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Older adults' frequent visits to a fast-food restaurant: Nonobligatory social interaction and the significance of play in a “third place”

Michael Cheang

*Center on Aging, John A. Burns School of Medicine, 1960 East–West Road,
Biomed C-106, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA*

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Abstract

How might older adults' nonobligatory social interactions in a “third place” be described and interpreted? The ethnographic methodology, primarily participant observation, was used to gather data from a naturally occurring group of older adults who frequent a fast-food restaurant. Emerging themes include the concept of sociability, play, and laughter. Findings suggest that: (a) older adults congregate at this fast-food restaurant to be with their buddies “to play”; (b) the group is fun for members and there are lots of laughter; (c) group membership in this “third place” provides structure, meaning, and opportunities for these older adults to engage in personal expression; and (d) the members are sociable, but relatively little social support is exchanged. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The use of leisure time in later years will gain increasing significance as more people retire and live longer, healthier lives. Leisure, defined as “activity chosen primarily for its own sake in which the dimensions of choice or relative freedom and intrinsic meaning as defining” (Kelly, 1982), is hardly the peripheral and residual life domain that many assume (Kelly, Steinkamp & Kelly, 1986). Initial studies on leisure later in life point to its importance in

E-mail address: cheang@hawaii.edu (M. Cheang).

older adults' lives (Atchley, 1976; Gordon, Gaitz & Scott, 1976; Neugarten, 1968; Palmore, 1979). For example, Gordon et al. (1976) and Purcell and Keller (1989) discovered that expressive activity is important throughout the course of life, while Palmore (1979) found that later-life adaptation is strongly related to outside of the home activity and social contexts. A later study by Kelly et al. (1986) indicates that leisure later in life is part of journeying the course of life, which enables older adults to cope with change, to maintain or develop important relationships, and to fill time or escape from problems.

Several studies have linked leisure to health and well-being. For example, Graham, Graham & MacLean (1991) found that leisure time activity contributes to some elderly people's psychosocial well-being by providing them with opportunities to be actively or passively sociable in an environment that is familiar to them. Additionally, Dupuis and Smale (1995) established that older adults' participation in leisure activities was positively related to greater psychological well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms among all respondents regardless of sex, age, or marital status. Similarly, Zimmer and Lin (1996) found that leisure activities increased feelings of emotional well-being, while Patterson's (1996) study on older adults' participation of leisure activities after the loss of a spouse revealed that greater participation in leisure activities was negatively correlated with stress scores.

Other studies on leisure have also associated leisure activity with life satisfaction (Parker, 1996; Steinkamp & Kelly, 1987). For example, Bevil, O'Connor, and Mattoon (1993) not only reported that the older adults who were more satisfied with their lives reported the greatest number of activities conducted at least weekly and more varied leisure activity participation, but also that leisure participation benefited these older adults physiologically, psychological, socioculturally, developmentally, and spiritually.

Leisure activities that are associated with positive outcomes such as improved psychosocial well-being and higher levels of life satisfaction are those that provide older adults the opportunities for creativity, personal expression, and freedom of choice (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). However, despite the many studies done on leisure and how it affects older adults' health and well-being, and despite Kelly et al.'s (1986) findings that leisure and play have a place in the existential development of life's meanings, little is known about an aspect of leisure, specifically the nonobligatory social interaction and the potential importance of play, in the lives of older adults.

The literature abounds with studies on play, almost exclusively so with early childhood (Howes, 1987; Howes, Unger & Seidner, 1989). Play, defined as "exercise or action by amusement or recreation", has been described by Garvey (1977) as an activity that is pleasurable and enjoyable, has no extrinsic goals, is spontaneous and voluntary, and involves active engagement by the player. Other characteristics include sheer exuberance, and the ability to "frolic, frisk, gallop, gambol, cavort, engage in mock combat, with every sign of pleasure and high spirits, and with no apparent utilitarian objective" (Garvey, 1977, p. 3). One characteristic of play that is central to the focus of this study is what Sherman (1975) coined as "group glee" or the "spontaneous eruption of mirth" (p. 21); group glee is a social phenomenon in which group members experience hilarity, merriment, and delight.

Play is important in children's lives not just because of the delight and amusement derived in the process; it is important also because children learn language and mathematics, to cooperate, and to problem solve. Play provides opportunities for children to develop a sense of curiosity, self-esteem, strength and coordination, self-direction, and values (Dacey & Travers, 1996). In other words, through play, children grow as they stimulate their senses, acquire new skills, and learn how to cope with complex and conflicting emotions by reenacting real life. Although the significance of play has been well established in the early childhood literature, little is known about the extent to which play assumes similar functions for adults in later life.

In a growing number of communities, older adults congregate in public settings such as fast-food restaurants and shopping malls for leisure. Graham, Graham, and MacLean (1991) and other investigators have suggested that some elderly people use urban shopping centers as places for social contact and exchange (Kowinski, 1985; MacLean, Brown, & Sijpkes, 1985). Other studies in the gerontological literature also found that for some older adults, "going shopping" is more about going to the mall than about buying things because these environments not only provide open, barrier free areas with good lighting, smooth level walking surfaces, and convenient seating arrangement, they also facilitate social contact and exchange (Mason & Smith, 1974; Lumpkin & Greenberg, 1982; Gillett, Scott & Davis, 1983).

