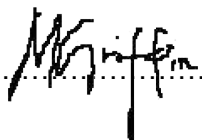


**Health Consciousness, Running and Female Bodies:  
An Ethnographic Study of 'Active Ageing'**

Submitted by Meridith Brooke Griffin to the University of Exeter  
as a thesis for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Sport and Health Sciences  
In March 2012

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## Abstract

This thesis is composed of an ethnography of the Women's Running Network (WRN) – a non-elite women's-only running group – and explores participant's lived experiences of health and ageing (and the intersection of these) in this physical context. In-depth interviews (n = 25), inclusive of case studies (n = 3), with women between the ages of 29 and 66 allowed insight into the subjective contours of participant's lives, and their particular biographical trajectories culminating in WRN participation. Several types of narrative analyses were applied to the emergent data, and results from these revealed insights into *if*, *why*, *how*, and *when* women engaged with health and 'active ageing' messages across the life course. Despite a prevalence of health knowledge, participants tended to report long periods of inactivity throughout their lives – citing the often documented barriers to physical activity such as a lack of time and caregiving responsibilities. However, a vast majority of participants also cited an utter lack of confidence with respect to physical activity, often stemming from highly influential poor early experiences. Embodying a perceived 'non-sporting' identity for as long as they had, they were foreclosed to the idea of physical activity despite simultaneously feeling pressure to participate. For many, it was particular life events - or 'critical moments' – that brought participation in physical activity to the forefront (i.e., birthdays, relationship issues, bereavement, and health scares). A consideration of these within this thesis explores the complex link that exists between health consciousness and action. In addition, alternative narratives about who *could* be a runner (within WRN advertising and by word of mouth) '*hailed*' participants to reconsider their foreclosed narratives, by offering a 'fun and non-competitive' atmosphere for people 'of all ages, sizes, and abilities'. Once pushed to action and within the WRN setting, participants described learning about themselves and their bodies, and thus developed the capacity to tell new stories. As such, through a narrative lens, this thesis introduces the stories that participants responded to (or not), and the stories that they *used to* tell, *felt able* to tell, and – in some cases – *learned how* to tell about health, about ageing, and about running/physical activity. Conclusions from this work have implications for both policy and practice, advocating for the necessity of comprehensive insight into people's perceptions and lived experiences of (active) ageing within the context of life history, current life stage, and the everyday.

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## Publications resulting from this thesis

### *Papers in international peer reviewed journals*

Griffin, M. 2010. Setting the scene: Hailing women into a running identity. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 2 (2), 153-174.

### *Book chapters*

Griffin, M. 2011. Setting the scene: Hailing women into a running identity. In Phoenix, C. & Smith, B. (eds.), *The world of physical culture in sport and exercise: Visual methods for qualitative research*, pp. 60-81. London, UK: Routledge. (re-printed article)

## Conference presentations resulting from this thesis

- 2011 Griffin, M. & Phoenix, C. "Stories 'sold' and stories told: Health, ageing, and running women." Paper presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual British Society of Gerontology conference, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK, July 5-7.
- 2011 Griffin, M. & Phoenix, C. "Women's health stories: Emotion, ageing and identity in non-elite running culture." Talk presented for the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG), at the British Psychological Society (BPS) funded workshop entitled 'Opening the multiplicity of opportunities: Practicing alternative approaches to qualitative research', University of Bath, Bath, UK, June 3.
- 2010 Griffin, M. & Phoenix, C. "Emotional narrativity: Women, running, and embodiment." Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Transnational Working Group for the Study of Gender and Sport, Bath, UK, November 26-27.
- 2010 Griffin, M. & Phoenix, C. "'Big stories, middle stories, small stories': Analytical strategies to examine women's experiences of physical activity and ageing." Paper presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Advances in Qualitative Methods conference, Vancouver, BC, October 7-8.
- 2010 Phoenix, C. & Griffin, M. "Experiences of physical activity across the life course." Talk presented for the Women's Institute, Kenton, September 1.
- 2010 Griffin, M. & Phoenix, C. "Setting the scene: Hailing women into a running identity." Paper presented at the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual British Society of Gerontology conference, Brunel University, London, UK, July 6-8.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would simply not have been possible without the incredible generosity of the participants of the WRN. I am so grateful for the time they spent with me throughout the research process, sharing their thoughts, insights, achievements and disappointments. This amazing group of women both facilitated and contributed to my enjoyment of my experiences as I ran with and researched the WRN.

My supervisor, Dr. Cassandra Phoenix, serves as an example of an exceptional scholar. Throughout my doctoral degree, she has shared her commitment to and love of research, and has motivated and inspired me to endeavour to be the best scholar I can be. I very much appreciate the supervision and friendship that she has provided.

I am also indebted to the productive, insightful comments and suggestions from the members of my small but highly supportive academic community: Professor Andrew Sparkes, Dr. Brett Smith, Dr. Victoria Stiles, Dr. Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke, and Jo Day (coffee, cake, and chat?!). I know this thesis is better because of your feedback and contributions.

Thank you to my family for their continued support, love, and tolerance through the ups and downs of this process. I could not have achieved this outcome without them. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to my Rachel – whose humour and unwavering support kept me going throughout this testing process. Cariad am byth.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.0 Auto/biographical introduction

On reflection, I have always expressed myself better through my body than through language – especially if people were listening!! My older brother was ‘the talker’ growing up in our family. I, on the other hand, was painfully shy but for when I felt in my element: kicking a soccer ball around a field, playing baseball in the street, shooting hoops in the driveway. Sport has always been how I made friends, how I established and nurtured connections. It helped that I was pretty good at it – never the star of the team by any stretch, but I had a certain degree of natural athletic talent. In school, I never really considered that my experience wasn’t necessarily akin to everyone else’s: that there were some who felt self-conscious in gym class, could only dream of making a school team, or feigned disinterest out of insecurity. This was brought to my attention when I pursued a Bachelors degree in Kinesiology which included courses on Sport Sociology, Health and Exercise Psychology, Sport and Social Issues, and Gender and Sport. My interest piqued, I then pursued a Masters in Human Kinetics, specifically looking at injury, gender, and competitive sport from a sociological perspective.

Following my Masters, my interests expanded beyond the realm of competitive and performance sport and into women’s health more generally. Still with a sociology of the body focus, I’ve been involved in qualitative research projects examining: ageing and body image, managing multiple chronic conditions, tobacco prevention and control, and emergency room dynamics in urban Canadian hospitals. Through all of this, sport continued to play a prevalent role in my life, physically and socially. Enter the opportunity to pursue PhD studies in the United Kingdom, and the first meeting with my ‘to-be-supervisor’:

*C: “So, what kind of thing do you think you want to do for your PhD?”*

*M: “Well, I don’t have a project in mind, really. Something that takes into account the areas of ageing, the body, women’s health, and sport and exercise. I’m definitely more interested in everyday participation rather than the elite side of things.”*

*C: “Right... Okay. Why is that?”*

*M: “I just feel that Sport Science is too focused on the elite, on performance, and leaves most ‘bodies’ out because of that. And most sport psych stuff – you know, on barriers to physical activity and all that, it just feels a bit too superficial to me, a bit too simplistic.”*

*C: “I see what you’re saying. And it leaves out folks who are ageing, and not competing – and not interested in competing.”*

*[...long pause, several possibilities proposed, discussed and discarded...]*

*C: “Oh – I have an idea! So there’s this local running group – well, it started locally, but is now pretty successful around the UK. And that’s their thing – teaching women how to run, no matter how old they are or what restrictions they think they have. One of the founders is also a physio, my dad goes to her – let’s see if we can set up a meeting with them? I’m thinking something in the way of an ethnography, joining the group, running with them, and seeing what goes on in that type of context – with ageing, gender, and all sorts.”*

*M: “That sounds interesting – like really get into the everyday experience of it..?”*

*C: “Yeah. And that way you could get nice and fit AND get a PhD out of it! Course you might need to stop playing football, I can’t have you getting injured mid-data collection...!”*

One brief meeting later, and I knew I had found my project. I was excited by the unmistakable passion and enthusiasm of those involved in managing the group. I was to join and run with the Women’s Running Network (the WRN), a women’s-only running group that catered to the ‘true beginner’, and welcomed women of all ages, sizes, and abilities. In this context, I was to explore participant’s perceptions and experiences of health, well-being, ageing, and embodiment.

## **1.1 The WRN**

My first task in understanding the local culture of the WRN was to interview several women who had been involved since the outset, to get a sense of the history of the group: how and why they came to be, their inspiration and motivation, and their vision. Doing so offered me an introduction to the space within which the project took place and insight into the historical and feminist roots of the group’s inception. I discovered that although they formed in 1998, the WRN was actually inspired by a predecessor organisation called ‘Running Sisters’. Similar in nature, this existing group had a part-time coordinating person who would dispense information out to people who wanted to then set up ‘satellite’ groups around the country. This initiative was relatively successful, and those who were involved in running the South West groups noticed:

We were just absolutely amazed by what we found. Because we hadn’t really come across that number of absolute beginner women participants before. And literally all shapes and sizes. And the programs were just so good. That whatever ability they were, they were just clearly really enjoying the experience.

(Pamela, 57, long-term runner and coach)

Unfortunately, due to a partnership break-up between the two shareholders of the Running Sisters, the organisation folded along with the satellite groups. Those who were deeply involved in South West running culture recognised the loss. Polly (55, runner and local coach), who was at the time working in the local running shop, recounted:

Quite a few women came in there with their partners, wanting to get started in recreational running and didn't know how. And this was at the really early beginnings of the mass women's market. So a few of us, we could see there was a potential there. And it's grown and grown since. But in those days, I mean, women – You'd be lucky if they made up eight to ten percent of any event. It was really small. And so we were in at the right end of it, really.

In this initial 'information-gathering' stage of the research, I spoke to several women who had been involved from the very beginnings of the WRN in 1998 through to present-day. They described how the group had grown from a volunteer-led, 'based out of the spare room' organisation to being one of the biggest clubs in England – having gotten more than 10, 000 women running and with 4000 current members. When I questioned them on the reasons for this success, they kept returning to their ethos:

I'd say the growth has been steady. But organic - we've never pushed it. We never kind of advertised or marketed much. It actually grew because people came to us and said they wanted to be leaders. And if they did, then we trained them. Everything depended upon the quality of the leader engaging with women. So every leader has slight differences, but they all carry that same sentiment of 'the runner is important. The slowest runner is the most important.' You know, so that was embodied within what we did. To us, all that matters is that any woman who comes to us gets the experience that we've aimed for.

(Laura, 44, WRN member and leader)

Pamela echoed these thoughts, emphasising the unique social environment of the group:

The space is fun and social. And it embraces all women. Whereas a lot of our women would be excluded at any other club. One of our members, Amy, is a classic example: liked sport at school, wasn't particularly good at it, and never got picked for any team. And on her school report they would write, 'Amy always remembers her kit.' And here she is, so many years later, having – at the age of 40 – won age group awards, and has done marathons... And is definitely someone that I'd call good at sports. So, you know, you're almost excluding people at an early age, which has quite a big impression on their life. And they wouldn't consider themselves sporty. So they're not going to go to a traditional running club. So going somewhere where they feel safe and looked after, and then find they do have a little bit of a talent for it, and they can do well and can challenge themselves.

And they don't have to be good, either. You can definitely see all the different people, the ages, shapes, the sizes, different abilities. We recently got a new lady

who is special needs. And it's just that we can do it. We're all out there together, you know. That's what we're about, that's who we are. The whole ethos of our organisation is to give every woman this opportunity. I think what we've done is given women the opportunity not only to run, but to actually value themselves. And we have changed a lot of lives through doing that. It's not just about how fast they can run, and how far they can run. It's giving them the confidence that, 'I can do something for me.' So it's believing in yourself, and believing that you can do it. And even small successes inspire people to the next success, and do so much for self esteem. And so for a lot of women, these successes lead them on to other successes outside of running.

Over the course of my 14 months with the WRN, these claims were, for the most part, confirmed by participants. Many of these women had come to physical activity, and running specifically, later in their lives after being relatively inactive – either for their entire lives, or since school, childbirth, full-time employment, or other time-consuming or life-changing circumstances. While participants were quick to cite these popular gendered and temporal barriers to participation, a far more complex picture also emerged: one in which individual biographies, personal history and (poor) early experiences were all influential in women's previous (non-)participation. On the whole, women were well aware that it was 'healthy' to pursue exercise and/or physical activity of some kind. Overwhelmingly, they all indicated that they had long felt pressure to engage in activity for both aesthetic and health reasons.

What emerged as particularly interesting was when and how these women decided to become involved in the WRN. I wanted to examine why and how certain health stories were taken on board and/or acted upon – or not, as the case may be. Given my general interest in women's perceptions and experiences of health, well-being, ageing, and embodiment, I was curious to see if, how, and why these had changed over time for participants. I was also interested in their WRN experience itself, and how it had influenced the stories that women told – or felt able to tell – about their health, their ageing, and their bodies. Experienced runners were also present within the WRN, and I elicited the stories of these women and considered the role that they played within the organisation: as leaders, role models, friends, mentors, and resources for information. From this, I felt compelled to explore the movement of stories, at the individual and collective level, and both within and outside of the WRN.

In the following chapter (chapter two), I construct a framework upon which to compose an analysis of WRN participants' health and running stories. In doing so, I draw upon literature from a variety of disciplines to provide a vocabulary for discussion, debate, and exploration. Chapter three presents the methodology and methods employed in this study, including a discussion on qualitative research in general, and ethnography in particular. It is here that I first introduce the important notion of reflexivity, and lay bare my epistemological and ontological beliefs. Chapters four through six present the main body of



research which considers sequentially (4) becoming aware of the WRN (recruitment to the WRN via their health media), (5) from thinking to doing (the process of moving from health consciousness to action), and (6) the experience itself (the actual lived experience of beginning to run with the WRN). Chapters seven through nine are comprised of individual case studies of women with unique yet representative WRN experiences and stories – specifically, a beginner who subsequently ceased participation, a beginner ‘turned’ runner, and a long-term participant. Finally, chapter ten concludes with reflections upon the empirical, methodological, and theoretical implications from, and contributions of, this research.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Backdrop**

### **2.0 Introduction**

Health may be reasonably described as a social cynosure, a meaningfully and emotionally charged fixation – both a goal and a source of anxiety, a value for self and others, integral to identity, a state of being that is continually being assessed and the organising concept for a vast organisation of social action.

(Crawford, 2006, p. 404)

Everyone is subject to the effects of the proliferation of health advice. As Blaxter (1990) found, most people can competently cite what they (and others) should be doing to lessen their risks of future ill-health. Yet while most age and social groups are well-acquainted with the messages of disease prevention, few people, in practice, enact 'healthy' lifestyles either entirely or in part (Blaxter, 1990; Backett & Davison, 1995; Dean, 1989; Hunt & MacLeod, 1987). As Williams suggests, the translation of health promotion messages into actual practice "remains a fundamental stumbling block for those concerned with the promotion of 'positive change' to a 'healthier lifestyle'" (1995, p. 578). No matter whether the mass of self-care advice is acted upon or not, its collective effect is to overlay and reconstitute a more deeply culturally embedded understanding about the accountability that the conscious actor bears for their own health (Ziguras, 2004). Indeed, contemporary health practices are always situated within a larger social, political and cultural framework (Ayo, 2011). As such, health constitutes a *social text*, something at least partially created by the densely interwoven network of experiences and interpretations we bring to it (Rail & Beausoleil, 2003). In Crawford's (1987, p. 103) words, "health is a metaphor, a moral discourse, an opportunity to express and reaffirm shared values, and an extremely important cultural site where the social self is constructed." Thus, to understand people's health practices and behaviours, it is important to be aware of the symbolic meanings and emotions which inextricably cling to each lifestyle 'option' (Lupton, 1994a). For example, why do people choose certain behaviours and activities over others? What do these choices mean for individuals, in terms of personal and social identity? Where do health-maintaining practices fit in?

### **2.1 The pursuit of healthiness**

In many late modern societies, the 1970s saw the rise of a new health consciousness, marked by a significant increase in the importance and awareness of health in everyday life (Ziguras, 2004). In addition, there has been a drastic increase in the amount

of health policy that focuses on health promotion since the mid 1980s (Burrows, Nettleton & Bunton, 1995). These policies both reflect and reinforce the prevailing political ideology of neoliberalism and, Ayo (2011) argues, operate in such a way as to facilitate the making of the 'good' and healthy' citizen. As Ziguras (2004, p.1) asserts:

We cannot escape being told that we are free, that we are responsible for our health, and that we are therefore potentially to blame for our lack of well-being. The belief that we are autonomously responsible for our own health is both more widespread and deeper than ever before... it is a dominant ideology of our times.

Common within such discourses is the aim of reducing the dependency of people on professional health-care services and institutions, and providing them with tools to undertake their own self-care. Securing health is now understood by many as an intricate and demanding project, and the pursuit of health has become one of the more salient practices of contemporary life (Crawford, 2006). Accordingly, health consciousness has become an ideological formation, wherein problems of health and their solutions are principally framed as being within the boundaries of personal control (Crawford, 2006).

### **2.1.1 Healthism and individualism**

Whereas historically disease and its causation were understood in fatalistic ways (Brandt, 1997), within the contemporary Western context, responsibility for health and its maintenance has been set firmly within the hands of individuals (Lupton, 1995; Brandt, 1990). Healthism, a term originally coined by Crawford (1980), is a system of beliefs which define health-promoting activities as a moral obligation (Crawford, 1984; 2006; Petersen & Bunton, 1997). Noting the prevalent dictum that everyone *should* work and live to maximise their own health (Petersen & Lupton, 1996), Crawford (1980, p. 365) saw healthism as an ideologically insidious force, which, "... by elevating health to a super value, a metaphor for all that is good in life, [ ] reinforces the privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being." Healthism is characterized by high health awareness and expectations, information-seeking, and self-reflection, and is a well-recognized socio-cultural phenomenon in the western (and westernized) middle classes (Greenhalgh & Wessely, 2004).

Current health promotion strategies centre on lifestyle changes to maintain and enhance health, and as such reflect and reinforce the prevailing discourse of healthism (Fusco, 2006; Hodgetts, Bolam & Stephens, 2005; Lupton, 1995). Further, taking personal responsibility for health is widely considered reflective of individual autonomy and good citizenship (Crawford, 2006). As Crawford (2006, p. 402) argues, the common assumption

here is that health must be achieved:

Individuals are expected to acquire medical knowledge. Large numbers of people eagerly seek out health information, and the media oblige them in devoting extensive coverage of health matters and in offering advice on a variety of health concerns. Moreover, health talk has become common, especially in middle-class social networks. Lay conceptions of health – including ideas about causal pathways of disease ('lay epidemiology'), strategies of protection and related commentary on individuals, situations, environments and medical recommendations – are elaborate and intricate.

Healthist discourse thus contributes to the creation of a subject who is interested in taking action to improve oneself; what Roy (2008) calls an enterprising or entrepreneurial self. The subjectivity of the entrepreneurial self is based on the idea that one's identity is a personal project requiring continual and active assessment, improvement and management, leading to particular forms of self-discipline and self-surveillance (Bunton, 1997; Lupton, 1995; Robertson, 2000). The entrepreneurial self within the discourse of healthism is premised on the idea of a free subject choosing to undertake those behaviours necessary to enhance and/or preserve good health:

A health that can be 'chosen', however, represents a somewhat different value than a health one simply enjoys or misses. It testifies to more than just a physical capacity; it is the visible sign of initiative, adaptability, balance and strength of will. In this sense, physical health has come to represent, for the neo-liberal individual who has 'chosen' it, an 'objective' witness to his or her suitability to function as a free and rational agent. (Greco, 1993, pp. 369-370)

Several scholars thus view contemporary health consciousness as contributing to the spur of "consumerist frenzy," whereby health promoters prescribe a certain lifestyle intended to minimise risks, and construct responsible, prudent, health conscious citizens who are expected to buy into this lifestyle (Galvin, 2002, p. 127; Parish, 1995). In this view, investing personal resources into healthy living is interpreted as a wilful obedience to the duties and obligations imposed by citizenship (Ayo, 2011).

In a health-valuing culture, people come to define themselves in part by how well they succeed or fail in adopting healthy practices and by the qualities of character or personality believed to support health behaviours (Crawford, 2006). They also tend to assess others by the same criteria. Accordingly, both the conventionally understood means of achieving health and the social state of being designated as 'healthy' are qualities that define the self (Crawford, 2006; Lupton, 1995; Roy, 2008). In short, they become features of modern identity. Through health, "the modern self demonstrates his or her agency, the rational capacity to re-make self and world" (Crawford, 2006, pp. 402-403). As Roy (2008, p.

465) writes, “this identity is worn on the body,” and is shown through body work like exercise targeted to produce a lean firm physique, dieting, and ascetic measures surrounding one’s deportment and consumption. Successful deployment of these measures produces subjects who embody the cultural ideal, and the body becomes the sign of both physical and moral health (Lupton, 1995; White, Young & Gillett, 1995).

### **2.1.2 Health promotion, consumerism and physical activity**

A healthist culture inevitably positions the body centrally in the creation of health, linking a range of bodily practices with the attainment of health. As Rail and Beausoleil (2003) point out, within such a culture are injunctions to life-long consumption of health practices, services and products, all linked to shifting notions of health. In this view, there is a commercialisation of health – in that people are constructed as health consumers who may consume health lifestyles (Marchessault & Sawchuk, 2000; Shaw & Aldridge, 2003). Central to this, as mentioned above, is an emphasis on body maintenance:

Within the consumer culture the body becomes a site of pleasure and a representation of success. The appearance of the outer body also reflects upon the inner body – looking good is feeling good. Health education reflects the commercialisation of body maintenance – encouraging self-surveillance of body and health. (Shaw & Aldridge, 2003, pp. 38-39).

To get one’s body into shape can be seen as a route to the enhancement of the self. It is also a sign of competence, self-control and self-discipline (Shaw & Aldridge, 2003). As Bordo argues: “Increasingly, the size and shape of the body has come to operate as a marker of personal, internal order (or disorder) – as a symbol for the state of the soul” (1990, p. 90). Given the growing attention to body surveillance in an expanding consumer market, the image of a fit body is also increasingly a mark of social status (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

The fitness industry could be seen as a prime example of the commercialisation of healthy lifestyles. For example, Featherstone (1991, pp. 185-186) draws attention to the ‘transvaluation’ of activities such as slimming and jogging:

The notion of running for running’s sake, purposiveness without a purpose, a sensuous experience in harmony with embodied and physical nature, is completely submerged amidst the welter of benefits called up by market and health experts.

The ‘health’ industry is thus benefitting from media constructions of ‘healthy lifestyles’ and ‘health consciousness’ – coated with what Rail and Beausoleil (2003, p. 7) call “an ideology of salvation through consumption and self-discipline.”

In societies where leisure activities have been highly commodified, engaging in exercise should not necessarily be viewed as solely a health-promoting activity. As Lupton (1994b, p. 113) points out, “the constellation of meanings surrounding activities suggest that people exercise because it is fashionable, because it is virtuous and ascetic, representing self-control and self-discipline, but also glamorous and sexy...” (see also Bordo, 1990; Featherstone, 1991). For some women, engaging in exercise may represent their desire to escape the bounds of the feminine role, to subvert the notion of the female body as weak, sickly, frail, and dependent, while for other women (and most men), the primary motivation is to acquire the lean, hard, firm athletic body so prized as sexually attractive by consumer culture (Bordo, 1990; Hargreaves, 1987; Saltonstall, 1993; Willis, 1991). For those people approaching middle age, exercise may signify an attempt to secure youth and attractiveness in a culture which views the ageing or overweight body as physically repulsive (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991; Mellencamp, 1992). When these cultural meanings are examined (as they will be in more detail in the upcoming sections: 2.3 and 2.4), the desire for ‘good health’ becomes a very minor component of people’s reasons for engaging in exercise regimens. Health is superseded by concerns engendered by the powerful ideologies of morality, asceticism, self-discipline, and control which underlie consumption patterns in a culture which is intent upon self-promotion and achieving ‘the look’ (Turner, 1991; Wernick, 1991). Notions of ‘health’ indeed are re-interpreted in middle-class commodity culture as concerning attractiveness and body maintenance (Saltonstall, 1993).

This last point underscores another important critique of healthism: that it promotes neoliberal ideologies that obscure the impact of government and structural contributions to health disparities (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). If, as Ayo (2011, p. 5) writes, “the very foundation of neoliberalism stands upon the premise of liberty and freedom,” then matters pertaining to inequalities in health become an inevitable outcome as a consequence of freedom of choice. Responsibility for the differences in health and illness are removed from the conscience of governing bodies and placed onto individual bodies and on the failure of individual people to ‘stay fit’ (Ayo, 2011; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). In this way, the issue of ‘choice’ can be seen as a facade, as it is understood that a number of oppressive social and structural forces mediate the choices one is able to make (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Parish, 1995). Further, the emphasis on citizens as having the prime responsibility for improving their health assumes that all are equally equipped to do so (McDonald et al., 2007).

In that regard, I re-assert the importance of examining the social and political ‘constructions’ of women’s bodies and health. Recent interdisciplinary work in the field of health studies has foregrounded the need for researchers to look at health as an ensemble of ideas and practices that belong to culture (Rail & Beausoleil, 2003). Following Rail and Beausoleil (2003), my view is that analyses of health must consider the way that health

discourses have come to make sense of women's bodies: the way 'scientific' knowledge, popular conceptions, and the various media have impacted on gender, racial and class identities. However, culture is but one component of the relational contexts within which health identities and ideas of health emerge. Alongside these cultural contexts we must also recognise the physiological capacities and limits of a body, emotional lived experiences, the valuations, beliefs and attachments that a person holds, and the reflexive and social expectations of what a specific body can do (Fox & Ward, 2006). Therefore, in order to grasp the character of health identities, it is necessary to study 'health', 'body' and 'identity' together, as emerging from activity and practice, and located within the totality of a body's physical and social relations:

Health identities are features of the clustering of relations around specific aspects of embodiment, such as sport and exercise, body modification, disability or growing old... Health identities are neither prior, nor are they determined. Rather they emerge from concrete embodiment practices in relation to material, cultural, technological and emotional contexts. (Fox & Ward, 2006, p. 475).

## **2.2 Moving towards an embodied perspective**

Framing identity and health as socially constructed and embodied requires a clarification of what is meant by several terms employed throughout this research. There are myriad ways of approaching the body as an entity within a socio-cultural context and of considering the body as a key social process. Depending on the theoretical standpoint taken, bodies tend to be conceptualised along a continuum of object through to subject, thus endowing them with variable levels of agency (Tulle, 2008). As elucidated in further detail below, for the purposes of this research, examining the body and the experience of embodiment within a social context requires recognition of the body as an influential agent both in the construction of individual and collective identity and within social interaction.

### **2.2.1 Embodiment: Body, self and identity**

The physical body, from a social constructivist perspective, is much more than a biological or physical entity, but is eminently social and thus inseparable from culture and society (Synnott, 1993). The body is both subject *and* object, simultaneously, and is a source of, location for, and a means of positioning the self within society (Shilling, 2003; 2005). Historical, social, cultural, political and technological change have produced many competing, contradictory and complementary sociological approaches to the body, concerned with how bodies are, for example: socially constructed, gendered, sexed and

sexualised, customised, fashioned, electrified and digitised, posthuman, objectified, overtaken by panic, mystical and sacred, stigmatised and freakish, commodified, subject to the discipline of fitness, training and diet, fetishised, and subject to the politics of gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 2). In the recent past, literature on the body has become abundant, wherein it has been theorised as an object of systematic attention and control (Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2003; Turner, 1996), and a key tool in the management of populations via liberal governmental principles (Foucault, 1978; 1997). The increasing salience of the body is associated with a number of factors, all revealing the socially constructed nature of corporeality: 1) the social order or (often gendered) politisation of the body (Nettleton & Watson, 1998; Shilling, 2003; Turner, 1992; 1996); 2) biomedicine, demographic factors, and the changing nature of the disease burden (Foucault, 1967; 1994; Nettleton & Watson, 1998; Turner, 1996), 3) consumer culture and the culture of narcissism (Featherstone, 1991), and 4) the advent of new technologies (Balsamo, 1995; Haraway, 1991; Shilling, 2003).

Contemporary treatment of the body has been primarily theoretical rather than empirical, and has tended to interpret the body from an etic (outsider/social science) perspective rather than from an emic (insider/lay) perspective (Watson, 2000). Adopting an intermediate constructivist stance that contends that the body has a material base that is shaped and constructed in a social context (Turner, 1992; Wainwright & Turner, 2006), this research understands the body as an “enormous vessel of meaning of utmost significance to both personhood and society” (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 3). Although bodies undeniably have a physical, material, and biological basis (Newton, 2003; Shilling, 2003), the socially constructed nature of the body is revealed by the multitude of meanings that the body is seen to take on in different cultures and over time (Sparkes, 1996; Synnott, 1993). Indeed, as a social object, the body cannot be separated from the self, or ‘body as subject’; they are emergent from one another (Waskul & van der Riet, 2002).

Similar to the concept of the body, there are a multitude of approaches to understanding the self and identity. Broadly speaking, identity can be conceptualised as “a personal theory of the self” (Kleiber, 1999, p. 94). More specifically, the concept of identity refers to attributes, actions and appraisals of the self, which in turn influence and shape the evolving self (Charmaz, 1987). Identity encompasses how individuals interpret and express themselves (personal identity), as well as how they are perceived by others, identify with others, and the roles that are available to them through the social world (social identity) (Goffman, 1959; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes & Haslam, 2009; Mead, 1934; Postmes, Haslam & Swaab, 2005; Tajfel, 2010). Traditional psychological perspectives interpret identity as something that evolves across the lifespan, particularly in development, ultimately becoming stable and fixed (Erikson, 1968; 1980; Smith & Sparkes, 2006). The etymology of the word



'identity' from the Latin *idem*, "same" resonates with this unitary perspective of the self and identity, within which individuals are understood to have a consistent, autonomous 'essence' or core identity that correlates to the self as knower/subject (Brockmeier, 2001; Erikson, 1968; 1980; McAdams, 1997).

In contrast, a postmodern perspective is taken within this research, wherein identity is conceptualised as something which is shifting, chosen, and multiple in nature, and wherein the self is both social and relational. For example, identity is instead thought of as a *process of identification* – where the concept of identity is less imposed, and more constructed when an individual makes decisions about who to be, with what group to be affiliated, and what beliefs to adopt (Hall, 1999). This approach highlights the relational aspect of identity, arguing that "...in forming our sustaining sense of self, we make use of models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit" (Eakin, 1999, p. 46). In this view, identity is dialogic and diachronic, and the self is non-unitary – "characterized by fragmentation, multiplicity, flexibility, variability, and context specificity" (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 175; Blumenthal, 1999; Gergen, 1991; Hall, 1992; Hermans, 2002; Ronai, 1998; Sampson, 1993). The postmodern self, then, is not stable but multiple, fragmented, dynamic, contradictory, contextual and distributed through and over time and place (Gullette, 2004; Murphy & Longino, 1997; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Sarup, 1996).

The plurality present within postmodernity presents individuals with a wide variety of identity choices that some argue can pose difficulty to the maintenance of a coherent sense of self (Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) points out that an individual may choose to emphasise different identities in different contexts as a means of holding onto a consistent sense of self and personal biography. However, Crossley (2003) asserts that a fragmented and disordered view of the self is phenomenologically unfaithful for many people, and lived human experience is often characterised by unity, and an implicit sense self imbued with temporal coherence and order. Accordingly, Sparkes (1996, 1997) points to the tendency for individuals to feel, construct, and present a coherent and stable sense of self that more or less remains consistent for them and others over time, despite constant, dynamic interaction with the social world. Similarly, highlighting social agency, Gullette (2004, p. 123) argues that 'identity' is coming to mean "me-ness," and refers to the self that we change or wish could change – with both difference and change, and stillness and stability being simultaneously meaningful and dependent on context. Giddens (1991, p. 8) suggests that the conditions of postmodernity call for individuals to engage in what he terms a "reflexive project of the self," wherein self and connected identities are not given, but can be seen as an ongoing accomplishment of both coherence and continuous revision.

Tying these concepts together, Baumeister (1997) argues that the self begins with the body, in that an understanding of selfhood begins with awareness of one's body and the

body continues to be an important basis of selfhood throughout life. As Heidegger (1979, pp. 98-99, quoted in Levin, 1985, p. 49) remarks, “We do not ‘have’ a body; rather we ‘are’ bodily.” Social constructivists and interactionists generally emphasise that the body (*noun*) is embodied (*verb*), and that “a person does not ‘inhabit’ a static object body but is subjectively embodied in a fluid, emergent, and negotiated process of being” (Waskul & van der Riet, 2002, p. 488). Embodiment, then, refers to “the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body” (Waskul & Vannini, 2006, p. 3).

For Leder (1990), our embodiment is our point of view on the world – both locating us in the world and putting us in a spatio-temporal relationship with other beings, thereby giving us a standpoint from which to perceive them. Embodiment, then, is our way of “being-in-the-world, of experiencing and belonging to the world” (Crossley, 1995, p. 48; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Merleau-Ponty (1962) notes that we achieve an experience of our bodies by interacting with others and garnering outside perspective on ourselves, such that we experience ourselves (as an embodied being) as something or other. Crossley (1995, p. 49) refers to this as “carnal reflexivity,” or “the body subject turning back upon itself to experience itself.” In both ‘being’ a body but also sometimes perceiving the body as an object that we possess, reflexive embodiment, then, “refers to the capacity and tendency to perceive, emote about, reflect and act upon one’s own body,” by way of body modification and maintenance (Crossley, 2006, p. 1). This approach synthesises a phenomenologically-informed approach to the body and the self (exploring the meanings actually attached to practice by social agents at the concrete and lived level) with perspectives which give primacy to structural processes.

### **2.2.2 Gender**

*“One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.” -Simone de Beauvoir (1974)*

As Butler (1988, p. 519) writes, “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Put simply, gender is *embodied* (Howson, 2005), and this embodiment occurs within a social world that supports and enables only certain ways of claiming and enacting a gendered identity (Butler, 2004). That is to say, gender is socially constructed – and gender ‘difference’ is not so much ‘natural’ as it is social (Davis, 1997; Lorber & Moore, 2002). Gender thus operates at the same time as an individual status, a relational factor, an organisational process, and a system-level social institution (Lorber & Moore, 2002).

For Butler (1999), normative gender seeks to define and limit which articulations of gender are acceptable. Butler's writings on gender highlight that the gendered subjectivities that the control system works to produce and circumscribe are neither fixed nor fundamentally authentic; they do not arise from an essential and fixed inner self. Instead, gender can be understood as a product of the very descriptions and acts which appear to be its authentic representation (Butler, 1999). These stylised acts come to constitute gender identity through their ritual repetition in the public domain. The sense that there is an essential "truth" to gender and sex is produced through these regulatory practices, and through the production of "discrete asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine'" (Butler, 1999, p. 23).

Indeed, Butler (1988) argues that gender is in fact a performance, and becomes an everyday practice in which people are engaged. Through interaction with caretakers, socialisation in childhood, peer pressure in adolescence, and gendered work and family roles, people are divided into two groups and portrayed to be different in behaviour, attitudes, and emotions. The gendered social order produces and maintains these differences (Lorber & Moore, 2002). Assumptions about gender thus involve people in "doing gender" – which has the effect of "reinforcing assumptions about gender differences" (Howson, 2004, p. 53; West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is, social meanings become attached to bodies in ways that constitute social differences, which effectively become embodied (Howson, 2005).

Crossley (2001) answers questions of difference by drawing upon Iris Young's (1990) account of comportment – specifically, the potential for not only physical but also social disempowerment in the limited agency associated with female modalities. Self-objectification arises from a culture in which women in particular are made aware of themselves as objects in ways that have the potential to develop a persistent self-consciousness and contribute to a sense of alienation from self (Howson, 2005). For Crossley (2001), in Young's analysis the body is gendered through classificatory processes that render particular body parts as symbolic markers of social difference. The body is lived as gendered via processes that limit the physical capacities of women in ways that in turn have consequences for their capacity as agents to act upon the world (Crossley, 2001). Finally, the body is gendered via processes of self-reflection (taking on the gaze of the other) through which women become objects not only for others but also for themselves (Crossley, 2001; Young, 1990). Lorber and Moore (2002, p. 5) assert that "gender is one of the most significant factors in the transformation of physical bodies into social bodies." As in Young's (1990) observations, one social field in which these performances take place is that of leisure – particularly sport and physical activity.

### 2.3 The gendered body and leisure

One domain where both gender and embodiment are enacted is that of leisure. However, according to Hamilton-Smith (1992), it is widely accepted that leisure is a social construct. Haywood et al. (1995) take this a step further by stating that leisure cannot be fully understood as something separate from the society and culture in which it is experienced. Much of the literature on women and leisure thus problematises definitions of leisure that do not take into account women's and men's different leisure opportunities and experiences, and highlights the relationship between leisure and gender expectations. For example, Clarke and Critcher (in Aitchison, 2003, p. 46) argue:

Some meanings are so entrenched that leisure cannot but give them expression. Gender we argued to be so powerful a meaning that leisure has come to be one of its principal forms of celebration. At those moments in leisure when people feel and appear most free of social roles, they are in actuality most bound to rigid expectations of gender behaviour.

Much of this literature is from a critical cultural studies tradition, and calls for an approach to studying leisure-time activities that is sensitive to women's experiences of leisure. This entails, amongst other things, avoiding a framework of constraint and structural analyses that fail to take into account women's agency, including the various ways women negotiate leisure time and space for themselves (Dixey, 1987). Women's and men's leisure (space, time, activity) is necessarily relational, and researchers have called attention to the ways women's leisure has been determined by men (McIntosh, 1981).

Simply making or taking time for leisure, separate from family and work obligations, is a challenge for many women: "As studies of women's leisure continue to show, time synchronisation and time fragmentation dominate most women's lives, which has led to them taking 'snatched' spaces for leisure and enjoyment" (Green, 1998, p. 111). Several researchers have explored the interrelationships of work-family roles and free-time experience, and the idea of whether marriage, children and employment curtail women's free time (Henderson, 2003; Im et al., 2008; Segar et al., 2002). Women's communal leisure, such as membership in voluntary organizations, has thus often been 'justified' as being gender appropriate, for example, associated with learning something useful, or with caring and traditionally/appropriately 'feminine' activities (Stalp, Radina, & Lynch, 2008). At the same time, many women enjoy participating in a wide range of leisure activities (e.g., bingo, flower arranging, walking, travelling, going to movies, book clubs, staying in), and consistently describe their experiences of "having a laugh" with other women, while they remain "serious" about the task at hand (Deem, 1983; Dixey, 1987; Green, 1998; Long, 2003; Miranda & Yerkes, 1983; O'Neill, 1993; Talbot, 1988).

In contrast, Shaw (2001, p. 186) postulated a link between empowerment, political resistance and leisure, suggesting that “leisure practices are linked to power and power relations in society.” Much of the research focused on resistance and empowerment through leisure uses a Foucauldian framework (Foucault, 1967; 1978; 1994) to illustrate the ways in which power, ideology, and discourse can be negotiated, challenged, altered, used or reinforced in everyday leisure settings (Poole, 2001; Wearing, 1991; 1995; 1998). From a structuralist perspective, resistance is conceptualised as acts that challenge the structured power relations of class, race, disability, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other forms of societal stratifications (Shaw, 2001). With respect to gender relations, leisure as resistance takes the form of challenging women’s and girl’s lack of power in general, and specifically their confinement to restrictive role expectations (Henderson et al., 1996; Scraton, 1994). Little (2002) also explained that leisure access and resources are not freely available, and gendered inequalities are influenced by structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints.

Feminist researchers have further argued that leisure sites are a potentially subversive space where women can “exercise personal agency by creating self-defined subjectivities that undermine those imposed by patriarchal culture” (Raisborough, 2006, p. 244; Currie, 2004; Wearing, 1998). Participation in leisure, therefore, can be constructed as a political act manifested in the types of leisure activities that women seek out, work to gain and maintain access to, and identify with. One avenue of alternative and potentially subversive leisure participation is that of serious leisure, the defining qualities of which include dedication, commitment, and identification with the activity, as well as a sense of belonging to a distinctive social world (Kane & Zink, 2004; Raisborough, 2006; Stebbins, 2006). In Raisborough’s (2006, p. 242) study of women involved in serious leisure via the Sea Cadet Corps, she noted that her participants engaged in “active and conscious practices and performances to both justify their access to leisure and to enable their disengagement from demands associated with normative femininity.” Shaw (1994; 2001) claimed that processes of negotiation may themselves be intended or read as political acts of resistance, and has subsequently argued that resistance can be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, individual and/or collective, and has the potential for personal empowerment and/or social change.

### **2.3.1 Women, sport and physical activity**

There exists an extensive literature on women and sport and physical activity. This is perhaps not surprising because gender is the key organising principle of sport (women playing with women, men playing with men, and sometimes women and men playing

differently) (Hall, 1996; Hargraves, 1993; Krane, 2001). Indeed, there is nothing unusual or remarkable about gender-segregated sport participation: “Sex segregation is such an ingrained part of athletics at every skill level that it rarely draws attention, much less protest” (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008, p. 8). According to McDonagh and Pappano (2008, p. 7), sport organization “is based on a principle of coercive sex segregation” that “does *not* reflect actual sex differences in athletic ability, but instead constructs and enforces a flawed premise that females are inherently athletically inferior to males.” Sociologists of sport have identified that notions of essential gender difference are produced and reproduced in sport (and physical activity), especially related to sport’s traditional role as a ‘school for masculinity’. For example, in his study of youth sport, Messner (2009, p. 20) reveals, “Adults’ views of children commonly oscillate between two apparently contradictory beliefs—that girls and boys should have equal opportunities, and that girls and boys are naturally different. Soft essentialism, as an emergent ideology, negotiates the tensions between these two beliefs.” Due to sport’s historically gender-segregated organization, “ideas and strategies for equal opportunity for girls are being carved out within a ‘separate-but-equal,’ sex-segregated context” (Messner, 2009, p. 21). Messner’s findings are some of the most recent that demonstrate the continued relevance of, and the extent to which the gender-segregated organization of sport has been naturalised.

Statistics on sports participation reflect the gendered nature of this form of leisure activity (Wiley, Shaw & Havitz, 2000). For example, in the UK, men are considerably more likely than women to participate – and to participate frequently – in organised and informal sports activities (Evans, 2006; WSFF, 2007). The reasons for this, in part, appear to be situated around a number of identifiable barriers to physical activity specific to women. Consideration of these necessitates an exploration of personal factors, including: past experiences with physical activity and the belief whether one can do, or participate in physical activity, enjoyment of physical activity, health status, and life stage (Bond & Batey, 2005). Social factors could include support, or lack of, from family and friends, and one’s social role in the family, whether one works in paid employment, and how much time is spent doing so. The social environment of the individual is also important, as it is considered to influence behaviour by shaping norms, enforcing patterns of social control, providing or not providing environmental opportunities to engage in particular behaviours, reducing or producing stress, and placing constraints on individual choice (Haughton-McNeill, Kreuter & Subramanian, 2006).

The patriarchal nature of sport as institution has not gone without challenge. The emergence of a host of new athletic icons reflects the changing status of women in sports and the larger culture (Heywood, 1998; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Wachs, 2005). Exploring the relationship between self-perceptions and exercise experience for women,

feminist scholars present opposing viewpoints. Some argue that sport is an active agent in maintaining and promoting sexism and patriarchal ideologies (McDermott, 1996), where typically masculine traits (e.g., competitiveness, strength, and assertiveness) are rewarded, and feminine traits such as cooperation and nurturing are devalued. The recent trend towards using exercise as an activity to shape an appearance which conforms to the feminine corporeal ideal is viewed as evidence of this (Cole, 1994; Mutrie & Choi, 2000). However, others contend that exercise and sport involvement has the capacity to be empowering or life altering (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). In this view, sport can be a forum for male hegemony to be challenged and alternative values and norms to be created (Bolin & Granskog, 2003; Krane, 2001). Through an empowerment process, women have the opportunity to acquire skills and competencies that can contribute to enhanced self-esteem which can extend to other life areas (Theberge, 1987). Indeed, some research has shown that increases in physicality and bodily competence, independence, pride, and strength of identity as a consequence of sport involvement are central to this empowerment process (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1993). Others have also noted that 'gynocentric' (or women's-only) environments have particular potential to be emancipatory and empowering (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Krane, 2001).

### **2.3.2 Women's-only leisure environments**

According to Deem (1986), much of women's leisure takes place in all-women contexts. Green (1998, p. 119) argues that women's experiences of leisure with other women – in “the company of women” – can lead to “a recognition of female diversity and the empowering aspects of a shared leisure experience which also serves to ‘unmask’ enduring gender stereotypes.” This statement may be particularly true in leisure and sports contexts that women control and that are away from the gaze of men (James, 2000). Researchers have also documented how women involved in some sport and leisure activities are able to transcend dominant ideologies about gender relations and the female body (McDermott, 2004; Shaw, 1994). Sport and leisure activities may provide women with the confidence to resist pressures to follow conventional ideas about femininity (Shaw, 1994; Wearing 1998). Simultaneously, leisure and sport may be significant social spaces where women learn about their bodies and their potential (Yarnal, Hutchison, & Chow, 2006). For example, women's-only leisure environments have been shown to provide an avenue for participants to recognise and experience themselves as strong and self-sufficient, as well as the opportunity to meet and be with other women (McDermott, 2004). Cronan and Scott (2008) also found that women training for a beginner's-level triathlon in a women's-only training group used surveillance of others around them to aspire to goals beyond the corporeal, and

to legitimise their own seemingly (or previously perceived to be) inadequate bodies. As such, women's-only leisure environments create opportunities to see other women succeed physically – which some argue is just as important as women's individual experiences of strength and accomplishment (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Yarnal et al., 2006).

The importance and purported uniqueness of women's-only spaces have been consistently explored in the field of outdoor education, recreation, and adventure programming. However, in place of research conducted about “the reasons underlying women's decisions to do such experiences, what they get from them and how this relates to their physicalities” (McDermott, 2004, p. 288), this literature is composed primarily of *assumptions* and *practitioners' personal experiences* of women-only programs. In this literature, particularly among practitioners (e.g., program developers and operators, guides, instructors), women are typically treated as a “special population”, and women's needs are described in essentialist terms (and assumed to be qualitatively different than men's needs), but rarely explained. Among the most common claims made about women-only programs are: women are non-competitive, and women support each other's learning as well as supporting each other as individuals; women work with, rather than against, nature; when participating in outdoor programs, women develop a sense of community; women are or feel secure and safe in women-only settings; and women are empowered by their women-only outdoor experiences (Hornibrook et al., 1997; Loeffler, 1997; McDermott, 2004; Miranda & Yerkes, 1983; Warren, 1990). Generally, women are perceived to learn differently than men, to experience nature differently than men, and to seek different outdoor experiences than men (Warren, 1990).

However, McDermott (2004, p. 297) warns, “Simply having an all-female setting will not necessarily engender this sense of community and support ...the politics of gender *have* to be understood in order to create an environment that resists dominant gender ideologies.” In this sense, McDermott (2004) acknowledges the production of a particular kind of women only-ness on the women-only canoe trips that she studied (characterized by mutual support and a sense of community). However, she does not elaborate on the ways that the canoeists themselves were involved in this production (i.e., the ways that *participants* accepted, promoted, or challenged the guides' version of what 'women-only' meant). Similarly, in their investigation of *GetFit* (a women's-only gym franchise), Craig and Liberti (2007) considered the production aspect of a women-only physical activity experience. Women's-only gyms are the fastest growing segment of the fitness industry (Craig & Liberti, 2007), and these businesses often rely on essentialist explanations to justify their existence, such as assumptions about safety and support, camaraderie and comfort in women-only settings. However, again missing from Craig and Liberti's (2007) analysis is a sense of women *participants' involvement in the production* of a feminised gym experience – or



specifically, the ways in which women *GetFit* gym members contribute to or counteract the company's attempts to feminise their gym experiences.

There are few examples of studies of women's sport *participation* (rather than sport organisation) that are directly relevant here. Birrell and Richter (1987, p. 396) studied women's softball, and specifically, "one community's attempts to shape sport into a practice which has relevance within their lives as those lives are informed by feminism." Birrell and Richter's (1987) participants made decisions related to the operation of their own teams, and their conduct and social interactions with teammates and others (e.g., umpires), but they did not take charge of or affect the organisation of the league. That is, these softball players attempted to transform their experiences of an already existing sport opportunity rather than 'designing' and organising something for themselves. In fact, their approach to softball, identified by Birrell and Richter (1987) as attempts by some participants to develop a "feminist model of sport", was often the basis for conflict experienced with other teams and officials. Interviews and observation revealed that the feminist softball players were critical of the "male model of sport", and "these criticisms serve as a blueprint for the changes they were putting into practice: a form of softball that is process oriented, collective, supportive, inclusive, and infused with an ethic of care" (Birrell & Richter, 1987, p. 408).

What Birrell and Richter (1987) contribute that is missing in much of the subsequent literature is a sense of *how* their feminist softball players actively produced a form of sport that better corresponded to *what they desired* from the experience. Their attention to production is apparent in the claim: "We argue that this is a feminist alternative less because these solutions are unique to women than because women have laboured to produce them" (Birrell & Richter, 1987, p. 408). It is important to acknowledge here that for most women, participation in sport and physical activity is not feminist or explicitly political. However, that participation still has the capacity to produce an 'alternative' model of sport. As a result, similar attention to production *and* experience of women's only spaces in a variety of sports and physical activities – in place of assumptions and essentialisms – is warranted. It is important to note that women's-only environments, such as that found in *GetFit* gyms or at women's softball games, do not necessarily (or naturally) result in a supportive environment for women or offer an alternative to men's sport and physical activity. Across these literatures, it is evident that women's-only sport and physical activity can take different forms – anywhere from transforming women's experiences of sport to meet feminist (or 'non-masculinist') goals to reinforcing more traditional gender arrangements. However, more detailed exploration of the processes of producing women's-only spaces, in its various forms, and women's active role as social agents in those processes, is warranted. The *lived experience* of female participants in these settings also merits attention. In addition, ageing has been consistently overlooked within all of this

literature despite the centrality of ageing to women's experiences of leisure, physical activity and embodiment. To examine this integral relationship, we need to return to the topic of the body.

## 2.4 The ageing body

Not only are women less active than men in general, the disparity increases with age. Older women number among the groups with the most sedentary lifestyles, with participation rates falling significantly after the age of 45 (Dumas & Laberge, 2005; WSFF, 2007). Despite increasing participation numbers, there remains a trend for older people to withdraw from regular exercise especially if it requires considerable exertion (Kelly, 1993; O'Brian Cousins, 1998). Sedentary behaviour is further entrenched by many older people's perceptions of what the older body should and should not do – fuelled by their understanding of the biological processes of ageing as well as pervasive ageist social and cultural attitudes, expectations, and prejudices (Blaikie, 1999; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995; Grant, 2001). This disproportionately affects women, who continue to live longer on average and who readily report sociocultural barriers including a perception that sport and physical activity is 'unfeminine', and a lack of physical confidence to take part (WSFF, 2007).

For the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rest or gentle exercise for therapeutic reasons was the expected norm for older people, and strenuous activities and overexertion were thought to be life threatening or too demanding for the ageing body (Coakley, 2001; Dionigi, 2006; Grant, 2001; Kluge, 2002). This was particularly true for ageing women – tied to traditional conceptions of the female body, which were deeply rooted in reproductive biology and a philosophy condoning separate, gendered spheres that constrained women's space and physicality (Vertinsky, 1994; 2002). Many older women, in particular, report feeling physically and socially vulnerable when participating in exercise of mild to moderate intensity, and hold strong beliefs about the assumed risks of being too active (O'Brien Cousins, 2000; Vertinsky, 1995). This is largely tied to the aged body in the modern West being constructed, entwined, and marginalised in several discursive contexts – all emphasising decline and biological failure (Bytheway, 1995; Featherstone, 1991; Newton, 2003; Oberg, 2003; Shilling, 2003; Vincent, 2003). Emphasis on decline has important implications, as it has been expanded to encompass not only biological, but also cultural processes, and has delineated ageing as being about "passively *getting* old," rather than "actively *growing* old" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 4, italics in original; Gullette, 2004). Ageing is then perceived as a medical and social 'problem', with images and understandings of older people primarily being associated with ill health, frailty, disability, disengagement, and dependency on the health care system (Blaikie, 1999; Bytheway, 1995). Decline is

constructed as a property of not just the ageing body, but of older people themselves (Kontos, 1999).

Individual management and control of ageing has come to have implications for the self (Kontos, 1999; Gullette, 2004). Visible signs of age are read as failure (Furman, 1999), and ageing bodies are viewed as contravening the cultural obligation and potential to be beautiful, unless they embody the ideal ageing and aged body (Oberg, 2003). In order to eschew the constructed threat of decline to social and self-identity, older people are increasingly expected to find ways of individually managing biological and social ageing, in order to maintain and/or reclaim social and cultural value (Hepworth, 2004). The literature is replete with examples of strategies to resist or deny ageing, a tendency which Katz (2000) describes as a “project of agelessness”. Gilleard and Higgs (2000) suggest that older people rebel against the cultural discourse of ageing as physical decline with anti-ageing strategies, such as beauty therapy ‘to stay young’ and fitness therapy to ‘actively resist age’. As Tulle (2008) states, exercising is no longer constructed as a health risk for the ageing body: “Older bodies are increasingly targeted as sites of health prevention measures that encompass healthy eating and the pursuit of physical exercise” (p. 233).

This has been accompanied by a shift in societal preferences to a thinner female physique (Furnham & Greaves, 1994), and an increased collective health consciousness (see section 2.1). As Williams (1995) points out, the “inner concern” with health and the optimal functioning of the body combines with the “outer concern” with the appearance and the movement and control of the body in social space (p. 591). While appearance and health norms affect both men and women navigating the life course, feminists argue that the cultural ideal for women – namely, a young, thin, toned, yet shapely body (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Gimlin, 2002; Wolf, 1991) is particularly injurious. Sontag (1978) asserted that women are subject to a double standard of ageing, and Ginn and Arber (1996) coined the term ‘gendered ageism’ to describe women’s ever-weakening social and cultural capital by virtue of their simultaneous membership in the categories of ‘old’ and ‘female’. The growth in the ubiquity of media and advertising images of naked or semi-naked bodies fuels a new perfectionism in the relation to the body that feminist writers have exposed and critiqued elsewhere in relation to the slim ideal and the rise of eating disorders (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991). As Poole (2001, pp. 301-302) points out, “the burden on all women to achieve this ideal of beauty is heavy, but it is all the greater for older women. Signs of aging such as wrinkles, sagging flesh, bulging bodies, and gray hair are all signs of our bodies’ betrayal.” Whereas historically bodies perceived to be in decline were warned against exertion, exercise is now touted as a method for staving off said decline. As links between exercise and disease prevention proliferate, more and more ageing individuals are receiving the

health promotional message that physical activity can be the 'solution' to the 'problem' of ageing (Eichberg, 2000).

Messages such as these are inherent within the positive ageing discourse which emerged in the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the related fields of gerontology and health care, exercise promotion, and leisure (Dionigi, 2006). Generally, positive ageing discourses call for a focus on the celebration and enjoyment of later life, and the potential for continued good health, independence, vitality, exploration, challenge, productivity, growth, and development (Chodzko-Zajko, 2000; Grant, 2002). Also referred to as 'healthy ageing' (Cardona, 2008) and 'successful ageing' (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), these discourses suggest that ageing bodies are malleable and controllable, and individual action is emphasised to prevent aesthetic and functional decline, disability, and visible or noticeable ageing. While potentially empowering ageing social actors to move beyond the decline model, social gerontologists have criticised the positive ageing model for placing responsibility (and thus blame) for the health, financial and social quality and outcomes in later life directly on the individuals themselves (Katz, 2001/2002; Minkler & Estes, 1999; Powell, 2001). However, this rhetoric of responsibility and self-governance has been embraced by social and political institutions, which have used the knowledge base gained from positive ageing literature to justify the health and fitness promotion movement (McPherson, 1994).

#### **2.4.1 Active Ageing**

An investigation of ordinary people's understandings of active ageing must thus first be situated in relation to the broader *social* and *political* role this concept currently plays in policy and practice. Active ageing is a broad and internally complex notion that plays a key part in a global strategy for the management of ageing populations (Kalache & Kickbusch, 1997; Walker, 2006; 2009; WHO, 2002). Evolving from (and closely linked to) positive ageing discourses such as 'healthy ageing' and 'successful ageing', active ageing is defined as the ability to continue participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs throughout the ageing process. A primary concern of the active ageing initiative is to facilitate individuals to realise their potential for physical, social and psychological wellbeing (WHO, 2002). Active ageing is designed to change social views, beliefs and understandings about ageing in order to reconstruct the practical societal reality of the ageing population (Stenner, McFarquhar, & Bowling, 2011). It is emerging as the "new paradigm" of ageing, destabilising traditional (and indeed ongoing) narratives of decline that frame perceptions of the ageing body in Western society (see Gullette, 2004; Phoenix, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011).

The word 'active' within active ageing is not simply intended to refer to an individual's capacity to be physically active or to participate in the labour force, but to participate in society according to his or her needs, desires and capabilities (Clarke & Warren, 2007; WHO, 2002). However, physical activity, leisure, and sport are promoted as avenues through which older adults can strive for the culturally-instilled imperatives of remaining active, healthy, and living independently (Chodzko-Zajko, 2000; Grant, 2002), as well as resisting the ageing body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002), postponing deep old age (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995), and reducing the health care costs associated with ageing populations (Hargreaves, 1994). As such, the discourses surrounding active ageing can be critically interpreted as reinforcing the ageist, medicalised view that old age is undesirable and something to be postponed and avoided. In addition, the active ageing model has been criticised as silencing alternative possibilities for, or definitions of, 'successful ageing' – and does not take into account how ageing social actors can act with agency to resist and/or redefine what an ageing body can or should do (Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Pike, 2011). Pike (2011) argued that active ageing, along with its prevalence in the policy arena, is central to the problematising of older people and the construction of a "moral panic" surrounding global ageing. In addition, embedded within active ageing policy and promotion is the rhetoric of coercion, obligation and normative behaviour (Walker, 2002; 2006). This implicitly carries normative standards and can inadvertently impose unrealistic ideals upon people as they age. Finally, Stenner et al. (2011) question the WHO's exclusive reference to the *determinants* (economic, social, physical, behavioural or personal) of active ageing. They argue that any future theory of active ageing should move beyond a focus on causal determinants alone and work toward a framework that considers the ways in which changing life events challenge the capacity to be active, and how these challenges are responded to.

For research on active ageing to have relevance to the lives of older adults, therefore, it must reflect and account for changes to the life course in contemporary society. Recent theorising points to the rapidly changing social landscape of ageing, to the extent that "normal ageing now takes on a multiplicity of forms" (Jones & Higgs, 2010, p. 1515). Gilleard and Higgs (2002) have emphasised the significance of social transformation, mass marketing and consumerism for the emergence of a "third age". This life stage is characterised by an ever-extending midlife enabled through continuities of choice and cultural capital. "Old age" – associated with a lack of choice (the result of illness, immobility, dependency, poverty) forms a key boundary marking the limits of third age culture. With the recent abolition of retirement age within the UK, traditional cohort boundaries across the life course will become increasingly blurred. These changes have consequences for active ageing policy. Firstly, it must work to avoid becoming a phenomenon reserved exclusively for the autonomous, consuming, age-defying "third agers." Research in this area needs to

ascertain how active ageing is and can be achieved at all life stages (Clarke & Warren, 2007). Secondly, it must acknowledge the importance of *diverse and inclusive understandings of 'activity'* that might deviate from the economically orientated norms typically embodied within active ageing policy and/or the inevitable conflation with physical activity (Walker, 2002; 2006).

Simultaneously, there must also be an understanding of how active ageing does in fact relate to the lives of people at earlier stages in the life course in order to prevent some of the negative consequences associated with later life. *A life course perspective is of critical importance* (Futureage, 2011; WHO, 2002):

We are convinced of the need for a new comprehensive paradigm of active ageing, one which brings together its gerontological heritage, stretching back to the 1960s 'successful ageing' concept, and the current pressing policy imperatives. This new paradigm would also reflect the need for a life course approach to ageing (in science, policy and practice) which transcends the traditional age segregation into three life stages – *education, work and retirement* – and adopts an age-integrated approach in which all three concurrently span much of the life course (Futureage, 2011, p. 13).

Previous knowledge of active ageing has been dominated by a 'top down' rather than 'bottom up' approach. For example, it has been policy makers, service planners and academics who predominantly have framed expectations of active ageing (Clarke & Warren, 2007). Meanwhile, ordinary people's values, beliefs and understandings of ageing (more or less) actively have been largely overlooked. Attempts to address this oversight are emerging (e.g., Bowling, 2008; Clarke & Warren, 2007; Hui-Chuan, 2007; Stenner et al., 2011), but the field remains in its infancy and is littered with knowledge gaps. There is a need to incorporate an embodied perspective within this literature – to elicit and explore lived experience within this social and political context.

#### **2.4.2 The gendered lived experience of active ageing**

Bodily ageing has not only cultural significance but also an experiential dimension, and the two constantly interact (Tulle, 2008). The lived body is always actively engaging with discourse and prescriptions of social, gender, and age appropriate behaviour. This being the case, it is surprising that only a few studies report the views of older women in regard to these matters. To better understand the views of active older women, it is necessary to 'get inside' ageing, as it is experienced and expressed by older women (Grant, 2001; Kenyon & Randall, 1997):

The study of active ageing consists not only of reports about so-called facts and scientific explanations about physiological and psychological processes, but also

descriptions of the meaning people attribute to their experiences of physical activity. To date...the dominant story of ageing tends to follow the reductionist model commonly associated with medicine and psychology... With few exceptions the central character (i.e., the older person) is hidden from the research text on ageing and physical activity. (Grant, 2001, p. 781).

