**Pools, Pilates and People: An ethnography of Harrow Leisure Centre**

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**Abstract**

https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/9ltup6vej2JB4ZGD9PpB3Vg2Nh86m25MB46ubSCfyLxBPAp-Ph0405ByOnfZW0lycd-tgz6Xk4hAhmZmuS-wfP56xO_CJIyCI84PvUgtpkexzEuZYdcaps_TttT5-U1ogdD1D7xl

This paper aims to use an ethnography of a ‘typical’ leisure centre in order to investigate how the leisure centre serves as pillar in the community and works to alleviate isolation from the community, bringing into the community those previously excluded such as the elderly. Harrow is chosen for being a highly ethnically diverse and under researched area, allowing for an original investigation of the interactions of ethnic groups with respect to the issue of community. The paper is able to conclude, through a series of observations, surveys, and interviews, that in the wider context that the leisure centre provides not only a social place to exercise but also a place to socialise and feel a part of a community. Hence in the current climate of increasing cutbacks in funding to public services, the paper judges that the leisure centre goes far beyond its initial functions as a centre for leisure and fitness. Indeed, Harrow leisure centre has transformed into a community space that not only helps to improve physical health but also mental health by alleviating social problems such as isolation and loneliness.

**Key words**: Ethnography, Leisure Centre, Community, Harrow, Isolation

**Introduction**

The research puzzle arose by questioning the role of a public place such as the leisure centre in the local community and its functions. Despite the abundance of literature concerning the problem of social inclusion, there is a lack of research specifically focusing on the sense of community in a leisure centre. Given the representativeness of the leisure centre for an area, we thought that it was an ideal space in which to understand the concept of community in Harrow.

Our investigation takes place in the Harrow leisure centre whereby the main function of the leisure centre is to facilitate improved health. The adoption of ethnography as our main qualitative research method enabled a deeper understanding of the experiences of the people that use the leisure centre. Thus this research paper will not only detail the idea of improved fitness in Harrow leisure centre, but also the story of the formation of a community and challenges such as isolation and loneliness that the community faces.

There are three major findings drawn from this research. Firstly, the leisure centre provides a point of contact and a community, particularly for older adults and the elderly. Secondly, the provision of services in the leisure centre is appropriately tailored to meet local needs such as diverse cultural events. Thirdly, the existence and effect of smaller subgroups on the wider community. This paper will offer justification for these findings and analyse in depth the implications of Harrow leisure centre as well as in wider social environment.

**History of Harrow**

Harrow is a borough juxtaposed by high levels of affluence in areas such as Harrow-on-the-Hill, Pinner, and Stanmore compared to high levels of deprivation in Wealdstone and South Harrow. Harrow is also a diverse borough, comprising of 63.8% of its population from the Black and Minority Ethnic communities, with the largest group being of Indian ethnicity (specifically those from Gujarat and South India). Nearly 70% of the people living in Harrow are classified as upper or middle class and 85% claim to be in good health.

**Leisure centre**

Harrow Leisure Centre, built in 1997, used to be Harrow School of Gymnastics. It is located in Harrow Wealdstone which is a relatively underdeveloped local area. It provides an extensive range of activities to the local community, including a gym, two swimming pools, a large sports hall, crèche for children and café. However, the overall economic and political policies are not as supportive to the leisure centres since councils have cut over £71m from leisure centre budgets since 2010, a 14% cut overall (Unison, 2014).

**Reliability and validity and representativeness**

There were three key limitations from the methodology. Firstly, the survey was conducted during the day on two consecutive weekdays, and statistical analysis is derived from 56 valid questionnaires. We are aware that both quantitative data and observation may not be representative of the overall population of the centre’s visitors, both due to the small size of sample and particular time of survey. Secondly, activities conducted during evenings, early mornings and weekends were not recorded, and thus the data may be skewed towards the people that were visited. Thirdly, it must be noted that it was difficult to build up a personal rapport with the users of the gym and staff members due to the short timescale.

**Literature Review**

There are two main concepts that will be explored, leisure and community.

