Bournemouth University

"Life is Good. Life is What You Make it"
The Significance of a Third Place:
An Ethnography of Masters Swimming

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the Masters swimming culture and to bring meaning to the lived experience of the Masters swimmer. The research is of particular relevance since the county of Dorset, where the exploration takes place, has an ageing population which is well above the national average. Furthermore, the National Governing Body for swimming is endeavouring to increase sport participation by ensuring that more people swim regularly.

Masters athletes are viewed as being unique as they continue to take part well into old age. The principal challenge of the research was to make sense of the Masters swimming culture in order that a more informed dialogue of *"active"* sport participation, ageing and sport-related customs could be composed. A key consideration for the research design arose from the nature of the study which centred on leisure experiences and active participation of older swimmers. In order to explore both the structures and interactions within their cultural context an ethnographic design was applied. This allowed for the collection of extremely rich data. A sample of thirteen informants were interviewed and observed over a two year period along with other older group members who enjoyed swimming as a leisure activity.

Five significant themes were explored in the research which included: the meeting point or *"Third place"*, active lifestyles, ageing, serious leisure and exercising to excess. The key message emerging from the data highlighted the complexities of a relatively small locale. The findings concluded that older swimmers benefitted from being part of a social world, where they could enjoy participation with like-minded people. More importantly, the significance of having a meeting point or *"Third place"* in which to socialise and interact was paramount. It was evident too that participants were able to escape from the pressures of home and work which underlined the importance of the social world. Swimmers played an

important role in the swimming community as each individual had a personal tale to tell as they aspired to achieve their individual challenges and goals. The challenges faced were wide-ranging and diverse. For some participants, their interest in swimming was so important that it was described as: *"a way of life"*. With regard to ageing, there was a sense of undesirability towards growing old evidenced in feelings of resistance and personal empowerment. Other themes emerging from the data analysis related to the advantages of adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The research also exposed the multi-faceted relationship between ageing and the serious aspect of leisure as older athletes were looked upon as being role models. The findings concluded that older participants were minded to resist their ageing bodies and live satisfying and personally empowering lives. In addition to the positive aspects of physical activity, a negative side of exercise was uncovered which related to obsessive exercise behaviour and deviant leisure lifestyles. Participants expressed feelings of suffering and pain in their determination to live life to the full and to keep going. Furthermore, the management of identity amongst older athletes hinged on the tensions between expressing one's competitive nature, negotiating the norms and performance standards of the older swimmer and resisting the ageing process in the desire to stay young. In addition, once swimming was learnt it was never lost and so they were dedicated to swimming *"for life"*.

Telling the stories of highly active older participants allows for the talk and practices of a group of people to be examined. Also, the experiences and actions of the group have the potential to influence dominant cultural discourses. The study emphasises the value of attaching to a *"Third place"* or *"great good place"*. As a consequence, this study extends knowledge. As swimming providers look to increasing participation, a theoretical framework for Masters swimming is offered. The framework has the capability of guiding leisure organisations, policy makers and National Governing Bodies in making both adequate and appropriate provision for the needs of older clients. In particular, it highlights the need to provide adult sports programmes which are varied, challenging and inspirational.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore sport culture within a group of Masters swimmers.

> *Water is H2O, two parts hydrogen, oxygen one,*
>
> *But there is also a third thing, that makes water,*
>
> *And nobody knows what that is.*

<div align="right">

D. H. Lawrence (2002)

</div>

This quote from Lawrence is fitting given that this thesis explores an activity that takes place in water. By going beneath the surface, the definitive aim of this research is to fathom that: *"third thing, that makes water"*.

From a practitioner's perspective, a better understanding of the experiences of sport participants will allow sport and leisure organisations and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to gain further knowledge and provide for their clients' needs. Roper et al. (2003) propose that research on exercise in later life can help to better understand older athletes and what is possible for older people in general. Paradoxically, Pike (2011) suggests that encouraging people to engage in exercise in later life is framed by an anti-ageing agenda. Tulle (2008a) concurs that ageing is something to be delayed or avoided rather than celebrated. Dionigi (2006; 2008) argues that older athletes have become an identifiable and emergent group in contemporary Western society whose experiences and lives we know very little about. Previous research has focused primarily on the health benefits of seniors' involvement in physical activity, with significantly less research focused on outcomes associated with older persons' participation in organised sport (Baker et al. 2010). By focusing on a group of older swimmers this research seeks to illuminate on these arguments in order to gain a clear understanding of what it means *"to be old"*. In turn, this will allow providers to make appropriate recommendations for physical activity in later life for ageing populations. I begin

by providing the background to the research which focuses primarily on Masters swimming, physical activity and older people. Subsequently, I provide information on my research design and outline my objectives in conducting this research.

