with squares or make eye contact with them for fear that they may influence their musical performance (Becker

1963). The water aerobics group is different from the subculture of jazz musicians given that they welcome new participants, who may be viewed as outsiders given that they are unfamiliar with the group.

While jazz musicians remain hostile towards outsiders (Becker 1963), the water aerobics group interacts with outsiders in a friendly manner. However, the water aerobics group does create distance with outsiders. In particular, Mark notes that individuals who exercise inside the health club (e.g. run on treadmill, lift weights) do not socialize with others. However, the water aerobics group prefers to exercise and socialize at the same time. Even though the water aerobics group creates distance with outsiders, they do not appear to be hostile towards other exercisers.

The role of the mayor pertains to specific responsibilities including greeting newcomers, maintaining the hugging ritual and managing the class environment. Ruth is the only group member who holds this position and is regarded as having high status within the group because of her experience with the class and previous health problems. Greeting newcomers entails welcoming new participants to the pool (e.g. asking their name) and informing veteran group members about the newcomers in the class. In addition to the hugging ritual, Ruth is responsible for managing the class environment, particularly to minimize the talking during the instructions.

As a former teacher, Ruth carries this identity in the pool as she manages the classroom environment. In contrast, Sassatelli (1999) suggests that individuals disregard other social roles in the exercise setting. However, Ruth's role as a former teacher is salient in her interactions with others in the pool. Moreover, Ruth's role in the water aerobics class is similar to the role as "socializer" in leisure groups (Miller 1976) because she educates members how to act in the pool (e.g. refrain from talking during instructions). In addition to "socializer," senior leisure groups

create a role as a “recruiter” (Miller 1976). Based on my fieldnotes and interview with Ruth, it doesn’t appear that Ruth recruits people to join the group.

The results suggest that gender segregation occurs in the pool, where the men tend to stay in the deep end. Previous research has explored females within male dominated subcultures, but very little research has examined males within a female dominated subculture. Nonetheless, research of females in a male dominated heavy metal subculture suggests that women tend to stay in the periphery of the mosh pit and may attend in groups of women (Krenske and McKay 2000). In the water aerobics subculture, the men stay in the deep end, which is on the periphery, while the other participants exercise in the middle of the pool. Although the men in the water aerobics class may not necessarily attend the class in groups, they tend to remain physically close to other men, which is similar to women in heavy metal subcultures (Krenske and McKay 2000). Women who stand alone tend to be the victims of sexual harassment due to their presence in the heavy metal subculture, a male dominated subculture (Krenske and McKay 2000). Like women in the heavy metal subculture, the men in the water aerobics group tend to be targets of teasing and verbal remarks. While the men are not the victims of sexual harassment, they still are targets of verbal “abuse” because of their presence in a female dominated subculture. The men in the water aerobics class do not have to be alone to be the targets of teasing, which is different from the heavy metal subculture. The women initiate the teasing, which suggests they attempt to control the micro-interactions in the pool, which is supported by Ronai and Ellis (1989). That is, the women have power to make the men look foolish.

The results of the present study suggest that men adopt feminine characteristics to integrate into the feminine space of the pool. That is, the men participate in the class for social

reasons, which is categorized as a feminine activity. In fact, research conducted by Scott (2010) indicates that women engage in conversation during exercise, while men tend to focus on their exercise routine. In addition, research of girl car races within a masculine subculture indicates that females are forced to accept masculine characteristics of toughness, violence and competitiveness to be viewed as members of the subculture (Lumsden 2010). Like girl car racers, men in the water aerobics group may be forced to display feminine behaviors of building relationships and socializing with others to fit in with the group. In the water aerobics group, men refer to women in sexual terms possibly to regain their masculinity in a female dominated group. Like the water aerobics group, men in the car racing subculture objectify women to cope with their vague status in the group given that the presence of females may discredit their masculinity (Lumsden 2010). Thus, men appear to react in similar ways, objectifying women, no matter if they are involved in a male or female dominated subculture.

