

ARTICLE

Middle-aged women negotiating the ageing process through participation in outdoor adventure activities

C. Yvette Wharton¹*

¹Division of Sport & Exercise Sciences, Abertay University, Dundee, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: y.wharton@abertay.ac.uk

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the motivations middle-aged women give for belonging to an outdoor adventure group. As part of this, how the women were negotiating the ageing process was also examined. Fourteen women aged 36–64 (average age 51.4 years) were individually interviewed with the purpose of exploring their perceptions, values, motivations and the beliefs they attach to their participation. Findings highlight the women's belief that participation delays the ageing process, gives them confidence in their lives and offers social support from other group members. In addition, pride, satisfaction and pleasure were expressed in the belief that they challenged the cultural norms and expectations of older women. Whilst delaying the ageing process, they also highlighted that they thought about a time in the future when they would not be able to continue to participate. The study emphasises that more adventurous activities are becoming more normalised and can be undertaken by women in middle age. This may also suggest that more needs to be done to promote diverse activities such as outdoor adventurous activities to women.

Keywords: middle aged; women; adventure; physical activity; outdoor; ageing

Introduction

Women's physical activity participation levels are lower than men's, with participation rates declining with age (Scottish Government, 2016; Althoff *et al.*, 2017; Sport England, 2017). It is suggested that during middle age women's participation in regular physical activity declines by up to half, at the same time as declines in basal metabolic rate and loss of lean body mass occur, which have the potential to result in increased risk of weight gain and related health co-morbidities (McArthur *et al.*, 2014). There are many reasons why women do not participate in regular exercise. The likelihood of participating in exercise is influenced by many factors including age, sex and lifestage (Jones *et al.*, 2011). There are strong associations between life events that both increase and decrease participation, with

these varying across age groups and across the lifespan (Campbell *et al.*, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 2009). Some of these, as noted by Little (2002), are structural factors that include family, financial resources and lifecourse stages. Middle-aged women tend to attribute the demands of life, lack of time, outdoor exercise and not having someone to exercise with as contributing to non-participation (Im *et al.*, 2008). As people age, individuals tend to cite health more frequently as a reason for not participating in exercise (Scottish Government, 2015). Analysis of reasons for participating in exercise varies between men and women, with men more likely to have higher scores for enjoyment, improving performance and taking part in competition, whilst women's motivations are more likely to be losing weight and taking children to activities (Scottish Government, 2015).

Participation in swimming and health and fitness activities such as aerobics classes tend to account for most activities undertaken by women, whilst men tend to engage in a wider range of activities (Jones *et al.*, 2011; Scottish Government, 2016). One exception to this is the popularity of hill walking which both men and women enjoy and, unlike other activities, this has not seen a decline in recent years (Scottish Government, 2015). However, in other outdoor adventure activities such as backpacking, climbing, canoeing or mountaineering, women's participation rates are considerably lower than those of men (Nolan and Priest, 1993; Jones *et al.*, 2011). Adventure activities have tended to be the reserve of men, reflecting the perception of an association between these activities and what are seen as masculine qualities, such as strength and risk taking (Anderson, 1999; Little, 2002; Ford and Brown, 2006; Thorpe, 2011). There is evidence to suggest that women may avoid some adventure activities because of perceptions of risk (Boyes, 2013). As a consequence of identifying outdoor adventure activity as an area of masculinity, women are denied access resulting in an under-representation (Humberstone, 2000; Coalter and Dowers, 2006). It has been suggested that the gendered and sexualised nature of many activities and leisure contexts can explain why women are often alienated from taking part in certain activities (Scraton and Watson, 1998; James, 2000). The choice of sporting activities made by individuals may therefore reflect the culturally sanctioned values of these activities within society (Eccles, 1994) and replicate and magnify gendered issues (Roth and Basow, 2004). This may explain lower levels of participation in physical activity, especially outdoor adventure pursuits.

