Older Sportswomen: Personal and Cultural Meanings of Resistance and Conformity

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Abstract: The interdisciplinary nature of ‘sport-as-leisure’ and ageing studies is highlighted in this qualitative examination of older sportswomen. This paper explores the multiple meanings that a group of older women attached to their experiences in Masters sport. The research takes an interpretive approach, drawing on post-structural theories of resistance and empowerment in sporting contexts and interdisciplinary studies on women, leisure and ageing. Masters sport (also known as Veteran’s or Senior sport) has developed into a sophisticated form of competition that provides space for older people to begin, continue or re-start participation in a range of individual and team events. The women in this study were competitors of the 2001 Australian Masters Games (N=70, aged 55-82 years) or the 2009 World Masters Games (N=23, aged 56-90 years) in events such as track and field, swimming, cycling, weightlifting, triathlon, marathon, tennis, badminton, hockey, basketball, netball and softball. The analyses of in-depth interviews and observations from the two sets of data revealed that these female athletes resisted traditional stereotypes of ageing and gender and experienced a sense of personal empowerment in the form of identity management, belonging, engagement and bodily competence. Simultaneously, however, the words and practices of these older sportswomen reflected and reproduced other dominant cultural ideals and philosophies, such as those commonly associated with youthfulness and/or competition. For example, many women celebrated and valued success in sport, the able and performing body and being selfish. Therefore, this study shows how the personal meanings, actions and talk of older sportswomen interweave broader cultural discourses of sport, ageing and gender.

Keywords: Masters Sport, Ageing, Gender, Leisure, Empowerment, Qualitative Research

Introduction

THE EXPANDING OLDER population in many Western nations has resulted in greater opportunity for involvement in various leisure activities, including a wide range of sports. The choice to engage in sport or physical activity (or not) is dependent upon many individual, situational and socio-cultural factors. For example, one’s decision to be highly physically active is “steeped in cultural ideologies about what types of behaviors are appropriate for men and women in society” (Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002, p. 259). In addition, age-appropriate activities are culturally assigned to particular groups of people, such as older men and women (Dionigi, 2008). Therefore, how people invest in these age and/or gender appropriate discourses will ultimately influence their leisure and health-related experiences and practices.

Older women in particular may negotiate age and gender discourses in unique ways because they have lived through a cultural period when exercise was not considered appropriate for females (or for older people) unless it was passive or therapeutic in nature (Dionigi, in press; 2008; Grant, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Vertinsky, 1995). Older women now live in a time where maintaining high levels of physical, mental and social activity, including regular ex-
Exercise, is promoted as a key ingredient to ageing well (Chodzko-Zajko, Schwingel, & Park, 2009). Regular physical activity is currently deemed an appropriate way for older women to maintain their independence, delay biological decline and improve their overall quality of life (Dionigi, 2010; Grant, 2002). Therefore, “Physical activity by choice” (or sport-as-leisure) is a concept that connects the importance of leisure, health and ageing (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007, p. 602; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005, p. 357).

This paper focuses on the notion of sport-as-leisure for a group of older women (aged 56-90 years) who participated in the Masters Games. The Masters Games are a multi-sport event for mature athletes in which age is the only qualifier for participation (usually 30 years and over; Dionigi, 2008; Weir, Baker & Horton, 2010). These large-scale events are often held locally, nationally or internationally every 2-4 years as part of the Masters sport movement. Masters sport (also known as Veteran’s or Senior sport) has developed into a sophisticated form of competition that provides space for older people to begin, continue or re-start participation in a range of individual and team events, such as track and field, swimming, cycling, weightlifting, triathlon, marathon, tennis, badminton, hockey, basketball, netball and softball. At the 2009 World Masters Games in Sydney, Australia, approximately 29,000 athletes representing 90 countries participated across 28 different sports.