**Leisure**

Laverie stated that the motivations of leisure vary. Intrinsic motivation, feelings of freedom, control and mastery associated with many leisure actives enhance self-determination (Laverie 277-283). Participation in leisure has potential health benefit both mentally and physically. When practiced in a social setting, leisure activities also helps to promote social ties. These social networks provide support and relief from stress for individuals. Even more, social identity theory indicates the sociocultural nature of leisure activities. Participation in sports may be incorporated into part of identity and provide some social connections.

Participation in leisure activities, especially using sports facilities, is closely linked with the demand to keep fit. Modern obsession with fitness is closely linked to consumerism and various discourses disciplining human bodies. King stated increasing medicalisation regulates not only illness but also fitness, while the idea of ‘natural’ body is artificially fabricated by modern medicine, gym exercises and nutrition diets (King 29-35). As Frederick et al. found women have a higher level of body dissatisfaction and comparison with others in sports class exacerbates the anxiety (Frederick 161-176).

However, participation in leisure activities is not equal. Previous researches mainly focused on only one major concern such as gender, and ignore the interplay between different factors and subjective experiences of individual participants. According to Bourdieu, class segments tend to value different kinds of sports, and access to different types of sports vary (Bourdieu). Physical fitness is also a form of embodied cultural capital that needs investment in both time and efforts.

**Community**

The existing literature outlines little consensus on the concept of community. Hillary detailed 94 definitions of the term ‘community’ relating to ideas of common features and social interactions between groups, for instance (Hillary 111-123). Sarason defined community as the perception of “similarity with others, a willingness to maintain interdependence and thus a sense of belonging to the larger structure” (Sarason). Though leisure centres provide a social space for local communication and network building, some social groups are more likely to be excluded and marginalised due to their inability or lack of motivation to access. However, previous surveys such as Sports England’s reports on leisure centre usage were mainly based on questionnaires (Sports England). There is a gap in the existing literature as it offers a limited insight into the actual setting on which leisure activities take place and does not allow us to reveal levels of integration through subjective experience.

**Methodology**

To obtain data of Harrow leisure centre, we conducted a qualitative approach. Our qualitative approach was conducted through three methods, closed-question surveys, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. We selected a qualitative approach for our methodology because the stories and experiences of people in the leisure centre were rich in detail and nuanced. Thus, investigating the experiences of people in the leisure centre was most appropriate with the qualitative method as well as in presenting our findings. However, we used a quantitative approach to interpret the broader story and views of people in the closed-question surveys.

**Surveys**

Closed-question surveys were crucial in our qualitative research in offering us an insight into the experiences and stories of the users of Harrow leisure centre. The survey was designed to aid our understanding of the experiences of community in Harrow leisure centre. There were nine questions on the survey that were aimed at the users of the leisure centre, and the sample totalled at fifty-seven surveys.

**Semi-structured interviews**

As well as the surveys, semi-structured interviews were also another crucial element of the qualitative fieldwork method. Interviews were instrumental in enabling us to obtain data that was more detailed and personal compared to the closed-question surveys. It served as an opportunity for users of the gym and staff to shed light on their views of the functions and experiences of Harrow leisure centre. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted on both Monday and Tuesday, by members of staff and users of the leisure centre.

**Participant observation**

Participant observation was also a key element in our ethnographic study of Harrow leisure centre. We used observation on both Monday and Tuesday to be aware of the dynamics of the leisure centre. Observing areas of the leisure centre from the entrance, the café, the sales area and a number of classes enabled us to analyse interactions between both members of the leisure centre and staff members, and how they interacted with one another.

**Quantitative**

We used quantitative methods such as inputting and analysing survey data in Excel, by comparing the characteristics and perceptions of people who feel a sense of community in the leisure centre to those who do not.

**Choice of location**

Harrow leisure centre was selected as the research site for a number of reasons. Firstly, the willingness and eagerness of the staff members to aid us with the research project was the one of the key motivations for choosing Harrow. The friendliness from Harrow leisure centre, by allowing us to conduct our research, was also reflected in our findings. Secondly, Harrow leisure centre was selected as a result of the lack of existing literature on exploring the idea of community in this area. Thirdly, Harrow is a diverse borough that has a wide range of ethnic groups and we were drawn to the location as we were interested to see if this diverse community was reflected in the leisure centre.