Background to the Research

Through working with older swimmers as a professional coach, I have become increasingly interested in the promotion of physical activity. As a coach, I consider that a positive experience is more likely to be enjoyed by participants if there is a better understanding of the issues facing them. Using an ethnographic approach, my thesis explores the leisure experiences of a group of Masters swimmers[1] and attempts to draw conclusions about the practices involved in the Masters swimming culture. More specifically, it considers the swimmers themselves and the tales they tell about their chosen activity. Brewer (2008) argues that the objective of ethnography is to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given field. Malinowski, a classical anthropologist and skilled ethnographer, argues that a central goal of ethnography is to: *"grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world"* (Atkinson et al. 2009, p.62). As qualitative research, the development of the ethnography, from the initial research questions, through the many stages of planning, fieldwork, synthesis of data and writing involves long-term immersion in the setting.

Rationale for Conducting the Research

Across the United Kingdom (UK) life expectancy and age of death have risen steadily and significantly in recent years (Office for National Statistics 2012). Advances in medicine and associated technology, along with developments in

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[1] Masters swimming caters for adult swimmers aged 25 and over. Masters swimming encompasses the whole range of ability from casual fitness swimming to highly organised competitive swimming.

health and social care have been responsible for the rise (Blackwell 2007). Although people are living longer, Coolican (2007) argues that Britain is entering a period of unprecedented ill-health. Evidence points towards a tripling in the rates of obesity (Bourn 2001) with the UK having the highest rates of obesity in Europe (OECD 2013). In addition heart disease, high blood pressure, certain cancers and Type 2 diabetes are placing an escalating strain on the National Health Service (Haslam et al. 2006). Coolican (2007) suggests that many of the health problems are primarily caused by lifestyle choices that people make on a daily basis; choices about what we eat and whether or not physical activity is considered to be an integral part of daily life. Blackwell (2007) contends that the alleviator to the problem of ill-health is exercise. He also maintains that exercise can be fun, relatively painless and more importantly, an investment that: "*Will pay back 300 to 400 per cent in terms of adding years to life*" as long as it is continued (Blackwell 2007, p.64). For me, as an individual, these issues raise serious concerns since I have a specific interest in nurturing and encouraging athletes through exercise. My concern is that leisure provision for older participants is inadequate. I also have an interest in seeing participants bettering themselves. Further, as a professional within the field I am particularly conscious of my responsibility in guiding others - especially those who are older. This research considers how swimming on a regular basis can help to alleviate some of the issues of ill-health which Coolican (2007) has highlighted. It then seeks to address how Masters sport can contribute towards active participation throughout a swimmer's lifetime.

The Relevance of Swimming

Figures from Sport England's Active People Survey show that swimming is the largest participation sport in England with over 3,000,000 adults taking part in at least one 30 minute session of moderate intensity swimming per week (Sport England 2009). The NGB for swimming in England is the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA). *"The ASA Strategy 2009-2013"* identifies the following

objectives as it endeavours to promote swimming as an activity and increase participation figures:

1. *To ensure everyone has the opportunity to learn to swim.*
2. *To offer everyone the opportunity to enjoy swimming, or water-based fitness activities for health and fun, throughout their lifetime.*
3. *To ensure everyone has the opportunity to achieve their different personal goals throughout their lifetime.*
4. *To ensure the nation achieves gold medal success on the world stage.*

(The Amateur Swimming Association 2009, p.2)

More recently, "*the ASA Strategic plan 2013-2017*" states that NGBs should provide leadership and direction to ensure that swimming remains the most popular sport in the United Kingdon (UK) (The Amateur Swimming Association 2014). In order to ensure this position the ASA affirms: *"swimming must actively ensure that more people swim regularly"* (The Amateur Swimming Association 2014, p.3). In identifying these objectives, the ASA recognises that it cannot fully deliver these targets alone but needs to work with a range of partners. The ASA also recognises the massive challenges it faces in reaching new participants. Consequently, the ASA is seeking to modernise swimming as a sport and to make it more attractive not only to young people, but also to those who are older. These opinions provide my justification for conducting this research as I reflect on the four objectives the ASA has identified and explore the relationship between health promotion, personal well-being and physical activity in contemporary society.

Background to Masters Swimming

Throughout Great Britain, Masters swimming encompasses the whole range of ability from casual fitness swimming to highly organised competitive swimming. This means that there is no compulsion on swimmers to compete. In fact, a recent

survey of British Masters swimmers showed that the majority rarely do (British Swimming 2011). For those swimmers who do wish to compete however, there are World Championships at the top end of the sport with a range of competitive opportunities for Masters cascading down to local events.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, swimming is the largest participation sport. With regard to Masters sport, an increasing number of National and International tournaments cater exclusively for Masters participants (Weir et al. 2002; Hastings and Cable 2005; Dionigi 2011). The *"World Masters Games"* include people of all sports abilities and skill levels from former Olympians and world champions to sportsmen and women wanting to achieve a personal best or simply compete (Hodge et al. 2008). Apart from sports competition, the Games offer social and cultural interaction for people from around the world who share similar attitudes towards lifelong sport, fitness and physical activity. In addition, some countries host their own national Games. For example; 10,000 athletes participated in the Australian Masters Games in 2005 and 8000 athletes participated in the 2006 New Zealand Masters Games (Hodge et al. 2008). Unlike mainstream swimming, Masters' competitions in England rarely impose a qualifying standard, making it possible for anyone to compete (British Swimming 2014).

