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Homes away from home: Registered clubs as leisure providers for older people living in the Tweed Heads region of Australia

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ABSTRACT • In Australia licensed clubs provide a contemporary context for many older people's leisure experiences. This study explored the way in which three clubs in the Tweed Heads region of New South Wales cater for older people's leisure needs. Participants comprised 40 club members aged 65 years or more, together with two aged-care/welfare professionals and two local residents affiliated with the National Seniors Association. Information was collected via focus groups and interviews. Findings suggested that clubs attract older people because they offer diverse activities that are enjoyable, affordable, and conducive to health. Older people value the social interaction found in clubs and believe clubs provide respite from domestic pressures. Their criticisms of clubs largely concern unresponsive managers and staff, unsatisfactory facilities, and the despoliation of valued amenities by poker machines. Overall, clubs appear to be a valuable resource for older people who often confront the transitions of later life with limited economic and social resources.

Key words: Leisure, older people, Australian registered and licensed clubs

Introduction

The demographics of the Australian population are changing. Findings from a comparative study of the nation's overall health, reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2007), indicated that Australians

are now the second-longest-living people on the planet, with declining death rates for heart disease, cancer, stroke, and injury.[1] A Japanese baby born today can expect to live for 82.2 years; an Australian baby born today can expect to live for 81.4 years. Longevity varies with gender: Australian men can expect to live for 79 years and women for almost 84 years. While the proportion of older people in the population is increasing, the proportion of younger people is diminishing: Australia's fertility rate was recently estimated to be around 1.9 babies per woman (McCrindle Research, 2008). As commentators such as Hugo (2003) have pointed out, Australia's older population is not evenly distributed over the continent, and this has implications for the provision and funding of aged care services. Demographic ageing is most pronounced in regional areas, since many of these areas tend to attract retirees while at the same time experiencing an out-migration of young adults. Within regional areas, older adults are concentrated in country towns and coastal resort areas such as the Tweed Heads region in New South Wales (NSW).

Predictably the phenomenon of population ageing has sparked considerable debate about the needs of older people and the degree to which these needs can and will be met. Pessimistic scenarios suggest that a small and disgruntled younger generation will struggle to meet the social and health costs imposed by older people and that the 'dependency burden' will be exacerbated by a high level of foreign debt. More optimistic scenarios assume that the degree of burden imposed by older people will vary according to their income, level of home ownership, health status, family support, and community networks; also that this burden can and will be moderated by appropriate policy measures such as delayed access to the old age pension and the abolition of a compulsory retirement age (for discussion of intergenerational transfers, see Jones, 1996: 125–139).

Leisure and older adults

To what extent will older Australians of the future enjoy their extended years of life? Will they regard these years as a blessing or a burden? Will they be able to find meaningful and satisfying activities or will time hang heavily upon their hands? Although these questions cannot be answered decisively, it is reasonable to surmise that the provision of leisure activities for older adults will become an increasingly important area for research and policy innovation, not only by federal and state governments but by private entrepreneurs. As commentators such as Wearing (1995) and Carrigan (1998) have pointed out, the development of leisure opportunities and services for the aged is economically and culturally important in consumer-driven societies where the

1 The longevity of Australia's indigenous population, however, is still relatively low.

traditional youth market is shrinking and many older people have a considerable amount of 'free or un-obligated time' when obligatory duties such as paid work are not being performed (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Leitner & Leitner, 2004: 3). There are many opportunities for industries dealing with financial and home services, the arts and entertainment, sports, travel, and technology; however, personnel within these industries will need to think carefully about the nature of the emerging 'grey market' if they are to avoid making the mistakes of the past (Semon, 1995).

Disengagement theory, as postulated by Cumming and Henry (1961), essentially suggested that older people engage in voluntary social withdrawal after retirement. Challenging this theory, recent studies indicate that many older people are disinclined to withdraw from life and are healthy, happy, active, and resourceful (Carrigan, 1998; Laslett, in Legge & O'Loughlin, 2002; Yang Yang, 2008). Older people's contributions to society via child care, voluntary work, and participation in cultural pursuits are now well documented (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; Tanner 2007). Ideas regarding suitable policies and programs for older people have already started to shift; for example, Wearing (1995) noted that the development of masters (or veterans) events in swimming and athletics and the accomplishments of some older participants had undercut the traditional therapeutic approach to sports activities.