Despite the growing interest and participation rates in Masters sport, older sportswomen remain the minority and participation in sport typically declines as one ages (Weir et al., 2010). Nevertheless, telling the story of highly able and competitive older women is important, not only because it allows for the talk and practices of this unique group to be examined, but also because the meanings, experiences and actions of a minority group have the potential to influence dominant cultural discourses. As Heuser (2005, p.45) argued, “in the drive to increase our understanding of the role of sports in older people’s lives, we may need to ascertain the personal meaning and value derived from such leisure pursuits rather than concentrate on their decreasing participation.” Moreover, ageing and being ‘older’ are primarily presented in the literature from a physical science or biomedical perspective which emphasises the ‘declining body’. However, I believe that focusing on the stories of older women and the ‘subjective, capable body’ through qualitative methodologies will allow for alternative meanings of ageing (and gender) to emerge.

Therefore, this study describes the multiple meanings that a group of older women attached to their experiences in Masters sport and explores these meanings in relation to cultural discourses of sport, gender and ageing. That is, I ask: What does it mean to be older, female and athletic and how do these meanings interweave dominant ideologies in Western society? The research takes an interpretive approach, drawing on post-structural theories of resistance and empowerment in sporting contexts and past studies on women, leisure and ageing (Hargreaves, 1994; Shaw, 2001; 2006; Wearing 1995; 1998). In particular, I take the perspective that personal and cultural practices and understandings of sport and leisure are linked to power relations in society. Therefore, I argue that although older women are influenced by socio-cultural norms and practices, they are also active agents who engage in the construction and reconstruction of their identities and social worlds.
Methods

Participants

This study combines the data collected from older sportswomen at two separate Masters Games competitions. The women I interviewed in-depth were competitors of the 2001 8th Australian Masters Games (AMG) (N=15, aged 60-82 years) or the 2009 World Masters Games (WMG) (N=23, aged 56-90 years). I also conducted short, on-site interviews with an additional 55 female competitors at the AMG. The participants were theoretically (or purposively) sampled (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) based on age (55 years and over), gender (women), sport (a variety of individual and team events) and country (English-speaking, Western nations). Informed consent was gained from the women before any interviews were conducted. Approval was granted by each Games’ organising body to conduct observations of the sports, the participants and the social events at each Masters Games. I focused my observations on women aged 55 years and over who were competing in ‘physically demanding’ team and individual sports. I also observed them socialising at the Opening and Closing ceremonies and organised sport-specific social gatherings at each event. The women I interviewed in 2001 were not the same women I interviewed in 2009; however, I did not determine whether any of the women I observed at the AMG were also observed participating in the WMG, so this may have occurred.

The 8th AMG were held in Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. This 10-day event attracted 11,225 competitors primarily from Australia (approximately 65% were from the host state, NSW) and it consisted of 61 different sports (Newcastle & Hunter Events Corporation, 2001). The majority of the 55 women I interviewed on-site at this event were Australian and a few participants were from New Zealand. They were white and primarily from middle-class backgrounds. The 15 women I interviewed in-depth from this event were white, middle-class and residing in NSW, Australia (e.g., Newcastle, Gosford or Sydney), which reflected the typical demographic of the older female athletes at this event. The women participated regularly in at least one of the following sports: badminton, tennis, swimming, cycling, cross-country running, half-marathon, track and field, triathlon, squash, field hockey, basketball or netball. Approximately one third of the women had played sport from a young age. Another third restarted sports participation later in life (e.g., due to family or work commitments), and the remaining third began participating at the Masters level after the age of 50 years. At the time of data collection with the in-depth interviewee sample, 9 were married, 4 widowed and 2 never married. Fourteen of the women lived in their own homes and 1 lived independently in a retirement village.

The 2009 WMG were held in Sydney, NSW, Australia. This 10-day international sporting festival attracted approximately 29,000 competitors from around the world. The 23 women I interviewed at this event were from Australia (n=12), Canada (n=4), New Zealand (n=3) and the United States of America (n=4). All women were from middle-class backgrounds and lived independently in their home or a retirement village. Eleven of the participants were married, 8 widowed and 4 divorced. The women in this group participated in long distance running (including orienteering), swimming, weightlifting, track and field or badminton. Half of the group began competing at the Masters level (i.e., later in life), while the remaining half were divided between women who had competed in sport from a young age and women
who had returned to sport after raising their children and/or when they retired from employment.