Yet many women from diverse backgrounds do participate in adventure activities, but in far fewer numbers than men (Little, 2002). Research suggests that although outdoor adventure leisure is both physically and intellectually challenging, there is potential for women to receive many positive benefits from engaging in these activities (Pohl *et al.*, 2000; Little, 2002). Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) posit that there is no reason to believe that women are unable to participate or to access adventure on their own terms. If adventure activities are appropriately led by effective leaders, women have been found to be able to balance negative perceptions and risk associated with adventure (Boyes, 2013). By participating in adventure activities women are able to experience numerous benefits, including self-discovery, reduced self-doubt, physical competence, self-awareness and social interaction (Henderson, 1992; Little, 2002). There is an increasingly held belief that older sports women have the potential to challenge and disprove culturally

held beliefs about the physical abilities of the ageing female body (Hargreaves, 1994). Breivik (2010) suggests that women adventure participants act as 'trendsetters'. Despite this, women continue to experience more barriers associated with participation, with this being particularly evident with outdoor exercise (Anderson and Noble, 2001; Kilgour and Parker, 2013). Little (2002) suggests that due to the male-dominated history of adventure recreation, research in outdoor adventure activity has been predominantly focused on men. In addition, the nature of the type of physical activities undertaken by women has resulted in research being focused on indoor and traditional sport and exercise contexts normally associated with women's participation (Kilgour and Parker, 2013).

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations and experiences of a group of middle-aged women belonging to an outdoor adventure leisure group. Although there are a number of definitions of adventure activities for the purpose of this study, the definition of Holyfield *et al.* (2005) is used, which focuses on recreational adventure activities as experiential. These are voluntary, uncertain and intense, and are experienced in an emotional context. In addition, participation has the capacity to enable individuals to 'achieve distance from all too familiar worlds' (Holyfield *et al.* 2005: 185). The main reason for the study is to provide an understanding of the underpinning reasons for the women being part of the group. Within this aim, the study also examined how women participating in outdoor adventure activities reflected on ageing and how they experienced the activities in light of ageing.

Methods

As women belonging to an outdoor activity group were the central focus of the study, purposeful sampling was used, with participants being drawn from a women's outdoor adventure group, based in the Dundee and North Fife area, Scotland. Following approval from the university ethics committee, all members of the group (N = 20; 36–64 years old) were invited to participate. An email was sent to each member outlining the purpose of the study, explaining how the study would be organised and inviting them to participate. From this, 14 subsequently participated in interviews.

Interview group demographics

Information about the participants, age, marital status, employment status, level of education and number of children is given in [Table 1](#).

Group description

The group was originally formed in 2007 following a 'women-only' adventure taster course run for eight women by a female instructor under the auspices of a local authority outdoor centre. This course allowed women to engage in six different

Table 1. Participant information

Participant	Age	Marital status	Children	Employment status	Education
1	42	Married	2	Part time	Post-graduate
2	48	Married	3	Full time	Professional qualification
3	53	Married	2	Full time	Professional qualification
4	58	Married	2	Retired	Post-graduate
5	59	Married	2	Full time	Professional qualification
6	36	Single	0	Full time	Degree
7	44	Married	2	Part time	Degree
8	53	Single	1	Full time	Post-graduate
9	44	Single	0	Full time	School completion
10	58	Married	3	Semi-retired	Post-graduate
11	61	Widow	3	Retired	Professional qualification
12	64	Married	3	Retired	Professional qualification
13	47	Single	0	Full time	Degree
14	53	Single	0	Full time	Post-graduate

adventure activities over a six-week period. These activities included mountain biking, canoeing, coastering, land yachting, climbing and gorge walking. For most of the women this was the first experience of some of the activities. Their enjoyment of the activities was such that they asked the instructor to organise further activities for them. The original course format was repeated twice with the same outcome, resulting in women from these later courses joining those from the first. In addition to those who had participated in courses, friends of the women were invited to come along and over time a cohesive group formed that identified itself as a women's adventure group. For the first few years activities were organised by the original instructor and included day activities such as hill walking, canoeing, coastering, winter skills and also going away for weekend activities.