Table 1. Benefits of leisure activities

Physiological Benefits	Social/ Psychological/ Emotional Benefits
Improved Circulation	Greater Psychological Well-being
Improved Respiration	Higher Quality of Life
Greater Flexibility	Higher Morale and Life Satisfaction
Greater Strength	Higher Self-esteem, Self-concept, and Self-efficacy
Greater Endurance	Keener Mental Abilities
More Energy	Feelings of Achievement and Accomplishment
Lower Blood Pressure	Greater Optimism
Lower Cholesterol	Greater Levels of Social Interaction
Improved Mobility	Laughter
Greater Physical Independence	Lower Anxiety and Hostility
Greater Longevity	Lower Incidence of Loneliness and Depression
Improved General Health	Improved Perceived Health
Reduced Risk of Osteoporotic Factures	Reduced Fear of Falling
Reduced Risk of Falls	

Source: Leitner & Leitner (2004: 17)

Increasing interest in leisure can also be predicted on the basis of research findings suggesting that leisure participation has the potential to bring physiological, psychological, social, and emotional benefits to people in all age brackets. Table 1 enumerates the range of benefits identified by Leitner and Leitner (2004: 17).

Although the benefits of leisure participation are now well documented, studies suggest that older people differ in their motivation and capacity to undertake leisure activities. Exemplifying this point, Cutler Riddick and Stewart's (1994) study regarding the importance of leisure to the life satisfaction of older female retirees concluded that these women displayed negative attitudes towards the development of new hobbies and other leisure activities as well as a low level of life satisfaction. The women's negative attitudes were attributed, in part, to their (self-reported) fair or poor health. Reviewing Cutler Riddick and Stewart's findings in light of theoretical models, Siegenthaler (1996) suggested that people who perceive their leisure options as limited may feel less motivated and consequently have less inclination to participate. Health problems are not the only barrier to older people's leisure participation — additional barriers noted in the literature include a lack of income and transport, a lack of skills, the weather, and the absence of a partner or companions (McGuire, 1983; Losier, Bourque, & Vallerand, 1993; Tanner, 2007).

A number of theorists have developed models of ageing that identify processes whereby older people confront difficulties and attempt to stabilise and protect their sense of self. Brandstadter and Greve (1994) posited three key processes. The first involves problem-directed action to alter situations so that they are better aligned with goals and values that have import for individual identity. The second involves the adjustment of personal goals and values. The third concerns psychological 'immunising' processes, that is, how older people absorb and interpret information in order to maintain a positive self-concept. In combination these three processes indicate the various ways in which leisure activities may help older people to maintain a positive sense of identity. To take one example, a professional athlete who can no longer compete may downplay the significance of retirement by undertaking voluntary coaching, thereby preserving a sense of status that previously emanated from his or her work. Exploring the implications of these processes for practice, Brandstadter and Greve advised that service providers should understand older people's values and goals, facilitate the substitution of goals and resources, and observe how older people represented themselves to self and others.

A different perspective was taken by Tanner (2007), who acknowledged the different contributions that models of ageing had made but also identified

their limitations. In essence, she saw these models as narrow and simplistic, contending that they focused largely on individual psychology. As a consequence, they ignored the social context in which particular goals and values became significant as well as external factors affecting choices in regard to coping strategies.