**Results and Data Analysis**

**Finding I: Leisure centre provides a community for the elderly**

Through our investigation, we have discovered that the leisure centre is particularly significant for the elderly. Elderly people are more inclined to consider the centre as a community than any other group.

Based on our survey data, the large majority of individuals going to Harrow leisure centre were old or middle-aged. This is significant as it demonstrates that those that use the leisure centre are predominantly older in comparison to younger people. Younger people may have other social spaces to interact in, whereas the elderly people may use the leisure centre as a space to create social networks. Our data further evidences this, as 36.8% of people above 65 years old thought that there was indeed a community in the leisure centre. As well as this, the percentage for the group of 44-64 year olds who thought there was a sense of community was 31.6%. Therefore, one can identify a possible trend that Harrow leisure centre is significant in providing a function for elderly people to create social connections and a community to be a part of.

**Do you feel there is a community in the Leisure Centre? (Survey Data – Question 8 and 4)**

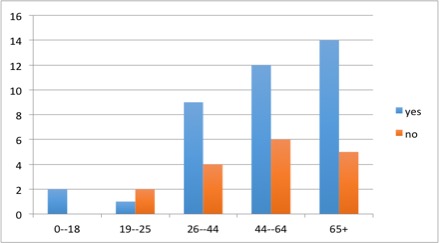


Figure1

The data from the surveys relate to and build on the qualitative data gained from the interviews. Building on the idea from the surveys that the leisure centre serves as a community for elderly people, this is also reflected by Lucy, an elderly Asian woman. Lucy notes that **“the centre is a good community centre for the elderly”** and she adds to this further, by stating that **“older Asian women who often do not take part in the community”** become a part of the community life in the leisure centre. In addition, Lucy extends her idea that for older women, like herself, with **“no family or friends at home”** the centre gives her an opportunity to socialise in classes and in other events hosted by the leisure centre.

The elderly or retired are generally considered to be excluded from wider society. This is partly because of the loss of friends and family, as well as the loss of regular contact from employment. The leisure centre in Harrow has thus remedied and reconnected the elderly with the community, by allowing them to build new relationships. Therefore, the functions of the leisure centre has evolved into a public space for the elderly to socialise. This is further supported by Beth, an elderly woman in the dance class, that stated that **“isolation”** was a problem for many of the elderly. Beth notes that **“going to the leisure centre is the only time we get to go out”**. This highlights the pivotal role that Harrow leisure centre plays in the social life of the elderly and the formation of a sense of community for them.

Interestingly, the leisure centre may improve communication and social skills for the elderly. Beth supports this notion as she stated that **“many isolated elderly Asian women are selfish as they live alone”**. In arguing this, Beth made the point that the elderly women have changed after coming to the leisure centre and have become more sociable. This is supported further by Beth’s remark that elderly women have **“learnt to become a part of the group”** and thus there is a suggestion that the leisure centre has enhanced the abilities for the elderly to communicate with one another.

Therefore, another implication emerges from the function of the leisure centre. It does not simply serve as a focus for the elderly to communicate but it also changes the behaviour of the elderly in a way that effectively integrates them back into wider society.

Ultimately the leisure centre not only provides a physical space to accommodate for the loneliness experienced by the elderly but it also motivates them to overcome social isolation and seek stronger connections with other members of the community.

**Finding II: The provision of services caters to local needs**

The provision of services in Harrow leisure centre are tailored to the needs of the users of the leisure centre and the local community in Harrow. The leisure centre facilitates activity classes that are aimed at people from all ages, abilities and groups in the local community of Harrow. For instance, Edith, an elderly woman organising the line-dancing and bingo class, stated that **“going to the leisure centre is when I only really get out the house”**. Edith’s remark highlights that the leisure centre offers activity classes to improve physical health but also perhaps mental health, to combat loneliness and isolation. This can be supported by our participant observation in the dance class, by regularly interacting with other elderly people through the dance, an elderly woman began talking to her dance partner.