Like older adults of today congregating at shopping centers, human beings have habitually gathered in public places for centuries—from the forum of ancient Rome, to the sidewalk cafes in Paris (Scott, 1992) and the teeming piazzas in Florence. Oldenburg (1999) uses the term "third places" to describe public settings "that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (p. 16). An important characteristic that makes "third places" suitable for such informal and voluntary gatherings is the option that people have to be as anonymous, impersonal, or social as they choose to be. Furthermore, third places are relatively inviting places to be in not just because of the informal and spontaneous nature of the setting, the nature of the social interaction is also nonobligatory.

Oldenburg (1999) stresses the importance of such places as fulfilling some of our social needs that may not be met at home and at work. While home and work are important sources of support, they may not necessarily be appropriate places for personal expressions or for people to engage in behaviors and conduct outside the boundaries of the formal social roles as parents, in-laws, and uncles and aunts. For example, an older adult may not find it appropriate to "be silly" and laugh uninhibitedly in the presence of his/her adult children, grandchildren, relatives, and in-laws, but may very well do so among his/her peers that he/she regularly sees at the senior club. Such expressive activity in a third place may not be surprising behavior among peers specifically because third places are often social settings in which social class, occupation, religious affiliations, financial standing, or formal social roles are not criteria for group membership.

Of these "third places" in Honolulu, fast-food restaurants seem to attract the largest numbers of older adults. In discussions with gerontologists and friends across the US, this social phenomenon is not peculiar to Honolulu, but it also occurs in other American com-

munities in Florida, Virginia, New York, and California. This study examines a large congregation of seniors at a fast-food restaurant in Honolulu in an attempt to discover who they are, and the extent to which nonobligatory social interactions and play assume similar and important functions for older adults as they do for children.

2. Method

2.1. Setting

Selected for study was a fast-food restaurant, part of a national chain, at a local shopping center. Seven days a week, between 5:30 and 11:30 a.m., about 80% of the occupants of this restaurant are older adults, with between 100 and 150 older adults on any given day. The majority of these older adults are “regulars,” most visit the restaurant several times a week.

Although seniors gather at fast-food restaurants throughout the state, this particular restaurant was chosen for study because of its large seating capacity (of 200), its central and convenient location (it is across from a popular public beach park, and buses from many parts of Honolulu stop here), and the wide cross section of the older adults who frequent it. Prior to the start of the study, the research proposal and a cover letter were given to the restaurant manager. Permission was obtained to informally conduct this study as a participant observer, as long as I could be regarded as a paying customer of the restaurant, did not conduct any formal interviews or surveys on the premises, and did not interrupt the flow of the business. Field work began in early August of 1997 and ended late May of 1998.

2.2. Research design and data collection

This study used the qualitative research tradition of ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The purpose was to develop a portrait and establish the “cultural rules” of this group of older adults as they engaged in leisure and play (Creswell, 1998). Central to the procedures used in ethnography, detailed descriptions of the culture-sharing older adults were made, analysis of the older adults’ behaviors and experiences by themes was conducted, and interpretation of these shared experiences was done (Creswell, 1998).

To gain an intimate familiarity with the setting and its participants, data collection was done in three phases over a period of 10 months. Data collection involved unobtrusive observations, participant observations, in-depth one-on-one personal interviews, and memoing (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Fine, 1994; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Yin, 1994). Two weeks of unobtrusive observations in Phase 1 were for the purpose of identifying the group of older adults on which to focus. Phase 2 included approximately 9 months of participant observations (two and sometimes three times a week from 6:30 to 10:45 a.m.) of this identified group. Phase 3 involved 22 in-depth, one-on-one personal interviews and included data validation and analysis. Throughout the phases, I also engaged in memoing to reflect on the day’s observation and experiences.

2.2.1. Phase 1—unobtrusive observations

Older adults in the restaurant were observed unobtrusively in the beginning stage of the research process for the first 2 weeks. Initial observations were unstructured and served to survey the older adults and their activities in the restaurant. As greater understanding of the setting was gained, observations became increasingly selective, structured, and systematic (Berg, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, observations became increasingly specific about who, when, and where to observe, what particular aspects of the setting or behavior to observe, and how to make and record the observations (Singleton, Straits, & Straits, 1993). Through these unobtrusive observations, a specific group of older adults was selected for study because: (a) it was the one of the largest groupings (of about 26 members) in the restaurant; (b) its membership appeared to be stable over time; (c) attendance of most members appeared to be frequent; and (d) the group was diverse in terms of age, gender (i.e., a balance of women and men), mobility, and personalities.

To gain entry into the group, I sat strategically close to the group members without infringing upon the group's physical "territory." Initially, smiles were cautiously exchanged. A few visits later, pleasantries were shared with John, the older gentleman sitting closest to me. Thereafter, I was able to initiate brief, casual conversations with John about the purpose of my visits. The snowball sampling method was then used to gain entry into this circle of older adults, as John began introducing me to the rest of the group members. My attempts to explain my presence and purpose were made easier because when John introduced me, he clearly told everyone that I was there "to do a research project about older people." Initially, my presence was met with cautious curiosity. I quickly became the focus of their conversations because I was the youngest (the baby) of them all around the tables. They were being sociable with me, but it was clear that I was being observed and scrutinized like a specimen. My efforts to participate in their conversations, to eat and laugh with them, and the predictability in my showing up every Tuesdays, Thursdays, and some Fridays quickly made me part of this group. Three weeks after my initial introduction, I felt accepted as part of the group. This was when Harriet, one of the core members of the group, not only reserved a seat for me at the table, she also brought an extra piece of pastry for me that morning and audibly announced to the group that "I brought an extra piece for Michael!"