Following Tanner's caveat, the present study focused on older people's experiences and perceptions in regard to a specific type of local venue, namely licensed social (and 'registered') clubs. Within Australia, registered and licensed clubs are mainly non-profit organisations created by groups of people who wish to pursue common interests. These 'common interests' may encompass social, community, sports, veteran, ethnic, professional, occupational, or religious concerns (Registered Clubs Association NSW, 2004). Along with hospitality services (drinking facilities, meals, and gambling), registered clubs have traditionally provided many different leisure and cultural activities. According to Hing (2006), the facilities of Penrith Rugby League Club in 1995 included a nightclub, a cinema, tennis courts, a golf driving range, and cable skiing. For a modest annual fee people can join clubs and use facilities such as these; indeed, membership fees have sometimes been as low as two dollars per year (Hing, 2006).

In light of the above it comes as no surprise that clubs have been found to play a substantial role in the social and recreational lives of many Australian adults (Oxley, 1978; Lynch & Veal, 2006), and to be especially popular with older people (Productivity Commission, 1999; Dawson, in Simpson-Young & Russell, 2007). Commenting on club use by NSW residents in 2007, the Allen Consulting Group (2008) reported that since 2003, memberships had grown to around 5.5 million. This represented an increase of 700 000 memberships in the four-year period, and equated to one membership for every adult resident in NSW. Making further observations on club membership, Hing (2006) noted that clubs catered largely for middle- and working-class individuals and that people with a 'social membership' could now use a club's facilities without pursuing the common interest for which the club was initially established.

Although studies regarding Australian registered clubs are gradually accumulating (see, e.g., McMillen, 1996; Poroch, 1996; Hing, Breen, & Weeks, 2002; Hing, 2006), older people's experiences and perspectives in regard to these venues have to date received little scholarly attention. The recent study by Simpson-Young and Russell (2007) is a notable exception.

Study aims and research questions

The present study's primary aim was to explore the experiences and perspectives of older people in regard to club use. In the context of the study, the term 'older people' denoted people aged 65 years or more. The Tweed Heads region of Australia provided a geographic focus for the study: this region contains a range of clubs and is attractive to retirees. Key research questions included the following: How do older people use registered clubs and what aspects of these clubs attract them? How do they experience and interpret their involvement with clubs? What factors facilitate their involvement, or alternatively, constitute barriers? What role do clubs play in their lives overall? Essentially, the present study sought to answer these questions by engaging with older club goers directly and inviting them to describe their inner worlds.

Research approach and method

The research approach

The research approach was shaped by the research questions, and because these questions concerned experiences, perceptions, meanings, and interpretations, a qualitative approach was preferred. Underpinning assumptions in regard to methodology were, firstly, that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual (Ponterotto, 2005: 129) and, secondly, that people's attitudes and perceptions are determined by their interactions with others (Lewis, 1999).

Participants and recruitment

Participants were drawn from three clubs in the Tweed Heads region. Only club goers over the age of 65 were included in the sample. To recruit participants, an advertisement explaining the research and asking for volunteers was placed on each club's notice board. When few people responded, club managers publicly called for volunteers at a popular club social activity. Each person who came forward was given a copy of the advertisement regarding the research. To recruit additional participants who could provide a wider picture regarding clubs and other leisure facilities in the Tweed Heads region, the researchers also distributed information about the study to local organisations that were in some way involved with seniors groups.

Data gathering methods

Focus groups lasting from one to two hours were used to gather data from the older club goers. Relative to individual interviews, focus groups have been found to be a time-efficient way of collecting data from a range of people. They allow researchers to ask questions and permit group members to rein-

force, challenge, and/or elaborate on each other's ideas. More detailed and nuanced information becomes available as people share their experiences and perspectives and respond to what others say (Patton, 1990). In-depth, semi-structured interviews, as described by Zikmund (2000), were used to gather data from the second group of participants. These interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, at a location convenient for each participant. Key questions for both the focus groups and the individual interviews were formulated beforehand to keep participants on track and ensure the best use of time. These questions partly concerned older people's recreational interests and needs and their motivations for club use. They also concerned the costs and benefits of club membership, that is the impact of club attendance on patrons' physical health and psychological wellbeing. With participants' permission, all data from the focus groups and the interviews were recorded on audiotape and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed the inductive processes described by Braun and Clarke (2006). As these theorists point out, this form of analysis is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and may be an essentialist or realist method 'which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81). In the preliminary stage, conceptual labels (codes) were attached to segments of text. The codes were then collated and sorted into potential or candidate themes relating to a research question. Through an additional process of discussion (see below), the candidate themes were reviewed, ordered as a set of major and minor themes, and labelled (Berg, 1995). Four overarching themes emerged. These were titled as follows: (1) Club Activities Offered and Utilised, (2) Factors Encouraging and Facilitating the Use of Clubs, (3) Personal Benefits Associated with Club Membership, and (4) Negative Aspects of Clubs.