Where older people's lived experience is explored, it is evident that a continual refining and redefining of the physical, social, psychological and cultural self occurs across the life course (Grant, 2001). Although I have acknowledged that the word 'active' within active ageing is not simply intended to refer to an individual's capacity to be physically active, the physical setting is the one in focus here – as *one avenue* through which active ageing is encouraged.

There is a distinct lack of qualitative ethnographic and interview studies on gender, ageing and physical activity, as most research on the topic has been quantitative (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001; Loland, 2000). However, there are a few notable exceptions that have used a qualitative approach to demonstrate the complex – and sometimes contradictory – impact of cultural discourses on subjective experiences of physical and psychological ageing (Paulson, 2005; Poole, 2001). Women have been variably described as being influenced by health imperatives, physiological statistics about the benefits of physical activity, as well as consumer culture and the accompanying (desirable) images of youth, beauty, health and fitness (Paulson, 2005; Poole, 2001). This research has demonstrated the importance of context for the subjective experience of the ageing body. In fitness contexts, it was shown that there tended to be an emphasis on the improved body, something which seemed to be partially influenced and regulated by a complex of messages about the ideal body size and shape exuding from a variety of images including those promoted by the beauty and health industries (Poole, 2001). On the other hand, women also reported that they attended exercise classes to gain strength and mobility for independent living; to create social networks with other women; to have time for themselves; and to be with others of a similar age (Poole, 2001). These are all reasons that Poole (2001) identified as empowering older women. The limitations of her approach are that she studied instructors as providers, rather than exploring *how* they constructed and interpreted the subjective experience of their clients' ageing bodies.

However, phenomenological work in this area has illustrated the nature and meaning of being physically active from the standpoint of older women (Kluge, 2002). This work is unique in that it provides information about why older women might value being physically active and how they negotiated a physically active lifestyle *throughout* their lives. As Kluge (2002, p. 4) asserted regarding her participants, "...continuity of a physically active lifestyle was not a luxury these women experienced over the life course. Being physically active was affected by gender socialization, ageist attitudes, and physical challenges." While

informative, the downside of this research is that it was contained to women aged 65 and older who had committed to lifelong physical activity, and as such did not consider the viewpoints of women who had begun participating in physical activity later in their lives.

Finally, several researchers have examined the intersection of ageing and competitive sport, in the context of Veteran or Master-level athletes: those who remain competitive when over the age of 35, and well beyond (Dionigi, 2006; Tulle, 2007; 2008). Acknowledging the existence of opposing discourses (that of the traditional medicalised view of ageing and the contemporary imperative of healthy, positive ageing), the work of these scholars has explored the meanings that older Veteran athletes attach to their experiences in competitive sport. Athletes who continue to engage in competitive sport despite advancing age are often categorised as either resisting the dominant negative stereotypes associated with ageing and feeling empowered to live an active, healthy life, or as internalising positive ageing discourses and denying the inevitability of old age (Dionigi, 2006; Tulle, 2007). However, Dionigi (2006) acknowledged that participation may instead be a simultaneous interaction and negotiation of these dimensions, and Tulle (2007, p. 330) stressed that Veteran elite runners – whom she referred to as “atypical older social actors” – can “help us redefine how we might understand embodiment throughout the life course and in the later years.” Tulle (2008) further contended that sports participation in later life may reflect and can even instigate social change, by increasing embodied agency and by widening the range of culturally available ageing identities beyond that of unitary, universal, and inevitable decline, or resistance of the same.

In summary, considering subjective, lived experience is a useful way to examine the various cultures of ageing, the way that individual actors engage with discourses of health and active ageing, and the subsequent variety in meaning that aged individuals give to events in their lives such as involvement (or not) in physical activity (Phoenix & Grant, 2009). However, the extant research in this area has either been performed in an exercise setting (Kluge, 2002; Paulson, 2005; Poole, 2001), or with elite, competitive older athletes (Dionigi, 2006; Tulle, 2007; 2008). In addition, it has tended to explore experiences of older people within discrete life stage ‘categories’ (i.e., 50+, 65+, veteran, masters). *As such, to this point, the gendered nature of subjective accounts of the physically active ageing body has not been adequately explored, and the voices of ‘everyday’ (non-elite) female exercisers of a variety of ages are missing.*

Following Paulson (2005), I argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of both discourse and physicality – namely, ways of talking about the experience of ageing and ways of living within an ageing body in a particular context. As such, an attempt to understand participants’ subjective lived experiences is necessary in order to elucidate the multiple, and often contradictory, meanings that (older) women can attribute to their exercise



experience (Markula, Grant & Denison, 2001; Poole, 2001). The lived reality of ageing (more or less) actively through an ageing, changing body *across the life course* warrants attention. Furthermore, although the importance of context has been acknowledged (Paulson, 2005), the way that ageing experiences *interact with changing 'norms'* of ageing, health consciousness, and physical activity imperatives requires consideration. Doing so allows insight into how personal and social stories of health and active ageing interact with and inform each other. Finally, it is important to contemplate what these stories *do*, including how people use stories to pursue or achieve health and active ageing, and also how stories work on people to restrain and/or discourage their ability to achieve the same.

## 2.5 Research questions

It is against this backdrop of health consciousness, embodiment, gender, (active) ageing and physical activity that I have situated my research. The purpose of this research was to examine how participation in the WRN shaped women's lived experiences of ageing. The central questions guiding my research were:

- 1) How are ageing and health perceived and experienced by women who engage in the WRN?
- 2) What are the narrative environments within which WRN members construct their own stories about self-ageing and health, and how do these environments operate?
- 3) What influences, motivations, and potential barriers to participation do WRN members identify? How do these correspond to life stage (i.e., midlife, later life, etc.), and how are these negotiated?
- 4) For members of the WRN, how and where do perceptions of their running body intercept with their health consciousness and their understandings of self-ageing?

In this chapter, I have laid out the relevant literature and the theoretical background to the following study. In doing so, I have given the reader *a* theoretical framework, but not *the* theoretical framework, which can be developed in relation to the data generated and within which my critical reflections on bodies, selves, ageing, health and gender can be situated. It is to the project itself that I now turn, first with an examination of the methods and methodology employed (chapter three). I bridge into this chapter with a brief interlude on *narrative theory* – which forms both the underpinning and the scaffolding to my research approach.

### **2→3 Adopting a narrative perspective: Body narratives and storied lives**

Against the backdrop I have described of body, self, and identity (see chapter two, section 2.2), how might we take seriously the lived body with a view to understanding the numerous and diverse ways in which women experience health, physical activity and ageing? Furthermore, how might these experiences interact to shape identities and selves over time and in specific contexts, such as the WRN? One approach is by focusing on *body narratives*. These are the stories told about and through the lived, material, and socially constructed body. The rationale for taking such an approach lies in the position taken by Miller and Penz (1991) that, “the body, despite its apparent immediacy, is never knowable in direct, unmediated ways. Instead, we know it through its discourses, the many meanings and senses that have accrued with it” (p. 48). This is supported by Becker (1997), who proposes that, “Narrative serves as a medium through which somatic acts are communicated, and it thereby affirms and reinforces embodied knowledge” (p. 193). Furthermore, as Sparkes (1999) points out, the stories that we are told and the stories we learn to tell about our bodies, and ourselves, are important in terms of how we come to impose order on our embodied experiences and make sense of events and actions in our lives.

From this view, in considering selves, identities, and bodies as storied, we can better understand the socially constructed nature of the body and self via cultural stories and narratives:

...if indeed we do live our lives within frameworks of meaning that invite or constrain, celebrate or oppress, then there is a need to interrogate the dominant story lines that frame the physical self and its associated identities and to tease out how our understandings of who we are, and who we might be, are culturally located. (Sparkes, 1997, p. 102)

This understanding of narrative as a form of social practice involves the recognition that available discursive resources in turn construct social and psychological realities, or specifically that “individuals draw from a cultural repertoire of stories that they then assemble into personal stories” (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006, p. 109; Fraser, 2004; Willig, 2007). This coincides well with Murray’s (1999) comments regarding individual stories. For him, “Narratives do not, as it were, spring from the minds of individuals but are social creations. We are born into a culture which has a ready stock of narratives which we appropriate and apply in our everyday social interaction” (p. 53). In this sense, the dominant body stories, or narratives available in a culture may shape not only who we think we are, but also who we think we can become in the future (Sparkes, 1997). Narrators tend to structure their stories

temporally and spatially, and typically “look back on and recount lives that are located in particular times and places” (Laslett, 1999, p. 392; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

Further, the selves and identities that people believe they hold over time are constructed by and through narrative. For example, Somers (1994, p. 614) notes that social life is itself storied and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*:

...research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that “experience” is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or two more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

A similar view is offered by Frank (1995) who, drawing on Giddens (1991), suggests that the self is not a passive ‘given’ entity, but a dynamic reflexive project, formed through stories. For Frank, an individual’s life story gives the life coherence, elucidates key moments and turning points, and gives meaning to the life. For him, stories therefore, are “the self’s medium of being” (p. 53). Therefore, as a way of knowing narrative implies a relational world and in this sense, human beings are only partly the authors of their own stories, and only partly in control of the content of their stories.

To understand this further I have found the dimensions of narrativity described by Somers (1994) to be useful. These include the ontological, public and metanarratives. For Somers, *ontological narratives* are the “stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed to act – in their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn is a precondition for knowing what to *do*” (p. 618). These narratives shape, derive from, are intimately connected to, and shaped by intersubjective webs of relationality that Somers calls *public narratives*: “those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks of institutions, however local or grand” (p. 619). These public narratives link to the third dimension of narrativity that is *metanarrativity*. This refers to the ‘master narratives’ in which, according to Somers, “we are embedded as contemporary actors in history and social scientists. Our sociological theories and concepts are encoded with aspects of these master narratives – Progress, Decadence, Industrialisation, Enlightenment, etc.” (p. 619). Such metanarratives usually operate beyond awareness and may reflect the expectations and experiences we have of life. For example, possible metanarratives that people may draw upon to shape and frame their ontological

narrative is the progressive narrative, the narrative of stability, and/or the narrative of decline (Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zibler, 1998; Gergen, 1999).

While most individuals recognise that their identities have changed over time, emphasising change and stability (or continuity) in identity construction is a narrative choice – and one that is influenced by interactional, societal, and cultural discursive resources (Gullette, 2004; Hall, 1999). Gullette (2004, p. 142) referred to these resources as “life-course imaginaries,” and described them as multiple, lifelong, and constructed influences structured by progress and decline. In this sense, life stories, or age autobiographies, are simultaneously creative and personal, as well as constrained and co-authored by the various larger (cultural) stories that we live our lives within (Gullette, 2004; Kenyon & Randall, 2001). Gullette (2004) also claimed that identity is itself a narrative of ageing, as ageing is a set of narratives—and that the ageing ‘self’ is discovered both through the passing of time and through societal and cultural constructions of the life course. Building upon this idea, gerontologists have also argued for a greater understanding of the subjective experience of ageing through narrative (e.g., Basting, 2003; Birren, Kenyon, Ruth et al., 1996; Black, 2002; Bowd, 2003; Bruner, 1999; Heikkinen, 2000; Jones, 2002; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer & Randall, 2011; Kenyon, Clark & de Vries, 2001; Randall, 1999; Shenk, Davis, Peacock et al., 2002). Numerous studies are beginning to surface within the relatively new field of *narrative gerontology*, defined as being “best understood as a lens through which to see the storied nature of ageing” (Kenyon, Clark & de Vries, 2001, p. xi).

According to Ruth and Kenyon (1996), a narrative approach to gerontology is important because it provides an excellent medium for investigating both the similarities and differences of human ageing over the life course. Furthermore, they contend that such an approach to ageing may facilitate an insight into how life has been lived, how it is lived, and how it may be lived in the future. Observing that the narrative story is a mode of meaning construction that displays various experiences with time, Heikkinen (1996, p. 188) wrote, “We look at our past through the present, which is the present we share with others; there exists no present that is not permeated by the future.” Thus, Ruth and Kenyon (1996) advise, by employing narrative approaches in gerontology, we may be able to describe how cultures, subcultures and family patterns are reflected in the life of the storyteller, and how particular individuals work within, or are able to expand the possibilities and limits set by the historical time period in which their life is lived. With this in mind, narrative gerontology may have the potential to allow the researcher to move beyond what Kenyon and Randall (1999) describe as the taken for granted nature of ageing, inasmuch as it may reveal some of the

complexities and contradictions that are embedded within the experiences of growing older and the construction of different selves and identities over the life course.

### **3. Methodology and methods: Capturing ageing and health embodiment**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the philosophical assumptions that inform this research, explain the methodology and methods employed, describe the analyses undertaken, and to position myself within the debates of representation and legitimation for this type of research. By *methodology*, I refer to the underlying principles and philosophy on which researchers base their procedures and strategies, and to the assumptions that they hold about the nature of the research they carry out (Sparkes, 1992). As such, it consists of the ideas and the rationale underlying the data collection and analyses. *Methods*, then, involve the actual procedures, strategies, and techniques for collecting and analysing data. Following Clough and Nutbrown (2002) and Sparkes (1992), research methods are thus viewed as *tools*, something that may be taken off the shelf and used in specific contexts for certain purposes. It is not, therefore, a case of asking and seeking to answer research questions with method(s) already in hand. Rather, it is important to ‘choose’ appropriate and relevant methods according to an articulated methodological approach, in order to address a set of questions which respond to a particular ‘problem’. In the following, then, I will articulate my approach, outline justifications for the choices made, and – put simply – describe both *why* and *what* was done to address the research questions.

#### **3.1 Paradigms and perspectives: Interpretivism, social constructionism and symbolic interactionism**

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain, paradigms are belief systems based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Also referred to as a worldview, a paradigm can be described as a set of “basic beliefs that guides action, whether of the everyday garden variety or action taken in connection with disciplined inquiry” (Guba, 1990, p.17). As such, it consists of the overarching framework that organises our whole approach to being in the world. While no one paradigm is or can be incontrovertibly ‘right’, the assumptions inherent within each paradigm have implications for research and thus can influence or ‘best fit’ the approach taken. A summary of the basic beliefs of four alternative inquiry paradigms is outlined in table one, according to three fundamental questions: that of ontology (what is the form and nature of reality), epistemology (what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known), and methodology (how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known).

**Table 1:** Basic beliefs of alternative inquiry paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Critical theory et al.</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>
Ontology	Naive realism – “real” reality but apprehendable	Critical realism – “real” reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	Historical realism – virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallised over time	Relativism – local and specific constructed realities
Epistemology	Dualist/objectivist; findings true	Modified dualist/objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	Transactional/subjectivist; value-mediated findings	Transactional/subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	Experimental/manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	Dialogic/ dialectical	Hermeneutical/ dialectical

There is much debate over the strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm and associated perspectives within the literature (see: e.g., Atkinson, 1995; Bryman, 2001; Gergen, 1999; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Schwandt, 2000; Smith, 1993; 1997; Smith & Deemer, 2000; Sparkes, 1992; 1998b; 2000; 2001; 2002a). However, rather than take the space here to elaborate on these, I aim instead to openly acknowledge and place myself – and this research – within a specified paradigm.

The position adopted within this research is located within the interpretive paradigm, and specifically is that of social constructivism (see: Gergen, 1994; 1999; 2001; Smith, 1989; Sparkes, 1992; Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Importantly, the ontological and epistemological assumptions steering this type of inquiry are very different from those that are associated with research informed by positivist and postpositivistic paradigms (Smith, 1989; 1993; Sparkes, 1992). Social constructivism is distinguished from other paradigms by its relativist stance, which holds that realities are apprehensible in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based (Guba & Lincoln,

1994). Characterised by ontological relativism, this view holds that the world is made up of multiple, constructed, subjective, and mind-dependent realities. As such, the individualised mind is problematised as the original source of meaning and replaced by relationships. Accordingly, as Smith (1989) highlights, how we interpret peoples' utterances and movements – the meanings that we assign to the motivations, intentions, and so on of ourselves and others – becomes social reality as it is for us: it is an interpretation.

Alongside a belief in ontological relativism, drawing on the work of Smith and Deemer (2000), I understand interpretive, social constructionist inquiry as epistemologically nonfoundational. Here, the nature of knowledge is subjective and relative in the sense that there is no one 'correct' view or all-embracing 'truth' concerning the social world (Sparkes, 1992). As Smith (1989) notes, "truth – or what we come to accept as true in terms of intentions, purposes, and meanings – is the result of socially conditioned agreement, arising from dialogue and reasoned discourse" (p. 171). Any and all knowledge claims are partial, contingent, historical, cultural, and contextually bound. Within this view, the researcher acknowledges that objectivism is impossible, and that there no "givens" upon which to found knowledge (Smith, 1984; 1988; Smith & Deemer, 2000). As Smith (1984) asserts, different claims about reality (from different perspectives) are not the result of incorrect procedures, but a case of one *interpretation* of reality versus another.

Symbolic interactionism provides one such framework for a social constructivist interpretation. This sociological approach is appropriate here in that it posits that meanings pertaining to identity, the body, and everyday interactions are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Hewitt, 2006). Specifically, symbolic interactionism explores the construction and negotiation of meaning in everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Blumer (1969) argues that "the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right" (p. 3), and that these meanings derive from and form the basis of social interaction. He further asserts that the symbolic interactionist approach "rests upon the premise that human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of *defining this situation* that confronts him" (Blumer, 1997, p. 4, emphasis in original). Symbolic interactionism thus maintains that human behaviour must be understood from the perspective of individuals who exercise agency, or free will, in the construction of their own realities, meanings, and choices (Hewitt, 2006; Prus, 1996). However, because this theory does not adequately account for the influence of gender and age norms, I employ symbolic interactionism through a lens that is sensitive to the construction of gender (Lorber & Moore, 2007) and the impact of systemic ageism (Bytheway, 1995; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). In this way, the construction of health, ageing, embodiment, and identity in an ageist and gendered world is *qualitatively* explored



from the perspective of the women/participants themselves (Garner, 1999; Ginn & Arber, 1995; Stewart, 1994).

### **3.2 Qualitative research**

The aim of exploring embodied meanings, perceptions and experiences is best pursued by using the voices of the women themselves, via qualitative inquiry and methods. Qualitative research is best suited within an interpretive paradigm, as it is a situated and diverse activity that emphasises the subjectivity of both the researcher and the researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, the word 'qualitative' itself implies an emphasis on the *qualities* of entities, and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Though difficult to clearly define, qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that attempt to make the world visible, and endeavours to answer questions about how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative researchers tend to stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers thus emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry, and appreciate that although they are attempting to gain a better understanding of the subject matter at hand, each interpretive practice employed makes the world visible in a different way and does not necessarily unveil the 'truth' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative methods tend to be ideographic in nature, and emphasise getting close to the participants, and exploring their detailed backgrounds and life histories (Sparkes, 1992). The design is also often described as being emergent, in that it affords the freedom to adapt and refine the focus and sample following the ongoing process of data collection and analysis. Other characteristics and features of qualitative research can be seen in table two. These characteristics have been drawn from a number of sources including Creswell (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Gergen (1999), Plummer (2001), Schwandt (1997), Smith (1989) and Sparkes (1992; 1998b).

**Table 2:** Characteristics of qualitative research

- Focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live.
- Involves 'being' with the person.
- Research as a dynamic, joint construction.
- Data collected tend to be non-numerical symbols, such as words and pictures.
- Ideographic rather than nomothetic.
- Researcher as main instrument of data collection.
- Researcher as reflexive and empathetic.
- Multiple interpretations of the data.
- Design is emergent rather than tightly prefigured.
- Data have primacy in that the theoretical framework is not predetermined prior to the study, but developed in relation to the data generated.
- Analysis and data collection often proceeds simultaneously.
- Writing is a form of analysis.
- Multiple forms of representation available to the researcher.
- Describe in detail using 'thick description'.
- Criteria can be located within a variety of perspectives, including replication, diversity of meaning, and letting go or renouncing validity viewpoints.

Having outlined the characteristics, it also needs to be acknowledged that there are also a number of strengths associated with qualitative research that inform this approach to the project. Firstly, qualitative research allows an understanding of the subjective meanings of events, situations, and actions that participants are involved with and the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences (Maxwell, 1996). Secondly, it enables attention to and comprehension of the particular contexts within which participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions. Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly useful for identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, generating new theories about the latter, and also for understanding the process in which events and actions take place. Thus, by using qualitative methods within an interpretivist, social constructionist paradigm and through a symbolic interactionist lens, I wanted to invite the participants to express their own lived, embodied experiences of health and ageing within the context of the WRN.

### **3.3 Research strategy: Ethnography**

The specific qualitative approach employed within this research was that of ethnography. The definition of ethnography can be unclear, as it overlaps with other labels within the general, multidisciplinary movement promoting qualitative approaches, but the term 'ethnography' holds distinctive connotations – primarily in terms of what an ethnographer actually does (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). For Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 3), ethnography involves the researcher:

Participating...in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry.

As such, ethnography tends to use a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with a group, and then involves richly writing up the encounter, respecting the irreducibility of human experience (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Methods generally include participant observation combined with qualitative interviews and techniques, and also often include a myriad of other data sources (i.e., visual images, newspaper cuttings, maps, surveys and statistics) (O' Reilly, 2005). However, the term 'ethnography' describes both the processes for accomplishing as well as the product of the research, and generally involves engaging in "an ongoing intellectual dialogue about what culture is in general," while "attempting to portray specific aspects of the culture of some human group in particular" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 84). An ethnographer's orientation is open-ended and exploratory, with the purpose of investigating some aspect of people's lives – including how "people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). Data collection is purposively unstructured, methods are multiple and emergent, and analysis involves "the interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) assert that, as a set of methods, ethnography is not markedly different from the means that individuals generally use in everyday life to make sense of their surroundings and their social world. However, ethnography is distinctive in that it involves a more deliberate and systematic approach than is common for most, and one that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge. An advantage of ethnographic research is that it occurs in 'natural' settings, in the 'field' – such that people's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). Whether the group or setting is familiar to the researcher or not, ethnographic participant observation involves framing the group or setting as 'anthropologically strange,' with the aim of attempting to make explicit the presuppositions of the culture or group. That said, the researcher can never be fully disconnected from the research setting – as the presence of an ethnographer ultimately influences the actions and behaviour of participants in the culture, and because ethnographers themselves construct the social world through their interpretations of it, "thereby producing incommensurable accounts that reflect differences in

their background cultures” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 11). As discussed below (in section 3.4.6), the degree of objectivity that a researcher can obtain when personally immersed in a research setting, and the ‘realism’ of the resultant ethnographic account of a researched culture, have long since been debated in the historical development of the tradition.

As a methodology, ethnography deliberately does not have a fixed theoretical framework, but is instead informed by inductive reasoning – where data come before theory, and theory emerges from data (Berg, 2004). Acknowledging that no ethnographer can enter the field without preconceived ideas and theories about how the world works, O’Reilly (2005) advocates that the best way to be inductive is to be armed with theory, and yet be fluid, flexible, and open to surprises. In a symbolic interactionist informed ethnography, this theoretical scaffolding is referred to as ‘sensitising concepts’: ideas that point one in particular directions but cannot tell one what one will find when one arrives (Blumer, 1969; Rock, 2001). Wacquant (2004, p. viii) also describes the necessity of being “theoretically armed,” in order to make it “possible for the sociologist to appropriate in and through practice the cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and conative schemata that those who inhabit that cosmos engage in their everyday needs.” As such, theory becomes precursor, medium, and outcome of ethnographic study and writing (Wacquant, 2004; Willis & Trondman, 2000).

Geertz (1975, cited in Plummer, 1995, p. 5) asserts that culture is, in fact, constituted through the “...ensemble of stories we tell about ourselves.” As such, culture both produces the conventions for living and shapes how individuals envisage their world and speak about their place in it (Fraser, 2004). Culture, however, is not wholly deterministic, as narratives can be used to reinforce but also contest dominant social practices (Nelson, 2001; Riessman, 2008). As Ellis and Bochner (1996, p. 16) explain, it is the trade of ethnographers to “inscribe patterns of cultural experience,” in an attempt to give perspective on life. Indeed, Van Maanen (1995, p. 3) described ethnography as a “storytelling institution,” and the narrative is highly valued within interpretive sociological ethnography, in seeking stories of lived experience and using researcher experiences as primary data (Foltz & Griffin, 1996). The ethnographer, then, attempts to *evoke* rather than *explain* the lived reality of others, discovering the multiple ‘truths’ that operate in the social world – or, the stories people tell one another about the things that matter to them (Foley, 2002).

### **3.4 Methods of data collection**

In this section, I provide a summary of the specific ethnographic methods employed to explore how women experienced, perceived, and storied their health, ageing and embodiment in the physical context of the WRN. True to the tenets of ethnography, the

research design was emergent and involved multiple methods and data sources. What follows will describe my access and entry into the field, fieldwork undertaken, and each method in turn, culminating in a reflexive consideration of my role as researcher throughout.

### **3.4.1 Sampling and access**

Following the conception of the project, interview guides, consent forms, and information sheets were drafted, and an application for ethical approval was submitted in February 2009 (see Appendices I-IV). The University subsequently granted Ethics approval in March 2009. Prior to this, initial contact was made with the relevant gatekeepers of the WRN (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), to describe the proposed project and seek approval for the research to take place within their organisation. I then met with the key personnel of the WRN in person, at which point they welcomed and approved the project, thus granting access to the field of study.

Following ethical and entry approval, I began participant observation within the WRN context at the end of March 2009. To date, this has involved attendance at and participation in 55 sessions of varying description and in excess of 100 hours in the field. Simultaneous reflexive field notes were recorded over this time, which now comprise four written notebooks (see section 3.4.2.1). Within the course of this ethnographic project, I have endeavoured to access and capture a variety of WRN experiences. In so doing, I have collected data from a myriad of sources, summarised in table three, and detailed more thoroughly in the sections that follow:

**Table 3:** Data sources

<b>Data source</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Detail</b>
Participant observation	'Regular'/weekday session	22	All abilities/levels
	Speed/track session	9	For those aiming to increase speed or achieve a PB (personal best) in an upcoming race
	Beginner's group	8	'Learn-to-run' program
	Half marathon training group	11	More 'experienced' women, though still all abilities
	Events	5	WRN Summer Race Series, Race for Life, Great West Run
Misc. fieldwork	Volunteering at the WRN office	2 days	Helping to prepare grant application for funding from Sport England
Questionnaire	Conducted by the WRN	342 responses	Consisted of 5 open-ended questions
Visual resources	Website Media clippings/coverage WRN promotional material Visual Elicitation Auto-photography task		Any available images  Pamphlets, posters, brochures, beginner's logbook, etc.  15 images per case study
Interviews	Staff	5	To gain a greater understanding of the organisation as well as their personal experiences of the WRN
	Members	11	To gain an understanding of individual embodied experiences within the social context of the WRN
Case Studies	3 interviews each	3	To gain a more in-depth understanding of three women's experiences: two beginners and a long-term member/participant

### 3.4.2 Participant observation

Fieldwork is composed, first and foremost, by the practice of participant-observation. As Van Maanen (1988) describes, this is less a definition for a method than it is an amorphous representation of the researcher's situation during a study. The method reflects a bedrock assumption held historically by fieldworkers that "experience" underlies all understanding of social life (Georges & Jones, 1980; Rock, 1979; 2001). Fieldwork thus asks the researcher, as far as possible, "to share firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3). To do so involves an investment of time: to build relationships, become part of the setting, learn the language, observe changes, and ultimately to enable "the strange to become familiar and the familiar strange" (O'Reilly, 2005, p.92; Wolcott, 2005).

Following this outline, upon gaining access and receiving ethical approval I made contact with individual leaders and began attending WRN sessions. Over the course of 14 months, I attended eight different groups in the area, of varying description, running with and alongside the WRN members. My role as researcher was overt, in that at each group I introduced myself and identified my purpose for attendance. That said, my role evolved into that of semi-overt over time (O'Reilly, 2005) – because attendance was on a drop-in basis and different women were present each week, and I chose not to continually explain the research. This was deliberate, as I felt that it was important that participants know what I was doing but did not always have it in the forefront of their minds – allowing, as close as is possible, insight into the setting in its 'natural' or 'everyday' incarnation.

The emergent nature of ethnography can be unsettling to the novice researcher, so once 'in the field', I followed the strategies of Wolcott (1994; 1995; 1999; 2005) to orient myself and approach the setting of the WRN. Firstly, Wolcott (1999) suggests starting broadly, initiating inquiry by asking the question "What is going on here?" Answering this question involves an attempt to observe and record 'everything' – something which Wolcott (1994) simultaneously acknowledges is impossible. However, as he argues, what you *do* record during this time allows insight into your own observational habits – establishing patterns for the recording of information, noticing what you notice, and learning how to be conscious in the space that you are in. Ideally, this allows you to record details as they are new to you – as newcomer – before familiarity and depth of focus occur. Going beyond this initial descriptive account, Wolcott (1999) recommends framing more provocative questions that allow focus on the *hows*, and underlying questions, to get at *meanings* imputed in action. For example, in looking at the WRN I asked, what do people in this setting have to know in order to make it work? How are stories told, shared, and circulated? Secondly,

again following Wolcott (1999), if culture, loosely defined as 'shared knowledge,' is mostly 'caught rather than taught,' how do those that are new to the WRN find their 'way in' so that the group – and collective identity – is maintained? Broad, descriptive, orienting questions like these helped me to attend to some aspects of what was going on and provided some focus and direction whilst in the field.

### **3.4.2.1 Fieldnotes**

Fieldnotes are the traditional means in ethnography for recording observational data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Textbooks on ethnography often advise that you use "thick description" to record anything and everything that might be important, as soon as possible following participant observation – and ideally, during (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005; Wolcott, 1995). Thick description consists of attempting to describe everything in vivid detail, or as Denzin (1989, p. 83) describes it, as "deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences... It presents detail, context, emotion and the webs of social relationship that join persons to one another." As it was not possible to write or record observations and in situ conversations while actually running at WRN sessions, my general practice was to come home and hand write (at length) memorable observations and aspects of interest following each session. Ethnographic research is iterative-inductive, moving back and forth between foreshadowed problems and theory grounded in data, and does not usually decide exactly what the focus of research is until near the end (O'Reilly, 2005). Therefore, without being precise and explicit about what I was exploring, I somehow had to write down what I thought might be relevant. At the outset, writing my fieldnotes often took longer than the session itself, due to the volume and detail of data that I was attempting to capture and record. The first several months of my fieldnotes are thus unruly and messy, as I was attempting "not to preclude or censor anything that might be germane" (Rock, 2001, p. 35; Marcus, 1994).

Following the guidelines presented by O'Reilly (2005), as the research progressed and became more directed and focussed, my accompanying fieldnotes became more concise and specific. I also incorporated the observational strategy of looking for contradictions, paradoxes, and distinctions within the setting and the stories told, with the belief that these areas of disconnect warranted attention (Wolcott, 1994; Wolfinger, 2002). As was noted regarding observations themselves, fieldnotes are always selective: it is not possible to capture everything (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). What I recorded was always shaped by my sense of what was relevant to the foreshadowed research problems, as well as my background expectations or tacit knowledge (Wolfinger, 2002). As I took notes, then, I was imposing a structure on events, shaping what I saw and heard. My



fieldnote entries can thus be thought of as both substantive and methodological records on the research process, and are part of a larger consideration of reflexive self-awareness within the project (Mahoney, 2007; for more detail, see section 3.4.6).

### **3.4.3 Visual methods**

Incorporating visual methods within a larger ethnographic project allows greater insight into how people may view themselves, others, and situations that they may face within their social world (Ball, 2005; Coffey & Atkinson, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, Riessman; 2008). Indeed, beyond data gathered via participant observation and interviewing, ethnography also often incorporates attention to the visual and material culture of the setting in question (i.e., including available visual images, newspaper cuttings, maps, surveys and statistics) (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O' Reilly, 2005). Highlighting the potential of visual research methods, Pink (2001, p. 1; 2009) describes how photography, video and electronic media are becoming increasingly incorporated into ethnographic work "as cultural texts, as representations of ethnographic knowledge and as sites of cultural production, social interaction and individual experience that themselves constitute ethnographic fieldwork locales." As such, an ethnography that employs all available visual resources allows sensitisation to potential themes, images and metaphors that form part of the narrative of the culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, Riessman, 2008). This approach "recognizes the interwovenness of objects, texts, images and technologies in people's everyday lives and identities" (Pink, 2001, p. 6), permits an exploration of the dynamic relationship between the visual and the textual, and elucidates the master and counter narratives that operate in and through a particular social context.

As Riessman (2008, pp. 179-180) states, "working with images can thicken interpretation. Images can evoke emotions and imaginative identification." It is this process of interpretation and identification that I endeavoured to explore by considering the visual culture of the WRN. The primary means of collecting any of this information was through engagement with various available images and associated narratives, within a visual culture that was primarily produced and/or mediated by the organisation itself, and variously engaged with by the members of the social group in question. The first step in data collection was thus the identification and compilation of available material resources. These included the WRN website, promotional and marketing material (i.e., posters, leaflets), organisational documents (i.e., the quarterly newsletter, emails sent to members, news items, and event reports), as well as media coverage of the organisation (i.e., press releases and newspaper articles).

Secondly, attention was paid to the visual and material culture in the course of both fieldwork and formal interviewing, within the case studies (see section 3.4.5). The same 'found' materials described above were used as visual elicitation devices in the interview setting – wherein participants were asked to share their interpretations based on their engagement with the images. As Robinson (2002) argues, photo-elicitation is an interesting and effective way of generating narrative accounts, and such interviews can offer an enabling context for those who find it otherwise difficult to narrate their lives. In addition, this technique allows an avenue for the participant to 'co-create' meaning, and offer interpretation – however reflexive. As such, photo-assisted interviews go some way toward reducing the power imbalance within traditional interview settings and can empower research participants (Robinson, 2002).

In addition, case study participants were invited to identify, bring to the interview, and then talk about biographical objects (Dant, 2001) that held personal meaning within their running experiences (i.e., prizes, finisher's medals, event t-shirts). As Tilley (2001, p. 264) describes, talking about material things became "a way of constructing, materializing and objectifying the self, for things contain and preserve memories, embody personal experiences." As words so often fail us as communication and representational devices, this approach thus allowed access to another layer of personal narrative, one constructed through a metaphoric language of things (Tilley, 2001). Participants were asked to describe what the object or artefact was, what it meant to them, and why.

In a similar vein, case-study participants were asked to complete an autophotography task as part of the research. Autophotography involves the power of the camera being turned over to research participants to document the images they choose, and to story their meanings collaboratively with investigators (Phoenix, 2010). Autophotography is a well established method within social sciences research, and provided another layer of insight into these individual's lives, allowing these participants to have both agency and opportunity to depict what they value, what images they prefer, how they make sense of their world, and how they conceive of others (Booth & Booth, 2003; Noland, 2006). In this instance, participants were asked to produce 15 images: five describing themselves, five describing who they are not, and 5 describing/depicting how they would like to be represented within the media (see Appendix IV for instruction and information sheets). These images were then used during a subsequent research interview to elicit the participants' reasons for choosing and taking those particular images, and to allow them to outline how they would like them to be interpreted.

### 3.4.4 Interviews

Given that there is a great deal of overlapping terminology in the areas of qualitative research and ethnography (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Reinharz, 1992; Silverman, 1993), I follow Heyl (2001, p.369) in defining ethnographic interviewing as:

Those projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds.

Heyl (2001) emphasises that both the time factor (duration and frequency of contact) and the quality of the emerging relationship between the researcher and participants help distinguish ethnographic interviewing from other types of interview projects. Traditionally, ethnographic interviews are conducted on site, or *in situ*, during long-term field studies. Certainly, this was the case during my attendance at weekly running sessions with the WRN, wherein I took every opportunity to ask questions, listen, and engage in conversations (or informal interviews) with numerous members of the group before, after, and during running sessions. At the beginning, this was primarily comprised of established members 'teaching', or telling me how the group operated, including discussion of processes, techniques, and the sharing of information. As time went on and I became more familiar with the women present at the sessions (and vice versa), this evolved to their sharing of personal stories and experiences, having informal 'chats' on just about every possible topic, combined with my continual (though more relaxed) interest and questioning.

Another style of ethnographic interviewing employed here centred on a set of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants: people from a variety of settings and backgrounds who have had certain kinds of experiences (Heyl, 2001). Specifically, I interviewed five members of the WRN staff to gain a greater understanding of the organisation as well as their personal experiences of the WRN. In addition, 11 members of the WRN were also interviewed, to gain an understanding of individual embodied experiences within the social context of the WRN. The sample was opportunistic in nature – an open invitation was made by email to all members of the WRN, and I interviewed all those who came forward as volunteers. That said, I endeavoured to include women of varying ages, and of varying running levels and abilities (see table 4: participant details, overleaf). In addition, participants broadly reflected WRN membership in general: aged from 29-66, with an average age of 47.

**Table 4: WRN interview participants: Brief biographical details**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>	<b>LENGTH OF TIME RUNNING</b>	<b>Time with WRN</b>
Meg	59	divorced	2 years	2 years
Maddie	66	married	20+ years	12 years
Cora	64	partnered	2-3 years	2-3 years
Harriet	62	partnered	2-3 years	2-3 years
Kate	40	married	6 years	6 years
Heidi	41	married	2.5 years	2.5 years
Paige	31	single	3-3.5 years	3.-3.5 years
Roberta	31	married	10 weeks	10 weeks
Janine	46	married	5 years	5 years
Jackie	48	married	12 years	12 years
Lucy	29	married	5-6 years	5-6 years
<b>Staff</b>				
Sue	25	single	12 years	3 years
Laura	44	married	7 years	7 years
Tanya	37	partnered	10 years	3 years
Polly	55	partnered	35 years	12 years
Pamela	57	partnered	40 years	12 years
<b>Case study</b>				
Leanne	63	married	< one year	No longer with WRN
Justine	48	single	< one year	< 1 year
Dana	52	married (2nd)	27 years	5-6 years

The aim of these interviews was to explore the meanings that the interviewees placed on their life experiences and circumstances, expressed in their own language (Becker, 1970; Chase, 1995; Spradley, 1979). Interview guides were deliberately open-ended, with the hope of empowering individuals to shape, according to their world-views, the questions being asked and influence the focus and direction of the study (Wolcott, 1982; see sample interview guide, Appendix III).

Therefore, the interviews were ‘semi-structured’ in nature, with the guide acting as a loose collection of related themes rather than a detailed list of questions and probes that are characteristic of more formal interview schedules (Patton, 1990). Themes covered within the interview guide were generated from a consideration of the work of scholars in a number of fields, such as narrative studies, gerontology, and the sociology of sport. The in situ interviews and ongoing participant observation (i.e., knowledge and insight gleaned from the ‘field’) were thus used as a backdrop to try to generate embodied stories of self-ageing, body-self relationships, and perceptions and experiences of health and ageing. Accordingly, the interview guide was centred on issues of the self, body, physical activity experiences across the life course, and running-specific experiences. Throughout, emerging themes

were probed for additional clarification. Prior to interviewing recruited participants, I conducted one pilot interview (with a non-WRN member) in order to revise and refine questions and prompts within the interview guide.

Linked to broader epistemological debates about what can be 'known' in the interview process as well as concerning the crisis of authority and representation (see section 3.6), all interviewing was undertaken with an awareness of postmodern and feminist critiques within sociology and anthropology (Briggs, 1983; 1986; Kvale, 1996; Maso & Wester, 1996; Michrina & Richards, 1996; Mishler, 1986; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Briefly summarised, these critiques highlight that the act of interviewing is a complex form of social interaction with interviewees, and interview data (or narratives emerging from the interview setting) is co-produced within these interactions. Furthermore, what the interviewees choose to share with the researchers reflects both conditions in their relationship and the interview situation. Central to this process is how interviewees reconstruct (or tell) events or aspects of social experience, as well as how interviewers interpret what has been said (Heyl, 2001; Kvale, 1996). As such, I have endeavoured to conduct all interviews in a way that incorporates acknowledgment of the impact of the interviewer/interviewee relationship on the co-construction of knowledge (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996). This was accomplished by viewing the ethnographic interview as a 'conversation'; focusing on the talk within interviews and how it was shaped by both parties and looking at collaborative meanings, language and listening patterns (Reinharz, 1992). What emerged were narratives consisting of a constant interplay between speaker and listener, intentional and unintentional turn-taking in 'conversation', and whatever expectations were brought into the interview situation (Mishler, 1986).

At the outset of each formal (non-field setting) interview I provided a brief outline of the study to the participant, and explained my interest in embodied experiences of ageing, health, and the non-elite running context. Participants were then invited to ask questions about the project prior to signing an informed consent form (see Appendix II), which included permission to digitally record and transcribe each interview and also use their comments in future publications. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours (average: one hour five minutes), and were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. The timing and location for these interviews was determined by the preference of the participant, and for the most part women chose to be interviewed within their own homes. To ensure confidentiality, no one other than myself was involved in the interviews, nor listened to the interview recordings. Extensive accompanying notes were recorded within a reflexive journal on interview context, setting, non-verbal communications, and pre- and post-interview reflections. To further add to the credibility of elicited accounts, I implemented a form of member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000) - presenting my transcripts and

preliminary interpretations following each interview, to each participant for their evaluation and giving them the opportunity to voice any issue that they may have.

### 3.4.5 Case studies

“What can we learn from studying only one of anything? Why, all we can!”

(Wolcott, 1995, p. 171)

Case studies were employed to gain a more in-depth understanding of three women’s experiences: two beginners and a long-term member/participant. These case studies were instrumental in nature; with the aim of understanding something other (or beyond) the particular person (Stake, 1995). As Stake (1978; 1995; 2003) explains, a case study is expected to capture the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. The aim is to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied (Hartley, 2004).

The first step is to select a case of special interest, and then look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. The first obligation, then, is to understand that one case. An attempt is made to understand episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, and ‘the wholeness’ of that particular individual (Stake, 1995). In this instance, I selected three individuals located on the different ends of the continuum of running experience. Firstly, there was Leanne, a beginner who joined a ‘regular’, beginner’s-welcome WRN group and subsequently ceased attendance and participation. Then came Justine, also a beginner who was approached following my attendance at a beginner’s-only ten week program. New to running, hesitant, and battling long-held insecurities about physical activity in general, Justine represented the WRN’s active target audience: a true beginner turned ‘runner’. The final case study was Dana, a long-term member of the WRN who I had interviewed in the first round of interviewing (see previous section; *all names pseudonyms*). She had been running for 27 years, a member of the WRN for seven years, and considered it central to her identity, life, and mental and physical health. Essentially, Dana was both a running and a WRN enthusiast. These three individuals were of interest for both their uniqueness and their commonality (Stake, 1995). As such, they were selected and invited to participate because I felt that they were typical of prevalent ‘types’ of members within the WRN.

The case studies themselves were composed of ongoing participant observation of the three women in the context and the environment of the WRN, and three in-depth interviews further exploring perceptions and experiences with the research questions in

mind. Much like the first interviews, these were guided by open-ended interview schedules composed of 'how' and 'why' questions (see example, Appendix III), and phenomenologically-inspired inquiry: focusing on participants' descriptions of embodied emotions and the events, memories or experiences to which they were associated (running and otherwise). Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour 20 minutes, and again were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately following – so as to allow ongoing analysis and clarification of emerging themes and member checking in the subsequent interview. In the second interview, the autophotography task was described and informed consent was obtained for this portion of the project (see Appendix IV for information and consent forms). Following a participant-defined interval of approximately 1.5 months for the women to take the requested photographs, the third interview was held. This consisted of going one-by-one through each photograph gathered or taken and garnering insight on why it was chosen, what it meant to the participant, and allowing room for probing questions and elaboration where appropriate. Once again, reflexive fieldnotes were recorded throughout the entire process (see section 3.4.6).

Linking case study strategies with a narrative approach, I align myself with those who call for letting the case “tell its own story” (Carter, 1993; Coles, 1989; Stake, 2003). Stake (2003, p. 144) best elaborates on this, with the caveat that:

We cannot be sure that a case, telling its own story, will tell all or tell well – but the ethos of *interpretive* study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong... Even when empathetic and respectful of each person's realities, the researcher decides what the case's own story is, or at least what will be included in the report. More will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be reported than was learned. Even though the competent researcher will be guided by what the case somehow indicates is most important, even though patrons, other researchers, and those researched will advise, what is necessary for the understanding of a case will be decided by the researcher. What results may be the case's own story, but the report will be the researcher's dressing of the case's own story. This is not to dismiss the aim of finding the story that best represents the case but to remind the reader that, usually, the researcher ultimately decides criteria of representation. (Stake, 2003, p. 144)

The same is true of all elicited stories emerging out of this research. My reflexive stance will explore the issue of co-construction, and representation will be discussed thereafter (see section 3.6).

### **3.4.6 Reflexive journal/reflexivity**

As referred to previously, to develop and extend my reflexivity and monitor my subjectivity, I employed the tactic of keeping an on-going research journal. The concept of

reflexivity acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Reflexivity thus requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which the researchers' social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Furthermore, it demands acknowledgement of how researchers (co-)construct their research findings. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.15) describe, what this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research "is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics."

Put simply, there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study in it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). With this acknowledgement that we cannot avoid relying on 'common-sense' knowledge nor, often, avoid having an effect on the social phenomena we study, the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear. Accounts of the social world in question are produced through selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen, through asking particular questions and interpreting what is said in reply, through writing fieldnotes and transcribing audio-recordings, as well as through writing research reports (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). These issues are important because they affect interactions in the field: who gets studied, which questions are asked, how people are written in and out of accounts and how 'others' and the self of the researcher are represented. As O'Reilly (2005, p. 222) elaborates, "you are not just experiencing and observing phenomena in their natural setting, you are interpreting, analysing, seeking, sorting, sifting, and even affecting outcomes by your own presence." Reflexivity means being aware of all these issues.

It is possible, however, to produce valuable accounts of the social world which take into account, and even take advantage of, who we are and how we experience that world ourselves (O'Reilly, 2005). For example, Smith (2003) sees reflexivity as central to the human project as people reflect on themselves, their activities and what is happening around them. Moreover, he argues that reflexivity is both a constitutive and constructive process as it can lead to one of change. Hertz (1997) points out that the notion of reflexivity implies a shift in our understanding of data and its collection toward something that is accomplished through detachment, internal dialogue and constant scrutiny of *what I know* and *how I know it*. Thus, researchers need to consider how issues of gender, nationality, race, social class, age, sexual identity and able-bodiedness shape knowledge construction. The foundation for my interpretations, or my positionality, is thus important to elucidate my whiteness, femaleness, relative youth of 29 years of age, Canadian heritage, and middle class upbringing, which all come to bear on how I read, hear and see – and make sense of – these



narratives, texts, and images. In addition, my academic background in the areas of Sociology, Women's Studies, and Human Kinetics provide a kaleidoscopic lens through which my assessments, critiques and evaluations inevitably pass.

Against this backdrop, my research journal and also to a certain extent, my auto/biographical positioning throughout this thesis provided a critical forum to record and work through a plethora of issues. For instance, this journal has encouraged me to be sensitive to how my embodied, emotional, physical selves and social categories shape and are shaped by the study, and to systematically reflect throughout the process of inquiry (Coffey, 1999). Furthermore, by writing in the journal I have tried to refer back and critically examine my own theoretical assumptions and actions in a self-conscious and self-aware manner. It has been a reflexive resource for reflection upon the many dimensions of the research, and how these may shape the manner in which knowledge is produced.

While distinctly separate activities, I did keep my reflexive journal in the same notebook(s) that contained my fieldnotes, and as such entries are scattered between reflections and observations made in the field setting. The notes are diverse – sometimes composed of short annotations, sometimes several hand-written pages – and run the gamut of reflections on ongoing reading, conversations with supervisor, peers and mentors, engagement with the media, 'feelings' on how the project was progressing, and so forth. In this way, the journal also provides an audit trail: an ongoing account of the pathways taken, and decisions made during the research project. This included issues of representation, such as how to represent the voice of the other and the voice of myself, as well as how to value and be more transparent about the tools and sensibilities I brought to the research context (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Hertz, 1997; Mahoney, 2007; Sparkes, 2002a; Tierney, 1995). I shall return to this representation issue (see section 3.6), but here I conclude with an example of a journal extract, which draws attention to my situated and embodied emotions and reactions that were evoked during fieldwork:

*I wonder at times if I'm too self-conscious to be a 'good' ethnographer – too worried about what people think of me to notice what's going on around me?? I realise I've only just begun, and can't be expected to feel 'a part of the group' already. On the whole, the women are really welcoming – making a point to ask me questions about myself, and my research. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a lot of this takes the form of trying to make connections, to find points of commonality. They notice my accent and when I say where I'm from, they ask me about bears (!), or tell me about their relatives that live in Canada, or a vacation they took last year or plan to take next. They ask where I'm studying, and then tell me about the courses that their children are taking and their university applications, or reminisce about how long it has been since they were at school. Basically, they 'observe' me right back – commenting on my running ability, asking what race I'm going to enter, what time I think I can get, or saying how they're going to let 'the young one' [me] go ahead on this interval. I want to tell them that I'm older than they think I am, that I know more (about life) than perhaps they think I do (...do I??). But I've decided to let this play out a bit – these attempts at connections are data in themselves. Their intention to educate the 'foreign', 'young' student might be conducive to gaining a foothold into this project. As I continue, I can reveal or not reveal what seems appropriate. I can make connections of my own. And ultimately, maybe them trying to understand me helps me, if just somewhat, understand them as well.*

*Journal entry, dated 15 April 2009.*

### **3.5 Analyses**

In recent years, a number of ways have been proposed to analyse qualitative data (see, e.g., Cortazzi, 1993; Crossley, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998; Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 1993; 2008; Sparkes, 1999; Wilkinson, 2000). Given the variety of types of data and methods employed within this project (i.e., visual data, fieldnotes, interviews, case studies), I was interested in using multiple forms of analysis to shed light on the complexity of the stories that women tell about their running experiences. Using multiple forms of analysis is supported by numerous scholars, who propose that qualitative researchers should consider drawing upon a variety of analysis in order to understand their data in a number of different ways (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Analytical diversity is useful, they argue, because researchers “can use different analytic strategies in order to explore different facets of our data, explore different kinds of order in them, and construct different versions of the social world” (p. 14).

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) further suggest that there is no need to privilege participant observation or interviewing (nor any data source/method) as the prime source of

data, once one recognises that spoken discourse always takes place within forms of action or performance. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, pp. 170-171) elaborate on this idea:

In their everyday talk, as also in their interview responses, people are *performing* social actions. They are, for instance, offering *justifications* or *excuses* for themselves or others; they are providing *explanations* for events and actions; they attribute *motives* to their own and others' actions, and so on. The detailed analysis of field data, therefore, needs to examine the forms and functions of talk. This includes the analysis of stories and narratives.

A careful analysis of the topics, content, style, context and telling of narratives told by individuals or groups under ethnographic study should, in principle, give researchers access to tellers' understandings of the meanings of key events in their lives, communities, or cultural contexts (Cortazzi, 2001). However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) warn that narratives should be studied within the context of an overall ethnographic strategy, and should not be treated as if they occupied a different, special and privileged analytic space. It is thus crucial to analyse narrative as both text and process (Cortazzi, 2001; Edwards, 1997), and recognise that in recounting events and experiences in narratives, tellers also directly or indirectly give their own interpretations and explanations of those events and experiences. They also evaluate, in their own terms, the principal people and others featuring in narratives, as well as the meaning of events and wider relevant contexts. Narrating "can be considered an interactive process of jointly constructing and interpreting experience with others, therefore narrative analysis is potentially a means of examining participant roles in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings" (Cortazzi, 2001, p. 384; Edwards, 1997).

With the above in mind, the primary approach to the analysis of my ethnographic data is informed by narrative inquiry. Crucially, however, analysis took place in an iterative and ongoing fashion. As such, throughout the entire fieldwork experience, and particularly following events of concentrated interest (i.e., a running session, or an interview), I deliberately engaged in a period of 'indwelling'. Here, I reflected upon notes recorded and listened to interview audio several times, jotting down further analytical notes and impressions, and considering the overall experience. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), indwelling means "to live within...understanding the persons point of view from an empathetic rather than a sympathetic position" (p. 25). This was maintained by trying, as best as possible, to recall women's own words when recording conversations from memory, as well as by transcribing each recorded interview verbatim. In the case of interviews, transcripts were then read through several times alone in order to immerse myself further in the data. Following this, fieldnotes, reflections and transcripts were once again re-read and

subjected to a paradigmatic (Polkinghorne, 1995), or what Lieblich et al. (1998) describe as a categorical-content analysis.

### **3.5.1 Categorical-content analysis**

Categorical-content analysis is similar to a traditional content analysis where “categories of the studied topic are defined, and separate utterances of the text are extracted, classified, and gathered into these categories/groups” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 13). In this way, it is intended to examine the thematic similarities and differences between the narratives provided. During this process, analytical memos were written as preliminary connections were made to various theoretical concepts that might possibly be related to emerging issues from the women’s individual stories, and how these connected to wider cultural narratives. These analytical memos and the coding of the interview transcripts also helped shape the questions and themes that were raised within subsequent informal interviews in the field, as well as within interviews with case study participants, as part of a cyclical process.

A categorical-content analysis is valuable in its focus on the *whats* rather than the *hows* of the telling. For Reinharz (1992), using this type of analysis allows questions of theory to be frequently addressed, and offers the potential to illuminate what kinds of cultural resources the storyteller might have access to, and how they may become lived experience through the themes presented. It may also be used to invoke certain contexts, which are particularly relevant in shaping the themes and narrated experiences of the teller. Thus, categorical-content analysis is useful for examining the thematic similarities and differences between narratives within a group of people. In addition, as Sparkes (1999) points out, another strength of this form of analysis lies in its ability to develop general knowledge about the core themes that make up the content of the stories generated. Core themes in this study included: *narrative hailing (healthism/the media), the meaning of health and well being, health/age consciousness, embodied change (ageing, gender, and the body), and social and emotional embodiment.*

### **3.5.2 Big/small stories**

Given the variety of data sources, attention was deliberately given to stories told in a variety of settings and contexts using the narrative framework of big and small stories (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). This approach recognises that stories are of a temporal nature, and places emphasis on the value of collecting them dynamically. Thus, it allows attention to *both* the unified, coherent,

autonomous, reflected upon and rehearsed self as well as allowing for the scrutiny of fleeting, contingent, fragmented and multiple selves. While often promoted as disparate or opposing perspectives, I follow Phoenix and Sparkes (2009; Freeman, 2006) in understanding that each tell about different but interconnected regions of experience, and thus represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry. 'Big stories' tend to be dominant within narrative analysis, as these usually reflect stories in which the participant is asked to retrospect on specific life shaping episodes or on their lives as a whole, in order to connect events into episodes, and to connect episodes into a life story (Freeman, 2006). These big stories are predominantly gathered during interview situations and thus elicited by someone, creating possibilities for reflection and understanding which are largely unreachable when focusing only upon the immediacy or the moment. Put simply, within big stories, storytellers tend to (try) to present themselves as unitary, coherent, and cross-situational: "this is who I am..." and emphasis is thus on unity, coherence, and self-sameness.

Big stories, however, have been criticised for being 'rehearsed', 'distanced', and attempting to capture a 'truth'/'whole' (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). If the position taken is that identity construction is ongoing and accomplished through interaction, analytical attention should also focus on narratives that emerge in an interactive context. This is the rationale for turning attention to 'small stories,' or those told during interaction. Small stories are composed of 'snippets of talk' – and are generally told within everyday settings, about very mundane things and everyday occurrences. As such, they are usually (though not always) heard outside the formal interview setting – and, in the context of this project, were heard or overheard within the ethnographic 'field': narrative in 'real time'. Small stories have been criticised by some as not having all of the elements of a 'story' (as have no beginning/middle/end or discernable 'plot' when heard in isolation). However, like Georgakopoulou (2006; p. 123), I conceive these "fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world" as potentially quite revealing with regard to how speakers (or tellers) convey a sense of self and identity – in context.

Bell (2009) describes this framework as a narrative meaning-making system consisting of parts and wholes. For example, parts might be processes at the small story level and wholes the big-level story. This approach thus allows for insight into change – or how 'parts' might interact to impact the 'whole', rather than drastic shifts in self or identity from small story to big. It also allows insight into how the same person can tell different stories: depending on context, narrative resources, audience, or the element of 'selfhood' they are attempting to emphasise or downplay. Including this aspect of narrative inquiry thus begins to go beyond the 'whats' of narrative to access the 'hows,' or how stories are composed, told, re-told, re-storied.

### 3.5.3 Holistic-form analysis

Following the categorical-content analysis, the transcripts were subjected to a *holistic-form analysis*. For Lieblich et al. (1998), this type of analysis focuses on the plots and structure of a story in its completed form. Here, as Sparkes (1999; 2005) highlights, the concern is to examine the form, kind, purpose, and conventions that structure the telling of particular stories as a whole, and the manner in which this confers meaning upon the events selected for inclusion. The assumption behind this kind of analysis is that the formal aspects of structure, just as much as the actual content, shape the telling and are an expression of the identity, perceptions and values of the narrator and the cultural group to which the individual belongs.

As Frank (2010) argues, this type of analysis allows the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual story, while at the same time understanding how individuals do not make up stories by themselves. He elaborates by saying:

Each story is singular; none is a mere *instance*. Yet, stories depend on other stories: on recognizable plots, character types, conventional tropes, genre-specific cues that build suspense, and all of the other narrative resources that storytellers utilize.... Experience follows from the availability of narrative resources, and people's immense creativity is in using these resources to fabricate their stories. (Frank, 2010, p. 119).

Thus, this approach allows insight into both the storyteller's narrative habitus (the disposition of the storyteller to hear, tell and re-tell particular stories), as well as the wider social context in which storytelling occurs (or, available narrative resources).

Despite being comparatively rare within the domains of sport and physical activity, the holistic-form of analysis has much to offer. Indeed, Sparkes (1999) proposes that a narrative of structure or form is useful because it provides important insights into the ways stories told by specific groups are patterned and the manner in which key elements, such as threats to self-esteem and identity, connect with this pattern. Furthermore, the holistic form of analysis was a valuable form of analysis here because it allowed me to inquire into the culture of the WRN in order to explore the way in which the telling of particular stories and experiences of individuals within the culture are shaped by its structure.

Following Somers (1994), another way of looking at this is that categorical-context analysis considers narrative at the ontological level, examining the immediate intersubjective relationships within which a narrative is produced. Holistic-form analysis then includes two other spheres of context in which narratives should be considered: the collective social field in which it is situated (also called public narratives), and the broad cultural meaning systems

(or metanarratives) that underlie and give sense to any particular life story (Phibbs, 2008; Somers, 1994; Zilber et al., 2008). Taking this layered approach to narrative inquiry allows insight into the stories that the women use to make sense of and to act in their lives, as well as the public narratives that are attached to (or tend to circulate within) cultural and institutional formations larger than the women themselves (Somers, 1994).

### **3.5.4 Holistic-content analysis**

Finally, I subjected the transcripts of the interviews with case study participants to what Lieblich et al. (1998) describe as a holistic-content analysis. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), the holistic-content mode of reading uses the complete life story of the individual and focuses upon the content presented by it. For these authors, by using separate sections of the story the researcher is able to analyse the meaning in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative or in the context of the story in its entirety. This type of analysis, suggests Lieblich et al. (1998), is familiar to case studies. As described above (see section 3.4.5), Stake (1995; 2003) acknowledges that cases can be chosen and studied because they are thought to be instrumentally useful in further understanding of a particular problem, issue, concept, and so forth. Case studies are therefore important for a number of reasons. For example, the examination and comparison of the smallest details of narrative accounts may reveal the contrasting meanings and interpretive complexity of age, gender, and embodied experiences (Riessman, 2003). In addition, Riessman suggests that case studies display the complexity of shifting and locally articulated identities.

In this project, three participants were chosen as cases (Leanne, Justine, and Dana). In line with Willig (2001), these are instrumental case studies because the cases constitute exemplars of a more general phenomenon. These women were chosen in order to allow me to study how the phenomenon of interest (i.e., women's perceptions and experiences of health, well-being, and their ageing bodies) exists within a particular case. This is possible, Willig (2001) notes, because the critical issues are known in advance (i.e., as a result of the categorical-content and holistic-form analyses), and are therefore at the forefront of the researcher's mind while analysing the transcripts.

Of course, conducting narrative analysis is not always as smooth or as simple as may have been implied from the procedures that have been described above. These descriptions may also have created the impression that analysing stories is straightforward and exists almost independently of the researchers' interests and efforts. However, as signalled earlier in my paradigmatic identification and discussions of reflexivity, I do not consider myself to be a neutral or detached analyst. Adding further complexity to the matter, echoing Richardson (1994), I have come to understand and accept writing as a form of

analysis and method of enquiry. Similarly, interviewing and transcription were also considered as part of the analysis, since these are also interpretive processes (Kvale, 1996). Against this backdrop, while theory is significant in distinguishing between form (e.g., the structure of the plot) and content analysis (e.g., salient themes), similar to Lieblich et al. (1998), I have found that in practice, trying to separate these forms of analysis is a far more complex – and at times messy – business.

Finally, it is important to stress the relational nature of analysis and this research in general. Throughout the entire research and analytical process, Dr. Cassandra Phoenix (PhD supervisor) has acted as a ‘critical friend’ and theoretical sounding board to encourage further exploration of, and reflexivity upon, alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in relation to the data. In such ways, I have come to experience the analysis of this data as a complex, interpretive, relational, and ongoing process.

### **3.5.5 Visual analysis**

Analysing visual material is also not straightforward, and is shaped and informed by a wide variety of perspectives and methods. As such, it is not characterised by essentialist step-by-step procedures (Collier, 2001, van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). However, in approaching the task of interpreting the visual data collected in this ethnography of the WRN, I have found Riessman’s (2008) description of visual narrative analysis highly useful. Specifically, it is argued that attention must be paid to the production of the image, the image itself and the possibilities for various interpretations by different audiences (Rose, 2001, Harrison, 2002, Stanczak, 2007, Riessman, 2008). Following Riessman (2008), the first analytical step was the examination of all selected (or ‘found’) images for how and when the image was made, and social identities of the image maker and intended recipient(s), as well as other relevant aspects of the image-making process.