When the female instructor left the outdoor centre, the women were faced with stopping the activities, continuing with a male instructor or organising activities on their own. They chose to continue on their own, only using instructors for specialist activities such as coastering. A number of the women periodically take on the role of organiser of activities; in addition, to enhance their skills, some have undertaken courses in navigation and kayaking. Once a month they try to do one activity; they go away for occasional weekend activities and each year they organise an activity lasting up to a week, which has included long-distance walks and a canoeing expedition. In addition to the actual adventure activities there are also social gatherings, including periodic coffee meetings to discuss and plan future activities and also an end-of-year dinner where they share photos and memories of what they have done during the previous year. They also celebrate notable birthdays such as 50 and 60 years with weekends away based around outdoor adventure.

The current research sought to examine the experience of outdoor adventure through the experiences of a women's adventure group. A phenomenological approach was utilised to develop analysis and describe the experience of adventure in the women's lives (Creswell, 2013). Through interviews, first-hand descriptions of the phenomenon of adventure have been gathered, with this approach allowing for the essence of this experience in the women's lives to be captured (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The focus was on determining the meaning of adventure to the participants in their everyday lives and how this impacted on their identity. The number of interviews carried out allowed for depth of data and richness to be obtained. Topics and prompts allowed for individual personal experiences to be gathered, enabling participants to 'tell their story'. Through the interviews and subsequent analysis of these it was possible to provide an in-depth description of how adventure was a lived experience in the women's lives (Finlay, 2008).

Procedures

A semi-structured interview method was selected to provide focus but also allowed individuals to express freely their own perspectives and experiences. Individual face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 40–60 minutes were undertaken to gain individual perspectives. The interviews took place in a location and time convenient to each participant, e.g. locations included an office of the university and individuals' homes. An agenda of topics was used to ensure that relevant issues related to the research area were covered systematically, also allowing flexibility to pursue details pertinent to individual participants (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003). All interviews were voice recorded using a digital Dictaphone, and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Initial questions focused on demographics such as age, employment and education. To develop focus and encourage discussion, a number of topics were explored. These focused on exploring the women's motives for being part of the group, their experiences of participating in the activities and how ageing impacted on their experience. An open questioning technique was employed to allow the individual's answers to direct the flow of the interview and reflect their own individual experiences.

A thematic analysis approach was utilised to establish themes, patterns and allow for interpretation of data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was achieved through familiarisation with data through transcriptions (Riessman, 1993) and re-reading transcripts repeatedly and taking notes. Initial reading was directed at becoming empathetically immersed to allow for reflection on the phenomenon. From this, data were organised into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005) resulting in the generation of structure, coherence and clustering which led to the identification of themes. After initial themes were identified and to ensure the findings were shaped by the responses of the participants, member checking was undertaken. This was achieved by presenting findings to a sub-group of the women with the purpose of allowing the women to give feedback and ensure authentic interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Thomas, 2017). This allowed for interpretation of data to be verified by allowing participants to comment on researcher analysis (Noble and Smith, 2015). Following this, the themes were further reviewed to discern additional meanings and their inter-relationships (Von Eckartsberg, 1998).

Themes were subsequently renamed to refine concepts that accurately represented participant beliefs, values and meanings they attached to adventure activities (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The researcher is actively involved in sport and exercise through participation and as an academic. Within the current research her role is that of a participant researcher, taking part in the first taster course and participating in a number of activities since. As such, it is recognised that she holds similar perspectives to the participants. This allowed the interviewer an insider's perspective that provided an opportunity to probe and develop questions. The researcher is, however, aware that this positioning could bias the interpretation of data.

Findings and discussion

Identified themes

Following analysis, a number of themes around belonging, confidence and ageing were identified. The key themes that are explored in this paper are given in [Table 2](#).

Group belonging

The group offers a supportive situation and opportunity to engage with the environment. This is highlighted by the emphasis the women place on group identity that has both social and adventure components.