Given the qualitative approach, the sample is not representative of all older female athletes. Notably, the participants’ characteristics reflect the somewhat ‘exclusive’ or ‘privileged’ culture of older sportswomen. They have the time, health, desire, ability and financial resources to regularly train for their sport and travel to national and international sites to compete in their sport. Therefore, their views and practices will reveal the complex and intriguing ways in which this sub-culture is experienced and understood.

**Data Collection**

The 70 women who competed at the 8th AMG were initially observed playing their respective sport at this event. As a volunteer of this event, I socialised with them at the Opening and Closing ceremonies and sport-specific functions over the course of the event. In this way, I developed a rapport with the women at the AMG and then invited them to be interviewed. The 55 women who were interviewed on-site participated in a short, semi-structured interview for approximately 10-30 minutes about their exercise history, why they competed in sport, the place sports participation had in their lives, and what they gained from their participation. Each participant was interviewed once only using an audio-recorder. The 15 women who were interviewed in-depth were interviewed once only in their own homes 5 months after the AMG. These interviews ranged from 50-150 minutes each, they were audio-recorded and I asked each participant open-ended questions about their sporting background, what competing in sport meant to them at that point in their lives, why they competed in sport, what outcomes they experienced from competing and their future plans.

The 23 women from the 2009 WMG were each interviewed in-depth (once only) onsite at the event. Women were approached by the interviewer and the research was explained to them. If the women met the purposive sampling criteria (explained above) they were invited to participate in an interview. Each interview averaged 30 minutes in length, they were audio-recorded and the women were asked open-ended questions about what outcomes they experienced from competing in sport, their sporting background, current training methods and strategies for maintaining sports performance, as well as their understandings of ‘old’ and ‘successful ageing’. I also observed older women competing in swimming, track and field, squash, orienteering, weightlifting, tennis and badminton during the WMG. I made field notes at the first available private moment about their interactions, performances and/or actions to provide a context for the findings. Moreover, I was a competitor in the women’s 30-34 age category in track and field at this event. Being a fellow competitor (or ‘insider’) was advantageous in regard to access issues. It also meant that I was well positioned to develop a rapport with my research participants and (to some extent) share their experiences (see Adler & Adler, 1998, for more details on observational techniques).

**Data Analysis**

This study takes an interpretive approach to analysis because I was interested in “understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 7). I interpreted the women’s meanings within the context of broader social discourses. Qualitative research recognises that there is always another
way to interpret the lives and stories of the people being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The observational and interview data were transcribed and analysed using codes and the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initially, I read and coded each transcript and field note individually to draw out tentative themes about the meaning of sports participation for that woman. I then compared the codes across all interviews with women from the AMG until raw data themes were developed to represent the most common findings among the 2001 participant sample. The data were grouped together under these initial (descriptive) theme categories. The next stage of analysis involved developing higher order themes (more refined concepts) from these raw data themes by linking similar themes together or dropping irrelevant themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The same approach to analysis was taken with data collected from women at the 2009 WMG.

Reflection on the themes emerging from both data sets revealed obvious similarities. Therefore, in this study I combined the findings from the AMG with those from the WMG and developed common themes across the complete set of field notes and interviews with the 93 women ranging in age from 55-90 years. Two key themes (with various sub-themes) emerged: Resistance and empowerment (sub-themes: identity management; belonging and engagement, and; bodily competence) and Conformity or (re)defining oneself? (sub-themes: valuing success in sport; celebrating performance enhancement and ability, and; “I can be selfish”).

