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Introduction

With the ageing of populations around the world, the number of older women is increasing. Alongside this demographic shift, new ways of 'doing' middle and older age are emerging and traditional understandings of what it means to be a middle-aged or older woman are being challenged. The majority of research on being 'older' is primarily presented in the literature from a physical science or biomedical perspective which tends to emphasise the 'declining body' (Dionigi, Horton & Baker, in press; Grant & Kluge, 2007). Moreover, today's middle-aged and older women have lived through a period that did not actively encourage girls to compete in sport (Hayles, 2005; Vertinsky, 2002). For example, "women were excluded from running distances above 400m from 1928 until the early 1960s" because it was considered to interfere with their ability to reproduce (Tulle, 2007, p. 334). Mainstream sport (especially elite and professional sport) is embedded in a 'power and performance' model which emphasises winning, masculinity and performance enhancement (Coakley, 2007). Consequently, women who participate in sport, particularly team sports, often encounter stigmatisation or labelling, such as being called a 'tomboy' or "mannish, butch, dykes, lesbians", because their practices are deemed gender inappropriate (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 135; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009).

The introduction of Masters and Veteran sport in the 1970s in Australia, such as field hockey, swimming and track and field clubs, and the International Gay Games in 1982, has provided space for women to participate in competitive individual and team sports, regardless of age, sexuality or ability (Dionigi, 2008; Symons, 2002, 2004, 2010; Weir, Baker & Horton, 2010). The Gay Games and the Masters Games are highly organised sports competitions, although they are framed in participation discourses which emphasise fun, involvement, fair-play, inclusion and movement (Coakley, 2007; Dionigi, 2008; Symons, 2002). 'Pleasure and participation' discourses are also aligned with the underlying philosophies of the Olympic movement and some recreational/social leagues, and are commonly used to describe other marginalised sporting groups, such as women's leagues and the Special Olympics (Coakley, 2007; Dionigi, 2008).

Participation discourses, with their focus on involvement, inclusion and enjoyment, in contrast to winning, exclusion and high performance, have been taken up by event organisers and promoters to define the participation of middle-aged and older people in sport. For example, the original intention of Masters and Veterans sporting competitions "... was to encourage mature-age people to be physically active and make friends through sport" (Adair & Vamplew, 1997, p. 87). Like the Gay Games (Symons, 2010), the Masters Games are dominated by white, middle-class participants who have the financial resources to attend and these events are typically held across developed nations. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) agree that the maintenance of an active, healthy and leisured lifestyle is highly dependent on access to resources, such as time and money. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the women in the current study represent a 'privileged' sub-culture.

Nevertheless, at this point in time, the knowledge base about the participation of middle-aged and older women in organised sport, particularly from the perspectives of women themselves, is embryonic. Competitive sport was traditionally the domain of youth, and, in this context, young female athletes are commonly teenagers or women in their 20s because these ages are considered typical of peak performance in most sports. In this study we were interested in the experiences of female athletes aged from early 30s to early 50s, whom we have termed middle-aged, and female athletes aged 55 years and over, whom we have called older women. In the United States, people over the age of 55 years are considered 'seniors' in the context of sport and they are eligible to compete in the Senior Olympics (Dionigi, 2008).

In Masters sport around the world, competition typically begins at age 30 years, but the starting age can vary depending on the type of sport and competition (e.g., swimming commences at 25 years and gymnastics at 22 because these ages are considered past the typical age of peak performance for that sport; Weir et al., 2010). Much more interdisciplinary research with a biographical dimension is needed in order to build a more complex picture of the role that sports participation plays in middle-aged and older women's lives and, in turn, how their participation resists and reinforces cultural understandings of sport, ageing and gender (Dionigi, in press; Grant, 2001; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009).

Two such studies that have begun to examine the meaning of sport in the lives of women within the context of broader discourses of competitive sport, ageing, gender, femininity and/or sexuality are by Dionigi (2010) and Litchfield (2011). The following section summarises these two studies and the literature that underpins them. The aim of the current study is to combine and analyse data that has been collected from these two previous studies to provide new insight into the meaning of sport in the lives of women. Therefore, the current study describes the multiple meanings that middle-aged and older women attached to their experiences of sport and explores these meanings in relation to cultural discourses of sport, gender, feminism and ageing.