Mike-buoy, as one of the men in the class, occupies the role of engaging in conversation with other members of the class and prefers to talk about politics in the pool. Mike contributes to the political divisions within the group, as a liberal who disagrees with the conservatives in the class and stereotypes them as misinformed. Given that Mike engages in stereotyping and divides the group, this is consistent with research indicating that subcultures create opportunities to reinforce stereotypes and create divisions within the group (Eyetsemitan and Gire 2003). Mike-buoy is not the only group member who creates divisions within the group. Mark commented that he uses the heaviest barbells and separates himself from those who do not push their physical limits. Further, Martha notes that some group members have a positive approach to life, while others are more negative. Both Mark and Martha view themselves more favorably than



fellow group members. Mark views himself as physically fit, while Martha views herself as having a positive outlook. This is similar to Red Hat society members, who view themselves favorably compared to other group members (Barrett et al. 2012).

### Reflexivity Statement

As a member of this particular health club for a number of years, I became curious about the water aerobics class. I normally exercise inside the facility, lifting weights, riding the exercise bike or elliptical, which are all solitary activities. I have never participated in a group exercise class and feel uncomfortable engaging in exercise where I am at the mercy of someone else's instructions. When exercising inside the facility, I would gaze out and see the water aerobics class in the outdoor pool. I found the setting itself to be intriguing. The class is physically segregated from other exercisers given that the pool is outside. On the other hand, the class seemed to take place in front of an audience, lifeguards and other pool going individuals. Open windows at the health club allowed exercisers to look out and see the pool. I found the pool to be a very unique setting, where a sociological perspective could provide depth and understanding about the social processes that occur in the pool.

Exercise has been integrated into my lifestyle since I was a child. In particular, I would exercise at a health club regularly training for sports and was a Division III collegiate athlete in tennis and golf. I stayed physically active through my 20s and continue to do so believing that exercise is good for my health. I experienced a number of knee injuries through my time as a collegiate athlete and still experience setbacks in my early 30s. I identified with the water aerobics group on a number of levels. I too was physically active throughout my life and

experience injuries that have prevented my involvement in certain types of exercise. I cannot participate in yoga because of my lack of flexibility or run because of the pounding on my knees. The water aerobics class seemed feasible for a research project due to my physical limitations. I began to develop compassion for these people given their physical challenges. Like the water aerobics group, I value exercise and feel that my continued involvement prevents setbacks in the future.

My previous involvement in exercise may have affected the research process. I have been a swimmer as a child and feel comfortable in the pool. This may have added to my credibility as a class participant and facilitated my relationships with group members. Initially, I was not uncomfortable in the pool, but was uneasy about forming relationships with the participants. I felt that I could relate to them because of my common interest in exercise, which may have allowed me to obtain detailed information from the participants. However, my previous involvement in exercise may have affected me what I did and didn't see in the setting. To a non-exerciser, different social processes may have emerged in the setting.

During my initial observation, I did not take part in the water aerobics class. Instead, I sat in a lounge chair on the side of the pool taking notes. I thought I was unobtrusive in doing so, but I was mistaken given that Michelle, the shallow water aerobics instructor approached me after class as well as a lifeguard. At that moment, I thought I had been exposed as a researcher and was unsure how I would gain entry into the group. However, the water aerobics instructors were friendly and approachable, easing my transition into this new group. When I arrived at the pool to participate in the class, the class members knew that I had not participated in the class before. Ruth inquired about my name and Karen and Gail showed me how to do the exercises. I was

treated like a newcomer in the class, which confirmed the comments made by Patti as a new member. I instantly felt comfortable in this setting because of my interactions with group members. Although I was anxious about being a 30 something female in a class full of seniors, they didn't seem to mind. I envisioned that I would be questioned about my participation in the class and segregated from the group. That certainly wasn't the case. They knew that I was conducting research, but still welcomed me to the group, like any other new participant.

I conversed with several of the members during the class, including John, Patti, Sally, Karen, Fiona and Ruth. Initially, the conversations were related to building rapport, such as asking about their family life, education and profession. During the 8 month period of my participant-observation (January 2013 – August 2013), I began to build rapport with the participants. My early conversations with members were positive about the class, which made me question their credibility and honesty. By March and April, the participants began to open about the tension between people, usually because of the conversation within the class. I found that interviewing participants would be a natural progression to this project where I could obtain richer information about the social processes that take place in the pool. I later realized that a majority of the members I conversed with in the pool were regulars and approached them to take part in an interview with me. Many of them were happy to talk to me, which I attributed to the rapport I built during my participant observations. I was fortunate to develop relationships with members through my continued participation in the class as well as participating in the social rituals of meeting for coffee and birthday parties. I was invited to the monthly birthday parties, which solidified my membership within the group.