Social support

Every comment made about the group was positive, with all participants highlighting how important the group had become to them. The group was a point of reference to organise activities around and to create challenges, and to provide alternatives to other commitments in their lives. One woman compared it to 'a natural family, a family that you choose'. This is an interesting point and one that has been observed previously. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) found in their study of women participating in wilderness expeditions that the women reported the bonds and support they experienced were at times greater than that received from family and significant others. This also reflects other research that seems to suggest that unlike men who focus on the activity, women are more focused on relationships that are formed during the activities (Kiewa, 2001). The women in this study acknowledged that the group was formed by chance and without it they would probably never have met nor had the opportunity to experience the activities and adventures. The group has become a potent force in their lives, providing the opportunities to challenge themselves, but also a powerful social resource offering support and companionship. Without exception all remarked on the qualities of the women in the group, using words such as *proud*, *remarkable*, *fantastic* and *inspirational*.

I have never looked back ... I have met so many fantastic people, I've had so many fantastic experiences and it has just been completely life changing.

I feel privileged to be a part of this group; it's a real privilege to me. And something that when I think 20 years ago how would I see my life going I wouldn't

Table 2. Key themes

Main	Subordinate
Group belonging	Social support
	Being different from social norms
Self-perception and identity	
Ageing	Decline and regret
	Role models
	Future resources
	Time for self

necessarily have thought this would be part of it, so I think that's a really important factor and it's good.

There were no obvious divisions or tensions, with many remarking on how consistent, co-operative and supportive all the other women were. Some used examples of difficulties they had experienced in their personal lives and how the women had been a positive supporting presence during these times. The opportunity to socialise and make new friends has been found to be a major benefit from engaging in activity, giving the opportunity to communicate with others through shared ideas and experiences (Ferrand, 2008; Nolan, 2010). This emphasis on these relational bonds has been found to be clearly prevalent in women (Henderson, 1996). It has even been suggested that the relationships that are formed through undertaking adventure activities together may be more important than the actual physical challenges that are experienced (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999; Boniface, 2006). Such is the synergy that has developed within the women's group that one woman commented on how the interconnectedness between the group enabled them to achieve and accomplish tasks and overcome obstacles as if it was choreographed, likening it to a dance:

Everything is like a dance, everyone knows their move, that's exactly it, we know our strengths we know how we complement each other ... you just do and let the dance happen, then you get the canoes over the fence and across the road.

The expressed bonds and support may reflect aspects of Loeffler's (1997) research that proposed that women's willingness to take part in risks associated with adventure is enhanced when the environment is nurturing and supportive.

Different from social norms

They liked the idea that they were different from other women of their age. They were particularly proud that they belonged to the group and were doing things that most women of their age avoid. Alongside this, they also delighted in the belief that they required a certain degree of 'madness' to do the activities, and this gave them courage to meet the challenges of being in the outdoors, but also something they believed distinguished them from others:

My friends that I work with think I'm nuts, that I'm absolutely nuts. And every Friday it's 'what adventures are you doing this weekend, what part of the world are you in this weekend?' They think I'm nuts.

My family and friends think I'm actually a bit nuts, (laughs) actually I am a bit nuts.

They sort of ask, things like for instance about the Great Glen Canoe, 'well why did you camp? Could you not have stayed in a hotel?' And I think well we could have done (laughs) but where's the challenge in that?

My mother doesn't get it, she always asks why do I want to do that, have you nothing better to do with your time? I'm just glad I do.

For women, it has been suggested that there is a socially orientated need to participate in exercise as part of a group and for the group to be seen as being defined by its distinctiveness (Edmunds *et al.*, 2010). It was clearly evident from the women that they regarded themselves as being different to what were the expected social norms for their age group. It has been found that group distinctiveness can be a predictor of more self-determined forms of motivation (Edmunds *et al.*, 2010). Their thinking and beliefs about the activities they participate in gave them confidence and a certain pride in standing outside the traditional norms associated with adventure activities and their age. Participating with the group and doing things that are not regarded as the norm certainly motivated them to want to participate and to push themselves. Although recognising themselves as being different, they are confident and comfortable in their position as adventure enthusiasts and are not restricted by regarding adventure activities as masculine or being male-dominated, which Humberstone (2000) has put forward as reasons for non-participation. It could be suggested that the women have an openness to experience that results in greater flexibility and thus have an attraction to unconventional ideas (McCrae, 1987), enabling them to step away from conformist concepts and perceptions of what women should be or do. An openness to experience has been related to self-perceptions of ageing that influences whether an individual experiences themselves as young or old (Canada *et al.*, 2013). As such, it boosts their confidence and belief in their own abilities.

