



Article

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Résumé

L'appartenance est un besoin humain essentiel à notre bien-être quand nous vieillissons. Les attitudes âgistes, les stéréotypes et les transitions de vie tendent à compromettre le vécu de l'appartenance chez les personnes âgées. On sait que l'engagement dans la communauté peut favoriser le développement de relations sociales qui entretiennent l'appartenance plus tard dans la vie, mais on en sait peu sur la façon dont l'appartenance est perçue et vécue par les personnes âgées. Cet article a pour but de communiquer les résultats d'une étude menée auprès de membres d'un centre communautaire pour personnes âgées de 50 ans et plus, au sujet de leurs perceptions et de leur vécu de l'appartenance. Les résultats de l'étude soulignent les répercussions des transitions de vie sur le vécu de l'appartenance, et révèlent les caractéristiques d'une expérience d'appartenance, notamment des sentiments de valorisation, d'accueil et d'acceptation, l'accès à des possibilités de créer des liens et la volonté d'appartenir. À partir de ces résultats, nous suggérons des moyens d'améliorer l'appartenance chez les personnes âgées.

Abstract

Belonging is a pervasive human need that is vital to our well-being as we age. Ageist attitudes, stereotyping, and life transitions tend to jeopardise older adults' experiences of belonging. Although community involvement can lead to the development of social relationships that support belonging in older adulthood, little is known about how belonging is perceived and experienced by older adults. The purpose of this article is to share findings from research conducted with members of a community centre for people 50 years of age and older who shared their perceptions and experiences of belonging. Findings highlight the ways that age-related life transitions affect experiences of belonging. Findings also reveal that features of a belonging experience include feeling worthwhile, being welcomed and accepted, having opportunities for connection, and seeking to belong. We draw from these findings to suggest ways to enhance belonging for older adults.

Introduction

Belonging, defined by Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusk, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992, p.173) as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment, so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” is a pervasive human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Despite its necessity, not all people experience what it means to belong. As we age, for example, we are more apt to encounter circumstances that jeopardise our sense of belonging (Nolan, 2011). Aging can bring about physical changes, such as decreased mobility, sensory impairments, and chronic illness that lead to a diminution of belonging caused by a reduction in social activities (Teater & Chonody, 2020). Transitions typically experienced later in life, such as retirement and widowhood, can also threaten belonging (Kissane & McLaren, 2006; Nolan, 2011). These transitions can bring about an increased risk of loneliness and social isolation resulting from a greater tendency to live alone on a limited income (Naud & Levasseur, 2021; Nolan, 2011; World Health Organization, 2021). Loneliness and social isolation, distinct but related terms, resulting from unmet social needs (Bruce et al., 2019) and lack of social contacts (Courtin & Knapp, 2017), are considered to be incongruous with belonging (Toepoel, 2013).

However, despite the risk of loneliness and social isolation that corresponds with aging, opportunities for older adults to experience a sense of belonging within their communities have been found to safeguard against loneliness, social isolation, and depression (Kitchen, Williams, & Chowhan, 2012; Nolan, 2011). Older adults who experience a strong sense of belonging are more apt to believe that they have the necessary coping skills to endure times of crisis (Kissane & McLaren, 2006).

Research focused on belonging for older adults living in Canada provides an inconclusive picture of the relationship between aging and belonging. Some research has suggested

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experiences of belonging are readily available for older Canadians. Kitchen et al. (2012), for example, reported that individuals over the age of 65 living in Canada are more likely to feel a strong sense of belonging than individuals between the ages of 45 and 64. Similarly, in 2016, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing released a national report suggesting that feelings of belonging are strongest among older Canadians. Research with contrasting findings, however, proposes that experiences of belonging can be elusive for older Canadians, with one of five reporting regularly experiencing loneliness (Gilmour, 2012). A low sense of belonging has been identified as a strong predictor of depression (Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, & Hoyle, 2002), which has been the most commonly reported mental health challenge for Canadians over the age of 65 (Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health, 2017). Ageism has also received increasing attention for compromising older adults' sense of belonging given that negative attitudes toward older adults lead to experiences of discrimination and exclusion (Nolan, 2011). Palmore (2004) reported that ageism is widespread in Canada, with 91 per cent of older adults reporting experiencing the affects of ageism.

Gaps and inconsistencies in what we know about experiences and perceptions of belonging as people age is unsurprising, considering that a range of factors can influence the aging experience. However, given that belonging is such a critical dimension of well-being for older adults (Nolan, 2011; Russell, Nyame-Mensah, de Wit, & Handy, 2019), we must continuously seek to advance our understanding of the connections between aging and belonging. Specifically, common threats to belonging experienced in older adulthood coupled with the detrimental consequences of non-belonging, make it imperative to deepen our understanding of what contributes to and hinders a sense of belonging as people age. The purpose of our study was to contribute to the knowledge base necessary to enhance belonging for older adults by exploring perceptions and experiences of belonging for older adults who are members of a community centre for people 50 years of age and older located in Montreal, Canada. To give context to the insights shared with us by participants, we first discuss existing literature examining belonging and aging with a specific focus on the effects of ageism on belonging.