Of the 13 participants I interviewed, I developed close relationships, had talked to them before or seen them in the class. In particular, I developed close relationships with Sally, Patti, Gail, John, Fiona and had briefly talked to David, Charles, Anna, Jane, Martha and Mike. Mark was the only participant that I had no interaction with prior to the interview, though I had seen him in the class. I purposely approached the men in the class for interviews because I was interested in their perspective in a female dominated class. However, I obtained richer information from the women in the class as opposed to the men.

During my interviews with the men, they would often get sidetracked and talk about information not relevant to the topic, such as dieting, their profession or their experiences with exercise in their youth, which may be considered masculine activities. Given that the men were involved in a female dominated activity, the interview may have been an opportunity for them to demonstrate their masculinity. I found it much more difficult to encourage the men to provide their honest opinion about the class. Men may not feel comfortable talking to a white, female in her 30s for fear of appearing vulnerable and less masculine. The men may have been “doing gender” in a sense that they wanted to appear masculine. In all of my interviews, I did not ask about the age of group members, but some chose to disclose that information. A majority of the men did not disclose their age, except for Mark who normally does not disclose his age, but did so for research purposes. I attribute the men’s lack of self-disclosure to my status as a young, white female.

In contrast, the women seemed to welcome me into their social circle, revealing their honest thoughts about the class. They interacted with me more like a friend and some seemed to take the role as an educator, informing me about what it is like to get old. Because of my age, the

women felt more inclined to tell me about the aging process. I admired them for their honesty and want to be like them as I move into late adulthood. For some of my interviews, the women effortlessly told me about the class and I didn't need to follow my interview guide. Some seemed to be mentally sharp and articulate, providing specific examples that added depth to my research. Even the women I did not form close relationships with during my participant-observations were open in their interviews. My consistent attendance may have influenced their willingness to open up about the class.

Not all the women provided rich information during their interviews. Even though Ruth was an 11 year veteran of the class, she had difficulty explaining the hugging ritual in the pool, particularly how the pool was "free-er." I may have asked questions that she hadn't thought about before. Fiona also experienced difficulty articulating her thoughts about the class. She would quite often get sidetracked and talk about unrelated topics. I gathered that she may need social interaction given that she lives in an assisted living facility. I was saddened by her mental and physical decline and wished that I could do something to ease her transition into late adulthood.

I asked all the participants the following question: "Does my presence have any effect on your participation in class?" I was somewhat uncomfortable in asking this question and was concerned about their responses. A majority of the participants were quick to answer "no." Some participants responded with a question, such as "Am I supposed to be scared of you?" (Ruth) or "Why would it? You mean am I nervous about you being in the class?" (Patti). Some interpreted this question negatively, thinking that I might have made them feel uncomfortable. Because most of them said that I had no effect their participation in the class, I questioned the integrity of their

responses. After receiving a compliment from the instructor about my performance in the class, Patti calls me a “show off,” while Jane says “ok yeah, say that to the young one” (fieldnotes 7-11-13). Therefore, it seems that my presence does affect group members’ participation even though they did not indicate that in the interview. Some participants commented in a positive way saying that they enjoyed having me in the class. I feel that this is mutual, as I have formed intimate relationships with some of the members.

The only male participant that expressed strong positive feelings about my presence in the class was David. He whispered that my presence affected his participation “a lot” and asked if the recorder was off to tell me more about how much he liked having me in the class. He then continued to tell me how he liked the shape and posture of my body, touched my hand and joked that I was his girlfriend. I was now aware of how he perceived me, which made me feel uncomfortable. I began to question if the other men in the class viewed me the same way. I felt that I was objectified, similar to the way Brett and John looked at Gail in the pool.

#### Future Research Directions and Limitations

Although the current study revealed interesting findings, a number of future research directions should be considered to provide a richer description of the water aerobics group as a subculture. First, the sample of this study is limited because the majority of the seniors who were interviewed were considered die-hards or regulars. Therefore, future research should investigate the experiences of individuals who are less committed to the group. These individuals may hold different views compared to the die-hards and may not fully endorse the norms, rituals and roles of the group. Likewise, future research should examine why individuals discontinue their

participation in the subculture and how these individuals are perceived by group members. The results suggest that group members may discontinue their participation due to health issues, but little is known how other group members interact with them after their return. In addition, snowbirds may attend the class in the winter months and it is unknown how snowbirds integrate into the water aerobics group. Further, future research may explore how the social rituals, norms and roles of the group change when group members enter and exit the group.