Self-perception and identity

All participants acknowledged the value of the activities and spoke about what it was they took from both the actions of doing the activities but also accomplishing them. Everyone highlighted how much they enjoyed the activity and acknowledged how uplifting these experiences were. They commented on the weather, the risks associated with activities and being outdoors, and how much these contributed and added to the sense of accomplishment:

Encouraging everyone to finish the activity, at the end when everyone is ... wind-swept and maybe soaking wet or really hot, it's a great sense of achievement when we all as a group finish.

Outdoor activity and weather conditions have been found to be common barriers to middle-aged women exercising (Im *et al.*, 2008). Yet for the women adverse weather conditions were to be battled, overcome and even enjoyed; for some it was an almost liberating experience. They were aware of the risks associated with being in the Scottish mountains but were able to manage this.

In contrast to Little's (2002) study, all of the participants were able to incorporate the positive outcomes into their sense of self. Adventure recreation had become part of their identity. It is interesting to note that the focus of all of the women was very much on the experience; what they took from the activity rather than the activity itself. The experiencing of the elements, camaraderie, being together and sharing were as important as or even more important than reaching the top of the mountain. The diverse nature of their adventure experiences challenged them both physically and mentally, resulting in a redefining of how they view themselves. There was a strong narrative running through the interviews that repeatedly emphasised the changes the women observed in themselves:

...more confident, more independent.

...about lifting your mood.

I love it I suppose really, it's just, it's been an unexpected part of my life that I wish I'd had when the kids were younger.

It's an inspiration.

Previous research found that participating in activities in the outdoors elicits positive changes that enhance self-concept and self-perception (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999). In addition, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) drew attention to how outdoor experiences had the potential to produce feelings of competence and self-confidence; although it is suggested that it is only through repeated experience of the outdoors that changes in the self will be experienced (Brookes, 2003). The women in the group have achieved this repeated experience by participating in regular monthly outings and weekends away. Their confidence can be observed not only in their desire to participate in activities with the group but it has also expanded to them being more independent. Many of those interviewed now engage in activities on their own or have extended their friendship circle and participate with others in outdoor adventure separate from the group. Also their decision to manage the group activities on their own when the original instructor left is also testament to their increased confidence.

Ageing

Decline and regret

In addition to the many positive aspects of participating, the women also reflected on the impact an ageing body may have. This was mentioned in how this already influenced participation but also the possible future consequences. Previous research has put forward that there can be an over-medicalisation of ageing and as a consequence the focus can be directed to the decline of the body (Pfister,

2012). Decline was part of the women's reflections in relation to specific questions about ageing. There was acknowledgement of future limitations that may accompany ageing, but alongside this was also the notion of trying to limit this. Although decline and deterioration were mentioned, these were not a dominant part of their narrative. They commented on two aspects in relation to not being able to do the activities; these were the physical limitations that often accompany ageing and their response to possibly having to give up participating:

In terms of the physical aspects of ageing, I absolutely some days ache to bits.

I would hate to think that I couldn't do the activities.

I dread that time, I dread that time.

I would be absolutely gutted, I think my self-worth would be pretty ****, I can't imagine life without it.

There was also a strong focus on maintaining fitness and carrying on participating in activities for as long as possible. Aspects of not trying to predict the future were also mentioned and seizing the opportunities that life presents:

No, I don't think that far ahead, it's like this is what we are doing now, and because the fact that we have been doing it for so long, we can continue because we feel we can but still pushing yourself a little.