Aging and Belonging

Much of the literature pertaining to belonging links the concept to social and psychological factors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). Hagerty et al. (1992) identified being valued and needed by and important to other people, groups, or environments as important attributes of belonging. Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2013) similarly emphasised the relationship between being valued and respected and belonging. The association of belonging with being valued and respected makes it easy to see how negative perceptions of aging, collectively referred to as ageism, would stand in the way of belonging for older adults.

Ageism is defined as "a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and the middle-aged – a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, and disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (Butler, 1969, p. 243). Emerging from Western societies (Butler, 1969; Holroyd, Dahlke, Fehr, Jung, & Hunter, 2009; Levy & Macdonald, 2016) that tend to place value on economic productivity, pragmatism, and the vigour of youth (Butler, 1969; Phelan, 2008), ageism commonly manifests in stereotypes, myths, subtle avoidance, and discriminatory

practices (Butler, 2010). Ageism has been found to be pervasive in many facets of community life, including health-care related services (i.e., Ayalon, 2016; Phelan, 2008), workplace settings (i.e., Abrams, Swift, & Drury, 2016; Sun, Phillips, & Wong, 2018), community and senior centres (i.e., Gallant & Hutchinson, 2016), and community settings such as libraries (Lenstra, 2017). Ageist stereotypes link older adult's social roles and value in society to their age rather than to their individual situations and abilities (Holroyd et al., 2009). Thus, older adults are apt to experience attitudes and circumstances precluding them from being recognised as integral parts of the communities in which they live, which is a central component to belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992; Mahar et al., 2013).

Persistent exposure to ageism may contribute to the internalization of ageist concepts amongst older people (Helmes & Pachana, 2016). Some studies suggest that internalized ageism can cause older adults to distance themselves from aging and negative age-related stereotypes. Levy and Macdonald (2016) for example, asserted that older people often describe others of the same age as "old" while avoiding referring to themselves using the same language. Similarly, Gallant and Hutchinson (2016) observed members of a seniors' community centre projecting negative aging stereotypes onto other members of the centre while actively distancing themselves from these negative stereotypes.

Ageist ideas may also affect older adults' behavior and socialization patterns. Liao and DeLiema (2021), for example, found that when negative attitudes about aging permeate senior centres, older adults who do not want to be associated with such attitudes tend to stay away. Whereas some older adults may take deliberate actions, such as avoiding senior centres, in order to try to dissociate themselves from age-related stigma, internalization of ageism may cause other older adults to accept powerlessness as a normal part of aging (Phelan, 2008). Gallant and Hutchinson (2016) observed that older adult participants in their study reinforced their own powerlessness by drawing on stereotypes about aging. These findings suggest that internalized ageism can fragment perceptions of self-worth and ability, which may impede older adults' ability to meaningfully engage with and contribute to their community and social contexts, thus negatively affecting their sense of belonging.

Age-related life transitions can also negatively affect older adults' sense of belonging by increasing the likelihood of experiencing social isolation and loneliness (Nolan, 2011). Moving from paid work to retirement, for example, may bring about a diminution of opportunities to meaningfully contribute and engage in regular social interactions (Toepoel, 2013). Widowhood may also result in decreased social interactions given that one's spouse is often a companion for social activities (Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008). Additionally, becoming a widow in older adulthood usually results in older adults living alone (Naud & Levasseur, 2021). As a risk factor for social isolation, living alone compromises opportunities for older adults to experience a sense of belonging (Angus Reid Institute, 2019).

Despite barriers to belonging brought on by ageism and age-related life transitions, research highlights ways that older adults overcome these barriers and discover ways to experience belonging in their communities. Liechty and Genoe (2013) noted that older adults seek opportunities to exercise and contribute their skills and knowledge in their communities through involvement in community-based recreation and leisure venues such as clubs, social groups, and volunteer activities. For example, Broughton, Payne, and Liechty's (2017) study of the role of coffee groups in the

lives of older men found that these social groups met participants' needs for sense of purpose, which in turn contributed to their sense of belonging. Studies have also shown that volunteering in older adulthood contributes to a sense of community and sense of purpose, while enhancing psychological well-being (e.g., Edwards, 2021; Johnson, Latham-Mintus, & Poey, 2018). Further, when older adults play an active role in the community spaces they frequent (e.g., being involved in decision making and taking on leadership roles), it contributes to their feeling valued and enhances belonging (Fortune et al., 2021; Salari, Brown, & Eaton, 2006). Older adults who regularly participated in a shared community art space (known as an art hive), for example, spoke about deriving a sense of belonging from playing an integral role in the creation of the space by welcoming newcomers, enlivening the space with music and food, and helping with set-up and clean-up (Fortune et al., 2021).