The results suggest that the social rituals of birthday parties and meeting for coffee take place in a location that is visible to outsiders at the health club. Future research may explore outsider's perspective of the group to provide a deeper understanding of the subculture. Outsiders may include other exercisers at the health club, but also employees as well, such as lifeguards, the Aquatics Director or staff in other departments. The research suggests that Michelle, the shallow water aerobics instructor is instrumental in maintaining the group's existence. Future research may explore the role of the instructor in perpetuating the subculture and how instructor turnover influences the subculture. This study only explored the perspectives of water aerobics members, rather than instructors, which may be a limitation. The instructors may confirm the responses of water aerobics group members, but may also provide detail about the changes within the subculture (e.g. group members, rituals). My fieldnotes suggest that Michelle is crucial in recruiting individuals to participate in the class. More research is needed to explore how group members are recruited to the class and the effectiveness of these recruitment practices in increasing group membership.

The results suggest that the social activities of the group may provide opportunities for members to learn about the norms, rituals and roles of the group. However, the current study did

not explore the social activities of the group outside of the health club. The health club, as a social setting, may influence how group members interact with one another. Therefore, group members may behave differently outside of this setting. Future research may utilize participant-observation methods to explore the functions of these social activities in the continued existence of the subculture. In addition, the results indicate that not all group members attend the social ritual of having coffee before or after class. Future research may explore the perspectives of those who do not meet for coffee and the diverse meanings of the ritual. This ritual may create divisions within the group given that not all members participate.

The pool setting remains a unique social setting and the results of this study may not be applicable to subcultures in other social settings. Thus, the study lacks generalizability, which is a common limitation of qualitative research. However, future research may explore whether the results of this study are applicable to research of subcultures, such as living arrangements or leisure groups. Future research may also compare and contrast water aerobics groups in different locations and health clubs. Water aerobics groups may differ according to the setting (e.g. indoor or outdoor pool), group members, instructor or the organization of the health club.

The results indicate that different statuses exist according to age and health. Individuals who are older appear to have a lower status and are involved in the shallow water fitness class, a class that has been recognized as low intensity. Individuals with more health issues who are able to engage in exercise appear to have a higher status in the group. More research is needed to determine the status hierarchy of the group. Research may also explore the interactions between individuals of different statuses and how these different statuses create cohesiveness or separate the group. In addition to these different statuses, the research suggests that gender dynamics are



present within this subculture, particularly with the male-female interaction in the pool. Future research may explore these dynamics further focusing on the intersection of age and gender.

### Implications

A number of implications can be inferred from the current study. First, the water aerobics group as a subculture can result in positive relationships among class members. Individuals in late adulthood may be more likely to experience isolation, loneliness and depression because of their lack of interaction with others. The class provides social interaction and encourages conversation, which may reduce the likelihood of individuals feeling depressed or lonely. The social interaction among group members is not limited to the class given that many individuals interact outside of the class. Thus, the engagement in the water aerobics subculture may enhance older adults' wellbeing and self-esteem.

Considering the group creates divisions and stereotypes members, this can have an effect on individuals' participation in the subculture. Group members may experience greater discomfort and drop out of the group. Their disengagement from the group may lead to greater isolation because of the lack of interaction with others. Further, the class allows group members to engage in exercise that allows them to adjust to their physical limitations. Without continued involvement in the class, individuals may experience more physical challenges due to a decrease in muscle tone, coordination or balance. In addition, the stereotypes and divisions among members may influence group members' self-concept or self-esteem. Individuals who are stereotyped as not pushing their physical limits may experience lower levels of self-esteem compared to those who are recognized as strong and fit. They may be more self-conscious in the

class and feel incompetent, leading to dropping out of the class. This also threatens the group's continued existence, without the presence of members.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that the water aerobics group is characterized by norms, rituals and roles. Group members experience similar physical and social challenges that have brought them to the class. A number of social roles distinguish the group from other groups, which include die-hards/regulars, newcomers, the mayor, men and deviant group members such as Mike and Jackie. The norms of the group are related to social contact, while talking about politics and complaining are considered norm violations. Physical contact is a norm violation, though no formal sanctions exist to discourage this behavior. The social rituals of the group include having coffee, birthday parties and Christmas luncheon as well as greeting and exiting rituals of hellos, hugs, high fives and kisses. This study demonstrates that a subculture exists within the water aerobics class and may assist the transition in late adulthood.

