



The Myth of Average: Active Senior Citizens in the Aomori Prefecture in Japan

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Abstract

Japan is known for the highest life expectancy in the world, but there are regional variations within the country. Aomori, located at the northern tip of Japan's mainland, is the prefecture characterized by heavy snow in winter and the lowest average life expectancies for women and men. Their short life expectancies have been attributed to excessive sodium intake and physical inactivity. In this short-term reflexive ethnography, I take the postpositivist stance and set up a strawman claim of "all citizens of Aomori Prefecture are physically inactive" in order to falsify it by providing a counter example. The counter example is a community of very senior citizens over 80 years of age who are physically and socially active in playing indoor golf. My purpose in writing this research report is to share an encounter with a unique community through a contextualized physical activity setting and a reflection on issues related to the community's survival. The theoretical model of physical literacy has informed my observations, conversations, and reflections that are narrated in the impressionist mode. My narrative demonstrates that there are physically active senior citizens in the Aomori Prefecture. Moreover, my interview with an organizer uncovered that the senior golf players were facing challenges to participate in and sustain the golf program in the future.

Keywords: Ethnography; Postpositivism; Older Adulthood; Physical Literacy; Physical Activity

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The Myth of Average: Active Senior Citizens in the Aomori Prefecture in Japan

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Introduction

Aomori Prefecture¹²³ is located at the north end of Japan's main island, Honshu. Much of the high-latitude winter precipitation falls as heavy snow, affecting transport and preventing people from venturing outdoors. In the past, food supply was limited during the winter, and people relied on salt as a preservative, which led to the prevalence of a diet that was high in sodium (Ehara 2012). Even after refrigerators replaced salt's preservative function, Aomori inhabitants still had high-sodium intake (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2012). Thus, it is no surprise that excessive sodium intake, coupled with physical inactivity, is one of the reasons for Aomori Prefecture's lowest in the rankings (47th in Japan) with respect to life expectancies (Nakaji *et al.* 2021), which was 85.9 years for women and 78.7 years for men in 2015 (Ministry of Health Labour Welfare 2017).

Population health research typically employs either one of two distinct methodologies: the positivist and postpositivist approaches (Carpiano and Daley 2006). The positivist approach has been often criticized for its reductionist perspective on the human individual or group as a sum of variables (Bergman and Trost 2006). For an example, a large-N quantitative research project concerning medical and health-related variables has been conducted in an attempt to improve the health index and average life expectancy of Aomori Prefecture's residents (Nakaji *et al.* 2021). Positivist scientists consciously manipulate variables to examine the effects of the manipulation (Guba and Lincoln 1994). In the case of the large-scale quantitative research project, the variables for manipulation are health indicators, such as physical activity levels, with the aim of improving population health and average life expectancy. To date, there is no strong evidence for the benefit of general health checks in adults for reducing morbidity and mortality from diseases (Krogsbøll, Jørgensen, and Gøtzsche 2019).

While the natural science model continues to play an important role in modern medicine by describing, hypothesizing, testing, and thus attempting to control desired outcomes, the social science model cultivates practical reasons to provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of situations that includes nuances and complexities (Buchanan 1994). Regarding the promotion of physical activity in senior citizens, Almond (2010) argues that the prevention of negative outcomes, such as the health and the economic cost of inactivity, is not sufficient to motivate older adults to be more physically active. Rather, Almond (2010) constructs a social science model of physical literacy as a lifespan issue and maintains that older adults require two positive perspectives: purposeful physical pursuits to energize and enrich their lives and a pedagogy of engagement with enthusiasm, empathy, interest, and confidence. The British Heart Foundation has implemented and demonstrated effectiveness of these perspectives (Almond 2010).

In contrast to positivism, the postpositivist approach is based not on *a priori* measurements of human subjects but on human conjectures or claims (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). Postpositivist researchers seek falsifiable claims and test them by interacting with research participants and obtaining and representing

contextualized qualitative information from small unrepresentative samples to refine or abandon the claims (Dudley *et al.* 2000; Flyvbjerg 2001). In the present study, I adopt the postpositivist stance, and attempt to falsify the claim that the residents of Aomori Prefecture are physically inactive by describing an “anomaly” — a group of active senior citizens — through the lens of ‘physical literacy’: purposeful physical pursuits and pedagogy of engagement (Almond 2010). I also attempt to identify needs for the active senior citizens to sustain their engagement in the activity. Regardless of how atypical this group engaging in “best practices” of physical activity may be, I hope to refute the claim of inactivity, while highlighting areas for potential support.

