



# Participation Styles of Senior Adults in Fitness Classes

YuChun Chen, C. Smiley Reeves, and Rhonda Boyd  
Department of Kinesiology, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA



## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Griffin (1984, 1985) described participation styles of sixth graders in coed school physical education. She found *athletes, JV players, cheerleaders, femme fatales, lost souls* and *system beaters* among girls, and *machos, junior machos, nice guys, invisible players* and *wimps* among boys.

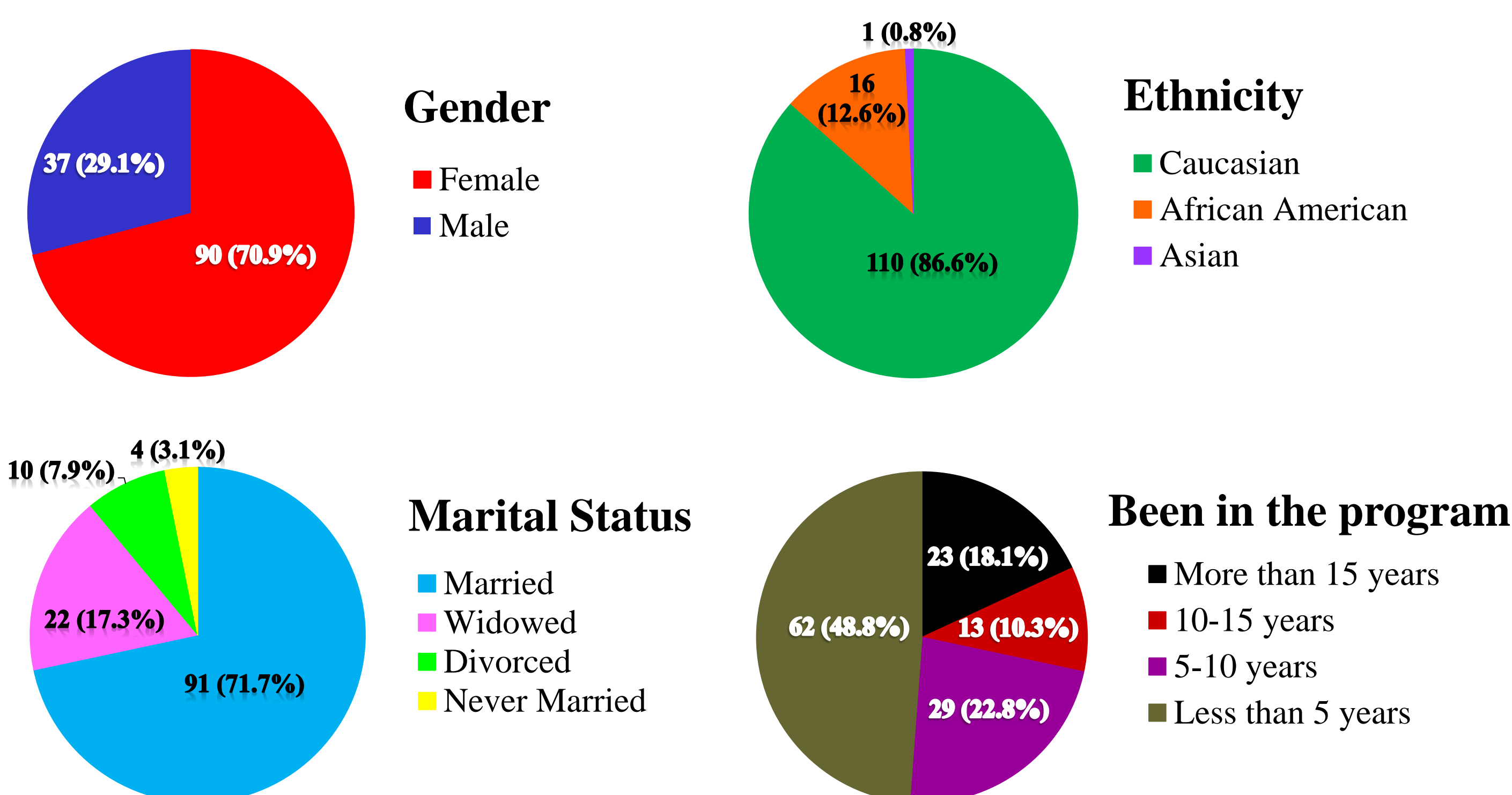
Among a group of high school students, Pope and O'Sullivan (2003) discovered "Darwinism" consisting of *bullies, contestants, jousters, benchies, posers, venerators* and *hangers* in free-gym settings.