Furthermore, the interview with **Julia** builds on Edith’s statement that **“I come to the leisure centre to meet people that I would have otherwise not have met”**. Building on this, she states that the leisure centre’s “**friendly and social environment”** is the main reason for her going to the activity classes, **“especially for retired people that gives them a sense of belonging”**. Julia’s interview captures the essence of the leisure centre as the heart of community life, providing a social space for those that may feel isolated in the wider society. Particularly in the light of the cuts to social services such as “Meals on Wheels”, a delivery service for elderly people funded by the government, social spaces such as the Harrow leisure centre are transforming into areas of community life.

The provision of services in Harrow leisure centre not only caters for activity classes, but also for diverse cultural events. This is evident by the interview with **Ben**, one of the managers at the leisure centre, noted that **“Hindu weddings and religious fairs are held in the hall regularly, with Hindu women coming in to cook and pray”**. We can ascertain from this that the leisure centre is serving as a hub of interactions and activities within the community for important events in people’s lives such as marriage and religious events. Ben adds to this further by stating that **“in the hall at Christmas, gift giving attracts about 2000 people”** which signifies that the leisure centre is functioning as the focus for human interactions on a large scale, and accommodating for the diversity of the local area. The services that are provided by the leisure centre are beyond the functions of the leisure centre as a centre for sports.

Women-only session activity classes further contributes to the idea that access and provision in Harrow leisure centre is tailored towards the local community. Ben outlines that **“we [the leisure centre] invested in a women-only gym, sauna, swimming pool that is really used by all women”**. The leisure centre, including the staff, recognised that these facilities should fit the preferences of women, as Ben further stated that “**it makes sense that a young girl of 18 would not want to work out in the gym next to a bulky 40-year old man”**. The leisure centre thus provides a space for the enjoyment of leisure in an environment that is appropriate for both men and women.

**Finding III:** Existence of ‘subgroups’ and the effect on the overall community at the leisure centre

From our investigation, we discovered that there is an existence of ‘subgroups’, groups or individuals within activity classes. These ‘subgroups’ have an effect on the overall community life in the leisure centre.

Lucy, an elderly Asian woman, made apparent the existence of these groups by noting them as **“cliques”.** By identifying these small groups within activity classes by this term, there was a suggestion of the negative effects of these groups as Lucy noted that she felt “**isolated”**. Furthermore, she added in her interview that **“I do not talk to new people”**. Therefore, this suggests that her exclusion from these ‘subgroups’ may be largely because of her own lack of confidence in communicating with others. Therefore, the leisure centre does not necessarily exist to always provide inclusion and promote a community atmosphere. In some ways, the leisure centre can intensify feelings of isolation and does not in fact harbour a feeling of community.

**Is there a community?** (Survey Data – Question 4 and 7)

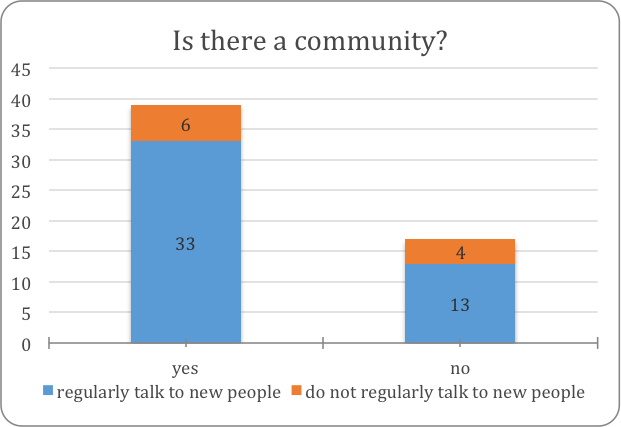


Figure 2

In addition from our survey data, we found that individuals in activity classes who answered they “felt a sense of community” were also more likely to converse with new people in the leisure centre. This implies that people who answered that they feel a sense of community were also more likely to regularly talk to new people. Hence, since subgroups will have members who all feel a community sense we have further evidence to support the summary that the isolation from the subgroups may be a self-inflicted issue.