Findings and Discussion

Resistance and Empowerment

My analysis revealed that these female athletes resisted traditional stereotypes of ageing and gender and experienced a sense of personal empowerment in the form of identity management, belonging, engagement and bodily competence. Today’s older women have lived through a period that did not actively encourage girls to compete in sport (Hayles, 2005). For example, “women were excluded from running distances above 400m from 1928 until the early 1960s” (Tulle, 2007, p. 334). Similarly, older people were discouraged from participating in vigorous physical activity because it was thought to be too dangerous for their ageing bodies (Grant, 2001; Vertinksy, 1995; 1998). Therefore, by choosing to train for and compete in physically-demanding and highly competitive Masters sport, the women in my study were using this leisure space as a site for resistance to these traditional views, regardless of their reasons for participation. Resistance can be individual and/or collective, intentional or unintentional, and has the potential for personal empowerment and/or collective social change (Shaw, 2001; 2006). The following data demonstrates how notions of resistance and personal empowerment were played out in this context.

Identity management. Many of the women in this study seemed to acknowledge that their sporting practices challenged age and gender norms. They expressed feelings of pride and a sense of identity management when discussing the difference between themselves and ‘other’ (more stereotypical) older women. For example:

I like doing what I’m doing in athletics and I’m able to do it... and I enjoy it, and it keeps me healthy, keeps me alert, keeps the old mind ticking over which is pretty important because I go to nursing homes to see my ex mother-in-law and some of the
people in there are much younger than me and they’re just sitting there doing nothing, and it’s sad to see all that. It really is. (74-year-old Australian track and field athlete from the WMG)

… it’s sort of a feeling of POWER, [she squints her eyes and really emphasises this word] alright, when my grandsons can go to school and say, “My grandma runs half marathons” and everybody else says, “Oh no, my grandma’s in a nursing home,” you know, and so, that’s good [she stands straight, puffs her chest out and appears proud] and I like that kind of feeling. (73-year-old runner and swimmer from the AMG)

This finding suggests that resistance to the dominant beliefs about older age can be interpreted as a form of power in and of itself. Through their participation in Masters sport, these women were expressing a strong, youthful, vital and active image that challenged the stereotypical passive, disabled and dependent image of ‘old age’.

Several women also recognised that they were resisting gender norms and expectations. For example, a 66 year-old athlete from the AMG described the reaction when her husband told her to do something that she would enjoy: “I think he thought I was going to join a knitting club or cooking club or something [grins], but I joined athletics [track and field] and life has never been the same since.” A 60-year-old AMG hockey player explained how sport helped her break away from stereotypical gender roles: “… I was known as either my husband’s wife or a mother... but only was it on the hockey field that I got my own identity…” Similar findings have emerged from studies of women and leisure. For example, Shaw argued that when leisure is interpreted “... as a situation of choice, control, and self-determination… women’s participation in activities, especially non-traditional activities, can be seen to challenge restrictive social roles” (1994, p.9). This resistance can result in feelings of personal empowerment and provide women with many other benefits.

**Belonging and Engagement.** Indeed, the friendships made and fun experienced through training and competing in Masters sport surfaced as particularly important for women who had retired from full-time work or no longer had childcare responsibilities. A 71-year-old retired worker from the AMG, expressed pleasure in the company of other women:

… I thoroughly look forward to playing [badminton each week]. It’s a wonderful game and I look forward to seeing the girls! You know, and having a chat to them…It’s great …we have a good time. It’s a good social thing, but it’s mostly the sport.

Similarly, a 76-year-old Australian track and field athlete at the WMG said:

Oh just the companionship with all these great girls that I see mostly you know, my own club at home and then down here when we get into another [track and field] meet where I can meet up with all the interstaters and even some of the overseas people that I’ve met before and make friends with some of the new ones. It’s great. Just the company and we encourage everyone, you know.

Comparable stories were told by women from swimming and hockey clubs at the WMG and AMG respectively. The findings indicated that regardless of whether they were involved in individual or teams sports these women felt they belonged to a group of women who were important to them. These women were also travelling away together in teams or with their clubs to compete nationally and internationally. They were engaged in a physically, socially
and mentally active lifestyle that provided them with a wonderful sense of community (see Lyons & Dionigi, 2007 for more on this feeling of community). A similar finding of “a community of women who amicably came together” emerged in a study of Australian women lawn bowlers (Heuser, 2005, p. 52). Despite the competitive nature of lawn bowls, the women in Heuser’s study “were attracted to the openness, warmth, and sisterly feelings expressed by club members toward one another” (p. 52).