Secondly, the image itself was considered, with attention to the story it suggested, what it included (and by association, excluded), how component parts were arranged, and the use of colour and technologies relevant to the genre. A third level of analysis examined the interface of the visual and the textual, with an attempt to draw connections between images and some kind of discourse: “a caption, written commentary, and/or letters of the image-maker that provide contexts for interpreting the image” (Lupton, 1994a, Riessman, 2008, p. 145). Subsequently, narrative patterns and strategies were identified in the data as a whole, followed by careful and methodical checking and double-checking for tensions and areas of disjuncture in order to refine emergent patterns (Spencer et al., 2003, Sturken & Cartwright, 2003). Recognising the complexity of material objects (artefacts), narratives, texts, and images within people’s everyday lives and identities, reflexive epistemologies of



visual research hold that images should be read interpretively (Rose, 2001, Riessman, 2008). I have attempted to do this by complementing my (reflexive) interpretations with the interpretations and creativity of the women themselves.

### **3.6 Legitimation and representation**

Ethnographic fieldwork has been central to anthropology since the early twentieth century, often taking the form of a descriptive account of a community or culture that was usually located outside the West (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Fieldwork required the researcher to live with a group of people for extended periods, often over the course of a year or more, in order to document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). While adding a wealth of knowledge to the field, early ethnographers such as Bronislaw Malinowski worked within a functionalist and positivist perspective – with the premise that, by looking at all aspects of the life of a society, a researcher can then objectively discern and represent the factual truth and reality of that society (O'Reilly, 2005). Anthropological ethnography subsequently became one of the models for some strands of research within Western sociology, studying human social life in Western settings and often examining the impact of urbanisation and industrialisation using community studies (Deegan, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005; Wellin & Fine, 2001).

Denzin (1997) demonstrates that ethnography, as interpretive inquiry, developed in accordance with the dominant aesthetic theories of this century (realism, modernism, and post-modernism). As such, traditional ethnography (early 1900s through World War II) in both anthropology and sociology has been criticised for making unfounded claims of objectivity and reality, and for a tendency toward colonial descriptions of the 'other' as alien, foreign and strange (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). Denzin (1997, p. 17) goes on to describe the attempts of modernist ethnographers (post-war through 1970s), yet still present in much contemporary work) as remaining infused with positivist and post-positivist discourse, emphasising the formalisation of qualitative methods and concerned with issues surrounding rigour, validity, and generalisability. In contrast, post-modern ethnographers reject the functional, positivist, and totalising approaches to inquiry, and make claims instead for pluralistic, interpretive, and open-ended perspectives (Denzin, 1997). From this standpoint, research and writing have become more reflexive, and representation is forefront: the once-valued realist ethnographic text has become a reflexive, interactional, and multiperspectival text that locates the researcher within and throughout the research (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). A relativist and interpretive approach to ethnography, then, aims to understand individual human action in

terms of daily interactions and common-sense ideas or in the context of the wider culture, all the while recognising the role of interpretation and interaction between researcher and researched (O'Reilly, 2005).

Accordingly, there has been a shift in ethnographic writing from a realist regime toward the representation of culture, as perceived by a situated narrator in the act of engaging with and writing about the self in interaction with other selves (Tedlock, 1991). As Foltz and Griffin (1996) assert, writing ethnography is cultural construction, not cultural reporting, and is thus always a construction of the self as well as of the other. In this view, narrative has many storied, performance, and textual forms, and is explored with more flexibility. Postmodern ethnography problematises the 'natural' relationship between narratives, truth, and reality, and privileges a performance-based, storytelling, listening, and hearing framework (Denzin, 1997). As a text, then, "the ethnographer's tale is always allegorical, a symbolic tale, and a parable that is not just a record of human experience," but seeks instead to provoke and move the reader to meaning making and action (Denzin, 1997, p. 284; Foley, 2002; Lather, 2001).

Focusing on the written outcome specifically, Van Maanen (1995) describes the qualitative ethnographic research text as a distinct form of cultural representation, charged with reproducing experiences that embody the cultural meanings and cultural understandings that operate in the world. The ways in which qualitative texts represent people's experiences are varied and include, for example, poetic representation, autoethnography, layered accounts, and so on. In their own right and for different purposes, all can potentially make a valuable contribution to our understanding (see e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Sparkes, 2002a; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). Here, in attempting to attend to and represent the sensuality of the field, an *evocative* and *representational* epistemology is sought, working with "a model of truth that is narrative, deeply ethical, open ended, and conflictual, performance, and audience based, and always personal, biographical, political, structural, and historical" (Denzin, 1997, p. 266). This is similar to the form of a modified realist tale (see Sparkes, 1995; 2002a). There are a number of reasons for why this type of representation was chosen.

Firstly, this approach recognises that no representational text can do everything at once (Denzin, 1997). However, in acknowledging the relational, dialogical nature of human interaction, and with a focus on careful and respectful representation, I chose this 'modified' form of representation because I also felt uneasy about producing an author-evacuated realist tale (Sparkes, 1995). In addition, similar to a confessional form (Sparkes, 1995), such a writing strategy may have the potential to evoke a sense of vulnerability. As Tierney (2000) suggests, at times this needs to be heard, for without it, we hold on to a unified voice that is cool, disengaged, and power laden. For him, "vulnerability is not a position of

weakness, but one from which to attempt change and social fellowship” (p. 551). With this in mind, I wrote myself into and throughout the text when, and where, I felt it was suitable.

Secondly, this choice is also informed by a pragmatic view (Fine, 1999). That is, both traditional and modified realist tales have produced startling, persuasive, and practical results and therefore, as Sparkes (2002a) argues, are useful for representing individual’s experiences of the world. Furthermore, Sparkes notes that realist tales have the ability to organise and present extensive, high quality, rich, persuasive descriptive data – such as that produced in an ethnographic project. Within such a representation, the voices of participants are foregrounded and the reader, it is hoped, is able to gain important insights into the participants’ perceptions and experiences of health, well-being, and embodied ageing in the context of the WRN. The intermittent ‘textual disappearance’ (Sparkes, 1995, 2002a) of the researcher (myself) in the text can be seen as a strategy to focus attention upon the participants’ words, with the intention to draw the reader into a storyline that attempts to portray the lived experience of women as they engage in the physical culture of running.

Most importantly, I stress here and throughout the project that interpretations made and conclusions drawn do not necessarily portray the ultimate ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of every woman’s lived experience of health, well-being and ageing within the context of the WRN. Instead, I take a relativist and interpretive approach to ethnography, in which the aim is to understand individual human action in terms of daily interactions and common-sense ideas in the context of the wider culture, all the while recognising the role of interpretation and interaction between researcher and researched (O’Reilly, 2005). From this standpoint, I endeavoured to conduct and (re)present the research in a reflexive manner, emphasising interaction and multiple perspectives and locating myself as researcher within and throughout the research (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

### **3.7 Judgment criteria for qualitative research**

Questions of judgement regarding qualitative research have been raised by a number of scholars (e.g., see Garrett & Hodkinson, 1998; Guba, 1990; Smith, 1989; 1993; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), and are central to what Denzin and Lincoln (1994; 2000) describe as the legitimisation crisis. Following those adopting a nonfoundationalist approach to research (Smith, 1993; 1997; Smith & Deemer, 2000; Sparkes, 1995; 1998a; 2000; 2002a), I make no appeal to an outside reference point or set of ‘facts’ that exist independently of themselves, and their historical conditions, or that can be known through pre-specified procedures or techniques (Hammersley, 1992). As an alternative, making judgements in qualitative inquiry involves debate, discussion, and the use of examples. According to Smith (1993), this involves “a willingness to engage in a free and open exchange of reasoned

arguments over why one researcher's interpretation is more appropriate than another researcher's interpretation" (p. 119).

Set against these points, in considering how the qualitative nature of this study might be judged or evaluated, I support and draw upon the use of nonfoundational criteria in the form of lists or characterising traits as proposed by Smith (1993), Smith and Deemer (2000), and Sparkes (1995; 1998b; 2000; 2002a). Such lists are neither closed nor fixed, but can be added to and subtracted from as the form and purposes of the inquiries change.

Accordingly, in what follows I present for consideration a number of criteria lists and guiding ideals (Schwandt, 1996; Sparkes & Smith, 2009) that the reader might take into account when considering the quality of this research project. For example, Riessman (1993) suggests that we evaluate narrative analyses in terms of whether they are persuasive, coherent, and useful. Similarly, in relation to what makes a 'good' narrative study, Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 173) suggest four criteria:

- *Width: The comprehensiveness of evidence.* This dimension refers to the quality of the interview or observations as well as to the proposed interpretation or analysis. Numerous quotations in reporting narrative studies, as well as suggestions of alternative explanations, should be provided for the reader's judgement of the evidence and its interpretation.
- *Coherence: The way different parts of the interpretation create a complete and meaningful picture.* Coherence can be evaluated both internally, in terms of how the parts fit together, and externally, namely, against existing theories and previous research.
- *Insightfulness: The sense of innovation and originality in the presentation of the story and its analysis.* Close to this criterion is the question of whether reading the analysis of the life history of an "other" has resulted in greater comprehension and insight regarding the reader's own life.
- *Parsimony: The ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts, and elegance or aesthetic appeal.* This relates to the literary merits of written or oral presentations of the story and its analysis.

Another starting point for judging this kind of tale, and ethnography in particular, may be drawn from the work of Richardson (2000, p. 254), who offers a list of criteria she uses when reviewing papers or monographs submitted for social scientific publication. These include:

- *Substantive contribution*: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?
- *Aesthetic merit*: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytic practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
- *Reflexivity*: How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?
- *Impact*: Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
- *Express a reality*: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem 'true' – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real'?

However, rather than following any such list element by element, judging qualitative research requires considering these types of criteria as “enabling conditions that not only allow for the development of guiding ideals, but that can be used to facilitate the adjudication of research but also actively engage researchers in a process of deliberation and dialogue” (Sparkes & Smith, 2009, p. 496). Fair or ethical judgement of qualitative research by those unfamiliar with it has been likened to the idea of ‘connoisseurship’ – or, that with open-mindedness, one can appreciate the strengths *and* weaknesses of an argument or a representation (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), and that what is desired (or ideal) is that this evaluation is subtle, complex, and informed.

### 3.8 Summary

The women's-only context of the WRN is inclusive of all ages, sizes, and abilities, and as such provides a useful environment in which to explore embodied (and gendered) perceptions and lived experiences from a *qualitative, interpretive, and social constructionist* perspective. It has been argued that these can best be grasped by way of observation of in situ interaction and practice via ethnographic interrogation (Crossley, 2007; Mauss, 1979).

In doing so, the health, well-being, ageing, and embodied narratives that operate within the context of the WRN are illuminated by both observation and from the perspective of the women themselves.

In this chapter, I have outlined the philosophical assumptions that underpin my research, and made a case for using qualitative, ethnographic research methods to explore women's perceptions and experiences of health, well-being, ageing, and embodiment in the context of a women's-only running group. I highlighted the methods of data collection and types of analyses applied to each data source. With all of this in mind, I presented and discussed issues of representation and legitimation for qualitative research, as well as some ideas surrounding judgement and evaluation for the same. In what follows, I seek to evoke and compose a picture of the ways in which women interpret and narrate their lived experiences of health, well-being, ageing, and embodiment – and elucidate what part running (and the WRN in particular) plays in that lived experience.

## 4. Media, health, and the visual culture of the WRN

### 4.0 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the visual and material culture of the WRN, and in particular on the type of media generated by, and about, the organisation. Firstly, I consider the content, or *what* stories are told in this genre – beginning with a focus on the forms and elements of WRN media health stories, examining the oppositions and narrative structures that underpin the narratives circulated via this avenue (section 4.1). Subsequently, the *whats* of the stories are further considered with respect to how age, gender, health, and well-being are represented and portrayed within these narratives (section 4.2). Following this, I move to a discussion of *how* these stories are told in the (WRN) media, considering the concepts of narrative hailing and interpellation, selection/evaluation, and the emotional nature of narrative appeals for beginning – or continuing – participation (sections 4.3 and 4.4). This chapter thus elucidates the intersection between metanarrative and public narrative, alongside how these ‘work’ to influence narratives at the ontological level.

### 4.1 The *whats* of the collective WRN media health story: *Forms and elements*

That people readily turn to the media to source health-related information means that we have to attend closely to the *form* in which advice and information is given, as well as how it is received (James & Hockey, 2007). Though representational sources are highly varied, the way information is given is never neutral and stylistic traditions govern the ways in which health-related narratives are reported (Karpf, 1988; Seale, 2003). As Hockey and James (2007, p. 96) point out:

Questions always have to be asked about which stories get told and why; about who has access to and control over the media; about the forms in which stories are told as well as the messages they disseminate; about how they work and what they accomplish in terms of people’s everyday lives.

Discussing narrative structures in media health coverage, Seale (2002a, p. 29) argues that an important overall ‘story’ told in this genre is “the life of the body, its struggle against the evil of death, its search for an admiring gaze, [and/or] its elevation of Everyman or Everywoman to the status of hero or victim.” Seale (2002a) further suggests that the media set up and deploy a variety of oppositions to generate the entertaining tensions involved in media health portrayals, and gives examples of commonly exploited dichotomies: heroes and villains, pleasure and pain, safety and danger, disaster and repair, life and death, the

beautiful and the ugly, the normal and the freak, cleanliness and dirt. In particular, he states that this can be detected when an overview of different media health stories is taken, rather than focusing on single stories alone.

Applying this perspective to the visual and material culture of the WRN allows insight into how health and well-being, age(ing), and gender are represented by the media created and disseminated by the organisation (as well as within media coverage about the organisation). In the following sub-sections, I break down these elements with respect to how/if they apply to collective WRN health media portrayal, and offer some examples with full reference articles to be found in Appendix V (keeping in mind that this particular analysis is based on the materials as a whole, rather than on individual stories). As Seale (2002a) argues, media health is a sophisticated and fragmented form because it addresses a skilful and knowledgeable audience, but still we may detect similar stock characters, routinely available plots, and familiar oppositions.

#### **4.1.1 Villains**

In general media health portrayals, “villains may take the form of disease, disease carriers, pollution of the environment or of food supplies, wicked or incompetent doctors, commercial interests selling foodstuffs that damage both health and appearance, and the like” (Seale, 2002a, pp. 29-30). An overview of WRN media health messages reveals the construction and depiction of numerous ‘villains’ that follow this precedent. Firstly, and perhaps not surprisingly (as it is an organisation attempting to increase participation in physical activity), the most prevalent villain depicted is that of disease, illness, and/or inactivity. This villain is not necessarily overtly ‘named’, though is referred to within a call for prevention. For example, ‘to get fitter and healthier’ (see Appendix V, article 1) is to take action against the potentiality of disease and illness associated with inactivity. These messages are underscored with the implication that a lack of health and fitness is equivalent to an undesirable appearance. Many WRN media health stories also depict excess weight, and inability to perform physical tasks like ‘walking up the slightest hill’ (see Appendix V, article 2) as villains to be resisted. The villain, then, can also be understood as any lack in physical competence, as well as being a body shape or type that does not fit with slim and toned Western feminine ideals. Media stories within the WRN subsequently present participation in the group (physical activity) as being what keeps the villain of physical inability – and the associated villains of ill health and excess weight – at bay.

Further, unhealthy food and alcohol are also depicted as villainous in the first example article (Appendix V) – a representation echoed within many other WRN media health stories. These villains signify temptations that must either be avoided altogether, or



eradicated if you have succumbed to them in weakness or temporary holiday 'release'. Articles or news stories such as these tend to acknowledge that 'you may have had a few too many', or at certain times of year 'the balance kind of goes out the window' (see Appendix V, articles 1 and 3). There is a discernable pattern here: while advocating abstinence from 'naughty' foods, the WRN position themselves as understanding and being compassionate to the external, everyday push and pull of temptation: 'But if you fail despite your good intentions, don't despair!' (see Appendix V, article 4). This fits into larger neoliberal metanarratives around lifestyle and health that advocate consumption while simultaneously practicing restraint and control (Crawford, 2006; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Markula, 2001). In so doing, the WRN media health stories represent participation as the 'good guy': the ally needed to defeat the villains in question, and the tool with which to master the "consume-but-control contradiction" (Markula, 2001, p. 168).

Various other villains are subtly referred to in WRN media health stories, amongst them being physical education programs, competitive and mixed gender running clubs, and time (or a lack thereof). For example, there are several references to women's poor experiences in physical education programs in their youth, and these are often framed as being responsible for putting women off participation in sport and physical activity thereafter (see Appendix V, article 5). In the same example article (and appearing in many other WRN media health stories), another villain is also identified: that of other, 'typical', non-women's-only running clubs as being too competitive or exclusive – and thus intimidating – for beginner runners. References to the final 'villain', a lack of time to engage in running participation, are even more subtle. Allusions to this include admonitions for women to claim and take time for, and care for themselves while simultaneously fulfilling work and family obligations. In all of these instances, the WRN situate themselves and participation in the group in direct opposition to the villain in question.

#### **4.1.2 Helper-heroes**

Langer (1998) argues that an important rhetorical device in the media is the framing of stories as a confrontation of opposing forces. Among these standard story frames, heroic deeds are contrasted with the ordinariness of everyday life, and victims are 'pitched' against villains or fools (Langer, 1998). Thus with the villains carefully constructed, it is evident that the WRN position themselves as the solution, or as a 'helper-hero' within their media health stories. Seale (2002a, p. 29) explains that, "helper-heroes may take the form of doctors or research scientists bearing magical cures, nurses behaving like angels, or fitness gurus pointing the way to beauty." In the case of the WRN, they claim to address each villain in

turn. Participation in running helps you to ‘Shed those extra pounds’, ‘Get fitter and healthier’, and ‘Start feeling a whole lot better about yourself’ (see Appendix V, article 1).

Further, the WRN claim to make these desired outcomes possible. At every turn, the ethos is emphasised – all ages, all sizes, all abilities – alongside a purported supportive, safe, non-competitive environment. The WRN repeatedly offer help, motivation, and support (e.g., Appendix V, article 1). Additionally, they identify themselves as a strong source of inspiration and the location of impetus for change: ‘Whatever your running goals for 2011, *we are there* to help you achieve them’ (see Appendix V, article 1, emphasis added). There is a moral undercurrent to these messages, and an assumption that everyone should want to be fitter, healthier, to lose weight and to gain self-confidence. If all women, of all ages, sizes, shapes, and abilities want these purported benefits – as reinforced by the WRN’s vast inclusion criteria – the message to the reader is that she should want these things as well. By using phrases such as ‘Let us help you realise your dreams’, the WRN present themselves as the answer, or the means by which to accomplish these goals (again, see Appendix V, article 1).

#### **4.1.3 Metaphors and numbers**

Seale (2002a) suggests that metaphors and numbers are also of considerable importance in creating rhetorical effects in media representations. He argues that, by placing disparate things together, “metaphor plays an important part in generating the stock stories ...and draw[s] parallels with other areas so that a sense of underlying order in the world is created and the unfamiliar can be presented as already known” (Seale, 2002a, pp. 37-38). While metaphor is not used heavily or with a large degree of complexity in WRN media health stories, when present it effectively echoes metaphors employed in larger metanarratives about health and illness. Thus, anything that threatens the body’s boundaries (or running performance) is depicted as being like a battle, or a race or other sporting struggle (Seale, 2001; Sontag, 1991) – allowing overdrawn contrasts between oppositional elements to be drawn. Returning to running, or starting to run after a villain has limited or precluded participation, is spoken of in terms of victory and triumph.

Numbers, too, are important devices for creating extreme contrasts (Seale, 2002a; 2002b). Classically, they are used to exaggerate effects as either very tiny or, more usually, very large and important, so that news value is automatically enhanced. Bell (1991) observes that numbers work by enhancing the facticity of reports and by appearing to be objective. Like metaphor, numbers play an important part in generating oppositional extremes that enhance emotional engagement, so any analysis of media health must be alert to their presence. While again not heavily used, numbers are found within WRN media

health stories in a few instances. Firstly, in media material focused on recruitment for Race for Life training programs, there is an emphasis on the large numbers of women affected by women-specific cancers (the cause for which the Race raises money). Secondly, reference to numbers in order to exaggerate effect is also found within accounts of heroism or selflessness regarding extraordinary people and their chosen charitable event(s). Here, reports are of large values of money raised for large numbers of miles run, and these feats are highlighted in WRN media health stories (primarily in the quarterly newsletters). These stories tend to be about women who are not only positively impacting their own health by taking part (often following a personal experience with the villain that the 'cause' in question addresses), but are more often than not also raising money for health (and/or illness/disability) related causes. Finally, numbers are used in terms of exaggerating the value of participation in juxtaposition to the small cost of participation. As one example, it is presented that two pounds per weekly run is 'a small price to pay' versus the large reward of participation: one that can 'change your life' (see Appendix V, article 6).

#### 4.1.4 Reversals

In the media health sphere, the drama of standard story forms entertains by generating a tension between feelings of anxiety or fear, and security or pleasure. At the same time, however, there are *twists* and *twitches* to standard plots which media producers like to use in order to stimulate audiences' appetites (Langer, 1998). Commonly this involves a system of sudden surprises that (safely) challenge ingrained expectations of media narratives (providing evidence of the dependency of media producers on the 'prior knowledge' brought to media consumption by audiences) (Seale, 2002a). In media health stories outside of the WRN context, typical depictions of a runner, or a runner's body, tend to reinforce societal stereotypes about who *can* be a runner. Images are generally of fit, toned, slim men and women clad in lycra and brand-name running kit (e.g., see Appendix V, example cover of *Runner's World* magazine). The WRN media health stories actively try to 'twitch' this representation, by including images of, and personal stories about, participants who vary from the typical 'running prototype'.

For example, an oft-included character in WRN media health stories is one who previously could not run – and, in fact, found the idea of themselves as a runner or participating in running 'laughable'. These women are represented as everyday, typical, and previously non-sporty – and who have 'changed', with the help of the WRN, to become runners. For example, in a testimonial included within a story aimed at recruiting participants for a women's-only half marathon, one woman writes, 'Initially, I could barely jog around the block but as the months went on, I progressed...' (see Appendix V, article 7). These types of stories are prevalent, highlighting the 'before WRN'/ 'after WRN' transformation (often with

images included) and the capacity for any woman to become a runner despite her starting point: 'Carole is the perfect example of what can be achieved from humble beginnings. She started from scratch in 2001, unable to run 2 minutes without walking...' (see Appendix V, article 8). Another example that clearly highlights the role of the WRN comes from a story which contains these two sentences: 'Julie had always wanted to run, but couldn't get around the park without getting out of breath, which put her off completely. Then in 2003 a flyer came through her door about a WRN beginners group and she's been running ever since' (see Appendix V, article 9).

Similar stories are told that outline specific barriers that individual (WRN participant) women have overcome – whether it be excessive weight, getting back to exercise post-childbirth, illness, disease, grief, bereavement, or loss. The 'twitch' in these stories is that they do not merely outline oppositions or emphasise heroism, but make everyday heroism more accessible. These stories make the adoption of a (WRN) running identity more viable for women who may have discounted themselves due to the reasons or barriers that the women in the WRN media health stories have surpassed or conquered. Readers have the potential, then, to be 'surprised' by these stories that perhaps challenge their ingrained expectations about health, limitations and capabilities. However, these challenges remain 'safe', in the sense that they tap into familiar, everyday storylines and discuss achievable goals (i.e., run/walk your first 5km Race for Life) or 'just getting some social time away from the kids' - without venturing into extreme examples of running performance at the elite level.

Seale (2002a) suggests that a stronger version of the twitch is the 'reversal', in which polarities previously set up may be suddenly reversed, so that 'opposites' swap places to provide an entertaining disruption of expectations. A number of examples of this can be found within WRN media health stories, including depiction of acts of participation that are extreme, unexpected, and presented as heroic. Still attempting to challenge stereotypes, one example of reversal comes in the WRN's discussion and representation of age. While claiming to welcome all ages, the majority of images and stories within WRN media health stories contain women who are roughly middle-aged in both appearance and description: women with children that still require childcare, juggling full-time employment, and starting to feel or notice age-related bodily changes. Older age is seldom depicted or referenced, with the exception of occasionally providing age ranges of group members when a specific sub-group is profiled. When stories about older members are included, they are presented as special, or extraordinary, cases: a 64 year old who has run three marathons in the last year, finishing in the top ten for her age group; a 62 year old who has regularly competed for 30 plus years and also lends inspiration by leading a group; and a 67 year old who is hoping to run her third London marathon next year and has no plans of stopping running (see

Appendix V, article 10). While these stories may be shared by the WRN with the intention of opening up possibilities for readers, they are also presented as anomalies, or unusual cases.

However, as Seale (2002a) argues, reversals have the potential to quickly settle down into new standard forms, so that over time stories such as these can begin to set normative expectations for those of older age. Similarly, when writing about positive ageing and the third age, Jones and Higgs (2010) argue that traditional conceptions of a 'natural' life course have been destabilised by improvements in population health and increased longevity. These authors point out that our understandings of the norm, or 'normal' ageing, are fast changing as the new reality of ageing "intersects with the somatic aspects of a consumer society based on difference and choice" (p. 1514). As a result, alongside earlier notions of normal ageing and its discourses of decline and dependency, a new discourse of normative ageing has emerged which is organised around the reflexively constituted culture of *fitness* (Bauman, 2001; 2005; Jones & Higgs, 2010). These newly reconfigured domains of the *natural*, the *normal* and the *normative* have implications for understandings of ageing and health – as well as for the diversity of narrative resources available to those in (or approaching) later life to construct and negotiate their individual health and ageing stories. I will pick up on this thread later when considering ontological narratives of WRN members (see chapters 5-9).

## **4.2 The *whats* of individual WRN media health stories: Emphasised femininity and commercialised feminism**

Moving on from elements found within WRN media health stories, this section further addresses the content, or '*the whats*', of stories found within wider WRN visual culture. While still health stories, these can also be understood to illustrate the organisation in action: depicting and describing what it is like primarily to the non-member, and attempting to recruit or entice beginner runners to join the WRN. As such, an attempt was made to analyse these visual and textual narratives from a beginner, or not-yet-member perspective. Importantly, analysis focused on individual stories rather than the overall or collective (as was the focus in the previous section).

### **4.2.1 Stories of gender and femininity: Assumptions and emphasis**

Blinde, Taub and Han (1994) note that most research examining the empowering aspects of female sport has occurred in woman-controlled sport organisations, feminist sport leagues, or lesbian sport teams, and that it is within these 'gynocentric' environments that we see overt challenges to hegemonic practices in sport. With their emphasis on accessibility for women of all shapes, sizes, ages, and abilities, the WRN can be seen to be aligning with

a feminist sporting ethos – seeking to offer an alternative to supposedly masculinist aspects of sport such as an over-emphasis on winning, elitism, hierarchy of authority, social exclusion, and hostility toward and endangering opponents (Birrell & Richter, 1994; Krane, 2001). Demonstrating this alignment, as in the media health stories, there is an overall attempt within the visual culture of the WRN to create the image of an accessible, supportive, social, and empowering environment. This is emphasised by an image depicted within the WRN's beginner's log book (Figure 1, below). Rather than attempting to achieve individual success in terms of finishing position or time, the women are clasp hands, smiling, and helping each other towards their assumed collective goal. This image underscores the message that participation in the WRN is not competitive, but is instead about building relationships and an ethic of care and support. However, there are alternative readings of this material, in that the very existence of a log book is suggestive of the monitoring of performance and/or improvement, and thus could be interpreted as contradictory to a non-competitive ethic.



*Women holding hands, WRN beginner's log book*

*Figure 1*

Speaking to the issue of competition, one newspaper article includes a quotation from the founder describing why the network is just for women: 'I had a couple of guys in the group once and they immediately hared off into the distance and disappeared. That's not what we're about...It's about staying together and supporting each other'. This sentiment is continually reinforced through the bodily positioning within many similar images – participants are pictured embracing, holding hands, and often (if not always) in close proximity to each other. These can be read as "images of collectivity," wherein the connection of the bodies pictured makes the group of women appear as an entity perceptible to themselves and any spectator: a plural self (Pillsbury, 1996, p. 36). Further asserting that there are differences between genders to think about when it comes to running, a group leader is quoted in another newspaper article as saying, 'Women have to think about a sports bra and men don't have to think about that. Women tend to have to fit their running in around working and looking after the children or getting all the jobs done at home... And then there are other issues like pregnancy and menstruation, of course'. Similarly, on the website and within the beginner's log book a list of what is needed for participation includes 'a well fitting sports bra'. As such, the visual culture of the WRN includes an effort to show a commitment and orientation to women and their perceived distinctive needs.

Continuing to stress stereotypical differences with respect to gender and competition, another leader in a different article remarked, '[the WRN is] non-competitive and non-pressured and people run at their own levels'. This is possible due to the technique of 'looping' employed within a WRN run, wherein front-runners loop back behind those who are running less quickly at regular intervals in order to keep the group together. However, for those not familiar with this structure (i.e., likely anyone within the audience who is not yet a member of the group), some women may very well interpret that unless they feel able to keep up with the group they are not welcome. In addition, the same leader then continued on to mention, and valorise, specific races that members of her group had participated in. Thus, while competition is underplayed, and even ideologically opposed by the WRN, leaders do tend to actively encourage members to participate in organised races and events. Indeed, this contradiction is both visible and pervasive, and reinforced within the visual culture: in 20 of the 26 images included in the beginner's log book there are visible race numbers, and the women pictured are either shown in motion (running), or with medals around their neck after finishing an event [see e.g., selection of three images below – Figure 2].



*Images of competition, WRN beginner's log book*

*Figure 2*

On one level, these images can be said to embody the ethos of the WRN – the women pictured are of varying ages, body sizes and types, and the medals are finisher's medals rather than awarded to the top finishers (discernable because there is one image in the logbook where all nine front-facing women in the picture can be seen wearing a medal). However, images of competition overwhelmingly predominate in what would be the initiate's or not-yet-member's first glimpse into the allegedly non-competitive athletic world of the WRN. In addition, while the 'typical' running body is not presented here (young, slim, toned, etc.), there are numerous bodies that are conspicuously absent from the images above (i.e., women of colour, severely overweight and obese women, women of considerably advanced age, women with disabilities, and women without the financial means to participate).

Further, gendered assumptions go beyond just the concept of competition. Paired with observations such as, '...quite a few of the women are surprisingly fit', and 'the network...works on the principle that anyone can run and can surprise themselves by just how much they can achieve', the media coverage of the WRN perpetuates the perceived limits and abilities of gendered bodies, with men's bodies presumed to be naturally faster, stronger, and more powerful than their female counterparts (Dowling, 2000). Headlines such as 'Run along, women!' and 'Girls on the run' could be interpreted as condescending, or as



humouring those women who are engaging with running as a leisure pursuit (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). This method of framing female participation has been referred to as that of 'ambivalence', where positive descriptions and images of women athletes are juxtaposed with descriptions and images that simultaneously undermine and trivialise women's efforts and successes (Christopherson et al., 2002; Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan et al., 1990; Eastman & Billings, 1999; Elueze & Jones, 1998; Kinnick, 1998; Vincent et al., 2002). Although often considered an improvement on stereotyped (or nonexistent) coverage of female sport participation, ambivalence remains problematic because it denies sportswomen appropriate recognition and prestige (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994).

Presenting the WRN as a 'larky all-female running group' (another phrase from a newspaper article) has the effect of excluding those women who do take it seriously and are, in fact, competitive – or want to be so, if we look from the perspective of the beginner. Indeed, an emphasis on frivolity or fun often found in WRN media coverage and marketing can be interpreted as a trivialisation of sport for women (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Krane, 2001). In highlighting the supposedly feminine aspects of participation in this leisure context, the visual culture of the WRN thus presents female members as culturally acceptable women by exaggerating their performance of femininity. The underlying message presented is that athleticism and femininity are contradictory, and women are encouraged to negotiate and perform gender in a particular and prescribed way if they wish to be both athletic and be socially accepted. By emphasising fun and camaraderie in female sport via a range of visual and textual narratives, the visual culture of the WRN assures women that running is an appropriate activity for them to participate in.

In defining themselves in opposition to sporting values imbued with hegemonic masculinity, the WRN are, according to them, non-competitive, non-pressured, social, fun, supportive and empowering. This entails an effort to demonstrate accessibility, positive aspects and benefits of participation, and ultimately difference if not opposition to traditional masculinist conceptions of sport such as competition and elitism. Dominant constructions do position masculinity as active and femininity as passive, and sport therefore as not a feminine activity. However, research has shown that the construction and performance of masculinity and femininity in sport is far more complex than is represented by a simple, binary division (Evans, 2006; Neverson & White, 2002; Theberge, 2000). Indeed, although dominant discourses exist regarding the performance of gendered identities within sport, it is important to note that individual women respond, resist, and negotiate these by constructing their bodies and performing identities in many different ways (Krane, 2001; Nelson, 1999). Thus, the binary approach to the performance of heterosexual femininity within the visual culture of the WRN denies the experiences of those women who do not fit neatly into these categories: those who are competitive, or who *do* view themselves as athletic.

However, rather than presenting the WRN as a space where multiple and varied gender identities are played out, the visual culture of the WRN is replete with images and discourses of heterosexual femininity. As such, narratives presented as supportive (i.e., references to women-specific needs and issues such as sports bras, pregnancy, and menstruation) may actually reproduce women's bodies as less-able to engage in sporting activities. Pointing to the distinctive needs of women has the potential of reinforcing a form of "inhibited intentionality": a tendency for women to underestimate their physical potential or ability on the basis of gender (Young, 1990, p. 147). Further, framing participation as 'fun,' 'larky,' and 'frivolous', the visual culture of the WRN again emphasises stereotypical and extreme heterosexual feminine values. By association, women's sport participation is trivialised, and the images and voices of those women who take their running seriously, are competitive in a myriad of ways, or take pride in their athleticism are silenced.

#### **4.2.2 Stories of commercialised feminism**

Women who *do* see, or can imagine themselves in the presented visual culture are meant to be enticed by the emphasis on fun and sociality, as well as media headlines such as 'Get your body back on track', and 'If you've only ever run for a bus, it may be time to get moving'. In deliberately distancing themselves from traditional measures of success and performance in the running context (race times, speed, etc.), the WRN align themselves with other measures that can be seen as gendered, particularly concerning weight loss and the achievement of a feminine body ideal. These gendered motivations and rationales were echoed in members' narratives of their participation within the media coverage. One newspaper article, entitled 'I started running to lose weight', included this quotation from a WRN member:

I still can't believe I've run a marathon, especially when I look back to my school days. I was the one lagging behind everyone else on the sports field. Sport was a chore not a pleasure, which is a real shame... Running has totally changed my life. I'm not just fitter, my skin's clearer, I'm toned, I've dropped a dress size, don't have any cellulite and I've met some great people.

Presenting numerous similar narratives of supposed success, the visual and textual narratives within the WRN serve to propagate gendered body ideals, responsibilities, and types of participation. Further, within both the newspaper coverage and the WRN marketing materials, women are urged to run both for their own health and the health of others, or, ideally, for a cause. Underlying these narratives is a commercialised version of feminism (Goodkind, 2009; Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1996), characterised by a focus on the potential for empowerment alongside both moral and individual responsibility. In effect, "the individual

change promoted by commercialized feminism is not only for the purpose of creating personal satisfaction but also is intended to create citizens who will regulate and govern themselves” (Goodkind, 2009, p. 400). In the case of the WRN, it is the individual woman’s responsibility for her own health, weight-control, safety, social fulfilment, confidence, self-esteem, and ultimately, happiness. This perspective can bracket the individual from the social and cultural realms, shifting the location of the problem from outside the self (e.g., patriarchal society) to within the self (Goodkind, 2009). “Personal fulfilment thus becomes a social obligation,” and those who fail to achieve or engage with this reform are categorised as “social problems” (Cruikshank, 1996, pp. 232-234). As such, the message within the visual culture of the WRN may be interpreted as being mixed: alongside inspirational declarations such as, ‘If I can run a marathon, anyone can’ (a quotation by a WRN member within a newspaper article), is the moral imperative that the reader/would-be runner *should* run a marathon – and preferably for charity – and is somehow irresponsible and morally lacking should she not decide to do so.

Analysis thus revealed that the visual and textual narratives championing the availability of empowerment via participation in the WRN cannot be separated from those also underpinned by individual choice and responsibility. As Goodkind (2009, p. 411) asserts, this “reflects the neoliberal belief that because an individual has the capacity to choose, she is solely responsible for her actions and the consequences.” In examining the images for the context and politics of their production, the WRN and the media can be conceptualised as “cultural producers,” or entities who exert social influence through both text and visual imagery (Childs & Barkin, 2006, p. 36; Otanez & Glantz, 2009). Via commercialised feminism, the WRN can be seen to engage in “rhetorical acts of public persuasion that rely on cultural formations and that appeal to cultural values” (Benjamin, 2007, p. xiii), in an attempt to establish a positive and desirable image and social identity. Potential members of the WRN are thus presented with a commercialised feminist message, through which they are shown and told that they are morally obliged to engage in projects of self-control, self-management and self-regulation (Haney, 2004) – projects such as joining and running with the WRN. In addition, the visual culture of the WRN simplistically implies that the achievement of, and what constitutes, ‘empowerment’ is the same for all women.

### **4.3 How are these stories told?**

Unlike the majority of running clubs, although it has many long-term members, the WRN consciously emphasise their accessibility to the ‘true beginner.’ As such, the WRN can be conceptualised as an important social and physical space in and through which

(often) previously inactive, non-elite, and supposedly non-competitive women potentially learn to experience and perceive their bodies in a different way. Especially apparent in the visual and material culture of the WRN is the proliferation of narrative text and images depicting the organisation to prospective members (i.e., websites, brochures, pamphlets, posters, and significant media coverage particularly within the South West region). The purpose of this section is to examine *how* the visual culture of the WRN presents an active running identity, and constructs a framework of narratives intended to hail initiates to perform, and perhaps begin to embody, this identity. Thus, the focus here is the *how*s of the (media health) stories presented by the WRN. Again the analytical perspective taken deliberately considers the point of view of a non-member or of an initiate to the organisation, and speaks to how health consumers are 'called' to health consciousness via WRN media health messages.

#### **4.3.1 Interpellation and narrative hailing**

Borrowing from Donnelly and Young (1988, p. 224), the information that women acquire about a specific setting, prior to initial participation in the activity, can be thought of as a form of 'presocialisation'. As these authors elucidate, uninitiated knowledge and understanding of specific sport contexts is developed from a variety of sources, including "family and peer group awareness, direct or indirect contact with established members and, most significantly, *the media*" (Donnelly & Young, 1988, p. 225, emphasis added). Donnelly and Young (1988) argue that this knowledge may be absorbed by an individual to facilitate a process of *anticipatory socialisation* whereby characteristics and roles of the setting, context or activity in question may be enacted – or performed – before the actor's current audience.

Importantly, recognising the significant influence of the media within presocialisation requires attention to the visual and narrative elements of the resources available to potential initiates. In this way, images and text can act to 'hail' or 'call' individuals into subject positions, or toward the acceptance, performance, and embodiment of a social role – a process that Althusser (1971) defines as 'interpellation'. While Althusser (1971) was primarily concerned with how ideology is deployed and imposed through the process of hailing, my interest lies in the relationship between narrative and interpellation. The use of the term 'narrative hailing' thus refers to that relationship, or more simply, to the narrative dimension of the hailing process.

There are, however, prerequisites that must be present in order for an individual to be recruited and/or select and seek out membership, including: opportunity, motivation, interest, proximity, and life circumstances (Donnelly & Young, 1988). A consideration of such prerequisites (i.e., by the organisation, or the cultural producers, of the media) in turn

shapes the strategic deployment of stylistic, visual and textual narratives designed to be unchallenged by the audience being hailed, or recruited into a role of identity (Althusser, 1971; Boje, 2008). That individuals bring their own life-texts, socio-cultural and political contexts, knowledge, values and beliefs to the meaning-making process determines what narratives that the organisation is able to construct, and the power that such narratives are able to exercise (Crinall, 2009). As such, attention to life circumstances and prerequisites has the potential to reveal who might be excluded on the basis of them. Further, a consideration of visual artefacts can reveal insight into how narratives operate in, through, and alongside visual texts, and can offer insight into how identities are presented, constructed, negotiated, and performed within a specific leisure setting, or culture.



*WRN logo*

*Figure 3*

#### **4.3.2 “We welcome women just like you”: Narrative hailing in action**

Analysis of the promotional material, website, and media coverage of the WRN revealed a distinctive visual and textual narrative strategy for encouraging new members to join the organisation. On the national WRN website, the home-page contains text that introduces the organisation and states the philosophy, or ethos, of the group: ‘Giving women whatever their age, size or ability the opportunity to run together to improve their health, fitness, confidence and safety’. When a region is selected from the menu on the left-hand side, the web-page navigates to the regional home-page, upon which the image below appears (Figure 4). Words of the ethos are superimposed on a composite image, citing reasons why women might choose to participate in the group (‘fun’, ‘fitness’, ‘health’, and ‘confidence’) as well as the words ‘welcome’, ‘run’, and ‘inspire’. Silhouettes of female runners appear as if floating in a grassy field, with blue skies in behind and visible smiles on the faces that are pictured.



*Welcome page, WRN website*

*Figure 4*

This ethos is echoed, and indeed ubiquitous, within and throughout all of the promotional material and the majority of media coverage on the organisation. Paired with the ever-present ethos is the picture below (Figure 5, overleaf), featured on the front cover of the beginner's training log book, as well as on the majority of the promotional material (i.e., advertising pamphlets and posters) of the WRN.



*Cover picture, WRN beginner's log book*

*Figure 5*

Appearing underneath this same image, the text on a recruitment poster reads, 'Come and join us with our complete beginners running group, designed to help the novice woman start running in a fun way!' On the back of the pamphlet, two smiling women in running kit embrace. The images are suggestive of celebration or congratulatory support, friendship, fun, and happiness.

Via these images and explicit textual invitations, narratives within the visual culture of the WRN interpellate, or hail, women into a specified identity, role and activity: that which is embodied by a WRN member. This identity is desirable by design and supposed characteristics: not many women would eschew the promised attributes of fun, friendship, fitness, and achievement. Interpellation can be understood as the process by which individuals come to recognise themselves as having the potential to belong to particular subject positions, or identities (Althusser, 1971). In this view, subject positions are conferred and assumed through an authority's action of 'hailing' individuals into social or ideological positions (Aston, 2009; Butler, 1997a). Althusser's (1971) classic example is that of a policeman shouting "Hey you there!" to a passerby (thereby 'hailing' her), and upon hearing the policeman's official address, the passerby believes/suspects/knows that it is for her and turns around to accept the salutation. As Aston (2009, p. 614) points out, the passerby thus "recognizes that she has been spoken to and begins to engage with and accept the social role being offered to her." With respect to the WRN, the reader of the promotional material is hailed by the narratives therein, seemingly being meant to feel as though she is being

directly addressed, personally invited to join, as well as see herself (or want to see herself) as a subject in the images in question. Simply, she is meant to see the possibility of a shift in identity.

Further according to the introduction on the website, the WRN 'genuinely supports the complete beginner'. They do this by offering personal accounts of success stories and using images that certain women are likely to identify with, as well as explicitly targeting and drawing individual women in through storylines that many can relate to: 'But I have never run before!' a headline in recruitment newsletters and on the website reads, with subsequent reassurance that if that is the case, 'We welcome women just like you'. Statements such as these continue the trend of narrative hailing by both developing and promoting a specific social identity, and by offering storylines that the reader/audience is invited to take hold of, and make part of her own narrative repertoire (Somers, 1994). For example, the phrase 'women just like you' has the effect of both creating a self from which an 'other' can be distinguished, and simultaneously likening that self to certain and particular others, thus emphasising the relational aspect of identification. Paired with images such as those included here, women in the audience may perceive themselves as either subject (self/potential WRN member) or other. The promotional material and media coverage are rife with such narrative hailing, as well as an identification of potential fears and barriers with an immediate attempt to address or alleviate them. Using phrases and headlines such as, 'You're Invited... to do something amazing!', 'Get your body back on track', 'Try something new', 'Make a date', and 'Step on it!', media coverage in particular attempts to hail the audience to participate in the image, identity, and ideological role as narrated by the organisation (Althusser, 1971). An image such as the one below from a newspaper article (Figure 6, overleaf), then, can be seen to narratively hail or interpellate certain individuals as subjects – or as members of the WRN.





*Invitation for women to get fit, local newspaper*

*Figure 6*

Again, this image visually emphasises the characteristics said to be gleaned from WRN participation, and acts to invite the reader to embrace a 'new' identity that is embodied by these characteristics. The women pictured are smiling, looking confidently at the camera, and standing close together with some linking arms to demonstrate camaraderie, support, and happiness. However, not every woman engaging with the images above will be able to see, or picture, themselves therein. The women pictured are all white, are all relatively youthful and slim, and present a limited body type and size. As such, it would seem that not all readers would relate to the narratives presented, and thus not all individual bodies are equally hailed by these images.

Another point that is emphasised within the visual culture of the WRN is the element of fun. This sentiment is clearly demonstrated in the images found on all of the promotional material as well as within newspaper coverage (see example below from promotional pamphlet – Figure 7). Women are shown being social, having a laugh, and smiling.



*Smiling and laughing, WRN promotional pamphlet*

*Figure 7*

The notion of ‘fun’ is further confirmed and emphasised in the text surrounding the images, in the words of WRN members, and in the headlines of media articles hailing would-be WRN participants. For example, one woman quoted in a newspaper article noted, ‘I just wouldn’t be out there on those rainy nights if it weren’t for the support of the other girls. I’ve found new friends and lost two stone and we all have a good laugh while we’re out’. A poster advertising a specific running group includes the sentence, ‘Come on give it a go and be frivolous!!!’ The material is spurring the reader to ‘take a chance!’ and ‘be exciting!’ by taking up the offered opportunity of shifting into a new identity of WRN member and runner. Another newspaper article states the following: ‘Any notions of austere training regimes and timed sprints should...be banished. Fun is the catalyst’. This method of framing participation has the intention of making physical activity more appealing to those who either have had negative experiences in the past or who generally have a hard time getting motivated on their own.

The media coverage generally features groups of women posed (such as in figure 6), often with their stories included in the text. These stories tend to voice and then refute commonly held preconceptions regarding starting to run, from the perspective of a novice. This strategy corresponds with the ideas of Butler (1997b), who asserts that in order for interpellation to be effective, certain factors must be in place. Specifically, an individual must have some “readiness to turn,” or some openness or vulnerability to the authority doing the hailing (Butler, 1997b, p.107). As Butler (1995) describes, this openness may consist of a promise of identity, the right timing, a guilty conscience, or some or all of the above. This also fits well with the prerequisites that Donnelly and Young (1988) identify as important within the ‘selection and recruitment’ stage of socialisation into a sporting identity. For

example, one newspaper article acknowledges that 'It can be daunting to get started...if you haven't done anything athletic in years, were never that sporty at school or gave up exercise when you had children'. However, by offering the success stories of women who once had such insecurities, these narratives function to hail the would-be WRN member to reconsider. For example, for those many women that feel motivated to try, but simultaneously fear exercise due to excess weight, this story is presented:

[Name] started running after her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. She went along to the Women's Running Network group in Cullompton and surprised herself by running four miles on the first night. She's lost four stone in the year and a half since she started running. 'I was a lot bigger last year', she says. 'I love it. I think I'm addicted to it. It was a challenge for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday to run a half marathon, and I just went further. It is a complete addiction'. She started off running the Exeter half marathon, the Great West Run, last year. This year, she is planning to do four half marathons. 'I think it has improved my mental health as well as my physical health', she says. 'I went for eight months and lost weight every week, with being careful about what I ate. I have had the best social life over the past 12 months than I have ever had'.

While weight loss was emphasised in many headlines and narratives within the media coverage (see section 4.2 for discussion on the feminine body ideal, weight loss and gendered identity performance), similar stories were presented for those women who have encountered and overcome different social, emotional, and physical barriers. Via these presented narratives, readers of a similar social background may recognise the possibility that participation in the WRN could offer a means of re-storying their body and identity in an athletic context.

Another article leads with the image below (Figure 8), and the by-line: 'Fit or unhealthy, young or old, experienced or a newcomer, the Women's Running Network promises everyone a warm welcome'.



*Narrative hailing, local newspaper*

*Figure 8*

Quoting the founder of the WRN later in the article, the narrative hailing continues:

Ninety percent of our members are women whom other running groups would not want because they are too slow. That's what makes us different: we encourage beginners. I see people who have never actually run before go on to complete a marathon.

As such, the WRN endeavours to define themselves, and by association their participants and would-be participants, by what they are not: 'You don't have to be on a strict diet and run like a complete nutter' (quotation from a leader recruiting for her newly formed group, within a newspaper article). The narratives presented in this section tend to emphasise fun and the social aspects of running with the group, and are disseminated in combination with images emphasising support, happiness, and what is purported to be embodied heterogeneity (i.e., in shapes, sizes, ages, and fitness). With this, I argue that the WRN is attempting to create a visual culture that not only aspires to redefine the general/typical representation of a running body, but also depicts and describes specific embodied identities that are performed, accepted, and celebrated within this context.

### 4.3.3 Vocabularies of emotion and morality

Speaking about the process of interpellation, Crinall (2009) notes that dominant discourses conveyed through narrative meaning-making processes constantly seek to position us with subjective identities by attempting, often successfully, to shape our beliefs and values. In this vein, WRN media (health) stories, and the technique of narrative hailing in particular, can also be understood as intended to elicit emotional and moral responses. As perhaps evident in some of the examples included thus far in this chapter, there are a multitude of references to emotion, emotional motivations, and emotional experiences via, or as a result of, WRN participation. As Nettleton and Hardey (2006, p. 444) write about the media coverage of larger (mass-participation) running culture, when such devices are employed the “result is an amalgam of emotionality and sentimentality constructed around a communal display of personal achievement, fit bodies, public generosity and apparent social solidarity.” A brief note from my research journal illustrates this in context:

*I spent yesterday morning watching the coverage of the London marathon. I've watched marathon coverage before, but primarily Olympic marathons where the 'drama' unfolds in the race for medals, and coverage of the event is usually spliced together with that of another sport. I suppose not doing so could be rather dull, and cutting to 'updates' of the marathon race does tend to speed up the audience's perceptions of the miles going by. As I recall, language describing the Olympic event tends to be rife with patriotism, nationalism, and athletic history, prowess, and endurance. Media – and television, in particular - coverage of the London marathon, however, strikes a very different tone. While elite athletes do get their accolades, more time is spent telling the stories of and about the 'everyday' participant: the so-called 'weekend warrior' who is raising money for an unarguably good cause, and/or in memory of someone lost; the thousands kitted out in fancy dress, running 26 miles in, for example, a dragon costume; the soldier or fire fighter running in full uniform.*

*These are emotional stories, meant to celebrate humanity and collectivity. They tell about the underdog, those who have overcome: whether it be grief, illness, struggles that are central to the human experience. These stories strike a tone of familiarity in the viewer and – I imagine – are told to resonate, to elicit compassion, inspiration, and perhaps even move to action. Tonight at the running group Alyson asked if I had watched the yesterday's 'London'. I replied that I had, and her response was, 'Wasn't it inspirational? What those people have been through! Makes me feel as though I have absolutely no excuse to miss a session, no matter how rubbish work is or how tired I might feel. Makes my life seem easy in comparison!!'*

Journal entry, dated 25 April 2010.

Similarly, WRN media health stories use the traditional discursive technique of women's personal accounts as both cautionary tales and inspirational stories to encourage readers to actively pursue healthy behaviours such as joining the WRN. For example, an article found within the WRN website 'news' section (see Appendix V, article 10) cites the case of Sue, a woman who has survived breast cancer. This article recounts a recent women's-only half marathon organised by the WRN, with the ultimate aim of building and recruiting for future similar events. Using what Nettleton and Hardey (2006) describe as a narrative hook – an opening to a story that 'hooks' the reader's attention so that she will keep on reading – human-interest stories like these are used to personalise complex issues:

Sue had signed up because the Ovarian Cancer Action and Breast Cancer Campaign charities supported by the series were very close to her heart. 'I've had a personal experience of cancer. I stopped counting the operations I've had at number 18!' she said.

The article is accompanied by two images, one of Sue pictured on her own in her running kit, and one of her surrounded by her running group. References to group support, as well as to the role of running in her recovery are forefront:

She met a fellow brave cancer survivor on the course and they ran the final lap together, sharing stories of cancer treatment and their love of running. 'She was nearing the end of her treatment and had an awful lot to think about,' said Sue. 'I remember the, "What happens now?" feeling as the safety net of appointments is withdrawn and the "What if it comes back?" questions start. Running really helps me focus on what's important. She and I ran through the finish holding hands. That's the sort of support that keeps me going!'

By sharing stories such as these readers are enticed and – the WRN hope – affected by their glimpses into the personal experiences of those living with disease and illness.

The founders of the WRN go a step further, however, and present themselves as women who are both personally and emotionally involved and affected by the causes that they endeavour to support. When introducing a series of three women's-only half marathons organised to raise funds for women's-only cancer charities (held in 2010 and called 'The Better Half'), an article appeared on both the website and within the newsletter chronicling their personal motivations for establishing the events. The article (see Appendix V, article 11) outlines how women-specific cancers have touched both of the co-founders lives in a very personal and emotionally affecting manner:

[The co-founders of the WRN] rather sheepishly dab their eyes as they share a moment of pain and understanding, remembering loved ones lost to cancer...Their emotions are not unique, neither is their resolve to do something, anything, to help with the quest for a cure for cancer.

*(Excerpt from article within WRN newsletter, Spring 2010)*

The message is that the co-founders were not only inspired to do 'something', but that they are eager to empower and inspire others to do something as well. On the whole, WRN media health stories such as these share a common desire to stimulate emotive and complex connections between private health problems and public concerns (Nettleton & Hardey, 2006; Turner, 1999)

Stereotypically feminine values of support and the ethic of care found within WRN participation (see section 4.2) are again championed within emotionally-charged stories of overcoming physical, emotional, and relational obstacles and adversity. The most prevalent stories of this type pay tribute to the group helping someone through a hard time, whether that be illness, loss, grief, injury or the like. One example is the story of Clare, who lost her husband suddenly to a heart attack (see Appendix V, article 12). While bereavement is an undeniably traumatic and emotional event, the language within the article is deliberately evocative. Describing Clare's sudden loss as 'devastating', and her world as becoming 'a bleak and desolate place', the article outlines the role that her WRN group played in her grieving process:

...the support of her group – not just fellow runners but now friends – has made all the difference as she's battled to come to terms with her loss. 'The girls in my group have been fantastic. I couldn't have coped if it wasn't for them. If I need to talk I can but if I don't, they just leave me alone.'

The reader is led to admire and empathise with Clare – her courage, her perseverance, and her strength despite experiencing great sorrow and loss. In addition, the reader is intended to understand how she might not have coped without the WRN's help and support.

Another story of this type is one of *transformation*, wherein the emphasis is on the positive emotions and achievements of the individual who has gotten 'a new lease on life': like Laura, who just last year was 23.5 stone and is now aiming to complete a half marathon (see Appendix V, article 13). Again pointing to the encouragement and support of the WRN, the emotions highlighted in these stories are tied to achievement, pride, confidence, and empowerment. Above all, they are meant to be inspirational – Laura's story, which claims to confirm that 'running can change lives', is found on the WRN website, under a link in the main banner menu entitled, 'Be inspired!' (WRN, 2011).

These emotional stories are particularly compelling because of their emphasis on the personal, ordinary lives of women/members and their offering of solutions to everyday dilemmas. Women's problems are presented with the understanding that many other

women experience the same things, but the solutions usually involve women finding and/or seeking ways to help themselves instead of situating issues in wider social structures and institutions (Ballaster et al., 1991; Berns, 1999; McRobbie, 2000). Through this emphasis, the media health stories of the WRN define the women's sphere as the personal and the emotional, with solutions to be found via participation in the group.

#### **4.4 Reflection**

In attending to the visual culture of the WRN, analyses revealed the distinctive visual and textual strategy of narrative hailing, meant to target and encourage new members to join the organisation. By considering prerequisites such as opportunity, motivation, interest, proximity and life circumstances of potential members (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Butler, 1997b), the visual and textual narratives collectively act to hail women of a specific social location to seek out and join the group. Indeed, despite the claimed ethos of welcoming "all ages, sizes, and abilities," the audience likely to respond to being hailed is composed of a particular 'type' of woman: one who is primarily white, young to middle-aged, able, and who has the leisure time and financial means to participate. Further, though these images and textual narratives are publicly available, it is important to note that those who actually view and engage with these images are not representative of the whole population. The audience is likely to be women who are already seeking some form of physical activity (for health, weight, or social reasons), and who – at least on some level – see themselves as able to perform the task in question (in this case, running). Thus, while attempting to represent embodied heterogeneity, the images and texts analysed actually reproduce a particular woman's body as the norm and may exclude other women (who deviate from this norm) from participating.

Readers of a similar social location to those within the visual and textual narratives are encouraged to see themselves as the 'before' women in the stories presented: those who struggled with sport at school, those who are carrying extra weight, or those who are trying to get active after having taken a break from being so. Having made this social identification, the WRN initiate is then hailed via moral and emotional narratives designed to encourage and convince her that she also has the potential to make healthy, positive, and exciting life and identity changes should she decide to join the WRN. Consuming these visual images and narratives, then, the would-be WRN member begins to learn and absorb the knowledge of what an average WRN member is and looks like. Further, these images and narratives portray and present gendered identity performances that, I argue, begin to instigate relational reflection and anticipatory negotiation from the perspective of the initiate.



As the visual and textual narratives included in this paper are integral to how potential participants first learn of and about the WRN, it follows that they also underpin the identity of a typical WRN member as conceived by the organisation, and influence the process of presocialisation into a running identity as defined by the WRN. These dominant narrative strategies and patterns, then, have implications for framing and facilitating would-be participants' identity performances, socialisation experiences, embodiment, and physicality within this women's-only context. Initially, as interested women are hailed by the visual and textual narratives in the promotional material and media coverage of the organisation, they are gaining "uninitiated knowledge and understanding," something which Donnelly and Young (1988, pp. 224-225) claim facilitates a process of "anticipatory socialization," or presocialisation. I argue that this process also engenders a form of *anticipatory embodiment*, wherein potential members may begin to reflexively experience their own bodies. They do so via their interaction with the images and text that are depicting possibilities for embodiment and identity performance within the WRN. For example, as women are hailed to participate and are confronted with ideologies emphasising heterosexual femininity, they are learning what it might mean to be embodied within a WRN social identity. Further, they are being called to reflect and act upon their bodies (Crossley, 2006) by joining the WRN, via discourses that are laced with commercialised feminism, emotional appeal, and associated moral responsibility. Simply, they are being told what is a good way of being in the body, hailed or called to desire this form of being in the body, and then informed that they are both individually and morally responsible for achieving this type and method of being in the body.

These analyses are not intended to be a critique of the WRN or the WRN's marketing and promotional strategies; commercialised feminism is reflected in the narrative images and texts available to the WRN initiate, but is not a product of them. The narrative strategies and identified patterns are effective for a particular audience because they allow the organisation to *appear* both feminist and gender-specific, are congruent with neoliberal imperatives toward health and fitness (Crawford, 2006; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Markula, 2001), and provide a way for many women previously unable to engage in physical activity a comfortable and appealing avenue of doing so. In many ways, the visual culture of the WRN actively redefines the running body and the running experience, thereby making both more accessible – something that is both positive and admirable. Indeed, while it is difficult (as well as unnecessary) to argue with the desirability of increasing confidence and self-esteem and engendering empowerment via sport participation, I propose that the seemingly feminist and inclusive ethos of the WRN possibly essentialises the female member experience. Far from reflecting diversity, the narrative images and text examined within the visual culture of the WRN present, ultimately, one type of woman and one type of sport participation.

Positively, it is a type often excluded – but it is one type nonetheless, and is thus exclusionary on many levels. Further, coverage of female sport participation and success within the WRN are laden with an apologetic and ambivalent tone.

With respect to both ethos and design, there are innumerable positive things to say about the WRN as a sporting organisation. They lay claim to getting over 10,000 women running over the past ten years, and attempt to share their joy of running with everyone possible, particularly those who are frequently excluded. Thus, the goal here was not to find fault with something that is working on some level, but instead to critically examine how it is working – and, ultimately, if it could work better. Doing so, I argue, entails attention to the visual culture of the WRN; a calculated awareness of the visual and textual narratives being presented and mediated via the organisation to potential members. This awareness has lent insight to the concepts of presocialisation, identity performance, and anticipatory reflexive embodiment within a physical culture. More importantly, this awareness could provide impetus for change and improvement. Specifically, can the WRN become ever more inclusive and accessible? Are there women who are currently excluded that may want to give running a go? Finally, how might the WRN best target, recruit, and convert non-runners to the running lifestyle that they so passionately advocate? Scrutiny and contemplation of the visual resources, materials, and artefacts within the WRN culture elicits, and perhaps goes some way toward answering, these questions.

By way of practical examples, I suggest that the WRN might deliberately include images of women of colour, women of size, and women of a wider variety of ages within their promotional materials and on their website. In addition, to avoid the tendency of essentialism, there is a need for the WRN to go beyond defining themselves in diametric opposition to masculinist sport, and instead to challenge the conception that athleticism and femininity are contradictory (Krane, 2001). For example, to achieve the ostensible goal of an accessible and inclusive sporting environment, the visual culture of the WRN would do better to work toward expanding the parameters of embodiment and gendered identity performance therein, rather narrowly defining it via narrative text and images. This would entail including and presenting the performance of a diverse continuum of gendered identities, including those who dare not to conform to the (typically narrowly defined) characteristics of heterosexual femininity. In addition, to avoid “inhibited intentionality” (Young, 1990, p. 147) the WRN might do well to attempt not to emphasise distinctions on the basis of gender, or at least might simultaneously acknowledge narratives of strength, power and endurance that widen the definition of femininity within the context. As such, rather than criticising what is there, what I am arguing for is an expansion of the visual and textual narratives available within the visual culture of the WRN.