The participants in this study include both non-competitive *"leisure-oriented"* adult swimmers who do not compete and also competitive swimmers who do compete. Of the swimmers who do compete, the terms *"sprint swimming"* and *"endurance swimming"* will be employed. For clarification, in the context of this study, these terms refer to swimmers who participate in events ranging from *sprint* (50/100/200 metres) and *endurance* (800/1500 metres and more). The distinction is significant, as the social worlds of the non-competitive, competitive sprint and competitive endurance swimmer are slightly different.

In 2007, the ASA were looking to encourage Masters swimming as both a fitness improving activity and also as a sport. Kelvin Juba, a consultant on swimming, was commissioned to develop a strategy for the next ten years. The subsequent document:

"A Strategy for Masters Swimming in England" outlined ways to increase participation and shape the future of Masters swimming through to 2017 (British Swimming 2011). This document provides a foundation for my research as I look to elaborate on swimming provision and its potential to increase participation in future years.

The ASA proposes that the core values of Masters swimming are recognised as being:

1. *Social and convivial - a meeting point for adult swimmers*
2. *Healthy*
3. *Challenging and target orientated*
4. *Self-fulfilling*
5. *Improving the quality of life and standards of performance and practice*

(British Swimming 2011, p.9)

Furthermore, the ASA's mission for Masters swimming is to:

Make Masters swimming competitions, clubs and coaching programmes available to all those adults participating in aquatics; to seek to improve their swimming skills and enhance levels of health and well-being; and to engage their interest through imaginative programming and to retain their involvement in the sport throughout their lives.

(British Swimming 2011, p.9)

This proposal indicates that Masters swimming has a significant role to play in encouraging the nation to swim. Notwithstanding, the strategy is based on quantitative information sourced on facts, figures and statistics. As a result, it does

not identify with the participants themselves. In other words, it is somewhat simplistic as it is based on empirical data. In contrast, my research will use a qualitative research design to advance the ASA's findings. In my experience as a sports coach, I have found that everyday life is complex. People have to find a sense of significance and belonging in order to feel *"at home"*. Through careful and meticulous examination, my challenge is to give voice to the participants themselves and bring meaning to the complexities of the Masters sport experience.

Background to Endurance Swimming

A number of swimmers featured in this research enjoy the challenge of endurance events.

> *Swimming is a rite of passage... When you enter the water something like metamorphosis happens. Leaving behind the land, you go through the looking glass surface and enter a new world...*
>
> (Deakin 2000, p.3)

For many participants, the attraction of endurance swimming is proving increasingly popular. *"A Strategy for Masters Swimming in England"* looks to *"encourage the expansion of open water events"* throughout the country (British Swimming 2011, p.11). The strategy also recognises that swimming for self-fulfilment is an important area for the development of Masters.

Although the majority of endurance events take place in open water it is rare for swimmers to swim outdoors throughout the year given the UK's climate and testing water temperatures during the winter months. Consequently, a large number of open water swimmers opt to train indoors in a pool environment. Early on in my research, open water events were already proving to be popular. For

example; in May 2010, over 2,000 competitors took part in the inaugural one-mile open water *"Great Salford Swim"* in the rejuvenated docklands of Salford Quays. The event was part of a nationwide five-race series of open water swims which were originally launched in 2009 for competitors of all abilities (Hassall 2010). The first Open Water Swim Series proved so successful that they were repeated in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 with distances ranging from 750 metres to 3 kilometres in order to raise money for Cancer Research charities. Other popular swims throughout 2010 included swims in the English Channel, the River Thames, the Wykenham Lakes, Rydal Water (Hassall 2010) and Dorset's Jurassic coast (Holman 2010). Throughout my research swimming featured on television and in the media with a variety of celebrities including David Walliams, Ronan Keating, Robson Green, Steve Parry, Alice Roberts and Pamela Stephenson taking part in open water and wild swimming challenges (Holmwood 2009; Tweedie 2010; BBC 2011a; BBC 2011b).