Results

Participants

A total of 40 people — 25 females and 15 males — participated in the focus groups. All were aged 65 years or more. The oldest person was in her mid-eighties. Most reported that they had joined several clubs in the Tweed Heads region. With reference to the club where the focus groups took place, their comments indicated that membership duration ranged from two to 27 years. Some appeared to spend considerable time at clubs, indicating that they went to a club four to five times per week. Approximately one-third stated that they engaged in some form of physical activity within a club each week.

The second group of participants included two aged-care/welfare professionals working in the local area and two local residents who were members of the National Seniors Association (NSA).

Findings

1. Club Activities Offered and Utilised

Focus group participants spent some time describing the range of activities offered by local clubs and the activities they themselves undertook. As indicated below, the remaining participants did not always agree with their views.

1.1 Activities offered by local clubs. Testifying to the range of activities provided by clubs in the Tweeds Heads region, focus group participants reported that they were involved in eating meals, drinking, gambling, promotions, dancing, movies, shows, entertainment, music, indoor and outdoor sport, aerobics, cards, arts, crafts, and charity work.

1.2 The most used activities and/or services. Collectively, focus group participants suggested that the three most regularly used and popular club amenities were the restaurants or other food outlets, the bars, and the gaming venues. The provision of inexpensive food and drink was perceived as a core part of club business, and members' ability to eat out cheaply in part accounted for clubs' appeal. Talking to people also appeared to be a very common and valued activity: '*Usually we have a drink and a win on the pokies [general laughter] . . . we do enjoy this club in particular. We enjoy the bingo and the promotions they have here. But aside from that, it is a social outing for us. We are not members of bowling clubs or anything like that — we really enjoy coming to this club. People are nice here.*'

1.3 Limitations in club activities. Focus group participants compared clubs in the local area with reference to the diversity and appeal of the activities offered. Collectively, they seemed reasonably satisfied with the range of activities available, with several indicating that they used the facilities of several clubs. The professionals were less positive, contending that clubs offered relatively passive forms of recreation and should do more to extend patrons' skills and interests. One suggested that club members could be encouraged to play musical instruments, join a band, or sing in a choir. An NSA member likewise pointed to limitations in club offerings, observing that guest speakers engaged by the NSA provided '*a bit more intellectual content for people who want it.*'

2. Factors Encouraging and Facilitating the Use of Clubs

Comments made by both groups of participants shed light on factors that encouraged and facilitated the use of clubs. As indicated below, these factors included the affordability and diversity of club activities, the timing of activities, issues of accessibility, safety and support, and the presence of familiar people.

2.1. Affordable activities. Focus group participants constantly underlined the inexpensive nature of club activities: *'You can get a three-course meal for $6.95.'* Raffles and members' draws were not only seen as fun but were appreciated because of the opportunities they provided to win money or goods. Clubs were applauded for giving value for money, and compared for their generosity: *'they give 20 free breakfast tickets, and Easter eggs and Christmas cakes.'* The entertainment and facilities that local clubs provided were deemed to surpass those found in other areas of Australia:

> *The shows are wonderful, of such a high standard. When we were younger we'd go to the Christmas shows and the Tivoli. The Tivoli shows get better and better.*
>
> *I'm from Melbourne and we didn't have anything like this there. The shows are cheaper than in Melbourne.*
>
> *The clubs in Sydney have nothing like the facilities and range of entertainment.*

While focus group participants clearly enjoyed the sense of getting a bargain, they were aware that club members often spent additional money on gambling activities. With wry humour, a number acknowledged that they themselves enjoyed 'a flutter' and often lost money on poker machines. None confessed to having a gambling problem; rather, their comments suggested that gambling facilities enlarged clubs' repertoire of activities and that gambling was usually a harmless indulgence: *'My wife plays the pokies or bingo while I go to the shows.'* They further argued that without this revenue stream, members' costs would increase.