## 4.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the narrative forms, elements, content and techniques within the visual culture of the WRN, and in particular within WRN media health stories. From a narrative perspective, Frank (2010) writes that stories' primary or primal work is to provide people with a guidance system that directs attention within the world. For this direction, "people need terms of *selection* – what to pay attention to – and following immediately is the need for *evaluation*, or what to think about what has been selected" (Frank, 2010, p. 46). Stories thus work as people's *selection/evaluation* guidance system, written by Frank (2010) with a hash mark because he argues that to select is already to evaluate; the processes are continuous, separable only upon reflection. Frank (2010) thus imagines stories as a tacit system of associations that makes particular aspects of the world seem worth attending to and suggests default evaluations of what is selected.

The analyses presented here represent one critical reading of the visual culture of the WRN within a specific historical/social context; I do not assume that my reading of these texts and images explains individual women's reading practices. As highlighted earlier (see section 4.1), media health is a sophisticated and fragmented form because it addresses both a skilful and knowledgeable audience (Seale, 2002a). Audiences are not passive recipients of media messages; they are active readers who translate the messages based on a number of factors, including race, gender, sexuality, class, age, literacy, and membership in other sub-cultural groups (Roy, 2008). The discourses of healthism, responsibility, and appropriate femininity within the visual culture of the WRN are inevitably taken up by individuals with various degrees of acceptance, negotiation and resistance (Brown et al., 1996; Fusco, 2006; Lupton, 1995; Parrott & Condit, 1996). Speaking to this, chapter five will consider the ways in which representations of the body's health and well-being are involved with such processes of bodily negotiation and identification – or the way in which interpellation 'works', and metanarratives and public narratives within the WRN are selected/evaluated at the ontological level.

## 5. From health consciousness to action: The road to the WRN

### 5.0 Introduction

Having examined the prevalence and types of media health representations in the context of the WRN – and the *whats* and *hows* of the textual and visual narratives depicted therein – the focus of this chapter is how these are interpreted and engaged with at an individual level. Specifically, I share how health is defined by respondents, as well as how and if this definition has changed over time (/with increasing age). Further, I share the women's discussions of how they perceive physical activity, and the act of running in particular, as fitting into wider conceptions of health and ageing (section 5.1). Following this, I explore how and why the women sought the WRN out specifically – how exactly they were 'hailed' to participate and how they made sense of their subsequent response to the interpellation (section 5.2).

The chapter continues with an outline of the prerequisites that WRN beginners identified as being present before they were recruited and/or selected to seek out membership (section 5.3). Doing so allows insight into the timing of these women's decisions to seek out membership in the WRN – or speaks to the question, *why now?* In answering this question, I present women's stories of previous barriers to participation – the reasons given for *why* they felt they could *not* participate *before*, and what has changed since in order to make participation a viable reality. In sub-section 5.3.2, I build upon the question of 'why now?' and explore the stories that women told surrounding their decision to *actually attend* their first WRN session. Using the concept of critical moments (Denzin, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al., 2002), I explore what influenced women to move from health consciousness (or awareness of the health benefits of physical activity/running) to *actually lacing up* a pair of trainers, attending a session, and taking those first hesitant steps. Finally, I offer a brief summary to synthesise the chapter (section 5.4).

### 5.1 Why running? The promise of health

Women involved in the project were keen to speak about health, what it meant to them, and how the activity of running matched their personal conceptions of health. References to health in general occurred in both formal interview settings as well as during informal conversation within the setting of the running group itself. It is important to note that individual definitions, understandings, and explanations of health and health practices were quite varied. Definitions emphasised both the physical and biological basis of health. Across the board, however, these women expressed an understanding of participation in running as beneficial to bodily health. Popular reasons for taking part in running included: to

lose excess or maintain current weight, to return to a former weight (e.g., pre-childbirth), to gain or re-gain fitness, and to prevent osteoporosis via weight-bearing activity. For example, Jackie, aged 48 and a member of the WRN for 12 years, defined health as follows:

I would describe health, or good health as a feeling of wellbeing...with any underlying medical issues being controlled, so even if one has high blood pressure but you take tablets in order for this to be controlled I would see the person as being in good health. To me health is something I am grateful for, that I try not to take for granted although often do, and am able to go about my daily life without problems.

The majority of women who spoke about health also emphasised the importance of mental, emotional, and social aspects. This is in keeping with broader narratives around the definition of health, such as that of the World Health Organisation which emphasises that health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely an absence from disease or infirmity (WHO, 2003). One Saturday morning whilst on a half marathon training run, Karan (who self-classified as middle aged) explained to me that:

Health means fitness of mind and body to me...If I feel physically healthy I can cope with the stresses of everyday life, but if I'm tired or not eating well or not exercising I feel sluggish and stressed. I believe that feeling mentally and physically healthy can help stave off illness, especially in later life...If I feel physically healthy, I think I look better. And if I look better, I feel happier. The better I feel, the more energy I have and motivation to take on physical and mental challenges.

Other women reinforced this idea, describing health as “a good sense of wellbeing”, and as a “combination of physical and mental, emotional, and spiritual that means being measured, balanced, strong and well enough to go about one’s business without serious hindrance” (Nancy, aged 53, member for 4 years). Moreover, good health was often linked to happiness, vigour, and energy. Ill health meanwhile was associated with gloom, stress, and lethargy. A number of women alluded to a near causal effect between physical and mental health, expressing sentiments such as “A healthy body is definitely a healthy mind” (Meg, aged 59, 2 year member). Others, however, appeared to treat each aspect of health as a different, though interrelated sphere that required separate and unique attention. For example, before a session began one evening, Deb (aged 44) told me that she felt that health was a “holistic” issue, saying: “Personally, I try to keep everything in balance. What’s important is that I have self knowledge of my type of personality – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually too. And that I do work on myself when needed”. This type of sentiment reflects many of the women’s beliefs that elements of health are highly, and individually, controllable.

Indeed, participants often made reference to control and health in the same breath. Primarily this had to do with weight control, and specifically weight loss. Running as a form

of cardiovascular physical activity was understood to be a means of addressing weight-related aims. Janine (aged 46 and a 5 year member of the WRN) provided an example of this when she said:

I was very overweight as a kid...I think that's something that sort of sticks with your body image. Weight. For women, particularly. For me, it was always there. I smoked heavily from about the age of 12, and only gave up properly when I was 40. Six years ago now. And decided, right, I wanted to get fit. And I'd never, ever... I mean, I'd done a bit of cycling and a little bit of walking. But nothing, not proper sweating activity.

Weight was often also contextualised as it pertained to larger health issues – and in particular, with respect to how excess weight could either cause or exacerbate ill health and disease. Control was also referred to when women spoke of age-related health changes. Breathlessly telling me her reasons for participating (between hill sprint repeats one autumnal evening), 54-year-old Kay, expressed that:

One of the things that brought me to running was knowing that I was at the beginning of the menopause. And I was reading about keeping bones healthy with impact, weight bearing exercise - so swimming (which I was doing maybe once a week) was not enough to keep the levels of calcium up in my bones and ward off osteoporosis.

For this woman, menopause acted as an indicator of age, which in turn was an impetus to seek out health information and change behaviour. This quotation aptly articulates women's common acknowledgement of the medicalisation of the ageing body (Tulle-Winton, 2000), in that ageing is automatically linked to osteoporosis: particularly for the midlife (pre/peri/post-menopausal) woman. Another commonality was the concept of using running to control underlying medical conditions. This was exemplified by Paige, aged 31 and a member of the WRN for 3 years, when she said:

I have noticed, yeah, I have got stronger. And I've maintained – Although I'm not doing Weight Watchers anymore, I'm eating the same as I was before I did Weight Watchers. So a lot of crap, basically. But I haven't put any weight on. And that's because I've been doing some running. So, yeah, putting on weight is a massive reason to start doing exercise again, for me... Also, I'm diabetic. So I have an awareness of my sugar levels, my sugar intake. Running has made a big difference in that side of things. Where I am a lot healthier, a lot more controlled. And the fact that I'm healthier means I take less insulin. Because I run. So running and diabetes do seem to work together quite well.



print were spoken more frequently, and from this it is possible to identify visible commonalities. For example, common responses included how good running made them feel (i.e., endorphins), the sensuousness of the running experience, the low cost of participation, and the outdoor space in which it takes place. Participants also referred to the therapeutic nature of running, and using it to de-stress, “de-fragment”, and escape.

Having elucidated the participant’s views on health and how they perceived the role of running in maintaining and benefitting health, it is also important to note the reported uniqueness of the WRN context and the associated implications for health therein. Women praised the WRN environment for simultaneously meeting all of their comprehensive health needs. For example, after a mid-run discussion during which Nancy (aged 47) struggled to articulate what the WRN offers her, she took the time to write me the following in an email:

Being part of the WRN means that I do more exercise, set goals, make commitments, meet interesting people. It has put me into a world of women who respect themselves and each other. All of this gives me a psychological boost. I feel better about myself. When I run I feel strong. That makes me feel healthy and the feeling carries on into other walks of life. It helps to fight the anxiety and tendency to depression and low self image I often feel.

Some of it is undoubtedly to do with endorphins, but it is more than that because it is more than just running - or said in a different way it is more than just one run that makes you feel good. For me it is a long term commitment to being fit and active and supportive of others and there is this knock on effect that just keeps happening. Also, when I feel a bug coming on I sometimes am able to "run it off". This doesn't always work but when it does it is just fabulous! It makes one feel strong and to some extent in control of one's body.

There is also the issue of age and ageing. The WRN is a great antidote to feeling old or past it or incapable of doing things you like and that is also related to health, feeling healthy, feeling empowered.

Nancy’s email effectively summarised themes inherent to many WRN members, when asked why the group was important to them and what their participation had offered. Specifically, their responses tended to emphasise the distinctive and relational nature of the WRN; a space in which not just physical, but also mental, emotional and social health and wellbeing could be addressed. Participants speculated that the women’s-only group setting of the WRN might be what distinguished the WRN from other fitness activities. Providing one example, Kate (aged 40 and a member for 6 years) said:

It gave me exercise and it gave me the fitness that I wanted. As my job’s got tougher over the years, it’s given me stress relief. So I’ve been absolutely shattered, but I’ve gone out, and I’ve felt so much better at the end of it. So definitely, that’s been a draw. But the biggest thing is the social aspect. Catching up with everybody. Getting a social fix. That when you’re busy at work and you’ve got kids growing up, that actually you just need some social interaction that is away from work and away



from the hassle of life. And the thing about the WRN, once you're in your running kit, that's who you are. You're not who you are at work, at home, or whatever. And you're all – Effectively, you're all the same. And it doesn't matter who you are, what your background is.

For Kate, amongst many others, participation in the WRN thus offers a social identity and a concomitant sense of belonging (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Postmes, Haslam, & Swabb, 2005; Tajfel, 2010; see chapter six for elaboration). It offers a social space in which to experience health and wellbeing, but for many women, it also offers an impetus to redefine and/or re-story their own health and wellbeing.

Knowledge and conceptions of health were often described as long-standing – for instance, women reported being long-aware that physical activity was important and beneficial to physical, emotional, and mental health. Further, most women had been well aware of the health benefits of running long before considering taking part themselves. As such, the next section considers how participants moved from their described level of health consciousness to actually seeking out and taking part in the WRN specifically. The remainder of the chapter considers these journeys.

## 5.2 Why the WRN?

It is important to note that the specific media health stories depicted in chapter four were not presented to the women directly, in order to elicit their subsequent 'audience' response. Instead, I interpreted the visual and material culture of the WRN using a critical feminist lens, and at a metanarrative and public narrative level. I turn now to a consideration of the ontological level, as this next section explores the *WRN participants'* interpretations and engagement with the images, language, and text within the media and promotional material – as well as any other means by which they may have been *hailed* or *interpellated* to join the WRN (see chapter four, section 4.3).

There are a number of core areas to attend to when trying to understand how people engage with representations of health at the ontological level. Seale (2003, p. 517) asserts that some people may “seek health-promoting information as a part of rational risk profiling at fateful moments” (see section 5.3.2 for an elaboration of this idea), while others may seek “emotional stimulation” through dramatised accounts of illness such as films and docu-dramas. What is important to note is that people also receive – or more properly engage with – such messages in different ways, actively resisting as well as aligning themselves with represented narratives. In Seale's view, when people engage with representations of health and illness they have an “imagined conversation with mediated ideas, and in an

imagined community of other viewers, people ‘like me’ and in so doing they ‘construct themselves” (2003, p. 517). Or, in Csordas’ terms, a “person encounters representations of the body and...has its being-in-the-world altered” (2002, p. 261).

To examine women’s engagement and interaction with available stories from a narrative perspective, I elaborate on the concepts of hailing and interpellation (see chapter four, section 4.3). In so doing, I borrow from Frank (2010), who writes:

Althusser, as a Marxist concerned with ideology, presents interpellations as virtually nonrefusable: the ‘Hey, you’ demands acknowledgement. The interpellations of stories are powerful, yet people do refuse these. However, this refusal is achieved only through the effort of fashioning a story that can contain the original interpellating story... The all too human dilemma is that by accepting being in a story, a person at least provisionally accepts being what the story casts him or her to be, its interpellation. (pp. 50-51)

Stories thus call readers into some form of ‘subject position’, which Frank (2010) defines as “the character’s more or less reflective awareness of who the type of narrative requires him or her to be, and what being that character requires him or her to do” (p. 51). Frank’s (2010) argument is that whoever hears a story is interpellated to some degree; called to pay attention, and to imagine themselves as embodying the subject position of the character depicted.

The vast majority of women reported learning of the WRN via some form of print media (newspaper article, brochure, pamphlet, website, etc.). For many women engaging with this media was no more complex than a *transfer of information*: for example, they read a short news article in the local paper which advertised a new or existing group in their area. Either they had been looking for an opportunity of this sort, had heard of the WRN previously but had not lived near enough a group to participate, or they were hailed by the language in the article itself: “I saw that it said ‘Beginner’s welcome!’ so decided to give it a try,” said one WRN member when asked how she learned of the group. Another replied, “Well, it said it was for beginners – and that’s certainly me – and that it was all ages, sizes, and abilities. And non-competitive – that was key. I probably wouldn’t even have read further if it hadn’t said that!” One more member described being hailed not just by the language within the description of the group, but by the image that ran alongside the article: “I saw this article in the local paper about the WRN with just a brilliant picture – lots of ordinary, normal women, all looking a bit nervous and uncomfortable in their lycra – just like me!” Many others reported seeing a WRN poster in a local shop window, composed of just an image and the contact information for the local leader.

Stories such as these demonstrate a “readiness to turn” to the depicted and promised healthy running identity (Butler, 1997b, p. 107) – an openness to recognising

themselves in the subject position being portrayed in the text or article. In reading or engaging with these public narratives, therefore, women described being called to action due to the timing of their exposure, or due to a guilty conscience or sense of responsibility for their health. Demonstrating the former, at one summer evening running session a participant explained to me how she came to be there:

I walked regularly and played tennis every week, and I thought that was sufficient for me to keep fit and keep my weight under control. But I realised recently that that wasn't enough exercise – the article about running in the local newspaper came at *the right time* as I was looking for some form of additional exercise that did not require too much commitment in terms of equipment, fees, and the like, and also exercise that I thought I could manage and enjoy.

These women already had interest in physical activity if not running in particular, and learning of the opportunity and proximity of the WRN compelled them to take action. They described several key words that caught their interest: 'beginner', 'non-competitive', 'fun', and 'women-only'. Janine, aged 46, elaborated on this when she said:

There was an ad in the local paper. I liked the fact that it was a beginner's group. And they were very clear that it didn't matter what your ability was. So it felt like a safe environment to go. And it was all women, so there weren't going to be any big, muscle-y men storming off making you feel inadequate. So that's what attracted me. It was very much about that it doesn't matter what your ability is. You know, we keep up, we loop back, we all stay together. And that's what appealed.

The gender specificity of the WRN was especially important to self-reported low-confidence beginner runners, who described that the women's-only environment was the primary attraction of the group. One participant explained to me that she "didn't fancy a mixed group – I love men but there's a time and a place!" Another member who had just joined the WRN said, "I didn't want to run with men as I find them intimidating. I didn't think I could keep up and didn't want to be at the back." It is evident from such expressions that many participants did buy into a gendered and binary sporting ethos, wherein they perceived men to be 'naturally' more competitive (Dowling, 2000).

However, other acts of engagement with the narratives within print media were more complex than described above: going beyond just a transfer of information, and one step removed from women being able to imagine themselves as directly and currently embodied within the represented subject positions. Participants described being called by stories that depicted subject positions that they did not see themselves in, per se, but desired to embody in the future. Alternatively, many women also identified that they were moved by admirable or inspirational stories of other women who had overcome stereotypes, hardships, or other barriers in order to participate. Somehow, seeing that these 'feats' were indeed achievable

made it more possible for women to imagine their own participation, and to identify with the subject position in question. For example, 40-year-old Kate put this quite simply when she said, “I was inspired by women in their 60’s running marathons. You see it and you think, well, if she can do that, why can’t I?” Inspirational media stories took many forms, but included women ‘overcoming’ such things as illness, bereavement, grief, preconceptions about older age, and so forth. For many individual women, these types of stories made them rethink and many times redefine their own perceived barriers to participation. Heidi, aged 41, provided another example of engaging with this type of story when she said:

Once you get beyond 40, you start thinking, oh God, you know? The weight starts creeping on, and things like that. And you think, right. I’ve got to do something. But what am I going to do? And it wasn’t until I saw somebody in the local paper. And she was in her 60’s. And she started running because she had lost her son through epilepsy. He’d had a sudden attack at about the age of – I think it was 28. Late 20’s, anyway. Unexpected sudden death. So she – After a couple of years, she took up running to sort of channel her energies into that. And move her focus away from what she was doing. For the grieving, really. And channelled it into running. And I thought, my God, if she can do it, then I can do it. So just make the call. But it was only seeing that which actually made me make that step... I owe a lot to this woman who had her picture in the paper initially. And she’ll often say to me, if I’ve had a good run or whatever, she’ll say, “I was responsible for you starting this.” She says, “I feel so proud of you.” You know, there’s this woman who’s like, in her 60’s. But saying that she’s proud of me. How sweet is that? I have great admiration for her.

Indeed, the statement, ‘If she can do it, why can’t I?’ was fairly ubiquitous. Key to this sentiment was that the inspirational woman was someone who the audience (individual women) did not previously think would likely be – or be able to be – a runner. Upon reading her story, however, the identity of ‘runner’ became more every day, accessible and achievable.

Yet, not all who saw WRN print media were effectively interpellated into a running identity. However inclusive the text and images endeavoured to be, some women described that they could not visualise themselves as holding the subject position depicted in the WRN print media. For example, a 3 year member of the WRN in her mid-forties explained: “I found out about the WRN through a friend – although I did see a leaflet in a Race for Life goody bag, but even then I thought I would not be good enough”. However, having heard of the WRN previously via print media, this woman may have been more amenable, or open to being hailed by her friend at a later date. As Frank (2010, p. 52) states, “most of us are fortunate to be cast into multiple stories, and the interpellations of those stories play against each other, softening if never negating the force of any single interpellation.”

As the last quotation suggests, there were several other ways in which the women learned of, and were hailed by, the WRN. The second most prominent means by which

women learned of the running group was word of mouth: recommended via friend, work colleague, family member or similar who were already participants or who had heard positive things about the organisation. For instance, Cora (aged 64 and a member of the WRN for 2.5 years) stated: “My friend convinced me to give it a go. She’s been a member for a few years and told me I wouldn’t feel out of place, and that it was a great group of women.” Via these interactions, women were convinced of the appealing characteristics of the WRN. Not being privy to these conversations, it is difficult to comment on exactly how women were hailed – though one can imagine that the emphasis was again on supportiveness, non-competitiveness, safety, and inclusiveness. For those who had attempted to run on their own, the activity was a point of connection. As an example, Jackie, aged 48 and a member of the WRN for 12 years, described her experience:

I decided I wanted to do the Great West Run, which is a local half marathon. When I went first, I just started – Well, I didn’t know about the WRN. And I thought, right, I’ll start training. And I got up my road and my neighbour stopped their car, because I looked so terrible, and said, “Do you want a lift home?” And I’d only just gotten to the top of the road. So I thought, oh, I need to do something about this. And then a friend of mine said, “Well, why don’t you come along to this group?” So I did.

Others spoke of chance meetings with local leaders who passed along information of the group, with an explicit invitation to join. One participant described such a scenario to me during a weekly session: “I was out running by myself and the local leader stopped me and told me about the group. I joined the same week and have never looked back!” (aged 40, member 2 years). For women such as these, individualised narrative hailing was what prompted them to seek out and join the WRN.

A final way in which women described becoming aware of the WRN is by seeing an actual existing group – out for a run in their local area, congregating in a public space before or after a run, or at local races or events. One participant (unknown name) stated: “I saw them running around, and the logo on the t-shirts, and then looked it up.” Another member told me that she saw women running races with their WRN shirts, and then ‘googled’ WRN to find out more information about the group. This was not an isolated occurrence, as Roberta (aged 31, and a 10 week member of the WRN) also reported doing similarly:

I live in quite a rural village in Mid-Devon. And I’ve seen groups of women running around a few times in the evenings. And I managed to track them down, and they said they were part of the Women’s Running Network. And they said there was a beginner’s group in Crediton. So I just thought I’d give it a go. It was quite lucky actually because the day I phoned up the leader said, “Well, there’s a beginner’s group that starts tomorrow!” So I didn’t even get the chance to think about it and back out. So I just went – I went and did it. So yeah, it was just seeing a group of women running around. And they all had the same tops on. So I thought there must be a women’s running club somewhere. I had to look them up on the internet.

Many others described that they had merely approached the group-in-progress, asking participants for information. As one now-member explained, “I saw a group of ladies meet on a Wednesday night in the car park and went and enquired what they were doing!” Similar to the visual and textual narratives within the print media, women who saw – and took notice – of a WRN group and then subsequently took action would have to have seen themselves in the subject position of those who they saw participating.

For effective interpellation – such as that described in most of the above examples – the timing of the engagement with available narratives becomes important. *When* women happened to see the WRN print media, noticed the group of women running around their village, or had a chance conversation with a friend is important. Some included quotations have already made reference to the timing of this narrative interaction. For example, one woman said she had been looking for something else to do to add to her fitness regime when she happened across an article on the WRN, and another woman had noticed what she perceived to be age-related weight gain and thus felt more inclined to act when she read an inspirational WRN story in the newspaper. The next section thus elucidates why women did not seek out the WRN (or running) previously.

### **5.3 Why now?**

Often, when explaining to me how they came to be involved in the WRN, women began by describing *how* and *why* participation came to ‘fit’ into their lives at a particular moment, or stage, in their lives. This reinforces Donnelly and Young’s (1988) ideas around the prerequisites necessary for participation, including opportunity, motivation, interest, proximity, and life circumstances (see section 4.3.1). However, rather than describing how and why such prerequisites came to be aligned for their current participation, women tended to tell these stories by focusing upon the *barriers* that prevented them from participating previously (section 5.3.1). They subsequently made subtle references to how these barriers had been (successfully) negotiated and, indeed re-storied. In this sense, the analysis revealed how such barriers were *overcome* to the extent that being an active WRN member became a viable identity. To that end, the ways in which the WRN provided a space and context which minimised, eliminated, or alleviated common barriers to participation have been discussed already (see section 5.2: Why the WRN?). However, in addition to these factors, several women also made reference to a change in perspective and priorities following some sort of life event. Using Thomson et al.’s (2002) concept of ‘critical moments’ (section 5.3.2), I explore *how* women storied these life events – and *why* these acted as an impetus for change.

### 5.3.1 Why not before?

First and foremost, women listed *time* – or what Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes (2007) refer to as '*pressured time*' – as a barrier to previous participation in running or, often, any physical activity. Participants spoke of having little to no time 'for themselves', particularly when juggling a working life along with caring for young children. As such, women described feeling constrained by stereotypical gender roles, citing dual responsibilities of home and work consistent with extant literature on the topic (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Henderson et al., 1996; Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Shaw, 1994). This was especially apparent within the responses to the questionnaire distributed by the organisation (see chapter three, table 3: data sources). As such, some quotations within this section are attributed to WRN members but not participants of this project itself (i.e., age and time with the WRN are noted, but no pseudonym was assigned). For the majority of these women, finding time for leisure was neither an option nor a priority over, for example, providing for and caring for their young children. As such, previously active women often described a period of inactivity spanning from pregnancy through to when their children were of a less dependent age. Janine, now aged 46, expressed her experience of this barrier in a very matter of fact manner by saying:

It's easier now the kids are older. I mean, my youngest is 16. Perhaps I didn't take [running] up before partially because of them. I mean, when I did take it up, which was five years ago, my son would have been 11, 12. So he was at the age where he was just beginning to be more independent. When you've got young kids, it's difficult.

Bearing and raising a child was thus nearly always associated with weight gain, a loss of fitness, and a long period of inactivity.

Further, several women described feeling guilty if they did take time away from their young children. A 34 year old who had been a member of the WRN for just 9 months explained that: "My husband works shifts so it took some time to realise that I could do something for myself and still have childcare...I thought I couldn't do stuff for myself because that would make me a bad parent." Another 54 year old WRN member said that she had been "too busy bringing up our son, chauffeuring him around and etcetera. I had little time to do much for myself until he went off to uni." Telling these kinds of stories, women made deliberate narrative linkages with the cultural categories of 'woman' and 'mother', and deliberately referenced these to convey and emphasise identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Participants thus felt guilty as many had, to some degree, internalised stereotypical norms around gender roles and parenting responsibilities under which women are meant to be caring, giving, and selfless with how they spend their time (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Shaw, 1994). Many women also reported negative pressure or influence from others in their

support system around this issue, dissuading them from participation. For example, a 49 year old participant, now divorced and a member of the WRN for 3 years, asserted that “When I was married my husband said I didn’t have enough time!” Also referring to having had such barriers in the past, Meg, a 59 year old, retired and divorced woman with two grown children commented that “I don’t have very many complications at the moment... I mean, in some ways I’m fortunate, because I have a lot of time. Because I’m at that stage in my life, I’m able to give a lot of time to it, and enjoy it.”

While one common strategy for overcoming this barrier was to wait until children were old enough to stay home on their own or had moved out entirely, several women reported negotiating time away from their young families. An emphasis on the identity of ‘mother’ is still evident in these women’s stories, but there is considerable narrative slippage (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). That is, the themes of empathy and caring for others (and young children in particular) remained present, but were applied “partially, contingently, judiciously and variably” – alongside alternative claims to identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 110). An example of such slippage occurred in passing at an early spring running session, when one of the WRN members told me: “I joined to lose weight, and to have a focus other than the children after having two. And to have some identity of my own rather than just being the children’s mum.” She continued on to say, “I do feel bad sometimes, a bit selfish – but I know I’m a better mum when I get out for a run, and get some time for myself.” Although her story differs from those women not participating due to childcare obligations, this participant was careful to justify her involvement by emphasising that running improved her parenting. Doing so yields a story that is tailored to the life under consideration – fitting with metanarratives and public narratives around what makes a good mother, but still different in its’ particulars. As Holstein and Gubrium (2000, p. 11) state, this also “...highlights the slippage between discursive practice and discourses in practice, between actually storying the self and the prototypic storylines available for conveying who these women are.”

However, for these women, childcare responsibilities did not cease to be a barrier once they were involved in the WRN. Rather, childcare continued to place restrictions on the level, timing, and degree of their participation. Strategies of negotiation included: non-working mothers attending day-time running sessions when available, when their children were at school; going for a run on just one pre-agreed evening per week having made alternative childcare arrangements; and/or not participating in training or events on the weekend. Of course, making alternative arrangements such as these was contingent on having the necessary resources to acquire childcare– for example, single working mothers would not necessarily have the means by which to negotiate. Further, many women admitted that they would ideally like to increase their participation, but were unable to



because of their work schedules, having to 'ferry' the kids around to their extra-curricular activities, and due to concerns about disrupting 'home' life. As such, most of these participants prioritised the needs of others over their own – embodying what Frank (1995) refers to as a dyadic body. Dyadic bodies are recognisable by an empathetic other-relatedness; an ethical choice to live for the other rather than for the self (Frank, 1995).

Reports of 'pressured time' and a tendency toward dyadic other-relatedness were not always due to the care-related responsibilities associated with children. Many of the participants also spoke of having obligations to other dependents. Extending existing literature which to date had predominantly focused on the relationship between women and children (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; 2004; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Sullivan, 1997), analysis revealed several references to also caring for ill partners and family members. Given the age of many of the WRN participants (70% of members are 34+ years of age), caring for ageing parents was also noted as a common and time-consuming activity embedded within their lives. Constraints such as these were strongly linked to life stage, and many women recounted that as their children required less care, their parents began to require more. Often, this precluded any level of participation – and accounts of this were widespread. For instance, one WRN member explicitly told me that she did not – and felt she could not – participate in something like the WRN until her 'poorly' mum had moved into a long-term, full-time care facility. For the two years leading up to her mum's move, this particular participant had been going to work, then directly to her mum's house every evening and weekend to help her with various tasks of daily living. She explained how there simply was not room in her schedule for any leisure activity. Again, existing participants of the WRN had not necessarily entirely overcome this barrier. Instead, they described ongoing negotiation with these responsibilities, with circumstances often forcing them to diminish their participation for periods of time when those around them were perceived to need more attention and assistance. An excerpt from my fieldnotes describes the experience of Amy, a 48 year old who was an enthusiastic and long-term WRN member:

*Amy pulled up a few minutes after she had told us to meet at hers to catch a lift out to Killerton for the evening run. She apologised for being late, explaining that she'd just returned from Cornwall where she'd been visiting her dad who's gone quite a bit downhill recently (he has dementia). She said she was exhausted because she's been back and forth to Cornwall four times this week. I listened as she openly expressed both sadness and frustration in seeing him 'that way' – she described a few of the things he had done and said to us (myself, 'Jen,' and 'Val'). Although it was very light-hearted, and even recounted with laughter (he thinks the lumps in the couch are aliens, apparently), she was clearly upset and affected by the experience. 'Jen' and 'Val' (who have known 'Amy' for some time) asked questions and offered support, and I listened in respectful silence. It strikes me that this is the kind of support and camaraderie that the WRN offer – it's not just cheering you over the finish line of the race you never thought you would enter, let alone finish – it goes beyond just the running. 'Val' asked if 'Amy' was still okay to drive, or even attend, the run this evening. 'Amy' replied, "Oh no, no, I need to," saying that she needed the release of the run, the fresh air, and to be amongst people for the evening.*

*(from field notes: Wednesday, August 16th, 2009).*

Experiencing time as 'pressured' was not always associated with caregiving responsibilities, but also with work and scheduling commitments. During WRN sessions, I overheard numerous women saying that they had rushed there straight from work, had missed last week's session due to a late meeting or similar, or could not make the run at the weekend because they were travelling or preparing for work. Shift work was a commonly cited barrier, as was a lack of predictability in work schedules. This is consistent with extant literature on the topic, which states that shift work tends to lead to poorer health habits, including a less than desirable amount of physical activity (Kivimaki, Kuisma, Virtanen, & Elovainio, 2001; Sparks, Cooper, Fried, & Shirom, 1997). Participants that reported this issue could be said to have experienced a mismatch between their social and physical

surroundings and their biological needs and bodily potentialities – making routinised modes of behaviour, or habitual action such as running, either impossible or ineffective (Shilling, 2008). Providing one example, Heidi, a 41 year old participant and a member of the WRN for 2.5 years, spoke of how her work schedule had prevented her previous participation:

I mean, I'm not in such a stressful job now, but previously I was... I used to do shift work. Which is one of the reasons why my fitness went down, because then – You know, working shift work, you don't get to the gym. Your social life goes out the window and things. So when I changed jobs I sort of thought, okay, I can do something about this now. I know that I'm going to be free at regular times, so I can join things like the Network.

In the same vein, another interviewee (Kate, aged 40) discussed how her future WRN participation was somewhat contingent on her job. However, Kate simultaneously acknowledged the importance of continued participation for both her physical and mental health:

I mean, the biggest challenge – if my career continues to progress – is fitting it in. And that's a challenge. But actually, if I don't fit it in, I'll probably be ill. So I need to balance, you know, this work-life balance thing, about maintaining your sanity and your physical health and well-being. Alongside, you know, holding down a really challenging job.

Several women reported that they had joined the WRN only after changing to a job that had a more predictable and regular schedule. However, many other women explained that they were still negotiating the timing and scheduling constraints of their working lives, and had joined the WRN knowing that they may not be able to attend each week. I met one WRN member at a running session, who stated:

I travel a lot for work – mostly within the UK, but I often can't predict if I will be in town from one week to the next. The WRN is perfect for this because you can miss several weeks and then still turn up – no questions of where you've been or why you haven't been there or anything. So you can just dip in and out, which fits with life really, doesn't it?

Many other women also made reference to how this informal and inclusive structure of WRN sessions was more conducive to their sometimes irregular and unpredictable schedules than even they had imagined.

Closely linked to a (perceived) lack of time as well to as past poor experiences, participants also described previously struggling with motivation. Innumerable women expressed that they had attempted to start running in the past, on their own or with others, and had quickly lost interest and momentum. Participants recounted varying reasons for this

lack of motivation, including: not experiencing immediate progress, poor weather, low energy due to excess weight, and not being able to 'picture' themselves as a runner. A wide array of women expressed that joining the WRN had fostered this motivation: by having a designated weekly meeting time and place, a dedicated leader, and other group members who expected/anticipated their attendance. For many, knowing that they would not be out there on dark nights in bad weather on their own was enough to motivate themselves to get out the door. However, many others described motivation as an ongoing battle, even while still WRN members. One WRN member explained this to me at her first session following two months away:

It's just easy to let other things take precedence. Especially at this time of year [pre-Christmas]. There's so many family events and social events, work is really busy for me, my mum's had a fall so has been in hospital. I feel like it's always something. Each week I say to myself, 'I must get back to running', and each week something seems to come up – or I'm so tired from dealing with things and it's chucking down rain, I just want to put on my slogs and hibernate. I feel better when I come, and I know that, but it's not always so easy.

As such, it was the social field of the WRN that enabled participation to continue, by providing a space in which the contingencies of everyday life were acknowledged, and women were amongst supportive peers with similar issues and goals. As each WRN session is elective and there is no commitment for weekly attendance, women described being able to come and go without being judged and according to their equally important external commitments and responsibilities. The structure of the WRN environment was such that it actually lowered expectations for habitual physical activity: women were free to start, interrupt/stop, and begin again with no questions asked. Due to this unique social milieu, participants were thus more able to *creatively* amend their habitual actions to include running, enhancing their embodied capacities for action (Shilling, 2008).

In addition to lack of time, the second most cited barrier to previous participation was a lack of confidence. A variety of sources were identified for this: ill-fated past experiences with physical activity, or running specifically; feeling too overweight, too unfit, or too old to be a runner; failed attempts at learning to run; a lack of knowledge that one could learn to run; low self-esteem and poor body image; and self-consciousness. Many women recited fears that went all the way back to physical education in primary school, saying things such as that they had "always been picked last for the team," had "bad school memories of cross-country," or "I remember from school being told I couldn't run." These women spoke of how deeply they had embodied these storylines – still powerful today, 30 to 40 years down the line. One WRN member explained within her questionnaire responses that she had not taken up running sooner because she had "very bad school experiences which convinced

me I simply wasn't built for, or able to run; an idea that became more engrained the older I got". Another member responded that she had a "fear of failure... I was never a sporty girl, and had pigeon-holed myself as such." Identities were thus forged on the basis of a lack of athletic ability, and fears and insecurities about the athletic realm were pervasive and long-standing. Oftentimes this was linked into concerns about excess weight, and the capacity of the overweight body to engage in an activity such as running. Responses from two additional members provided examples of this experience:

I have always been overweight, and never sporty. Running was something I was 'made to do' at school, and it didn't occur to me that I could run and enjoy it!

I am overweight and didn't like going out running alone, and I have always had a major fear of running since cross country at school!!

As such, an extremely common response when women were asked why they had not participated in running in the past was, "I didn't know I could do it," or even more strongly, "I didn't think I could."

Further, the longer that the woman had embodied a so-called 'non-sporting' identity, the harder it was for her to imagine that she might ever participate in something like running. Women thus often cited age-related barriers or hesitations, providing explanations such as "I didn't think I could run – and I thought I was too old," and "I never thought I could, being the wrong side of 50." Others described having thought that running was actually harmful to older bodies. A 46 year old WRN member responded that she "was previously concerned about injury and the advisability of strenuous exercise at [her] age." Similarly, another stated that she had been "unsure whether it might be damaging for my joints." These stories echo metanarratives around the medicalisation of ageing, and the perceived frailty and thus incapacities of the female, ageing body (Tulle-Winton, 2000; Vertinsky, 1991; 1998; 2000; 2002). One member retrospectively summarised this in a humorous way, saying "Me, run?!? Never!! Too old, too fat, too self-conscious. I'm not a runner!!" These stories reveal a very real, identity-based disconnect between what these women previously felt was their physical reality, and the mere possibility of running. This can be conceptualised as a form of *narrative foreclosure*, in which women were 'caught' in a story that was both limiting and lacked imagination (Freeman, 2000; Randall & McKim, 2008). As well as adopting the 'I'm too old to run' storyline, being old(er) meant that the 'I'm not the running type' identity had been entrenched for a long period of time. Metanarratives around age-appropriate behaviour thus collided with foreclosed ontological narrative identities (Freeman, 2000). Running alongside Kay (approximate age of between 45-55) one evening, she said she could really relate to this sentiment, explaining: "I'd spent years saying I can't run." Further, participants described having a very clear sense about what a runner's body looked like,

and, by comparison, discounting themselves from ever fitting into that category. On her first session at the group, one WRN member told me that she had always been interested in running, but “I kept picking up things like *Runners’ World* magazine, or watching elite athletics on telly. Then I’d look down at my rather more substantial belly or thighs, and the idea would just be shelved again.” Another 29 year old member expressed that she “thought all running groups were for ‘proper’ runners”. Similarly, women expressed reservations at wearing running-specific clothing, as it was too tight and “shows up all the lumps and bumps!”

Lack of confidence was strongly linked to a lack of knowledge in how to begin running, with many participants saying, quite simply, “I didn’t know running was something that you could learn.” These women spoke of trying to go out on their own but getting tired within a few short minutes, thus rapidly losing any confidence they may have briefly had. One WRN member echoed this sentiment when she said, “I just didn’t know how to start. It always felt like a massive mountain to climb, with being unfit. I had no idea of how to build up slowly.” Hurdles such as these posed somewhat of a catch-22, as women asserted that they were too embarrassed and not knowledgeable enough to run on their own, but simultaneously felt too self-conscious, unfit, and un-athletic to try running with others:

I hated running on my own, mostly because I tried running too fast and couldn’t keep the pace up for long enough to be satisfying. I had tried going out with friends who were runners, but they were too quick for me and I couldn’t keep up with them – which was completely disheartening, so I stopped. And I was intimidated by other running groups, which seemed too elite and didn’t cater for beginners.  
(aged 61, member of WRN for 5 years)

It was not until these women came across a club that deliberately catered for beginners – the WRN – that they felt comfortable to take the plunge. Furthermore, the WRN setting provided week-by-week instruction in how to build up and improve running – so those who had previously struggled by going too fast too quickly described that they finally experienced success when following a more structured and technically informed program. The structure of the WRN environment allowed participants to achieve what Tulle (2008) calls ‘athletic competence’ – learning how to rationalise and routinise their bodies via an unfamiliar method of training. Competence also extends to acquiring knowledge about the body by learning to ‘read’ the body (Tulle, 2008). In this way, becoming a runner is an apprenticeship during which experience is acquired and embodied. Ultimately, what is achieved is both a new conception of a runner’s body and embodied mastery (Monaghan, 2001). Further, competence is enfolded into the body and self of these women, and it is in this symbiosis that a running identity is achieved – or able to be imagined.

Hailed by the beginner-focused, non-competitive nature of the WRN (see section 5.2), participants also described overcoming their lack of confidence when they were exposed to different narratives about running participation. These different narratives about who could run (and how to begin running) had the effect of unsettling their assumptions about the social world of running, destabilising what they thought they knew, and divesting them of their views of what was what (Bruner, 2002; Randall & McKim, 2008). The public storyline that the WRN offered thus acted as a counterstory: one that fit into the gaps between what the prescriptive master narrative demanded of these women, and what they actually (can) do or are (Nelson, 2001). Participants often then uttered retrospective refutations to their previous beliefs, such as “But you are never too old!” and “I realise now that you can start at any age, and don’t have to be super fit to begin with.” In addition, many other women also spoke of taking action *because* of advancing age – being spurred to participate by celebrating a particular birthday, and perhaps considering the health implications of an ageing body for the first time (see section 5.3.2 re: critical moments). The social field of the WRN thus provided an avenue within which these women’s foreclosed narratives could be re-opened, enabling the stronghold of the past to release its grip on the future.

Furthermore, the public narratives of the WRN provided the narrative resources for women to begin to question a previously oppressive master narrative as well as to imagine, or tell, a new story. The public storyline that the WRN offered thus acted as a counterstory to the ontological narratives that the women had (to date) been telling themselves (Nelson, 2001). One woman responded to the questionnaire by saying, “I now feel like part of a sporty group without any pressure to conform to any stereotypes, or to be a certain level of fitness.” Another point made to me on several occasions echoed the WRN ethos, with women emphasising that runners really do come in all shapes and sizes – and “you really cannot tell how accomplished someone is at running by looking at them.” Further, while there were still women that claimed they would never succumb to the “unforgiving” lycra running kit, many did indeed begin to wear such clothing. These women would laugh, and either say that they were extremely proud of the bodily changes they had noticed due to running and wanted to show them off, or simply, “I used to care, but I don’t mind now what I wear or how I look to other people. I’m just so proud that I’m out there!”

A final barrier that women described was that of safety, and concerns around this issue needed to be addressed and overcome prior to women taking up running. Most often, women stated that they did not feel safe going out running on their own – especially on dark winter evenings, which was the one time they were free from other constraints (i.e., after work, after tea, kids in bed). Furthermore, many of the WRN members were from relatively rural areas, as one 39 year old, year-long member of the WRN explained: “I now live in a

rural area which lacks safe places to run, as there are no pavements or street lighting.”

When interviewing Roberta, a 31 year old brand new member of the group, she expressed similar hesitations to me by saying:

I've wanted to go running for a while. But part of it is my husband was nervous about me going out running on my own. Especially because we're in quite a rural area. I didn't think it was safe to go out on my own. I think that's probably why I thought to start with, I'll do [join the WRN]. Go out with other people.

For obvious reasons, joining a group such as the WRN addresses this concern, as women described feeling safer when in the company of a larger group. Fears of this nature are highly gendered, in that the same concern would not exist for most male would-be runners. Interesting, however, women who reported feeling a lack of safety seemed to acknowledge their fears uncritically, without reflection or comment about this gendered discrepancy.

However, the notion of safety was described in additional ways to that previously cited in the literature regarding women and barriers to exercise (i.e., Eyler, 2002; King et al., 2000; Schutzer & Graves, 2004). For example, many women described feeling less self-conscious of their bodies and thus 'safer' when running in a group of women. They felt that they were less visible – and perhaps less likely to be singled out as an object of ridicule – since they were one among many. Participants explained that they felt too conspicuous when they tried running on their own, but said that they could almost 'hide' in the group. Safety was thus found in the collectivity of the WRN; from being amongst others who were also perhaps overweight, struggling for breath, and “turning puce through effort.” Harriet, aged 61 and a WRN member for 3 years, elaborated on this at length when she said:

I think it's safe. It's a safe environment. You don't have to be so competitive... Women know women's needs. And it's nice because a lot of them sort of come away from their family, and that's their time. And you just, you know, talk about women's things. And you can be – it's fun. It's giggly. And you can be silly. And I just think it's a safe time. You don't have to be anybody else but yourself. And you know that that's going to be accepted and tolerated – if not encouraged – within a women's group... You know, the fact that you don't have to be sexy and beautiful to run. You can just be out there, trying to get fit. And enjoying it. And you know that you're not going to be criticised, or laughed at, or jeered at. And I guess you probably would be, if there were men around...”

Attributing much of the uniqueness of the WRN environment to the fact that it is women's-only, many participants emphasised this bodily basis of safety. Participants of the WRN thus spoke of how the organisation creates and nurtures a 'safe space', but not just in terms of physical safety. Safety thus had multiple meanings within the context of the WRN. While similar insights have been noted in literature on body image, ageing, and traumatic



experiences (see Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008), to my knowledge this has been overlooked in health promotion/leisure studies literature to date.

This section has addressed the wide variety of reasons that participants have for turning to running at a particular point in their lives. Primarily, this has been expressed through explanations of why they have not participated in the past, with some preliminary discussion as to how and why these barriers may have been alleviated or addressed. Many of the included quotations speak to how the specific setting of the WRN addresses many of these barriers; an issue that will be further developed in chapter six. The next section provides more detail on why participants sought out change in the form of physical activity *when* they did.

### **5.3.2 Critical moments**

A number of commentators have drawn attention to the consequential character of particular events within the biographies of individuals. Denzin (1989) referred to these as 'epiphanies', which he described as representing interactional moments and experiences that leave marks on people's lives by altering their fundamental meaning structures. These moments, or life experiences, can radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their life projects. Using a narrative perspective, Denzin (1989, p. 38) explains that, "epiphanies are experienced as social dramas, as dramatic events with beginnings, middles, and endings. Epiphanies represent ruptures in the structure of daily life." Similarly, Giddens proposes that individuals embark on a 'project of self' within which they experience what he calls 'fateful moments' – "times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences" (1991, p. 113). Fateful moments thus threaten ontological security, and as such are moments when the individual often launches out into something new.

These concepts are fruitful for identifying and understanding women's stories about why they began to run with the WRN. Following Thomson et al. (2002), I merge Denzin's 'epiphanies' and Giddens' 'fateful moments' into the idea of a 'critical moment': an event described in an interview (formal or informal) that the individual sees as having important consequences for her life and identity - both as it pertains to running and beyond. Derived from narratives, Thomson et al. (2002) define a critical moment as "a formal rhetorical device in the unfolding of a story, the pivot, or 'complication', on which a narrative structure turns" (p. 339, also see: Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Cortazzi, 1993). In my analysis, I examined critical moments in women's narratives in order to understand whether elements within them could be understood as 'fateful' in Giddens' terms. This section outlines many women's

descriptions of this tangible 'push' to action – what took them from health consciousness and an awareness of the benefits of running to actually buying that first pair of trainers and showing up for their first WRN session.

According to Giddens (1991), a 'fateful moment' can be within the control of an individual, even engineered – but could also arise from the intervention of events beyond an individual's control. Falling into the category of the uncontrollable, many women identified that advancing age was their impetus to action. In particular, 'milestone' birthdays were often referenced as the trigger for beginning to run. A new member provided one example of this at a training session when she said to me, "I was embarrassed to run out on my own, but I knew I had to face my fears after turning 30 last year!" Similarly, another participant (aged 53 and a member of the WRN for 4 years) explained:

I reached 50 and needed something else in life apart from family and work, so I decided to run the Great West Run and needed to learn how to run! I found the WRN on the internet when looking for some half marathon training tips.

For these women, a chronological marker of age was enough to make them think about where they were and what they wanted from life. These numbers, or markers of age, coincide with socially constructed life stage categories and associated age identities (Gullette, 2004). Within these, women had very clear conceptions of what they wanted to be doing – or what they *should* be doing – and who they wanted to be, having reached a certain age. Providing an example of this, another participant explained her reasons for joining the WRN within the past year by saying: "I had a goal of running 5k before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I ran 8 last week and I'm still 49!" Often, this was strongly linked to the metanarrative of decline (Gullette, 1997; 2004), wherein participants envisioned getting older in an entirely negative light. Thus, women spoke of resisting perceived inevitable decline by way of physical activity. Explicating this position, one 51-year-old, two-year member of the WRN stated:

I joined to help improve my fitness. I didn't want to hit the big 5-0 and just slip into a gradual decline... I'll never run any marathons or beat any records, but I find so many things easier now! I'm not sure if this is physical or psychological, but who cares – it feels good! My confidence is so improved, from doing something I never thought I would.

Participating in running via the WRN, this woman was endeavouring to claim some level of control over her ageing – and perceived to be declining – body.

In the same vein, several women spoke of age-related health problems and how these acted as critical moments at which they made the choice to seek out running. When chatting about her reasons for joining, one member remarked, "I was approaching my 50<sup>th</sup>

birthday and then unexpected surgery made me think about staying alive!” Similarly, another WRN member explained:

I joined because I was diagnosed with osteopenia... My GP is convinced that my bone density came back into the normal range with the help of running. She took me off the medication I was on and said that this had been the first time in her experience this had happened – usually the need for medication to stimulate bone growth in patients like me is for life. (aged 58, member 4 years).

Giddens (1991) writes that expertise is commonly the vehicle whereby a particular circumstance is pronounced as fateful, as for instance in the case of a medical diagnosis. Indeed, the key element of a ‘fateful moment’ is that it demands that the individual considers the consequences of particular choices and actions and so engages in an assessment of risk (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). In doing this they are likely to undertake identity work, drawing on ‘expert systems’, seeking advice, undertaking research, and developing new skills. Fateful moments then become potentially empowering experiences. This was certainly one participant’s experience, who said the following:

I had a suspected medical issue and was advised to get fit. I saw an advert for the beginners group and despite being a complete novice, I decided to challenge myself in light of recent medical advice. So I joined the WRN as part of that process.

As in the above example, health problems were not always specifically age-related. For instance, several women stated that running helped them to cope with what had been ongoing – and at times debilitating – depression. Often, this was an unexpected benefit after they had joined for other reasons. However, attempting to deal with depression was what compelled Roberta (aged 31, member for 10 weeks) to seek out the group. Reflecting back on her decision, she explained:

I suppose I feel – I’ve certainly been feeling a lot better, mentally. Because I’ve had really bad depression for about ten years now. And I’ve started to notice a difference to my mental health. Um, again, my doctor’s been saying for years, “Go out and do some exercise, you’ll feel better.” And I was like, “Yeah right, whatever! I’m feeling too sorry for myself to do anything about it.” So I have actually noticed that they were telling the truth. Yeah, just feeling – I’m feeling better that I’m actually getting out and doing something. Instead of sitting there thinking about doing it, I’m actually doing something... I do feel better about myself. I have gone through a phase of really – Kind of self-loathing, to be honest. And now... Well, it’s getting more towards acceptance now. It’s definitely getting better. And I think it will continue to, as well, as I keep doing it.

Again, this narrative is about control – or specifically, about being empowered to regain and re-claim agency over an unruly body/mind, through disciplined action. As in Roberta’s

experience of depression, critical moments could be reached while suffering from chronic illness. These instances are akin to what Denzin (1989) calls 'cumulative epiphanies', which occur as the result of a series of events that have built up in the person's life.

However, critical moments were often elicited by an acute health event – or a major epiphany, in which an experience shatters a person's life, making it never the same again (Denzin, 1989). For example, a 62-year-old woman (who had been a member of the WRN for 3 years) told me why she had joined the group:

I thought it would help me to stay strong and healthy. I had been quite ill after my husband died unexpectedly, and I wanted to somehow acknowledge that I was still alive – but within a safe setting... Running has given me such a feeling of confidence, which spills over into other areas of my life. It has empowered me, has enabled me to come to terms with personal tragedies, and above all has kept me feeling healthy and strong.

Turning to physical activity when faced with such a critical moment was not unusual. Giddens' (1991) view is that the empowerment and skills gained through a fateful moment have important effects. He states that "fateful moments are transition points which have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual's future conduct, but for self-identity...for consequential decisions once taken, will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue" (p. 143). For example, several women spoke of turning to running following their recovery from an illness. For these women, it was the interdependence of medical charities and running events that held particular appeal. Thus, countless women spoke of beginning to run in order to train for Race for Life, a 5 kilometre run/walk event to raise money for women's-specific cancers. One participant summed this up neatly when she said, "I'd had cancer and a major operation and after walking a Race for Life I wanted to run the next one." This reflects a growing trend of 'going public' to share experiences of illness (Nettleton & Hardey, 2006). For example, quest narratives "defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience" (Frank, 1995, p. 115) are increasingly presented in books, newspapers, virtual locations and other media (Hardey, 2002). Through such accounts, illness is presented as a metaphorical journey from which the ill person may gain self-awareness, which they then seek to share with others in order to help them. Examples of this were prevalent in WRN participant's stories, wherein they highlighted their personal battles with illness and a subsequent desire to raise money for an associated cause – to "give something back," and help those who were similarly suffering.

In addition, several long-term members of the WRN described running the London marathon for their charity of choice as the highlight of their running careers. These women had not necessarily personally endured the illness or disease in question, but had been

close to someone who had: a mother, sister, friend, or similar. Thus, numerous WRN members spoke of being inspired by the Race for Life, and taking up running in memory or in honour of a loved one. Following the 2009 Race for Life in Exeter, one participant explained:

When a friend got cancer, we decided to run the Race for Life and downloaded the training program. And it was a revelation. Emotionally – sometimes it feels like you just can't do it – which is why the group is so good, we are all encouraging to each other.

As Nettleton and Hardey (2006, p. 451) write, charity-focused events such as the Race for Life and the London marathon bring individuals into “a collective struggle so that they can utilise the ‘physical capital’ of their own bodies in order to ‘give’ to those with ‘sick’ bodies.” For women such as these, critical moments are when they learn of a loved one’s diagnosis, struggle, or passing. Providing an example of this was Dana, a 52-year-old participant and 6 year member of the WRN, when she said:

I've done various races, for various people. And that has meant a lot to me. I did the Multiple Sclerosis one, because I had a friend that had just been diagnosed with MS at the time. That was in 1998. And I actually got onto the radio about that, I was interviewed because I was so passionate about it. Because she was a runner. And then all of a sudden one day she's struck down with this MS. So that meant such a lot to me. And I felt so proud running London with that MS t-shirt on. And the people in wheelchairs actually shouting at me, saying thank you. I almost want to cry now, actually.

For Dana and others like her, the care of the self through the cultivation of her own fitness appears at least symbolically to provide for the care of others (Nettleton & Hardey, 2006). A number of commentators have highlighted how the inculcation of desires to become ‘good’, ‘responsible’, ‘moral’ subjects forms part of contemporary discourses of governance in neo-liberal societies (Miller & Rose, 1997; Nettleton, 1997). Thus fit bodies may also become ‘charitable bodies’ and manifest both public policy and private self-fulfilment.

As mentioned, critical moments also come in the form of loss of a loved one. As such, bereavement in some form was not an uncommon impetus to make life changes. Providing an example of this, one woman took the time to email me her story as she was unable to meet for an interview:

What happened aged 61: The worst nightmare ever, the sudden loss of a son. My lovely lad aged a mere 29, married only 18 months and about to be a father. No time to say goodbye. My world fell apart. How does one cope (you don't). You feel completely on your own. Friends (so-called) disappear – they don't know what to say to you...

I was watching the London Marathon and thought maybe I could do that to try and unload all this grief... I eventually bucked up the courage to go along to the WRN. What a fantastic group of girls: everyone talks to you, we have a laugh – all ages, young and old alike. They even did a small charity run for my cause not long after I joined and are of tremendous support to me...

I have been running just over a year now. Whoever thought I could run 8 miles!! I have found a new group of friends... I go out, have a gossip (between the breaths), clear your head, and it doesn't make things better but it definitely helps you carry on. Oh, and what a buzz you get afterwards, you feel so good, so proud of what you've achieved even though the hurt will never go away. I feel he is egging me on. 'Go on Mum, you can do it!' I can see him now running alongside me." (FA, aged 64)

This fits well with what Walter (1999) refers to as the 'democratisation of grief', or the need to work reflexively with one's emotional responses to suffering and death. Again, it seems for many women the negotiation of disease, illness and death involved a quest (Frank, 1995). This often took the form of sharing stories and experiences with others, with the desire to ensure that some good would rise out of the tragedy. As Nettleton and Hardey (2006) found when examining the urban mass-participation marathon, this sharing and exchanging of experiential knowledge and suffering combined with the desire to raise the profile of and funds for diseases forms a feature of managing and making sense of illness and death in this reflexive world.

Loss was not always associated with death, however, and many women spoke of turning to running following a different sort of critical moment: wherein a relationship had ended through divorce or break-up. Though not controllable per se, responses to these types of disruptive life events can take on a variety of forms. For these women that turned to running following emotional upheaval, they took the opportunity of relationship change to make other, embodied changes. One participant explained that her relationship ending opened up time for her, which she was looking to occupy when she came across running:

It was about three years ago, maybe four. I had split up with my partner. I was a bit kind of unsure as to what to do with my life. And just needed something to occupy me. And someone who I was working with, his wife was quite involved in the WRN. So I just went along. (Paige, aged 31, member 3.5 years).

As Bauman (1983, p. 41) notes, "the urge to do something about my life" is most eagerly translated into a precept "to do something about my body." Whether or not the decision to part ways was theirs or their ex-partners, these participants spoke of channelling negative emotions (i.e., anger, betrayal, hurt, disappointment) into some sort of positive change. Meg, a 59-year-old participant who joined the WRN two years ago, described taking up running as a way of dealing with issues in her marriage, and continuing after she had gotten divorced:

I've lived in Devon for four years...I was living in London before. I got divorced a couple of years ago after a long marriage. Got two children who've grown up... I did do a little bit of running when I was still in London and we were having marital trouble. Just to get out of the house, blow off some steam. And then more when my husband and I split up. I lived very near a park and I'd just sort of, just rush off on my own, 20 minutes or so... I sort of came down here to start a new life. And I didn't really have any friends here, just about one when I first came. And then I saw a notice on the door of the sport shop, saying about running. Um, beginner's welcome. So I just went in...

Finally, Meg was not the only one to refer to a 'new start' by way of relocating to a new home. Numerous WRN members spoke of having sought out the group as a way of building a social life and social network after moving to an unfamiliar part of the country. Up-rooting and settling down somewhere new thus acted as a critical moment for these women, who said things like:

"I had just moved to the area and was keen to meet new people." (aged 30)

"I moved here and needed to join something to meet people...I have run in the past, sporadically, but it suits me having moved to the area to have people to run with." (aged 54)

"I moved to the area and decided it was a way to make friends. I was also inspired by the London Marathon – I always have been but have never before committed myself." (aged 46)

Whatever the reason for the move, seeking out the WRN upon arrival in new surroundings provided these women with the social and physical outlet that they were after. Participants were very quick to sing the praises of the group in helping them to feel at home relatively quickly. As one WRN member offered:

I had only just moved and wanted to meet new people...I am not a natural runner and find it hard work but running with other women really helped. Without the WRN I wouldn't have made the friends I have now. (aged 31, divorced)

Critical moments not only featured in participant's narratives as turning points at which they were compelled or called to run, but also as points of inspiration for other participants. Sharing these critical moments thus created a particular opening to becoming a dyadic body, because the afflicted person is immersed in a suffering and/or epiphany that is both wholly individual but also shared (Frank, 1995). Thus both telling stories and being exposed to stories about critical moments allows a shared corporeality to develop. Further, storytelling becomes one medium through which the dyadic body both offers its own pain and/or knowledge and receives the reassurance that others recognise what afflicts it (Frank,

1995). For example, Kate (aged 40 and a 6 year member of the WRN) describes how an awareness of other women's critical moments can also act as an impetus to continue an involvement with running:

It's really inspiring. For whatever reason, there is a huge number of people in the group that have overcome something to carry on running. You know, probably most people in the group have something that they would say they'd been inspired by. Either by their achievement or what they've overcome. And the fact that you know that about them, and have shared that with them, is really good. You know, the personal stories in the newsletter. And the things that are always impressive, the personal stories in there about what people have managed to achieve. Despite whatever life throws at them. Makes you realise you have no excuse but to go out, really.

Whether these stories were shared in person (in the group setting) or in the WRN media (i.e., in the newsletter or local newspaper), they worked to affirm, challenge, stretch, expand and transform the narrative resources of those women who heard or read them (Randall & McKim, 2008) – making them more likely to continue.

#### **5.4 Summary and reflection**

In summary, participants were generally highly aware of neoliberal health discourses, health messages, and the health benefits of physical activity and running in particular. Women sought out the WRN specifically because they perceived the organisation to embody their holistic conceptions of health. They described being hailed by visual and textual narratives within print media coverage of the WRN, by word of mouth and recommendation, and by seeing the group in action. All of these acts of interpellation served to emphasise the supportive, non-competitive environment of the WRN – displayed in opposition to alternative modes of running club participation. Further, participants also explained the timing of their participation in the WRN. Women took action at a particular point in their lives for a variety of reasons, including overcoming previous barriers to participation. This happened as they were exposed to counterstories in print media or elsewhere that opposed the master narratives around who *could* be an athlete/runner, thus allowing narrative foreclosure to a running identity to be challenged. Further, the inclusive public narratives of the WRN allowed participants to affirm, expand and diversify their narrative resources, and to negotiate commonly experienced barriers. Often a direct impetus to join the group came in the form of a 'critical moment', such as milestone birthdays/ageing, illness/disease (their own or others), bereavement, divorce/break-up, and moving home. Events such as these created some form of epiphany through which the risks of inaction became 'real' and personal and/or action (i.e., running) was perceived to benefit both themselves and others.



Having considered participants' journeys *to* the WRN, the next chapter considers journeys *within* the WRN. I continue by unpacking these women's first group experiences; stories of fear, anxiety, accomplishment, empowerment and socialisation into the WRN social identity.

## **6. Taking action: Lacing up the trainers**

### **6.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I endeavour to demonstrate what it is like for a beginner to show up at a WRN session for the first time. To do so, I share data from a variety of sources: an autoethnographic account (section 6.1), the diary of a beginner (section 6.2), and narratives elicited within participant observation and during interviews. In the third section (6.3), I explore two disparate entry points into WRN participation and how socialisation into a WRN running identity takes place in these environments. Section 6.4 continues by exploring the collective social identity of the WRN in more detail. In particular, I describe several reasons for how and why participants tend to remain involved in the WRN for some time. Finally, section 6.5 is comprised of a brief summary to tie the chapter together.