## **APPENDIX A: UCF IRB LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Sarah A. Halbert**

Date: **September 04, 2013**

Dear Researcher:

On 9/4/2013, the IRB approved the following minor modifications to human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Modification Type:	A new research instrument that explores the theme of body image will be used with approximately 15 water fitness exercisers. A new interview guide has been uploaded to the study along with other revised study materials. A revised consent document has been approved for use.
Project Title:	An Ethnography of Water Fitness Exercisers
Investigator:	Sarah A. Halbert
IRB Number:	SBE-13-09123
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 09/04/2013 03:48:23 PM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori".

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT**



## Informed Consent

Principal Investigator(s): Sarah Halbert, M.S.

Faculty Supervisor: Elizabeth Grauerholz, PhD

Investigational Site(s): Respondents' homes or any location where the respondent feels comfortable

**Introduction:** Researchers at the University of Central Florida (UCF) study many topics. To do this we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. You are being invited to take part in a research study which will include about 15 people at the [REDACTED]. You have been asked to take part in this research study because you participate in a water fitness class at the [REDACTED]. You must be 18 years of age or older to be included in the research study.

Because the researcher is a masters' student she is being guided by Elizabeth Grauerholz, a UCF faculty supervisor in Sociology.

### **What you should know about a research study:**

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- A research study is something you volunteer for.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You should take part in this study only because you want to.
- You can choose not to take part in the research study.
- You can agree to take part now and later change your mind.
- Whatever you decide it will not be held against you.
- Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of senior water aerobics exercisers. Previous research suggests that seniors have developed both positive and negative feelings about their bodies. However, seniors who engage in physical activity were satisfied with their bodies and participated in exercise to remain independent and

protect themselves from falls. This research study will explore how seniors experience their bodies in a water aerobics exercise class.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:** You will engage in one face-to-face interview with the principal investigator. The interviews will take place between September and December 2013. The research will conclude the week of December 9<sup>th</sup>. You do not have to answer every question. You will not lose any benefits if you skip questions.

**Location:** We will meet in your home or another private location of your preference.

**Time required:** We expect that you will be in this research study for one hour. Shorter follow-up conversations after the interview may also occur.

**Audio taping:**

You will be audio taped during this study. If you do not want to be audio taped, you will be able to be in the study and I will take detailed notes. If you are audio taped, the tape will be kept in a locked, safe place. The tape will be erased or destroyed at the conclusion of the research project.

**Risks:** Psychological or emotional risks may be possible with this study including anxiety, embarrassment or nervousness associated with the discussion of body image. You may experience discomfort conversing with an unfamiliar person about their experiences with their bodies. Because the data may be sensitive in nature, if you feel upset and need to speak to a counselor, you can contact the Crisis Hotline of Central Florida at (407) 425-2624.

**Benefits:** We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include social benefits (e.g. developing friendships) and the enjoyment of discussing their relationships with others and experiences with exercise.

**Compensation or payment:**

There is no compensation or other payment to you for taking part in this study.

**Confidentiality:** We will limit your personal data collected in this study to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of UCF.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to : Sarah Halbert, Sociology Graduate Student at [REDACTED] or [shalbert@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:shalbert@knights.ucf.edu) or Dr. Elizabeth

Grauerholz, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Sociology at (407) 823- 4241 or by email at [Elizabeth.Grauerholz@ucf.edu](mailto:Elizabeth.Grauerholz@ucf.edu)

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:** Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901. You may also talk to them for any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Results of the research:** If interested, you will be informed of the results of the research in the Spring of 2014.



## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## Interview Guide

- Why do you attend water aerobics?
- Have you always been physically active?
- What do you see as the benefits of water aerobics? Other benefits?
- Describe a typical class.
- Tell me how you feel when you participate in the water aerobics class.
- Do you ever feel self-conscious when you're in the class?
- Have your feelings about your body changed as a result of participating in the water aerobics class?
- For men: What is your relationship like with the women in the class? What are your thoughts about being one of the only male participants in the class? What is your relationship like with the other men in the class?
- For women: What is your relationship like with the men in the class? What are your thoughts about the men participating in the class? What is your relationship like with the other women in the class?
- Does my presence have any effect on your participation in class?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in the class?

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