In addition to fulfilling the need for valued social roles and a sense of purpose, community involvement can provide opportunities for meaningful social connections and friendships in older adulthood (Fortune et al., 2021). Humans have a natural drive to form and preserve social bonds through face-to-face personal interactions that create feelings of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Involvement in community recreation and leisure provides opportunities for recurrent interactions that help to forge social relationships conducive to experiencing belonging and well-being in older adulthood (Broughton et al., 2017; Capalb, O'Halloran, & Liamputtong, 2014; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011). Maidment and Macfarlane (2011) for example, observed that older women who participated in women's craft groups emphasised friendship, support, and the relational aspects of their involvement, which they perceived to improve their well-being. Further, research has shown that development of friendships and strong social ties within the context of community-based physical activity programs alleviates loneliness and social isolation, enhances feelings of connection, and motivates older adults to continue their participation in such programs (Capalb et al., 2014).

Summary and Statement of Purpose

Literature discussed in this section suggests that ageism and age-related life transitions have the potential to hinder experiences of belonging, while community recreation and leisure spaces provide opportunities for older adults to experience a sense of purpose and social bonding, which in turn contribute to a sense of belonging. Although these findings are encouraging, studies that have explored the relationship between belonging and aging directly are limited. There is also a gap in the literature related to perceptions and experiences of belonging from the perspectives of older adults. To help address this knowledge gap, this study explored the perceptions and experiences of belonging for older adults who are members of a community centre for people 50 years of age and older located in Montreal, Quebec. By understanding how older adults perceive that their belonging is both enhanced and hindered, this study brings new knowledge to the relationship among belonging, aging, and the role of community recreation and leisure spaces in supporting belonging. The following research questions guided our study:

1. How do community centre members perceive and experience belonging?
2. What role can a community centre play in enhancing belonging for older adults?

Research Context and Methodology

Data collection for this study took place at a community centre located in Montreal, Quebec. The centre has a mission to enhance the quality of life of adults 50 years of age and older. It provides services to thousands of older adults annually, offering an array of arts, education, and wellness programs each season. The centre boasts a volunteer base of more than 900 people, the majority of whom are members of a community of 50 years of age and older. Built on a Jewish heritage, the centre welcomes individuals from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We chose this setting for our research because it would enable us to connect to a large number of older adults and because staff at the centre had expressed a desire to understand how the centre may be contributing to experiences of belonging for its members.

We employed a qualitative approach for this study, using focus groups to collect data with the intent of using the interaction among study participants to generate data related to their social realities of belonging (Morgan, 1996). We used a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit members of the centre. Although we sent an invitation to all members, in an attempt to understand experiences of belonging from multiple perspectives, we worked with centre staff to specifically recruit participants who reflected the diverse ways that members participate in programs and services. For example, after conducting four focus groups with interested members across the general membership, we realised that we were missing members who attend the centre for social services and specialised programming, such as supported conversations for individuals with aphasia. We reached out to staff who work in these areas and arranged to host an additional four focus groups. We conducted eight focus groups that comprised 43 participants in total, with participants in each ranging from 4 to 7. We also conducted six individual interviews with members who wished to participate but were unable to attend a focus group. All focus groups and interviews took place in a private room that was booked at the centre. Both authors facilitated the focus groups, and the first author conducted all individual interviews. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded for purposes of analysis.

Forty-nine members participated in our study; 17 were male and 32 were female, which approximated the gender composition of the centre. Twenty-two participants were volunteers who also participated in educational, leisure, and adapted programming (e.g., exercise classes and rehabilitation for individuals with reduced mobility caused by a progressive neuromuscular disorder or stroke). Seven participants indicated that they participate in educational and leisure programming but do not volunteer. Ten participants received social services such as psychosocial support, social programming, and meals on wheels. Ten participants had aphasia and attended supported conversations as well as other programming. Participants ranged in age from the mid-fifties to mid-nineties. All participants had been members of the centre for at least 1 year, and more than half of the participants had been members for more than 5 years.

Given that the centre is located in an area of Montreal with a high concentration of white, English-speaking, Jewish older adults, membership is generally reflective of this demographic. Participants in this study were also predominantly white, English-speaking, and Jewish older adults. Specifically, 40 participants were white, 6 participants were black, and 3 participants were Asian. Although we did not ask participants to identify their ethno-religious affiliation, most

participants indicated that they were Jewish. We also did not ask about socio-economic status or marital status, but diversity was evident when some participants spoke about living alone on a limited fixed income and other participants described being married and having the financial means to travel on a regular basis.

During focus groups, we asked participants questions about their personal understandings and experiences of belonging generally as well as their reflections on the ways the community centre fosters or hinders their feelings of belonging. Sample questions included:

- What does belonging mean to you?
- When do you most experience a sense of belonging in your life? What are you doing? Whom are you with?
- What are there some things that contribute to your experiences of belonging?
- How do experiences of belonging at the community centre compare and contrast with experiences of belonging in other community spaces?
- What happens at the community centre to foster belonging? What does a community centre that supports belonging as people age look like to you?