**Bodily competence.** The realisation for the women in my study that they had the physical and mental ability to achieve in vigorous, competitive physical activity was extremely satisfying and personally empowering. As one participant said, “It’s personal pride to think, Ok. I’m out here and I can do this!” (a 59-year-old hockey player from the AMG). Likewise, a 73-year-old woman from the AMG who ran in her first half marathon at age 67 explained, “Well, it is just satisfying to know you can run a half marathon or swim 1,500 metres, which I do, and that makes you feel as though you are actually still here.” The women experienced a great sense of enjoyment because of their capacity to maintain sports performance in the face of an ageing body. As explained by an Australian swimmer at the WMG, “I’ve enjoyed being here, it’s wonderful just being well and able at [age] 82 to be able to do what I’m doing.” Moreover, at the WMG I watched the 1,500 meter track run for women aged 75-80 years in which the initial leader was overtaken on the final lap, only to make a sprinting comeback meters before the line to claim the gold. The ability to use one’s body in such powerful, natural and effective ways was liberating for these women, especially when dominant beliefs about the ageing, female body assume that it is not capable of such extreme activity (see Hargreaves, 1994; Vertinsky, 1995).

It is important to note, however, that many of the women in my research lived with a chronic condition, such as arthritis, asthma, osteoporosis, diabetes or had experienced major surgery such as a hip or knee replacement, yet they learnt how to manage and adapt to their circumstances so they could begin or continue competing in sport. For instance, a 66-year-old Australian weightlifter at the WMG said:

... we all have our problems and we work through them. And I think it just depends on your strength of character really. Some people just can’t do it. And others we just don’t like giving in. Stubborn’s the word.

Ahern (1996) claimed that, because today’s older women have lived through numerous hardships, such as world wars, pandemics, economic depressions and the loss of loved ones, perhaps these women have developed identities as resilient and capable individuals. In the current study, a 64-year-old swimmer from Canada at the WMG explained that competing in sport was primarily about, “Making the most of your life, doing what you can, with the capabilities that you still have, and surrounding yourself with positive people.”

The women’s stories and practices demonstrated adaptation, acceptance and determination in order to maintain sports performance (and an athletic identity) in the face of an ageing body. Therefore, in addition to challenging dominant cultural views of ageing and femininity, these women were resisting, pushing and monitoring the ‘real’ physically ageing female body. Previous studies have found such experiences to be personally significant for many older people. For instance, Grant argued that managing and adapting to one’s ageing body through sports participation in later life can help provide one with “a sense of self-worth, identity and empowerment” (2001, p. 795). Similarly, Morell (2003) found that long-living
women believed that life’s journey continues with new discoveries and experiences and that
as life’s circumstances change one’s capacities expand. Therefore, in Morell’s study, as in
the current study, it is not that older women fail to perceive and experience disability or illness,
but these factors are not central to their sense of identity.

At the collective level, the growing number of older women participating in atypical
activities such as Masters and Veterans competitions is actively redefining the conservative
view that only gentle exercise is appropriate for older women (Hargreaves, 1994). Therefore,
the actions of the women in my study also challenged broader ageist discourses. As supported
by Wearing (1995), “When applied to older persons, leisure emphasizes what a person can
do rather than what they are no longer physically capable of doing. Therefore, it has distinct
possibilities for resistance to ageism” (p. 272). Simultaneously, however, by resisting tradi-
tional stereotypes of ageing and gender, the older female athletes in my research were also
reinforcing and internalising other dominant cultural ideologies. Are these women conforming
to discourses that value youthfulness, ability and competitiveness or are they (re)defining
themselves (and what it means to be an older ‘Western’ woman in general)?