It made me realise that live for every day, keep fit, do things that you want to do.

I think that is the thing about the outdoors is it's not age limiting, because you can be in your fifties, sixties or seventies and still do things outdoors.

There was recognition that there are already aches and pains and there may come a time when as a consequence of physical limitations they may have to give up or change the type of activities they do. Yet alongside this there was preparation to avoid or limit this. There was a determination that they will keep going for as long as possible. Although there was recognition of problems, actually exercising may in itself delay the point at which they have to give up or curtail certain activities. Current evidence suggests that the benefits of exercising at their age acts has a protective factor against sarcopenia in old age, maintaining muscle strength, motor function and, as a consequence, physical performance (Kamijo and Murakami, 2009; Akune *et al.*, 2014). Pfister (2012) raised the notion that remaining young, slimness or beauty, which can be seen as devaluing ageing, are reasons associated with denying the ageing process; these, however, were not part of the narrative of the women in this study. Rather, keeping fit and active were things to be done to allow them to continue to be engaged in adventure.

It was also recognised that it is not possible to predict the future and as such it was important to extract enjoyment from the now:

Obviously it's going to happen as we get older, that capabilities might not be the same but I just think with the way we are – positive, we do try to keep fit and healthy, I just hope that we have many years still together.

This emphasis on living in the now reflected the belief that the future was unpredictable and as such should not be second guessed. As seen, with regards to their health, participants in the present study were pro-active in trying to maintain health. The desire to do the activities encouraged them to want to continue. The combination of the dynamics of belonging to the group and the nature of the activities they undertake positively impacted on their perception of ageing and their aspiration to remain active. There was acknowledgement of some limitations associated with ageing but their major concern was on putting things in place that enabled continued participation. This would be achieved by remaining positive and being prepared to adapt activities to accommodate limitations. By making adaptations they believed adventure participation would be prolonged.

Role models

Although the average age of the group was 51 years, the age-span of the group was 36–64 years. Younger members of the group remarked that the older women were to be esteemed and that they acted as an incentive to continue. The older women's participation and ability was an example to be admired as an illustration of good ageing, of what could be achieved and should be emulated. The younger women's views of older members laid down a foundation of beliefs about future possibilities and expectations:

...it's inspirational to see the other women who are there and possibly older but extremely fit. To see everybody out there is phenomenal so yes that, I like to see that because it is an incentive to keep fit so that I can keep doing the same, but it lets me see higher level of fitness is still achievable.

The older ones are inspiring; none of us can say we can't do that because we are too old.

...they just seem as young at heart as the rest of us, so I think that if they can do it so can I.

The pervading views of ageing can often be negative, resulting in attitudes and beliefs that are dominated by a negative discourse that emphasises ill-health, reduced functioning and loneliness (Horton *et al.*, 2007; Wurm *et al.*, 2013). Ageing stereotypes have been shown to have detrimental effects on physical and mental performance and health in older adults (Meisnar, 2012; Freeman *et al.*, 2016). Repeated exposure to negative stereotypes can serve as catalysts that result in individuals internalising this pessimistic perception (Levy *et al.*, 2011). Self-perceptions of ageing play a significant role in the way individuals age (Wolff *et al.*, 2017). These perceptions are an amalgam of life experiences, expectations and societal attitudes that subsequently impact on behaviour (Levy, 2009). Understanding of the role others may play in shaping perceptions of ageing is

limited and, as a consequence, has the potential to constrain the experience of ageing (Jopp *et al.*, 2017). Jopp *et al.* (2017) posit that role models have a positive function to play in how people identify with others and aid in providing motivation and acting as a positive example. Active older people as role models can motivate others to be active and counter the impact of negative stereotypes (Ory *et al.*, 2003). Images of athletic older people have been shown to be effective in altering perceptions of ageing in younger people (Horton *et al.*, 2013). It could be argued that the impact of the older women in this study, although unintentional, was a positive and welcome by-product. For the younger women, the example of the older women was clearly a positive example which laid down an inspirational illustration of what can be achieved and served to inform understanding of ageing expectations. Positive images of ageing have been found to weaken the detrimental impact of negative stereotypes (Hess *et al.*, 2006). Little (2005) raises the notion that role modelling can be a viable and meaningful element of women's participation. This was clearly evident and the example of the older women served to challenge the limiting roles often associated with ageing.