2.2 Diversity of activities. Comments from focus group participants suggested that clubs attracted and retained a heterogeneous group of members by virtue of offering a large and diverse range of activities. As indicated below, these activities catered for not only people with different interests, but people with different levels of fitness. Highlighting their willingness to be active rather than passive consumers, some focus group participants reported that they

and others had occasionally approached club managers and staff in order to obtain additional activities or amenities. Their requests were not always heeded; indeed, one couple reported that they had terminated their club membership after a rebuff. Collectively, these participants paid tribute to club managers who were friendly, responsive, and respectful: *'Because the management here in the club are overwhelming to help us get everything we need. You only have to ask something and they will provide it.'*

2.3 *Timing of activities*. Several individuals disclosed that their lives were structured around different club activities, arguing that this was possible and reasonable given that they had no family responsibilities and needed a social outlet. One man indicated that he could occupy his time during the week by drawing on the facilities of one club only: *'I've been a member for 13 years . . . I come here every day. Sometimes I am here twice a day. Come to bingo Monday to Friday, then for the members' draws on Tuesday and Thursday nights and for the promotions on Saturdays. Well, I'm on my own, so I can do what I want. And it's a social outlet and not very expensive.'*

Daytime activities were important when people's sight had deteriorated: *'On Saturday mornings — I have bad eyes — I come and listen to the pianist. I also come for the daytime shows. They are good for the elderly, who don't go out at night.'*

For one participant, freedom of choice in regard to club attendance was a crucial issue. As he pointed out, people who were social members had no time constraints — they could go to their club if and when they felt inclined:

> *. . . if you are a member of a bowling club, or a team, you have to be there at 11 am for roll-up. Being a member of a club such as this, you can go if you want to . . . I don't have to go to any club I don't want to. You are your own master to a large degree . . . it is so relaxed'.*

Conversely, other participants mentioned the compulsion created by clubs' use of incentives, noting that raffle prizes were forfeited if winners were not on-site at the time of the draw.

2.4 Accessibility of activities. Many participants emphasised that the provision of free transport made clubs available to older people who did not drive and/or had difficulty in accessing public transport: *'Why this club is popular is that there is the free bus that picks them up and brings them [older people] here and then takes them home. And that is a big help for those that don't have cars.'* The potential for the frail aged to be marginalised was noted by one professional,

who noted that these people were confined to their homes if they could not walk to a bus stop and were not collected at their door.

2.5 Safety and support. Safety issues were discussed by a number of participants, who made various cautionary remarks: '*You need to be careful. You don't know who is around.*' Nonetheless, clubs were generally considered to be safe venues for older people, partly because staff members were friendly and helpful in the main when difficulties or problems arose: '*You can't knock the staff here, they're tremendous. I have been to clubs where you can't get anyone to help you. We know all the staff here.*'

2.6 Presence of familiar people. Several focus group participants noted that attending clubs was not a daunting social experience since they usually encountered people they already knew. For one individual who had no partner and consequently came alone, the presence of familiar faces was especially important: '*I have no problem coming here being on my own, because there are so many people I know. If I walk into [name of another club], it is different.*' Endorsing the notion that clubs helped older people to link up socially, an NSA representative described the Tweed Heads region as 'a *retirement paradise*' that older people often chose to settle in because it was well known for '*retirement and club life*'.

3. Personal Benefits Associated with Club Membership

According to focus group members, participation in club activities brought patrons many personal benefits. These included social interaction, relief from domestic pressures and constrictions, and the maintenance of physical and mental abilities.