Once the group was entered, verbal consent were eventually obtained from the group members to take field notes. After this discussion of the research, however, I did not set myself apart from the group or engage in obvious note taking in the presence of members; rather I became an active member of the group.

2.2.2. Phase 2—participant observations

Participant observations were done two to three times a week (Tuesdays, Thursdays, and sometimes Fridays) from 6:30 to 10:45 a.m. and lasted for approximately 9 months. Initial recordings of participant observations were done discretely by occasionally jotting down keywords or phrases on 3 × 5 cards. If I needed to document longer quotes or ideas, this would be done outside the group (e.g., at the telephone booth a stone's throw away and outside the restaurant, or in the bathroom of the shopping center). My jotting down of

keywords and phrases on the 3×5 cards quickly became oblivious to the older adults as I rapidly blended in with the group, and as they were soon back to their preoccupation with the activities of being there.

At the end of each day's observations, field jottings were then expanded into full-length field notes. Depending on the circumstances and events of the day, the expanded field notes would be organized in different combinations of formats (Wolcott, 1990). Initially, field notes described the events chronologically as they unfolded. On other occasions, the expanded field notes took the form of a narration as I tried to record the older adults' stories as they were told, or focused on chronicling one or two critical aspects of the day. Field notes also highlighted the group's interactions or roles and characters that the older adults assumed.

Determination of length of the data collection phase was based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of "theoretical saturation." However, instead of focusing on specific categories, I looked at emerging themes of behaviors and experiences. Three themes became clear by the end of the fifth month of participant observation: laughter, personal expression, and sociability.

2.2.3. Phase 3—validation and theoretical comparisons

I continued as a participant observer for an additional 3 months, now sharing data in the form of printed field notes, vignettes (with conversations recorded verbatim), and diagrams of major themes with the older adults for verification, elaboration, and clarification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I began conducting one-on-one personal interviews in Month 6 to: (a) gather individual demographics; (b) get individual responses to the themes that emerged from the participant observation phase; and (c) ask directly about why the senior frequented this restaurant (rather than another restaurant or senior center), what they liked about the group, and what they would do if they did not come to the restaurant.

Of the 26 group members, 22 participated in the personal interviews. One couple chose not to participate in the interview because her husband (also part of the group) was terminally ill and decided that it was not a good idea to be interviewed at that time. Another couple was not comfortable "being interviewed." Most interviews were done at the beach park across the street from the restaurant and at the food court within the shopping mall. We either sat at the park bench or sat at a dining table in the food court of the shopping center. Six interviews were done when an older adult couple offered to host me for luncheon at their home and then invited two other couples from the group to join in.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was done according to Wolcott's (1990) search for patterned regularities. Field notes and interview transcripts were initially reduced into data summaries, clusters, and themes. For example, because there were numerous incidents of laughter, I decided to log laughter into different clusters—laughter that arose from different sources. For example, there were incidents of laughter that came about because one senior was poking fun at another. Then there were incidents of laughter because the seniors were laughing at themselves—when something funny or comical happened to one of them in the group. Yet, at other times,

there were incidents of laughter because the group members were laughing at others in the restaurant because they found these individuals or incidents funny or comical.

2.4. Who are these older adults?

All 26 participants were second-generation Japanese Americans who were born and educated in Hawaii; half of them were female. The mean age was 73, with an age range from 57 to 83 years. On average, members visited the restaurant four times a week, spending 2.3 hours each visit, and had been doing so for the last 6 years. Almost everyone in this group had a fast-food restaurant close to his/her home, but they all preferred to gather at this particular branch because they “like to be with their friends.” The average distance traveled by members of this group is 5.6 miles, although one traveled 14 miles to be with his “buddies.” None of the group members walked to the restaurant; most of them drove, while two took the local bus.

The group included a spinster and a widow; all other group members were married and had grown children. Among the 13 women, eight had worked (all in relatively low-paying jobs, e.g., as a clerk, receptionist, travel agent, sales assistant, resident manager, or teachers’ aide). Of the 13 men, most had held technical or support jobs (e.g., electrician, welder, accounts clerk, inventory clerk, draughtsman, maintenance), one had been a journalist, and another a hotel front office manager. None of them had college education.

Some had learned rudimentary Japanese from their parents, but English was their primary language. It should be noted that I did not set out to study this particular ethnic group. In fact, adults of other ethnicities (e.g., Caucasian, Chinese, Filipino, and Native Hawaiian) also congregated at the selected fast-food restaurant and at other restaurants around the state. It was by happenstance that the largest grouping of seniors at the selected restaurant was Japanese American (and this was discovered after the group had been selected and individual ancestries were revealed to me).

2.5. How did these older adults become part of the group?

The group formed around Harriet, who came daily to drink coffee while her husband went swimming or walking at the beach park across the road, and Edna, a widow, who was also a regular. Edna would go for her early morning walk at the shopping mall, and then finish her walk with a cup of coffee at the restaurant. Harriet did not know Edna prior to being a part of this group; they met at the restaurant while sitting at adjacent tables over 6 years ago. Once, Harriet invited Edna to sit with her when the table at which Edna usually sat was taken by tourists. Ever since, they have been “buddies” at the restaurant. Others joined the group in similar ways—by being a regular visitor sitting in close proximity of the group members. The familiarity of the faces would lead to courteous nods and greetings, and by circumstances like that of Edna’s, they were eventually invited to “sit over here.” The criteria for being invited to join the group are mostly subjective and visual in nature, and are based on gut feelings. These include “not looking scruffy,” “not looking like a homeless or a ‘mental’ person,” “looks like she’d be a nice or fun person to be

with,” “if she can stand our silly antics and laughter,” and “respectful, but not looking too prim and proper.”