### **6.1 Myself, as a WRN initiate**

I begin here by including reflections and recollections of my first WRN session, with the aim of providing some insight from my perspective as both newcomer to the group and researcher. The following extract is a form of creative non-fiction (Gerard, 1996; Gutkind, 1997), constructed from fieldnotes (from March 25, 2009) and evocative memory. I include it as an entry point into and ethnographic description of what was 'going on' (Wolcott, 1999) in the WRN setting, so that the reader might have some inclination of the experience of a first-timer.

#### **6.1.1 The first session**

I look at the clock – again – mentally calculating how long it might take me to get to tonight's running session. Trouble is, I don't really know where it is, nor how long it takes to get anywhere here, really. I can't, won't be late, but don't want to be too early either – I've inherited my dad's tendency toward over-compensating and getting everywhere excessively early, only to spend your waiting time ever-increasing in self-consciousness. My stomach is churning as I go over what I'd like to say to introduce myself to the group. I can't help but think this introduction, this first impression, is crucial and could make or break the project if I get it wrong. I want my intro to be short, casual...nonchalant. I want to appear confident, yet quiet and approachable.

Purposely distracting myself, I turn to wondering what to wear – it's cold, but I'll (obviously) be running, so will warm up. But I don't know how fast we'll run, how difficult I'll find it, so am not sure how warm I'll get. Hearing some wind against the window, I glance outside and see some ominous clouds rolling in through the fading light. Yeah, I think I will take that extra jacket. I'd rather be too warm than too cold. I've decided not to bring my notebook tonight – I don't know if there are lockers/anywhere to store my stuff while we're out running. I do

have a running backpack that I could bring, but I don't want to be or look awkward. I'm assuming the other ladies will either stash their personal belongings in their cars or not bring anything at all. I want to look like a runner, like a part of the group. Another glance at the clock – perhaps I should get going!?

\* \* \* \* \*

Studying my printed google map, I make a left turn, picking up the pace a little bit. I'm anxious that I don't know how long it will take me to get to this place. Another right turn and suddenly I'm there. My pace slows, my feet not wanting to move forward. Oh, dammit, now I have to do this!! It's 6:25, and the group is meant to start at half six, so I hurry in and look around. Noticing my confusion and general bewilderment, the woman behind the kiosk asks if she can help me. I ask where the group generally meets, and she points to the café – a little waiting area that looks out over the pool. Bracing myself, I peer in. It's empty. Relief! Confusion! Am I early? Late? I sit down, choosing a small table in the corner that allows me to keep an eye on both entrances. I can hear children shouting through the glass window to the pool, jumping and splashing and clearly having much more fun than I currently am.

Five agonising minutes and then two women enter, together. They're wearing running shoes, running clothes, and one of them is carrying a water bottle. They stand on the opposite side of the room, chatting. More and more women arrive. They stand together in pairs, or small groups, talking and laughing. Some of them smile at me welcomingly – perhaps they recognise that I am new? No one approaches me or comes over, and I have mixed feelings to this: I both really want them to and am silently willing them not to. I keep my eyes peeled on the door, waiting for Sam to come in, see me, recognise me, make me feel more comfortable. The room has become quite loud, a cacophony of women's voices in numerous simultaneous conversations, voices rising to compete and be heard over the din. A few women sit alone, tying shoes, putting on or taking off layers, and otherwise preparing. Still no Sam.

After what feels like hours (but is only minutes), a shorter woman bustles in carrying a lockbox and a tote bag. She sets herself up at the table next to me, apologising for being late. Without direction, the women (now about 20 of them, by my count) queue up to pay for the run, each depositing £2 in the lockbox as this woman ticks off their name (without asking who they are) on the list in front of her. Spotting me, she seeks eye contact and says, "Are you new? Are you here to run?" I go over and introduce myself, and recognition flashes over her face as she says, "Oh, right, Sam said you would be coming. She's not here tonight because she leaves for holiday in the morning, she's at home packing. I'm Tracey. You're from the university, right? Doing some kind of research?" I explain, "Yes, I was just hoping to tag along with the group for a while, really. Get a sense of how it works, the kind of space it is, the women involved, and so on." "Oh right" – she replied, half-listening, still taking payments and ticking off names – "Well, I'll introduce you to the group outside once I have their attention. We're just going about 3 miles tonight, you'll be okay with that?" I nod. "Okay, if you could just fill out this insurance waiver form, you'll be all set."

I borrow a pen and quickly fill my details out on the form which asks for my name, age, and whether I have any health problems, injuries, take any medications, and about my previous running experience. After signing it, I hand the form back to Tracey and she quickly glances at it before stashing it in her binder, then the binder in her tote-bag which she then – wordlessly – passes along to the waiting members who deposit their extra layers, keys, and so forth into it. She speaks loudly to the group, "Right, just going to stash this stuff and meet you outside, let's get going! If you don't have a reflective I've got a few extras you can borrow!" With that, she disappears and the group slowly shuffles out to stand on the steps of

the building.

Emerging from the building, Tracey gathers everyone together – though she struggles to get their attention over the noisy traffic and ongoing conversations. Satisfied, she shouts, “Okay, we’re doing about three miles tonight, up towards the university and looping back around.” This elicits groaning and a few comments: “That means hills!”, one woman moans. Another pipes up, “Are you sure you don’t mean the quay?” “You can handle it ladies,” Tracey replies, “and tonight I’d like you to welcome Jo, who usually runs with the Monday night group but is along with us tonight – let’s all show her who the best group is!” Various cheers and comments erupt: “Ah, you won’t go back to Mondays now!” Tracey continues overtop of the outbursts, “And also, Meridith is here from the university, doing some research on the Women’s Running Network. So please answer any questions she might have! Okay, off to the right from here.”

So, that was my introduction. No chance to introduce myself, or the research. Surely that’s not informed consent?? Opportunity gone, I realise that the group is already forming into a line and heading off at a slow jog. I fall into formation towards the back and try to reassure myself. It’s not a big deal, Meridith. I’ll be spending a long enough period of time in the group, and with these women, for them to get to know me and vice versa, and decide to what degree (if any) they want to take part in my research. Better to let relationships emerge organically than to force an (over-prepared) speech on everyone when they just want to go running! Wary of that introduction, however, I decide that rather than barrage participants with questions the first time I am out and thus perhaps put them off, I will just run and observe quietly.

I position myself mid-pack. We’re moving slowly, but not unbearably slowly – there are some faster people up ahead that keep looping back behind the main group. This looping creates movement and means that I am consistently alongside, in front of, and behind different groups or pairs of women, overhearing snippets of their conversations here and there between the noise of the traffic, and as they drift in and out of earshot. For the first two-thirds of the run, I run on my own – self-conscious, worried, and anxious that somehow I was already doing the worst ethnography in the world. However, in the latter third of the run I deliberately drop toward the back of the group, where I make easy (though superficial) conversation with a few women. Them: “Where are you from?”, “Are you a runner?” Me: “Do you come here every week?”, “How long have you run with the group?”

I don’t recognise the neighbourhood, but I realise that it’s been about 45 minutes and we’re nearly back at the starting point. I have no idea where we went, it was a loop with a mixture of quieter and busier roads, and certainly parts of Exeter I haven’t seen before. I think running with these groups will definitely help me get to know the area in detail! We slow our pace as we approach the building, each woman finding a piece of wall and independently stretching in an undirected sequence. Tracey goes inside to get the items that I assume she had stashed in a locker, and women then swoop in to pick up their car keys and jackets, quickly say their goodbyes before heading off. I linger, wanting to talk to Tracey but not sure what I want to say. She has entry forms that she’s handing out to members, for upcoming local races. Also, there is some WRN kit available to try on, for sizing. One by one, the group dissipates until it is just myself and Tracey, and I say, “Thanks Tracey. See you next week!” She replies “Bye! Nice to meet you!” without looking up, as she re-stows her flyers and the kit in her various bags. I’m cold now after stopping and with my thoughts swirling, I break into a slow jog towards home...

\* \* \* \* \*

### 6.1.2 Reflections

It is evident from the above that many of my first-time attendance anxieties were related to my role as researcher: my desire to make a favourable impression, and to try and do 'good' work. I was concerned and lacking confidence in myself as ethnographer, which is something that only eased with time and immersion in the setting – after which I became less concerned with myself and what people might think of me, and more interested in how others experienced and made sense of the group.

However, perhaps due to the emphasis in the WRN ethos on the 'true beginner', from the outset I found myself imagining the group from that specific perspective. Thinking about this, what struck me most when reflecting on my first WRN session were the unspoken routines of the group: pre, during, and post-run. The queue to pay the £2 fee, borrowing 'reflectives' (bright yellow reflective vests to make themselves more visible to traffic in the dark), and putting car keys into a provided bag and throwing extra clothing and jackets together in a pile for the group leaders to store somewhere during the run. This was all done without announcement, without explicit statements. No one explained the 'loop back' system to me prior to the session, but I picked it up during by following examples and instructions. The group sets out together and finishes together – the way they accomplish this is that those who are faster, when they get a fair distance ahead, they loop back around and behind the last person. This seemed often to be done instinctively – at corners and junctions after a stretch of road, but was also often indicated by the instructor when explicating directions. Following the run, there was the quick and independent yet highly coordinated stretches (calves, with hands against the wall, quads, then hamstrings) – each woman seemingly self-directed, yet often in unison.

Ability to perform the physical task of running was not a particular concern for me – while not a competitive runner, I had run for several years to supplement my football training. As such, I was not unfamiliar with running terminology, running kit, independent stretching exercises, and the general world of physical culture. My anxieties were therefore not bodily, but social in nature. I could but imagine the experience for those who had both physical and social insecurities about running participation, or who perhaps lacked knowledge and/or courage in these areas. Some insight on this was provided when I interviewed longer-standing participants who retrospectively recounted their first WRN session, but I suspected that these accounts – while thoughtful – may have lost the near visceral quality inherent within real-time, emotionally-laden beginner experiences. Capturing this was a challenge as it was difficult to identify and locate women who were considering joining a running group, prior to their commencement. Opportunely, in a casual conversation with an acquaintance about the project, I learned that her mother (Leanne) was considering joining the WRN. I

asked whether she would be willing to speak with me about her experiences, and not only did she agree but Leanne went on to become one of my case study participants (see chapter seven).

## 6.2 Diary of a beginner

One of Leanne's first tasks was to keep a running diary to document and reflect her first experiences with the group. Here, I present lengthy extracts from that running diary in her own, un-edited words. This "offers an alternative to lengthy bridges written to give an account the appearance of flow when significant events do not seem all that continuous" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 18). Leanne's voice and experience is thus forefront, and her story can, in effect, 'speak for itself' (Wolcott, 1994). In Frank's words, I am allowing Leanne's story to "have the first word" (Frank, 2010, p. 4).

It is evident from her compositions that she felt many of the same anxieties and uncertainties as did I – the difference being that she did have considerable reservations about her physical abilities and was obviously not concerned with embodying a 'researcher' role. The following is Leanne's diary, within which I have italicised portions of text to highlight how she stories her identity, her anxieties and preconceptions about physical activity, and the prominence of emotions (both positive and negative) within her first WRN experiences. I will offer my interpretations and brief reflections in the subsequent section (6.2.2).

### 6.2.1 Leanne's diary

#### *Background:*

I was born in 1948 and after a difficult delivery, suffered ill health for most of my early childhood. Consequently, although I played outside with my friends, running round, riding bikes, etcetera, *I was never the most active* of our group. At the girls' Grammar School, which I attended from age 11 to 18, sport was important but there was a strict hierarchy and if you were not talented the PE teachers were scathing about your performance before completely losing interest in you. In gymnastics lessons *I was one of the few who couldn't climb a rope*, I was in the school netball team but in two years my team never won a match! I grew up knowing that *if I attempted* any physical activity in public *I was likely to be ridiculed* for my inability. My younger sister, on the other hand, was a County Netball player, the youngest girl in the school ever to become school tennis captain and in recent years has played tennis at Wimbledon in the British Women's Tennis Association Finals. Our teachers thought it very strange that we could be sisters. That's the way it was in those days but when the Government began to promote 'Sport for All' in the 1970s and '80s things began to change and people began to take up sport for enjoyment and to improve their health, whether they were stars or not.

When my own children were born I was determined that I would do everything in my power to encourage them in physical activity. During his teens, my husband had been school cross-country captain and luckily all three girls inherited his build of long limbs and slim bodies. There were so many more opportunities to learn sport for them than there had been in my day and I made sure we took advantage of them.

Despite improved attitudes to sport in school and the Sport for All programmes for adults, I continued to become *entrenched in my 'can't do sport' feelings about myself*. Over the years I joined clubs and took up various outdoor activities but didn't sustain my interest in any of them because *I was inevitably the weakest member of the group and quickly became demoralised*. The only activity with which I persevered for many years was aerobics which I could do at home, on my own, following instructions and movements from a video. My daughters have all given me great encouragement to get fit and set myself physical challenges. The latest came from my youngest daughter who knew about WRN and suggested I join. I rang the Beginners Group leader who told me that there was *no pressure, beginners were very welcome* and I could walk and run at *my own pace*. She and her colleague would offer training and help me to become a runner, walking and running alongside me and *making sure I wasn't left behind* the rest of the group. I was convinced by her warmth and encouragement and joined the next week. Unfortunately, after attending twice, during the winter, a series of *unexpected family commitments* caused me to be out of Devon for some time. I didn't want to return to WRN until I was sure I would be able to attend reliably every week and so eventually, I returned last week (April 14<sup>th</sup>). I have bought myself some running shoes and hope that, at last, I am on my way!

#### **14<sup>th</sup> April:**

5.15pm

I feel like a child who is starting school! Pathetic! I have used a lot of energy trying to think of a way out of this but my daughter Skyped me a few minutes ago 'Are you going running tonight?' so that was that! I can't believe that I am so *terrified* about running around the roads of Exeter. To say 'running' is an exaggeration. I've only been twice before, during the winter, and on both occasions I mainly walked round which I didn't think was bad for a true beginner to running but *none of the rest of the group look like beginners to me!*

9.00pm

I feel so *pleased* that I went tonight. Sam stayed beside me for most of the route. She doesn't usually lead this group but she quickly identified my needs and made me feel very positive about the whole experience. The only thing that bothered me was when people kept saying that I would 'soon get back into it' after being away for a while. *I never did get into it* from the age of 5. *Everything is new territory!* I don't think anyone really realizes that it is literally true that I am a beginner to running.

#### **21<sup>st</sup> April:**

9.00pm

This evening was *terrible*. It's the second time I've been since my return and the route was round public footpaths in the Pinhoe area. There was little opportunity for looping because the paths were narrow and consequently *the gap between the rest of the group and me became greater and greater* to the point that for much of the time the rest of the group was out of sight. Towards the end, one of the other runners, who is one of the most able in the group, waited for me and I was so *grateful* to her. We started walking / running back to the Arena and were joined by Liz, the leader, who had come back to find the stragglers. In the

course of conversation she realized that we had been out for an hour and was mortified. The run is half an hour in theory but is usually 45 minutes and about three and a half miles, which is fine. When the three of us returned to the Arena we found out that tonight's route had been four miles. Liz was very *apologetic* and the other runners were very good humoured about the whole thing. It would be true to say that *I did not enjoy this evening!*

**28<sup>th</sup> April:**

4.45pm

We've had a very hectic week and weekend and today *I feel really tired*. I would much rather sit in front of the tv this evening than do battle with my body, pushing it round a course, faster than it wants to go. However I've made the commitment and I shall have to do it. It would be so much easier if I did more between weekly sessions. *Most of the women in the group seem to be in pairs*. They run together and also seem to meet up at the weekend to run together. Needless to say, *I'm not in a pair – I'm the one at the back!* What pleasure would there be for anyone in the group to come running with me? My next door neighbour, who is about my age, goes running in the lanes near our house. *If I could improve* I could go with her but just at present it's as much as I can do to go on my exercise bike and go to WRN once a week. She, too, is a good runner. This is the third consecutive week I have been to WRN and every week at this time *I feel physically sick* as my body kicks into flight mode. *At least now that I know the routines* for putting my valuables in the locker, entering the Arena by the entrance and leaving it by the exit, the *embarrassment factor* is limited to the activity itself. *Several new people* have joined recently *but they are definitely not beginners*. One girl hasn't run for two years but was obviously pretty good two years ago. So despite getting to know the ropes *I'm still bottom of the class*. I don't mind not having a running partner and I don't really mind being at the back but it's horrible when the gap gets wider and wider. That's what happened last week because we ran on narrow public footpaths and there was little opportunity for 'loops'. Hopefully that won't be the case tonight.

Think positive! Last week's route was four miles and I got round it, probably ran half of it. That is an amazing achievement for a *61-year-old woman who has never even run for a bus until joining WRN*. Time to get changed. 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends!'

9.00pm

For the first time ever, I have come home *feeling more confident*. When I arrived at the Arena, there seemed to be quite a few people whom I hadn't met before. I suppose I've become more confident *now that I know the routine* and so I plucked up the *courage to engage some of the other women in conversation*, rather than standing there frozen with terror as I have done in the past. By the time we started running I'd chatted to several people in the group which *made me feel more part of things*. With my new-found determination I also manoeuvred my way to the middle of the group as we started running instead of hanging back. This meant that for a few minutes at least I was running as part of the group, although it wasn't long before I took up my usual position at the back. This week the priority was to support two girls who will be running in the Great West Run next Sunday and so for the first part of the evening we followed the Great West Run route.

Tonight I managed to run more than I walked and *was feeling really good*. I realized that I am becoming *less dependent* on support from the leaders than I was at first, both *physically* in terms of them setting my pace *and emotionally* in terms of needing their encouragement simply to keep going. This *new self confidence* was put to the test at the end of the session when one of the leaders was encouraging a new girl who looked very fit to me (had the stance and build of a dancer and had previously belonged to a different WRN group). She



was despondent because she had found it tough and the leader said ‘Don’t worry, just go at your own pace and walk sometimes if you want to. Look at Leanne, she just stops running and walks when she’s tired and then she has another little run. I’m not breathing down her neck to run and I’m not beside her all the time. Occasionally I’ll think, ‘Oops where’s Leanne?’ and then I’ll go back to find her because we never leave anyone behind.’ I wasn’t quite sure how to take that! Luckily my personal improvement was good enough this evening for me to smile and agree vocally that there was *no pressure* but there was *lots of encouragement*. All of this is true but if I had been held up as a role model for failure last week I probably would have cried!

I still have a problem at the end of the run, remembering how to do the stretches because most people have almost finished by the time I reach the Arena and I’m *not familiar enough* with the various stretches to do them without watching someone else (particularly because the coordination section of my brain has pretty well stopped functioning by the time I get back to the Arena).

### 6.2.2 Reflections

Leanne’s diary provides insight into how she stories herself – her perceived identity – and the role that physical activity has played (and not played) across her life span. Her account reveals that she has consistently tended to evaluate her physical aptitude and performances in comparison to others, whether it be friends and siblings when younger, or more recently to family members (i.e., husband, daughters). Leanne’s early experiences with physical activity were laced with criticism and fears of ridicule, alongside disbelief at her inability as compared to a talented sister. This resulted in a form of narrative foreclosure (Freeman, 2000; Randall & McKim, 2008), wherein a ‘non-athletic’ identity pervaded Leanne’s life and the stories she found herself able to tell. In a sense, therefore, Leanne grew up ‘cast into’ one version of a particular story. As Frank (2010, pp. 7-8) writes, “from all the stories that people hear while they are growing up, they remain caught up in some, forget many others, and adapt a few to fit adult perceptions and aspirations.” Leanne grew up with the story that she was ‘unathletic’, and this story can be seen to have guided her powerfully – but not necessarily well. This also shows how a story can steer someone’s perceptions and actions (Frank, 2010). Although opportunities for women to participate in sport increased over the course of Leanne’s life, she described not ever having overcome this foreclosure. As a result, the only physical activity that Leanne described feeling comfortable doing was that of aerobics from a video in her own home, away from the evaluative gaze of others (Duncan, 1994; Evans, 2006).

Faced with the prospect of running with a group of women, Leanne described being reassured by the warmth, encouragement, and language of the group leaders during her phone inquiry. Importantly, Leanne was told she would not be left behind. Similar to my worries about what to wear and what to do, she did not want to stand out or attract attention from the group. In her first few sessions, her tendency toward comparative evaluation

continued and was fraught with insecurity and negative emotion. She described feeling physically sick, tired, 'pathetic' with nervousness, terrified, and embarrassed. Although it was meant to be a beginner's group, she expressed that she still felt isolated and different from the others: "None of the rest of the group look like beginners to me! ... I don't think anyone realises that it is literally true that I am a beginner to running."

As Leanne became familiar with the everyday routines of the group, she expressed increasing positive emotions. She described feeling pleased with herself, grateful for the support and encouragement, less dependent, and "more a part of things." She alluded to one example: at the building where her group met, the entrance and exit are through one-way turnstiles – and it is not well indicated which is which. An action as simple as going the wrong way through an unfamiliar turnstile can attract unwanted attention, adding to an already heightened self-consciousness. Once Leanne knew the ins and outs of the WRN routine, she described feeling less attentive to each and every action, big or small. In this way, she was learning and beginning to embody habitual actions (Shilling, 2008). Doing so, Leanne was less aware – and less embarrassed – about each potential mis-step. However, this was an ongoing process, as in the case of post-run stretching about which she remained apprehensive.

Leanne's account is a powerful example of living in a storied world, because it includes both highs and lows, progress and setbacks, fulfilment and frustration (Gergen, 1999). Stories such as Leanne's are evocative because they create the effect of reality; celebrate concrete experience and intimate detail; examine how human experience is endowed with meaning; is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy; helps us know how to live and cope; features multiple voices and repositions readers and "subjects" as co-participants in dialogue (Ellis, 1997; 1999). However, Leanne's experience is one of two ways into the WRN, as a beginner. She joined a WRN group that met at a regular time and place, that actively claimed to welcome beginners but also included a range of other abilities in its membership. The other entry route to the WRN is the beginner's-specific program, which is a ten-week course targeted at beginners only, who are meant to be starting (from 'scratch') at the same time and progressing at a structured rate all together. The following section (6.3) will discuss these two different routes in more detail, paying particular attention to how a beginner is socialised into a WRN running identity.

### **6.3 From beginner to runner: Two different methods of socialisation**

In this section, I examine the two different entry points into the WRN as a beginner. The first is that of a beginner attending a 'beginner's welcome' regular group, immersing

themselves amongst more experienced runners, and longer-term members of the WRN (section 6.3.1). In this context, the reported experiences of beginners were more varied – dependent on the leader, the other members of the group that typically attended, and the time and place of participation. The second entry point described here (see section 6.3.2) is the structured ten week beginner’s course offered by the WRN, after which women are encouraged to join a regularly meeting group once they have built up a running ‘base’ and, as an associated by-product, their confidence. This program offers a structured – and I argue, *storied* – socialisation into a WRN/running identity. By describing these in turn, I hope to elucidate the beginner’s experience: of learning and beginning to embody the WRN identity, and – for many – of establishing a strong association with running in general, and the group in particular.

### **6.3.1 Regular ‘beginner’s welcome’ groups**

“I turned up in my jeans – I didn’t really know about running clothes. And the leader sort of said, “Oh, are you going to change?” I said, “No...” I just had my jeans and t-shirt.” (Meg, aged 59, member of the WRN for two years)

Like Meg, most beginners were not difficult to identify – conspicuous in their appearance, and their clothing in particular. During my time running with the regular WRN groups I witnessed several beginners arrive for their first session, often clad in non-running specific ‘leisure-wear’ and in what leaders referred to as ‘fashion’ trainers. If the beginner continued to attend, her first acquisition tended to be running-specific trainers – with initiates explaining that they wanted to be sure that they would ‘stick’ with running before investing in what they considered expensive associated attire.

Despite feeling and looking ‘different’, most participants spoke of how welcome they were made to feel upon their first introduction. In an environment which, like Leanne, they anticipated might be both alienating and intimidating, members instead tended to recall their first experiences with fondness – emphasising how welcome they were made to feel. For example, Lucy (aged 29, member of the WRN for 5.5 years) described her experience in this way:

I know it sounds cliché, but it’s like a family. There’s nobody they would turn away. Going for the first time: “I mean, no one said, “Who are you? Why are you here?” It was like, “Oh, this is Lucy. She’s new.” And I went, “Hello, I’m Lucy.” And people were like, “Oh, don’t worry about it. Don’t be scared. It’s – This is what we’re going to do. And it’s supposed to be a laugh.” And people would speak to you and, you know, you’d go back the next week and people would go, “Oh, hi!” And then warm up, you know, just... That’s the nature of the group. So you’re welcomed in straight away.

Similarly, Kate (aged 40, member of the WRN for 6 years) still recalled the feelings of encouragement and support that she experienced during her first session:

It was the first ever meeting for a new location of a WRN group. It was probably about six years ago now. And, um, there was five or six of us turned up. No one else took kit, except me. And so I said to [the leader], "Well, let's not bother." "No, no! We're going for a run!" So actually, I was the first and only runner that week. So she had a general chat with everybody, everyone else went home and I got taken for a run. And I'd never run! I was absolutely petrified. And if she'd have said, "Oh yeah, there's only one runner, let's go home," I'd have gone. I'd have been out the door like a shot... You know, and at the end, I was gasping for air. I was really struggling. And we only went around the block. You know, that's how rubbish I was. But the whole way around, you know, "You're fantastic! You'll be a great runner!" You know, all that encouragement.

Support was not only offered by the leaders of each group, but by existing members as well. Indeed, the group was structured such that when a new person showed up for the first time, the leader tended to pair them with another member for the course of the running session. The seasoned WRN veteran would describe the inner workings of the group and make certain that the newcomer was comfortable. Indeed, leaders tended to select particular individuals to take on the mentor role: people who were outgoing, approachable, personable, and enthusiastic about the WRN. Ability seemed not to matter, in that mentors ranged from being very experienced, long-term participants to those who had relatively recently been a beginner themselves. This person was selected because they embodied the WRN ethos ('giving all women, whatever their age, size or ability, the opportunity to run together to improve their health, fitness, confidence and safety'), and as such provided a desirable first point of contact to the beginner. An excerpt from my fieldnotes captures this process in action:

*While waiting for the track session to begin this evening, I noticed a face I'd not seen before – lurking at the margins of the group, eyes down, not talking to anyone. Clothed in a cotton vest top, fleece joggers, and ancient trainers, she stood out amongst the lycra-clad group. Collecting our payments, the leader noticed her and spoke: "Have you been before? Are you looking for the Women's Running Network?" Shyly, she nodded. "Oh, right. What's your name?" "Becky." "I'll be out in a second – Jo, why don't you take Becky along in your warm-up, show her the ropes. Becky, just do what you can tonight, no pressure." I fell into step alongside Jo and Becky in our slow, three lap warm-up, keen to hear how the group was introduced to a beginner. They were chatting easily:*

*Jo : So have you done much running at all?*

*Becky: No... I've done a lot of walking. With my dogs. But I haven't really ever run before.*

*Jo: Yeah, I hadn't either when I started. Don't worry – they build you up nice and slow. This is a great group to start with, because you can just go at your own pace and you get really individual attention. So what kind of dogs do you have?*

*Becky: Oh, perfect. Yeah, I'm a bit nervous about keeping up. Um, I have two West Highland White terriers.*

*Jo: Oh yeah? You should chat to Ginny, she has a Westie. She's that one up there, in the pink shirt.*

*Becky: Oh, cool... So how many laps do we do to warm up?*

*Jo: Usually three or so, but just depends on how long they take before they come out and start the session.*

*Becky: Wow, three laps is already a longer run than I've done since school!! What will the session be?*

*Jo and Becky's conversation continued, with Jo reassuring Becky that she would be totally fine, that she could just do whatever she was comfortable with, and that she would catch on quickly. They caught up with Ginny in the next lap, with whom they talked dogs. They also asked about why and how Becky had happened to come out to tonight's session (a friend had recommended it), whether or not Becky had kids, what she did for a job, mentioned having found the best recipe for chicken pot pie, and finally discussed where each of them were going to go on holiday this year. I marvelled at how quickly Becky was embraced and enveloped within the WRN collective. This differed somewhat from my welcome into the group, as I recall it. While members were quite keen to 'educate' me on the inner-workings of the group and their experiences therein, I was not treated as an individual of interest – but rather as a researcher, as 'other'. Interesting that within a group that I have seen to be so open and candid with each other, I can't recall ever being asked a personal question the way Becky is already being quizzed! Disregarding these slightly self-defeating thoughts, I actively returned myself to the moment. We finished the third lap, walking to where the session was to begin and the rest of the group was gathering around the leader: "Right, Becky, I trust Jo has taken good care of you? Okay ladies, tonight we're going to do a 100m, 200m, 300m, then a 400m. We'll do that sequence three times, time permitting. Walk 100m in between each distance. Becky, just tuck in at the back and follow the crowd..."*

*Fieldnotes, April 20<sup>th</sup> 2009*

Interactions such as that between Becky and Jo were not uncommon – not unlike meeting a new person in any context, the tendency was for each individual to seek and establish commonalities and points of connection with other participants. These could be running-related connections, in that two people might have, for example, similar goals, previous experiences, fears, anxieties, accomplishments, injuries or the like. Alternatively, connections might be situational, in that perhaps individuals found that they lived nearby and could share lifts to WRN sessions, had children of a similar age, or were both returning to physical activity after a long absence.

Creating – or establishing – these connections was part of learning the ‘local culture’ of the WRN: navigating the circumstantial resources for self-construction within that context, and familiarising themselves with situated discourses (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Holstein and Gubrium (2000, p. 161) describe that local culture, from this perspective, “is not a set of prescriptions or rules for interpretation and action; rather, it’s a constellation of more or less regularized, localized ways of understanding and representing things and actions, of assigning meaning to lives.” In the context of the WRN, those unfamiliar with the setting took explicit direction and/or mimicked subtle cues (embodied and otherwise) from those already established within the local culture. This formed a very deliberate means of ‘modelling’, by which the neophyte member slowly and over time began to adopt mannerisms, attitudes, and style of dress, speech, and behaviour that she perceived to be characteristic of established members of the group (Donnelly & Young, 2001). Reflecting on her engagement in this process, one participant (Harriet, aged 62 and a member of the WRN for 2.5 years) recalled:

You get a phenomenal amount of information from other WRN runners. There are some terribly experienced runners. And you know, little things – you often end up talking to others about, rather than leaders. There are two women in particular I’m thinking of, that for me have just been tremendous resources... You find the ones that have done a lot. You know, like you say, “Have you done a marathon?” “Oh yeah, I’ve done 17.” Well, they’re the people to talk to. “What do I do about this?” “What shall I,” you know, “What shoes should I wear?” All those sorts of things.

Unlike Harriet’s recollection, social support was not always received on a conscious level. Further, examples such as Harriet’s demonstrate the presences of *informational support*, with other members providing individual women with advice and guidance (Rees, Smith & Sparkes, 2003). Other types of social support were also frequently recounted in the WRN beginner experience. Many cited receiving extraordinary *emotional support* (Rees et al., 2003), wherein existing members offered them comfort and security, and helped them to deal with concerns and frustrations that arose along the way. Similarly, many described receiving what Rees et al. (2003) refer to as *esteem support*: explaining that other members

attempted to bolster their sense of competence and/or self-esteem, and expressed the belief that they had the capability to overcome some of the obstacles in their paths.

From a narrative perspective, immersion within the setting allowed the beginner access to locally specific narrative resources that they could then begin to integrate into their own self constructions. Important here is Holstein and Gubrium's (2000, p. 162) further point that local culture is *always in the making*: "as members reflexively refer ongoing experience to their stocks of cultural knowledge and categories, both making sense of experience and re-informing the cultural parameters called upon in the process." As such, the local culture of the WRN may incite particular interpretations and supply the vocabulary for their articulation, but, as a matter of practice, it neither dictates nor determines what is interpretively constructed by the members therein. Further, exposure to and immersion within the local culture of the WRN did not guarantee adoption of a WRN social identity. Although the vast majority of participants observed and interviewed were current members of the WRN and did identify with the WRN social identity (to varying degrees), certainly many individuals' responses to WRN socialisation were much different. These individuals were more difficult to include in this study because of their absence from the setting, making contact and access complicated – if not impossible. On some level, these were the women who resisted (some or all of) the social and cultural imperatives of the group and subsequently ceased their attendance – either immediately or gradually (as one example, see chapter seven: Leanne's story). Doing so, they had realised that the WRN social identity was not one with which they wanted to, or felt they had the capacity to, belong to or identify with.

Working from this view, although all individuals *are* unique and have unique responses to local storied culture, their identities are still always constructed in and through embodied interactions with others (Jenkins, 1996). Haslam et al. (2009, p. 2) write that groups "are not simply external features of the world that provide a setting for our behaviour. Instead they shape our psychology through their capacity to be internalised and contribute to our sense of self." That is, groups provide us with a sense of *social identity*: "knowledge that [we] belong to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to [us] of this group membership" (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). As such, immersion in the WRN context tended to breed a collective identity – built on similarity. Accordingly, when these women began to relate to the WRN local culture and consider it an important social entity in their lives, they began to see members not as 'other', but instead to embrace them and begin to refer to them as an 'us'. Demonstrating this in action, Jackie (aged 48 and a member of the WRN for 12 years) recollected starting with the WRN, with her personal pronouns noticeably shifting from 'I' to 'we' throughout this short excerpt:

It was just the fact that I could go and just say that I can't run. And the WRN said, 'Well, yes, you can'. And you didn't feel like a dork or anything, you know. And then we regularly have people come along who've never run. And it's really nice just to see them progress... Yeah, there's no competition... You can just turn up and not worry about how you look. Or you talk about all sorts of things. You know, we talk about everything. And women, you know, a lot of women, their pelvic floor is not what it used to be. But it's fine, we can talk about that as we run. All sorts of things we talk about.

The local culture of the WRN thus both offered and showed beginners ways of thinking, seeing, and talking – virtual paradigms of experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000) – to which participants continually and subsequently turned and, in turn, shaped to make sense of their lives and selves. This process took place both internally (on the level of identification) and externally, as beginners began to embody the social identity of the WRN. As Jenkins (1996, p. 21) writes, the embodiment of a social identity is at one and the same time a “referent for individual continuity, an index of collective similarity and differentiation and a canvas upon which identification can play.”

As time passed, more and more running kit would slowly infiltrate the beginner's wardrobe: performance fabrics, running tights/capris, and light blue WRN logo emblazoned kit – until they were visually indistinguishable from longer-term members. In addition, modelling was a cyclical process, as evidenced by one participant's description of how she subsequently became a mentor for incoming new runners:

I remember just feeling so encouraged by everyone at the group, my first time out. I certainly wouldn't have continued running if I didn't have that encouragement. And it was literally people just being nice to you. And you always get allocated – Like, we do it in groups now, where I get allocated to someone who's new. And you end up being with them all night, to make sure they're okay. And that's what they do. Someone engaging with you, and helping you. (Paige, aged 31, member of the WRN for 3.5 years)

Somewhere along the line, those novices that continued to attend the WRN began to accept – and pass along – the values of the group, leaving behind misconceptions that they may have previously held about sport in general, or running in particular.

### **6.3.2 Beginner's-only groups**

The structured ten-week beginner's-only course provided a very different avenue into WRN participation. These courses were run with various starting points throughout the year, whenever interest was expressed and/or a leader was willing to take one on. Often partnered with local council, community sport, or workplace initiatives, these courses were advertised to 'complete novices'. Within this more structured format, participants could learn



to run by building up slowly and safely, with advice on nutrition, stretching, shoes, clothing, and the like offered as part of the program. I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of a leader just prior to the first week of her next beginner's course, and she invited me to come along for the duration. I was eager to accept because this course took place in an urban area of relative economic deprivation (as compared to the majority of other groups that I attended). I was interested to explore whether the social class of the area had any bearing on the number or type of women who participated and/or their experiences therein. I attended and ran alongside the beginners for the entire ten weeks which offered me both insight into how the course was organised and run, as well as access to the personal experiences, emotions, and journeys of the participants therein. To set the scene for the reader here, I include an excerpt from my fieldnotes recorded after the third group session:

*I was a bit disappointed about the evening, in retrospect – it struck me as not too dissimilar from groups I have already been attending, and I was hoping to see more nuances, etc. Everyone last night seemed to be 'kitted out' in the latest gear – all had decent, brand-name (some very expensive!) trainers on, running-specific clothing, etc → no obvious indications of lower SES (is there any other way to observe this beyond clothing/material goods?). I suppose that is informative as well, however.*

*I did feel a bit awkward this evening, as I was running alongside one woman, and she seemed to be almost asking for encouragement (saying things like: "I'm struggling/just not up for this today"). I don't really feel well placed to offer that without sounding condescending or patronising. I guess it's a bit confusing because my role is unclear to them. They know that I am a researcher, so I'm not one of 'them' (a beginner runner), nor am I a leader or coach. They know I have some knowledge re: running and they know why I am there, but there is no precedent for our interaction, or for how to relate to me. Anyway, I'm certain that I could have handled it differently – and better! – but I had a hard time on the spot, so chose not to offer explicit encouragement. I wish I was quicker/lighter with humour and etc, because if I could have made her laugh or said something flippant but encouraging, it would have fit well...*

*Another observation of note: never have I seen/observed a 'leader' with so little confidence as [N]. The other leader pretty much runs the session and [N] runs at the back – but I heard her make several little comments last evening that expressed low confidence (i.e., re: speed, running uphill, etc). I wonder the effect – if any – this has on leadership?? Perhaps true beginners feel more of an affinity to her, as they are similar? [or they don't feel intimidated by her??] Or do they prefer someone like the other leader, who could answer any question thrown at her, appears knowledgeable, confident, etc.? Will be interesting to examine this further.*

*Fieldnotes, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009*

What was unique about the beginner's course was that each participant was meant to be on equal footing: each of them novices to the social and physical field of running (Shilling, 2008; Tulle, 2008). As such, the only 'experts' in the context were the leaders and coaches (and to a lesser degree, myself – see text box above). These knowledgeable individuals passed information along to the beginners in a structured format, providing more – and more detailed – information with each passing week. Participants were assigned 'homework' in between weekly sessions to complete in their own time (for example: run for ten minutes alternating between one minute running, one minute walking), and discussion and feedback was encouraged by leaders throughout. In this way, I argue that the ten-week beginners program offered a structured – and indeed, a storied – socialisation into a WRN/running identity. When interviewed, Roberta (aged 31) had only just completed the ten week course. She described her take on the purpose and structure of the group in the following way:

It was presented to us as... it's just almost like teaching us how to run. So we've done things like one week we just concentrated on doing hills. And then another week, concentrated on doing speed work. And it's just been more about learning the skills and the confidence. Um, just so that when you go into the groups that run all the time, you've just got the skills to do that. And so that you know that you can see a hill and you can get up it, and you don't have to think, "Oh my God, it's a hill." And you know, panic at the bottom.

For Roberta as for others, this learning took place on multiple levels. *Firstly*, through this course women learned how to be in their bodies in a new way: a way in which they were unfamiliar with, unaccustomed to, and – in many cases – initially resistant to. The body thus became part of, if not *the*, technique for learning about the physical and social context of the WRN (Yarnal, Hutchinson, & Chow, 2006). Though not a novel concept, embodied learning tends to have been explored with respect to youth and physical education in schools, and rarely as it relates to older populations (Evans & Davies, 2005; Evans, Davies, & Rich, 2009). However, as Shapiro (1999) asserts, all knowledge is body-mediated – and this is not a process that comes to a close outside of a formal educational system. With all learning as primarily somatic and the act of knowing as largely a form of corporeal shaping, these women's bodies as 'obdurate facts' subsequently shaped the stories that then came out of them within and outside of the WRN environment (Shapiro, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 2011).

The act of running gradually became embodied knowledge, with beginners learning and retaining new meanings and acquiring skills that were henceforth 'stored' in the body (Yarnal et al., 2006). As Frank (1995) writes, in making sense of our experiences, we not only tell stories *about* our bodies, but we also tell stories *out of* and *through* our bodies.

Therefore, for these beginners, new bodily sensations and experiences involved both formulating and telling a story to oneself and to others (Sparkes & Smith, 2011). Now an accomplished runner after two years of WRN participation, Meg (aged 59) recounted that she experienced similar embodied learning during the course of the ten-week beginner's program:

I've never really pushed myself – in anything, actually. And it was weird, one of the leaders quickly worked out that I stayed in my comfort zone. So they tried to push me. And then I realised that I stay in my comfort zone, so I welcomed that pushing... I learned that actually, I could push faster. But at the beginning, I was afraid I was going to have a heart attack or something. I thought that sort of [*makes panting noises, exhaling really quickly*] – meant you've pushed yourself too far. But when you actually watch athletes on tv, they're half dead afterwards. I mean, I'm not half dead. I'm fresh as a daisy at the end of a session... So I probably could have gone even faster. Even faster – I mean, for me... So you learn an awful lot about yourself.

Meg described that her experience of learning how to physically 'push' herself through running also extended to other aspects of her life. It could thus be said that aspects of Meg's storied identity that were previously foreclosed were re-opened as a result of her WRN participation.

*Secondly*, it is important to note that this embodied learning process was ongoing as beginners encountered new experiences, feelings, achievements and barriers. Participants thus constantly sought out information to validate their experiences and/or to reassure their concerns. The most frequent source of this information was their beginner course leader. On countless occasions prior to and following the weekly session, I witnessed the leader being approached by hesitant beginners with questions about clothing, footwear, nutrition, and – most of all – injuries, pain, and bodily 'niggles'. Speaking to this, Roberta described the process of learning her bodily capacities and limitations:

One thing that I've struggled with has been injuries. I was talking to my leader about it last week. And she said, "You've got to learn to know your own body, really." So she can't tell me whether I should or shouldn't run because my knee hurts, because she doesn't know how much it's hurting... But, you know, you just don't – You don't really know what to expect from your body. And when you've got aches and pains, you don't know if that's normal aches and pains or whether you should be stopping. Or whether you should be worried about it... You don't know if what you're doing is fine, or whether you're pushing it too hard or not. It's quite difficult. And that, I think that's where I'm almost, not losing confidence in it, but I can feel myself, even when I went out Sunday, sort of holding back a bit. Thinking, 'Oh, I don't know. Should I be doing this, should I not?' And not feeling, or just not quite sure exactly what I should be doing at the moment. Probably, I just need to sort of learn more about it – about my body, really.

This process also took place by comparing and sharing experiences with those of peers, or other participants in the program. As with the novice female triathletes interviewed by Cronan and Scott (2008), WRN beginners who participated in the ten week 'learn to run' course stated that belonging to a group of fellow participants who were going through the same physical and emotional feelings was crucial. Indeed, in these groups, the inclusiveness of the community was an essential part of the experience.

Further, this sense of community grew exponentially over the duration of the ten week program. Participants would arrive and compare their homework experiences: "Did you find that hard?"... "Oh yeah, I really did. But I did it!" Or, similarly, they would compare aches and pains: "My knee was really sore after the hill session last week. I was worried I did something awful to it."... "No, mine was too! Maybe that's normal, when you're not used to hills? It went away after a few days...". Beginners thus described finding reassurance through collective knowledge and shared experience (Cronan & Scott, 2008). Perhaps knowing the value and impact of encouragement in their own personal experience, beginners in this context were incredibly quick to offer praise to others as they achieved milestones and/or targets within the program. Despite all being beginners, there were still varying degrees of aptitude within the group. Rather than being divisive, however, this seemed to create opportunities to demonstrate support and encouragement. For example, those first up a hill (or first back to a starting point) would applaud and cheer on those who were behind. Also, when implementing a 'loop back', the front-runners tended to really make an effort to smile and verbally encourage each of those behind them when on their way back to fall in behind. Examples such as this highlight the supportiveness and the relationality of the setting (Gergen, 2009), within which ran a gamut of emotions from elation and pride to disappointment and frustration.

Part of the success of this beginner's program was in the fostering of positive emotions in a setting where perhaps –for these women – these have not been experienced previously. Aware that most newcomers reported anxiety and fear about their bodily capabilities, the course was designed to foster and even embellish accomplishment, through very structured progression as well as built-in affirmation. Further, leaders tended to deliberately target common preconceptions about running and, essentially, attempt to refute or reframe them. As described in chapter five, often just being present at a running group meant that many of these women had overcome assumptions about themselves and their abilities. However, showing up was merely the first hurdle, as many women still held and freely expressed uncertainty around their abilities within the running context. Much of the structure of the course, therefore, was built around challenging these highly engrained assumptions, and developing a new – and less inhibited – embodied habitus (Shilling, 1991; 2005). In the first session, the leader tended to take the group along a small, circular route –

for example, around a field or park. This way, she could evaluate the level of each participant and set them individualised goals, while in a setting where she could keep an eye on each of them. At the end of the session, the leader would break the workout down into numbers, so that each woman knew exactly what she had accomplished. An excerpt from my fieldnotes captured this in action:

*Tanya [the leader] brings the group into a closer semi-circle after finishing leading them in a few stretches.*  
*Tanya: Right, how's everyone feeling?*  
*A few murmured responses, all positive:*  
*'Good!'... 'Yeah, alright, thanks'... etc. One woman asks, 'Oh, is that it?'*  
*Tanya: Yep, that's it for tonight. Do you know how much you did?*  
*A few curious replies... 'How much?'*  
*Tanya: Tonight you ran for a total of 15 minutes. Not all at once, not continuous. But when you add up all the running time between the walking breaks, you all did 15 minutes of running tonight.*  
*'Really?!' ... 'Wow!'...*  
*Tanya: Just out of curiosity, have any of you ever done that before?*  
*No one.*  
*Tanya: Did anyone think that they could do that?*  
*Again, no one. Silence.*  
*Tanya: Right, well – excellent work ladies. I'm really proud of you tonight. If you could all try to do exactly the same just once on your own before next week's session, that would be fantastic. Now, any questions anyone?*

*Fieldnotes, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2010*

The following week of the course, I overheard several of the participants remarking on how the previous week had challenged their assumptions about their abilities. Upon arriving, one participant said, "I wonder what we're doing today. I really never thought I'd be able to do what we did last week!" Others agreed, although insecurities remained: "I just hope we're not doing hills...".

Leaders had developed several strategies for breaking down these barriers, and changing attitudes by building confidence in specific tasks. This often took the form of breaking the activity into small, achievable tasks (as above with the walk-running), and then revealing and celebrating accomplishments following their completion. In addition, this was often done somewhat deceptively – for example, with the leader intentionally not informing the group exactly what the session would consist of, so as to pre-empt any objections.

Describing one tactic her leader had used, Justine mused that running was far more of a psychological or mental activity than she had expected:

She [leader] quite often tricks us, actually. But that's quite a good thing, because it stops us from deciding that we can't do it before we've done it. Yeah, she just says, "Oh, we'll just go for a little one around the block." And then she'll go, "And this time we'll go left." And then she'll go right up this hill. And we're like, you know, running up the hill before you've even had a chance to think about it. So, um, she does trick us quite a lot, actually. A couple of weeks ago we did a route, and we thought, "Oh, that was quite quick and easy." And she said, "Oh, now we're going to go out and do it again." But it is good. Because it – I think a lot of it with running is just don't think about it. If you think about it, then you sort of – You've stopped yourself before you started, haven't you? ...So yeah, we never know how far we're going. And we only find out when we've got back how far we've done. And, you know, the first time we did over two miles, and she said, "That's only your third week, and you've done more than two miles." And we were all just like, "No way would we have believed that we could have done it." You know - ...I've been surprised how much of running is about the psychology, actually. There's a lot to it. And, um, yeah, I think the – Just don't think about it too much is probably the key to it, actually, isn't it?  
*(for more of Justine's experience, see chapter eight)*

Further, more than one leader explained to me that they deliberately held a session towards the end of the course that was exactly the same as one held at the beginning, so that participants could accurately measure their progression. Again, this served the purpose of pointing out what the participants had become capable of, versus what they thought they might be capable of at the outset. Doing so enabled the women to re-story their athletic participation, and begin to imaginatively explore new, and less limiting, narrative possibilities.

#### **6.4 Staying involved: 'You're not alone'**

Having a hand in storying the beginner's experience, the WRN as an organisation can be said to be encouraging the uptake of a collective WRN identity. Both within 'regular' groups and ten-week beginner's courses, the WRN is presented to the initiate as a collective entity that has distinctive features which are shared and which endure recognisably across time (Hockey & James, 2003). Within formal interviews as well as informally, in passing, many participants expressed to me how the WRN provided a very important environment for them, and that this went beyond merely learning how to do something new (i.e., running). Rather, the unique aspect of the WRN was very often the social role that it played in participants' lives. Remarking on this, Janine (aged 46 and a member of the WRN for 5 years) explained:

It was the first time I felt a part of something....It was lucky, because you don't always

feel that comfortable when you join a new group... It's a really nice feeling of well-being and being part of something. And people now know me. And I think that's been really, really nice. Really nice. And so supportive... And so kind. And, you know, offering advice. And I feel very much a part of it.

This collectivity was visibly identifiable, with many women commenting on the feeling of recognition, familiarity, and solidarity that they felt when they turned up at an event and saw 'a sea of light blue' (the WRN kit colour), or passed other WRN members on a training run. Again, this speaks to the existence of a desirable social identity through group membership (Haslam et al., 2009; Tajfel, 1972). The readiness of participants to identify and locate themselves as sharing category membership with others in the group demonstrates the growing salience of the WRN social identity (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994). Crucially, this growing salience led members to express that they desired to *stay involved* in the WRN, as they felt a sense of community, camaraderie, and cohesion with the group as well as with other members of the larger organisation.

For example, on a somewhat mundane level, participants explained that having the WRN as a sort of 'escape' helped them to deal with the grind of daily life and the responsibilities, worries and concerns that come with it. Jackie (aged 48 and a member of the WRN for 12 years) explained that the friendships she made in the WRN helped her to deal with the stresses of parenting:

Running with the WRN, I can kind of... Well, I've run through sort of turbulent teenage years with my children. [laughs] Um, with this one friend of mine, in particular, who has daughters the same age. And I think it's been – Although they haven't been awful. But they've just been teenagers. They're not really bad or anything like that. But it sort of – When we're running, we chat. You know, and it's like a therapy session. Go out for a run and put the world to rights.

Another participant described that the WRN provided an outlet away from her employment and family responsibilities:

It can be a release mechanism for me, if I've had a hard week at work or whatever. And I think, oh no, I'll just go to the group and have a chat or whatever. I mean, I'm not in such a stressful job now, but previously I was. So it was good to have that outlet and just go somewhere where your mind is forced to focus on something else completely. Or you can just go into your own zone and just think things through whilst you're beating out a rhythm. And sometimes that rhythm actually helps you clarify your thoughts. And what I always say is I'm 'de-fragmenting' my brain at that point. It helps put things in order. And it's just having the space and the time on my own as well, away from my family.... This is really the first time I've done something completely on my own. So it gives me a sort of freedom, I guess.

(Janine, aged 46, member of the WRN for 5 years)

In this way, the WRN group context provided a social environment within which participants

were surrounded by like-minded and similarly situated women with multiple, and often competing, priorities and responsibilities. Reportedly, this helped to ground many of them, so that they felt less overwhelmed by the routine (though draining) aspects of daily existence.

On a slightly more extraordinary level, many participants cited how the community-focused, supportive local culture of the WRN helped them through adversity, uncertainty or hardship. For many women, this was encountering and then having to deal with a personal health issue. Demonstrating this, Heidi spoke candidly about her experiences:

The WRN provides a mechanism for social networking and this has been invaluable when I have suffered with health issues. By talking about issues you are able to share experiences and gain valuable support and knowledge by learning from others who have experienced similar situations. For example, I had an abnormality that could have been an early indicator for breast cancer. Due to the improvements in the health system, within 10 days of first symptoms I was given the all clear. However, due to the speed of the process, I did not have chance to come to terms with what I could have been facing and this affected me for some time. Only by discussing my distress with fellow runners was I able to understand what had happened and bring the event to a close. So in this instance, the social networking contributed to my mental recovery long after I was discharged from the health system.

Sharing their health stories thus allowed participants to regain some control in a situation where both their ontological and their bodily security felt threatened (Giddens, 1991). Given the increasing pressure highlighting individual responsibility for health – and health maintenance – in neoliberal society, the safe and welcoming narrative environment of the WRN thus made these women feel less isolated. A ‘narrative environment’ is any context in which we talk about our lives, whether to others or ourselves (Bruner, 1990; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Ranging from open and inviting to rigid and restrictive, such contexts inevitably shape the ways in which women go about telling and interpreting their experience. Indeed, the supportive narrative environment of the WRN created a safe space for participants like Heidi to share and seek empathy for health stories and experiences. Heidi continued by saying:

Running with the WRN has also identified health issues that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Ever since I started running I suffered with SUI [stress urinary incontinence] when putting in extra effort. Having researched the many causes, I did not fit the stereotypical candidate for this. I had not had children, had a good pelvic floor, not a smoker, and so on. I learned to live with the symptoms. It was not until I was diagnosed with fibroids that I resolved the conundrum and made the connection. Earlier this year I had a full hysterectomy (it was the evidence of SUI that convinced the consultant to carry out the operation)... I no longer suffer with SUI or sleep deprivation as a direct result of the operation that the consultant might not have carried out if I did not have the evidence of SUI whilst running. In addition, the social support from local WRN through recovery was excellent together with the support to get me back running post-op, just fantastic.



(Heidi, aged 41, member 2.5 years)

Heidi's experience was not unique, as many members reported seeking support from their WRN compatriots. This was not isolated to the experience of personal health issues, however, and extended to the health issues of elderly parents, partners or friends, as well as relationship turmoil and/or termination, employment upheaval, and so on. Throughout these somewhat more critical moments (see chapter five, section 5.3.2), the WRN provided a social space to deliberate, vent, unload, and just generally let loose. Further, and somewhat circularly, the organisation deliberately presented themselves in this manner: perpetuating a supportive social identity within media health stories (see chapter four). One example of this is an article entitled 'A fitting send-off', within the Winter 2010 quarterly newsletter. The following is an excerpt from the article:

When her Network friends heard the sad news of [her] death, they wanted to mark her passing in a way that she would have appreciated. So a group of members decided to run in club kit to her funeral. It was a gesture that her husband and family really appreciated and one that brought a round of applause from the large congregation...There have been many fitting tributes to [her] – we hope that describing her as someone who represents what the Women's Running Network is all about with her caring nature, a great sense of humour and an amazing fighting spirit will do her memory justice.

This article underlines and emphasises the ethos of the WRN while paying tribute to a long-standing and much-loved member. Highlighting instances such as these to the wider WRN membership underscores the supportive social identity of the 'ideal' WRN member, as well as revealing desirable qualities with which most participants were proud to be associated with.

Finally, participants reported wanting to stay involved with the WRN because the local culture of the group was one that publicly acknowledged and celebrated each of their achievements and accomplishments. Nearly all of the participants that I spoke with recollected an instance (or several) in which the support of the group helped them to achieve a goal, target, or the like. Providing one example of this within an interview context was Harriet (aged 62 and a member of the WRN for 2.5 years), who said the following:

My first marathon, I planned to run it – or Pam told me that I must do it in a nine minute mile. But you know what it's like. You get going, you're going well. You're going too fast. And then you hit the wall at 20 miles. And I was really, really suffering then. You know, I could hardly... And at about 23 miles, her and Sue ran out. Found me. And then bullied me and screamed at me all the way home. And I did a phenomenal time. And I honestly wouldn't have finished if it wasn't for those two. I mean, where else would you get that sort of support? Where someone actually comes out, finds you in a marathon, and runs you home? You wouldn't get

that anywhere else. And I think that's what's so unique about the WRN, really. It's so caring, in that way.

Receiving this kind of support from the leaders and organisers was what spurred many members to offer that support on, to other members – as if to give back the time, knowledge and dedication that they had found so valuable. Speaking to this, one member recounted:

I think the social aspect is just so nice. Because people are mutually supportive. It feels quite nice to support somebody else who's just starting, or who is perhaps struggling and needs a boost. You know, to encourage them. So it's not just that you're being encouraged, it's mutual. And I think that's very positive. That's the nature of a network, obviously.

(Cora, aged 64, member of the WRN for 2.5 years)

This level of mutual support resulted in an environment within which members were valued and celebrated both for their accomplishments as well as for nurturing and encouraging the accomplishments of others. The solidarity of WRN membership thus grew exponentially from the point of being welcomed into the group, becoming part of it, and then participating in and perpetuating what the local culture was all about. Though difficult for many to put into words, more than one member took pains to tell me how loyal they felt to the group because of all it had done for them (and others 'like them'):

It's something that you... It's a really unique thing, and you can't... I sometimes wish I was in a quite serious club. But then, once you're in the Network, you're sucked in. You can't not be in the Network.

(Paige, aged 31, member of the WRN for 3.5 years)

## **6.5 Summary and reflection**

In summary, this chapter has explored the journey of many WRN members, from those first lacing up their trainers as a beginner to keeping their trainers ever-ready at the door – and at least one group running session in their weekly diary as a standing engagement. I have elucidated the tensions, fears and anxieties inherent to this process via two separate first-person accounts: firstly, an autoethnographic description of my first foray into the group as researcher and WRN initiate, and secondly from the perspective of Leanne, a beginner who kindly kept a diary of her experience and agreed to share it.

Moving on from these accounts, I presented two disparate entry points into WRN participation (beginner in a 'regular' group and the ten-week beginner's course) – elucidating how each of these were structured and organised, the general day-to-day features of their functioning, and the social environment therein. These two entry points differ dramatically,

and each has potential advantages and disadvantages for the absolute beginner – and as such, any recommendations toward one entry point over the other would have to be both highly personalised and individualised. There are those who enjoy being around others who are already experienced ‘experts’, and as such represent excellent and accomplished sources for advice, support and encouragement – something found within the ‘regular’ beginner’s welcome groups. However, some beginners may find this intimidating, and would be more comfortable surrounded by others in similar, inexperienced subject positions to themselves. These individuals would perhaps be more at home in the ten week ‘learn to run’ beginner’s only groups. I hesitantly posit, however, that the ten week course perhaps leads to slightly better ongoing adherence, as members tend to complete the course and subsequently join a regular group (after having built up the confidence to do so). Two of the participants who act as case studies within the upcoming chapters (Leanne, chapter seven and Justine, chapter eight) provide slightly more insight into these two entry points via their personal experiences.

Finally, I considered how and why these interviewed participants tended to remain involved with the WRN once having made the decision to attend, through finding camaraderie and a support structure within the local culture that was both unique and rewarding on many levels. This chapter has been kept purposely *general* in nature, as the next several chapters are composed of case studies intended to explore the themes, ideas, and characteristics of WRN participation in more detail. These will be presented for the purpose of providing general guides to both listening and storytelling in the WRN context. As Frank (2010, p. 119) writes, elaboration of specific narratives allows us to recognise “the uniqueness of each individual story, while at the same time understanding how individuals do not make up stories by themselves.” Each case study in the upcoming chapters (seven - nine) represents an individual story – however, each was also chosen as an instrumental example from the variety of narratives present within the WRN.

## 7. Leanne's story

*"[We all] begin with an earlier story that works to hold [us] to a particular understanding of [our] lives. That story is then incorporated into a later one, the telling of which is an act of breaking free from the first story, or at least instigating new possibilities for what that story will be allowed to do."*

-Arthur Frank (2010, p. 5)

*"It's not who you are that holds you back, it's who you think you're not."*

-Author Unknown

### 7.0 Introduction

As signalled in chapter three (methods and methodology), I have selected three instrumental case studies (Willig, 2001) from my participant sample. The next three chapters are dedicated to delving into the individual stories of these women. Chosen because they exhibit the general phenomenon considered throughout the thesis to this point, detailed attention to these women's stories also demonstrates individual women's capacity for narrative creativity, uniqueness, and complexity. Analysis of these case studies was informed by a holistic-content mode of reading (Lieblich et al., 1998). This type of analysis uses the complete life story of an individual and focuses upon the content presented by it. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), by using separate sections of the story, the researcher is able to analyse its meaning in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative or in the context of the story in its entirety. With these points in mind I begin here with the story of Leanne. First introduced via her candid reflections within her beginner's diary (chapter six, section 6.2), I now share more of Leanne's story to offer further insight into her background, her experiences with sport and physical activity over the years, her journey into WRN participation, and her subsequent exit from the group.

### 7.1 Leanne

I've barely taken my seat before Leanne leads with "The thing is, I come from an athletic family. And I was never any good." Quickly, I press record, worried that I might miss something – only to hear this refrain repeated many times over the next hour and a half. Leanne's words are direct, though carefully chosen. She is reflective, earnest, and at times apologetic – worried that her experience with the WRN might not be overly helpful to me, as her time with the group was relatively brief. I assure her that the duration of her participation is precisely why I am interested in her experience, and that I am interested in her life as a whole and how, why, and when the WRN fit into her life rather than just the few weeks that she attended. Below, I present Leanne's story chronologically, interjecting intermittently with interpretation and theory. In addition, I also incorporate several images throughout this

chapter: photographs provided by Leanne to help to illustrate her story, alongside her rationale for their selection and her reflections on the images.

### 7.1.1 The formative years

Leanne was born in 1948, post Second World War. Recounting how this affected her experiences, she explained that rationing continued until 1953, imported food was scarce, and people were far more concerned about avoiding tuberculosis than getting enough exercise. As such, physical activity was not so much about fitness and/or health as it was just a part of life: cycling from A to B, walking to and from the shop, and so on. In Leanne's words, "There was no consciousness of being fit. People then didn't really think about it." That said, she went on to describe her family of four – mum, dad, one sister – as "very athletic," and said that she had never fit into this category, right from the outset. She began her story in the same manner as her diary: laden with self-deprecation and tales of being lesser than the others in her family circle. She explained:

It's a lack of confidence... Because most things I knew I was no good. And coming from an athletic family, it just emphasised that, really. My father was very active. He used to do an awful lot of mountaineering. He wasn't a competitive sportsman, but he was very, very active. And my sister was always good at it, but I never was. Whatever we were doing. So if we were mountaineering – My dad was very good, actually. He used to say, 'Slowest first', and he'd put me at the front of the group. And everybody had to stay behind me. But I knew they were all very frustrated. Because they really wanted to get on up the mountain. So even from then, I'm the one holding them back.