In terms of young adults in university-level exercise classes, Bain (1985) identified *serious runners, serious walkers, social interactors* and *absentees*. Bennett (2000) discovered similar participation styles but labeled them as *ex-athletes, sidekicks, socializers, manipulators, underachievers* and *minimalists*. More recently, Zmudy, Curtner-Smith, and Steffen (2009) examined children over week-long summer camp and identified *go-getters, explorers, limelight seekers, fear conquerors, chickens, light hikers, ground supporters, housers* and *mini-rough housers* in such adventure education.

In a developmental soccer league, Neels and Curtner-Smith (2012) described *MVPs, ball hogs, chest thumpers, overreactors, free spirits* and *entertainers* among children aged eight to 12 years.

The purpose was to describe the participation styles of women and men aged 50 to 94 years with a mean of 69.85 years ( $SD = 9.078$ ) enrolled in chair/floor exercise, water aerobics, bowling and after-five [o'clock] fitness classes.

## PARTICIPANTS: Senior Adults (SAs)



## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Chair/Floor Exercise was offered at 7am, 8am, and 9 am; Water Aerobics was at 7am and 8am; Bowling was at 8am on Mon, Wed, and Fri. After Five [o'clock] Fitness was at 5pm on Mon, Tues, and Thurs.

Field notes from each class were taken from *non-participant observation* by the first author and her research assistant at least twice a week. *Informal discussions* with SAs and instructors before/after classes were recorded. *Unstructured questionnaires* were completed by eight co-instructors with follow-up emails as needed. *Focus group interview* was conducted with the three course instructors. Entrance surveys completed by SAs were also used as *document analysis* to identify their demographics.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the standard interpretive methods of analytic induction and constant comparison. Data trustworthiness was secured through the use of triangulation, a thorough search for negative and discrepant cases and member checking. Quantitative data were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics such as mean, frequencies and percentages.

## FINDINGS

### Sticklers:

They followed instructions exactly as demonstrated, made sure of doing all exercises correctly, and left the class soon after it was over.

“If you scratch your nose, they'll scratch their nose with you. (Patrice, focus group interview)”

They hardly interacted with others during class period. They were more likely to give co-instructors constructive feedback since they knew the exercise routines really well.

“Amber is doing the exercises like she always does. Greg comes in late, slowly moves next to her and starts talking to her. She looks and smiles at him once in a while, but is not really paying attention on him. Judy, who stands in front of them, turns around and cuts him a look because he is getting loud. A few minutes later, the exercise becomes a traveling movement. Amber and Judy move on while Greg floats around waiting for them to come back. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

“The co-instructors, Cody and Amanda, are teaching without the course instructor today. They run out of exercises 21 minutes into the class. Mary, who had attended the program for 12 years, jumps in and leads the class. When Cody and Amanda thank her for the support at the end, Mary suggests them to write down a “cheat sheet” with all the exercises on it. (field notes, Chair/Floor Exercise)”

### Enthusiasts:

They arrived at the facility early and/or stayed late to walk laps. They challenged themselves with more weights or reps but those add-ons were not necessarily appropriate.

“When asked to “take three laps as fast as you can”, Ginger jogs as big of a loop as possible, Joe runs with two dumbbells in hand, and Larry races with one of the co-instructors while everyone else walks at different paces. When Joe is done with his three laps, he finds his wife and walks with her. (field notes, After Five Fitness)”

“Using water resistance to build muscles, Patrice demonstrates an upper-body exercise where her arms with aquatic barbells in hand are straight out to the side, push down into the water until they touch her thighs, and then lift up to shoulder height for one repetition. Robert adds a jumping-up-and-down motion to the exercise, but has his arms lift up above his head until they meet and back down to the side. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

### Busybodies:

They engaged in minimal participation, not because of physical limitations like the adapters, but because they were talking to others. They were also easily distracted.

“Gracie and Joan are sitting next to each other, like they always do. They are talking to each other from the beginning of the class. The conversation does not affect their performance at first, but their movements start to become slower and slower, and then stop. A few seconds later, they look up and realize the class has moved on to the next exercise. (field notes, Chair/Floor Exercise)”

“Somebody drove up in a Maserati, they went “What is that? A Maserati?” ... This group of men by the window [would be] looking out and I thought, “Well, it's either a pretty girl, somebody fell down, or... I can't remember what the other thing was, but you know, just anything gets them off track. (Frances, focus group interview)”

The busybodies mainly interacted with other busybodies in class. They would skip a class if they knew ahead of the time that their friends would not be there that day.