3.1 Social interaction. A few focus group participants said that meeting different people and hearing their opinions was one of the most enjoyable aspects of club life. Several indicated that they liked being acknowledged by staff members at the club and relished opportunities for good-humoured teasing and banter. The friendliness of club members and staff, together with the provision of facilities that allowed people to sit and talk in comfort were mentioned as reasons for joining one club rather than another: '*This is a friendlier club; there is a quiet area where you can sit and not play the pokies.*' In some instances social contacts made in the context of club activities eventually flowered into more intimate and enduring relationships that were pursued in other settings. One woman summarised her experiences as follows:

> When I first started here I was line dancing, and I met five or six ladies. It was very social. I no longer line dance but we all meet on a regular basis, we all go out for lunch with each other on our birthdays. You can form good friendships through a club. I met my husband through a club.

Female focus group members also emphasised that clubs provided a forum where interests could be shared, noting that patrons often undertook art and craft activities as they sat and talked:

> *At the same time we are knitting, crocheting, making bed socks, and swapping patterns. See, that's the whole thing, isn't it? We don't come in just with our handbag — we come in with our whole other bag as well with the knitting or a pattern or crochet.*

Commenting more generally on older people's leisure needs, one professional remarked: *'Social interaction is huge. A lot of older people are living by themselves, so they go out to link up with other people.'* An NSA member echoed this view: *'Many [older] people are bored and isolated.'*

3.2 Relief from domestic pressures and constrictions. Observations made by a number of focus group participants suggested that their residence was not always a haven; rather, it was a place of loneliness, boredom and drudgery:

> *The people at home need to get that breakout; not to be confined at home all the time.*

> *You can't spend all day between four walls.*

> *Who wants to stay home and do housework? It's always there and when you go out somewhere you get it done faster and quicker.*

For these participants, clubs provided an escape route from family responsibilities and other people's irritating traits or demands. Describing the sense of relief he obtained from bingo, one man said: *'I feel better if I play . . . and then, when you go home, you can hide the car, pretend you are not home.'* For another, bingo offered a welcome diversion from child minding: *'I have my grandchildren just about every day of the week . . . but I still make sure that I have my own time to go out.'*

3.3. Maintenance of emotional health. A number of participants argued that social isolation led to depression and saw involvement in club activities as a

preventive measure. Some told anecdotes about individuals they knew, arguing that the routines and social networks that clubs helped to establish were important in getting people out of bed and out of the house: *'We'd all be like that [withdrawn and apathetic] if we didn't have somewhere to go.'* One recounted her personal story as follows:

> *My husband is in Sydney looking after his disabled sister. We only talk on the phone in the mornings . . . I don't want to go down there with him . . . if I didn't have the grandkids I'd be in bed with those other depressed people. And that's only my story.*

3.4 Maintenance of physical fitness. In the opinion of one professional, only a minority of club patrons were interested in physical exercise. By contrast, roughly one-third of focus group participants highlighted their enjoyment of sporting activities and the role of exercise in keeping their body fit. As one observed, sports such as table tennis kept arthritic joints moving. Several individuals emphasised the regularity and frequency of their sporting activities:

> *I come to the club every day either for bowling or whatever.*

> *Table tennis is our main focus . . . [we] come to the club three times a week and three times for meals.*

> *. . . and if you are a bowler it is a challenge to come back the next day and play after you have played badly.*

By contrast, some noted that chronic illnesses or the ageing process in general had diminished their physical capacities and forced them to alter their exercise regime. Bowling was a replacement activity for one woman who could no longer participate in rock-and-roll dancing. For another, bowling was an activity of the past: *'I'm too old to hold a bowl anymore.'*

3.5 Maintenance of mental agility. Keeping mentally alert was a goal mentioned by a number of focus group participants. Various activities were deemed to provide mental stimulation; for example, playing cards was described as '*good mental exercise*'. Bingo, line dancing, craft hobbies, artwork, and formal classes (e.g., classes dealing with information technology) were likewise seen as enjoyable recreational activities that kept the mind active.