Comparison – or more specifically, a *comparative lack* was frequently expressed by Leanne when talking about her early experiences with physical activity and/or sport, particularly as it pertained to the performance and ability of her younger sister. Her sister was "the youngest county tennis player, the youngest county netball player, and the only girl in the school to get her tennis colours before sixth form." In contrast, although Leanne was captain of the under 14 netball team at her girl's grammar school, they "never, ever won a match."

Describing herself as a "very sickly baby," Leanne suffered from many ailments as a child, including measles, bronchitis, and chronic tonsillitis. Though by no means an invalid (by her own admission), she explained, "My breathing was never good. I was left sort of... weedy, I suppose." However, she was also adamant that she did not feel limited by this: "People then didn't really think about keeping fit. You either were fit or you weren't, really... And I loved reading. So I was happy to just sit and read all day." Nevertheless, these bodily (in)capacities marked Leanne socially as well as physically, as she had to wear particular items of clothing that distinguished her as being prone to illness:

I used to have to wear things... I mean, this was before people wore tights. And I used to have to wear woollen tights all through the winter. And I used to have to wear a vest and a – there was a thing called a liberty bodice, which you put on top of your vest. And it was almost like a quilted waistcoat. So I was sort of muffled up...

Far from lamenting her experience, however, Leanne asserted that she never felt that she was missing out as a child. In her words, “I never felt the urge to get out there and run around.” Further, she was not completely inactive - she cycled, walked on the common near her childhood home, and played outside with her friends.

Leanne’s account of her childhood shows how deeply she became caught up in one version of a story about physical activity in general, and her abilities in particular. Referring to the historical period in which she was raised (post-war), she alludes to the reality that any actions, priorities and choices that she made were contingent on the material, cultural, and imaginative resources at her disposal in that given time (Nelson, 2001). Being born *when* and *where* she was determined the form of life that she inhabited: the niche she occupied in society, and the practices and institutions within that society set the possibilities for the courses of action that were open to her (Nelson, 2001). This backdrop, combined with her childhood experiences of ill health and comparatively poor athletic ability, formed the story that Leanne ‘grew up on’ (Frank, 2010). As Frank (2010, pp. 7-8) writes:

People grow up cast into stories, as actors are cast into their parts in a play – but that is too deterministic a metaphor. People are like actors cast into multiple scripts that are all unfinished. From all the stories that people hear while they are growing up, they remain caught up in some, forget many others, and adapt a few to fit adult perceptions and aspirations.

Although Leanne’s description is, by nature, retrospective, one can begin to see the ways in which her agency was at least somewhat constrained by *her own* and *others’* conception of who she was – from childhood onward. Her early experiences can thus be interpreted as pervasive in structuring both her desires and her expectations about what was possible and what was not. As Freeman (2011) points out, constrained agency can result in immobilisation: a sapping of motivation, creativity, and narrative desire. While Leanne asserts that she did not feel constrained by her limitations, that she was happy to spend her time reading and being the ‘un-athletic’ sister, it is possible that she is recollecting a time during which her story was already in the process of “congealing and hardening” (Freeman, 2011, p. 7).

Alternatively, citing the contextual and historical background of her childhood might be Leanne’s way of claiming agency over her story, normalising it by emphasising that “there was no consciousness of being fit” back then. Leanne’s conception of being fit or not in her

youth, then, has developed retrospectively – as she (and society in general) became more conscious of health practices and behaviours. As Leanne grew older she continued to cycle as a means of transportation. She described being slim, and happy with her body as a teenager and young adult. She presented me with the photograph below (Figure 10), with the following words:

This picture shows me with my parents, Grandad and [my husband] when I was 26 and four months pregnant with our first child. I felt on top of the world because I was delighted to be pregnant and healthy. I didn't suffer from morning sickness and the years of walking and cycling (simply because I couldn't afford to do otherwise) had paid off. I loved dancing and the photo was taken at a company dinner dance. My father and grandfather worked for the company and I had worked for them during vacations when I was a student. Those were such carefree days! Less than a month after the photo was taken, I was rushed into hospital with a severe kidney infection. Happily the baby survived but my kidneys were never the same again and the baby was quite poorly for the first 6 months of her life. Within two years of the photo, my Grandad and both of [my husband's] parents were dead, two of them from cancer. Welcome to the world of the grown-ups!!



*Leanne and family*

**Figure 10**

### 7.1.2 The world of grown-ups: Balancing demands

Leanne went on to have three children, all girls. She referred to becoming more aware of the necessity of exercise when she experienced the bodily changes that accompanied child-bearing - specifically weight gain. Indeed, she explained that her first attempts to increase her activity level had more to do with attempted weight loss than any awareness of health benefits:

Really from the time I started having babies I've had health, uh, weight issues. And of course, it's easy to put it on and hard to get it off, isn't it? And really, I think, to be honest, the exercise was all part of the trying to lose weight regime. And that was from a very young age. Well, you know, 30's. I didn't ever think, 'exercise is good, it will make the blood go around faster.' I didn't ever think like that. You know, I just thought, if I can burn off these calories, I shan't have to give up so much food!

Regardless of her emerging bodily awareness and self-consciousness, Leanne recounted that she struggled to find the time to invest in exercise, given the competing demands inherent within her multiple roles of wife, mother, and teacher. Constrained by the dual responsibilities of home and work (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Henderson et al., 1996; Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Shaw, 1994), Leanne experienced time as 'pressured' with little to none leftover to dedicate to herself for leisure or exercise pursuits (Phoenix et al., 2007). In her words:

I had a really demanding job. And a husband who went away for work. When the kids were young, I only worked part-time. But even so, my life was full. There was no possibility of going out, let alone leaving your children at home to go to a gym or something.

That said, she reiterated that her lifestyle remained a fairly active one: cycling to and from work because they were a single car family (and her husband used the car), and walking to do everyday chores with small children in a pram.

Further, she made every effort to ensure that her children had an active lifestyle. Slightly contradicting her claim that being inactive as a child did not bother her, she said:

With my children, I think I was more concerned that they would enjoy being active. Which I really hadn't. Because I was always the one lagging behind. And it was something that I wasn't good at. And so I used to take them to swimming lessons. And we'd go for walks, and I'd teach them to ride bikes, and all that. Well, my husband and I both - you know, we did it together. And also, my sister - the super fit, super good one - lived opposite us. And she had two children. And because both of our husbands travelled a lot, we would do things with the children together. So we'd take them all swimming and we'd take them all to the tennis courts. And of course my sister dragged me along. I think I've always been dragged along to these types of things.



As her girls grew up, both Leanne (in her role of teacher) and the girls were exposed to new and pervasive rhetoric around the health benefits of physical activity. For example, a subject entitled PHSCE (Physical Health Social Citizenship Education) was introduced into the new school curriculum in the 1990s. Leanne was responsible for teaching pupils about social skills, sex education, drugs education, and healthy eating and exercise. Doing so meant that she was more aware than ever about the necessity of being physically active. As a result, she recounted trying various activities over the years: Keep Fit classes, aerobics, pilates, gym memberships, and so on. However, her reservations about her own ability remained prevalent and – ultimately – cumbersome. She elaborated on this by saying:

I've always had a real hang-up about being no good. But the thing that I've enjoyed doing most in a group, all my life, is water aerobics... Because when you do water aerobics, nobody can see when you go wrong! [*laughs*]. And I know that's why I enjoy it. Because I don't feel self-conscious. I always – you know, in all of these things I'm always frightened that everybody will go right and I'll go left. And I'll do the feet wrong...

The combination of Leanne's self-consciousness and her continued experience of pressured time (Phoenix et al., 2007) as she progressed within her career to become a full-time headteacher culminated in intermittent, if any, participation in physical activity. As she explained: "Once the kids were older, I was sort of driving to work, sitting at work, driving home and collapsing in a heap...I always worked quite long days. I was always the one who got thrown out by the caretaker." Although Leanne described enjoying her job, she reflected that the level of stress within it was detrimental to her health. Providing the photograph below (Figure 11, overleaf), she explained:

This photo is of the village summer fete when I was about to retire from headship of the local school. We had taught the children to Maypole dance and they put on a display. A headteacher's job is very varied and on this occasion my job was to stand on the Maypole (a converted netball post) so that it didn't tip over when the children were dancing. This was a very happy day but I was very aware of how fat, tired and unfit I was and I felt ready to retire in a few weeks time... I think, in retrospect, I really was in serious danger of having a heart attack. Because the job was so demanding. And I look back at these photographs – there were a lot of photographs taken of me at the time, sort of in the build up to my retirement. I look at them now and think, 'My goodness, it's a good job you left when you did!'



*Leanne as head teacher, holding up the Maypole*

*Figure 11*

### **7.1.3 Retirement as opportunity**

Continuing in the same vein, Leanne reflected at length about her relatively recent retirement. She provided the following photograph (Figure 12, overleaf), with the information that it was taken on the first day of her retirement. She explained: “I felt relieved, exhausted and both excited and anxious about the future.” Her first “project” (her word) was to go to the gym every day – an act inspired by her daughter’s upcoming wedding and the prospect of being photographed/ “on display.”



*Leanne and husband, first day of retirement*

*Figure 12*

Going to the gym every day was something that Leanne described never having time for when she was working 12+ hour days. She elaborated by saying:

I retired in August, and my daughter got married in December. So, if you're going to have your photograph taken you've got to look as good as you can. See, it's never really to do with health! [*laughs*]. There's always another reason. And usually it's because I'm going to be on public display, and I can't stand the sight of myself. So, my daughter bought us a gym membership at Fitness First for a retirement present. And I went every day. From the day I finished work to when we came down here for the wedding. And I lost a lot of weight. And I became very fit. And it was the only thing I did. You know, I was sort of, 'What am I going to do when I give up work? Oh, I'll go to the gym.' And that almost filled the space.

Having time to fill and wanting to look good for her daughter's wedding provided the incentive for Leanne's newfound motivation toward physical activity. However, retirement did not mark the end of her contentious relationship with her body and her bodily capabilities. Her self-consciousness remained, shaping the activities that she sought out and/or continued to engage in. For example, she left Fitness First for a smaller gym where she feels more comfortable:

It's sort of a branch from the doctor's surgery... And they've also got a gym. So for people who've had heart attacks and so on, who have GP referrals, that's the gym they use and they don't have to pay. But you can also join the gym if you want to. I mean, it's not big. But it's nice. And it's not – It's not the lycra brigade. You know, I don't feel exceptionally overweight, or ugly, or rubbish when I'm there. I really like

going there.

Evident within this admission is that Leanne continues to evaluate her body (both how it looks and what it is able to do) by comparing herself to others – and, more often than not, finds herself lacking. Instead of putting herself in a position where she is likely to feel badly about herself, she has adapted by avoiding situations where comparisons can readily take place. As she recounts: “I... I know, I’ll sound pathetic. But to be honest, anything that I do in a group...I’m always conscious that I’m the weakest member of the group.” Not only does this mean seeking out environments within which comparisons are less harsh (i.e., the smaller, GP-surgery based gym), this also affects the activities that Leanne participates in – or chooses not to. As one example, her husband and daughter had gone on a long cycle ride the previous weekend and had invited her along. Explaining her choice not to go, she said:

You know, life isn’t a competition. But generally speaking, people who are sporty are also competitive. And my husband is very competitive. Um, and wants to set himself challenges. And so if we’re walking, he has to really try with every ounce of his will to be positive towards me. And wait for me, and encourage me, and go at my pace. He hates it. He doesn’t say that he hates it, but you know, when you’ve been with somebody for 20 years as we have, you just know. You don’t need to say it, really... I mean, I wouldn’t have gone on that bike ride this weekend. Not because I didn’t think I could do it, although I don’t know whether I could. But because I know if I had gone, I would have been dictating the pace. And that’s not fair.

At the same time, however, Leanne is not content with relying on herself alone to motivate her engagement in physical activity. Ongoing pressure from her doctor as well as from family members to lose weight as well as an increasing awareness of potential health issues as she gets older means that Leanne is now much more attentive to her health and the need to engage in (more) physical activity. As she says, “I’m conscious – I’m conscious that I need to be doing something all the time.” As such, she is continually looking for opportunities that fit with her unique and now long-engrained hang-ups and predilections.

#### **7.1.4 The WRN**

Relocating to the South West from the Midlands following her retirement, Leanne and her husband settled in a small village not far from where their youngest daughter resides. Though closer to some family, the move essentially meant starting anew, building and developing new social relationships and networks. Leanne identified physical activity as one avenue of doing this, and set about trying various classes and exercise groups in her new area – “to kill two birds with one stone,” she said. Ultimately, a willingness to try these new

things on for size was what led her to the WRN, with some help from her daughter. She explained:

I was round at my daughter's house one day. And I'd been going to this Keep Fit class, and I was really appalled at the teacher there. And so I'd decided that I wasn't going to go anymore. But I knew that I needed to do something. And [my daughter] said to me, 'Oh, have you heard of the WRN? It's designed for beginners. So, why don't you do that?' And she showed me – she brought up the web page, which of course had the phone number on, and she said, 'Look, this is it. Read about it.' And I said, 'Oh, yeah, that does look – That looks just the thing for me,' you know. 'If you can't run, come to our running group' – That's me. [laughs]. I said, 'I'll give them a call.' And she said, 'Here you are, here's the phone.' [laughs]. So, I rang the main leader for the group. And she said all of the things that I wanted to hear. About the fact that nobody's going to put you under pressure. We want you to learn how to run. Everybody can run. Have you ever seen a playground with children who can't run? Uh, if you've never run in your life before, you can run. And we will help you to do it. And it's not a competition, it's not a race. And we'll support you. So I thought, that's it. Yeah, sold. So I went.

Her daughter's encouragement combined with the language on the WRN website – and echoed by the leader during that first phone call – worked to hail Leanne into the group. Emphasising support, a non-competitive atmosphere, and inclusivity rather than elitism, Leanne's response says it all: "That looks just the thing for me."

Her 'fit' with the WRN ethos did not completely transfer into practice, however. The group that Leanne joined was the regular beginners group rather than the ten-week beginner's-specific course. While targeted for beginners, this group consisted of women who had joined as beginners, but had yet to move on to a non-beginners group despite the fact they had now been running a long while and had become quite competent. Leanne elaborated on this by saying:

That was one of my big disappointments with it. That it was sold as a beginner's group. And I went along and most of the people were younger than I am. And they had all been beginners, in so far as they'd never done running for a hobby. But because of their age, they would have done things like cross-country running at school. Which I had never done - And also, because the leaders of that particular group were very nice people, and because most of the girls who were doing it were young mothers who had to fit running in with the rest of their lives. So they – For me, I could go any night. But for them, they'd made arrangements with husbands, babysitters, whatever, that this was the night they went running. And the leader used to say to me, 'Really these girls ought to be in another group now, but they won't leave.' And I can understand why they wouldn't leave. But it doesn't help if you really were a beginner, and really not particularly talented, and really didn't know what you were doing. It meant that you demanded a lot of attention. And that's kind of the last thing that you want.

This perceived conspicuousness infiltrated Leanne's WRN experience, making her hyper-conscious of herself, her body, and her abilities. As was palpable in the words she recorded in her diary (see chapter six, section 6.2.1), she fought weekly internal battles prior to the group sessions, trying to bolster her nerve and convince herself to go. She elaborated on this perpetual struggle by saying:

I would dread going. I was afraid of not being able to do it. But it was my own fault really. It was because I let it get to me. I take everything to heart. If I did have a thicker skin, then it wouldn't have bothered me so much. I would just think, well, I've paid my money, same as everybody else. If I want to go at a different pace, I'll go at a different pace. But I was always thinking – Oh, you know, I don't want to hold them up. And I don't want to do this, and I don't want – I don't want to be a nuisance in the group.

Leanne was extremely quick to assume all responsibility for her less-than-pleasurable experience with the WRN beginner's group. By her own admission, she was "hyper-sensitive," and certainly was not treated negatively by anybody within the group. In the contrary, she described her running group compatriots as "really kind" to her, and "very, very encouraging."

That said, interspersed with Leanne's recollections of support and encouragement within the group were a few instances where she found the WRN ethos not entirely represented in practice. Likely more apparent to her, given her self-confessed hyper-sensitivity, Leanne illustrated several examples that she noted during her participation. The first of these occurred within a 5 kilometre charity run that she had tentatively agreed to take part in, alongside the rest of her WRN group. It was a warm – or in her words "sweltering" - June day, and Leanne had never participated in an event of this type or distance before. Although she acknowledged that completing the run was a great achievement, one ill-timed exchange stayed with her, somewhat dulling her accomplishment:

Well, I ran some of it and walked some of it. And one of the leaders of our group ran beside me and walked beside me for a lot of it – a high proportion of it. Because you won't be surprised to hear that I was quite close to the back and away from the rest of our WRN group, very early on. Um, and she was very, very encouraging. I mean, she was just so kind. I couldn't even speak too highly of her. But she said – Of course, it's always the bad things you remember, isn't it? And she said to me, 'My husband won't believe how long it's taken me to do this run today!' And I thought, ooh. [laughs].

Thus even in the supposedly supportive, non-competitive world of the WRN, Leanne was hyper-aware of her positioning with respect to the rest of the group, and the 'laughable' speed at which she was going. She also recounted another occasion, not involving her

personally, which hinted at the existence of a hierarchy of goals and successes within the WRN:

There were two girls who went off and did a run. Because they were always telling us about these runs that were on, if you wanted to go and do them. Um, and she'd done – would it be 10k? And she'd got a medallion, she came the next Tuesday with her medallion. And we all made a big fuss of her. And then almost as an afterthought, "Oh, and so and so did the 5k as well." And I just thought, well, that's such a shame. Because for that girl, that was a huge... You know, it's like – I used to teach swimming. And it's, when a child swims a width, that's the big achievement. Not when they swim 20 lengths. That's just building on it. It's that first width, when you take your feet off the bottom and you get to the other side, isn't it?

In the context of what was meant to be a beginner's group, this open valorisation of one accomplishment over another was revealing. Having recently completed her own 5k, Leanne was of the opinion that this commanded more celebration and recognition than was offered here. For her, a focus on the longer distance achievement to the detriment of the shorter reinforced the inherent competitive nature of running and a previously concealed emphasis on progression within the WRN.

Leanne did not consciously decide to stop attending her WRN group. Although events such as those outlined above likely did not attenuate her unease and self-consciousness, she volunteered many other reasons for withdrawing from the group. Family commitments necessitated that she was out of town for several weeks: her mother needed assistance moving into a care home. Her husband had pneumonia, and a bad back. She went on holiday to America to visit one of her daughters who now lives there. Quite simply, as she said, "We had quite a few things going on." One of the main selling points of the WRN is that it does not demand unrealistic commitment – women may dip in and out of sessions, only paying for a weekly session when they are in attendance. In theory, this should have meant that Leanne could return to her group once her responsibilities, holidays, and other commitments had passed. However, for Leanne, the issue was not structural but emotional. She elaborated on this by saying:

With the Women's Running Network, every single week it was – I had all the same feelings going on in my body that you have if you're going for an interview for a really important job. And I just – You know, the flight or fight thing? I was definitely in flight mode. For at least two hours before I went. And I had to make myself go. So it was very easy to not go. If I had an excuse not to. And then to go back is such a huge thing, isn't it? When you've not gone for – When you were going every week and you were scared stiff, and then you leave it for 6 months... To go back is almost impossible, really.

Leanne never went back to the WRN. It is fair to say her experiences and her feelings about the group are mixed. On the one hand, she realised that it was not for her. In her words, “I still prefer the things where I’m not noticeable. So that’s something else I’ve learned from it, as much about myself than anything.” On the other hand, however, Leanne’s brief experience within the WRN did encourage her to challenge long-believed notions about herself and what she was and was not physically capable of doing. As she said:

I’ve spent most of my life saying, ‘I can’t run.’ And I didn’t run. I never ran. And I did leave it knowing that I *can* run. Even if it’s only for one minute in five. So, even when I went to the gym every day, I never ran on the treadmill. I walked. I walked faster and faster and faster, but I always walked. I was frightened to run, in case I lost my balance and fell over. When I go to the gym now, I always set myself – or have set for me – a program on the treadmill where I am running at least some of the time. And I will go running with my neighbour. Knowing that we shall only be within sight of each other for the first two minutes. But that doesn’t matter. And that’s really a complete turnaround for me, in many ways. So it was successful.

Further, Leanne claimed that her experience with the WRN offered benefits beyond the mere expansion of her running abilities. Providing the picture below (Figure 13), she reflected how her efforts since moving to the South West three years ago, which include joining WRN, have given her the confidence to believe that she can attempt physical activities such as a recent ten mile cycle ride in France.



*Leanne, cycling in France*

**Figure 13**

Reiterating how far she has come, Leanne wrapped up our interview by speaking about the lasting impact of her WRN experience:



Because it wasn't just 'I can't run.' It was, if it's to do with sport, I can't do it. It was bigger than that. And running is – If you like, running is the key to most sport. So if you can actually run... it opens up a few more options. I guess I just don't dismiss things as easily. I'm more willing to have a go.

## 7.2 Summary and reflections

Throughout this chapter I have illustrated how Leanne has drawn upon one, very limited, version of a story about her perceived lack of athleticism. This story has been consequential for her participation in – and perceptions of – physical activity not only as a child but over the entire course of her life. Early experiences marked her as both weak and slow, not only in her eyes but (and perhaps more importantly) in the eyes of others. This was an identity that she did not resist, and indeed continues to call forth in order to justify first her lack of participation and then her withdrawal from various forms of physical activity over the years. As the years went by, metanarratives surrounding health and fitness infiltrated the public consciousness, highlighting the importance of physical activity and a personal responsibility to engage in it. Spurred on the weight gain that she associated with childbirth and a sedentary lifestyle, Leanne described several attempts to overcome her preconceptions about her abilities – each time faltering or fizzling out. She was quick to offer several (popular) rationalisations for each of these unsuccessful forays: a lack of time, reduced accessibility, poor instruction, and so on. Upon further examination, all of these linked back to a deeply engrained self-consciousness – a fear of being conspicuous, of being the slowest/weakest/least coordinated. However, retirement and relocation took away many of these excuses. Still bombarded with messages from numerous sources regarding the necessity of physical activity for the sake of her health, Leanne resolved to continue trying. Hailed into the WRN by their public narratives emphasising their embodiment of a unique, non-competitive space for true beginners, she made contact. Despite the promise the group held, her experience was mixed. Familiar feelings of fear, self-consciousness and embarrassment resurfaced. Persuading herself to attend each session was a major triumph, and when circumstances conspired to prevent her attendance for several subsequent weeks she felt unable to return – both physically and emotionally. However, although no longer attending the group, Leanne remained positive about the lasting impact of her participation in the WRN. Her short time with the group and the successes that she experienced therein (i.e., the 5km charity run) provided her with the narrative resources to imagine, and to story herself, in a different light: as capable of doing something she had never envisaged possible. In this way, I suggest that although the WRN was not for her, it did play some part in creating a 'fissure' in Leanne's narrative foreclosure towards running in particular, and

physical activity in general. This fissure has not reversed her foreclosure entirely, but has provided a gap through which some additional narrative resources have entered her library, so to speak. In short, Leanne left the WRN with the knowledge that not only *can* she run, she also has the capacity to '*try on*' other forms of physical activity – imagining herself in subject positions and able to experience things that she thought previously impossible.

## 8. Justine's story

*“Stories do not simply report past events. Stories project possible futures, and those projections affect what comes to be, although this will rarely be the future projected by the story. Stories do not just have plots. Stories work to emplot lives: they offer a plot that makes some particular future not only plausible but also compelling... Stories learned early in life have an especially compelling force, but **growing up never ends**... Not least among human freedoms is the ability to tell the story differently and to begin to live according to that different story.”*

-Arthur Frank (2010, pp. 9-10)

### 8.0 Introduction

In this chapter, Justine's story is considered. Like Leanne (see chapter seven), Justine had spent the majority of her life relatively inactive – foreclosed to any notion that she may outgrow her perceived inadequacy for physical endeavours. In contrast to Leanne, however, Justine first joined the WRN via their ten-week beginner's 'learn-to-run' course. I was fortunate enough to attend and participate for the duration of the same ten-week course. Although this was before we had much interaction (and certainly prior to identifying her as a case study), many of my notes refer to Justine: her progress throughout the course, and the accompanying growth in both her physical ability and her confidence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Justine's WRN experience prompted a near complete reversal of her previously foreclosed athletic identity. That said, it was important here to avoid presenting Justine's transformation in an overly simplistic manner, as a 'before and after' story wherein her previous 'self' was outgrown and discarded. As Davies et al. (2004) suggest, the self as a noun (stable and relatively fixed) is moved to the self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape *in* and *through* the speaking. Justine's story is thus one about the complex, murky, and always unfinished process of identity, or 'selfhood'.

To represent this complexity, I have written Justine's story into a 'messy text', moving back and forth between description, interpretation, and voice (Clough, 1999; Denzin, 1997; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Marcus, 1994). This type of writing strategy is a "powerful means of conveying complexity and ambiguity without prompting a single, closed, convergent reading" (Smith, 2002, p.14). Up until this point, I have primarily represented participant's stories through modified-realist tales (Sparkes, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988). In doing so, I have endeavoured to place participant voices in the foreground. As a result, at times my shaping influences and 'visibility' as researcher may have faded into the background. This has been deliberate, and presented in conjunction with 'critical tales' that read the data according to my theoretical investments – as well as the assertion that I do not claim to represent 'truth' as it would be universally interpreted (see chapter three, section 3.1). However, as Diversi (1998) argues, employing a writing strategy such as 'messy text' may "render lived

experience with more verisimilitude than does the traditional realist text, for it enables the reader to feel that interpretation is never finished or complete” (p. 132). The genre thus becomes an opportunity and space where one may relinquish the role of the “declarative author persuader” and attempt to write as, and be represented by, an artfully-persuasive storyteller (Smith, 2002, p. 14; Barone, 1995; Frank, 2010; Sparkes, 2002).

A further reason for making such a representational choice is a desire to destabilise the (Western) dominant traditional discourse of how a self-story *should* look, with the presence of a plot that turns the story (and the self) into a linear, structured whole (Sermijn, Devlieger & Loots, 2008). Messy texts can provide a useful means by which to construct an embodied tale, enabling a glimpse of how Justine’s stories are not just told *about* the body but *through* it (Frank, 1995). In so doing, it has the potential to evoke an emotional texture, shifting body-self relationships, and the corporeality of lived bodies, affecting readers at an immediate and emotional level. Such an approach thus allows me to represent ‘the lived border’ between everyday life where people construct their reality and the social discourses that guide them in their reality making (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), and to give expression to the complex dialectic of body, selves, and culture. With this in mind, I highlight Justine’s conceptions of health, ageing and physical activity and how these have evolved, expanded, and been influenced over time. The text in section 8.1 is organised into three sub-sections: *challenging assumptions* (8.1.1), *small changes, big transformation* (8.1.2), and *a shared (WRN) story* (8.1.3). Although there is brief theoretical commentary interspersed throughout, Justine’s voice is presented as forefront.

## **8.1 Justine**

### **8.1.1 Challenging assumptions: I can’t run ... Can I?**

One, I’m too old.

And two, well, *I can’t* run.

So that’s it. I’m not going to be any good at it. I’ve *tried* it, I can’t do it. I just *can’t* do it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Justine recounted trying to take up running on three different occasions in her twenties and thirties, each time without success or progress. Undoubtedly, there was something about the activity that was appealing to her. Whether it was that it was out of doors or that many of her peers were trying and enjoying it, Justine found herself drawn to

the sport – only to be continually disappointed with her efforts, reinforcing her extant beliefs about her capabilities and affinities.

Minutes into her efforts, she would find herself struggling for breath, the muscles in her legs resisting and complaining with every step. Discouraged, she would yield to the negative and painful bodily feedback, believing herself unable to continue. Each time this happened, her conceptions of her own (lack of) physical ability were confirmed. She would resign herself to the conviction that, simply, she did not have the capability to run, or to become a runner. Justine felt that her experiences confirmed her belief that you were either born with a natural aptitude for running, or you were not – and she, to her regret, fell into the latter category. As time progressed, now in her late forties, her beliefs became ever more cemented. Certainly, she thought, beginning to run would be more difficult the older she was – if not blatantly impossible.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Fidgeting on the extra swivel chair in my office, Justine explained:*

I just couldn't work out how to do it properly. And I because I couldn't do it properly, I thought, well, *I can't* do it. I didn't think it was something you could learn. I thought running was something you can either do or you can't. What didn't register was actually that there's actually a right way of doing it. And I think that's what I didn't know. And I had no support, I was trying to do it all myself. And of course, like a lot of things, there's more to it than what you sort of think – I suddenly realised it's just not a case of putting a pair of shoes on and going for a run.

And the other thing was the age aspect. You know, I'm 48. I'm too old to take up running. And that's honestly what I thought: 'I'm too old to be doing this. I'll look a right idiot.' I felt that running was a young people's sport. And I was too old for it. Starting something when you're older is more daunting, isn't it? Especially when you haven't done an awful lot of activity when you were younger.

Can you go from doing very little to doing one of the most difficult things?

\* \* \* \* \*

According to Laz (2003), age can be understood as something that is accomplished or performed. She writes: "We all accomplish age; we perform our own age constantly, but we also give meaning to other ages and to age in general in our actions and interactions, our beliefs and words and feelings, and our social policies" (p. 506). If, as Laz (2003) argues, the accomplishment of age is *social* and *collective*, then we need to attend to the social settings and contexts in which people "act their age" and to the variety of resources that individuals draw on, use, and/or transform in the process of accomplishment. These

resources can be institutional (i.e., the law, the media, medical knowledge and practices). They may also be cultural (i.e., community standards and beliefs, local culture, kingship networks, etc.). Lastly, they may be highly personal and potentially idiosyncratic (i.e., interpersonal relationships, physical bodies, and biographies). As we “do age,” says Laz (2003, p. 507), “we draw on this array of resources and make use of them in complex ways that are neither entirely random nor completely patterned or predictable.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I was able to speak to one of the co-founders of the WRN. She was doing a talk at my work. This was actually before I even joined up with the running group, I was just thinking about it. So I went, just to get an idea of what it was all about. And she was telling us about the health aspects of it, and the benefits. And I’ll always remember putting my hand up and asking a question:

“Can everybody – Is there anybody that can’t run? Or is there any reason why you can’t run?”

“No.”

“I suffer from asthma, though.”

“No excuse.”

“Oh...”

\* \* \* \* \*

What’s it going to be like? What are we going to have to do? (*This is a bit scary!!*)

Then she said, “Walk a little bit, run a little bit.” (*Oh! That is quite easy, really.*)

I am completely knackered. And my asthma – I can hardly breathe! (*I’m not convinced... Maybe I just can’t do this.*)

She said, “No, you CAN do it.” (*I guess I’ll give it a second go...*)

Nope, still hard! (*Is this for me? Am I going to be able to do it anymore?*)

\* \* \* \* \*

Nerves... Anxiety... Fear... Insecurity... Lack... Failure...

\* \* \* \* \*

*Fieldnotes, February 23<sup>d</sup> 2010*

Following the speed session today, we gathered together and headed back at a slow jog. No matter what direction we originally head from our starting point, our return journey requires that we scale a hill. It tends to be the same hill each time – so it has become quite notorious amongst the group! It lies just before the finishing point, tantalising the tired women with its' simultaneous proximity to completion and breath-sucking inclination. A seasoned runner wouldn't think twice about this hill – perhaps wouldn't even call it a hill! – but for this group, it is an adversary.

The first week or two, we walked up. Then, we progressed to run-walking in measured spurts – using lamp posts beside the pavement as a guide, the leaders encouraged each participant to slowly increase the amount they were running versus walking. This being the 7th week, most of the women can now run the whole hill – not quickly, mind you, and they're puffing at the top. However, there are still a few who struggle.

As per usual, when approaching the hill, I take up a position near the back of the group. T (the leader) is running back there with Justine, who is quiet but looks forward apprehensively. Sensing her mindset, T says, "Don't worry – just one lamp post at a time, okay?" Nodding, Justine sets off upward at a slow but steady pace. Halfway up, T turns and shoots me a knowing look, gesturing toward Justine's progress. Justine is looking down at her feet, but is still going strong – no idea where she is on the hill, no pausing for breath or walking breaks.

We're nearing the apex now. I catch Justine's eye and she's still focused, breathing hard, but I spot the very beginnings of a smile at the corners of her mouth. The others have all stopped at the top and are clapping encouragement, cheering her on. Five more steps, and she's there. She turns and looks toward the bottom, then to T – "I didn't have to stop! I have never not had to stop!" Enthusiastically, T replies, "I know! I was wondering if you realised. Amazing!! We'll have you sprinting up those next!" Justine's face falls. Then she laughs, and looks down at the hill again – her nemesis for the past 6 weeks. "I can't believe it," she says. "I really, truly never thought I'd be able to do that."

Putting her arm around Justine's shoulder, T addresses the group, "Well, none of you ever thought you could do that, did you? And look at you now – in such a short time as well – well done, ladies!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Pride! Success! Triumph! Delight! Accomplishment!

\* \* \* \* \*

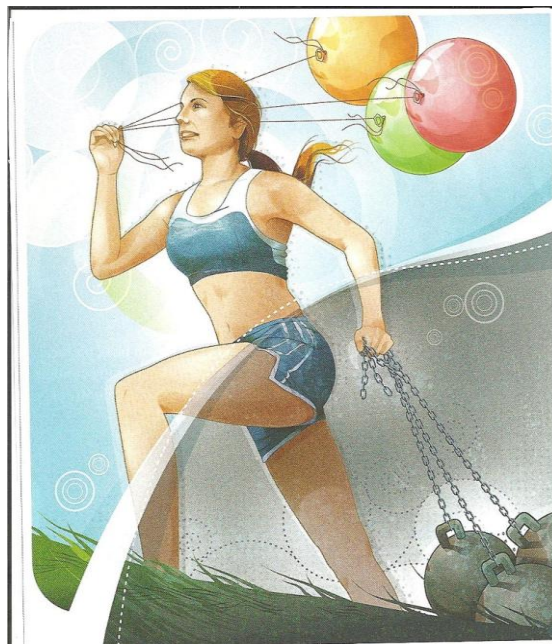
Let's bear in mind that at beginning of this year I couldn't run down the road without getting out of breath...You know, if anybody said to me 20, 30 years ago, 'You'll be running 5k races,' never mind 10k, I would have just laughed.

*Laughed in their face.*

\* \* \* \* \*

So it's just such a feeling of pride. I've achieved something that I never thought possible... You know, going from somebody that didn't touch sports. My sister was always the sporty one. I mean, she did tennis and gymnastics and all this sort of stuff. I was always the one that sort of did the office work. And was always Miss Pretty, the secretary. And I was always going to be the one that was going to have a family and everything like that. And my sister was the sporty one, the go-getter one. But now it's gone totally the opposite way. You know, she did the Race for Life with me, but that was an absolute push. I was the one actually pushing her!

I don't know... I just found that I absolutely love it. So I found this picture, in a magazine, and I had to bring it to show you (see figure 14). It made me laugh. That – That's me.



*Justine: Me in two halves*

**Figure 14**

\* \* \* \* \*

*Fieldnotes, September 13<sup>th</sup> 2011*

Helping out at this year's Powderham 10k this past weekend, I saw Justine run past my checkpoint. It's been a few months since our last interview and she looks fantastic – all smiles, toned and focused. I noticed that my sentiments towards her have shifted dramatically from supportive, if not somewhat condescending ('Good for her!') to admiration, even envy. She looks like a 'proper' runner! I wrote her an email afterward, and said as much.



Delighted, she replied almost immediately. Attaching a picture of herself post-race (see Figure 15), she wrote:

*It really makes me think, when I remember what I was like before to what I am now. It almost feels surreal. My weight's better, my health's better. And it makes me realise what I can actually do to control my health, to control my body... Because my mum suffers from heart problems, diabetes, high blood pressure and all that stuff. So it's made me more aware, and I see now that I can do something to prevent that for myself.*

*And not just the way I look has changed. It's also the way I used to care about how I look. Because before, I would never walk out of the front door without make-up on. I was always very much a 'everything's got to be in place' sort of person. But, for example, now I go out for a race with no make-up on. None at all. Normally, the thought of walking out the front door without make-up on would be unthinkable! But now – Like on Sunday, I was out of bed, running gear on, off down to Powderham, and didn't care. And I even had my photo taken – I've attached it here.*

*You know, before I started running, I had a bit of an issue with cameras. Now I can't say they're suddenly my favourite, but at the end of the day I didn't mind somebody taking a photograph of me in my running gear, without any make-up on. It didn't faze me. And again, to have done that even six months ago, to be quite honest, I would have been hiding behind people, looking desperately for layers to put on. So it's absolutely fantastic, I can't say enough about it!*



**Justine post 10k**

**Figure 15**

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tellers of quest stories use the metaphor of initiation, implicitly and explicitly...The quest narrative tells self-consciously of being transformed; undergoing transformation is a significant dimension of the storyteller's responsibility” (Frank, 1995, p. 118). Quest narratives are about finding (or gaining) insight, and part of the lesson is learning to see the

ordinary as already containing all the resources one needs. Inherent in quest stories are a sense of mythic heroism – wherein the protagonist tells a tale of ‘conquering’ – not by force of arms but by perseverance (Frank, 1995).

\* \* \* \* \*

### 8.1.2 Small changes, big transformation

As time went on, sort of four or five weeks in, my breathing actually started getting better. And rather than being like *gasp...*

*...gasp...*

*...gasp...*

...halfway through the run, I would find I was breathing a lot easier. I was recovering a lot quicker.

*If I'm like this after four or five weeks, what am I going to be like after ten?*

And as time got on it got better and better. And that really then gave me the push. And come the sixth, seventh week...

Yes!

And I was actually losing weight.

*If it's like this after such a short space of time, what's it going to be like if I keep going?*

\* \* \* \* \*

When I went to Cyprus this year, I went parasailing. And I hate heights. Absolutely hate heights. I'm scared stiff of them. But I went parasailing. Which is starting off like this:



**Justine: Parasailing #1**

**Figure 16**

Going up higher:



*Justine: Parasailing #2*

*Figure 17*

Going up higher:



*Justine: Parasailing #3*

*Figure 18*

And going up higher:



*Justine: Parasailing #4*

*Figure 19*

And for somebody that's scared of heights...!! Last year, I said I'd love to try it, but I don't think I could do that. But this year, I went for it. Looking at these pictures now and seeing myself up there again, that's confidence. And I've got no doubt that's running that's done that. Because I can now run, I can do that, it's almost like, well if I can do that, I can do this. Yes, my stomach turned over a few times. I did feel a little bit queasy. But I got up there. And I look at those now and I just think, 'I'm so proud of myself.' Because I feel like I've actually achieved something. Because if I can do something I couldn't do before, like running, then what's to say I can't do parasailing?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Blimey, Justine, your bum's got smaller!"

Yes! Somebody actually noticed! And mum, too, who's always been so critical. I can still hear the familiar refrain:

"You have got a big bum, dear, haven't you? You take after me."

So for her to actually sort of say, you know, "Your bottom has got a little bit smaller!" Wow. You know, not major, not mega. There's no danger of it disappearing! But I guess it is sort of slightly noticeable...?

\* \* \* \* \*

The day before yesterday, I cycled into work and ran home. In the rain. And it's about four and a half miles. And then yesterday, ran in and cycled home. So I left my bike at work and did it the opposite way. I could never have done that before. A couple of years ago, even the thought of doing that...! Yes, I used to ride my bike occasionally. But the thought of running to work? You know, I mean, was an absolute no go. It would have scared me stiff. And one day last week, I cycled into work –and I always used to use my inhaler before I left home? This one morning, I actually forgot to use it. And it wasn't until I got to work, I put my bike up and I thought, 'I didn't use my inhaler before I came out! And I'm not out of breath!'

\* \* \* \* \*

Too old to run? Out the window.

Now it's, "Hey, look what I can do!! I might be 48, but look what I can do!!"

And when I hear someone say, "I couldn't possibly do that" –

I get to say, "Well, I didn't think I'd be able to do it either!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Really, what I learned was how to push myself. The big difference this time was when I hit those ten minutes where I felt like I wanted to give up, I learned how to push through that. A little bit more, a little bit longer each time. And I know now that I *can* push through that. And

that was just absolutely fantastic. You know, it's learning to feel more in control. Knowing what your body is capable of, and that it's a lot stronger than you think.

\* \* \* \* \*

Embodied knowledge is knowledge held within the tissue of the body. It is a somatic, physical knowing which comes from direct experience (Blackler, 1995). Sometimes referred to as know-how (Brown & Duguid, 1998), this type of knowledge was originally defined by Polanyi in 1966. It refers to intuitive, hard to define knowledge that is largely experience based (Gendlin, 1992). Because of this, embodied knowledge is often context dependent and personal in nature. It is difficult to communicate and deeply rooted in action, commitment, and involvement (Nonaka, 1994). Embodied knowledge is thus fundamentally practical, situated and emotionally charged, and skills held as embodied knowledge are taught through observation, imitation, and practice (Nonaka, 1994). In chapter six, section 6.3, I referred to this process as 'embodied learning', wherein the act of running gradually becomes embodied knowledge, with beginners learning and retaining new meanings and acquiring skills that are henceforth 'stored' in the body (Yarnal et al., 2006).

\* \* \* \* \*

There's something that my first leader said to me once. She's a great believer in that the majority of running is actually mental. It's actually mind over matter. And I was still convinced that, you know, it's your physical ability. But I must admit, I think as time goes on, I am thinking more and more now that a lot of it is psychological. That you just need to learn to push yourself psychologically. Because I kept thinking I was going to be aching, or I'd get out of breath if I did it. And I've just sort of pushed myself and pushed myself. And positive thinking, 'I *can* do this, I *can* do this.' I'm not getting out of breath anymore. You know, so I think there's something in it. Yes, I think physical ability does come in, to a certain extent. I think it has to. But I do now think a big part of it is psychological. And I think, as I'm learning that, this is why I've been able to gradually build up my distance. I mean, now that I am able to run the four miles from home, I've got over that psychological barrier. I used to think I could only do three miles. So, you know, I was like, 'I can't try four yet!' Now my thinking is switched to, well, if I can do three, I can do four. And if I did four, I'm not far off five!

\* \* \* \* \*

*Standing by the window, Justine gazed out at the uninspiring view of the nearby building opposite and reflected:*

I actually had a blister a few weeks ago. And my leader said to me, she goes, "Oh, you're a proper runner now! You've had a blister!" [*laughs*]. So I'm learning about socks, and getting proper socks now. And sort of gradually learning about all of the little things like that... I mean, up until a couple months ago, I wouldn't even go and buy myself some proper tops and shorts. I did get decent running shoes, yes, but that was important. But I wouldn't

have dreamt of going out, spending money on tops and shorts. I made do with what I had. Because I thought, 'I might give it up. It might not last.' And I did half think that it might be a one-minute wonder. And give it two or three months and the novelty would wear off. But it didn't.

Now that I have running gear, I actually *look* the part as well. I like that. I'm proud of that. That people might say, "Oh, she must be quite serious about running!" I feel good about that now. It was intimidating at first, because I didn't think I would be able to run very well and I'd look a bit of an idiot doing it. But now I want people to know I am taking it seriously, and I don't care what I look like.

So from being an absolute non-runner to – Well, I'm buying running magazines now. I mean, I go into a running shop now to ask advice. You know, the thought of walking into a running shop – a specialist running shop, I mean, wow! This is me. Now I can walk in and say, "This is what I'm doing." And I even went in the other day to ask advice about how often you should replace shoes. Because I didn't know. That wouldn't even have crossed my mind before. You know, apart from the fact I would never have run enough to actually let them wear out anyway. I mean, a pair of running shoes would last me 12 years. But I was thinking, 'I'm doing quite a lot of running, I wonder how long before I ought to start thinking about changing them.'

\* \* \* \* \*

### 8.1.3 A shared (WRN) story

I saw the running group advertised through work. I think some people see the word 'running', and it's immediately: 'Nah. Don't do running.' You know, delete the email, throw out the pamphlet, whatever. Which, put my hands up, two, three years ago, I'd have done exactly the same. I would think:

*Running? Ugh, don't think so.*

But, although I've never been any good at it, I've always been interested in running. So I read it, I looked at it:

*Oh, running. Right, what have we got here?*

And actually started reading it. But I was very hesitant.

*Hmm... I've never got on well with running. I couldn't do it. I didn't enjoy it. I won't enjoy it again.*

Then a couple of the girls at work, they said, 'We're going to go over and try it'.

*Ugh. Well, I'll go over and try it. If I don't like it first off, I'll... You know, I won't bother.*

\* \* \* \* \*

As Donnelly and Young (1988) identify that in order to be 'selected and recruited' into a running/sporting identity, one must have the following prerequisites: opportunity, motivation, interest, proximity and life circumstances. Similarly, Butler (1997b) asserts that

in order for interpellation to be effective, certain factors must be in place. Butler's "readiness to turn" (Butler, 1997b, p.107) refers to a vulnerability to being interpellated (Althusser, 1971) – or some openness or susceptibility to the authority doing the (narrative) hailing. As described in chapter four (section 4.3.2), this readiness or openness may be derived from the promise of a certain identity, the right timing, a guilty conscience, or some or all of the above.

From a narrative perspective, Frank (2010) imagines stories as a tacit system of associations that makes particular aspects of the world seem worth attending to and suggests default evaluations of what is selected. Stories thus work as people's *selection/evaluation* guidance system, providing them with a guidance system that directs attention within the world. Those not 'ready to turn' are interpellated into the story differently (Althusser, 1971) – unlikely to engage with the story, and/or merely letting the story pass on by (Frank, 2006).

\* \* \* \* \*

*"So what was it about the WRN group then, that made it so different from your previous attempts at running?" Justine pondered my question, blowing on her tea in an effort to make it cool enough to drink:*

A lot of it was just being able to meet up with other people. It was actually being in a group. I didn't think things like that existed. I thought if you want to run, you go out by yourself and that's it. And also knowing they were beginners as well. I think there were two or three that had perhaps done a bit of running before. But it was being in a group of people in exactly the same situation as I was. You know, some people had never run before. Some people, like me, had perhaps sort of tried it but didn't get on with it.

And it was very supportive. I mean, I knew for a fact I was going to be pretty much at the back of the group. And I didn't come with any expectations. Um, initially, the first week or two, I was like, 'Ugh, I'm the slowest. I'm always at the back of the group'. But the leader still made me feel like I was part of it. She got the message across that you go at your own pace. You know, you don't try to keep up with other people. But at the same time, don't try to hold back from others. So it was having that encouragement. And I got a lot of encouragement from the others in the group as well. Which I thought was absolutely fantastic.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh, hey Justine? Are you going to running group today?"

"Oh, I think I might not... I don't know that I'll bother. I'm still sore from last time, and I have a lot of work that I need to get done today."

"Oh... Oh, I don't want to go by myself. Maybe I won't go either."

“Ugh... That’s not – Okay, okay, I’ll come with you! If I don’t go today, I probably won’t go back to be honest.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Human beings are a collection of stories – they accumulate stories over a lifetime, and when they are given the opportunity, they select an appropriate story and tell it (Schank, 1990). ‘Appropriateness’ is determined by a variety of measures – primarily “familiarity, emotion, and the potential for a shared viewpoint, and seeking approval” (Schank, 1990, p. 135). Understanding, in its deepest sense, depends upon shared stories. Parry and Doan (1994, p. 50) write that ‘shared’ or ‘colliding’ stories are important to individual stories: “People’s sense of being part of a shared story is connected to the feeling that they exist within some story larger than themselves.” If we share the same stories, we feel a part of a common group (Haslam et al., 2009; Jenkins, 1996; Schank, 1990; Tajfel, 1972). Moreover, when we believe that our most intimate stories are shared by our listener, beginning to share them is helpful in story ‘re-vision’ (Parry & Doan, 1994) – or the capacity to re-story (Randall & McKim, 2008).

\* \* \* \* \*

Today, I was out running by myself... But it was strange, I didn’t feel alone. I passed a few other runners – two guys, one girl – and each one of them acknowledged me. You know, it’s almost like I’m now part of a secret club or something, I have something in common with them and we both know it. I mean, I didn’t know any of them. And I wouldn’t recognise them again, I don’t think. We didn’t stop - the woman waved at me, one of the men smiled, and the other one just nodded in my direction. Maybe they’d do that to anyone they passed, I don’t know – but I felt as though I was a part of it, a part of something.

And you know, really, it’s all because of the WRN beginner’s course. That was responsible for really getting me into running. And it’s the support and everything that was there. And I think without that, I wouldn’t be where I am now. I’ve got no doubts about it. That if it had just been me trying to do it by myself, I would have failed again. It was the support, and the people being there. And having people with you, that are actually mostly beginners as well. They’re in exactly the same situation as you are. And it’s just – That group, that was just absolutely fantastic. And like I say, without that, I would have given up. None of this would have happened. And I just absolutely love it.

\* \* \* \* \*





*Justine, as ballerina*

*Figure 20*

Because of various operations I had when I was young, the only sport that I was allowed to do was ballet. It helped to strengthen up my stomach muscles a little bit. And for a long time, I really held onto that. And this photo (see Figure 20) is from a fancy dress day at work, believe it or not. I was thinking, ‘What can I go as?’ At this point, I’d tried running, unsuccessfully, and was convinced I couldn’t do it. And I started dragging out ballet stuff. And I thought, [*exhales deeply*], yeah, at least I can do something. I can still stand up on the points, and I can still do it.

I went home that night and I got to thinking. I realised, ‘This is silly.’ It’s almost like I’m clutching on. I’m never going to be a ballet dancer. I mean, let’s face it, I’m too old for that now. I could perhaps still play around with it, if I wanted to. But it’s not something I can improve on, get any better at, or do anything much with now. I look at that realisation as a bit of a turning point. I think, yeah, absolutely I am proud of what I did with ballet. But now that’s in the past, I don’t need that anymore. Now I’ve got something else I can do that is giving me as much pride, if you like. And as much sense of achievement as that did. But it’s also something I actually can take further. From here, I can only improve, I can only get better. And I haven’t felt that in so long.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **8.2 Summary and reflections**

Through this chapter, I have been privileged to share the story of 48-year-old Justine who – until her WRN experience – had all but resigned herself to her perceived athletic inability. Like Leanne (see chapter seven), Justine spent her youth and beyond telling

herself and others a slender story about her supposed bodily frailty. Health problems as a child led to restricted participation in any form of physical activity outside of ballet. As she grew older and became more conscious of her body, she felt compelled to include more activity in her lifestyle. However, severe asthma curtailed her every attempted independent foray into running, and she found herself giving up as quickly as she began. Interpreting these failed solo efforts as confirmation of her inability, Justine's narrative foreclosure toward running was reaffirmed. As she got older still, her perceptions and preconceptions about running (i.e., who *could* be a runner) became ever more engrained.

Hailed to join the WRN via an email that circulated in her workplace, Justine decided to give running one last attempt. Although apprehensive, she was convinced by the promise of a program designed for 'true beginners', and 'for women of all shapes, sizes, and abilities'. Unlike Leanne, Justine joined the 'learn to run' ten week beginner's course rather than a 'regular, beginner's welcome' WRN group. This proved to be important, as many of the other participants really were 'just like her', in that they were all beginners to running, and were similarly anxious and insecure about their bodies and abilities in an athletic context. Shared uncertainties somehow justified her own, as they brought the realisation that she was not alone in her experience. Her story became a shared story – retaining individuality and uniqueness but finding strength in commonality.

Within the group, Justine's entrenched perceptions and preconceptions about running were challenged one by one. This acted to widen her available narrative resources, and to allow her to begin to see alternative stories. For example, seeing older participants, participants of all shapes and sizes, and participants of widely varying ability all acted to destabilise her notions of who could be a runner. With some help from her leader, Justine also learned to experience the act of running in and within her own body, rather than through constant comparison to other bodies. By building up slowly and in a structured manner, she began to experience noticeable improvement: physical weight loss and shape change, less insistent asthma, ability to run longer distances and through barriers (i.e., hills), and so on. For the first time, she was learning about her body and gaining control in a context where she had previously experienced only helplessness. She referred often to this embodied learning, emphasising that what she really learned was how to push herself through new challenges rather than pre-emptively giving up. These small achievements worked to build up protective measures against previous 'failure', and helped Justine to appreciate that change, growth, and embodied learning can occur at any age.

Small accomplishment after small accomplishment, Justine's confidence grew markedly during the ten week program. However, when I saw her six months later, this was only accentuated further – Justine has now embraced all things running, and has wholeheartedly and enthusiastically thrown herself into all aspects of participation. Running

has become a focal point in her life, and she is now building it into her life in every imaginable way. She has gone from previously identifying as “Miss Pretty, the secretary” to loudly and proudly identifying as a runner. She enthused at great length about how her WRN experience has affected all aspects of her life. Running has improved her health and heightened her health consciousness. It has completely reframed her body image, making her more comfortable with herself and her appearance. Perhaps the greatest effect has been a psychological one, as she referred repeatedly to how participation has boosted her confidence and expanded her comfort zone – both within and outside of running itself. Justine called this “a 180 degree transformation”, and attributed all of these changes to running and, specifically, to her experience with the beginner’s group.

Justine sincerely never thought it was possible for her to learn how to run, let alone become a runner. And, as she said, since that was her experience with running, then why can it not apply to other – or all – aspects of life? If Leanne experienced what I called a ‘fissure’ in her narrative foreclosure (see chapter seven, section 7.2), then Justine’s was an earthquake: a complete foundational destabilisation of perceived life parameters. Narrative foreclosure dismissed but certainly not forgotten, Justine now finds herself with a myriad of new imagined possibilities and a renewed energy for life.

\* \* \* \* \*

In presenting Justine’s story via messy text, I acknowledge that the multilayered text that I have produced here risks a degree of choppiness (Lather & Smithies, 1997). However, as indicated earlier, one reason for choosing ‘messy text’ as a style of representation was a desire to construct an *embodied tale*. As Smith (2002, p. 14) wrote, “messy texts can help us to hold onto the fundamental embodiment of problems and keep us connected to the needs, pains, joys, and desires of socially constructed and socially constructing bodies.” The hope is that this chapter, as an open text, works to invite the reader in, enticing them to think and feel *with* the story being re-told rather than *about* it (Frank, 1995).

## 9. Dana's story

*“A good story – a story that people become caught up in because it holds them in suspense, engages their imagination, and calls for interpretation – is not necessarily a good story, in the sense of encouraging goodness among those who tell and retell it... Living well [with stories] is as much about avoiding stories' dangers as about learning from their wisdom.”*

-Arthur Frank (2010, pp. 145-146)

### 9.0 Introduction

In this last case study, I introduce Dana – who unlike Leanne and Justine, was not a newcomer to running. Her story is thus distinct on many levels, and offers insight into the central role that running can and has played in many WRN participants' lives. During my time with the WRN, I met many like Dana: once-upon-a-time beginners turned advocates, enthusiasts, and leaders. All felt strongly about passing on what had once been offered to them, by the activity in general as well as from the WRN in particular. For 52 year-old Dana, running was both a mainstay and a passion. It defined who she was and who she wanted to be, and fuelled a desire to share her story and her experiences with those who might listen. During the time that we spent together, Dana told me about her love affair with running, accenting her story with photographs and objects of biographical significance (Dant, 2001).

### 9.1 Dana

Over four separate meetings that culminated in nearly five hours of recorded audio time, Dana plied me with tea and stories of her running life. These included tales of both triumphs and hardships, although she would certainly contend that the former far outweigh the latter. Indeed, Dana could not say enough about running – and this was reflected in the photographs displayed within her home, as well as those she produced for the assigned auto-photography task (see chapter three, section 3.4.3 for a reminder of the parameters of this task). For example, when she provided the image below (see Figure 21) to visually describe herself, she emphasised: “It is such a big part of my life. Running...I've run for 27 years now. And if I hadn't run, I don't think I'd be here today, Meridith. I don't. So to me, it's a good part of my life. It means so much to me.”



*Dana's running shoes*

*Figure 21*

Dana recalled that she had always been relatively active, even as a child. Unlike both Leanne and Justine, she participated – and excelled – in many sports during her school years including netball and cross-country. She enjoyed sport so much that she considered pursuing a career as a P.E. teacher, a notion discouraged by her parents:

I was always sporty at school. I wanted to be a P.E. teacher. But my parents poo-hooed that idea. They had other ideas for me. So I had to – I went into banking. Which – Well, it gave me a good career. But I would have loved to have gone into the sports field, really.

Dana described only a very brief disengagement period from sport, as she transitioned from school to a working life. This was partly due to less structured opportunity for participation, as well as a stressful adjustment period during which she was trying to prove herself at work and start and nurture a family. During this time she got married and gave birth to her only daughter.

### **9.1.1 Divorce as a critical moment**

Dana's life soon took another drastic turn, however, and with it brought many additional changes. Shortly after her daughter was born, her relationship with her husband disintegrated and the marriage was unsalvageable. It was then that Dana began running:

I first started running - It was just after my first marriage broke up, actually. It was, at first, a way of escaping and dealing with stress. I just started running around the block, and I really took to it like a duck to water, really. And it sort of grew and grew from that. I think, the first thing for me was I noticed it helped me keep the weight down. That was a big thing. Because after I had my daughter, I'd put on quite a bit of weight. So that started to really help. And then I found that I actually loved it. I really enjoyed it. And I got so much from it. You know, the whole buzz of the whole thing, and the whole taking part and winning races. And getting good times.

Dana's marital issues culminated in divorce, which of course brought all of the associated stress and headaches of custody battles, legal fees, and general unrest and upheaval. As such, it could be thought of as a consequential event or *critical moment* (Thompson et al., 2002) in Dana's young adult life – described in chapter five (see section 5.3.2), as an 'epiphany' or social drama (Denzin, 1989) through which she experienced a rupture in the structure of her daily life. Her ontological security threatened (Giddens, 1991), Dana responded by investing in the project of her 'self', pouring herself into the embodied act of running. In Dana's story, she identified her divorce as the *pivot* on which her narrative structure turned (Thompson et al., 2002) – the moment at which she first started running and ultimately *became* a runner.

As Giddens (1991) wrote, critical (or using his word, 'fateful') moments are "transition points which have major implications not just for the circumstances of an individual's future conduct, but for self-identity...for consequential decisions once taken, will reshape the reflexive project of identity through the lifestyle consequences which ensue" (p. 143). His view is that that the empowerment and skills gained through a critical moment have important effects. In Dana's case, although her feelings of insignificance and persecution had their roots in an unhappy childhood, they were brought to the forefront with the dissolution of her marriage. She explained by saying:

I felt that I'd failed in my marriage, and running was something I'd found I was good at. In my own right. I felt like I'd been put down in my marriage. And as a child as well, very much so. Lots of things happened as a child. I was bullied by my mum. I was always put down. I've battled with anorexia since I was 8. It went back to that age. When I was told I was fat, and I was ugly. My mother and I had a terrible relationship. And I was looking for attention, almost. So I was always trying to prove myself, but I didn't really find anywhere to do it.

So I started off by just running around the block with a lady one morning, when my husband and I split up. And it felt really natural to me. I just found it really easy, and it gave me a real buzz. And then I set myself goals. And every time I achieved them, the fact that I did it... It was really uplifting. I started believing in myself more, and felt good doing something for myself. And it was something that I could do, that I was in control of – it didn't affect anybody else. So running became a thing that I did for myself. And I came to realise, "God, I'm quite good at this actually." You know, I'm winning things and I'm feeling good about it. And I lost the baby weight. And it's a real stress-buster as well.

I gradually went from running around the block to running 10, 13 miles. You know, half marathons. And I just went from strength to strength. And continued to feel good about myself – I enjoyed the achievement of it. Especially because I was always put down as a child. Always put down, I couldn't achieve anything. And I was hopeless. So, you know, to have recognition and achievement in something was fantastic. Finally, with this running thing – I had my own identity from it. And it gave me such a buzz, it really did. Although I had to work, as well, for it. But it was something that I found that I could do, that I absolutely adored. I just took to it.

As illustrated in her words above, Dana's running story is dominated by notions of failure and hopelessness being replaced by control and mastery. Specifically, she spoke of a learned empowerment to regain and re-claim agency over an unruly body/mind, through disciplined action. It is important to note here that Dana was nearly immediately proficient at running (i.e., her words: "I just found it really easy"). This is quite a contrast to Justine and Leanne, where running continued (at least for a time) to make them feel no good and/or hopeless.

### **9.1.2 A running way of life**

From then onward, running was central in Dana's life story. She became a member of the local elite running group, the Harriers, and got heavily involved in both training and racing. Providing the photograph below (see Figure 22), Dana said: "This is my box of medals. It got to the stage where – I used to, like hang them up, display them, but then it got so many. There's all sorts of stuff in there." She then opened up the box (fittingly, it once held a pair of running shoes), and proceeded to talk me through them, one by one, recounting the year, the race, the venue, her time and/or finishing place and other memorable associated tidbits.



*Dana's box of medals*

**Figure 22**

Dana also showed me photographs, certificates, and trophy after trophy. She had 27 years of running memorabilia, and much of it was displayed prominently in her home and clearly held an equally important place in her heart. Somewhat sheepishly, she divulged: “They all mean such a lot. Because it shows that I’ve done something. Achieved something. Of all the failures that I’ve had in my life, this has made up for so much.”

The passage of time was readily apparent in her carefully preserved paraphernalia, with hair styles and clothing reflecting the decade depicted. For example, the pictures below (see Figure 23) demonstrate that running was part of her family’s life as well. In the photograph on the left, her young daughter is captured on film, supporting her mother at a race. Several years later, the second photograph was taken – Dana’s daughter now participating alongside her mother. When presenting me with these images, Dana commented:

This is her in her first race here. And this was a very proud moment. This was about a year ago? The First Chance run. And my daughter, it’s her first race that I trained her to. And we wanted to do it under an hour. We did it in 55 minutes. But that’s my daughter and I at the beginning. It was freezing cold, really cold. But that was her first race. And I was really proud of that. I stayed with her. You know, egged her on, and we got round. And it was amazing. She was really pleased. So from that little girl there watching me like that, then she’s actually doing it herself...