We followed the six steps of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze data collected. First, we each familiarised ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading focus group and interview transcripts. Second, we worked separately to identify aspects of the data that were relevant to understanding how belonging is experienced and the factors that both enhance and hinder belonging, making note of initial codes in the margins of our transcripts. Third, we organised codes into groups by identifying patterns of meaning (themes). Fourth, we worked together to discuss the themes that we each identified and determine which themes had sufficient supporting data from focus group and interview transcripts. Based on this process, step five involved reviewing and re-grouping our themes and developing thematic descriptions. During this phase of analysis, we presented our themes to members of the centre and asked for feedback. The feedback we received indicated that our themes resonated with members in attendance. For our final step, we finalised each theme by considering them in relation to our research questions and selecting participant quotes illustrative of the data. We use pseudonyms to distinguish among participants in the reporting of our findings.

Findings: How Older Adult Participants Perceive and Experience Belonging

We organised our findings into two overarching themes: age-related life transitions influence on belonging, and features of a belonging experience in older adulthood. The first theme captures participants' perspectives regarding how their own sense of belonging developed and changed as they aged. The second theme, which we divide into four sub-themes (feeling worthwhile, being welcomed and accepted, having opportunities for connection, and seeking to belong), highlights the particular aspects of experiences that most contribute to participants' sense of belonging.

Age-Related Life Transitions Influence on Belonging

Participants spoke to us about how their perceptions and experiences of belonging fluctuated across their life span. Age-related life transitions, such as retiring from work, having children move out of

the home, becoming a widow, moving out of their community, or receiving a diagnosis of an illness were all examples that participants provided as aspects of aging that affected their sense of belonging.

Some participants described their previous workplaces as settings in which they previously experienced a strong sense of belonging. As Lucy stated: "I loved working. I loved my job. That was my belonging." Circumstances such as transitioning out of the workplace and losing spouses and friends resulted in a shrinking of participants' social worlds: "...the things you want to do, the friends, everything is on a much smaller scale than it was before..." (Betty). Further, transitioning out of roles that participants held throughout their lives created major changes in their self-identity and social positioning, which led to feelings of disconnection: "I no longer have these huge groups to belong to that fill up all my time and now I feel I need these pockets" (Sam). A sense that something was missing from their lives as a result of the loss of paid work, social roles, and relationships became a motivator to seek out new ways to belong for some participants.

I retired three years ago and I was at a job that I loved...It gave me friends, it gave me professional interaction with people, gave me a place to learn... I had this sense of belonging to something. I left that and suddenly I had this part of my life that was empty, and I needed to find something to do, to give me a sense of purpose. (Sandra)

Zelda similarly spoke about her need to seek something to fill the void left by the loss of relationships: "...you have to overcome this period and say, 'hey, wake up. There is something else.'"

Describing her search for belonging after the death of her spouse, Helen captured the relationship between having a place to be, fulfilling a valued role, and belonging.

Belonging means I have a place to go that makes me very happy...My husband passed away six years ago after 66 years of marriage so I was free of having to care for somebody, which I did for many years, and I needed a destination to get me out of the house. I was asked to do volunteering and it gave me a reason to get up, get dressed, and face the world. It made a big difference in my life. It kept me going and it still keeps me going.

Shayna similarly spoke about her need to search for new avenues to belong as her circle of friends diminished: "When you're older, a lot of my friends are starting to die on me now and I want to feel belonging to other people because I think belonging is a very critical word in our world."

This theme suggests that although age-related life transitions affected participants' sense of belonging, these transitions also prompted them to seek out new spaces, experiences, and circumstances that would contribute to their sense of belonging. The next set of themes highlights the types of experiences that most contributed to belonging for participants in this study.

Features of a Belonging Experience in Older Adulthood

When participants discussed the ways that they experience belonging, we heard them describe certain features that were integral to their belonging experience. These features include being welcomed and accepted, having opportunities for connection, and feeling worthwhile. Importantly, participants related the relative importance of these features to the extent to which they were seeking experiences of belonging.

Being welcomed and accepted

Participants regularly noted that environments within which they felt welcomed and accepted contributed to their sense of belonging. Some participants recounted stories of being personally welcomed into a space, usually by someone who took time to greet them with a warm smile. Debbie, for example, discussed the importance of volunteer greeters contributing to belonging at the community centre: "...I think they're the ones that create that sense of welcoming and belonging. You walk through the doors and you know that people at the desk will greet you." Arlene also highlighted that within welcoming spaces, people are comfortable being themselves: "Belonging, to me, means having a sense of comfort and, as you said before, being able to feel like myself in a situation... and that's usually done by people welcoming me or encouraging me, pulling me out."

Openness was a key factor that helped participants feel comfortable and accepted. They emphasised the importance of celebrating diversity and noted that all people should have the opportunity to belong. Some participants described this openness in terms of being accepting and welcoming of individuals from different racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. For example, Betty, a black participant, explained, "If you can come here, whatever the colour of your skin, if you are Jewish, if you are Christian, if you are Muslim—whatever religion you are, you are very welcome."