Literature Review

Litchfield's (2011) research involved in-depth interviews with middle-aged women participating in a weekly recreational, as opposed to a highly competitive, field hockey competition. Amongst other things, this research suggests that team sports may be a place for women to share experiences in a safe, affirming environment, feel a sense of community and develop positive identities, especially among women who identify as lesbian. In particular, it was noted that these women's stories and experiences were informed by second-wave feminism, which was a pertinent phase in women's liberation in Australia.

Bullbeck dates the beginning of women's liberation in Australia to the summer of 1969/1970 (1997, p. 22). Liberal feminists during this period focused on rights and equal opportunities and argued that legal changes would help women achieve equality. Liberal feminism has been criticised by many feminists, as it focuses on the gendered inequalities in society and getting women to the same 'starting line' as men, without critiquing the oppression of women based on the power structures of patriarchy in society. This time period also saw the emergence of more radical thoughts encircling feminist theory. According to Donovan (2000), 'radical feminist theory' was developed during the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Radical feminists looked into "men's social control of women through various mechanisms of patriarchy... especially violence, heterosexuality and reproduction, where men as a group are seen as responsible for maintaining women's oppression," (Maynard, 1998, p. 253). Radical lesbian feminism, a form of radical feminism, also originated during this period (Rich, 1980). The 'Radicalesbians' group, formed in New York in the late 1960s, argued that a lesbian was the "natural 'unconscious' feminist, who devotes her energies to other women," (Donovan, 2000, p. 174).

The period of second-wave feminism helped provide the landscape for sporting women, along with the establishment of female only sporting clubs, to contest for equality in terms of sporting facilities, equipment and club governance (Hargreaves, 1994; Symons, 2004). For example, through this period of feminism, women's only sporting clubs were created that resisted the patriarchal culture of many other clubs. That is, these sporting clubs did not have male members, nor were these clubs governed by males.

Although not focusing on feminist theories or sexuality, Dionigi (2010) has noted in her work on older Masters athletes (who regularly train for, compete in and invest money to attend major sporting events) that older sportswomen tend to express feelings of empowerment and resistance to gender norms and stereotypes of ageing, identity management and a sense of belonging through their participation in sport. Dionigi (2010) explored the phenomenon of older women in sport within a post-structural framework. That is, her work took the perspective that personal and cultural practices and understandings of sport, ageing and what it means to be a woman are linked to power relations in society. From a post-structural standpoint it is argued that although 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. Similarly, in the current study, we have analysed the data within a post-structural framework. In particular, to interpret our findings we drew on post-structural theories of resistance, empowerment and identity management in sporting contexts, as well as past studies on women, sport, feminism and ageing (e.g., Coakley, 2007; Green, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Lenskyj, 2003; Namaste, 1996; Shaw, 2001, 2006; Symons, 2002, 2004; and Wearing, 1995, 1998;).

What has not been explored in these previous studies on women in sport is how the meaning of sports participation in the lives of a group of middle-aged women in recreational team sports *compares* to the meaning of sports participation in the lives of older women involved in competitive individual and team Masters sports. For that reason, the purpose of this study is to combine and analyse data that has been collected from the two abovementioned studies (i.e., Dionigi, 2010 and Litchfield, 2011) to provide new insight into the meaning of sport in the lives of women. This study focuses on the *similarities* in experiences, stories and meanings that were found across a diverse range of women (i.e., women who differed in terms of age, past experiences, relationship status, sexuality or type of sport [individual versus team; highly competitive or recreational]).

Method

Research Design

Overall, this research takes an interpretive approach to analysis because we were interested in “understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 7). Qualitative research recognises that there is always another way to interpret the lives and stories of the people being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Specifically, the current study compares and contrasts the in-depth, case study interview data from middle-aged women (32-52 years old) who belonged to a recreational field hockey club in Litchfield’s (2011) study with interview data from older women (55-90 years old) who were competitors of Masters Games events in Dionigi’s (2010) research. The combined data was thematically analysed within a post-structural framework.