**Conformity or (Re)defining Oneself?**

The words and practices of these older sportswomen reflected and reproduced other dominant
-cultural ideals and philosophies, such as those commonly associated with youthfulness and/or
competition. For example, many women celebrated and valued success in sport, the able
and performing body and being selfish. Competitive sport was traditionally the domain of
youth. Mainstream sport (especially elite and professional sports) is embedded in a ‘power
and performance’ model which emphasises winning, performance enhancement and egotism
(Coakley, 2007). Although sport is now promoted to and available for older people, Masters
sport is typically framed in terms of ‘friendship, fun and fitness’ or a ‘pleasure and particip-
ation’ model (Coakley, 2007; Dionigi, 2008). Nevertheless, sport is inherently competitive,
regardless of whether it is amateur or professional, elite or Masters.

*Valuing success in sport.* Many of the women in my study said that when they played
sport or competed in an individual event they “try to win,” and/or aim to achieve a “personal
best.” They were competitive and they valued success in their sport. For example, a 60-year-
old squash player from the AMG said:

> I am [a competitive person] when I play, but I’m not aggressively competitive, but I
like to win, but… I don’t do it at-all-costs… If I lose that’s the end of it… I don’t brood
over it and I don’t make excuses.

A 76-year-old tennis player from the AMG said that she had a “doggedness to win” when
she was younger and this tenacity remained with her now. She explained, “You’re out there
to outwit your opposition, and if you can do it by powerful play, or clever play, or just good
luck [laughs], that’s what you do.” A 66-year-old Australian runner at the WMG said:

> ... It’s just that I’ve got a competitive nature I suppose and I just like improving and
the fact that I can beat someone else of my age. I find it’s very stimulating and interest-
ing... I like testing myself.
Many women described the joy they experienced from winning medals and breaking Australian or world records, and they reported appreciating the recognition and status that accompanied Masters sports participation. Many medal-winners proudly wore their medals throughout the AMG and the WMG, especially at the nightly social activities and the Closing ceremony of each event. A 90-year-old Canadian athlete who won several gold and silver medals at the WMG stated, “I think winning is important and I think that’s what I focus on because I always check to see what the record is to see if I can meet it or beat it. And that keeps me going and travelling.”

Not only do older women value competition and its associated practices, they also value the pleasure of using their bodies in athletic ways and testing their capabilities. In this sense, ‘success’ for older women in sport means much more than just trying to win, as explained below:

I am a competitive person to begin with. I like to push myself and I like to swim... It’s the feeling good when you master something that you are able to do it... I don’t need to win although I try to. But if I don’t win it is okay, it is the fun of pushing your body as hard as you can and see what you can do. (77-year-old Canadian swimmer at the WMG)

Nevertheless, this notion of pushing oneself to the limit to see what they body is capable of readily aligns with the dominant sports performance model that values the strong, performing body and its ability to be trained and monitored (see Coakley, 2007; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007).

Celebrating performance enhancement and ability. The majority of women spoke about the rigorous training schedules they undertook to maintain their health and fitness and perform at their peak during major competitions. For instance, the 90-year-old track and field athlete from Canada (quoted above) said, “... the main idea is for me to keep healthy, strong, prior to the competition so that I can maintain and do well during the competition...” Many women indicated that they constantly monitored their performance levels in comparison to their previous standards, and/or compared to others of the same or significantly younger age. Some women said that they kept detailed accounts of their times, competition rankings or past performances. I also saw many older women at the AMG and WMG adopt tactics and practices that are usually associated with elite or youth sports (see Hayles, 2005, p. 115), such as using state-of-the-art sporting equipment and wearing sports apparel to enhance their performance and chances of winning (e.g., many track and field athletes wore spiked shoes and used starting blocks for sprints). These findings highlight that discourses and practices of competition were pervasive in shaping the meanings of participation in sports, regardless of age or gender.