Personal Narrative on Swimming

I was born and brought up in Harrogate in North Yorkshire. Having learnt to swim at the age of five, my interest in swimming continues some fifty years later. I won my first county swimming medal in Rotherham, South Yorkshire in 1966 followed by my first regional swimming medals in Felling, Tyne and Wear in 1968. As a girl, I had aspirations of swimming in the Olympic Games. During the 1970's, as a devoted age group and youth swimmer, I represented Yorkshire and North Eastern Counties and went on to compete at National level. I made several National finals but the demands of training and relentless competition made me give up competitive swimming at the age of eighteen. The experience gave me an insight into the swimming culture and the rigours of training. My weekday training schedule consisted of a six o'clock start each day, training for an hour and a half in the pool followed by a further one and a half hours training in the evening. The majority of my weekends were spent travelling to competitions around the UK and I also competed in France, Switzerland, the United States and Canada. As a young amateur athlete, I understood the dedication and commitment

that swimming required and the pressures of maintaining a lifestyle in which, quite simply, swimming came first. Although I did not fulfil my dream of swimming in the Olympic Games my interest in the sport continues, for the most part as a professional sports coach. Consequently, my interest derives from past experience in the sport as a competitive swimmer and continues today through coaching a diverse mix of swimmers. During the course of my research, I even went back to training and competing as my position changed from that of an *"outsider"* as I became absorbed in swimming again.

Physical Activity and Older People

Although Masters swimming in the UK caters for swimmer aged 25 and over, the swimmers who feature in this research are primarily aged 40 and over. Moreover, a number of them are aged 60 and over and remain extremely active. This is of particular relevance since the county of Dorset, where the research takes place, has an older population which is well above average with 34% of the population aged 60 and over (Dorset County Council 2011). Consequently, it is crucial that the issue of ageing is discussed. Statistics show that according to current population forecasts, the number of older people will increase worldwide from 6.9% of the population in 2000 to a projected 19.3% by 2050 (Tanaka and Seals 2008). In Dorset, the number of middle-aged people is also expected to rise (Dorset County Council 2011). Recent figures released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) determined that in the UK in 2012 over 22 million people are aged 50 years and over which is over a third of the total UK population. Of these, 10.8 million people are aged 65 or over (ONS 2012). Looking to the future, the proportion of people aged 65 and over is expected to rise from 17.7% currently to 23.5% in 2034 (Age UK 2014). By 2083 about one in three people in the UK will be over the age of 60 (ONS 2012). As the population ages the requirement for individuals to maintain as high a degree of personal health as possible cannot be underestimated.

Exercise is perceived to have numerous physical, psychological and social benefits and is promoted in campaigns by governments and other policy makers in an attempt to keep older people healthy and independent for longer (McAuley and Rudolf 1995; Resnick 2000; Netz et al. 2005; Pike 2011). Pike (2011) has argued that one of the greatest demographic challenges facing most developed societies is the shift to an ageing population as a result of greater longevity combined with decreased birth rates. Population statistics have connotations for future years and they cannot be ignored. However, it remains the case that very little is known of the meaning and significance of involvement in exercise in later life (Roper et al. 2003; Tulle 2003; Allen Collinson and Hockey 2007; Grant and Kluge 2007).

Leisure Provision for Older People

Predominantly, the setting for this research is leisure centre based. It is therefore appropriate that the subject of leisure should also be considered. In recent years, leisure has evolved into a complex phenomenon which has many meanings for different people and groups. Kelly and Freysinger (2000) suggest that the spectrum of leisure motivations and satisfactions suggests dialectic between involvement and escape. There are both engagement and disengagement poles to this dialectic. Leisure is not just a single meaning, dimension, or kind of activity. Rather it is complex. There are choices and constraints. There are deep involvements and shallow entertainments. There are both seeking and escaping dimensions to choosing leisure. There is also boredom in leisure related to attitudes, values, and levels of involvement (Iso-Ahola and Crowley 1991). Perhaps more importantly, leisure is increasingly being associated with the notion of well-being which can lead to personal enjoyment, relaxation, personal fulfilment and a sense of pleasure (Page and Connell 2010). Kelly and Freysinger (2000) suggest that leisure includes both relaxation and challenge and an opportunity to escape the expectations and demands of the various roles of workers, family members and community participants. In other words, leisure is vital to provide an outlet and opportunity to change routines and daily activities.

The Research Design - *The Choice of Methodology*

An important consideration for my research design (ethnography) arose from the nature of the study which concentrates on leisure experiences and active participation which is entered into freely. In general, ethnographies are characterised by their focus on a particular group or subculture and the collection of extremely rich data – in my case Masters swimmers. Ethnography is premised on the view that the central aim of the social sciences is to understand people's actions and their experiences of the world, and the ways in which their motivated actions arise from and reflect back on these experiences (Brewer 2008). Furthermore, an ethnographic approach enables researchers to explore both the structures and interactions within their cultural context, and the meanings that participants give to their cultural environment (Holloway and Todres 2003). Moreover, it provides immediacy to the account given by participants so that readers can gain an in depth picture of their experience, motives and expectations (O'Reilly 2005). As a result, it is possible to attain a greater depth of information (Gratton and Jones 2010).