Participants

The eight middle-aged women in this study came from a field hockey team based in inner northern suburban Melbourne, Australia. The participants were recruited from the women only *Northern Central Hockey Club* (NCHC) and had an average age of around 42 years. The participants from NCHC competed at a recreational level with seven other teams in the regular winter season of 2006, operated by Hockey Victoria (the State Sporting Association). While the competition was described as ‘recreational’, the women interviewed said they were

competitive and wanted to win. There are around 70 field hockey clubs in suburban Melbourne and many of these clubs have several women's teams. NCHC were the only exclusively women's hockey club in the competition. Pseudonyms are used for this hockey club and the participants.

Most of the participants from NCHC were white and middle-class. All but one of the participants had reached a tertiary level of education, with three having completed post graduate qualifications. All participants were in some form of professional employment at the time of their interview. No participant from NCHC was identified as 'married', and seven of the eight participants interviewed identified their sexuality as either 'lesbian' or 'gay', while the eighth participant identified her sexuality as 'heterosexual'. All, except for two participants, were involved in a romantic relationship.

The older women 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). The 8th AMG were a 10-day multi-sport event held in Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The 15 women 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. There were 11,225 competitors primarily from Australia (approximately 65% were from the host state, NSW) at this event and it consisted of 61 different sports (Newcastle & Hunter Events Corporation, 2001). 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 AMG women had played sport from a young age. Another third restarted sports participation later in life after a break (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, nine were married, four widowed and two never married. Participants were not asked to identify their sexuality. Fourteen of the women lived in their own homes and one lived independently in a retirement village.

The 2009 WMG were a 10-day international sporting festival held in Sydney, NSW, Australia, which attracted approximately 29,000 competitors from around the world. The 23 women 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 white, from middle-class backgrounds and lived independently in their home or a retirement village. Eleven of the participants were married, eight widowed and four divorced. The participants were not asked to identify their sexuality. Half of the WMG 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. The women in this group regularly participated in one of the following sports: long distance running (including orienteering), swimming, weightlifting, track and field or badminton.

All participants were theoretically (or purposively) sampled (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) based on age (middle-aged or older), gender (women), sport (recreational or highly competitive, individual or team events) and country (English-speaking, Western nations). Institutional ethics committee approval was gained from the researchers' respective universities and informed consent was gained from all the women before any interviews were conducted.

Data Collection

The eight *middle-aged women* from NCHC were interviewed after matches, training sessions or other times and locations that were convenient to the participant. In-depth interviews were used to explore the participants' lived experiences of belonging and identity at their hockey club. Additional topics included their sporting backgrounds, community, safe spaces in sport, and club culture. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes each.

The 15 *older women* (from the 2001 AMG) were interviewed once in their own homes five months after the AMG event. These interviews ranged from 50 and 150 minutes each and they were also audio-recorded. Each participant was asked 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 *older women* from the 2009 WMG were each interviewed (once) 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 and they were audio-recorded. 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.

Data Analysis

All interview data were transcribed and analysed using codes and the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initially, each author read and coded each of the transcripts from their respective data sets individually to draw out tentative themes about the meaning of sports participation for that woman. We then each compared the codes across all interviews within each of our data sets until raw data themes were developed to represent the most common findings among each data set. The raw data themes for the *middle-aged women* were: a sense of community; identity; club culture; homophobia; and welcoming and inclusive spaces in sport. The raw themes from the *older women* were: a sense of identity; belonging and engagement; feelings of competency; valuing success in sport; celebrating performance enhancement and athletic ability; and the right to be selfish.

Reflection on these raw data themes emerging from both data sets revealed obvious similarities. Therefore, the next stage of analysis involved both authors discussing and comparing their raw themes in an attempt to agree on higher order themes (more refined concepts) by linking similar raw themes together and/or dropping irrelevant themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Three common themes were identified to represent the similarities in the experiences of this diverse range of women: Identity Management; Community and Inclusiveness; and Competition.