*Dana and daughter, over the years*

**Figure 23**

Running thus became the platform through which Dana was able to forge quite a different mother/daughter storyline to the one she had been a part of before, with her mother. Also represented in her collection were photographs of her grandson and her second husband, standing proudly alongside Dana following several different events. Images such as these demonstrate the centrality of running in Dana's life, across much of her life course.

Dana's collection of biographical objects primarily depicted races and/or events, as these were more likely to be photo-documented. However, she also recounted that most of her time spent running was in the realm of training, and the activity itself was thus an integral part of her everyday, mundane routine. Elaborating on this, she explained:

When I was working, I used to get up at half five and run in the morning, before work. And in the evenings, I used to have a headlamp, and go around the lanes with a headlamp. I guess I was thinking, if this is the only way I can do it, I'm going to do it. And it used to be tough sometimes. You know, in the winter when it was raining and it was dark. And running at 6 o'clock in the morning, the wind is blowing and there's nobody around... My friends used to say to me, "I don't know how you do it." But my running is so important to me. I have to do my running. And I know it sets me up for the day. It will make me a better person. I can deal with the day. Because I was doing, like, 12 hour work days easily. And I just could handle it. You have to work around what you've got. If you really want to do something, you'll do it. So I'd go to bed at night thinking, okay, my alarm goes off at half past five tomorrow. My kit is by the side of my bed. I'm up and running. Quite often it would help by running with a couple other people, as well. But if I couldn't, I would throw the covers off and I'd go.

And I never struggled with that. I've always been quite a highly motivated person. But I just think, it's the highway or no way. You know, this is it, I'm not going to miss out on my training. I'm not going to let work take over. I'm not going to let whatever take over. I am going to get my training in.

Not only enjoying the physical feelings that her running elicited, Dana also referred to enjoying the idea that other people knew her as a runner. External recognition certainly played a part in keeping her motivated over the years, as well as an acknowledged affiliation with what she felt was a desirable, if not admirable, social identity. Perhaps most compellingly, Dana valued the positive recognition that she got for her running accomplishments – something that she had not experienced in many other aspects of her life:

I started getting a bit of a reputation for myself. I can remember having my picture in the paper. I was doing a half marathon in Exmouth, and it said – oh, what was it? 'Our local treasure', or something. And wherever I went people would say, "Oh, you're a runner, aren't you?" And that just made me feel good. And it's, silly little things, like I'll be somewhere and someone will come up to me and go, "Hi! You're the runner, aren't you?" And I think, I don't know who you are. That's quite nice, actually. You know, I love it. You know, everyone, if I go anywhere, the first thing people say, "Are you still running?" You know, that's the first question they ask me: "You still doing your running?" So, you know, it's nice to be recognised for something that you can do.

Pondering this social identity further, Dana claimed that there was something about the act of running that tends to unite people of a certain ilk. Evident from the shift in pronoun use within the above quotation ("I") to that below ("we"), for Dana, running enabled membership to a group:

I do think that runners – We're a bit idiotic, aren't we? We're a special kind, aren't we, really? People see you out running in 90 degrees and say, "You're mad!" And then the freezing cold, "You're mad!" And I say, "Yeah, we are a bit." [*laughs*]. I mean, runners are their own breed, aren't they... You've got to be a bit cracking or something to actually do it, haven't you? I mean, going out in the weather, in the snow, in the dark to do... So it creates this, um, bonding really. That you've got this sport that is – It's something that you either love or hate. And all the people that see it through, love it. And you just find this – I don't know, it's just marvellous. This common denominator. And then other things build from that. You know, you really do become friends. And it just becomes more than just a sport, really. It's a way of life.

Friendship borne out of a shared interest in running featured prominently in Dana's life. She spoke fondly of the community that she found through running:

I've met wonderful people over the years. Really, really good friends. That I'd never have met through anything else, you know? From all different walks of life. And we would never have crossed paths before. And I've had my friends now for years and years and years, from all the running. And it's just wonderful. I met my best friend through running... I met her through her husband, who was a Harrier. So I used to run with her husband. And then we met, and we just motivated each other and encouraged each other. And now we run together. And we are best friends. She's like my sister. It's just terrific. Yeah, we've been best friends now for the last 15 years, I suppose. And we would never have met otherwise.

Running thus provided Dana with both a social outlet and resource through which to channel her energies. Through her involvement in the sport, she met others who held similar values and enjoyed the same things in life as she. As such, through running she found both her personal and social niche, and developed a strong athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). While positive in many ways, such an athletic identity can also act as an Achilles' heel when faced with a disruptive life event (Sparkes, 1998b). As so much of Dana's life revolves around running, it begs the question of what she might do if she became unable to run – through injury or the like. Since running dominates the stories that she tells and the relationships that she has formed, any disruption to her running participation has the capacity to introduce a form of narrative wreckage (Sparkes & Smith, 2011). In Frank's (1995, p. 94) terms, the danger is that “there is no other story to fall back on,” and in such an instance, Dana might find the task of re-storying rather difficult due to limited narrative resources.

That being said, Dana went on to complete her long list of what she loved about running with one final point. She emphasised that she has never been a “gym person” – for her, the gym context feels too restrictive and constrained. Though not far from the city, Dana lives in a rural area and is thus surrounded by greenery, open fields, woodland, and so forth.



**Dana: Tree of reflection**

**Figure 24**

Handing me the photograph above (see figure 24), she paused for nearly a minute before saying:

I love the outdoors. I love nature, I love being out in the open. I'm spoilt out here. I'm so lucky. It is lovely. I like running the country lanes. I do a little bit of off-road here, through the woods. I love running by the coast. I love running by water. We're so lucky in this part of the country. So I took this picture to try and show how important that is to me. It's a big, old oak tree. – That tree is probably so many years old, it's got probably so many stories it could tell. Just like me really. Yeah, a lot of my runs are taken outside at the beach or the sea or whatever. You know, that tree has probably seen so many things in life. And it's still standing.

### **9.1.3 An unwelcome companion on the road of life**

Leading, as I have, with Dana's enthusiastic ruminations about the joys of running might give the misleading impression that once she 'found' running, her previous struggles with her body-self relationship were completely resolved. That is, that her anorexia was cured and that channelling her energies into running has been *only a positive* experience. Unsure if she was comfortable discussing her eating disorder in any detail, I gently and hesitantly probed her to elaborate on this area of her life. Dismissing my attempt at sensitivity, Dana immediately launched into a thoughtful and carefully considered account. It was evident that this was something she had spent a fair amount of time thinking about. Below, I include an excerpt of her thoughts, essentially summarising that although she considers running to have been her saving grace, keeping it 'in check' has been a juggling

act – and at times, she admitted, she has dropped the ball. As with many who have spoken about the experience of chronic illness, Dana has endured both the good days and the bad days that mark her illness (Charmaz, 1991). She elaborated, at length, by saying:

You know, [anorexia] never, ever goes away. You learn to live with it. And you manage it. But every time anything in my life went wrong, this ugly demon would rear its head. And running is the only thing that I could manage it with. And so at first for me, to run, I could allow myself to eat. Because before running I would sort of deny myself that. It was all tied to emotions. And then when I started running, it was, “Okay, I’ve done a run. I can eat. I feel okay about it now.” So that has been a huge component for me, all my life. Huge. And that is never going to go. I think that anybody that’s said they’ve battled with anorexia, you never get over it. You deal with it. You work your life around it. But it never goes.

I think, the only thing I have to – I do think, because I’m an addictive personality, and I think it can be quite an obsessional thing. You have to get the balance right. So it’s keeping it under wraps. I got quite obsessive about running at one time. Really quite obsessive. I lost quite a bit of weight as well, and got really competitive.... The better I became, the better I wanted to become. So I’m at this level, I want to get to that level. So then I went from running once a day to twice a day. And if I didn’t get out twice a day, I’d be crawling up the walls. And if anything got in my way and I couldn’t do it, I would like – Uh, no, I have to run. I have to run. It was almost like a – A bit like a drug addict. Because I had to have my fix. Because if I don’t do that, I’m not going to get any better. And then once I’d done it, I’d come back and I was on a high. But that was probably unhealthy for a while, because I did completely obsess. But I do think, emotionally, that replaced a huge void in my life. That I wasn’t getting from anything else. I wasn’t – I didn’t have a partner. I didn’t get anything from my other family. I had a daughter, but that was all I had. I had nothing else. So this, for me, was my – It was something that I hung on to. And I took so much from it. Because it made me feel so good.

I mean, I used to do the most ridiculous things. I used to train twice a day. And I’d eat about three pieces of cake. But I’d think that was okay, that was healthy. But it wasn’t. But to me, it was – I felt okay. And I was completely putting in the wrong things. I wasn’t getting my balance. I wasn’t getting my – I used to live on rubbish. For years. Well, I didn’t think I was, then. But when I look back on it now, I just think, wow, what were you doing with that? You know, I’d have an apple. And that was my fruit intake for the day. Yeah, I thought, yeah, I’ve had some carbohydrates. You know, I’ve eaten two pieces of cake today or whatever, and I’ve drunk black coffee. Or I might have had a bowl of soup. You know, that was great. No, I thought I was being healthy. But I wasn’t. So I’ve realised that with, I think, experience. And also, wanting to listen. You know, if somebody had said to me, “You shouldn’t be eating that,” that’s one thing – I didn’t want to hear that. Because I was doing what I wanted to do. I was in control.

I have a picture (see figure 25), actually, that shows...This is the Cheddar half marathon in 2007. And I was just beginning to get really poorly then. And you can see, actually, look. [*points to her arms in the picture*]. I had a fantastic race. But I was beginning to get really ill, then. It’s a good reminder for me, to look back on that, and think, ‘Well, yeah, you were getting a bit too thin then.’ I think I got a lot thinner than that, but... Because you forget sometimes. And that was probably the beginning, that I... I got two stone worse than that.



*Dana, when poorly*

*Figure 25*

The last 12 months have not been a good place for me. I'm a lot, lot better now. But I ended up in the Priory with my eating disorder. I was really, really poorly. I lost two and a half stone, and I wasn't eating. Due to a lot of things that were going on in my life. And I couldn't run. And so it was really bad. And unfortunately when I was in there, I picked up dysentery as well. So I was in a wheelchair for a while. Couldn't run. It was just really, really bad. But since then I've really - I've been having behaviour therapy? CBT, which has been absolutely fantastic. And I've really got to a different place in my life now. So I'm eating well again. I've put on weight again. And it's really worked.

So I've battled with anorexia all my life, basically. And running has really kept it under tabs. It has, running has enabled me to eat all my life. When I couldn't exercise, I really had problems with my eating. And it was like a vicious circle. So now I'm back on a healthy weight. Um, back off all the therapy and everything. I've finished all that now. And just back running, which is where I want to be. It's not easy to get back into it. Because your confidence goes as well, when you've been out of it for a while. But I've enjoyed it, actually. And it was really nice to meet up with people again. So hopefully start to get back into things a bit more now.

I've really learned a lot about myself, and how to manage it. And now, because of what I've been through, I'm even more determined. That whatever I'm going to get hit with, I am going to beat it. So now, I think I keep an eye on it, and my friends keep an eye on it as well. Because my best friend will say, "Hang on a minute. You've run seven days a week for the last four weeks. Hang on, come on," you

know. “Oh, I have actually. Yeah, you’re right.” [laughs]. And then I need to pull the reigns in a bit. I think, okay. Yeah. And then somebody will say, “I saw you running twice today! You went out this morning, you went out tonight.” “I did actually. Yes. Yeah, you’re right. You’re right.” [laughs]. But it’s just because I love it.

It’s always been very much an emotional thing. Well, in stages of my life that different things have happened, it’s always been a – I’ve said it this week, I say it almost every week, “Thank God I have my running.” Because if I didn’t have my running, I don’t know what I’d be. I think I might have been a drug or - I don’t know. But I think I would have had real problems.

Dana’s journey has been one of continuous learning – about herself, her body, and what she can and cannot control. As she said, over time she has learned to manage her anorexia in various ways, including seeking treatment, building up a support network that helps to ‘keep her on track’, and trying to re-frame her view of food from that of punishment to nourishment (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010). As Papathomas and Lavalley (2006) write, disordered eating in sport often tends to be pathological and chronic as opposed to purely behavioural and transient. Dana has had a setback as recently as the past year, and by no means does she regard her eating disorder as a thing of the past. For her, anorexia and running are inextricable – both prominent parts of her life, for better and for worse. Of note here is that for Dana, running has been a way to deal with life events, rather than life events getting in the way of running (i.e., as per both Leanne and Justine).

#### **9.1.4 The WRN and Dana as mentor**

Dana was a long-time member of the Harriers, an elite road-running club. However, she explained that over the years, the Harriers had shifted their focus away from road-running and concentrated more on the track events. With this shift, the number of road-runners dwindled due to a lack of support. Friends of hers had run with the WRN for a long time, and kept trying to entice Dana to switch over and join them. Hailed by both member-friends as well as the promise of more support, she made the move six years ago despite some misgivings. She explained by saying:

I must admit, to start with I was a little bit against it being women’s only. Because I thought it should be men and women. But, having then run with them, I think it’s just such a wonderful place to be. Because, say if you look at the co-founders, they’re such wonderful examples, aren’t they? They’re not the average, sort of, skinny athlete runner that you put on a pedestal. They’re really just ordinary, lovely, down-to-earth people. And I think it really encourages women of every shape, every size, for whatever reason they run for, they are just complete examples of how anybody can run. Because it made me think, it must be quite daunting. I can remember going to the Harriers, and there would be this bunch of skinny people there that are really like whippets, really sort of purposeful and focused. But the WRN, it’s like everybody from everyday, from housewives to people that are size 20 to size zero. And I just

think that is so encouraging. Nobody feels threatened, nobody feels everyone's looking at them. Nobody's talking about them, nobody's putting them down. We're all there for all different reasons, everybody has their own reasons for running. Whether it be self-confidence or getting fit or losing weight. And the Network enable you do that without any feeling of fear or confidence loss. And it doesn't matter if you're last, if you're first, if you have to walk. If you, whatever. Nobody's judging anybody. And I think that's the nicest thing. It's just a really nice, safe place to be.

Despite being quite a capable runner within the WRN context, Dana was able to imagine the group from the broader perspective of those who were less confident in their abilities.

Perhaps sensitive to others with body image and/or self-confidence issues due to having her own, she noted that the WRN was distinct from other running groups (i.e., the Harriers) for its inclusivity and support. Pointing to the accessibility of the group, Dana continued to think from a beginner's perspective when she said:

I think that's what keeps people going is the fact that they remember, these people got me started. You know, a lot of people probably look at it and think, well actually, if it wasn't for the WRN, they wouldn't ever have got going. They wouldn't have bought a pair of trainers, they wouldn't have gone out. They wouldn't have had the advice. And I think a lot of it is loyalty. I think a lot of it is encouragement and the motivation. And the comradeship, as well. And the development. And there's nothing nicer than getting to a race and seeing a swarm of blue, all the blue – "Look at the Network tonight!" Gosh, I can remember when there'd be a handful of us. And now there are 90 of us, 100 of us turning up.

Dana acknowledges that the 'Network blue' of the WRN kit is thus symbolic: of similarly, of belonging to a group, and of a desirable social identity. She elaborated by saying:

If ever you go to a race, they're supporting you. And it's wonderful. It really is. They're always there at the end, and they're always out there on the route. It doesn't matter what the weather is or whatever. It's just their smiling faces, "Come on, WRN!" It's really funny, last year I did the Dart Vale half marathon, and I – this sticks in my mind, actually. We had this really big hill to go up, it goes on for about a mile. Um, as I ran up the hill, there were two other ladies. And I said to them, "Oh, well done, you're doing really, really well!" And one of them turned around, she said, "Only a Network runner would be that encouraging." And I was really pleased at that, I thought it was really nice that they'd said that. So it's, yeah, you're part of a big group, and you're all in it together.

Given her experience and aptitude for running, Dana sees herself as playing a leadership role within the WRN: encouraging others, and providing support and motivation. This is a role that she is looking to build upon in the future, as she had recently completed her coaching license in order to officially begin as a leader and coach. Indeed, wanting to "give something back" to running was an oft-repeated phrase by Dana. Acquiring her coaching license was the first step toward setting up a group of her own and sharing her



passion with others – something which, to this point, she has only done informally. She described how gratifying it has been to be able to help people get started on their running journey, and went on to share the story of each and every individual who she had trained in recent years. Emphasising the transformation that running can offer in people's lives, she offered an example:

There's a chap that lives down the road. He's a lorry driver. I mean, you can imagine, he lived off of sausage rolls. Fish and chips. So he's a big man. And he's a lot younger than me, actually. I think he's about 40 now. And he was one of these that used to say, "I should, I should..." - and so I said, "Right. Come on out." He came out. It took quite a long time. He lost about two stone. We set the target that we were going to do a 10k. So I trained him up for that. And got him round in just under an hour. And he was just amazed. Because going from this big bloke who sat on his backside all day in a lorry, to doing that. He then went on to run a half marathon. And I encouraged him, I trained him. So it's been really good. It's just so, so rewarding. Just to see that – You know, from somebody that couldn't run at all. And now he's doing a marathon. It's amazing.

In stories such as these, the physical act of running became an ethical act – and Dana's body an ethical body (Frank, 1995). By this, I mean that she made a choice to use her body as an example, instrument, and impetus *for* other bodies (Frank, 1995). Doing so, she acknowledged, was personally rewarding as it enabled her to share her passion, and see what she perceived to be positive changes in others as a result of her efforts. When Dana recounted these experiences, she was almost evangelical – unable to contain her ardent enthusiasm for running, and eager to continue share her devotion with the world.

From Dana's perspective, her passion and influence has been received only positively. More than one individual has said to Dana, "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be running." When I asked her why she thought that she had been able to impact so many lives, she replied:

I think probably they see me as a role model. You know, they see – They see me running. They see me doing half marathons and marathons. Um, working it around a life. And I think the knowledge as well. Because you forget, actually, how much knowledge you pick up over the years. Sometimes I come up with something and I think, how do I know that? [*laughs*]. So I think it is experience. And yeah, just seen as a role model as well, really. And the encouragement. I mean, I like to think that like the WRN, I give them so much encouragement. You know, because it's so important, isn't it?

Pondering this further, Dana also posited that her own personal struggles have perhaps made her more sensitive and compassionate when it comes to helping people to understand and challenge their bodies in a physical context. In this way, Dana views her body not only as ethical, but also dyadic and communicative (Frank, 1995). She perceives herself as more

in tune with potential suffering, because she has experienced it herself. Saying on more than one occasion that, “everyone has a story,” she offered the following example as an explanation:

You have to be aware that everybody runs for a personal reason. And you have to be really, really switched on to that. Because there was an incident – it was told to me at my coaching day. A girl came to the Network and come rain or shine she’d wear long shorts and long sleeves. So people would like really get on her, “For goodness sake, take your clothes off!” Well, it turns out she was a self-harmer. No one paused to think... So everybody runs for a reason. You know, to get fit, to lose weight, or for stress or whatever. But I just think you have to be a little bit sympathetic to everybody’s reason why, really. And just be careful you don’t, like, put your foot in it – Because you could easily do, couldn’t you?

#### **9.1.5 ‘Living well’ with her own story**

As evidenced by the above quotation, Dana had thought a great deal about her own story, as well as about the (potential) stories of others. Over the years of living with and managing her eating disorder, she described now having finally gotten to a place where she was more accepting of herself. She said:

I’ve always hated my body, had really bad body image. But at last, I’m getting there. And I know that running has been a part of that, but definitely not everything. This picture [see figure 26] is from my recent birthday. For the first time, I got dolled up and I was actually at peace with myself. And I’d like to be proud of that. Yeah, my body’s toned now. I’m not bad for 53. And I did, I felt really, really good. Yeah, which – I’ve always hidden before. I’ve always, always hidden. And now I think, hang on a minute. No, I’m not hiding behind this anymore. This is pretty damn good actually.



*Dana, at recent birthday*

*Figure 26*

Dana's comments reveal a marked shift in her previously overwhelmingly negative body image. Now 53, she feels as though she compares favourably to others of her same age, and as such her tendency to strive for invisibility has eased. These shifting perceptions are closely tied to Dana's evolving health consciousness – which, in turn, has a direct bearing on her motivation to adopt behaviours aimed explicitly at lessening her risk of future ill health (Lawton, 2002). Dana continued:

I think, when I look back on it, I have abused my body over the years. There's no doubt about it. With my eating and drinking and excessive exercising. Um, because I've got an addictive personality. But I'm now at the age where I respect it. I've come to realise that health is such a huge thing, and I don't take it for granted. It's being able-bodied. Being able to be active. Being able to get up in the morning, um... A lot of it, I think, is luck to be honest. Um, but I think a lot is what you put into your body. Is, you know, looking after your body. I mean, health, to me – If you haven't got your health, you haven't got anything, really. And money can't buy it... Health is so important. And nobody knows what's around the corner. So I think by managing to keep healthy, and this is where running came into it as such a huge, huge part of it. It really did. Because I said to you before, if I didn't run, I wouldn't eat probably. And I certainly wouldn't look after myself properly. And so by being able to run, it's controlling... And I do, I am conscious of what I eat. Conscious of what I put into my body. Because I think that is very much a part of maintaining your health.

With age and experience, Dana describes having become more health conscious. As Lawton (2002) writes, increasing age can precipitate thoughts of finitude, and older people are much more likely than others to have been exposed to ill-health and death amongst their

family and peers. As such, older people are more likely to perceive the prospect of future ill-health and death as certainties as opposed to possibilities. This (often, though certainly not always) has the effect of stimulating the adoption of 'healthy' lifestyles, either entirely or in part (Backett & Davison, 1992, 1995; Blaxter, 1990).

Having had a spell of being quite ill herself, Dana has re-evaluated the importance of her own health. She has, perhaps, always been health conscious, but her personal definitions of what constitutes health have changed. Further, after spending a good portion of her life attempting to control her body – in an admittedly unhealthy way – she has also come to acknowledge the contingent, and at times, fleeting, elusive, and uncontrollable nature of good health. She explained:

I've realised we cannot control our destination with our health. You could be in an accident. You know, you read about these people that have done everything by the book. They've never drunk, they've never smoked, they've never eaten poorly, they've never been overweight, they've exercised. And then they've dropped down dead. And I've had friends like that myself. But it's been something that they couldn't control. So, to a point, you can be careful. You can do the right things. But you are not in control of everything. A lot of it is out of your hands. And as much as you can try to be aware, be educated, at the end of the day, the answers have been taken away from us. I just think there are some things that you have no control over at all.

Dana's journey, to this point, has been one of learning to accept the contingency of the body in a response to body problems (Frank, 1995). It is evident, however, that this learning process is still ongoing. Many of Dana's words continue to reflect an individualistic view of health, with an impetus on individual agency toward prevention and/or recovery. In her words, she feels quite strongly about "the importance of controlling the things that you are able to control." Maintaining the significance of a 'positive attitude' in response to ill health, Dana offered:

You have to want to do something about it. You know, you either give up and roll over and just say, okay, that's the end of me. Or you think, no I'm not. I'm going to get my head around this. I think that's the big thing, for any health issue – that you can't let it beat you. I think attitude is so important. You know, hope, desire, you're going to beat this, you're going to... whatever. Even at my lowest point, I was still thinking to myself, 'I'm not going to let it beat me.' And I'm sure that's what got me through.

I mean, I don't know Meredith. If I was struck down tomorrow with something else, I don't know if I'd still be the same. I'd like to think I would be. I'd like to think I'd want to beat it, and I wouldn't give in. And I certainly wouldn't end up being a couch potato. That is not me. The day I do that, I... Roll over and somebody shoot me. So, you know, if something does happen, I think I would try to fight it all the way. As I have done. But that's me. It's not everyone.

In all of this contemplation, Dana's story demonstrates *movement* (Frank, 2010): a dynamic nature, and evolution and development over time, particularly with respect to her narrated body-self relationship and her conception of health. As such, her story is as much physical as metaphysical, and is both her "dignity" and her "calamity" (Frank, 2010, p. 146). Dana's journey has thus been in learning to tell her story in a way that enhances dignity rather than precipitating calamity. Dana is determined to learn to tell a *good* story and not merely a *good story* (Frank, 2010). That is, she is committed to having her story *do good* for others, to act – or work – on them positively and to inspire them to action. In doing so, she would be able to somewhat salvage her own calamitous experiences, and she could at last 'live well' with her story (Frank, 2010).

One of the ways in which Dana envisions doing this is by sharing her story with others, in one form or another. To reach a larger audience than perhaps possible through leading and coaching, she mentioned the possibility of recording and distributing her story in print form:

I really want to write a book one day, because I think it would be really interesting. Because I'd like to help other people that have had food disorders as well. It's such a minefield, for both men and women. And this is where running can help people, if you're mindful with it. I've read articles in *Runner's World* before where people have – You know, they really were criminals and running had changed their lives. There was an article in the Express & Echo only last week, about a lady that had been a drug addict. Um, had an eating disorder, was a heroin user. And she's done the New York marathon. And yeah, an absolute inspiration. And it, you know, it's so powerful.

I like *Runner's World* magazine for the articles, but most of all for the stories. Real life stories. Uh, they're just amazing. And it's not just about the elite. You know, it's about the general public. The guy that's lost six stone. And come from drugs and alcohol. Rehab. The person that was like an 18 stone couch potato that drank six pints a night, you know, was an absolute waster. And is now, you know, absolutely amazing. You know, recovering alcoholic. He's now running marathons. You know, the real people - Every month there's a story about people that have done something really fantastic in their lives. You know, run, beaten cancer. So it's really – You can relate to them. I've often thought about writing one myself, actually. Because mentally, it's harder... When you break your leg or something, you have a plaster to show for it, don't you? When you have mental problems, you don't get the same acknowledgement as walking around with a physical ailment. It's a stigma, people don't talk about it. And people do not understand. Unless they've been through it themselves, they do not understand mental illness. But so many people go through it, and maybe if more people talked about it... I don't know.

I get so enthusiastic about it because, you know, I just wonder sometimes if I hadn't had my running, where would I be today? I don't know. I really don't know. You know, would I – Because I'm an addictive personality, maybe I would have taken to something else. Maybe I would have turned to drugs. I don't know. But it's saved my life, I think. I really do.

Both Dana's story and the stories that resonate with Dana (in popular running culture) can be classified as heroic narratives: the plot of which entails triumph over some form of adversity, populated by ordinary people displaying exceptional powers when threatened by illness or addiction (Kleiber & Hutchinson, 1999; Seale, 2002a). Stories such as Dana's, as a WRN leader and mentor, can act as narrative maps or scripts for newcomers to the running world in ways that can be either inspirational or constraining. What Dana wants for her story is the former – for it to act to inspire, to empower, perhaps even to transform. If people heard or read or listened to her story, she hopes that they may respond by – even on a small scale – integrating it into their own story, or at the very least into their narrative resources. What she wants most is for her story to *connect* with others and *guide* action, and for them to find the fulfilment and meaning that she has experienced through her love of running.

As a received story, however, the hero narrative can be constraining because it tends to advocate appropriate or correct behaviour and thus provide versions of the way the world should be (Sparkes & Smith, 2002). For example, how would a story such as Dana's *work* on an audience made up of 'true beginner' women like Leanne and Justine? In Dana's binary world, you either love or hate running – there is no middle ground. It is important to consider how a beginner – who is not completely sure how she feels about running – might react to the sentiments expressed by a true advocate such as Dana.

## 9.2 Summary and reflections

To say that Dana was enthusiastic about running would be an understatement. Since her divorce from her first husband, running has been the constant in Dana's life, the activity through which she has experienced success, found recognition and support, and maintained her health and balance. Though it has not always been a smooth journey, she credits running with keeping her on track and has never strayed from it. As such, Dana is very much a running advocate, eager for others to find what she has found. The WRN has provided one avenue through which to encourage this, and Dana was equally enthusiastic about the inclusivity and accessibility of the Network. As a more experienced runner, she saw her role in the WRN as one of leadership and provider of encouragement. Despite her misgivings about it being women's-only, she came to understand the unique aspects of the WRN culture that perhaps made it more appealing to beginner runners. However, for Dana, the WRN itself is of secondary importance to the activity of running. The existence of the group did not instigate her starting to run, and does not determine her continued participation.

Perhaps a budding narrative scholar herself, Dana has given a great deal of thought to stories. Influenced by her struggles with anorexia, she has devoted much time to the construction of her own story – on what has been influential in her life and how it has played a part in who she is today. The story that Dana presented to me was very much a success story, a tale of overcoming of adversity because of her participation in running. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), as part of the treatment for her eating disorder, has likely enhanced her self-awareness and helped her to ‘craft’ her story to this point. She has considered what stories move and/or inspire her (i.e., the ‘real life’/ ‘transformational’ stories featured in *Runner’s World*), and believes that her story has the potential to inspire and motivate others. At peace with her body *and* her story for the time being, she desperately wants for others to benefit from her experience. She aims to do this by perhaps writing her own story in the form of a book, as well as by her more ‘everyday’ participation in the WRN.

I chose Dana as an instrumental case study (Willig, 2001) not because her experience, in its totality, is representative of the majority of WRN members. However, she does embody characteristics of many long-term WRN members and leaders in her fervour for sharing her passion for running with others. Almost as though it were a ‘calling’, Dana feels compelled to ‘give back’ to the sport which has offered so much to her life. In an ideal scenario, there is mutual reward: a novice gets introduced to the running world by someone who knows it inside and out, and the ‘expert’ (i.e., Dana) gets the reward of positively impacting the novice’s life. Less ideally, a story such as Dana’s has the capacity to merely pass beginners by (Frank, 2006) – or worse, to prompt them to pre-emptively discount themselves from the running world due to perceived limitations, and to deny them access to (creating) their own story (Frank, 1995; Kleiber & Hutchinson, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 2002). What Dana’s case undoubtedly does capture, however, is the idea of *story movement* (Frank, 2010), which has been forefront in this thesis: that stories are active social interactions, which are heard and responded to, and which – whether told, re-told, ignored, or silenced – are influential in the larger social world.

## **10. Reflections and concluding comments**

### **10.0 Introduction**

In this final chapter, I pull together the strands of this thesis in relation to theory, methods, data and interpretations. In doing so, I offer several empirical, methodological and theoretical reflections that have emerged throughout the research journey. I then outline the implications of this work for policy and practice. A number of limitations within this study are acknowledged, followed by a consideration of future directions and recommendations for further research in this area.

The aim of this work has been to explore women's lived experiences of health and ageing (and the intersection of these) in a physical context. This was accomplished through an investigation of embodiment, opening up opportunities to explore issues of *if, why, how, and when* women engage with health and 'active ageing' messages across the life course. Through a narrative lens, I was able to explore the stories that participants responded to (or not), and the stories that they *used to tell, felt able to tell, and – in some cases – learned how to tell* about health, about ageing, and about their body-selves. By carrying out an ethnography of the WRN – a non-elite women's-only running group – I was able to observe examples of all of these stories in context: how they were told (and re-told) and to whom, how they circulated and evolved, and who they included and excluded. In-depth interviews and case studies allowed insight into the subjective contours of participant's lives, and their particular biographical trajectories culminating in WRN participation. To some extent, the final interpretations that I present in this chapter confound the research questions as posed earlier (see chapter two, section 2.5). However this, according to Wolcott (2001, p. 36) is not necessarily a negative: "Good qualitative research ought to confound issues, revealing them in their complexity rather than reducing them to simple explanation." The outcome of this, for me, is a strong emphasis on the value of individual experience, and the importance of attention to individual stories.

### **10.1 Empirical contributions**

#### **10.1.1 Pathways precluding participation**

As described in detail in chapter five (section 5.3), when explaining how they came to be involved in the WRN participants tended to begin their stories by explaining why they had not participated in physical activity previously. Echoing much of the literature on gender and access to leisure experiences, participants were quick to cite commonly reported barriers to participation (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; 2004; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003; Shaw, 1994). Foremost amongst these was a lack of time, or the experience of 'pressured time' (Phoenix et al., 2007), wherein participants spoke of having to juggle the multiple roles of mother,



wife/partner, carer, and earner (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Henderson et al., 1996).

Constraints such as these were strongly linked to life stage: oftentimes, participation in physical activity was not even on participants' 'radar' when, for example, they had young children. However, this is not to say that these women were not health conscious or were unaware of health imperatives – rather, the health and well-being of others around them tended to take precedence.

A second highly prevalent reported barrier to participation was a lack of confidence. A variety of sources were identified for this: poor past experiences with physical activity (or running specifically); feeling too overweight, too unfit, or too old to be a runner; low self-esteem, poor body image, and self-consciousness, and a lack of knowledge that one *could* learn how to run. These are not discrete variables that are easily overcome, as much research in the realm of barriers to physical activity may suggest. Instead, barriers such as these are both highly personal and emotional, and tend not to be easily shifted or re-imagined. This is particularly true for long-held fears and preconceptions about individual (in)abilities – the longer that women had embodied a perceived 'non-sporting' identity, the harder it was for them to imagine participating in something like running. Furthermore, this became ever more firmly entrenched as time passed, with many women reporting age-related barriers and hesitations linked to the metanarrative of decline and perceived increasing frailty (Tulle-Winton, 2000; Vertinsky, 1991; 1998; 2000; 2002). As such, over the course of their entire lives, participants developed and sustained an embodied narrative habitus: they became accustomed to telling a particular story about themselves, who they were, and who they could be.

In chapter five, I conceptualised this as a form of narrative foreclosure, in which women were 'caught' in a story that was both limiting and lacked imagination (Freeman, 2000; Randall & McKim, 2008). Frank (2010) warns that there is a danger that people can become the stories that they tell – for better, or for worse. Living with negative (or unimaginative) stories about a restricted future can also lead to a sense of narrative foreclosure (Freeman, 2000; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). According to Freeman (2000), narrative foreclosure relates to the degree to which the culture in which one lives fails to provide adequate narrative resources for living one's life meaningfully and productively. Narrative foreclosure is an eminently social phenomenon that connects to the reification of cultural storylines and the tendency, on the part of many, "to internalize storylines in such a way as to severely constrict their own field of narrative expression: the story goes this way, not that" (Freeman, 2000, p. 83). Therefore, Freeman argues, by accepting the prevailing endings to cultural stories one accepts a certain kind of narrative fate and this potentially reduces the possibility of self-renewal as one grows older.

### 10.1.2 Pathways into participation

How, then, did participants describe their process of addressing these perceived barriers, and ultimately become members of the WRN? For many, the first step was exposure to different, or unexpected, narratives about running participation. These alternative narratives about who could run (and how to begin running) had the effect of unsettling their assumptions about the social world of running, destabilising what they thought they knew, and divesting them of their views of what was what (Bruner, 2002; Randall & McKim, 2008). The public storyline that the WRN offered thus acted as a counterstory: one that fits into the gaps between what the prescriptive master narrative demanded of these women, and what they actually (can) do or are (Nelson, 2001).

In chapter four, I explored the manner in which images and text can act to 'hail' or 'call' individuals into subject positions, or toward the acceptance, performance, and embodiment of a social role (Althusser, 1971). In my analysis of the visual and textual public narrative of the WRN, I examined how women were hailed (or interpellated) to join the organisation. I noted that the public narrative of the WRN frequently echoed neoliberal health imperatives, urging women to take individual responsibility for their fitness. Often highlighting weight loss as a result, or 'success' story, of participation, the WRN public narrative can also be interpreted as aligning with metanarratives of the feminine body ideal. However, also evident within the WRN public narrative 'strategy' was the construction of the organisation in deliberate opposition to a 'masculinist' sporting ethos (Birrell & Richter, 1994; Krane, 2001). In doing so, the text and images representing the organisation emphasised the fun, supportive, and non-competitive nature of the group. The ethos of the WRN was ubiquitous within the public narratives that I examined: it was impossible to miss their claim of welcoming 'true beginners, and women of all ages, sizes, and abilities'. The social field of the WRN thus provided an avenue within which women were able to visualise the re-opening of their foreclosed narratives, enabling the stronghold of the past to release its grip on the future. Furthermore, the public narratives of the WRN supplied the narrative resources for women to begin to question a previously oppressive metanarrative as well as to imagine, or tell, a new story. The public storyline that the WRN offered thus acted as a counterstory to the ontological narratives that many of the women had (to date) been telling themselves (Nelson, 2001).

In order for interpellation to be effective, however, certain factors must be in place. In chapter four (section 4.3.2), I elaborated on the importance of *timing* in this process: that an individual must have some "readiness to turn," or openness or vulnerability to the authority doing the hailing (Butler, 1997b, p. 107). In the instance of potential WRN recruits, attention to the WRN public narrative required a collision – or better put, an intersection of meta,

public, and ontological levels of narrative. In order for women to see themselves as potential participants, each barrier to participation (however discrete or complex, situational or biographical) had to be addressed, overcome, or alleviated. For every WRN member, this was a unique journey. That said, when exploring why participants sought out change in the form of physical activity *when* they did, some similarities emerged.

Specifically, many women reported the consequential character of particular events within their lives (Denzin, 1989). In chapter five (section 5.3.2), I characterised these events as ‘critical moments’ (Thomson et al., 2002) – wherein daily life was, in some way, ruptured, ontological security was threatened, and change (in some form or another) ensued. For the women who participated in this research, critical moments took many forms, including such things as milestone birthdays, health scares, bereavement, divorce and/or relationship break-ups, geographical relocations, and so forth. Each of these represented a turning point – or a pivot – in the participant’s story (Denzin, 1989; Thomson et al., 2002). In recounting these, participants invariably described a form of epiphany through which the risks of inaction became ‘real’ and personal and/or action (in the form of running) was perceived to benefit both themselves and others. The prevalence and importance given to critical moments in these women’s lives and stories re-emphasises the complexity of factors that must be in place in order to culminate in action – or the evolution from a ‘readiness to turn’ to *actually* turning.

### **10.1.3 Proponents of continued participation**

After being hailed and then ‘pushed’ to action, by critical moment or otherwise, participants tended to report their experiences within the WRN environment as positive and distinct. The majority of interviewed participants felt that it was the women’s-only nature of the WRN that engendered this uniquely supportive atmosphere. They felt that women were ‘naturally’ less competitive than men, and as such echoed both larger metanarratives concerning gender and sport (and essential differences between men and women), as well as the public narratives of the WRN (see chapter four, section 4.2). However, there were several participants who admitted to being hesitant about the gender segregation of the group, or who claimed that the women’s-onlyness was – for them – not a distinguishing factor. That said, even these participants acknowledged the importance of this variable in drawing many women into the organisation, and noted that it did perhaps create a particular form of group dynamic.

Despite being hailed by promises of a supportive, encouraging, non-competitive atmosphere, actual experiences of the same were often met with a degree of surprise. Women who had never before felt comfortable within a physical setting remarked upon the

level of acceptance and belonging that they felt when learning to run in the WRN setting. They spoke of the WRN as portraying an accessible and desirable social identity (Haslam et al., 2009; Jenkins, 1996; Tajfel, 1972), wherein they found others ‘just like them’ as well as experts who either used to be like them or who displayed a perceptive understanding of them. Furthermore, this went beyond the activity of learning to run itself – participants reported receiving informational, emotional, and esteem support (Rees et al., 2003). They spoke of the WRN as representing friendships, escape, ‘me-time’, and so forth. Those who identified with and began to embody the social identity of the WRN cited a remarkable sense of community, camaraderie, and cohesion with the group. Participants told of seeking – and finding – support for personal crises, health issues, family and relationship problems from the friends that they met through the WRN. In addition, setting and achieving physical goals, as well as receiving recognition for these accomplishments in the group setting, served to strengthen association with the WRN social identity.

Because so many participants’ positive experiences with the WRN were unanticipated, strong feelings of appreciation and gratitude were often expressed. As above, for many this culminated in a durable commitment to WRN participation. In addition, countless women expressed a sense of loyalty to the organisation, and described feeling indebted to those who had helped them on their journey. As both observer and interviewer, I heard countless declarations with these type of sentiments:

“I wouldn’t be here if not for...”

“I never, ever thought that I could...”

“It’s the first time I have felt...”

Inevitably, these statements were accompanied by an expressed desire to give something back – both to the group/organisation itself, as well as to others living with the perceived limitation that they had surpassed. This ‘giving back’ took many forms, from informal mentoring of beginners in the group context to training to become a leader and coach. Even by participating in this research, several women noted that they wanted to share their story with others – in hope that they might be similarly inspired. As such, their individual (or ontological) narrative could be seen to become part of the WRN public narrative, and vice versa.

That said, there were women who joined and ran with the WRN who never committed to, or entirely internalised, the social identity of the group and did not remain as members of the organisation (e.g., see chapter seven, Leanne’s story). Due to accessibility, I spoke to fewer of these women than I did to continuing members. However, even those who did not ultimately stay with the group itself reported a shift in their perceptions of health

and ageing. For example, through her WRN experience, Leanne (see chapter seven) opened up a new storyline in her life – not a reversal of her previous foreclosure per se, but an opening for imagined possibilities. Since her time with the group, Leanne has been more apt to engage in physically active endeavours. Further, she very much attributes the change in her attitude and inclinations to her WRN experience. In her words, “Because before it wasn’t just ‘I can’t run.’ It was, if it’s to do with sport, I can’t do it. I guess now I don’t dismiss things as easily. I’m more willing to have a go” (chapter seven, section 7.1.4). Stories such as Leanne’s therefore demonstrate the complexity of evaluating the success of interventions or programs advocating participation in physical activity. Success is not necessarily captured by statistics (i.e., the number of yearly WRN membership subscriptions). Underlying these numbers are innumerable individual stories, many of which reflect lasting positive implications of WRN participation. The broader empirical lesson here, therefore, is that those who have experienced a lifetime of inactivity need to *learn how* to become active later in life. This research has thus elucidated that active ageing, in some instances, has to be ‘learned’. Without consideration of this element, metanarratives of health consciousness and active ageing will not resonate. I pick up on this as a theoretical reflection in section 10.3.3, with a discussion on embodied learning and embodied agency.

## 10.2 Methodological reflections

This thesis represents what Ellingson (2009, p. 10) calls a ‘crystallized project’, in which I have deliberately spanned multiple points on the qualitative continuum “in order to maximise the benefits of contrasting approaches to analysis and representation,” while also remaining self-referential in my claim to partiality. Such an approach has allowed me the freedom to both understand and represent participants’ experiences from multiple perspectives:

Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4).

In the following sub-sections, I elaborate on the advantages of a multi-genre, multi-method ethnographic approach (10.2.1), make a case for analytic diversity (10.2.2), and include a reflection on my personal journey as researcher over the course of this project (10.2.3).

### 10.2.1 Design and data collection

In this section, I share some methodological reflections that relate to the study of subjective meaning, particularly in terms of participant's perceptions and experiences of health and ageing. For this thesis, I employed an ethnographic approach - the rationale for which is outlined in chapter three, alongside specific details of the design. I feel strongly that this approach allowed a level of insight that would not have been captured by other means. Indeed, I argue that the ethnographic elements of this research enabled the pursuit of questions that were beyond the frontiers of extant knowledge. This is because ethnography is particularly well-suited to topics that are not easily spoken about, involve ambiguity or ambivalence, involve examining processes of change, and focus on how lived experiences are negotiated (O'Reilly, 2005). The use of multiple methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of the (WRN) social environment and perceptions of the members of the social group (Krane & Baird, 2005). Further, this ethnographic study produced original in-depth knowledge of how health consciousness and active ageing are each constructed through narrative, senses, and material objects within the context of the WRN. The collected data was analysed and presented in an attempt to understand the culture of the group members and their behaviours, values and emotions with regard to both health consciousness and ageing (more or less) actively – as well as the everyday meaning of growing older within the group.

In addition, including a consideration of the visual culture allowed me to *show* rather than merely *tell* what was going on (Wolcott, 2005), and the auto-photography task permitted participants to engage in creating their own images. Regarding the latter, it struck me in the fairly early stages of the project that there was a ubiquity of images circulating in the 'material culture' that I was exploring. Inspired by writings on sensuous ethnography, I knew that I wanted to include analyses of these within my project. However, I was not content to treat these as 'realist representations' or reflections of 'truth', so wanted to build in some audience (participant) reaction and interpretation, as well as to ask my participants to create some images of their own. For me, images raise problems and questions (not solutions!), and these bleed from the theoretical to the methodological (and by extension, ethical) very quickly. An inclusion of the visual presented some difficulty within the larger ethnographic project, as there is no clear guide, or 'how-to' when embarking upon a project of this nature, and plenty of competing discourse. In my experience, including such an approach was very much a case of finding my own way, and not making comprehensive claims about elicited responses or participant-provided photographs. As such, inclusion of the visual does *not* lend some elusive 'magic' lens or insight into the culture that would otherwise be overlooked – for me, it just added another layer, another 'language' with which to attempt to

communicate with both participant and reader. Indeed, given the culturally limited connotations of language, I feel that the inclusion of the visual within my research allowed both myself and participants the opportunity to communicate some intangible aspects of the culture. By treating images – both existing and produced – as a critical text, or a visual narrative, I could explore issues of both representation and interpretation. Doing so allowed me to combine audience (media/cultural) studies with a sociological narrative approach: in particular, looking at the ‘movement’ of visual narratives, and how representations of a culture work within – and are responded to – by those ‘members’ of the culture. In short, I was seeking a collaborative understanding rather than one I imposed as researcher.

Inspired by existing excellent ethnographies (i.e., Wacquant, 2004), my aim has been to *transcend* the data, not merely transform it. I have elucidated my understanding of the role that specific settings (e.g., the WRN) play in facilitating and promoting health consciousness and active ageing. Further, the various ‘levels’ captured within the ethnography clarified the significance of the discrete social forces at play in this process – for example, *who* the key individuals are, and *when* opportunities to pursue or ignore health practices and/or age actively are most likely to arise. This information is an important and politically relevant resource, as the ‘obligation’ and ‘responsibility’ to achieve health and active ageing shifts from an individual endeavour, to an organisational one as well. In summary, adopting an ethnographic approach aided me in establishing an innovative approach to health consciousness and active ageing research that is highly productive, methodologically astute and future orientated.

### **10.2.2 Narrative analyses**

In this thesis, I have made a case for analytic diversity and have used novel and multiple forms of narrative analyses (see Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2010). This was, in part, due to the wide variety of data ‘types’ that emerged from my ethnographic investigation. In addition, however, multiple analyses were employed in order to exploit the full potential of narrative work to generate insight into the complexity of human life and the social function of storytelling. This is rarely done within qualitative research (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delemont, 2003), and even less so within health and active ageing research.

The analyses of narrative data included: (1) a categorical-content analysis, which is useful for examining the thematic similarities and differences between narratives within a group of people; (2) an examination of *big and small stories*, where attention was deliberately given where and when stories were told (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006); (3) a *holistic content* analysis, which deals with entire stories and their content; (4) a *holistic analysis of form*, which focuses upon the general plot and organisation of the narrative (Leiblich et al., 1993); (5) a *visual analysis*, which considers the production of the

image, the image itself, and the possibilities for various interpretations by different audiences (Reissman, 2008; Rose, 2001). My intention has not been to advocate one style of narrative analysis over another. As discussed in chapter three (section 3.5), each type has a role to play in developing our understandings of health, ageing, and body-selves. However, focus upon a *singular* type of analysis has the potential to detract from an understanding of the social world.

For example, I was concerned that the use of a categorical-content analysis in isolation would lead to an over-determination of the themes identified in the data, seemingly “ironing out the pleats” (Smith & Sparkes, 2002, p. 147). This was particularly so given my growing awareness of the diversity of the stories I was being told, and the contradictions and tensions contained within them. Indeed, numerous authors have noted the dangers associated with becoming too fixated on core themes. For example, Faircloth (1999) argues that core themes can often be underscored at the expense of variation and difference, and so lead the researcher to under-appreciate the heterogeneity of experience, detaching themselves from the “artfulness of storytelling” (p. 210). By relying on central themes and categorisation by the researcher, the uniqueness of each story may be missed. As a consequence, other possible messages that individual stories might hold are overlooked (Sparkes, 1999). This is especially the case, Eakin (1999) argues, with regard to the reflexive, constructive nature of live stories and “of the selves we say we are and the lives we say we have lived” (p. 26).

With a view to alleviating the danger of ‘ironing out the pleats,’ a holistic content analysis was also employed (see chapters 7-9). This type of reading takes into consideration the entire story and focuses on its content. Accordingly, the stories of Leanne, Justine, and Dana were examined and the contradictions, complexities, tensions, main themes and overall form of their narrative presented. It is important to note that this process was extremely time consuming, involving multiple interviews, lengthy transcription and far longer periods set aside to explore initial and global impressions of the data before deciding on special foci of content or themes that evolved in the story from beginning to end. To perform this type of analysis with additional participants would have far outstretched the time allocated for this project. Furthermore, as shown in chapters seven to nine, the result from this type of analysis is three very different stories. Thus, using a holistic-content analysis in isolation may have provided an over-whelming number of varied and complex stories from which any chance of ‘generalising’ the observations or being able to offer a ‘broad’ view on the project may have proved impractical. Combining these two approaches (categorical-content and holistic-content) thus allows a balance between over-generalising and ignoring all complexities and contradictions, and becoming so embroiled in the nuances of each individual narrative that no attempt at general observation may be put forward.



Lastly, one potential weakness of a holistic form analysis is that it can mask the dynamic fluidity of narrative structures, as well as how they are situated in social action. Reflecting this, Frank (1995) warns that once we focus upon a broad storyline that can be recognised as underlying the plot of particular stories, there is a risk of creating a 'general unifying view'. Furthermore, as Frank suggests, and as shown through the stories of the women involved in this study, no actual telling of a specific experience conforms exclusively to one, two or three narrative types. Rather, in any particular experience, all types can be told, alternatively and repeatedly.

As such, a commitment to subjecting life stories to multiple forms of analysis would seem to be in order if, as Sparkes (1999) suggests, researchers are to do justice to both the complexity of the experiences of the teller and of the stories they tell. Accordingly, if lives, stories, bodies, selves and identities are constructed, multidimensional, complex and changing with time and with context, then researchers should seek forms of analysis that are sensitive to, and respectful of, this complexity and multiplicity. With this in mind, supporting one kind of analysis over another seems less productive than asking how we might effectively combine different forms of analysis and generate different and more complex understandings of women's perceptions and experiences of health consciousness, ageing, and embodiment across the life course. As part of this development, I would propose that narrative analysis is a useful and reasonable way of approaching future work in this area. Furthermore, I would also add that narrative analyses could go beyond the production of the looking *at* people's stories, to thinking *with* the stories – as well as looking toward what stories can *do*, what they can do best, and the narrative environments that help and hinder this process (Frank, 2010; 1995; Phoenix & Griffin, in press). Considerations such as these are elaborated upon within section 10.3: theoretical reflections.

### **10.2.3 Reflexive reflections**

It has been nearly three years since my first WRN session – which was also my first foray into the world of ethnography. I began this journey by making both my positionality and vulnerability evident (see chapter one, section 1.0, and chapter three, section 3.4). I have also deliberately kept a level of reflexivity present throughout this thesis, by explicating the epistemology and theoretical lenses through which I have offered interpretations. Reflecting back upon a research journal entry that I wrote at the beginning of this project (included in section 3.4.6), it is safe to say that I was very much a hesitant and self-conscious ethnographer. I was worried about – well, just about everything, but primarily about my ability to produce a 'good' piece of research, and being competent enough to do the participants' stories justice. Without making any claims about the quality of this now

completed project, I now believe that my perceived limitations in this arena were actually advantages. My own anxiety and self-consciousness enabled me to be more perceptive of the same feelings in others, which were highly prevalent in the WRN context. My hesitancy to trust in my own, singular interpretation resulted in the consistent consideration of multiple interpretations. Throughout this process, I have certainly gained confidence in my skills as researcher and ethnographer. However, and perhaps more importantly, I have also learned to embody my beliefs that no researcher is privy to an ultimate truth – and that humility in any research approach is, in point of fact, beneficial to both researcher and the researched.

### **10.3 Theoretical reflections**

#### **10.3.1 Co-construction and narrative literacy**

One theoretical implication that may be taken from this thesis focuses upon the potential of viewing our lives as being constituted through narrative. Frank (2012, p. 33) writes that “stories reshape the past and imaginatively project the future.” As such, stories have the potential to revise people’s sense of self, as well as situate people in groups (Frank, 2006). Further, stories are always told within dialogues – and must thus be examined for an understanding of co-construction: of hearing how multiple voices find expression within any single voice. As Frank (2012, p. 35) writes, “A storyteller tells a story that is his or her own, but no story is ever entirely anyone’s own. Stories are composed from fragments of previous stories, artfully rearranged but never original.” Indeed, as Gare (2001) points out, by appreciating and seeing our lives as narrative we can more deeply understand what kinds of narratives we have been socialised into, and what narratives could replace or accompany them. Thus, understanding our existence, perceptions and experiences of health and ageing, and indeed our body-self relationships over the life course as being storied, may allow opportunities for change – and in particular occasions for re-storying our perceptions of what might lie ahead.

In taking such an approach, I advocate Frank’s understanding of stories as “artful representations of lives” (2012, p. 33). Therefore, throughout this research, I have attempted to consider each storyteller’s ‘art’ within identified levels of narrativity (meta, public and ontological). Doing so elucidates (to the observer/researcher) where individual stories ‘fit’ within the social world in question and how they ‘work’ within the larger cultural context. In addition, stories often become real to participants only in telling them (Frank, 2006). As such, only upon articulating their stories did participants recognise the narratives that they were drawing upon. For example, when asked about metanarratives within media health and active ageing messages, participants could – and did – cite common tropes and themes that they felt to be prevalent. In identifying these, many women made accompanying claims

to being critically aware, and thus invulnerable, to such messages. However, several participants subsequently found themselves echoing and incorporating elements of these metanarratives within their own stories – to their own surprise. Another instance in which this became apparent was upon feeding back my interpretation of her story to case study participant, Justine. In response to reading her story as I had written it, Justine was astonished at how much her early experiences with physical activity affected her current feelings and attitudes. Although I was using her own words, it was not until she ‘heard’ her story ‘re-told’ (and inevitably re-interpreted) that she was able to really *recognise* certain elements of her story.

Thinking about the theoretical implications of this, I propose the term ‘*narrative literacy*’. Akin to media literacy, I define narrative literacy as narrators/storytellers becoming aware of both the stories they tell and how these are connected to stories that they are surrounded by. Within this thesis, and going forward, I reiterate Frank’s (2012, p. 50) question: “How might people’s lives change if they heard their own stories with enhanced reflective awareness and if they heard others’ stories with a more generous sense of what makes these stories viable representations of the lives those storytellers live?” Enhanced narrative literacy, then, entails not only a greater personal/individual awareness of the stories one is ‘caught up in’, but also the diversity of alternative stories that circulate and are told by others. Similarly, Gare (2001) proposes that the cultivation of an *assortment* of narratives acknowledging the *diversity* of independent voices, might allow individuals to recognise that constituting their own lives as narratives should be done in dialogue, real or imagined, with a diversity of others. In doing so, any commitment to a particular identity may be acknowledged as a way of thinking or orientation that is only provisional and can be open to further questioning in the future. He continues:

Identities so formed should situate people within pre-existing narratives which constitute traditions, communities and institutions, and it is as situated that individuals become able to question these narratives, consider alternatives and take an active part in reformulating both the narratives of their own lives and these broader narratives. (Gare, 2001, p. 10).

Similarly, Freeman (2000) also advocates the need to challenge the cultural order as the primary means of altering the fate of narrative foreclosure and as an attempt to re-write the future. For him, the combined forces of public and metanarratives may become all the more powerful when individuals are unwittingly relegated by the images and narratives surrounding them to what he describes as “the status of the living dead” (p. 90). That is, by becoming more aware of the storylines one has internalised in the past, although at times difficult, may help to break the stronghold of identity foreclosure. For Freeman, rewriting the

future involves refusing prevailing endings and attempting to refashion alternative ones thereby allowing “the chains of the present to loosen their hold” (p. 90).

To summarise the above points, it would seem that in order to fully comprehend their embodied perceptions and experiences of health and ageing, women might benefit from firstly understanding their lives as being formed through narrative. Increased narrative literacy allows insight into the co-construction of personal, individual (ontological) stories – and permits the realisation that our lives can in fact be re-storied, or re-imagined. This is accomplished by bringing more stories into collective and individual consciousness (Frank, 2010; Gare, 2001). As Frank (2010, p.41) writes:

Stories have the capacity to arouse people’s imaginations; they make the unseen not only visible but compelling. Through imagination, stories arouse emotions... The capacity of stories is to arouse people’s imaginations concerning how their lives might have been different, and the possibilities that still lie open to them.

People’s level of narrative literacy influences their capacities to exercise their narrative ‘art’, and this is affected by how much they use or misuse their imagination (Frank, 2012).

Stimulating imagination starts with a critical examination of the stories we tell and why, the stories we want to tell, and – most importantly – the stories that others are telling, whether we want to hear them or not.

### **10.3.2 Stories at ‘work’**

According to Frank (2010), the work of stories is to animate human life. Stories “work *with people, for people*, and always stories work *on people*, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided” (Frank 2010, p. 3).

Conceptualising stories as active social interactions, which are heard and responded to, necessitates an understanding of what the story *does*, rather than understanding the story as a portal into the mind of the storyteller (Phoenix & Griffin, in press). For Frank (2010), viewing stories as actors (as opposed to passive accounts) enables researchers to consider what capacities enable stories to do the work that they do. To examine the work that stories might do, I have considered the stories about health and ageing that circulate within the WRN social context.

Firstly, as Frank (2010) claims, stories can stretch us. Following their exposure to WRN public narratives, participants tended to declare their previously lacking awareness of other women ‘like them’ being able to learn how to run (i.e., older, inexperienced, non-competitive, etc.). Reading the WRN health media stories (see chapter four), and seeing the accompanying visual narratives, alerted them to this new and for them, novel storyline. This

challenged many of their existing assumptions about what an ageing body (and, by association, what their bodies) could and could not do. These stories thus worked to educate participants, and expand their frame of reference (Phoenix & Griffin, in press). This process resonates with elements of the 'affirmation-expansion' stage of story engagement described by Randall and McKim (2008), who propose that during this stage a story stretches us, opening us up to "aspects of our lives that we are not normally, or at least not knowingly, aware of . . . acquaints us with people and situations that are by and large foreign" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 137). During this preliminary encounter, Randall and McKim (2008, p. 137) suggest that the story confronts us with 'complexities of emotion which, though technically within our capacity to imagine, surpass what we have actually experienced in the past'. According to Frank (2010; Phoenix & Griffin, in press), it is this imaginative opening that makes stories attractive and can explain why people might be willing to listen to a story and at times use it to re-story their own.

Secondly, stories can get under peoples skin (Frank, 2010, Phoenix & Griffin, in press). Frank notes how stories have the singular capacity to generate the most intense, focused engagement among listeners and readers. People do not simply listen to stories – rather, they get caught up in them. Further, once stories are under their skin, "they affect the terms in which people think, know, and perceive... [they] teach people what to look for and what can be ignored; what to value and what to hold in contempt" (Frank 2010, p. 48). Analyses of participants' responses to the public narratives of the WRN (see chapter five) showed how these stories worked as an impetus for women to begin to question the parameters of their socially situated beliefs concerning who *could* be a runner, especially in relation to their capacity to learn a specific (and perceived to be difficult) form of physical activity later in life. This provides empirical support for Randall and McKim's (2008) conceptual discussion of the 'contradiction-examination' stage of story engagement. This stage requires that the story first disrupts what the audience thought was known, and work to "crack the shell of our habitual perceptions and to question our tried and true patterns for making sense of our lives, our selves" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 138). In this instance, habitual perceptions generally revolved around learning how to run later in life, particularly when earlier attempts to do so had proved unsuccessful. An indication that success stories of 'women just like them' (prevalent in the WRN public narrative) had got under the participants' skin is readily apparent – participants had since joined and learned to run with the WRN, creating and telling their own 'success' stories. In learning to tell these stories themselves, participants had to first examine and expand their own stories about health and ageing, and the possibilities therein (Randall & McKim, 2008). As Frank (2010, p. 59) writes, "Vital, breathing stories can break between filters and grids," and it is this movement that created fissures in what were previously foreclosed narrative identities.

Frank (2010) also notes that stories can both connect and disconnect us. In chapter six, I noted that the WRN stories that circulate in both beginner's-welcome and beginner's-only groups work to both promote a social identity and to reduce a sense of 'otherness' – and in doing so, can connect people (Frank, 2010; Phoenix & Griffin, in press). However, by the same means stories can also disconnect. Just as stories call upon individuals to assert common identities, so too can they emphasise difference (Phoenix & Griffin, in press). Engaging with stories (or not) is required if social change is to occur. Randall and McKim (2008, p. 137) propose that, "the deeper our engagement with a story, the more the story changes us, slight though the change may be. We enter it as one sort of person and exit it another." For stories to be taken fully on board and restorying to be optimised, they must engage (or interpellate) the listener. By definition, participants in this thesis were all interpellated by the WRN public narrative, although to varying degrees. However they were hailed to participate, and whether they continued in the long-term or not, all participants were members of the WRN, and had all 'responded' to being hailed by joining and running with the group. Missing here are the voices of the women who did not engage with the WRN story – those who either let the story pass them by, or discounted themselves from being hailed for any number of reasons.