My choice of an ethnographic approach was entirely opportunistic. In 2005, working as a professional coach, I was asked to head up a *"Masters"* session for adult swimmers. The initiative was aimed at adult swimmers who were interested in following a *"coached training session"* with a structured programme. Nine years on, the Masters sessions continue to be as popular as ever. Sands (2002) argues that good sport ethnography is more than recording behaviour through a video lens or microphone, catching in a snapshot, or describing in a notebook. He argues that reliable sport ethnography is about the time spent doing research. Hence, it is through a prolonged investment in time spent in the cultural scene as both participant and researcher that I have been drawn into the Masters swimming community. Consequently, in physical terms, my research entailed total immersion in training routines and practice patterns and in emotional terms, it required an understanding of human behaviour, and personal experiences from the swimmers' perspective.

Research Objectives

I selected the topic for this thesis after completing a first degree in Sports Coaching and Development. My undergraduate dissertation examined Masters swimming at a basic level but there were elements of the subject matter which remained under researched. In other words, there were certain aspects of my research which remained unexplained. Sands (2002, p.150) argues that it is through ethnographic research, including participant observation that the statement: *"Sport reflects culture and culture reflects sport"* yields greater understanding. At the outset of my research, I had a number of vague assumptions concerning swimming culture and juxtaposition within the culture that surrounds swimmers. These assumptions were brought about following my undergraduate dissertation which explored serious leisure and Masters swimming (Hutchings 2009). My suppositions were deepened through listening, observing, and subsequently questioning swimmers on the intricacies that existed in their daily lives. These notions within the swimming culture broadly related to the significance of: the location, health and well-being, ageing, lifelong participation, and the benefits of swimming.

As already stated, the principle aim of this research is to explore sport participation subcultures of a group of older swimmers including amongst others: competitive *"sprint swimmers"*, competitive *"endurance swimmers"* and non-competitive *"leisure-oriented swimmers"*. Swimming is a sport where people can participate across the lifespan and is popular with adults of all ages (Hastings et al. 1995). The ASA refers to this as: *"cradle to grave"* (British Swimming 2011, p.2). Since Paige and Connell (2010) suggest that the traditional stereotypes of ageing that associate passive behaviour with leisure are no longer valid, the research also explores the concept of ageing and lifelong participation. My ultimate aim is to add to knowledge and benefit those involved with delivering active sport programmes.

A fundamental area of interest in this research is the location. In particular, I am interested in the swimmers themselves with a view to understanding their personal goals and challenges. In so doing, I utilise: *"A Strategy for Masters Swimming in England"* as a starting point, as I explore the five core values which have been identified by the ASA. I therefore begin with the "*meeting point*" itself and its importance in community i.e.: the place. Secondly, I explore active participation and matters relating to active lifestyles and *"health"* and well-being. Thirdly, I look at the people - older athletes, and issues relating to ageing well and *"self-fulfilment"*. Fourthly, I look at the significance of serious participation in Masters swimming in relation to *"quality of life"*. Finally, I look at the consequences of an active lifestyle "*standards of performance and practice*". In reviewing these five themes I subsequently look to reveal the consequential dimensions which emerge from these themes in order to formulate a theoretical framework for Masters swimming. The five themes and objectives are:-

➕ 1) To critically explore the extent to which a Masters swimming community can be conceptualised as a *"Third Place" (the meeting point).*

Oldenburg (1999) describes a *"Third Place"* as being typically plain. A great building is just a building and a place is just a space unless the people are present to make it a living space. These people are the regulars who give the place its character and set the tone, mood and manner. Research suggests that skill acquisition in sporting endeavours requires time spent in training, which intrudes upon family relationships (Ryan and Trauer 2005). However, the degree of commitment to that training can be justified by the attraction of the pursuit, which has both physical and psychological benefits and therefore compensates for the time not spent in other activities. Kelly and Freysinger (2000) propose that leisure includes both relaxation and challenge and an opportunity to escape the expectations and demands of our various roles of workers, family members and community participants. Wann et al. (2001) concur that participation in an activity provides a diversion and so individuals are able to temporarily forget their troubles. At one end of the spectrum, Kolt et al. (2004) and Swanson et al. (2008)

advocate that sport provides a means of escape from the boredom and monotony of everyday life, for example; under stimulation. By contrast, Wann et al. (2004) argue that sport serves as a distraction from stress and anxiety i.e. overstimulation. Hence, the desire to find a diversion or escape from daily routines is one potential motivation for being involved in organised sport (Swanson et al. 2008). Segrave's (2000) view is that sport provides a brief, intoxicating relief from the complexities and confusion of everyday life. The concept of the *"Third Place"* has received little attention within the context of the literature on active leisure participation, and as such, there is relatively little practical evidence either to substantiate or disprove the concept. Nevertheless, the need for a *"Third Place"* would seem essential for individuals to allow escape from the first and second places of home and work.