I was involved in an incident that eventually led to a lady, who always sat by herself, being invited to join the group. Once I made a passing comment about this lady who sat three tables away from us. I mentioned that this particular lady reminded me of an aunt of mine who was very “fierce” and that I was afraid of this aunt when I was a child. That comment made the group burst into laughter, and it inadvertently became a running joke for the group. In the several weeks that followed, whenever this particular lady walked into the restaurant, the ladies in the group, particularly Harriet and Edna, would say, “Oh look! Here comes your fierce aunt!” and they would burst into laughter. Eventually, Edna, the least bashful one of the group members, crossed path with this lady in the aisle, and at the spur of the moment, decided to tell her what I said. Surprisingly, there were lots of laughter between the two ladies. As it turned out, this “fierce aunt” was really very pleasant and nice, and this particular exchange opened doors for her and the group members to become more acquainted with one another over time; she finally joined the group.

3. Findings

Fig. 1 consolidates the three themes that emerged from the study: Sociability, Play, and Laughter. These three themes will be discussed from the eyes of Edna, a 76 year-old widow, who has been going to this restaurant everyday (“except Christmas or when I am sick”) for the past 8 years.

3.1. Sociability

The social interactions to reflect the concept of “sociability,” which Simmel (1950) defined as the “interaction that exists for its own sake, that is spoiled if its contents grows significant or its emotional impact too strong, and that is separated from interaction solely geared to providing or receiving information” (p. 163). As established repeatedly in the personal interviews, the intent of most group members was to meet with casual friends at the restaurant and have an enjoyable time “talking story,” rather than to develop relationships that required a considerable amount of investment in terms of time and personal commitment (Kenen, 1982; Ortiz, 1994). The nonobligatory social interaction was much preferred and more comfortable in this group.

Social support (as defined by appraisal, instrumental support, emotional support, and informational support) was surprisingly minimal within the group. Support was exchanged in casual, mostly nonobligatory, ways. For example, Edna would tell Barbara about a sale that might be going on in the supermarket or drug store, but not about her personal or health problems, or about her siblings’ troubles. Once Edna asked Helen about her ailing husband’s health, but she did not offer visit him in the hospital even though he was quite seriously ill. In yet another case, Edna commented to me, “I know Alan, but I don’t know his wife because she never came to the restaurant.” Months later, when Alan’s wife eventually passed away

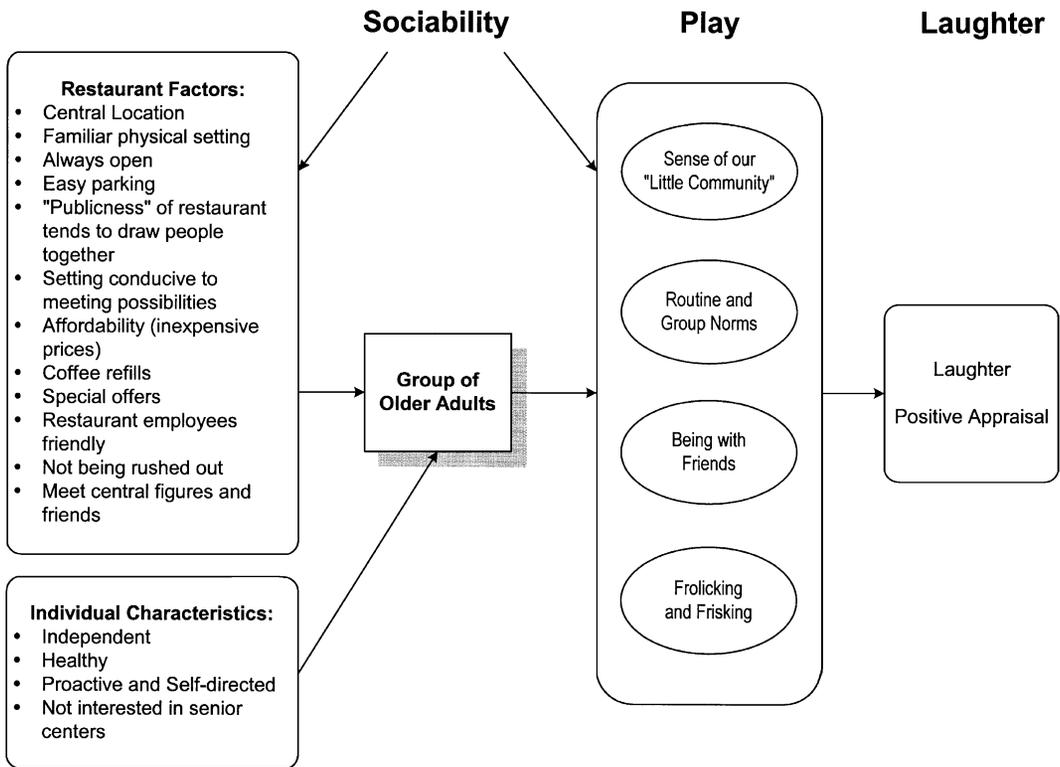


Fig. 1. Older adults' frequent visits to a fast food restaurant at the mall: emerging themes.

from cancer, Edna (and many others) did not attend the funeral service because she did not feel obligated to do so. Most interestingly, in my conversations with Alan, it became clear that his visits to the restaurant were his time and life, while his wife and family matters were not part of his "third place." Alan said during his interview, "Oh, we don't talk family things here . . . we come to have a good time . . . it's not appropriate, ya . . . to discuss personal matters . . . here we have coffee, breakfast, talk story, laugh . . . and then move on with day . . ."

