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
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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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