- 2) To develop an understanding of active participation with a focus on health and well-being in Masters swimming *(health).*

A better understanding of the needs of sport and leisure participants will establish how sport and leisure providers and NGBs provide for the needs of their clients. Since this research is set in a leisure centre setting it contributes towards perspectives on health and fitness provision. Bradley et al. (2005) found that the most highly ranked motives for participation in elite athletes were fitness, health, personal challenge, competition, fun, and excitement. They concluded that their findings have implications for the development and implementation of training and competition programmes in Masters sport. Wellard (2007; 2009) argues that bodily pleasure, fun and enjoyment are factors that contribute towards sports participation as they constantly appeared in the narratives of the conversations with interviewees, both young and old. More recently, Wellard (2014) has demonstrated that successful participation often relies on a range of competing factors including, social, cultural, psychological and physiological factors, all of which contribute in varying ways to an enjoyable experience. British Swimming recognises that Masters sport has an important role to play in encouraging people to take part in physical activity by creating an environment which is suitable for

all adult swimmers to achieve personal fulfilment in all levels of swimming and embrace all parts of the community (British Swimming 2011). As the NGB for swimming, it also has a parallel role to play in encouraging those who are already taking part to remain physically active by presenting them with both a challenging and social environment. This research seeks to bring a rich and detailed understanding of the experiences of swimmers in order to contribute towards perspectives on health and fitness. If leisure providers can understand why sports participants do what they do, then they are in a better position to cater for their clients' needs. The same is applicable in understanding what they enjoy doing. Allen Collinson (2008) has argued that although there has been an increase in ethnographic research, very little attention has been paid to the actual *"doing"* of sport activity.

➕ 3) To advance the *"successful ageing"* discourse in relation to Masters sport.

One of the greatest challenges facing most developed societies is the shift to an ageing population as the demographics of age are changing dramatically (Pike 2011). Older people are often constructed as dependent and over-burdening societal resources, with many consequently experiencing marginalisation, discrimination and social isolation. Public health messages, promoted through various national and international policies, suggest that physical activity may be one solution to the problem of becoming elderly. Consequently, the social and economic concerns of an ageing population have prompted governments and businesses alike to provide opportunities for older people to participate in sport and exercise. For example; encouraging participation in Masters sport has become part of the existing health promotion and successful ageing or ageing well discourses (Tulle 2003; Grant and Kluge 2007; Dionigi 2010). Pike (2011) concludes that it remains the case that very little is known of the meaning and significance of involvement in exercise in later life.

4) To explore *"serious"* participation in Masters swimming *(quality of life).*

This research enters the social world of one group of Dorset Masters swimmers in a leisure centre setting. The idea of Serious Leisure can make an immense contribution to understanding leisure lifestyles, founded as much of it has been on the use of qualitative methods for direct exploration of particular amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer activities. Stebbins (1992) identified six qualities that distinguish serious from casual leisure. Those qualities being: perseverance, having careers in their endeavours, significant personal efforts, durable benefits, identifying strongly with the activity, and the unique ethos that exists within the activity. As a consequence of this final quality, amateurs, hobbyists and volunteers tend to develop subcultures composed of special beliefs, values, moral principles and performance standards (Worthington 2006). Consequently, serious leisure participants carry on with their interests within their own social worlds. Kane and Zink (2004) suggest that the acquisition of knowledge, training and skills, and stages or turning points are characterised as signifiers in a commitment to a career in serious leisure. According to Jones (2006) serious leisure activities tend to demonstrate a progression through stages of achievement or competence. For example; McCarville (2007) notes career progression from short triathlon events to a full Ironman triathlon. Hence, this theme is discussed in terms of progression in ability or involvement for example; from novice to intermediate events, or the mastery of a particular element of the activity (Shipway and Jones 2007).

5) To explore the consequences of active participation in Masters swimming *(standards of performance and practice).*

Literature offers broad support for the role that exercise can play in the promotion of mental health (McAuley 1994; Martinsen 1995; Biddle and Mutrie 2008). Researchers have identified the positive relationship between exercise and psychological health (Lavallee et al. 2004). For example; engaging in regular exercise has been shown to be useful in reducing negative mood symptoms such

as depression and anxiety (Antunes et al. 2005) and contributing to psychological well-being (Mutrie and Biddle 1995; Ruuskanen and Ruoppila 2001; Takkinen et al. 2001; Kolt et al. 2004). There is also evidence to suggest that there are motives for engaging in exercise which are less than healthy. Recent trends show that exercise may become harmful for those who exercise excessively with no regard for possible negative effects such as injury, resulting in addiction (Hausenblaus and Downs 2002) and abnormal or deviant lifestyles (Coakley and Pike 2009). The concern for a moralistic stance is incorporated in the general definition of abnormal leisure as: *"pushing the limit of experience so that it threatens the self or others"* (Rojek 2000, p.176). Lavallee et al. (2004) suggest that it is not sensible to aspire towards consensus, given the wide diversity of psychological and physiological processes which intertwine in determining the relationship between physical activity and psychological well-being.