Methods

Philosophical Perspective and Methodology

The present study is based on the philosophical perspective of postpositivism (Phillip and Burbules 2000) and the postpositivist methodology of short-term reflexive ethnography (Pink and Morgan 2013), which guide the use of observation and reflection as a primary data collection method. In his historical review of positivism, Corman (2005) candidly asserts that “positivism is a strawman.” To falsify a strawman claim, according to Hicks (2018) citing Popper (1968) who used the verbiage that “all swans are white,” a postpositivist needs only to find a single black swan (Phillip and Burbules 2000; Hicks 2018). Note that Popper has been considered an early postpositivist (Corman 2005). In line with this approach, I construct a strawman claim that “all citizens of Aomori Prefecture are physically inactive” for the purpose of dismantling it. Given the low average life expectancy of Aomori’s inactive residents who consume high-sodium diets — the white swans — I falsely assert that I cannot expect to encounter any physically active senior citizens — the black swans. I then counter this assertion by describing the black swans, or more precisely, a substantial group of physically and socially active women and men who enjoy playing a sport.

It is apparent that the data of the low average life expectancies, high sodium intake, and low physical activity level of people in Aomori Prefecture are based on the statistical inference about the population means. The statistical inference assumes deviations from the means and the possible existence of outliers. To provide a research motivation as part of my self-disclosure, the core research purpose is not to undermine the statistical statement but to challenge and contrast it against a counter example. In conclusion, I share my reflections on the complex and nuanced issues for the community’s survival.

Selecting a Research Setting and Gaining Access

This research project was conducted during a five-month period that I spent in Aomori between 2020 and 2021 under the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. I had few opportunities to directly observe people, older adults in particular, engaging in physical activities in public spaces. To construct, rather than discover a research field site (Burrell 2009), I followed the first step that Burrell (2009) proposed and sought entry points rather than sites. These entry points included the Sports Promotion Department of the local city government and city newsletters. I carried out all written and oral communications in standard Japanese and translated them into English for this report. Following several unsuccessful attempts to reach the organizers of sports events that were announced in the newsletters but canceled due to the pandemic, I eventually succeeded in communicating with an organizer of indoor golf games, Mr. Spark (pseudonym), by calling the telephone number provided in an advertisement in a city newsletter:

ふれあい高齢者
ニュースポーツ研修会

▼内容 ①ゲートボール (30人)、
②グラウンドゴルフ (80人)、③ペタンク (42人)、④マレットゴルフ (30人)、⑤ターゲットバードゴルフ (40人) (いずれも先着順)

▼参加料 無料

問い合わせは (☎XX-XXXX) へ。

Newsletter Advertisement recreated by author. Translation: Senior Citizens Get Together Workshops for New Sports: "Gate Ball" (30 people), "Ground Golf" (80 people), Pétanque (42 people), "Mallet Golf" (30 people), "Target Bird Golf" (40 people). Citizens aged approximately 60 years and over can participate free of charge on a first come, first served basis. To save your place, call this telephone number XX-XXXX.

Mr. Spark answered the phone, listened to my explanation, and communicated his understanding of my research project. He invited me to a ground golf practice on a particular morning. I eagerly accepted the invitation and told him that I would send him written information on the research project and a consent form by post.

Methods of Data Gathering, Recording, Analysis, and Representation

To ensure focused observation and interaction with selective informants for short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan 2013), I was careful not to be intrusive by following Mr. Spark's guidance at the indoor golf hall and conducting non-participant observation of golf players first until I felt the players were ready for my participant observation. I then interacted with them in the hope of having short but intense encounters. My observation focused on the overall impression that I obtained from the scenes, or "feelings of the scenes" (Angrosino 2007) through observing the participants holistically rather than the identifiable details (e.g., exact number of people, age, gender, name, address and so forth) of the individuals, who remained anonymous. For this reason, informed consent was obtained only from Mr. Spark before an unrecorded personal interview. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Committee of Health Science Ethics of the Hirosaki University Graduate School of Health Science (2018-168-1). Adopting an impressionist mode (Angrosino 2007), I took fieldnotes on sporadic occasions when I encountered impressive scenes in terms of "purposeful physical pursuits" and "pedagogy of engagement" (Almond 2010). I present my impressions, self-disclosure, and my reflections in the Observations section below. Findings from non-participant observations, participant observations, and Mr. Spark's interview will be triangulated to reflect the diverse dimensions of the field (Flick 2018).