Participants described how a number of intentional actions helped them to feel welcomed and comfortable being themselves within the community centre. Such actions included staff and volunteers at the centre personally acknowledging them and showing appreciation for their presence and participation in programs and services. As participants explained, these intentional actions contributed to belonging by demonstrating recognition and acceptance: "I have a sense of belonging there because I'm recognised and people remember my name" (Shayna). Similarly, Ruth explained, "I am accepted for who I am and this is important to me." Pam, a participant living with Parkinson's disease, spoke about the judgment she endures in the community because of her illness and acknowledged that acceptance is not easy for her to find outside of the community centre.

There are many people out there who don't understand and they're quick to judge. When I come here, I feel accepted. We all participate in the activities and we have a lot of fun. It makes it joyful. I was involved in things elsewhere but I didn't feel that sense of comfort that I get here. We're all close here – we hear each other.

Having opportunities for connection

Throughout this study, participants made it clear that their connections with other people strongly influence their sense of belonging. For many, opportunities to be around individuals who share common interests, goals, values, or identities made it easier for them to form meaningful relationships. For example, participants who regularly attend exercise programs designed for individuals living with Parkinson's disease explained how individuals whom they met through these programs became a source of support and connection that contributed to their sense of belonging. As Tina explained, "After we have the classes... we get together in the cafeteria and always share a meal and that becomes like another family, so I have a Parkinson's family... And we really care for each other." Tom, another participant who attended these exercise programs, also explained that the common experience of participating

in an exercise class together helped him bond with others in ways that are conducive to belonging. He described, "We've become a little support group to each other, a little community based on the fact that we took the common class together. We all went through it together."

Participants also recounted stories of connecting over shared identities or common experiences such as having similar religious beliefs, being retired, being born in a particular era, or sharing leisure interests. Claire captured the association between shared leisure interests and belonging: "The people I do watercolour with give me a sense of belonging. It is a group of ladies and we have a lot of fun. We laugh. We share a passion for art so it's a lot of fun." Lisa similarly spoke about how her leisure interests help facilitate belonging because she is surrounded by people with whom she shares these interests: "If I follow my energy and my interests, that's where I find belonging because I am with like people who enjoy the same things I do and we're seeking the same kinds of things." The importance of common interests to belonging was also highlighted by Julie when she explained, "Some of the lectures I attend focus on old time movies from my era and the others who come, we have that in common. Because of that mutual interest, we enjoy each others' company." Bella's insight around common interests suggests that any number of things can bring people together in ways that may enhance belonging. As she explained, common interests may simply involve a common desire for connection, "Another definition [of belonging] is a group of people or a couple of people with common interests and objectives. The common interest may be to socialise and get together to meet other people."

Feeling worthwhile

In some cases, age-related transitions not only resulted in the shrinking of participant's social worlds. These transitions also decreased participants' opportunities to engage with and contribute to the community. Participants who found meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities as they aged described a strong sense of purpose that enhanced their sense of belonging: "I think it all ties into having a sense of purpose... [the community centre] is a different kind of belonging and I think for me it ties into fulfilling a need for having purpose in life..." (Dan). Although participants sought out and found their sense of purpose in diverse ways, it was clear that they valued opportunities to give something of themselves to others, often through volunteering. As Carol explained, "I think by volunteering... you belong to somewhere. You make a contribution." Noreen also linked volunteering with belonging: "I feel belonging when I'm helping people, when I've done something good for somebody. I think volunteering makes me feel a sense of belonging."

Participants further emphasised that opportunities to give back to their communities are more likely to enhance belonging if they are personally meaningful and align with participants' skills, interests, and passions: "There are so many places looking for volunteers... You have to find what clicks with you and your personality and what your sense of belonging is" (Mary). Debbie similarly cautioned that belonging is not an automatic outcome of volunteer contributions: "I need to feel passionate about what I'm doing."

Although meaningful opportunities to contribute can enhance belonging, participants also emphasised the importance of being valued and appreciated for their contributions: "...everybody wants to be patted on the back and say hey you did a great job... Everybody wants to feel that they're appreciated and loved and cared about" (Zelda). Notably, participants also spoke about experiencing ageist assumptions that left them feeling undervalued

and unappreciated, effectively hindering their sense of belonging. As Mary explained: "...society places a value based on what you do...once you reach a certain age and are no longer part of what's considered the norm within society, you're no longer considered of value to society..." Being valued for their contributions was important; so too was having their opinions and perspectives valued and respected: "My only comment on belonging is that no matter where it is... it's where you feel your ideas and opinions are respected... Once you get the idea that you're no longer respected, you don't belong..." (Lucy).

Participants who specifically accessed the social services department of the community centre to receive support for mental health did not speak about volunteering as a means of contributing. Nor did they link volunteering with experiences of belonging. However, participants living with mental illness similarly discussed contributing and feeling worthwhile as key aspects of belonging: "Each one of us has something to offer but sometimes with the heaviness of our illness, it is hard to understand that. But we all need to feel worthwhile and that we have something to give" (Ed). Leanne similarly explained:

So many of us have talents. [Name of another participant] is so talented with her ability to listen and find the positive in any situation. I have a crazy sense of humour... Each of us have a unique set of skills that we use when we are here. It's acknowledged and we're able to shine.