### **10.3.3 Embodied learning and embodied agency across the life course**

Investigating the embodiment of participants in the WRN through ethnographic methods has proven fruitful. As I have shown throughout this thesis, it has given me access to the lived experience of the body and to participants' own interpretations of their circumstances. Forefront in many of these interpretations, particularly amongst participants who were new to the activity of running, was the concept of embodied learning. As discussed in chapter six (section 6.3.2), the term 'embodied learning' refers to the process of participants learning how to be in their bodies in a new way: a way in which they were unfamiliar with, unaccustomed to, and – in many cases – initially resistant to. For these women, the body became part of, if not *the*, technique for learning about the physical and social context of the WRN (Yarnal et al., 2006). For WRN participants new to running (and often entirely new to physical activity), the act of running gradually became embodied knowledge, with beginners learning and retaining new meanings and acquiring skills that were henceforth 'stored' in the body (Yarnal et al., 2006). As Frank (1995) writes, in making sense of our experiences, we not only tell stories *about* our bodies, but we also tell stories *out of* and *through* our bodies. Therefore, for these beginners, new bodily sensations and experiences involved both formulating and telling a new story to oneself and to others (Sparkes & Smith, 2011). Indeed, learning to tell this new story (via learning how to run),

increased the embodied *agency* of participants – the capacity to tell new stories about themselves, their bodies, and their capabilities.

As with the consideration of narrative (see above, section 10.3.1), embodied agency cannot be conceived of outside the broader structures – cultural and discursive – which map out a space of possibilities for social action (Tulle, 2008). Bodily ageing has been identified as a key factor to explain the marginalised structural position of people as they age, and theoretically this has been captured by the observation that older bodies and the social actors who inhabit them have traditionally been understood primarily within the narrative of decline (Gullette, 2003). At an *experiential* level, bodily ageing is less well known but a range of concepts also suggest that it has a disruptive impact on the management of everyday life and on identity. Extant literature has identified an array of strategies to counter the threat posed by bodily ageing: one strategy is to disembodiment oneself through the mask of ageing and the claim to agelessness. A second strategy is to opt for anti-ageing strategies to postpone illness, deal with the visible signs of ageing and essentially postpone death. A third strategy is to stay ‘busy’ (Katz, 2000) to counter the risk of social and cultural marginality.

However, understanding how older adults construct alternative storylines to those associated with inevitable physical decline and deterioration has relevance for recent conceptual developments within social gerontology regarding ‘the third age’ (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Laslett, 1996). The third age refers to an emerging life stage within contemporary society that represents new possibilities for personal identity development through an expanded period of consumption and choice (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Drawing upon the work of Bauman (2001), Jones and Higgs (2010) argued that these characteristics represent and are reinforced by an ongoing desire for bodily fitness. For them, the social landscape of ageing is rapidly changing to the extent that “normal ageing now takes on a multiplicity of forms” (p. 1515). Diversity within the ageing experience – including the pursuit of a ‘fit’ or ‘healthy’ body – has become the normal and the normative. The third age can be seen as problematic in terms of promoting excessive positive ageing (for more on this critique, refer back to chapter two, section 2.4). That recognised, the concept does alert researchers to better understand the changing social landscape of ageing and those persons within it, who deviate from a unilinear notion of natural ageing (Phoenix & Smith, 2011).

Within this thesis, I have elucidated the power of the narrative of decline, which for many participants underpinned a restricted approach to their own ageing and what they felt their bodies were capable of. The data also revealed the salience of the neoliberal cultural trends of late modernity, namely the engagement with body projects to attain socially valued norms of physical appearance and the rationalisation of the body required to attain those

norms. In addition, however, I have drawn attention to the other side of the ageing story: the progressive, growth-focused thicker narratives that may be more representative of the third age and what now constitutes normal ageing (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Jones & Higgs, 2010). In amplifying stories that would not otherwise be heard, this research has generated awareness of alternative stories of ageing – and, in doing so, has provided more meaningful ways of imagining and living within the ageing body across the life course (Phoenix & Smith, 2011).

An important theoretical contribution of this research is evidence of a *modulated* account of embodied agency – wherein social actors engaged with neoliberal health imperatives and active ageing agendas in individual, biographically unique ways. For WRN participants, sustained (and for some, recently developed) embodiment of a sporting identity provided opportunities to challenge assumptions informing the narrative of decline (Phoenix & Smith, 2011). Analyses revealed how, and the extent to which, notions of inevitable decline were resisted through the telling of counterstories. The most vocal and powerful counterstories were those told by women who had experienced an epiphany about the inaccuracy of their own perceptions of the ageing process. Inspired by their realisations, they sought to share their stories and strategies with others at every opportunity. As such, they embodied what Phoenix and Smith (2011, p. 7) called regular and dyadic resistance: through their stories, their bodies related to other bodies, existing in mutual constitution with them and communicating with others across the life course.

Like Tulle (2008), I argue that the point of this analysis was not to create new *norms* of embodiment based on individual compulsion. The embodied learning and resulting embodied agency which I discerned amongst WRN participants is not to be confounded with athletic competence (although it is among these social actors, in this social context). Instead, for these women, embodied agency can be understood as the ability to *control* and *broaden* their ontological position without feeling culturally obligated to deny their corporeal existence (Tulle, 2008). Here, I am therefore arguing for a reconstruction of ontology as social, open to renegotiation, growth and flux *at any age*. The challenge for sociologists and social gerontologists (both within and outside of academia) is thus to find ways of eliciting, better understanding, and addressing the subjective experiences of people who have *lived the reality* of ageing over time and how they have responded to life change in relation to activity.

#### **10.4 Implications for policy and practice**

There is no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to designing physical activity programming or encouraging participation (Henderson, 1996). Much of the extant literature



relies too heavily on quantitative measures in which contextual features are treated as discrete variables to be overcome. Intervention – or participation – is viewed as treatment and solution, and is oriented towards the individual, with little consideration of personal context, or the influence of cultural values on behaviour. However, it is clear that understanding the ways in which representations of health and illness become meaningful to us involves more than simply considering the body that we end up with through the health and illness practices we adopt. Indeed, as James and Hockey (2007) assert, the negotiation of health identities involves taking subjective account of the body that we start from – and indeed act with. My hope is that this research acts as an impetus to further explore the lived reality of ageing (more or less) actively through an ageing, changing body across the life course. I argue that scientists and policy makers have much to gain from understanding the subjective experiences of people who have *lived the reality* of ageing over time and how they have responded to life change in relation to activity.

Narrative research within gerontology over recent years has developed our conceptual understanding of ageing as a biographical event. It has also offered rich insight into the varied experiences of ageing. While this work has been extremely valuable, I believe that if narrative research is to fulfil its potential within gerontology policy arenas, there is a need to continue this work on what stories of ageing can do. After all, successful interventions and policy initiatives are implicitly governed by the notion of stories doing things – and doing them well. As examples, this might involve moving people to take action over their health behaviours, connecting communities via storylines of common goals, or creating a fair and equal society through highlighting (and thereby normalising?) difference rather than sameness, which has the potential to destabilise entrenched and stereotypical storylines about others. The task of understanding what stories can *do*: how they can work with people, for people, and on people affecting what they are able to see as real, possible, worth doing or best avoided (Frank, 2010) has the potential to be undertaken in a multitude of settings. This should include an investigation of how people use stories to achieve active ageing and also how stories work on people to restrain their ability to achieve active ageing. Understanding what (alternative) stories people are more likely to engage with is a useful first step. Some insight into this may be gleaned by returning to/continuing with research which explores the narrative complexity of everyday life and identity. Likewise, being attentive to peoples' narrative habitus – their disposition to certain stories over others – is another. It is my belief that policies and programmes will seldom produce the results that are wanted – a healthy, active and integrated society that values people of all ages and abilities – until we better understand these issues. Most importantly, practice and programming for older adults must begin to reflect the increasingly broad policy definitions of

active ageing (Walker, 2002; 2006), and need to consider active ageing in the context of ordinary people, everyday life and the passing of time.

### **10.5 Limitations and possibilities**

This study was very much situated in a particular place and time, and as such can only be regarded in that context. Women participants in the WRN were, with few exceptions, Caucasian, educated, and middle to upper-middle class. Despite an attempt to broaden the socio-economic scope of the sample by attending groups in larger urban areas, it is important to recognise that this research did not address the health and ageing perceptions and experiences of economically disadvantaged and marginalised women. In the study, women of lower education were not represented, and during my 14 months of participant observation I encountered only one ethnic minority participant. Because of this, I was unable to explore economic, or ethnic-specific or cultural factors that might influence some women's access to narrative resources; hence, any findings cannot be generalised outside this particular demographic. Additional cases would contribute more data, and future research might take an intersectional approach and/or try to incorporate case studies of women-only social formations that include women from different social backgrounds.

Another possible limitation is sample bias. Women who volunteered to participate in interviews may have self-selected for their enthusiasm about the WRN and for their positive perceptions about the organisation. Although an attempt was made to locate and include women who had left the group, the primary participants in this research were current members of the WRN. Essentially, this fact alone suggests a positive evaluation of both the organisation and their personal experience therein. As such, future research might do well in casting a wider net of recruitment: interviewing those who both engage in health behaviours and physical activity, and those who do not.

Throughout chapters four to nine, numerous issues have been illuminated relating to gender, including perceived ('essential') gender differences in both physical ability and bodily comportment, as well as supposed 'naturalised' behaviours and preferences that are innately 'feminine'. Despite this being a prevalent discussion point with and amongst participants, I am reluctant to make any broad assertions about the women's-onlyness of the WRN and the environment that this may (or may not) foster. This is because I do not feel as though I have a point of comparison from which to work from. As such, future research might benefit from an exploration of men's perceptions and experiences of health, ageing and embodiment – how these might compare, differ, or offer similarities. In addition, research with both mixed-gender and men's-only beginner's physical activity groups has the potential to offer insight into these issues.

Lastly, knowledge would be enriched by research investigating the lived experience of active ageing outside of the realm of physical activity. A primary concern of the active ageing initiative is to facilitate individuals to realise their potential for physical, social and psychological wellbeing (WHO, 2002). To gain insight into the complexity of active ageing, theoretically informed and methodologically innovative research is needed which takes into account a variety of voices and settings (Phoenix & Grant, 2009). Future research needs to consider the key fields identified by AGE Platform Europe (2011) within which to promote active ageing: (1) employment, (2) participation in society, (3) health and independent living, (4) intergenerational solidarity. Knowledge in this area will expand only through a detailed exploration of how active ageing is negotiated across the life course in a range of physical settings that are identified within social policy as being integral to its promotion.

## **10.6 Concluding thoughts**

In this chapter, I have drawn my strands of thinking together in relation to the theory, methods, data and interpretations presented in this thesis. In doing so, I have aspired to highlight the empirical, methodological, and theoretical reflections that have emerged from this research journey. Accordingly, I have illustrated within these pages that narrative forms of engaging with body stories have much to offer in terms of exploring women's subjective, embodied perceptions and experiences of health and ageing. They also have much to offer in terms of helping us to understand how these subjectivities are lived and then expressed in the telling of stories that are themselves culturally located, shaped, and framed both beyond and within the conscious awareness of individuals and groups. Indeed, the manner in which an individual makes sense of and relates to health and self-ageing is derived from the group, cultural, institutional, and historical formations and the narrative resources available in them.

The issues raised within this thesis add to the debate on the potential of narrative as an epistemological, ontological and analytical tool that may assist our understanding of the lived experience of active ageing, along with the complex dynamics of body-self relationships in these lives as they develop over time. There are policy and practice implications arising from this work as well. This thesis invites a narrative approach to everyday life, as well as advocating the necessity of comprehensive insight into people's perceptions and experiences of active ageing within the context of life history, current life stage and the everyday (relative to gender and socio-economic status). It has taken the first step in considering *how* active ageing is achieved (or not) across the life course, and – ideally – will inspire further enquiry into people's lived experiences of ageing (more or less) actively in response to the challenges that are encountered throughout life. Such

understanding is imperative in helping to shape future knowledge production that supports the promotion of healthy ageing.

## Epilogue

“We wanted to share the world of running with those who were maybe interested, but thought it was closed to them for whatever reason. We’re immensely proud of what we have done – it is so rewarding getting women to push their boundaries and reach goals they didn’t know they had. Truthfully, our downfall is probably that we don’t mind if women stay with the WRN – if we get them going, and then they move on, we consider that a success...”

-Pamela, WRN co-founder

Approximately six months following the completion of my fieldwork, I was amazed to discover that the WRN was folding: forced into compulsory liquidation in April 2011. Citing financial difficulties, the local media included a quotation from the co-founders declaring that they had “no alternative” but to cease operations. This announcement was met with surprise and shock by many of the estimated 4000 members in groups all over England and Wales. Rumours and conjecture abounded in online forums and via social media. Although concrete answers remain elusive, the over-arching public opinion was that the WRN’s issues were structural. Insiders critiqued the business model of the organisation, and several of my participants referred to the WRN as being a “victim of their own success,” citing the unanticipated rapid growth of the group as contributing to disorganisation. The bottom line, however, is that the WRN no longer exists in its previous form.

That the WRN, as an organisation, did not enjoy continued success does not negate or diminish the research that I conducted therein. Although interesting and important, an examination of economic, practical and structural constraints within women’s sports organisation and participation is beyond the scope of this thesis. What the WRN did offer was an unusual sporting context, not segregated by age or ability. Over the years (1998-2011), the organisation recruited 10,000+ women to start running. Furthermore, the vast majority of these women have continued to run: many of the existing individual groups have continued operating, as their insurance is still in place and the qualifications of their leaders remain valid. Clusters of members have united together in forming smaller, locally-run groups, still campaigning for ‘others just like them’ to join in for fun and fitness. Certainly, the WRN have left a legacy in the amateur/non-elite running culture in the UK, and any organisation aiming to increase participation in physical activity across the life course would do well to learn from the WRN’s example.

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- NB2:** URL no longer active since WRN liquidation. See epilogue.
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## Appendix I - Information sheet



### SCHOOL OF SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES Qualitative Research Unit

#### Ethnography of the Women's Running Network

##### Information sheet for participants

*An ethnography of the Women's Running Network (WRN)* is a project based at the University of Exeter, UK, and is being undertaken as part of the requirements for the PhD in Sport and Health Sciences. The purpose of this particular research project is to understand the meaning that individuals (specifically female running group participants) give to their engagement with exercise in the setting of the WRN, and the ways in which this may shape their perceptions, experiences, and expectations of the ageing process. This would involve an interview or series of interviews that focus on your experiences and participation with the WRN, as well as broader questions considering the role of physical activity over your life course. In the interviews I would simply like you to tell me, in your own way and at your own pace, about your life and your involvement in running (and physical activity in general). There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. It is your experiences, and what you want to tell me about them that I wish to hear. The information you provide is under your control and you are free to decline to answer any question. Should you feel uncomfortable about any issues that you or the interviewer raises, you are free to change the topic, interrupt the interview for a while, or terminate the interview altogether. Furthermore, you may decline to participate in the study at any time, without giving a reason and without incurring displeasure or penalty.

The length of the interview is negotiated with you, but I have found in the past that people normally feel comfortable with 1-3 hours. If you agree, the interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient to you. All interviews will be conducted and transcribed by myself (Meridith Griffin) for the purposes of analysis. Interview data and all personal information will be treated as strictly confidential and will not be made publicly available. Only I and my research supervisor, Dr. Cassandra Phoenix, will have access to the data. The use of personal data conforms to the data protection guidelines. The Ethics Committee of the School of Sport and Health Sciences has reviewed and approved this project.

The information generated from this project may be published in the future but no details about yourself will be divulged from which you could be identified. You are most welcome to

request a copy of any future papers, as well as the report sent to the WRN upon the completion of this project should you so wish. You will be invited to sign a consent form indicating that you agree to take part in the study. If you have any questions about this, and/or the project in general, either now or in the future, then please do not hesitate to contact me by email ([mbg202@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:mbg202@exeter.ac.uk)), or my supervisor by telephone at (01392) 26 2861 or email ([H.C.Phoenix@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:H.C.Phoenix@exeter.ac.uk)).

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## Appendix II – Participant consent form



### SCHOOL OF SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES Qualitative Research Unit

#### Ethnography of the Women's Running Network Participant Consent Form

Researcher: Meridith Griffin

Supervisor: Dr Cassandra Phoenix

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---

Name of Participant (upper case) .....

Name of Researcher (upper case) .....

#### **THIS SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED BY THE PARTICIPANT:**

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes / No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions? Yes / No

Have you received enough information about the study? Yes / No

This study has been explained to you by whom? .....

#### ***Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study:***

- At any time
- Without having to give a reason for withdrawing

#### ***Do you understand that:***

- The interviews will be audio-recorded

- The interview transcripts may be used for publications
- Your identity will not be revealed at any time or in any publication

Yes / No

***I agree that data from my interview transcripts can:***

Be used in future publications.

Yes / No

Do you agree to take part in this study?

Yes / No

Signed (Participant): .....

Date:.....

Signed (Researcher): .....

Date:.....

## Appendix III – Sample interview guide

### Interview guide (WRN member)

NB: Essentially what I want to know (any interview with members) are two things:

1. Why the WRN? (what they perceive the WRN as uniquely offering).
2. Why are *you* involved? (personal meaning, connection, drive and attachment).
3. Their experiences and perceptions re: their involvement, their (ageing) bodies, running, etc & so forth.

#### *General/Personal*

Can you tell me a little bit about your past / upbringing?

Are you from here (Exeter/southwest)? Have you lived here your whole life?  
Education... Work... Family (marriage, children?)... Leisure activities... ?  
Major life events?

Did you play any sports growing up or over the years? (early involvement in sport)

(And/or) – have you been active over the years?  
Have there been any times in your life where you were more/less active?

#### *Personal WRN*

Can you tell me about how you came to be involved with the WRN?

How long ago?  
Did you run before you joined?  
WHY did you seek out the WRN?  
Why running rather than other forms of P.A.?  
How did you find it/hear about the WRN?  
What was the impetus for joining? Why then (in your life)?  
What was your motivation for joining? What did you/do you hope to achieve?

(If recent/ you can remember), can you tell me about your experiences of joining the WRN?

What was it like when you started out? Were you nervous? Confident?  
What is the social/ environment like for a beginner/newcomer?  
Do you, or how quickly did you feel a part of the group?

What is your current level of involvement in the WRN?

How many sessions/week? Where? Races? Socials?

What does running bring to your life?

[Alternative questions... how does it make you feel? How important is it, if at all, in your life?]

What is it about running that you like/dislike?

How does the WRN fit in with the rest of your life? / What role does running play in your life?

Are your family/partner/children supportive of your participation?

Can you talk about any barriers that you've encountered with respect to your participation?

How important is running with the WRN, in your life?

Have you participated in any races at all – and if so, which ones? Do you have a favourite?

Do you do any travelling to compete? (may come up earlier)

What is it about racing that you enjoy?

### *Ageing/Embodied experiences*

How would you describe your body?

How has this changed over time, if at all?

How do you feel about your body?

How has this changed over time, if at all?

How do you think that you'll feel about your body as time passes? / In the future?

Do you think that your participation in running/the WRN affects how you feel about your body?

Why? How? To what extent?

How do you feel about getting older?

What do you expect will happen?

From where do you gather this information? / How do you know this?

Can you tell me about a specific occasion when you felt that your body was ageing?

What? When? How did you respond?

How did it make you feel?

How do you foresee your future as a runner? As a member of the WRN?

Stopping at a certain age/continuing indefinitely?

How do you feel about running as you get older?

Do you think being part of the WRN influences how you feel about yourself as a woman?

Why? Where? How?

How important is it, as a woman, to be part of a women's only exercise group?

Can you tell me about any of the other members who are older/younger than you?

Can you identify with them at all? Sensible / silly? Etc...?

### *WRN – the group*

What does the WRN, as a group, mean to you?

What is it about the WRN that keeps you here?

What role has the WRN played in *your* life?

What does the WRN offer to you? What does it bring to your life?

[\*distinguish this from earlier question... this one is about the WRN GROUP, the other is about RUNNING per se]

That other groups don't?

What doesn't it offer, that you wish it would?

Can you tell me about your experiences with group leader(s)?

How would you describe the role of leaders?

What level of support do leaders offer, in your experience?

Can you tell me about your experiences with other members?

How welcoming (and/or) supportive do you find other members?

Do you socialise with other members, outside of running sessions?

Have you made any connections/friendships?

What do you tend to talk/connect about?

What makes you want to/not want to run with these women?

Have you had any negative experiences with other members?

Has there been anyone who has been particularly influential in either encouraging or inspiring your participation?

Leader, group, family, older/more experienced member, etc?

Has there been anyone who has been discouraging?

### *General WRN*

To what extent do you think the women's-only aspect is important to the group?

Why do you think other women join and participate?

What do you think keeps the long-term members coming out?

What about people you've seen join and then stop attending – what do you think their reasons are? ['success' stories vs. 'failure' stories?]

What would you say is the philosophy of the WRN?

How well do you think it achieves its aims?

Is there anything that you would change about the organization, or your experience?  
Anything that needs improvement?

In what ways, if at all, would you say that your life has changed since joining the WRN?

In what ways, if at all, has the way that you view your life (i.e. future) changed since joining the WRN?

## Appendix IV - Auto-photography task: Information sheet and consent form



### COLLEGE OF LIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES

#### Research Project: Ethnography of the Women's Running Network

#### Instructions for Auto-photography task:

##### **Describe Yourself.**

To do this, I would like you to take 5 photographs that tell who you are. These photographs can be of anything, just as long as they tell something about who you are. These pictures should say, "This is Me!"

##### **Describe who you are not.**

I would also like you to describe who you are not. To do this, I would like you to take another 5 photographs. These photographs can be of anything as long as they say, "This is Not Me!"

##### **This is how I would like to be represented.**

Finally, I would like you to take 5 photographs depicting how you would like to be represented in 'society' (i.e., within running magazines, internet, promotional materials, ETC.). These can either be photographs of yourself, or of images that already exist in the public record that you feel represent you and your running experience(s).

To help you keep track, I have put a label on top of the camera/provided a checklist. When you take a picture of something that describes you, cross out a number under *Me* on the label. Similarly, when you take a picture that does not describe you, keep track by crossing out a number under *Not Me*. Finally, when you take a picture of how you would like to be represented (of yourself, or of existing representations), keep track by crossing out a number under *Represent*. Please remember, the 'Me' and 'Not Me' should not contain any images of yourself. In addition, whilst you are allowed to take pictures of other people, please take the following precautions for ethical reasons: none of the photographs should contain strangers, and permission must be granted by the individual(s) prior to the image being captured. In addition, none of these images will be reproduced in any reports (i.e., publications/conference presentations, etc.) emerging from this research.



**SCHOOL OF SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES**  
**Qualitative Research Unit**

**Research Project: Ethnography of the Women's Running Network**

**Checklist for Auto-photography task:**

When you take a picture of something that describes you, check off a box under *Me* below. Similarly, when you take a picture that does not describe you, keep track under *Not Me*. Finally, when you take a picture of how you would like to be represented (of yourself, or of existing representations), record this under *Represent*.

**Me.**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**Not Me.**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**Represent.**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Please remember, the 'Me' and 'Not Me' should not contain any images of yourself. In addition, for ethical reasons, none of the photographs should contain people other than yourself, as signed consent would be necessary from all those pictured as well.





COLLEGE OF LIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES  
SPORT AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Research Project: Ethnography of the Women’s Running Network

Notes on the use of photography for the above project:

As part of the above project, you are invited to participate in some tasks involving photography. Following a discussion with Meridith Griffin about this aspect of the study, please read the statements below. You should tick ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as appropriate.

I understand that this project involves the use of photography and that these photographs are intended to be used in research publications, research presentations, and for teaching purposes only.

Yes / No

I understand that I will be given copies of all photographs that are taken.

Yes / No

I understand that some photographs might include images of myself. I am aware that although the researcher will take steps to protect my identity (through the use of fictitious names), it might still be possible for me to be recognised by other people. Knowing this, I still give permission for these photographs to include pictures of myself.

Yes / No

I understand that I am entitled to withdraw from this (or any) part of the study at any time without offering any explanation. This will not affect my relationship with the researcher in any way.

Yes / No

Signed:

Print name:

Date:

Signature of researcher:

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## Appendix V - WRN media health stories

Article 1: from website (WRN, 2011)

### New Year New You



We'd like to wish everyone a Happy New Year for 2011.

And here at the Women's Running Network we can make that happen.

Maybe you'd like some help and motivation to shed those extra pounds after over-indulging this Christmas.

Or perhaps you need some support with that New Year's resolution to get fitter and healthier. Well that's where we come in.

Don't worry if you've had a few too many roast potatoes on Christmas Day, have polished off that box of chocolates on Boxing Day or celebrated the New Year with a bit more booze than is probably good for you.

Get out there and get running in January and you'll soon start feeling a whole lot better about yourself. Our leaders are there to support you – they're all raring to go for the New Year with groups going out across the country throughout this month and beyond.

Whatever your running goals for 2011 are, we are there to help you achieve them. You may be aiming to take part in a local event - one of the hundreds of Cancer Research UK 5K Race for Life runners, a half marathon or full marathon. Or maybe you simply want that special feeling of making steady progress after you started out thinking you'd never be able to keep going for more than 30 seconds!

Let us help you realise your dreams – check out our website for details of where you can find a group, get out there and make it happen in January. And don't keep it to yourself. If you've enjoyed being a part of our fantastic network then why not share the good news.

Tell your friends about us and why running would benefit them too. As you know, joining the Women's Running Network can change lives so spread the message far and wide. Pick up the phone, mention it in your thank you cards and letters or post it on your Facebook or Twitter page.

Let's get more women running in 2011.

**Article 2: from website (WRN, 2011)**

## From couch to coach in six months

It's been an incredible year for Kim Lester from the Midlands – she's gone from couch potato to coach and Women's Running Network leader in just six months.

This time last year, Kim was five and a half stone overweight, in a rut and ashamed of how she looked. But the holistic therapist from Birmingham took a grip of her life and decided to run her way to fitness. It's been a tough and, at times, painful journey but Kim has shown amazing determination to reach her goals. And she's now encouraging other women in her home city to follow in her footsteps after setting up the Soul Runners WRN group.

"Running has changed my life in many ways. I feel better fitter and I love going out running. I still have another 1.5 stone to get to my ideal weight but I know I will get there now," said Kim.

"If I can do it everyone can do it! You just need someone to motivate and encourage you because it's so hard alone. You sometimes feel like abandoning but with a little help you can make it and when you stop and look back you feel so glad you didn't," she added.



Kim (pictured on the left before she started running) was born in Birmingham but went to live in Switzerland at the age of 19, married at 23 and had two children. She lived there up until about two years ago.

"It was a beautiful country but being so far away from family and friends was stressful and I got into the habit of eating nice foods for comfort. The weight started to pile on and before I knew it she was 16.7 stone. I lost all my joy of living and basically got into a rut," she said.

She came back home to live and set about trying to lose weight but found it hard, not helped by a lack of fitness which meant she couldn't walk up the slightest hill without getting out of breath. In March, her friend Karen Lolli, suggested she start running to help with the diet. Kim's response: "I laughed - what ME, RUN! No way, I can't run for 20 seconds and you want me to go out running."

Karen, who loves running, explained to Kim that she could start by walking, then walking a bit faster, and eventually walking a minute, running a minute. "I decided that I would love to be able to go out running with my old school mate as we grew up together from the age of eight, so I started walking. She bought me a pedometer and told me she wanted 10.000 steps a day.

"I started immediately and could feel myself breathing better every day. I was tired and I had a few aches and pains but I felt good. Karen motivated me and congratulated me all the time, which was exactly what I needed.

“In May, I started to run three minutes, walk three minutes. Although my breathing was better and I felt fitter, I still couldn’t run any longer than three minutes due to my weight as it tired me out, my legs hurt and I started to get a bit frustrated as I couldn’t run any longer,” said Kim.

### **No encouragement from running clubs**

She contacted some local running clubs to see if she could join, reckoning it would be more fun to go out with other people. But to her surprise it wasn't as easy as she thought!

“I contacted a couple of clubs in the area and they asked if I could do a nine-minute mile or if I could run for five miles. When I said ‘No, not yet,’ I was told to come back when I could! So I decided to do the Race for Life 5k in June in Solihull to motivate me but it was already full so I took a chance and signed up for the Race for Life 10k in Stratford-upon-Avon.”

Karen thought her friend was mad and was worried because Kim could still only walk-run three minutes. She didn’t want her being put off – but that wasn’t the biggest problem. Kim explains: “I was determined I would make it, but I did something quite stupid - I bought new trainers from a running shop, and they didn’t check my gait because they didn’t really think it was necessary as I was too big to run very far!

“The trainers they sold me were for people who under-pronate and I over-pronate so I injured my knee. But I refused to give in as I already had some sponsors, so on the race day I went off to Stratford alone as Karen lives in Oxfordshire and couldn't be there.

“When I got there I was feeling a bit lonely as everyone seemed to be in groups or with friends. Tears rolled down my face as I thought all of a sudden ‘I’m never going to do this, my knee hurts and Karen was right it is too soon.’

### **Motivated to run a half marathon**

“We spoke over the phone before the race started and she told me I could do it! That was enough to give me back my motivation and my confidence.

“Well I did it. I run-walked it, but I ran more than I walked and did my first 10K in 1hour 24minutes and wasn’t last by a long way - there were hundreds after me.”

When the euphoria subsided, Kim realised her knee was very painful and she ended up in hospital. She was told to rest it for three to four weeks so couldn’t run or walk throughout July at all. But she was so motivated after completing her first 10K that she signed up to take part in a half marathon with Karen, who had already done a half and full marathon and encouraged and motivated her running partner all through her training.

By this time Kim had lost 3.4 stone.

She and Karen decided to take the Leadership in Running Fitness course so they could organise a running group for women who wanted to lose weight and get fit again with Women’s Running Network.

“The main thing that drove us to do this was that it is so difficult to get into a club as an unfit beginner that women like us tend to abandon, and they are the ones that need the most help and motivation,” said Kim (pictured left after her fitness regime).

She and Karen ran the half marathon together, crossing the finish line in 2hours 46minutes and by now Kim was almost 4 stone lighter than when she first started running.

And now she is keen to motivate and support other women, the way Karen inspired her.

“It’s so easy to abandon but with our help it’s so easy to continue because it’s fun and there is no competition, no timing, no minimum distances!” she said

“If you are aged between 16 and 80 and you can put one foot in front of the other, then you can join one of our groups.”

## With The Coming Of Christmas... The Goose Gets Fit!

We runners know the importance of a balanced diet, not only to sustain a healthy lifestyle but also to give us the fuel to keep on running.

At Christmas time however, the balanced bit kind of goes out the window. Were it only the 25/12 meal including trimmings, booze and second helpings, even, we would cope just by adding an extra run on Boxing Day, but it is the season and all the parties that does us in. It is also family time for most people and this can mean that we have even less time to dash out to do a corrective run after over indulging.

If you are training hard for a big race then your needs will be quite specific and your discipline will no doubt carry you through the festive season.

...and the rest of us? How to approach the darkest month and all of its warming treats?!?

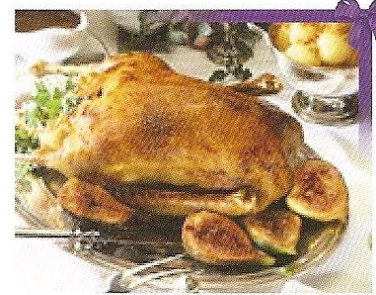
### Here are some tips:

- 1) Think in terms of tit for tat—calories in, calories out. For every extra mince pie you eat, say, add ½ mile to your run.
- 2) Ask your organiser to run a couple of “fat burning” interval sessions
- 3) Do more long and slow runs; i.e. longer than usual, slower than usual.
- 4) Get down to the gym.
- 5) Fake it - at a party, nurse your drink, make it last, drink sparkling water with ice and lemon and pretend it's a large G&T.
- 6) Rave about the food but only take small portions and leave at least half the cream on the plate.
- 7) If you go to a restaurant try to have just the main course or consider starter +pudding only.
- 8) Between parties cut your calorie intake a bit by eating more salads and veggies and cutting down on fats and carbs.

9) In general cut out between-meal snacking—save it for the festive meals.

10) Ask Father Christmas to bring you running kit which may help to focus the mind.

Another way to look at this is to remember that it happens once a year. Why not relax and enjoy ourselves-within reason of course-whilest maintaining our fitness as best we can? January will welcome us with open arms, that bit more daylight and the promise of spring to refresh and restore. Happy Christmas!



## Warning! Warning! A festive word to the wise

Alco-choc Toxic Shock is spreading fast as the festive season approaches.

How to recognise the symptoms:

- You greet the New Year not recognising the person in the mirror
- Bins are still full of bottles and wrappers...and the bin men came yesterday
- Bathroom scales are face down since you last used them
- Baggy clothes are the fashion - only you know the truth that lurks beneath
- Still pretending to be 'jolly' when you're really pig sick
- Skin like the nether regions of a walrus in colour, texture and folds
- Everything wobbles when you try to run...even your lips!

Believe me, prevention is better than cure.

- Plan your festive fayre – don't get caught by the siege mentality
- Tell everyone you're into quality this year not quantity – champagne and truffles only
- Have fun that you remember the next day with people you recognise
- Add a little super burner run once or twice a week - 5 minutes warm up ; 10 x 1 minute hard and 1 minute recovery; 5 minute cool down
- Have a PB goal for the Turkey Trot 10k rather than a survival jog hoping to be sober by the finish



Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

*Peg Wiseman*

But if you fail despite your good intentions, don't despair - hide or go to bed with a box of chocs! And then get out there and start all over again....just like last year!



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# Get your body back on track

*If winter's getting you down, there is no boost like physical exercise. And even absolute beginners don't need to worry - help is at hand. Sarah Pitt has a sporty night out with the Women's Running Network*

IT IS Monday evening at the Exeter Arena and a group of trainer-clad women are putting a brave face on the cold and running laps. Pauline Beare, founder of the Women's Running Network, stands beside the track with her stopwatch, calling out words of encouragement. Some of them, like me, need it. Everyone knows exercise is good for you, until they start doing it. Then it feels like murder, at least at first.

The track session involves running 400 metres four times, pausing for a break, then running three laps, then two and then one.

This is speed work, quite different from my usual plod. It totals just two and a half miles but feels much further. I get used to seeing someone overtaking me over my shoulder as I round a bend. The group range in age from early 20s to 60s, and quite a few of the women are surprisingly fit.

Running is one of the most effective forms of exercise to boost your mood, lose weight and get fit quickly. It can be daunting to get started though; if you haven't done anything athletic for years, were never that sporty at school or gave up exercise when you had children.

This is where the Women's Running Network comes in. Pauline set it up with friend and fellow runner Peg Wiseman in 1998 to encourage women of all levels of fitness to get into running.

The network, which has groups across the country as well as in Devon and Cornwall, works on the principle that anyone can run and can surprise themselves by just how much they can achieve if they just keep going at it.

"People usually progress quite quickly, especially as beginners," says Pauline. "As long as they put in two or three sessions a week they will improve very quickly."

I stagger off to the changing rooms afterwards still catching my breath, and get the chance to speak to some of the group. They are perky by comparison, and full of evangelical zeal. Running, once you have got through the initial puffing and perspiring phase, is hugely addictive.

Yvonne Gilbert started running after her 50th birthday. She went along to the Women's Running Network group in Culmington and surprised herself by running four miles on the first night. She's lost four stone in the year and a half since she started running.

"I was a lot bigger last year," she says. "I love it. I think I'm addicted to it. It was a challenge for my 50th birthday to run a half marathon, and I just went further. It is a complete addiction."

She started off running the Exeter half marathon, the Great West Run, last year. This year, she is planning to do four half marathons.

"I think it has improved my mental health as

The Women's Running Network group in Exeter meets every week, and there are branches all over Devon and Cornwall

RICHARD ALLEN



well as my physical health," she says. "I went for eight months and I lost weight every week, with being careful about what I ate. I have had the best social life over the past 12 months that I have ever had."

Kim Lambert comes to the women's track event every week. She was a keen runner before having her first baby last year. She has found the track training to be a quick way of getting fit again, and is spurred on by being in a group.

"I find it really good for speed and it has increased my fitness because I would never have got my heart rate up otherwise, especially having had a year off doing exercise," she says. "Also it is quite social. If you are feeling a bit tired you think, 'I'll go'. It is definitely motivational."

Amanda Perry, 43, has been running with the group since it started in 1998. As well coming to the track session every Monday night, she goes to some of the other running events in the week, including the new mothers and daughters group, which she attends with her 16-year-old daughter.

She ran her first marathon in 2001, and is in training to take part in her fourth London Marathon.

Amanda was put off running at school but regained her enthusiasm when she came along to Pauline and Peg's sessions.

"I wish Pauline had been my teacher at school,"

she says. "The only running we did at school we would go too fast and I would get that awful feeling that your lungs were burning and you can't possibly go any further. At the Women's Running Network, though, we were shown how to slow the pace down and build up slowly and steadily," she says.

"The fitness side of it, the friendship as well and the social side of it is absolutely amazing. I get a buzz from it. It is a great stress reliever, there is something about running outside and running through the seasons."

"I come to track on a Monday and hopefully go to a Wednesday night group, which is the main club night. I'm also training for a marathon."

"I never thought I could run a marathon, and many of us are in the same position. We have just been given the confidence and the skills to do it."

Pauline understands what it is like to have to gain fitness from a slow start. She was a teenage athlete who woke up in her mid 30s to find herself out of shape and unfit, and resolved to do something to about it.

"I decided to run the London Marathon," she says. "People helped me to get back into running and the fact that people helped me made me want to encourage other women to run."

"Most of the ladies who run want to go to a normal running club because they are all so fast.

It is a case of lacking confidence. Lots come to me and say, 'I can't run at all' and go on to do marathons and completely surprise themselves."

The Exeter group runs sessions on the roads in the city as well as on the track. The two taken together can increase speed very quickly.

"Predominantly the track sessions are designed to help people gain more speed, but obviously it is also a safe environment to get people started and to run a distance without getting left behind. Obviously you get more endurance when you get out on the road. They go hand in hand," she says.

"A lot of people do it to get fitter, to lose weight and feel healthier and to get a better body image, because your body shape changes even if you do not lose weight. Also I think what a lot of people get out of it is more confidence. I know for a lot of women it has given them confidence in other areas of their lives."

For more details go to [www.womensrunningnetwork.co.uk](http://www.womensrunningnetwork.co.uk), call 01392 682118 or e-mail [www.womensrunningnetwork@hotmail.com](mailto:www.womensrunningnetwork@hotmail.com)

There are groups in Braunton, Budton, Buckfastleigh, Crediton, Culmington, Dartmouth, Exeter, Exmouth, Penzance, Tregunna, Trowbridge, Torquay and Tipton. All contact details and list of meetings are listed on the website.





## £2.00 a week can change your life

It is surprising sometimes how we miss fantastic opportunities just because we think "I don't know about that." We might stop for a coffee, buy a magazine, pick up a bottle of wine, buy a lottery ticket or even buy a bar of chocolate. Without thinking we can spend £2.00 or even more! I was surprised (well more like shocked!) to hear that people often are hesitant to pay £2.00 a week to run with the Women's Running Network.

To me, it is the best £2.00 I spend all week. No magazine, coffee, bottle of wine or bar of chocolate ever makes me feel as good as my Thursday night run with Bev Pearce, our coach, and the ladies of Newquay's Women's Running Network. That £2.00 a week has changed my life. The group of ladies I run with are absolutely great, they are funny, brave, passionate, engaging, interesting and, as we find out as the weeks go by, very determined. It is unlikely that I would have met any of them but for the £2.00 a week I invest my well-being. Within a relatively short period of time you see people increase their confidence, they laugh more, breath more, live more. They become more proud of who they are. The best thing of all is that we have all become very proud of each other. Together we have run in the wind, rain and wonderful sunshine. Mile by mile we have run further and further from the unfit people we used to be.

And we are not alone, there are lots of us out there. Women who are dreaming of changing their lives. For just £2.00 a week you can join us. How fantastic is that! But that's the thing, take £2.00 out of your purse right now. Think how you normally spend it, have you ever spent £2.00 to change your life? What a bargain. So the choice is yours would you like be extra ordinary or extraordinary - I know which one I'm picking!



Example: *Runner's World* magazine cover, December 2010



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## The Better Half makes a dream come true



They're off in the Better Half at Oulton Park

Having completed the Oulton Park Better Half, I would like to express my thanks to the Women's Running Network for giving me the opportunity to make a dream come true.

I got into jogging several years ago as an outdoor alternative to aerobics. Initially, I could barely jog around the block but as the months went on, I progressed to a 5-mile hilly route through the local countryside. Running was no longer a chore and I looked forward to catching up with the gossip and challenging myself to run further and further.

But when I was diagnosed with an underactive thyroid and struggled to

walk, never mind run I thought, I either give in or attack life with a new bout of enthusiasm. Thankfully, I chose the latter and set my heart on a half marathon. Getting back into training was hard but I kept the half marathon dream in sight and kept going.

When I discovered the Better Half series, I finally found the ideal event for me. I'm not a fast, competitive runner so most races fill me with fear. Here was a race for everyone and was about completing not competing – I was determined to sign up.

My friend Christine hates running and I was really moved when she said she would run with me and help me achieve my goal. Our training programme was hard work and a few weeks before the race, Christine hurt her knee. Rather than giving in, she was determined to give the Better Half her best shot.

We were very nervous standing at the starting line but we needn't have worried.

Yes the course was challenging, yes it was hot and the wind was against us and yes running 13.1 miles is hard (especially for Christine with her injury) but the event was well supported by positive, enthusiastic helpers with water, jelly babies and more importantly big smiles at the ready. We were especially lucky that Peg Wiseman joined us for the last lap. She got us through with her upbeat nature and encouragement.

I realised a lot that day: I can run 13.1 miles; being last doesn't matter, it really is the taking part that counts and above all things, I am very lucky to have such a special friend in Christine. On top of this, I raised £100 for the British Thyroid Foundation. All of this is thanks to The Women's Running Network – I'll certainly be joining you again!

*Helen Lewis*

**Read more of Helen's story on our website**



## Come to the Boyle – it's London calling



London Docklands Group Leader:  
Carole Boyle

The countdown to the 2012 Olympic Games is well and truly underway – the big event is now less than two years off but the Women's Running Network is already delivering its own London legacy.

Dentist Carole Boyle leads the Docklands group in the East End of the capital. She and her members have watched with interest as the Olympic Park has taken shape in the Stratford area of the city.

"One of our routes takes us past the Olympic Stadium and it looks fantastic. There aren't many WRN

groups in London - it's hard to find the right venue to meet and that's often a limiting factor but hopefully the Olympics will give running the sort of spur that my group gets from the London Marathon each year," said Carole.

Carole is the perfect example of what can be achieved from humble beginnings. She started from scratch in 2001, unable to run 2 minutes without walking.

"In fact, I gained a place in a 5K run in Hyde Park in 2000 but I was too embarrassed to run in public and gave my place away," she said. Since then she's completed 3 London Marathons and in 2006 achieved a personal ambition by completing it in 4 hours 23 minutes – an hour faster than her first.

Carole set up a WRN group in 2003, meeting at Mile End Stadium and running around Docklands, an interesting area with routes alongside canals, fields, parks in the summer and around the well lit Canary Wharf area in the winter.

The Docklands group reflects the vibrant, multi-cultural demographic

of the area and now has around 30 members with ages ranging from 23 to 53.

The group is divided into different speeds and distances to ensure everyone works to their own level. Runners meet on a Monday night, usually for a coached session and every 4-6 weeks they have a time trial to help monitor progress - useful even if you are not training for a race. Members also have their own email group and organise runs for themselves on Wednesdays and at weekends.

"The biggest achievement for me is seeing women making friends, getting together socially and doing things together after making contact through the WRN. It's great when I hear members have been to the cinema or out dancing. It can be difficult in London where there's often a shifting population and I do have a high turnover in my group - there's no-one left from the original sessions.

"The best part of being a Group Leader is seeing other women's delight when they run further or faster than they ever thought possible."



## Let's hear it for Harrogate

Whatever the weather – and North Yorkshire can certainly throw up some treacherous conditions – you can guarantee that our members in Harrogate will be out there pounding the pavements, roads, tracks and trails in one of the most spectacular parts of the country.

There are groups out four days a week and despite one of the fiercest winters on record, only once last year was a session cancelled when the ice was just too dangerous.

The town's spa is internationally famous and it's not the only hotspot in the area – the Harrogate WRN has boasted a membership of up to 100 and there's also another group led by Gio Fitzgerald just five miles away in Knaresborough.

"The interest is massive," said hospital manager Abbie Scott, who teams up with teachers Julie Lewis and Kathleen Coates to lead the Harrogate groups. "I started my first beginners group in 2008 and 40 ladies turned up. There's nothing else around that offers what we do and we even get people from as far afield as Leeds and York joining us."

Abbie started running on her own as a complete beginner as part of a campaign to give up smoking, improve her health and get fit. Her sister-in-law in Plymouth told her about the Women's Running Network and when she discovered there were no groups in her area, she trained as a leader.

"I didn't think I'd be fast enough to be a leader but I discovered that you don't have to be. I have enjoyed inspiring women to get active and discover how enjoyable running can

be!" she said.

Kathleen joined in February 2009 and found Harrogate a welcoming group.

"I had run a few 5k and 10k events before but had a long break from running after having children.

Running with a group has motivated me to keep going this time. I recently completed the training to be a group leader so that I can share my love of the sport with women of all abilities" she explained.

Julie had always wanted to run, but couldn't get around the park without getting out of breath, which put her off completely. Then in 2003 a flyer came through her door about a WRN beginners group and she's been running ever since.

"I've done five half marathons and am now training for my first marathon," said Julie.

"It really doesn't matter how far or how fast you want to go. I love running and I think anyone can do it and enjoy it. I love running rain and mud, I don't need to know where I'm going and I'm always de-stressed when I get home."

The Harrogate groups have members of all ages and from all walks of life and many have progressed to racing locally and further afield – last year's Benidorm half marathon had a strong Yorkshire contingent among its starters!

And despite the fact that there are two good running clubs in the town, none of the members have left for the more competitive atmosphere they provide.

"I think we offer enough of a challenge for everyone," said Abbie.

"But as much as anything it's about the social aspect of belonging to the WRN. We've all become friends and when we go out we share our thoughts about books and films and all sorts. Before you know it the run's over!"



Harrogate Leaders Abbie, Julie and Kathleen



women's running network

Autumn 2010 - WRN News



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## Celebrating our sensational over 60s



FLYING ALONG: Paula Phillips striding out in a 10K

**They say that 60 is the new 40 and when you look at the lovely ladies who have hit that magic milestone, it's easy to see why.**

The likes of Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, Dolly Parton, Joanna Lumley, Sigourney Weaver, Olivia Newton-John, Debbie Harry, Twiggy and Mamma Mia! even Frida and Agnetha from Abba have all put the sex into sexagenarian.

And the Women's Running Network has its fair share of members who have gone from nifty at 50 to still very much in shape at 60...and beyond.

Not only do we have plenty of people in our groups who provide living proof that over 60 is definitely not over the hill, but we also have some inspirational leaders who can put fellow members of the bus pass brigade to shame.

Annie Foot from Brithem Bottom in Devon leads the Tuesday group in Cullompton and a Sunday session

with Heather Holland plus at least two beginner groups each year. She's 64 and has run three marathons in the last year, finishing in the top ten for her age group in the Edinburgh, London and Mont Blanc events.

"I didn't intend to become a leader but as our group was growing I wanted to offer another night to women in our area," said Annie. "Age is only a number on a piece of paper – don't let it put you off. Come along and give it a try, you might just discover all that hidden talent you didn't know you had – and running keeps you young," she added.

62-year-old Paula Phillips from Bath has been involved with athletics for nearly 30 years and was leading a group even before the WRN started.

She readily admits that she's a little slower these days and bits ache and don't recover so easily.

"But once I am out there chatting and running, I turn into a much more enthusiastic and optimistic person. Well worth making the effort!

"It is never too late to start. I have several older ladies in my group. Running has given them so much unexpected pleasure and fun. They have a great attitude, excellent health and look younger."

Maggie Cornforth celebrated her 67th

birthday in August and is part of the thriving Barnstaple WRN in Devon.

"I became a leader in November 2009 because I fully agreed with the ethos of the WRN and was eager to encourage other ladies to enjoy running as much as I do" said Maggie, who leads out on a Wednesday and has a Saturday morning mixed ability group as well as beginners' sessions.

She is hoping to run her third London Marathon next year and is adamant: "I intend to keep running as long as I enjoy it and am able to and don't envisage stopping anytime in the near future. I have had quite a few runners say that my fitness and dedication to running has inspired them. I tell all my runners, especially when beginning, not to worry about distance or speed but just to come out and enjoy running."

Inspiring you is what keeps our super seniors going, as Paula Phillips explains. "I was watching the Bath Half trying to see and encourage my WRN ladies when I was spotted by a couple of ladies that I hadn't seen for some time. One of them shouted 'Hey, everyone, see that lady over there, she's the reason we are out here doing this.' That sums up what leading is all about."

**Read more from our sensational over 60's on the WRN website soon.**

### What's inside your latest WRN newsletter

- The latest on the Better Half
- Running Wales end to end
- London calling
- A great run North
- Advice for the autumn
- Meet the directors
- The key to happy feet
- Be a winner
- Pauline's message

**Article 10: from WRN website (WRN, 2011)**

## **Sue takes the chance to share and support**

The first Better Half of 2011 is almost upon us - on the Quayside in Exeter on Sunday, February 13th - and hopefully Britain's first women-only half marathon and relay will grow to be bigger and better this year.

One of the most positive and satisfying aspects of the Better Half series has been the way the events have brought so many women together to share their experiences and stories.

And the final race of 2010 at Pippingford Park in East Sussex was no exception.



Sue Yoxall from Kent wasn't going to take part – a busy time at work combined with the effects of running a 10K personal best just a couple of weeks before had left her feeling lousy. At the last minute she decided to go after reading Sam Murphy's article in *Runner's World* on the Saturday night and it proved an inspired decision.

Sue had signed up because the Ovarian Cancer Action and Breast Cancer Campaign charities supported by the series were very close to her heart.

"I've had personal experience of cancer. I stopped counting the operations I've had at number 18!" she said.

She met a fellow brave cancer survivor on the course and they ran the final lap together, sharing stories of cancer treatment and their love of running.

“She was nearing the end of her treatment and had an awful lot to think about.” said Sue.

“I remember the ‘What happens now?’ feeling as the safety net of appointments is withdrawn and the ‘What if it comes back?’ questions start.

“Running really helps me focus on what’s important. She and I ran through the finish holding hands. That’s the sort of support that keeps me going!”

As a cancer survivor Sue was advised to keep fit and active so took up running in preference to the gym and never looked back. To recover from a biggish operation and after running on her own for a few months, she joined the Canterbury WRN group in April 2008.

And things have really taken off from there. She is now a leader with the WRN and our partner organisation Run in England and is out with a group in Canterbury or Whitstable on most weekday evenings as well as tutoring new leaders.

“I now have a huge network of friends and lots of helpful advice about running as I don’t consider myself to be a sportswoman. I just enjoy being outdoors, meeting lots of new people and helping them with whatever they want to get from being part of a running group. There is always a great atmosphere and a lot of laughs,” she said.

Her Kent colleague Sarah Hinton is full of praise for Sue. “She is one of the most committed, loyal, kind, unselfish and supportive members that I know,” she said. “She has always been there night after night with a smile on her face and often a slice of cake! All for the love of running. She has been amazingly supportive to all my members. I know that some of them wouldn’t have carried on without those kind words of support and gentle encouragement that she gives. She is at her happiest when she is helping and motivating others.”

Sarah asked some of her group for their comments about Sue and this is what they said: “She is a star!” “She has definitely added a little of her magic to each and every one of us runners at some point.” “Sue has kept me going and still does”

And as for Sue and the Better Half: “Great organisation - thank you - sign me up for next year before I change my mind again!”





## THE BETTER HALF – FROM SORROW TO SUCCESS



All smiles. Peg and Pauline's dream is finally coming true...

Pauline Beare and Peg Wiseman rather sheepishly dab their eyes as they share a moment of pain and understanding, remembering loved ones lost to cancer. They are strong, confident women not easily given to letting their guard down.

Their emotions are not unique, neither is their resolve to do something, anything, to help with the quest for a cure for cancer.

What does set them apart is the scale of their response and their determination to empower women just like themselves.

Pauline and Peg already have form on that score as founders of the national phenomenon that is the Women's Running Network. But resting on some pretty impressive laurels is not in their nature.

Their latest dream is to establish a series of women-only half marathons that'll raise money for cancer charities. And that dream will become a reality in April when the starting gun sounds on the very first event - to be known as the Better Half - at Castle Combe in Wiltshire.

"It will be very emotional, just as it is even talking about it," said Pauline. "We've put years of work into the Women's Running Network, we've won quite a few awards for what we do but nothing takes away the excitement of seeing everybody else out there achieving and reaching their goals and ambitions because that's what it's all about."

Peg continues: "What we do is more than a sporting event. The biggest reward for us is to see our leaders and their groups coming together to run. We've got tears in our eyes now and I guarantee it'll be tears and shouts and tissues all the way in April."

As ladies who launch on a regular basis, Peg and Pauline are no strangers to new initiatives. They are currently pioneering the Run in England campaign to get 50,000 more people running on a regular basis in the run-up to the 2012 London Olympics. They certainly don't shirk a challenge.

But the Better Half series has a special place in their hearts. The three half marathons planned this year - at Castle

Combe on April 18th, Oulton Park in Cheshire on July 11th and Pippingford Park in East Sussex on September 19th - will be raising money for Breast Cancer Campaign and Ovarian Cancer Action, two charities that have great significance for Pauline and Peg.



Pauline lost her best friend Christine to ovarian cancer last year at just 59; Peg's grandmother and sister died from breast cancer and her mother is now recovering after she was diagnosed at 80.

But why do our dynamic duo from Devon feel there's a need for a women's half marathon series to raise money for cancer charities.

"We've been involved in the Race for Life since the beginning in helping and encouraging women get involved in it," said Pauline. "But women naturally progress and there are a lot of women that want that challenge of doing something different. There isn't a women's only half marathon in this country so the Women's Running Network is just a natural partner to bring that about and make that happen."

"I don't know why we're so far behind here," said Peg. "Around the world there are some phenomenal women's only events. The Dublin mini marathon is a case in point. In Norway there are huge events so why it hasn't quite taken off



researching the cure





here I'm not entirely sure. But having seen the impact of women's only events, the joy, the social running, the competitive end at the front if you want it, an entire day of partnership and laughter, it's there in Dublin, it's there in Race For Life. There was no half marathon so we needed to provide it."

For some, the prospect of running 13.1 miles might still be just a little daunting, albeit with just other women for

company and on traffic free circuits. But in the spirit of nurturing even the most reluctant runner into taking part, Pauline and Peg have thought of that.

The answer – a relay. Teams of three can enter the Better Half with each runner taking on one lap of just over four miles. Peg explains: "Involving everybody is our trademark. We want to include everyone, even those who can't yet make the 13 miles. We don't just want those who are

already ready for the half, we want those who might think about it in the future but with a couple of supportive friends want to come and cover the distance together. That's what we believe in and to us it'll be a huge thrill seeing that first event happen. I guarantee you we'll be clapping the first runner and we'll still be there clapping the last."

## THE BETTER HALF - SIGN UP FOR OUR UNIQUE EVENT

Race numbers are building up nicely for our unique women-only half marathon series which we're launching this year. The 'Better Half' gets underway at Castle Combe, Wiltshire on April 18th, and goes on to Oulton Park, Cheshire (July 11) and Pippingford Park, East Sussex (September 19).

You can enter online at [www.womensrunningnetwork.co.uk](http://www.womensrunningnetwork.co.uk)

There's a special relay event, so you can team up with two friends and cover the half marathon distance between you!

women's half  
marathon



the better half

## NEWSLETTER SPREADING THE MESSAGE

We want to make sure as many people hear about the Women's Running Network as possible, and you can help spread the message far and wide! We're hoping that, once you've read this newsletter and made a note of all the important information, you'll pass it on to friends and work colleagues who may not be members... yet.

How about leaving it between the car brochures and gossip magazines next time you visit the Doctor or Dentist? Everything helps to build our membership.




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## We'd Love To Hear From You

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**Article 12: from WRN website (WRN, 2011)**

## **Group support gets Clare through tough times**

When her partner of 11 years died suddenly at the age of just 43 last year, the world became a bleak and desolate place for Clare Douglas.

There'd been no warning, no symptoms, no sign that Simon had a problem.



His life was cut tragically short by a heart attack at a time when he'd never been happier.

It was devastating for Clare, who leads a WRN improvers group in Swansea every Monday. She didn't run for six weeks, wasn't sure if she could ever face it again.

Then she realised what Simon would think.

"I knew full well he would have kicked me up the backside if I didn't go back. He would have been very disappointed in me so I started running again and it's been a godsend. It's kept me sane," said Clare.

And the support of her group – not just fellow runners but now friends - has made all the difference as she's battled to come to terms with her loss.

"The girls in my group have been fantastic. I couldn't have coped if it wasn't for them. If I need to talk I can but if I don't, they just leave me alone," she said.

Clare has found the strength to use Simon's death as a motivation to help others. She'll be running the London Marathon this year to raise £1,500 for the British Heart Foundation in the hope that helping to fund research into congenital conditions will spare others from the pain and sorrow she has endured.

"It's going to be hard to run it, both physically and emotionally without him there to cheer me on. He was always there to support me but my family and some of the girls from the running club have said they'll come so I won't be alone," said Clare, a psychiatric nurse.

She's been running for four and a half years after her mum dragged her along to some beginner sessions. She quickly became hooked and found staunch backing from Simon, who was a bit of a charmer and popular figure with the WRN girls for his unstinting support of their efforts.

"I was a proper golf widow before. He was always on the course and once I discovered running, I

could see the appeal. I could understand why he needed to play because I knew how I felt if I didn't run," she said.

Clare describes herself as a plodder and has never stretched herself to the full marathon distance before – a 14 mile race in Snowdonia is her longest run yet – but she's determined to do herself and Simon proud.

The fund-raising has already started. Clare makes jewellery as a hobby and is selling some in aid of the BHF. She's also had donations from her Monday group and the ladies she runs with on Thursdays, led by Sue Pendleton and Helen McDaid.



**Article 13: from WRN website (WRN, 2011)**

## Running works wonders for Laura

If you ever needed confirmation that running can change lives, then the story of Laura Stewart should deliver the message loud and clear.



In March 2009 Laura weighed 23½ stone and by her own admission, would never have thought about running. But a year and a half later she's completed her first 10K and credits running with helping to give her a new lease of life.

Laura, who is from the Wirral, explains how it all started: *"I went to my local doctor's surgery for a new patient medical and they told me about a weight management scheme they were running. My weight loss nurse was fab and really encouraging. I started to lose weight from managing what I ate and I eventually built up the courage to join a gym. To start with I could manage about 20 minutes of walking/cycling before I felt like I was going to pass out! I stuck with it and went from strength to strength but eventually I started to get bored and feel like I wasn't achieving."*

Laura needed something different to get her motivated and that's where running came into its own.

Laura first saw a Run in England poster at her local gym. She mulled it over for weeks before plucking up the courage to do something about it. She was sceptical and VERY nervous at first but emailed the local Run in England leader voicing her concerns over her ability as she had not run since school and felt she was still overweight.

*"The response I got could not have been more encouraging,"* said Laura. *"She called me and explained that beginners really did mean beginners."*

This put Laura's mind at ease and she attended her first session on Saturday May 15th 2010, managing to jog for a minute with a 2-3 minute gap between each burst. Despite being tired and sore, Laura was determined to get into running!

And my goodness has she got into running! She now attends running group three times a week having discovered how easy it was to find a session to suit every availability and need with 10 sessions throughout the week on the Wirral.

As the weeks went by she was improving more and more and began to concentrate on her running

style as well as running for longer periods of time.

Laura then entered the Birkenhead Park 5K Race For Life alongside other members of our Wirral running groups as extra motivation to keep running. Before the start, the running group leaders and members met up to offer words of encouragement and support – and it certainly helped as Laura managed to run for 3k without stopping.



*“I was so pleased with how my first race had gone, the atmosphere was great and running with one of the leaders from the club and some of the other club members really spurred me on,” she said.*

Spirits were high as the group had come a long way since their first session. For the majority, running was no longer a chore but a hobby. They had officially caught the running bug!

But Laura wasn't prepared to stop there - she was already looking ahead to her next challenge.

Leaders Zoe McNee and Fiona Hanik advertised the Hoylake 10k on September 12th to their West Kirby Concourse group, and 12 members of Run in England signed up for the run, including Laura!

The group asked if Zoe and Fiona would support them on the day and they were more than happy to oblige.

Everyone was nervous at the start but looking forward to the challenge, no-one more than Laura, who was eager to get going and took part in a warm up with the rest of the Run in England group.

*“Just over 4 months since starting running, I completed my first 10k race and I ran the whole thing!”* said a justifiably proud Laura. *“I ran with another club member who was doing her first 10k too and we both finished around the same time. Our leader stuck with us the whole way encouraging us. I couldn't have done it without their support and encouragement.”*

As Laura ran the last 100 metres, our other runners were waiting to clap and cheer her on alongside her family, who had been there from the start. Other members of Run in England, who hadn't felt ready to run 10k had also come along to support the group and in particular Laura, who has been an inspiration to them all.

Their backing reinforced the ethos of our running groups and Laura reckons coming over the finish line and seeing all that support was *“the best feeling in the world!”*

*"I can honestly say I would never have done anything like this if I was left to my own devices," she admitted. "The encouragement and support you get from the group is amazing. It doesn't matter about ability, everyone is always cheering each other on and pushing each other. The leaders are great too. They know how to push you without putting you off. I'm looking forward to my next race now that I have a time to beat. My eventual aim is to do a half marathon. Now exercise has become about doing something I enjoy rather than something I have to do to help me lose weight. I'm not going to lie, it was, and still is, hard work but the sense of achievement and just the fact I can tell people 'I'm going running tonight' makes it worth it in my eyes. I've lost just over 7 1/2 stone in total now. I still have a lot of weight to lose and that's still something I'm focussed on, but now I am enjoying running it doesn't seem like such a chore anymore."*

Laura has blown everyone away with her determination - her Wirral Run in England group will be there every step of the way and everyone at the Women's Running Network wishes her the best of luck!