Future resources

There was talk of the distant future when activities could no longer be carried out. Although one aspect of this was to talk about the anticipated regret of having to give up activities, there was also another aspect highlighting how current experiences may be used to define or influence future identity through the memories that were constructed. Memories in old age have been suggested as enabling people to cope with the uncertainty of the latter stage of life (Boucher and Osgood, 1969). In addition, older people build their life stories around past events and the importance that is placed on these (Kaufman, 1995). Alongside this is the notion that the memories that older adults preserve are those that aid in maintaining self-concept (Dijkstra and Kaup, 2005). One woman eloquently identified this notion when she suggested that the activities and experiences would form the backdrop for when she was old and no longer able to do the activities:

I feel as if I'm actively writing my life story and when I am old I will take the photos out; I will be able to look back and remember all the great things I did and say life was good.

This perception of being actively engaged directing life was also observed in Kellert's (1997) work in which it was found that being in the outdoors resulted in more ownership and directing of life rather than an inert passing through. Many of the women had a strong sense that their choice to engage in outdoor adventure was actually a very positive act on their part. In addition, there was a strong story-telling component when they gathered at social events, where they shared anecdotes and photographs of their activities, reliving events and experiences. One of the traditions that the group has is the compilation of photo books to celebrate notable birthdays, such as 50 and 60 years. These books are made up of photographs of the women engaging in the adventure activities and provide memories of adventures undertaken in previous years and are a tangible celebration of their achievements but also a strong memory aid. McAdams'

(2003) work emphasises that memories and future projections can provide a means of constructing a life narrative or life story. Alongside this is the notion that people's imagined future stems from cultural life scripts and that highly positive memories aid in people's ability to maintain a life script through autobiographical memories (Rubin and Bernsten, 2003). Belonging to the group and the activities undertaken have become aspects that define these women. Their notions of self have adapted and developed to incorporate group belonging and the notion of themselves as adventurers has become part of their self-identity; it has become part of their narrative about self. For the women, the already strong memories of accomplishments and experiences could become a marker for a life lived well. The present experiences are in themselves an affirmative component of their current life but may also become in the future a resource for positive ageing.

Time for self

As with many women in society, there is a need to balance demands and responsibilities of career, family and engaging in activity, and by doing this achieve a balance that impacts positively on overall wellbeing (Whitehead and Kotze, 2003). As a consequence of having to juggle multiple roles, many women sacrifice opportunities to engage in activity and prioritise others, leaving little time for self (Shank, 1984; Nolan, 2010). Participating in physical activity can be one of the areas that is jeopardised by this need to juggle roles. It is estimated that during middle age up to half of women decrease the amount of regular activity they participate in (McArthur *et al.*, 2014), with decreases in activity of as much as 40 per cent (Evenson *et al.*, 2002; Elavsky, 2009). Yet physical activity participation at 50 years is more predictive of continued activity into later life than participation at earlier ages (Evenson *et al.*, 2002). Frequently cited barriers for non-participation in middle age tend to be attributed to demands of lifestyle (McArthur *et al.*, 2014), time and exercising outdoors (Im *et al.*, 2008), and the multiple roles and responsibilities associated with work and family (Pan *et al.*, 2009; Carmichael *et al.*, 2015). Some of these women were at an age that had mixed responsibilities; some were employed full time and a couple of the younger ones still had dependent children at home. A larger number, however, had no children or dependent children; instead for some of the older women in the group care responsibilities had shifted to helping to look after grandchildren and the care needs of ageing parents. This meant that there was at times a tension created by organising activities around the needs of family and/or work commitments. For many women in society, the normal experience is to put family and home first and themselves second (Henderson, 1996; Nolan, 2010). Although at times some of the group do not always participate as a consequence of family and home commitments, these are infrequent. Many times the women reorganised their priorities to ensure participation and they were happy to leave other activities in their lives to another day in order to participate:

It's more important that women just get out because the idea of staying at home every weekend and having a perfect house! I just feel – I know it's up to them but I just feel that they are missing out on so much.