Sociability was evidenced in three different ways. First, there was a certain degree of anonymity. Most surprisingly, individuals were known mostly by their first names, and few people knew each others' last names. The informal and fleeting nature of the social interactions was reinforced by an avoidance of sharing of last names and other information that might intensify relationships. Furthermore, while they met as a group several days of the week, most of them had never been to one another's homes to visit. In the interview, Edna said there was no need to go to one another's homes to visit, and commented, "Hmm . . . we all have our separate lives to live, and meeting everybody here is fine . . . I don't want to be obligated, you know . . . if they invite me to their home . . . then I have to invite them to my home, too . . . Oh, humbug . . .!"

Second, the topics of conversation were kept general and inconsequential in nature. The interactions existed for their own sake and were not spoiled by deep significant or emotional

investment. When serious topics were brought up, they did not receive much attention from the group. Responses to such potentially weighty comments were relatively impartial and brief. For example, when Judy commented to the group about the surgery she was scheduled to undergo the following week, the tone of the group visibly changed and Edna briefly said, “you betta take good care of yourself . . . don’t go standing on your feet so long . . .” The atmosphere became somewhat tense and uncomfortable around the table as if a group rule had been broken. Edna then eased into a different subject of conversation.

Of course, there were occasions when the conversation turned to more profound matters. For example, the atmosphere one particular morning was sullen because one of the group members walked in and said that her brother had a stroke the afternoon before. After asking how he was doing, the conversation then quickly shifted to a related, more general, topic (i.e., health and the dangers of strokes) instead of the group member’s brother’s well-being. For the most part, the group maintained an atmosphere much like that of a cocktail party, where it is more likely that people exchange funny and interesting stories rather than intimate details and secrets. In the words of Russ, a more reserved of the group members, “we come here to chit-chat with friends, but we don’t discuss personal matters.”

Third, sociability was evidenced by what I call the “Cinderella syndrome.” Every morning, between 10 and 11 a.m., after they have had enough of playing for the day, group members would start leaving, and by 11:30 a.m., the group had disbanded. The older adults would go their separate ways, and relationships ceased to exist beyond the confines of the restaurant. It is as if a spell had been broken and the older adults reentered their regular lives, lives that were entirely unconnected to the group. It felt as if the older adults had had enough of socializing for the day and were ready to move on with their separate lives. As David, a regular in the group stated in his interview, “this is my fix for the day . . . after hanging out with my coffee buddies, I have work to do at home.” Post group activities included running personal errands (e.g., shopping or visiting the doctor), engaging in other leisure activities (e.g., playing golf, doing repairs at home, or gardening), and going to regular “jobs” (e.g., babysitting grandchildren). Edna, at 76 years old, a widow, is a resident manager of a small apartment building. Often, at about 10:30 a.m., she would make references about having to go soon because “the plumber is coming to one of the apartments.”

3.2. Laughter

One of the outcomes of the older adults playing with their friends is that they experience a considerable amount of “spontaneous eruption of mirth” or “group glee” (Garvey, 1977). It made me want to come to the restaurant and be with this group because they had so much fun “talking story” and “being there”; they laughed more heartily and more often than any people that I know. It quickly became clear to me that these older adults were letting the child in them come out to play, and they were having a great deal of fun. They laughed at themselves being silly, at people in the restaurant, and when they were reminiscing the good old days. Laughter was brought about when an individual teased or poked fun at another, or when the older adults were able to see the funny sides of life. The

following field notes illustrate this theme as it quickly emerged. Edna was a witness or party to all of the following incidents.

Making faces. A scruffy, hobo-looking man came by and sat next to Roy at the far end of the group's tables. Roy, the oldest in the group at 83 years old, turned silently towards the ladies, and put on that "Red Buttons" look on his face. He puckered up his lips, tweaked his nose, and squeezed his eyes shut as if he was a baby experiencing stranger anxiety and was breaking down and crying. It was Roy's way of trying to tell the ladies that the scruffy man smelt awful. The look on Roy's face brought about a big roar of laughter among the ladies. They were not so much laughing at the incident, as they were laughing because Roy's "stink face" expression, as it later got to be known, was unexpected and very comical.

Playing truant. Barbara told the ladies in the group about her husband, Glen (77 years old), playing truant from school when he was in middle school, "You know ... the school principal was in his house ... in the living room talking to his mother about her son (Glen) not showing up at school today, and just at that same moment, Glen comes walking right into his mother's and principal's conversation ... pretending that he had a full day of school ... boy, was he in for a big surprise ... and did he get some good licking that day!" Big roar of laughter around the table ... Glen, sitting with the guys within ear shot at the next table, let out a big laugh, squinted and covered his face with both of his hands like a little boy in ignominy ... more laughter around the table.

Funny time. The following is not an excerpt of a conversation, but an account of an incident that happened. Because of the distance away from the group (this time, I was sitting with the guys two tables away), I was not able to listen in on the ladies' conversation.