Edith clarifies the idea that ‘subgroups’ that exist in activity classes do not in fact create feelings of isolation. In fact, people in classes generally feel a strong connection with one another. This is evidenced by Edith’s statement that two of her friends in her activity class, **“travel all the way from Wimbledon which is over one hour away”.**

Building on Edith’s notion of community, there exists some evidence that small groups do emerge within activity classes but this does not necessarily promote exclusion. In fact, ‘subgroups’ promote a feeling of belonging and inclusion within the community centre. For instance, Beth and Amy, both elderly women in the bingo class, described how they become friends within classes. What is more, these activity classes have enabled these women to meet outside the leisure centre for **“coffee and dinners”,** as they noted, which suggests that the leisure centre serves as an opportunity space for elderly people to create strong relationships. By providing a social space for contact with other individuals of similar ages, Beth and Amy stated that the leisure centre made it possible for them to build **“lifelong relationships”.**

Hence, while clearly ‘subgroups’ exist and can occasionally feel isolating, generally they are in fact an integrating force providing particularly at the class level a structure onto which users can integrate

**Conclusion**

Overall the paper analysed three findings of the existence of subgroups, the formation of an elderly community, and the provision of services in the centre. Through all the findings a similar conclusion became evident, that the centre brings together both those generally included in wider society and also those excluded such as the elderly. A further conclusion was that even though ‘subgroups’ do exist and sometimes leads to isolation, they in fact generally helped enhance and build this community atmosphere. Although limited by restricted observation time, the paper concludes in the wider context that the leisure centre can be judged as providing a service far beyond that of a place of leisure and exercise but indeed as a provider of well being and social interaction for the otherwise isolated. Hence in the current setting of increasing cutbacks in the funding to leisure centres, it must be judged that the impact is felt far beyond the effect on the physical health of an area as also impacts the mental well being of those who see such places as the nucleus of their social community and a relief from loneliness and isolation.

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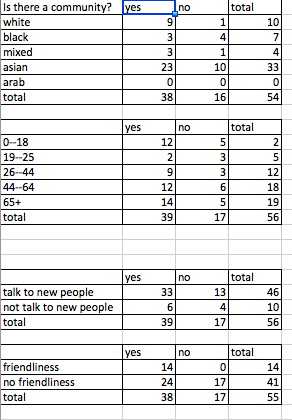
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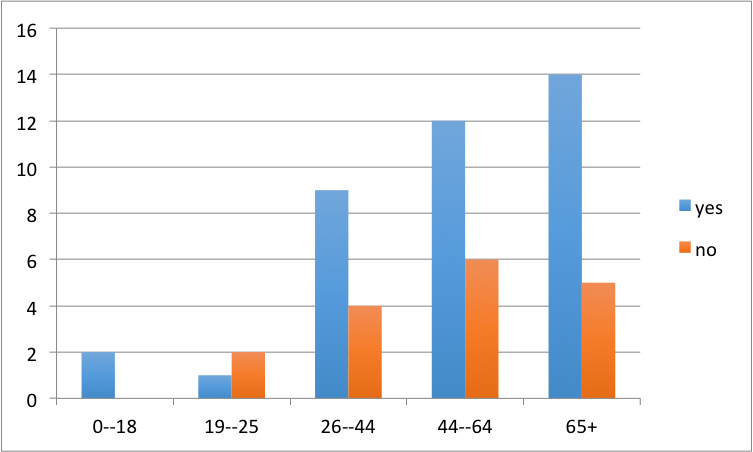
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**Appendices**

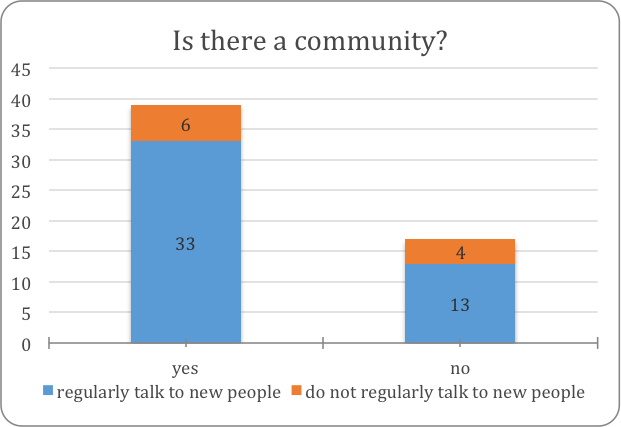
Appendix 1 (Survey Data)



Appendix 2 (Figure 1)



Appendix 3 (Figure 2)



Appendix 4 – Survey Data