In recent decades, the participation of elderly trained people in endurance events such as marathon running has dramatically increased (Lepers and Cattagni 2012). Research suggests that older endurance athletes represent an ideal model to determine successful ageing due to their customary participation in high intensity exercise (Hawkins et al. 2003). Furthermore, older athletes are a rich source of insight into a person's ability to maintain peak physical performance and physiological function with advancing age (Tanaka and Seals 2008). In particular, this research investigates the challenges faced by Masters athletes firstly, by facilitating a deeper insight into their social worlds and secondly, by providing some guidance for the continued healthy participation of the older athlete. Such research is important in order to grasp what it means to be old, to better understand older athletes and what the stories of these athletes might tell us is possible for older people in general and to make appropriate recommendations for physical activity in later life for ageing populations.

My Personal Philosophy

According to Lumpkin et al. (2003), professional responsibility is an outward behaviour that comes from our inner beliefs. Furthermore, moral values and principles include: honesty, honour, truth, respect, sincerity, justice and duty (Lumpkin et al. 2003). This research provides a true reflection on the subject and my research is founded on empathy, respect, honesty and sincerity. Martens (2004) recommends increasing self-awareness by firstly, reflecting on your own beliefs and assumptions and secondly, requesting feedback from other people. Sands (2002) argues that for qualitative research to work, a relationship of familiarity, trust and comfortableness must be reached with the cultural members. Indeed, my research will serve as a rite of passage and I seek to learn, not only of the swimming culture and the subcultures which co-exist, but also something more about myself.

The requirement for reflexivity in conducting this research has led me to consider my personal coaching philosophy. In essence, from a sports psychology perspective, I favour the humanistic model as I prefer to adopt an athlete-centred approach dependent upon individual abilities and needs. In addition, from a coaching perspective, I seek to impart knowledge by teaching and guiding others which suggests I am also a behaviourist. The role of the psychologist in the behavioural model is that of teacher:

> *Behavioural theory conceptualises humans as learning organisms with the capacity to earn according to personality, thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and most aspects of the self.*

> (Hill 2001, p.26)

Contribution to Knowledge

In December 2009, I watched a documentary on television about marathon running entitled: *"Running to the limits"*. The programme was narrated by filmmaker Alex Vero and set against the backdrop of a massive decline in British professional marathon running. Weighing over 16 stone, Vero set out to find what it took to be a marathon runner. As well as telling his own story, he told the story of an Ethiopian named Mengistu Abebe, an extremely talented marathon runner who trained with Vero. Closer to home, he also trained with Oxford graduate Ben Moreau. The three runners pushed their bodies to the limits of human endurance as they strived to make the international grade. In summing up his marathon running journey Vero stated:

> *One trait stood out more than anything else. The key to success is motivation. It's what you get up for in the morning. And what keeps you going when your body screams at you to quit. Find what motivates you. Use it and never look back. It might change your life forever.*

> (Running to the Limits 2009)

Vero then made an appeal for the sport's governing body to get behind British distance runners. In many ways, Vero's request also applies to swimming. In order to understand what inspires and motivates swimmers it is important to find out what they do and why they do it. Only then, can improvements be made. The aim of this inductive study is to contribute to the body of knowledge on Masters swimming and more generally on active sport experiences. The ASA is looking to increase participation but in order to do so, providers must develop an understanding of the participants themselves; not only as individuals but also collectively. Leisure research can further our understanding of firstly, how people use their leisure time and secondly, how to evaluate people's leisure time as well as examining activity patterns. According to Brewer (2008) the principal methodological justification for ethnography comes from naturalism and the humanistic model of social research. Hence, it is possible to be true to the natural

phenomena and provide thick description and deeply rich data. If providers can understand why sports participants do what they do, then they are in a better position to cater for their clients' needs. This research makes a contribution towards knowledge in this area by developing understanding on the constraints and attitudes of a social community. It explores the social worlds of Masters athletes, focusing upon their lived experiences in order to develop an insight into their involvement, reasons for participation and training patterns. In so doing, it contributes towards an understanding of lifelong involvement in sport.

Telling the stories of highly active older participants is important because it allows for the talk and practices of a group of people to be examined. In so doing, it gathers rich and detailed information about a group of swimmers by exploring their personal journeys in the sport. The strength of the thesis lies is in my close association with a group of Masters swimmers. Over an extended period of time I observe training sessions, competitions, parties, social gatherings, informal get-togethers, discussions and meetings. I aim to appreciate the complexities of the status and situated identity hierarchy that exist in a Masters swimming environment first-hand, including success and disappointment. The research findings are clearly situated within the literature on sport and leisure provision and active participation in contemporary society. As ethnography, the research is embedded in a real world. Furthermore, as a researcher, my immersion in the setting will provide a journey of discovery resulting in unexpected twists and turns and highs and lows.