Another outburst of boisterous laughter from the ladies ... this time, the shrieks were loud enough for the others across the dining room to hear! Maggie put her head down on her forearms as they rested on the table. Grace turned her head towards her shoulders to dry her tears on her short sleeves, and Edna reached out with her index finger to wipe the tears streaming out of the corner of her eyes ... behind her bifocal eyeglasses. Claire threw her shoulders back against the back rest of the plastic bench, mouth wide open and gasping for air; her eyes were visible only as two thin slits on her craggy, sun-baked face. Susan, who looked the most prim and proper of all the ladies, realizing that she was the loudest, covered her mouth while muffling her giggles like a little girl sharing a funny secret.

The outburst of laughter caught the attention of the guys sitting on the other side of the rows of tables. They turned their heads towards the ladies in wonderment. The look on Bob's face in seeing his wife, Grace, in such happy moments, was one of contentment and joy.

Like watching a movie. Come over here (Edna called out to me) ... sit right here and see ... it's like watching a movie! You can see most people in the restaurant sitting ovuh here ... you can see who's walking in ..., you can see that lady steal all the napkins ..., you see how strange some people are ... like that man in the green stripe T-shirt ... try see ... he's very odd you know ... he pulls wet paper napkins out of a zip lock bag ... it's inside his (Safeway) plastic bag and before he eats his breakfast, he always wipes his hands and arms ... Oh look! He's doing it now!! (Edna suddenly became very animated, almost anxious ..., but Nellie was laughing at how animated Edna had become). Here ... quick ... move ovuh here you can see betta! Try look! Hee hee ... ha ha ... See! Afta wiping his hands and arms ... he then wipes the table and even the next table ... ha ha ha!!! Nellie! Tsk ...! Don't laugh so loud ... he can see us, you know! Ha ha ha ... But see ... Ooh ... ooh ...! Nellie ...! Today he brings his own loaf of bread and a bottle of jelly! (More laughter from Nellie). He just buy the coffee! Oh! You cannot imagine how a small sized man like him can eat so much, ya?! Like yesterday ... Nellie! Stop laughing! (Muffled giggles ...) like yesterday ... (some more giggles ...) he ate a big

muffin like the Costco kind . . . this big (she gestured with her knobby, arthritic hands a muffin the size of a large grapefruit) . . . and then he pulled out two bananas and finished that, too! This time a big burst of laughter, but they all turned away from the man in the green stripe T-shirt so as not to look obvious . . .

Eating a pomelo. Henry was particularly thrilled when someone in the group brought his favorite citrus fruit, a pomelo. When he began eating a portion of it, he became so engrossed in the eating that he stopped listening to the group's conversation. Then Edna looked at him and commented, "Hey, Henry, don't forget to stop and come up for air to breathe now." The group burst out laughing. Henry just looked up, gave them all a big bright toothy grin, and continued gobbling down the fruit. The smile on his face clearly indicated a sense of delight and joy.

Sometimes, the outbursts of laughter would be so loud that they would attract the attention of other people in the restaurant. The laughter seems contagious, rather than annoying, as older adults in other groups often laughed, too.

Laughter would range from big toothy smiles, restrained giggles, cackles, and chuckles, to outbursts of uncontrollable, boisterous guffaw. The laughter was loudest when members poked fun at themselves. For example, Edna made the ladies laugh out loud when she mumbled, "ooh . . . look . . . this sticky mochi (rice cake) is all stuck in my dentures!" They also poked fun at each other, but in gentle ways.

While the men did not laugh as often or as heartily as the ladies, they, too, had their share of laughter. For example, Harry once made a comment to the men around the table about how he had to go home on time so that his wife would not be upset with him. "Being upset," according to Harry meant that his wife might not cook his favorite dishes, might not cook at all, or might give him the silent treatment for days on end! It was not just what Harry said but the timid, comical manner in which he said it that made the men laugh out loud.

3.3. *Play*

These older adults were relatively healthy, purposeful, proactive, plan making, and self-directed individuals who came to the restaurant to be part of an informal, social network. They were there to have fun, and not to seek social support, especially not informational or instrumental support. Stated simply, these older adults came to the restaurant to "play" and, for the most part, they came to the restaurant to be with their playmates. Of particular interest is the notion that these older Japanese American adults would not be able to play at home given the rigid roles that adults assume in the Japanese culture. The social norm is that parents, adult children, relatives, and in-laws are expected to maintain a certain decorum and restraint, and to engage in public display of behavior that is outside the boundaries of social norm is unthinkable if these older adults were at home or any place else besides a "third place."

Some of the things that the older adults did when they played in the restaurant were "talking story" about funny things that happened to them recently or in the "old days," telling jokes, sharing food, exchanging points of view about stories read from the morning paper, and watching other people who frequented the restaurant.

The informal and spontaneous nature of restaurant interaction is also nonobligatory. The older adults seem to have a sense of control of the time they choose to arrive, how often during the week, and whether they want to be actively or passively engaged.

While play and fun appear at first glance to be trivial pursuit, a closer examination shows that it is socially constructed and experienced and assumes important functions in the qualitative life experience of these individuals (Podilchak, 1985; Simmel, 1950). In being able to play with their friends, these older adults: (a) were members of a group, meetings of which provided structure to the day; (b) maintained a set of group norms and rituals that were self-regulated and comfortable; and (c) were able to engage in expressive activities like “frolic, frisk, gallop, gambol, cavort, engage in mock combat, with every sign of pleasure and high spirits and with no apparent utilitarian objective” (Garvey, 1977, p. 3). Members were sociable and, although some social support were exchanged, the exchanges were likely to be superficial and of little consequence to the lives of the seniors.