On one hand, the women’s investment in the performance and competitive discourses and practices that are embedded in sport indicates that Masters sport gave these older women the opportunity to conform to this dominant sports model (Dionigi, in press). At the same time, these women rejected aspects of this model such as the use of aggression and the win-at-all-cost mentality. Instead, they celebrated the pleasure of being with like-minded women, the excitement of a challenge and the self-pride from using one’s body effectively in sport. Similar themes have emerged in studies on younger women’s participation in traditionally male-dominated sports. For instance, Theberge (2000) found that Canadian female ice hockey...
players invested in the mainstream ideologies of the men’s game through their expressions of strength, power, domination, speed and physical aggression. However, they also demonstrated grace, finesse and emotion on the ice. A study by Guthrie and Castelnuovo (1992) of elite female body-builders explored how this competitive context encouraged both resistance and compliance to dominant gender ideologies.

On the other hand, the older women in my research challenged the boundaries of the ‘acceptable subjects’ of discourses and practices commonly associated with youthfulness and competition by proving that they too can be competitive and athletic (see Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). They were showing that Masters sport is not only about having fun with your friends and keeping fit, it was also highly competitive and physically demanding. By investing in sport performance discourses that emphasised strength, youthfulness, determination and a sense of power, are these women attempting to (re)define what it means to be older and female in contemporary, Western society?

“I can be selfish”. Another interesting finding, and one that was more often implied than directly stated by the women, was that Masters sport provided them with an opportunity to do “something for me”. This was the time in their lives when they felt that they had the right to be selfish. In my conversations with them, several women said, “I leave my husband at home” because their partner was not interested in sports participation, or “my children have all grown up, so I can do what I want now”. A 66-year-old Australian runner from the WMG said:

… if there’s a fun run on, I love to do it and get involved in it... because I suppose I can be selfish because I don’t have a family here or grandchildren or husband, I can concentrate on my running which a lot of women can’t do. I realise it’s a big problem for a lot of gals if they have their family to look after and so on. So I can be selfish in that respect.

This finding highlights (1) that being selfish in later life was important to many women because they lived through a period when they were expected to ‘do for others’ and were not entitled to leisure, and (2) the ‘privileged’ position that many older sportswomen are in. These women have the time, independence, resources and ability to be ‘selfish’ in later life and do what makes them happy. More research is needed to explore this notion of ‘selfishness’ among older women in the context of Masters sport. Given the focus on white, middle-class Western women in this study, further research is needed to explore the experiences of women from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to determine and compare the factors affecting their participation in sport. Recognising that many older women do not have the means, ability or desire to compete in sport is vital. Masters sport is merely one type of leisure activity that can have powerful and contradictory personal and broader outcomes for older women. Therefore, examining the experiences of older women who do not compete in sport and determining the varied ways in which resistance and conformity is played out at the personal and cultural levels through other forms of leisure is equally important.
Summary and Conclusion

Historically, dominant discourses of femininity have defined women as relatively weak, passive and incompetent (Young, 1990). Traditional stereotypes of ageing emphasised decline, frailty and dependency on others in later life (O’Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1999; Wearing 1995). In the past, older people were generally expected to slow down and take a well-earned rest (Grant, 2001). Therefore, the potential for personal empowerment is evident when older women use their bodies in sporting activities, win medals in events that were previously inaccessible to them, maintain friendships, are mentally stimulated, feel a sense of belonging and community through sport, and travel great distances to compete in their event(s). The women in this research had the opportunity to experience immense joy and pride in their achievements, and develop and maintain an identity as an older sportswoman, despite their older bodies and chronic conditions.

Simultaneously, the findings from this research indicate the potential for the words and actions of older sportswomen to conform to and reproduce dominant sport discourses and practices. That is, discourses which value winning, success, training and pushing the body for performance enhancement, and practices which celebrate youthfulness, strength and ability. Therefore, this research raises questions about the phenomenon of older women in sport. Are these women merely buying into the discourses and practices that typically frame competitive sport? And/or are they actively (re)defining themselves and providing alternative meanings of what it is to be an older, female athlete (specially) and an older, Western woman more generally? Many more qualitative, interdisciplinary studies on older women in sport are needed to adequately address such questions.

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References


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