Go to almost any Latino neighborhood in Miami and you would be hard-pressed not to find a domino game in progress. Spend some time in these neighborhoods and you will understand this leisure pursuit is not only a way to pass time, but it is also a link to people’s culture. For some immigrants, the game is a link to their homeland.

We teamed up (one of us is a Cuban-born occupational therapist, the other an anthropologist) and set out to explore the meaning of this ritualized game from the perspectives of occupation, aging, continuity, and the role that dominoes may play in the cultural and life transitions of older Cuban exiles in Miami. As a backdrop for our visit to Maximo Gomez Park (informally known as Domino Park), the hub of this activity in Miami’s Little Havana, we will first consider the Cuban immigration experience and how it has shaped Miami’s Cuban culture.

Coming to America
How and when one’s family came to America significantly impacts the Cuban American experience. Cuban immigration occurred in distinct waves, with the first taking place in 1959 after Fidel Castro’s ascent to power. At this time, Cubans began to emigrate from their homeland and relocate throughout the United States, Latin America, Mexico, and Spain. This first wave of immigration occurred in response to the loss (or anticipated loss) of personal and economic freedom via a series of reforms planned and enacted by the Castro regime.

Serious grievances leading to this exodus included political persecution, land seizure through agrarian reform, the freezing of bank...
accounts and property, and business seizures. Many individuals from this first wave identify themselves as exiles rather than immigrants. This identifier may stem from the fact that their departure was not by choice, but to escape a Communist regime in order to seek personal and political freedom, and to reclaim their way of life, valued roles, and occupations.

Perhaps no relocation has had a more dramatic impact on Miami’s local culture and economy than that of exiles who came to Florida in 1959 and 1960. They brought their traditions, music, culture, language, and food. They also brought dominoes—a game almost as popular as baseball, their national sport. Miami became known as “Little Havana,” with a newly awakened economy fueled by efforts of this immigrant group comprised of well-educated professionals.

In the next few years, Cuban immigration slowed as the Cuban government made the exodus increasingly difficult and risky.

A second wave of Cuban immigrants arrived between 1965 and 1973. The third wave, the Marielitos, made their way to Miami in the early 1980s, with the Castro-sanctioned mass exodus from Mariel Beach. The most recent and fourth wave began in 1994 and continues today, consisting mostly of people desperately fleeing the Castro regime in small boats and rafts. These immigrants are known as Balseros (after the Spanish word for rafters).

Though all these immigrants are Cuban, the four waves of groups have distinct differences, including backgrounds, work and life experiences, values, beliefs, and goals. Earlier immigrants were predominantly Caucasian from middle- and upper-socioeconomic classes, better educated, and many—though certainly not all—were financially well off prior to their arrival in the United States. Immigrants arriving in the “Freedom Flights” between 1965 and 1973 were “predominantly middle- and working-class Cubans; those arriving during the Mariel boat lift, and those who followed, were mainly people

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Domino Park, because of its domino players, has become a Miami tourist destination.

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A walkway in Domino Park.
of mixed race, not as well educated, and represented lower socioeconomic groups including the poor” (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006).

Given these differences, the groups have had dissimilar experiences in the United States in key respects, including economic success and social mobility. Many of the early exiles have no interest in returning to Cuba while Castro is still in power, yet many more recent immigrants return to Cuba on a regular basis to visit family and friends. It is important to always consider intra-group variation among Cuban Americans, including experiences in aging.

**Domino Park**

Since the early 1970s, elderly Cuban domino players have frequented Domino Park, which was an open area, devoid of tables and chairs, where players had to sit on the ground. Older Cuban adults would congregate in the park daily, drink coffee, and play dominoes. This community ritual was jeopardized by certain undesirable activities happening in the park. In 1987, after numerous complaints from local business owners regarding drug activity in Domino Park and potential safety issues, there was talk of closing the park and moving the domino players to another location.

After months of discussion and counterproposals, the city commission approved plans to renovate the park. When it reopened in September 1988, the Little Havana Development Authority decided to implement regulations, including new operating hours (9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily), an age requirement of fifty-five years and older, and a security guard who would check membership IDs before allowing players into the park. The city was able to implement the age requirement because age discrimination had not yet been recognized as a problem in Miami.

While people may often think of playing dominoes as a casual activity, we learned through observation and informal interviews that many elements of domino play are ritualized and formalized in this venue. The game here has its own set of formal rituals—mandatory membership, monitored entry, and pairing off. Like prospective partners at a tea dance, each player comes and observes who may be available, which table may have room for one more player, and who may be interested in forming a pair or a foursome. Even though individual players may not know one another, the regulars who come to the park understand the etiquette of forming a group, and there is a shared understanding of how to act while playing dominoes—how to begin, and when the slamming of the tiles is appropriate. The ritual is predictable, connects participants, provides continuity, and helps create a locally well-understood social niche for these immigrants.

Playing dominoes helps elderly Cuban immigrants to stay connected with their culture, to foster hope and celebrate living, and to have a sense of mastery in old age.