I used to worry a lot on weekends; the house has to be tidy, I have too much washing to do, the kids' rooms are a mess, but I'm less stressed about that now ... housework to do? It doesn't matter. Not to care as much as before; you will not get these days back.

The women adjusted their lives to manage both family and home obligations, enabling them to engage in the adventure activities which include not only a one-day activity per month but sometimes weekend and week-long expeditions. This supports the findings of Boniface (2006) who found that women doing adventure activities are able to step back from other commitments and reprioritise themselves. In addition to shifting priorities, it has been suggested that mid-life can be regarded as a new beginning (Utian and Boggs, 1998; Finn, 2000).

For many of the women in the present study, joining the group and engaging in activities represented a transitional phase in their lives and that, despite commitments and shifting responsibilities, the women suggested that their age allowed them to look to do things for themselves. It was almost as if they were able to give themselves permission to be 'selfish' or at least able to switch the focus to themselves. The women do at times have to fit their engagement with adventure around their personal circumstances. However, adventure was seen as a priority which resulted in flexibility and creativity in managing their lives to enable engagement. Alongside this they also recognised that they were in a position of having the resources with which to do this:

...at least I now have the time, money and space to do what I want to do. I have transport, I have good bikes.

I think because I haven't got children because they have left home, I don't feel quite so much that I can't do things for myself, because I do have more time for myself. It's nice to meet other people and do things I enjoy.

This would suggest that for the women doing adventure activities and being part of the group was a priority that enabled them to focus on themselves and to channel their resources into this being a significant part of their lives. Previous research has put forward that time constraints, family commitments and lack of financial independence often act as causal factors for not participating (Mutrie and Choi, 2000). It would appear that this particular group of women were able to prioritise activities for themselves, stepping back at times from family commitments and work responsibilities to find time for themselves. This ability to do what they want to do has been observed in previous research and is suggestive of an ability to frame positive health behaviours and to act upon these (Smith-DiJulio *et al.*, 2010).

Conclusion

As a consequence of diversity of experience observed in women's physical activity participation, it is not possible to arrive at a simple understanding of exercise behaviour or motivation. The complexity of developing an understanding is influenced by factors such as education, time, financial resources and family commitments. The present study is limited in that it does not represent a broad spectrum of society. The

women in this study are well educated and have the financial means to dedicate to adventure activities, and as such it is not possible to take a broad view. However, this research does contribute to our understanding of the complex relationships between middle-aged women's response to and experience of adventure.

Formation of the group was in many ways serendipitous, with a group of like-minded individuals by chance coming together to experience adventure activities. Through the auspices of a local authority adventure taster course, the women experienced a diverse range of adventure activities allowing for the subsequent development of new skills and abilities. A significant aspect of this experience was the opportunity to share this with other like-minded women. From this, the women joined together to form a clearly identifiable group. The women may be part of an increasing movement representing changing patterns of activities in middle-aged women, and therefore demonstrate an ability to disprove gender and ageing stereotypes. They display a capacity to be confident in their physical abilities. Such was their enjoyment of the activities and the engagement with the group that they shifted their priorities, placing adventure as a significant feature of their lives. Taking up the adventure activities provided an avenue that enabled the women to develop new skills and through group membership to develop robust supportive mechanisms. In addition, enjoyment of the activities facilitated a desire on the part of the women to focus on themselves, and to dedicate time for activities that gave them enjoyment and challenge.

The impact of engaging and belonging to a group of like-minded women has created a sense of the women having control and self-determined direction in their lives. As such, the women's experience of adventure activities opens up the opportunity to be different but equips them with the confidence as both individuals and as a group to feel comfortable in their identity as adventurers, as women and as ageing individuals.

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