3.3.1. *Routine and community*

As a focal point, the restaurant provided a place where the older adults could keep a daily routine of sitting and having breakfast together with their friends. Having a daily routine is important to people because it provides structure to life. Hooyman and Kiyak (1996) state that one of the factors to a satisfactory retirement is the ability to find or create new, predictable routines in which to settle. A predictable routine can provide order, stability, and a sense of well-being.

The daily gathering also created a sense of community for the older adult members. Belonging to a group that meets on a regular basis, it is likely that members of the group became central figures for each other. For older adults, most of whom have experienced a loss of critical contexts for social engagement through retirement and the maturation of children into independent adulthood, the identification of new “central figures” is important (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1996).

Of significance, too, is that these older adults have managed to find friends who are fun to be with and who develop positive affective attachment. The routine and regular contact may be especially important for the two older adults in the group who lived alone and had few other people with whom to socialize and for the four couples whose children and grandchildren lived outside of the state. As stated by Edna:

It's nice to eat together, you know . . . I live alone and somehow food tastes better when you have people to eat with. Besides, if I cook just for myself, it's TOO much . . . At least, if I cook and bring it here, I can share with my friends the food. Yes . . . it very nice . . . these friends make me happy.

3.3.2. *Group norms and rituals*

For most of the times in the 9 months that I sat with the older adults, the social environment had the cheerful atmosphere of a party, filled with the lively, constant buzz of conversations, excitement, and laughter. Group members often brought food to the group to share such as homegrown mangoes and pomelos, or cooked food such as savory cakes and sweets. They also brought flowers, newspapers and magazines, funny stories and jokes, and

even small gifts or crafts to show and tell. Members were ostracized by the group if they never brought anything to share, did not figure out the seating patterns, demanded too much attention for their own stories, or dampened the mood. In the course of this research, only one member was expelled from the group. The following field note captured an episode in which this group member who boasted too often about her adult son's academic and career successes was eventually expelled from the group:

Shirley, not seeing the writing on the wall when, once again, brought up the fact that her son was a scientist with a major research corporation. Dolly rolled her eyes, turned to Helen, and gave her "the look." Helen smiled knowingly. Then both Dolly and Helen casually turned away from Shirley as if to ignore her, and began talking about something else. Shirley eventually stopped coming to the restaurant. While words were unspoken about appropriate or inappropriate behaviors in the group setting, this episode made clear to everyone present that morning that one should not boast or draw too much attention to oneself.

3.3.3. *Being with friends*

When asked why the older adults came to the restaurant, the predominant reason was to be with friends (e.g., to meet friends, to see my friends, to be with my friends, to sit with my friends, to spend time with friends, to hang out with friends, to eat together with my friends, to talk story with friends, to share things with my friends, to give things to my friends, or to learn from my friends). Interestingly, although most of the individuals consider the group members as friends, they exercised varying degrees of intimacy. Only a few regarded other group members as "very good friends," or "like family." Most regarded other members as "good" friends or "casual" friends. The definition of a "good" or "casual" friend in the context of this group was one who "had similar interests, had a pleasant disposition, brought and shared food, and was fun to be with." The definition did not include the sharing of personal or confidential information. As Edna said, and many of the group members would reiterate, "I think it's good we all mind our own business . . . if they tell me too much, then it becomes awkward because it's like we now become their shrink?"

Although the older adults were not exchanging much informational, instrumental, or emotional support, they were providing positive support in the area of appraisal. The older adults had formed a group in which members could "be themselves" without fear of being judged by traditional, cultural, and societal standards. This positive appraisal was supportive and likely increased self-esteem. The 26 members of the group all liked each other and laughed at each other's stories, so each gained esteem as an acceptable and fun person. For the older adults who lived alone, who did not have close ties with family, or whose family members regarded them in different light, the positive appraisal support from a peer group could be especially satisfying and fulfilling.

3.4. *Why play at this restaurant?*

3.4.1. *Elements of the restaurant*

Several characteristics of the restaurant fostered this gathering of older adults. First, the restaurant was accessible. Group members could drive there and find ample parking, several

buses stopped there, and the restaurant was on the ground level and accessible to individuals in wheelchairs and walkers. Elders who liked to exercise included in their morning routine a walk or swim at the nearby beach park prior to coming the restaurant. Others liked to shop at the mall after the morning gathering. In addition, the food items at the restaurant were affordable and coffee refills were free. The management did not hurry the older adults away; in fact, the restaurant workers were generally friendly and welcoming, and did not object when group members brought their own food items to share with each other.

Interestingly, the restaurant staff provided the group members a sense of security. The restaurant staff were like police officers and the restaurant manager was like the captain. Whenever there was any indication of disturbance by a “deviant” individual (e.g., a “mental” person disrupting the peace and sense of security in the restaurant), Edna or Harriet would not hesitate to call on the restaurant staff or manager. For example, Harriet once walked to the cashier and asked for the manager because there was “a homeless person who was undressing himself and changing his clothes” in the restaurant. Soon enough the manager calmly spoke with that man, and he was on his way out, fully clothed.