Seeking to belong

Although participants acknowledged the need for belonging, they also believed the intricacies of belonging to be unique and personal to the individual. Wes, for example, noted that belonging is different for everybody: "... it's a very personal thing for everybody. I think everybody would have a different definition and feeling about it..." Carol noted that the circumstances through which one person might experience belonging could be isolating for someone else.

I think different people have different needs to belong and for one person sitting home all week might be very isolating, and for another person sitting home all week is just great, thank you very much. Many people need to go out and need to go here and need to go there, but I am quite happy if I don't go out all week. I have plenty of things that keep me occupied. I do not feel isolated. So I think that you need to recognise that there are different levels of need.

Participants further asserted that having different needs related to belonging meant that people had varying levels of motivation or desire to seek out experiences of belonging. As Pam stated, "There's got to be a motivation to belong..." Other participants echoed this statement, explaining that motivation and desire for belonging was their reason for engaging in certain settings or activities: "Well I think a lot of it comes down to motivation too. You have to be motivated to want to do these things. I find so many people my age just stay home, they don't make that effort. But I'm so grateful I can take advantage of these things" (Sherry). Further, some participants noted that they did not experience a sense of belonging in spaces where others did experience a sense of belonging because they did not have desire to belong in that particular space: "I personally was not looking for a sense of belonging. I've been coming here for a number of years and I feel comfortable, but not a sense of belonging" (Scott).

The diverse perceptions and experiences reported by participants indicate the importance of personal choice surrounding how

and where one belongs. For example, participants valued opportunities to choose for themselves how involved their lives were: "I keep pretty busy, as busy as I want to be... like I said [I go to] current events and my weekly volunteering in the cafeteria and that keeps me busy" (Debbie). For others, having awareness that a space or opportunity would be there for them when they needed or wanted to belong was important: "...it's comforting to me because I know that when I'm ready to volunteer, I know that I too can experience that sense of comfort and feeling of belonging..." (Arlene). Therefore, although participants valued having control and choice as to whether or not they would engage in opportunities that might support their sense of belonging, they believed that it was important that these opportunities to belong were available when needed.

Discussion

This study explored how members of a community centre for people 50 years of age and older located in Montreal, Canada perceive and experience belonging. Participants described how age-related life transitions such as retirement, widowhood, moving, and changes in their health status had implications for their identities, social positioning, sense of purpose, and social connections, all of which affected their sense of belonging as they aged. Mahar et al. (2013) emphasised the dynamic aspect of belonging and highlighted interplay between enablers and barriers that influence the extent to which an individual will experience belonging. In this study, we saw how belonging could be dynamic throughout the life course. For example, although age-related life transitions influenced participants' opportunities to experience belonging, these circumstances also led them to seek new opportunities to belong by exploring new places and experiences within their communities. Features identified by participants as contributing to their experiences of belonging as they aged included being welcomed and accepted, having opportunities for connection, and feeling worthwhile.

The Importance of a Welcoming Environment

Participants in this study emphasised the importance of a welcoming environment that incorporated warm, personal greetings and efforts to ensure that everyone was meaningfully included. Such environments helped participants feel comfortable being themselves, which contributed to their sense of belonging. Previous studies have emphasised the importance of a welcoming environment for older adults to experience a sense of belonging. Fortune et al.'s (2021) study of older adults' involvement in art hives, for example, highlighted how experiences of belonging are more apt to occur in spaces where individuals are welcomed and acknowledged with warm greetings that let them know they are in the company of people who care about them and are happy to see them. Similarly, older adults who participated in Gardner's (2011) study experienced belonging within a seniors' community centre when they felt welcomed by centre staff and were able to forge close friendships with others over time.

Participants who may face stigma and judgment because of their mental illness or physical disability also expressed the importance of a welcoming environment. The importance of welcoming environments has been emphasised in literature related to combatting the stigma of mental illness. For example, Hutchinson and Fenton (2018) identified characteristics of welcoming and supportive

environments in mental health settings. Several of these characteristics were consistent with findings from this study. Specifically, similar to what participants shared with us, Hutchinson and Fenton discovered how warm and friendly greetings let people entering a space know that they matter, and that inclusive environments support community participation and a sense of belonging.

Having Opportunities to Connect with Others

Findings from our study support the association between opportunities to forge social connections and relationships and belonging. Participants identified ways that the community centre environment facilitated the development and maintenance of social relationships, and indicated that this is a key feature that they appreciate in other community settings as well. Numerous studies have demonstrated ways that community-based recreation and leisure settings (i.e., clubs, libraries, social groups, and volunteer organisations) offer opportunities for older adults to develop social connections that lead to an enhanced sense of belonging (see Broughton et al., 2017; Capalb et al., 2014; Dalmer, Griffin, Baluk, & Gillett, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018; Liechty & Genoe, 2013; Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011). Often, in these studies, it was found that shared leisure interests formed the basis for connection.