Outside the players’ circle, there are other ongoing rituals. Domino Park has become a destination for busloads of tourists who want to catch a glimpse of local scene. Tourists engage in a ritual that includes watching the many games in progress from behind the park fence, and snapping souvenir photos of themselves (against the park fence) and of the domino players inside. This ritual visually highlights who belongs inside Maximo Gomez Park, and who does not.

Many tourists have posted online comments about their experience at this boundary marker. Some enthusiasts said, “I had to give this place 5 stars because it’s so authentically Cuban,” and “Hot damn this place is cool. Maximo Gomez Domino Park is a famous site. A must-see for tourists, in my opinion. First of all, the sound! The loud metallic ringing of the dominoes crashing together announces a new shuffle, a new game.
The sound of excitement, of friendship, of luck, nostalgia, and freedom” (Yelp.com, 2011).

The rituals of the park’s insiders and outsiders are structured and follow predictable patterns that enable everyone to understand when and how they should interact.

The Meaning of Dominoes for Cuban Elders

Besides visiting the park and observing this ritual, we also conducted informal interviews (in Spanish) with a group of seven elders who frequent Domino Park. We were also fortunate to meet one longtime player, “Mr. F,” in his home as he prepared for four to five hours of domino playing.

Several key themes emerged from these interviews. Attendance at the park was described as a way to pass time and entertain themselves. Some watch rather than play; for them, visiting Domino Park allows them to connect with friends. Time at the park was described as a way to connect with a part of Cuba, a form of therapy, and the opportunity to “live another day.” Sentiments among these elders were quite similar, although the length of time they had been coming to the park varied from two to thirty-seven years.

Through Mr. F’s account, as well as those of the other players, we came to see that the Cuban elders view the game as a way of carrying on a proud national tradition, even when they are forced to live out their old age in exile. This ritualized leisure pursuit is seen as a key way to remain connected with the culture of their homeland, a way to maintain hope and celebrate living, a way to have a sense of mastery in late life.

Parsing the Ritual of Dominoes

Assessing our experience with Cuban elders, how might gerontologists interpret the meaning of this ritual? Continuity in our human life course is predicated on keeping a sense of who we are, who we have become, and what we value as we age. It is the life-course perspective that
explains how individuals and groups adapt to changes over time and maintain a sense of self, activity patterns, and social engagement. People manage and master physical and mental changes through adaptive strategies that link them to their past experiences and social world. Continuity is how we grow and thrive through role losses, role substitutions, and the potential expansion of social connections as we lose loved ones and friends.

From an occupational therapy perspective, continuity—like occupations in which we engage in each of our roles—is dynamic, multi-dimensional, and multi-directional. Through occupations we structure our time and give meaning to our lives (Kramer, Hinojosa, and Royeen, 2003). Occupations and the lifespan continuity they provide reflect and sometimes shape our identities; they create a vehicle for social engagement as we grow, mature, and age. Occupations and continuity can serve as buffers to change, playing a significant role in the adjustment of immigrants—by helping individuals transition into new roles, and by providing connections to their cultural roots and values.

Though playing dominoes is obviously an entertaining leisure activity, the Cuban domino players at Maximo Gomez Park find cultural continuity through the game: there is the opportunity for them to create new roles and new friendships with people of shared history—despite age difference, immigration group, or socioeconomic status. They maintain internal continuity by keeping a sense of personal identity through a perceived past. This buffers the changes that accompany normal aging, and their sense of being forced to live out old age in exile (Atchley, 1989).

If, as research indicates, “successful aging” means retaining connection to others, the domino players at Maximo Gomez Park have that opportunity. If, beyond physical and
cognitive health, successful aging requires social capital to support the aging community (Dychtwald, 1999), then Miami had a good vision when Maximo Gomez Park was re-designed as a place for elders. This ritualized game reinforces the need for, and the meaning of, occupation in later life; it is important for fostering continuity and aids the transition to retirement. All of the smaller aspects of the larger ritual, including the cafecitos (small cups of very strong Cuban coffee) that the players drink, are a connection to their past and a way to keep their culture alive and thriving.

Finally, it is important to recognize that while domino playing is important to the current generation of Cuban elders, it is not limited to them. Although most players are Cuban immigrants, there are other Latinos who frequent Maximo Gomez Park.

On a recent Saturday, we attended several elementary school soccer games in a local Miami park. We noticed that a group of men in attendance, individuals of varying ages, had set up a table and several chairs. Over the next few hours, while the children played soccer, the men played dominoes. These men are middle-aged, but there is good reason to believe they will continue this tradition into their older years—maybe even becoming future players at Maximo Gomez Park.

We wonder how this group will resemble the current generation of first-wave Cuban immigrants. Unlike the first generation, the next generation of elders will have had a different experience of immigration and life in the United States. How might their life experiences, experiences of aging, and lifelong connection to their homeland(s) change how the ritual of domino playing is enacted? These questions will be answered in time.

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References