In the setting, the older adults could interact with “central figures” in their lives, primarily their fellow group members, but also restaurant employees and other regular patrons with whom they had become friendly. Exchanges with the restaurant employees and older adults not part of the group may have been fleeting and superficial, but the mutual acknowledgment seemed to meet some basic need for human contact and social interaction.

In addition, the fast-food restaurant, which attracts many children later in the day, felt like a safe and appropriate place to release one’s inner child and to engage in “frolicking and frisking.” The restaurant was large and had some key elements that made it conducive to strangers approaching each other (Mehrabian & Russell, 1975). The cheerful, social environment set the tone for mirth and laughter. The restaurant allowed the group members to establish a “play area” for themselves (their regular tables), and this became the place where the “gang” came to play. It is evident from the expressions of their faces as they walked into the restaurant that group members were anticipating another good play session in which stories, food, and laughter would be shared. Edna once remarked with a twinkle in her eyes, “Oh, this is so fun, you know . . . really quite funny because I used to come here for my morning walks . . . all by myself . . ., but now I know these nice people that I sit with, I don’t even walk anymore . . . I just come here, take my seat and watch the world go around . . . ha ha . . .”

3.4.2. Why here, rather than a senior center

Each older adult who participated in an individual interview was asked why he/she came to this restaurant, rather than going to a senior center. The overwhelming response to this question was, “because senior centers are for old folks.” Senior centers were seen by these group as places where old people went to get help, and were perceived as overly structured. Many were not interested in the activities offered at senior centers such as arts and craft work (e.g., crochet and watercolor painting). These older adults did not see that they needed the level of help, structure, or constraint that they felt were characteristic of senior centers. What they most wanted to do at the restaurant was to “hang out with my friends.” What appealed

most to them about the restaurant was that they could congregate on a voluntary basis, and each member could decide for him/herself when to visit, how long to stay, how much to disclose, what to share, and so forth. These older adults perceived the restaurant as an environment over which they had control and within which they had freedom. When asked what they would do if they had not joined this group at this restaurant, most said they would be staying home.

4. Conclusion

Oldenburg's (1999) notion of the "third place" seems to hold true for this group of older adults. This very accessible, public setting hosts the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of adults beyond the realms of family and work. Contrary to the many studies in the social support literature that portray older adults as needy and seeking instrumental support, these community dwelling, physically independent seniors have found "a magical corner of the city where the city's peoples came together to have a good time in public" (Nasaw, 1993, p. 2).

Insignificant as it may seem, the nonobligatory social interactions and play were meaningful to these older adults as they are for children because it is through these opportunities that they get to be part of a social group of their choice. The nonobligatory social interactions gave the older adults a sense of control and sociability they desired, and play provided them with delight and amusement. More importantly, in the midst of group glee and spontaneous eruption of mirth, play gave these older adults opportunities for personal expression. These kinds of personal expression with public display of emotions are likely to be unthinkable in a family setting at home.

An important consideration that made this group experience particularly meaningful and delightful was the fact that the older adults got to spend time with whom they voluntarily choose to associate. Even though the group members did not exchange informational, instrumental, or emotional support, the group served to meet an important need in the older adults' lives. Oldenburg (1999) refers to this important need as "spiritual tonic" where, in a third place, the older adults "make other peoples' day as they make one's own in a situation where everyone gains" (p. 55). Oldenburg argues that people enjoy the third place interlude, and "are left feeling better about themselves afterward for having received and bestowed the warm acceptance" (p. 55).

Group members benefited from belonging, but also from the regular dose of laughter that the group provided. Laughter has been linked positively to health, morale, life satisfaction, and survival (Cousins, 1989; Fry, 1994). For example, Fry found that 20 seconds of laughter can double the heart rate for 3–5 min—the equivalent of 3 min of strenuous rowing. Richman (1995) looked at the life-saving function of humor with the depressed and suicidal elderly and found that humor is life affirming because it is interactive, increases social cohesion, and reduces stress.

Findings from this qualitative study are not generalizable to the larger older adult population. However, they inform gerontologists about older adults who are not part of the

service networks but who congregate in “third places” where they find and create social environments that allow them to “simply be.”

Our study participants, by happenstance, turned out to be Japanese Americans, which is a predominant group in Hawaii (comprising 30% of the state’s population and 40% of its seniors).

This social phenomenon, however, is not uniquely practiced by Japanese Americans, or in the state of Hawaii. Rather, I have observed similar groups at fast-food restaurants in Florida, Virginia, New York, and California. Most often, these groups appear homogeneous, comprised of Jewish elders in some communities, African Americans in others, and Caucasians of Christian faiths in others. Of particular interest is the fact that when this study was presented at local and national conferences, it was not unusual for middle-aged members of the audience to remark, “you have just described my mother,” or “this is what my father and his buddies do.” It falls to researchers in other locales to see if a similar phenomenon is occurring in their communities, and what reasons lie behind it.

The results of this study indicate that Oldenburg’s third places—like this naturally occurring, autonomous groups of older adults in a fast-food restaurant—do not just exist; they are thriving, and they are important in some older adults’ lives. Despite the fact that group members may not exchange instrumental, emotional, or informational support, the groups, in themselves, are important to the older adult members and can be seen as supportive of healthy aging. In a sense, the social phenomenon at the restaurant gathering is a good example of an existing, naturally occurring primary prevention program where various degrees of sociability exist within the nonobligatory social interactions. These older adults, who are physically independent and engaged in productive activities, have created an opportunity for themselves to play, laugh, and be positively appraised on a regular basis.

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