4. Negative aspects of clubs

With reference to the negative aspects of clubs, participants referred to design features and furnishings, passive smoking, issues associated with gambling, and differences between stakeholder groups. The impact of clubs on other local amenities was also mentioned.

4.1 Club design and furnishings. The physical design of clubs and the quality of fittings were points of discussion in both the focus groups and individual interviews. Focus group participants expressed an appreciation of clubs that had comfortable furniture and places where patrons could sit and rest or just talk quietly. They wanted bingo rooms that were quiet and well lit and comfortable chairs that did not impede blood circulation. Clashes in the use of space — in particular, the spread of poker machines throughout club facilities — drew adverse comment. A number of individuals complained that poker machines had been moved into areas used for dancing, bingo, and musical performances. The physical scale of clubs and their glitzy ambience were likewise criticised; for example, one participant surmised that newcomers felt intimidated and another said that the lights and noise of clubs made entry like '*going into a spaceship*'.

4.2 Passive smoking. The potential for club environments to adversely affect patrons' health was discussed by a number of participants. One professional conceded that clubs gave older people something to do, but also expressed disapproval as follows: '*Clubs are very smoky venues and thus not healthy for older people . . . If you have a hearing aid you can be quite alienated in that environment. It is enclosed and an unreal environment in air-conditioning all day . . . and then they [older patrons] come out into the heat*'. Non-smokers in the focus groups complained that smoke tended to percolate through club premises and that certain spatial layouts obliged all patrons to walk through smoky areas.

4.3 Problem gambling. As indicated above, the issue of gambling attracted disparate and ambivalent responses. Some focus group participants disliked the proliferation of poker machines, but believed that these machines provided a significant revenue stream for clubs and were a necessary evil if clubs were to survive: '*Poker machines, [but] someone has to pay the taxman.*' Obliquely acknowledging the potential for addiction, a few intimated that club members looked out for each other, and would quickly intervene if someone they knew appeared to be at risk. The strongest opposition to gambling activities came from one NSA member, who believed that these activities constituted a

safety risk for patrons, especially those who had a low income and were local residents rather than tourists.

4.4 The 'young–old' divide. The competing needs and interests of different member groups were touched on by a few participants. One found the club less pleasant at weekends when *'riffraff'* attended; another suggested that older people were *'at risk on the dance floor'*. Varied attendance times were seen to keep different age groups apart: *'. . . the clubs here are all grey power during the day and the young ones at night. They make more noise than we do, and they spend money and drink.'*

4.5 Impact of clubs on other amenities and services. Both NSA members discussed the value of clubs with reference to the wider local environment. In the view of one, the success of clubs was double-edged, partly because their achievements compromised the development and viability of alternative leisure outlets, with restaurants being especially affected. The other disagreed slightly, suggesting that the more fundamental issue was the influx of a disproportionate number of seniors into the region and the consequent 'skewing' of local services and amenities.

Discussion

As indicated above, the present study primarily explored how older people living in the Tweeds Head region of Australia make use of registered clubs and interpret their experiences at these venues. Collectively, participants' comments suggest that clubs hold appeal because they provide a safe and familiar environment and sponsor a range of enjoyable activities. Because these activities are affordable and suitably scheduled, they help older people to occupy and structure their abundant free time. By providing periods of distraction and engrossment, they also offer a refreshing break from daily stressors (for further discussion regarding stress release, see Kleiber & Hutchinson, 2002). The diversity of these activities assists older people whose health is in decline; indeed, the popularity of bingo and poker machine gambling may partly reflect the sedentary nature of these activities and their indoor setting. Club buses provide freedom of movement to older people who might otherwise be homebound. In addition, clubs provide a forum where older people can meet, talk, and receive social acknowledgement on a regular basis. They thus help to foster a sense of connectedness and may reduce the loneliness that older people often experience as a result of retirement, bereavement, and children moving away.