Observations

Day One: February 4. First Field Visit

Accessing the Field. It is early morning in my parking lot, I scrape the ice from my windshields, remove the snow that has accumulated on my car, and drive along the snowy road to the indoor golf hall that I have never visited before. Despite the continuous snow, the visibility is manageable on the well-guided main road. Following my GPS, I leave the road, drive towards a small town, and follow a narrow road to the end of the town, surrounded by nothing but snow. The GPS directed me to a snow-covered path, and I proceed carefully. Eventually, I spot a sign in front of a building that reads, "Indoor Golf Hall." I park my car, replace my snow boots with my sneakers, and walk to the entrance. It is 8:30 a.m., half an hour before golf practice starts. A small number of older men and women are standing in line, cleaning their hands with sanitizer gel, and writing their names and contact details on the clipboards held by two men who appear to be the organizers. I stand at the end of line and wait.

Presenting and Immersing Myself to the Field. When my turn comes, I introduce myself to the organizers. One of them smiles and identifies himself as Mr. Spark, the person I spoke with over the phone. He introduces the man next to him as Mr. Director (pseudonym) of the indoor golf hall. During this brief interaction, dozens of senior citizens arrive behind me and wait in line. To avoid getting in their way, I enter the hall, find a bench on which I place my bag, and prepare a pen and field notebook.

At 8:50 a.m., the indoor golf hall is filled with players, scattered throughout the space and performing warm-up swings. All the players seem to know what they are doing. At 9:00 a.m., Mr. Spark blows a whistle, and the players gather around Mr. Director and Mr. Spark. I stand behind the players facing Mr. Director and Mr. Spark. Mr. Director offers a brief greeting and announces the beginning of the practice session. Mr. Spark then reviews the schedule and logistics of the morning's practice before finally introducing me to the players: "Miyahara Sensei (Professor) works for a local university, and he is visiting us today to conduct research on physical activity for senior citizens. Please introduce yourself, Miyahara Sensei." "Thank you, Mr. Spark. I am Miyahara, still 59 years of age, not yet fully qualified to join your group, but please allow me to observe your activity here today." Mr. Spark asks whether any of the players object and confirms, "Silence is taken as approval." Mr. Spark blows a whistle again, and says, "Let's get started." Several groups spread over the two courts and the players in each group begin to take turns at hitting the ball.

Non-Participant and Participant Observation of Practice Session 1. To observe the players, I first place myself on the top of a platform outside the courts to avoid obstructing the play. The players wear outfits of assorted colors and styles: some appear to be wearing their casual winter jackets, pants, and outdoor shoes, while others appear to have intentionally coordinated their entire outfits for playing golf, including their hats and scarves. The players use their own golf clubs which they call "my club." My impression is the players are all financially well-off.

After the players take their shot, they move to the location of their ball: some wait until the ball has stopped and walk to the resting ball; others begin walking briskly before the ball has come to a halt and chase after the rolling ball; others run after the ball as soon as they have completed their shot, despite their advanced age.

Eventually, a ball rolls out of bounds and reaches my feet. I assume that the player needs to collect the ball and go back to where the ball went out of bounds. With the best of intentions, I pick up the ball and hand it to the player, but the player grabs the ball, evidently upset, and explains that the rules state that

the ball should be left where it lies. I feel embarrassed and apologize. The player then smiles, saying, "It's just a game."

Between shots, players chat pleasantly with one another in their groups, commenting on their own and others' shots, catching up on each other's lives, and clearly enjoying one another's company. After a short time, all groups rotate around the courts. Mr. Spark blows a whistle and say, "Let's take a break."

Interview. During the break, Mr. Spark and Mr. Director guide me to a staff office building apart from the hall. There are two desks, a pair of couches facing each other, and a table on which numerous boxes and sheets of wrapping paper sit. Mr. Spark tells me to take a seat on the couch and he sits on the other side. Mr. Director excuses himself for wrapping prizes for the upcoming event and designates Mr. Spark to take my interview. I ask Mr. Spark to read and sign the informed consent form, so he does. Having observed his clear communication style during our telephone conversation, I decide that it is not necessary to audio-record the interview, and that it will suffice to make notes afterwards.