Findings

The findings show that regardless of age, sexual orientation, past experiences, current circumstances or type of sport (individual versus team; recreational versus competitive), these middle-aged and older women share similar meanings of sport. These meanings shape (and are shaped by) discourses of sport, ageing, gender and feminism through their involvement in sport. Each theme is presented below and then discussed further in the following section.

Identity Management

Many of the older women and all of the middle-aged women in this study recognised that their sporting practices challenged age and gender norms. For example, a 66 year-old athlete from the AMG described her husband's reaction when he 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." It appears this woman took pride in dismissing the stereotypes held by others. Similarly, 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...." The ability to manage a sense of identity and express oneself was important to all the women in this study.

When describing the stark differences between themselves and 'other' (more stereotypical) older women, the *older women* in this study expressed feelings of pride and strength. 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)

Through their participation in Masters sport, these women were expressing a strong, youthful, vital and active image that resisted the stereotype of an older woman as passive, weak and dependent (see Hargreaves, 1994; Vertinsky, 1995).

Similarly, the *middle-aged women* from NCHC were aware that their sporting participation challenged gender and age expectations. In fact, the hockey club's foundations were informed by a combination of liberal and radical feminist principles (Bullbeck, 1997; Donovan, 2000; and Maynard, 1998). These principles were used to promote opportunities for women to participate, compete and govern a local sporting club. One of the original founding members of the club, Dawn, suggested that the club was deliberately constructed as this type of space:

There was a woman who [wanted] to start up her own team based on feminist principles, sort of equality and no judgment... it was certainly expected that you, you know, promoted and practiced feminist principles and, and the participation of sport... (Dawn, 49 years).

The creation of such a team was a radical alternative to mixed-gendered club participation in the mid 1980s. Although field hockey was historically considered a 'women's sport', today white, middle-class males and females participate (Cashman, 1998) and women only clubs are not common. The act of founding the NCHC club on second-wave feminist principles is a deliberate challenge to traditional gender constructions at sporting clubs (i.e., a resistance to male dominance and governance in sport; Hargreaves, 1994).

Many of the *middle-aged women* in this study described the NCHC club environment as one that is available to all women and therefore has the potential to shape and affirm individual identities. For example, it was found that the club provides many women the opportunity to explore non-conventional practices of sexuality, such as openly engage in same-sex relationships, in affirming surroundings. Several of the participants refer to the club culture at NCHC as a 'safe space': "...it's actually about surrounding themselves [members] in a safe environment where they can be comfortable" (Grace, 40 years); and "...the culture is like a family" (Claire, 40 years). They also described their experiences of playing with NCHC as "liberating", "supportive" (Karen, 42 years); "safe", "fantastic" (Claire, 40 years); and "pivotal" (Dawn, 49 years). Such descriptions of the club culture at NCHC convey a space where individual identities, regardless of age, gender or sexuality or the type of activity, can be constructed and confirmed and feelings of empowerment expressed. It was found that all of the women in this study were not only self-expressive, but also experienced a shared sense of identity. The latter finding is depicted below.

Community and Inclusiveness

A common theme amongst the middle-aged and older women was the joy of being around like-minded individuals when participating in sport. This companionship gave them a sense of fellowship, security, shared identity and community. At NCHC, the friendships made between the club members were strong. In fact, many of the women socialised outside of the hockey club space. For example, Dawn said that she enjoyed being involved with NCHC as she was able to play sport with, socialise, share experiences with and build solidarity with like-minded women (Dawn, 49 years). The club members had a tight bond on and off the field, as this bond reflected the shared experiences of marginalisation and discrimination among many of the lesbian members of NCHC. Some of the social activities included parties, travel and participation in a major international sporting event (the Gay Games) as a team. This participation at the Gay Games further strengthened the participant's bond as a community, as team-mates and friends. Participation in such an event was open to all club members, irrespective of sexual orientation. Within this Gay Games culture the women expressed feelings of inclusivity and community.