The older people who participated in the present study spoke candidly about the tribulations of the ageing process and domestic stressors, but often

used a wry humour to alleviate gloom. At the same time, they highlighted their competencies and desire to lead a full life. Collectively, they portrayed themselves as discerning consumers with an eye for a bargain, and as socially gregarious and health-conscious individuals who drew on club resources to keep physically and mentally fit. These findings resonate with those reported in previous studies; for example, Simpson-Young and Russell (2007) concluded that club use contributes to older club-goers' social integration, sense of control, and positive identity, as well as facilitating the management of stressors in day-to-day life. Additional findings reported by Tanner (2007) and Thompson et al. (1990) highlight the importance older people attach to keeping busy and presenting themselves to others as busy and productive. According to Tanner (2007), 'busyness' is seen as a bulwark against depression and physical deterioration. Observations made by participants in the present study suggest that busyness may also signify virtues such as fortitude, self-control, and a refusal to succumb to pointless despair.

Findings from the present study have further links with the literature concerning older people's quality of life. A study by Gabriel and Bowling (2004) concluded that older people tie quality of life to: friendly and supportive neighbours; a comfortable and accessible public transport system; good local facilities; and an income level that permits not only a decent daily living standard, but periodic breaks in routine and involvement in desired activities.

Several limitations to the present study need to be noted. Specifically, the study relies on a voluntary sample of older club members. Most participants were female, as is usual with volunteer samples (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 1998). The experiences and perspectives of these participants may differ from those of other club patrons; indeed, it is reasonable to assume that individuals with a strong commitment to clubs would have had the greatest motivation to volunteer. In addition, the study is small and exploratory in nature, taking participants' statements at face value. Many of the issues it raises warrant further and more detailed exploration; for example, it is not clear whether participants mixed largely with 'their own kind' in the club context or whether this context promoted the development of friendships across traditional social cleavages.

These limitations being noted, a number of areas can be recommended as worthy of future enquiry. One concerns the leisure-related goals, values, and behaviours of single women in the 'old-old' age group, that is those aged 80 years or more. These women are an important target group for policy makers and leisure providers given gender differences in longevity. In future years they will comprise a greater proportion of the older population and

this gender imbalance will increase with age. They are likely to be poorer than men, with estimates suggesting that by 2019 they will (on average) have half the amount of superannuation that men will have (Vecchio & Jackson, 2002). By implication, they are more likely than men to live alone as they age and, as noted above, may be reluctant to participate in leisure activities due to age-related health problems.

A second area of study concerns the governance of clubs. Clubs (at least in some instances) are large and substantial businesses open to the public at large. There are positives in this situation — as Tanner (2007) has pointed out, older people's involvement with 'ordinary' or mainstream organisations may have cognitive as well as practical implications, stimulating feelings of citizenship and inclusion. On the other hand, organisations with multiple stakeholder groups must determine the best ways to balance competing needs and interests. The potential for older club members to be marginalised has been noted in previous literature (Simpson-Young & Russell, 2007). Hing (2006) has raised additional and wider concerns regarding clubs' tendency to stray from their original mission regarding social and community benefit. By implication, it is worthwhile to know more about how clubs are being run, by whom, and in whose interests.

Older people's gambling in clubs, and the measures clubs take (or do not take) to reduce excessive gambling, constitute a third area of study. Recent findings from both Australian (Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 1997) and overseas studies (Hirsch, 2000; McNeilly & Burke, 2001), indicate that older people are largely responsible for an upsurge in gambling. Although there is no consistent evidence to suggest that older people are especially prone to become problem or pathological gamblers (Nixon, Solowoniuk, Hagen, & Williams, 2005), they are nonetheless an 'at risk' group, and as Pavalako (2002: 202–203) has observed, are often targeted by the gambling industry on the assumption that they have income and time to spare.

Conclusion

Current demographic trends in Australia make leisure provisions for older people an important area of enquiry for policy makers and researchers. Knowledge generated by the present study illuminates some of the ways in which older people in the Tweed Heads region of Australia use clubs and construe the value of these venues to themselves and others. Findings from this study provide a starting point for policy development at all levels of government and may assist commercial entrepreneurs who seek to capitalise on the opportunities created by the rise of older consumer groups.

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