We observed in this study how activities geared toward specific groups or leisure interests (i.e., Parkinson's exercise classes, art classes, lectures on particular topics) created opportunities for participants to be around others who shared common interests, goals, values, or identities. Opportunities to connect over shared identities and experiences led to the creation and maintenance of meaningful social relationships. Klinenberg (2018) emphasised how shared passions and interests remind us of our common humanity. He further asserted that relationships are more likely to grow when people interact regularly with others while doing things they enjoy. Evidence of how common interests set the stage for relationships that support belonging in older adulthood can be found in examples of older women's craft groups (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011), older men's coffee groups (Broughton et al., 2017), art hives (Fortune et al., 2021), and public libraries (Dalmer et al., 2020).

Feeling Worthwhile through Community Involvement

Experiencing a sense of belonging often entails feeling secure, being able to participate, being recognised and valued by others, and fitting in with one's environment (Hagerty et al., 1992; Nolan, 2011). However, transitions between different phases of life and different social roles often affect a sense of belonging for older adults (Russell et al., 2019). Participants discussed how age-related life transitions influenced their sense of belonging because they resulted in both a shrinking of their social world and a perceived loss of purpose. Although participants differed in the extent to which they actively sought out opportunities to belong, they all recognised the need for belonging, and identified fluctuations in belonging through their lives.

Participants discussed a number of ways that involvement in their community, and in the community centre specifically, generated sense of purpose that contributed to feeling worthwhile. One mechanism was through meaningful volunteer opportunities aligned with the participant's skills, passions, and interests. Similar to Hagerty et al.'s (1992) assertions, participants explained that belonging is tied to feeling valued, appreciated, and having one's opinions and feedback listened to, respected, and responded

to. Notably, this was perceived as applicable to all members of the community centre, not just members who volunteered. Participants who were members but did not volunteer described feeling a sense of purpose and belonging in response to feeling heard by staff when they provided feedback and to developing social bonds at the centre (i.e., Parkinson's family).

Resisting and Reinforcing Ageist Ideas

During discussions related specifically to contribution and sense of purpose, we could see how participants in this study were both resisting and reinforcing ageist ideas. At first glance, attaching notions related to contribution with belonging seems to suggest that the value of older adults will diminish unless they actively work to preserve their self worth through purposeful endeavours. Being engaged in life was related to feeling valuable and being able to contribute, often through volunteering (Teater & Chonody, 2020). Russell et al. (2019) argued that the benefits of volunteering are often emphasised for older adults, in part because of increased societal expectations for older adults to remain productive as part of a successful transition from work to retirement. Marshall (2006) however, cautioned that when we associate aging with staying active and remaining productive, we place value on "doing over being" (p. 4), which does little to change negative valuations of aging. Nolan (2011) acknowledged the tendency for older adults to internalise ageism. They do so by believing that they need to be productive to be of value. Yet, as Martinson and Minkler (2006) suggested, emphasising the benefits of community engagement and volunteerism in later life and encouraging older adults to be productive risks stigmatising older adults who do not actively engage with their communities. Stigmatisation occurs through implicit messages conveying that older adults may be of lesser value if they do not contribute to society either through paid employment or volunteer endeavours. Such messages have implications for belonging because they suggest that belonging does not come naturally, and instead must be earned.

Certainly, participants' involvement in the centre's various programs and volunteer initiatives resisted stereotypes brought about by ageist ideas that older adults' social roles and value diminish with age; helping to reframe aging as a time of continued activity, growth, and enjoyment (Nelson, 2016). The diverse ways that participants sought out and experienced a sense of purpose within the context of the community centre as they aged suggests that there are many ways for older adults to meaningfully contribute to their community depending on their individual circumstances, interests, and motivations. Further, participants' readiness to value each other's diverse contributions, whether they be through volunteering, forging social bonds, voicing feedback, actively listening, displaying a sense of humour, or participating in the centre's programs, resists anti-aging discourse that implies a single positive, healthy, or successful way to age. In other words, we could see how appreciating various forms of participation and presence supported belonging by valuing older adults for who they are, not simply for their productivity (Martinson & Minkler, 2006).

Practical Implications

This study highlights a number of implications for practitioners working in community settings designed to provide programs and services for older adults that are conducive to belonging. One such implication is creating a culture that supports belonging through intentional efforts of staff, volunteers, and members/participants to

create a welcoming environment. Based on our findings, one strategy that helps to create a welcoming environment is extending warm and personal greetings to individuals as they enter the space, and taking a genuine interest by learning each person's name and personal attributes. Another strategy involves encouraging individuals to be involved in the space in ways of their choosing (e.g., inviting and encouraging individuals to participate and respecting personal choice in terms of level and type of participation). According to participants of our study, a vital aspect of creating a welcoming environment is working to ensure that older adults of diverse identities and backgrounds will feel at home within the space. Valuing and accepting diversity happens when there are a diverse range of programs and services that reflect variations in individual characteristics, such as religious affiliation, ethnicity, and health status.