The *middle-aged women* conceived of inclusion at the hockey club in different ways, however, most of these women felt that inclusion was about the chance for all women to play sport, regardless of their ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, colour, (dis)able-bodied ness and sexuality. Cassandra (the President of the club) explained this position:

...we encourage women of all abilities, of all ages, of all classes, of all educational abilities. Our premise is that we encourage diversity at the club. So if you are the worst player, it doesn't mean that you're not going to get a gig on the field... we have given people that have never played before the chance to play, we have [given] women who are poor a chance to play (Cassandra, 52 years).

Importantly, discourses of inclusivity surrounding the club culture encompass 'diversity'.

Diversity amongst members at NCHC is both acknowledged and celebrated, further strengthening a community that encourages all women to participate.

For the *older women*, feeling a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded women was also important. They made close friendships and had fun, not only at major events like the Masters Games, but on a weekly basis at the Masters club level. 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, particularly among women who had retired from full-time work or no longer had childcare responsibilities. Notably, many older women claimed that Masters sport provided them with an opportunity to do 'something for me'. Now was the time in their lives when they felt that they had the right to play sport if they chose to, without feel guilty about leaving their husbands or children to care for themselves. For example, 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". It appears that the responsibilities of their mid-life, such as raising children, had been removed and these women currently had the flexibility and desire to regularly participate in sport. Lewis and Ridge (2005) note that the role of motherhood is commonly regulated by an ethic of care and that in some cases highly physically active women can resist and reconceptualise this notion of motherhood. In later life some women can relinquish this notion of ethic of care because it no longer monopolises their sense of self, as was evident in our study.

On the other hand, for some older and middled-aged women, an ethic of care never had to be negotiated. For example, 66-year-old Australian runner from the WMG said:

... 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.

Several of the middle-aged women also linked not having child care responsibilities with more time to play and be with like-minded women. Cassandra (52 years) identified what she believed to be some of the advantages of being a lesbian involved in sport:

Ah, I think that another unique thing about it is lesbians have time to do it [play sport]... most lesbians don't have children and so they are not encumbered by family and husbands and they have the ability, or the time and the space to play sport. I think that that is definitely a lesbian issue, a nice issue that means that they can do it... a unique thing about being a dyke (colloquial term for lesbian) is that you can play sport and be yourself and you can play your sport to your fullest ability...

While lesbians do have other challenges that may affect participation, such as discrimination, stereotypes and 'coming out' (Peper, 1994; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), an 'upside' of being a lesbian involved in sport is (for many) the lack of family and childcare constraints that many heterosexual women may experience.

To summarise, the above findings indicate that regardless of age, relationship status, family structure, sexuality or whether they were involved in individual or teams sports, these women felt they belonged to a group of women who were important to them. At the same time, these women enjoyed the competitive nature of the activity they were involved in.

Competition

The women in this study valued success in sport and celebrated their competitive spirit. Although sport is now promoted to middle-aged and older men and women with a focus on 'friendship, fun and fitness' or, as explained in the Introduction section, a 'pleasure and participation' model (Coakley, 2007; Dionigi 2008) – sport is inherently competitive, regardless of whether it is amateur or professional, elite, recreational or Masters. Many of the *older women* said that when they played sport or competed in an individual event they "try to win," and/or aim to achieve a "personal best." 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 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 interesting...I like testing myself."

Similar to the older women participating in the Masters Games, the *middle-aged women* at NCHC valued participation, along with competition and high performance. Discourses of competition and performance, which emphasise training, winning, athleticism and assertiveness (Cashman, 1998; Coakley, 2007), were evident in many of the comments made by the women. While participation, fun and friendship were key motivators to be involved in sport, many middle-aged and older women felt that their 'competitive juices' were difficult to ignore. For example, Dawn (49 years) from NCHC explains; "...we [are] the toughest, most

competitive lot of women you'd care to meet". Similarly, Claire (40 years) explained that the team do not like losing and are a "strong willed" group of women.