I first ask Mr. Spark about his background and his current role in the hall. He explains that he is the retired CEO of a major merchandising company; since his retirement, he has held the manager position in the indoor golf hall, which is run by the city's council for social welfare. He and Mr. Director perform a range of tasks, including planning, recruiting, organizing practices, and running competitions. When I ask how the golf hall is used, Mr. Spark explains in a clear and logical fashion:

The current number of users is approximately 200, much less than the number ten years ago. The present users' ages range from 80 to 93 years. We are struggling to recruit younger participants aged from 60 to 80 years, which we need to ensure the continuity of the indoor golf activities and to secure city government funding for the hall's maintenance. The other problem is transportation; most participants share rides with their neighbors, and often the youngest person in the neighborhood serves as the designated driver. When the driver becomes unavailable due to illness or unforeseen circumstances, all intending to travel with that driver must forgo participation on that day. The closest bus stop to the hall is a few miles away in town, and it is not realistic or safe for the older participants to walk from the bus stop to the hall in the snow. Because the participants live in different areas of the city, it is impossible to charter a bus to collect them from all over the city.

I asked Mr. Spark why people aged 60 to 80 do not participate in indoor golf activities. He disclosed that he himself falls within that age range and speculates that his generation is not accustomed to group activities. As someone slightly below that age bracket, I am puzzled by his theory, because post-WWII baby boomers seem to me to be significantly more group-oriented than my generation. I decide to hold on to this conundrum as my homework, because the break time is up, and the second half of the golf practice session is about to begin. Mr. Director, Mr. Spark, and I return to the hall.

Non-Participant and Participant Observation of Practice Session 2. Where the players formed groups with their neighbors and friends for Session 1 before the break, the organizers have randomly assigned groups for Session 2 so that strangers can get to know one another. With the new group members, the players begin a new round.

Having made the mistake of picking up a ball prior to the break, I have learned not to pick up any approaching balls. I am also on alert to any movement on the ground so that no ball will hit my feet. At one point, I hear footsteps approach me. The owner of the footsteps extends a golf club and ball toward

me, asking “Sensei, why don’t you also play?” Behind him, a group of players are watching and awaiting my response. I feel pressured, make up my mind, and say, “I will give it a try.” This represents an unplanned but smooth transition from non-participant to participant observation.

In my first attempt, I hit the ball too hard, and it goes out of bounds. The next time, I strike the ball as though the club were a putter, and the ball goes right into the target gate. The audience cheers, but my swing still seems too hard, and the ball goes out of the gate. The audience sighs with me. I feel as though I belong to the group of passionate and encouraging players and as though I am participating in this activity not as a researcher but as a fellow player.

Day Two: February 9. Golf Competition

Observing Competition Session 1. At 9 am, a line of gift-wrapped competition prize boxes—awards for places from the first to ninth, participation awards, a “booby prize” (i.e., consolation prize), and a hole-in-one prize—are neatly displayed on top of a long table. Mr. Director gives a brief greeting, and Mr. Spark introduces me to the competitors as a researcher observing the event. Due to the time pressure, I have no opportunity to introduce myself this time, and the indoor golf competition begins. This group of competitors are more serious, chatting and laughing less, than the practice group that I observed on Day One. I jot down players’ words that I hear in my fieldnotes, including “Shoot! The ball has gone out of bounds.” One player is trying to use psychokinetic powers to influence the rolling ball, pointing at and saying “Listen to me. Go this way.”

One female player approaches me and informs me, “In the group of players over there, there is a 90-year-old player. I have pain in my back and legs, but I still play.” I ask, “Does your pain improve while you are playing?” She replies, “No, it doesn’t, but I still play.” “Do you have fun?” I ask. “I am having great fun!” she replies, with her face breaking into a smile.

Intermission. Both Mr. Director and Mr. Spark are too busy with the competition to talk to me, and I continue to observe how the competitors behave during the break. One competitor is standing in front of the awards table, browsing, touching, and lifting the award boxes one after another. Realizing that I am watching him, he mutters, “I cannot win any of these.” I ask, “You cannot win any of these?” The competitor explains, “Before this intermission, you have to score 30 points.” “Is that so?” I say, indicating my understanding.

The 10-minute break is approaching its end. I become tired of standing and sit on a bench. A male competitor sits next to me and asks a question, “How many indoor golf teams exist in this city?” “Sorry, I don’t know.” I answer honestly. Before I finish the sentence, he begins talking so rapidly in the local dialect that I can barely comprehend. I manage to glean only that he is currently ranked seventh, four points behind the player who is ranked first.