Another implication highlighted by this study is the recognition that social connections and subsequent development of relationships are supported by a variety of programming and volunteer opportunities that bring people together around common interests, goals, values, and identities. Participants developed relationships based on shared life experiences (e.g., a similar health diagnosis) and shared passions (e.g., interest in art). Findings from this study remind us that commonality in its many forms can help relationships develop and grow. This realisation suggests that practitioners can support experiences of belonging by offering opportunities for older adults to discover and develop their interests and passions while in the presence of others who share these interests and passions. Findings from this study also highlight the importance of common spaces for informal gathering. As participants shared, they are able to maintain and strengthen their social connections when they have spaces to gather in that are separate from designated program spaces (e.g., a cafeteria or similar type of space to share a coffee or a meal before or after organised programs). This finding lends further support to literature related to the importance of third spaces and social infrastructure for older adults. In addition to community centres, public libraries have received attention for their ability to bring older adults together with members of their community based on shared interests. Dalmer et al. (2020), for example, identified public libraries as essential community spaces for older adults by functioning as third spaces that support valued social connections. Klinenberg (2018) also argued that libraries serve as social infrastructure for older adults by creating opportunities for meaning and purpose through shared social experiences.

The connection between belonging and feeling worthwhile has a number of implications for practice. Perhaps the most obvious implication is providing a variety of opportunities for older adults to experience a sense of purpose, particularly when some of the more traditional pathways for contributing (e.g., paid work or taking care of others) may be no longer available. As our findings suggest, older adults may find a sense of purpose through volunteer endeavours, especially when these endeavours align with the older adults' passions and interests. Participants also valued opportunities to provide feedback and input regarding the community centre's programs and policies. This finding suggests that participants do not necessarily always want to be passive users of programs and services; they may rather be active and contributing members. An important consideration for belonging was how participants felt about their engagement in the centre and how they felt that others perceived them within the space. Therefore, practitioners are more likely to help enhance a sense of belonging for older adults when they communicate their respect and value older adults' presence and participation, including but not limited to these older adults'

participation in programs, volunteer contributions, feedback, input, and suggestions for improvement.

As participants shared, older adults may have different needs related to belonging, which can translate to varying levels of motivation or desire to seek out experiences of belonging. The idea that older adults are more likely to experience belonging when they are motivated to seek it has important, yet cautionary implications for practice. If, for example, practitioners believe that older adults who are not involved in their programs and services are not looking for or in need of experiencing belonging, they may inadvertently be contributing to isolation and exclusion. By considering the connection that exists between low levels of belonging and depression, practitioners must be mindful that older adults who are not motivated to seek out experiences of belonging may be the very older adults who need to experience a sense of belonging the most, and that they would benefit from invitation, encouragement, and support to be in community spaces.

Implications for Future Research

This study illuminated the perspectives of older adults who are members of a community centre for people 50 years of age and older. We heard from older adults who were diverse in terms of their gender, health status, and the ways that they engaged with the centre. They all indicated that they connected to their community through their involvement in the centre. Our study is limited by the fact that we spoke only to participants who spend time in the community centre with some regularity. As such, experiences of belonging may have been more readily available to study participants than to older adults who do not spend time in community spaces. Future research would benefit by hearing from older adults who struggle to find a sense of belonging within their communities and older adults not involved in community centres or other types of community spaces. A participant in this study speculated that many older adults choose to stay at home rather than get involved in their communities. It is important to hear from uninvolved older adults in order to understand their perspectives and experiences of belonging. It is also important to consider the extent to which their lack of community involvement is actually a conscious choice. There are undoubtedly challenges associated with identifying and connecting with older adults most at risk of loneliness and social isolation. Therefore, future research would benefit from partnerships with health and social service agencies that can help make these connections and ensure that we hear these valuable perspectives on belonging.

Our study is also limited because we heard from participants who either experienced a sense of belonging within the centre or indicated that they were not necessarily seeking a sense of belonging. Given the voluntary nature of this study, it makes sense that it would attract participants for whom the topic of belonging resonates. Although the perspectives of older adults who experience a sense of belonging are helpful when seeking to understand how to enhance belonging, it is also important to hear from older adults who participate in community spaces, such as the community centre, but do not find a sense of belonging. The findings of this study do not provide a clear sense of who might not experience a sense of belonging in the community centre. Therefore, future research specifically exploring the barriers to belonging within such spaces would be illuminating. Future research would also benefit from a more diverse participant sample so that we can understand how experiences of diversity shape experiences of belonging.

Conclusion

Experiences of belonging are strongly associated with being valued and respected (Hagerty et al., 1992; Mahar et al., 2013). Older adults may encounter ageist attitudes and assumptions that cause them to believe that their value diminishes with age (Nolan, 2011; Phelan, 2008). While seeking a sense of belonging, older adults are likely to be drawn to experiences that help them to feel worthwhile and integral to their communities. Feeling worthwhile may come from continued engagement in productive activities, such as volunteering, but it can also come from connecting with others in meaningful ways and being appreciated for what they personally bring to social exchanges (e.g., a positive attitude, a sense of humour). As this article makes clear, intentional acts that help create welcoming and vibrant community spaces within which older adults are able to connect around common interests and engage in meaningful endeavours that let them know they are valued and cherished members of their communities help to set the stage for belonging.

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