It was not only team sports that brought out competitiveness in women, because 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." Another individual athlete among the *older women*, a 90-year-old Canadian 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." Many women described the joy they experienced from winning medals and breaking Australian or world records at their respective Masters Games, and they reported appreciating the recognition and status that accompanied Masters sports participation in general. 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.

Likewise, many of the middle-aged women from NCHC expressed the joy of winning medals when describing their achievements at the Gay Games in 2002. The 2002 Gay Games were held in Sydney, Australia. The program consisted of 32 sports and there were around 12,000 sports participants at these Games (Symons, 2010). Several women explained that their team has won a medal at the Games; for example, "...winning the silver medal in the grand final. It was everything. It was absolutely everything. It was brilliant" (Dawn, 49 years). While Symons (2010) explained that the Gay Games ethos is about participation and personal best, the women from NCHC embraced the competitive discourses and practices commonly tied to mainstream sports.

Discussion

The first theme, identity management, showed that, because of their involvement in sport, the women in this study were questioned by societal attitudes in general, and in the opinions of significant others in particular, not only on the basis of gender, but also age. Yet, they managed to remain resilient and maintain their unique expressions of self through sport. Similar findings have emerged from studies of older people in sport, women's leisure and lesbians in sport, respectively. For example, 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). 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). Shire, Brackenridge and Fuller (2000, p.53) and Hillier (2005, p. 62), although focussing on young women, have described sporting contexts as potentially 'safe' environments for women to 'come out' (i.e., openly identify as lesbian/gay/queer) and explore their sexuality. Therefore, resistance to norms and stereotypes can lead to feelings of personal empowerment and provide women with many other benefits, such as experiencing a sense of community.

The next theme, community and inclusiveness, described how the women felt a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded women. It was also demonstrated that retirement from work or family obligations and/or having no children or partner to care for provided many of these women with the flexibility and freedom to play sport and form social networks. These women were also travelling away together in teams or with their clubs to compete nationally and internationally. 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). Irrespective of 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). Gill (2007) and Kluge (2002) have shown that women often rely on the social support of other women when attempting to maintain their involvement in non-traditional activities, such as physically demanding competitive sports, and that they are able to resist gender and age norms if empowered by a group of compatible women. Similarly, Griffin (1998) proposed that sport and sporting clubs provide a sense of community for lesbian athletes, in particular, which does not exist in all realms of society due to discourses and practices of discrimination and homophobia.

The final theme about competition showed that the middle-aged and older women in this study challenged the boundaries of the ‘acceptable subjects’ of discourses and practices commonly associated with youthfulness, femininity and sports competition by demonstrating their competitiveness and athletic ability (see Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). They were showing that sports participation is not only about having fun with your friends and keeping fit, but it is also highly competitive and physically demanding. By simultaneously investing in ‘power and performance’ discourses that emphasised strength, youthfulness, determination and a sense of power, as well as ‘pleasure and participation’ discourses, are these women attempting to (re)define what it means to be older and female in contemporary, Western society?

Concluding Comments

Through an examination of the meaning of sport in the lives of middle-aged and older women, it became apparent that regardless of age, past experiences, sexuality, childcare or family responsibilities, or type of sport (individual versus team; recreational versus competitive), these women share similar meanings and experiences of sport. These meanings and experiences shape (and are shaped by) discourses of sport, ageing, gender and feminism through their involvement in sport. In particular, notions of resistance, empowerment, identity and a sense of community were found to be important in terms of understanding the role sport plays in these women’s lives. Nevertheless, research on the involvement of middle-aged and older women in sport is rare, particularly from the perspectives of women themselves and especially from those who identify as lesbian. Studies on middle-aged and older women in sport are typically limited to white, middle-class samples, and the sexual identity of athletes is often silenced in such research. This situation exists at a time when the number of older women is increasing, more people are ‘coming out’ in regard to their sexuality and new ways of experiencing ageing and sport are emerging. More interdisciplinary research on this topic is needed if we are to better understand the ways in which middle-aged and older women, from a variety of cultural backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances and sexual orientations, experience and think about sport and, in turn, how sport can be a vehicle for resistance, personal empowerment and identity management.

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