“When Teresa is ready to bowl, Karl coughs loudly to distract her. He does the same thing to Donna. When the coughing does not work, Karl makes silly faces to make them laugh. (field notes, Bowling)”

“When Tracy walks in, Gina gets really excited to see her so she gets up, makes to her way and gives her a hug. The two ladies sit side by side. They chat on and off while doing exercises. Tracy has to leave the class early. After Tracy leaves, Gina does a few exercises halfhearted. A couple minute later, she packs up her key and leaves the gym. (field notes, After Five Fitness)”

### Adapters:

They had physical limitations due to temporary or permanent health issues, so they modified the exercises themselves so it's easier for them to consume the intensity they desired to be engaged in.

“Instead of traveling to the left and to the right, Ian jogs in place while pushing the kickboard up and down in the water as the instructors demonstrate. For the same exercise, Opera, who has a flotation belt on today, does not push the kickboard as deep as others and only travels to either direction to a certain extent. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

“Jimmy has his chair, dumbbells and stability trainer set up before the class begins. As usual, he starts the upper body exercises with the dumbbells. Halfway through the class, he puts them down and finishes up without weights. For the balancing exercises, he stands close to his chair and holds on to it as needed. (field notes, Chair/Floor Exercise)”

They stayed in the front row, just close enough to see demonstrations. Their focus came from the consciousness of not further damaging their bodies, so minimal interactions were also observed. If someone initiated a talk, they would engage in short conversations. They had more interactions with instructors about their health issues and proper way to modify exercises.

### Freestylers:

The first type of freestylers attended and stayed the entire class period but did not follow the instructors at all. The second type came and left the facility as they wished as long as they got their workout in, which could be lap swim or weight lifting.

“Sherry dances with the music. When it is an upbeat song, she jumps and turns with arms swinging everywhere. When the song goes slower, she takes steps or shuffles to different directions. She enjoys herself in the very back of the class; nothing seems to bother her at the moment. (field notes, After Five Fitness)”

“Rico starts his lap swim at 8:07. He takes breaks between laps. Becky and Sharon kicked on the kickboards while visiting before they start swimming laps. Meanwhile, Fred waves from the glass window in the gym upstairs that is connected to the pool area. They all leave the facility before the class is over. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

### Chatterboxes:

They took the full advantage of the social aspect of the program and had very little intention to improve their physical fitness.

“Ed moves around looking for conversations. He makes his first stop next to Brent, a busybody. They are in a face-to-face position with Ed's back to the instructors. Brent shuffles to the left when the exercise becomes a traveling movement. Ed stands there and is now interrupting Rico who comes in for lap swim. When Rico goes on to his lap swim, Ed stops Patrice on the side of the pool. They talk for a while until she has to go on and restart the background music. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

They moved about to find somebody to talk to. They would talk to anyone who would listen, so the receiving end did not have to be somebody who was socially in need.

“For some strange reason, Ed is the only chatterbox at the 8 o'clock class today. He is having a difficult time keeping up a conversation since the people he tries to talk with is either a stickler or an adapter, who once in a while gives him a nod or a response such as “oh yeah” and “really?” (field notes, Water Aerobics)”

“A group of chatterboxes are now huddling together in the middle of the pool. They are talking so loud that I can hear them from the side of the pool. They are so intensively engaged in their conversations that the rest of the class has to move around them during the traveling exercises. (field notes, Water Aerobics)”



## CONCLUSIONS

The physically active groups (i.e., the **sticklers**, **adapters** and **enthusiasts**) mirrored the “serious” and “sweatin” participants in the previous research (Bain, 1985; Bennett, 2000).

Bain's (1985) social interactors and Bennett's (2000) socializers could also be found in the shadows of the **busybodies** and **chatterboxes**.

The **freestylers'** behavior and attitude toward physical activities were not as consistent as the rest of the SAs, which made them a unique category.

Regardless of their participation styles, all SAs appeared to have a positive experience toward the fitness program from either the physical benefits or the companionship they were willing to be engaged in.

The practical implication was to make aware that a successful fitness program designed to cater to older generations should focus on the physical routines that improve/maintain SAs' daily living as well as the social environment where they can meet new people and make friends with common interests.

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