Competition Session 2 and awarding ceremony. The competition resumes, and I watch and admire the players’ fierce competitive play. The game eventually ends, and the awarding ceremony begins. Mr. Spark reads out the winners’ names, and Mr. Director distributes the awards individually. Some players chuckle as the booby prize is presented to one competitor. The awarding ceremony is completed in due course, and the competitors walk toward the exit door. Smiling broadly, one of them approaches me, proudly brandishing his box labelled “Fourth Prize.” I recognize the face of the man who sat next to me on the bench toward the end of the break, and I shout “Congratulations!”

Discussion

Adopting a postpositivist approach, the present short-term ethnographic study sets up the strawman claim that “all citizens of Aomori Prefecture are physically inactive” and, ultimately, falsifies it by describing and drawing insights from a positively aging anomaly, that is, a community of senior golfers. Over the two mornings of practice and competition sessions that I observed, several participants approached me to convey how much they enjoyed playing golf, encouraging me to try it, and exhibiting a competitive edge, a passion to win. These behaviors are interpreted as indicating that the oldest old adults were pursuing the physical activity purposefully, and applying pedagogy of engagement with enthusiasm, empathy, and interest. The interview with the organizer revealed two crucial needs: access to the golf hall and participation of younger players. Through the triangulation of non-participant observation, participant observation, and an interview, this ethnography reflected the hopes, aspirations and challenges faced by senior golfers in this community.

My narrative of what I observed and reflected on at the golf hall may be open to criticism as a self-fulfilling prophecy or Pygmalion effect (Wineburg 1987); I might be biased toward input that reflected what I expected and blind to the unexpected. Indeed, it was possible that the golf players and the organizers just put on a show for me for an altruistic motive, or to appeal to the significance of the activity and their needs. Rather than merely acknowledging this bias, I seek to embrace it, as Brown (2004) recommends in relation to postpositivist ethnography: “It is a researching Self sensitive to the political interests of participants and committed to altering the material conditions that oppress participants” (311). Whether the golf players are oppressed or not, I view my representation of the described scenes and my reflections as a product of co-construction by the participants and myself, not an objective reportage (Bruni 1995).

After writing up my narrative description and reflections, I pondered why the participants were unusually welcoming and friendly toward me. Perhaps, my age of 59 years was advantageous, as the players related to me as a potential promoter of ground golf or a future player. However, my understanding of the local dialect was limited, and I sought advice from my local colleague to confirm the meanings of some of the words that I wrote down in my fieldnotes. One of my unexpected blind spots was revealed during a conversation with Mr. Spark who informed me of the fragility of the group physical activity. Had I invested more time in building closer relationships with the participants by learning the local dialect, as a conventional ethnographer would often do, I may potentially have gained different understanding and insight into this and various other issues. However, a high level of immersion could increase habituation (Bruni 1995); it was likely because I was attempting to be “the Other ‘without concealing what we learn about ourselves in the process’” (Brown 2004, 311) that I was able to discover and experience the dynamics at play with fresh eyes, which in itself may be considered an advantage. In this regard, Pink and Morgan (2013) regarded short-term postpositivist ethnography as “using different methodological, practical and analytical entry points into the lives of others” (2013, 353) from those used in conventional long-term positivist ethnography.

The ground golf played by the oldest old people may be viewed as “the best practice” in terms of physical activity to which all should aspire, not necessarily for replication but for guidance: a model of what can be achieved in the public space if older citizens’ interest, mental and physical conditions, accessibility and socioeconomic status, all work together. Another factor that deserves some attention is the puzzling finding from this study; why are members of the 1940s and 1950s generation not accustomed to group activity? Although research on this issue remains limited, a recent study by Tabata (2015) explained that group activities were considered controversial in postwar physical education as part of the pacifist reaction to Japanese militarism before and during the Second World War. If this is

indeed why the older adults in this generation refrain from participating in group physical activities, a collaborative support system for individualized purposeful physical pursuits should be developed. In the interim, methods such as short-term ethnography would be a useful tool for assessing current practices and identifying needs among current seniors, as well as other cohorts in the population.

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Notes

At the time of data collection and writing the first draft, the author was a faculty member of the Department of Clinical Psychological Science, School of Medicine, Hirosaki University, Aomori, Japan.

1. In her PhD dissertation Solomon (2017) represents the culturally unique community of Tsugaru region in the Aomori prefecture by referring to folk music and vernacular literature.
2. For her PhD research in cultural geography Brucklacher (1998, 1999) investigated Aomori's apple industry.
3. As a faculty member of the local university Rausch (2017) proposes Tsugaru Studies as a specific area study.

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