Through meticulous examination, this thesis will bring comprehension and understanding to everyday life. The findings will be used to inform both sport and leisure policy and practice within the context of participation in sport and leisure, emphasising the capability that Masters swimming has in providing an easily accessible leisure activity. The challenge is to bring meaning to the Masters swimmers' experience in order that a more informed dialogue of *"active"* sport participation and sport-related practices can be developed. Through continual probing and exploration I uncover the thoughts and feelings of the genuine

athlete. My thesis will also extend knowledge and influence the future of swimming in this country in explaining the constituent parts that contribute towards that *"third thing that makes water"*.

In chapter two I present an overview of the literature on physical activity and leisure within the sporting context. In order to understand the study, I begin by introducing background and theory on motivation and participation including contemporary models of exercise behaviour. Understanding leisure and exercise behaviour provides a context for the thesis. I subsequently provide an overview on five fundamental themes which include: *"Third Place,"* active lifestyles, ageing athletes, serious leisure and deviant leisure behaviour. In chapter three I outline my methodology and research approach, which is specifically designed to provide a rich and detailed insight into Masters sport culture. The analysis and interpretation of the ethnography are presented within the discussion chapters in chapters four, five, six, seven and eight. In chapter nine, I offer a chapter which points toward making sense of the Masters sport culture. I conclude by presenting an evaluation of my findings in chapter ten which also outlines the implications of the research and makes appropriate recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: Overview of the Literature

Introduction

The profile of regular exercise and sport in society has risen in recent years (Hagger and Chatzisirantis 2005; Coakley and Pike 2009). According to Weir et al. (2002), one method of modifying personal health is through exercise. Oldenburg (1999) argues that modern day lifestyles can be plagued by boredom, loneliness and alienation. He also highlights the fact that the structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. For a growing number of older people, leisure provides an alternative to a life of feeling isolated and lonely. This chapter presents an overview of the literature on a meeting point, active lifestyles, ageing athletes, serious leisure and the outcomes of being a Masters swimmer. These themes are collated as a foundation to the main focus of the research, which is to understand active participation from several perspectives but principally addresses that of a *"Third Place"* for the *"serious"* Masters swimmer. Jones et al. (2013) advise that at the start of research it is common for qualitative researchers to undertake an overview of the literature rather than a comprehensive review. Consequently, this chapter does not offer an exhaustive review of literature but rather, it provides an initial review on both theoretical concepts and key studies from previous research which provide a context for the study.

Ageing and being *"older"* are primarily presented in the literature from a physical science or biomedical perspective which emphasises the *"declining body"* (Dionigi 2010). Heuser (2005, p.45) writes:

> *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.*

Hastings et al. (1995) argue that social worlds involve individuals either singly or in networks pursuing an activity or some aspect of that activity perceived as a sphere of interest. Consequently, according to Dionigi (2002), being a member of a social world can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment.

Understanding Motivation

The study of motivation has never been far from the core of psychological theory, research and application (Franken 2002). According to Biddle and Mutrie (2008) the discussion of any sort of physical activity inevitably touches on the topic of motivation. Motivation is concerned with an internal state or process that energises, directs and maintains goal-directed behaviour (Cashmore 2008). In order to understand motivation it is necessary to understand what induces a person to act. Maslow's answer in the 1950's was based on his *"hierarchy of needs"* which was concerned with the structure of human imperatives, the primary one being biological: hunger, thirst, temperature maintenance etc. Other needs include the need for affiliation with others, aesthetic needs and the need for self-actualisation to find fulfilment and realise one's own potential. According to Maslow, motivation derives from the satisfaction of needs at the lower end of the hierarchy and ascends upwards as those needs become more sophisticated. Motivation in this model is concerned with drive and instinct. Maehr and Braskamp (1986) proposed that there were four important components which help to define human motivation: *"direction, persistence, continuing motivation and intensity"*. One could argue that initially, there is a choice of whether to be active or not. Similarly, there is a need to make a conscious choice regarding what the leisure activity should be. Perhaps more importantly, given that exercise is mostly structured, issues surrounding facilities and location become a factor in behavioural choice. This has meaning for leisure providers who are seeking to either make a profit or make adequate provision for their members and I will address the importance of place in this research. Persistence refers to the degree of sustained concentration on one task. It is also a reflection of choice and decision-

making and is likely to be correlated with how important something is to the individual (Biddle and Mutrie 2008). It could also be argued that such persistence in a task can enhance positive self-image and confirm an individual's identity as an active person. Maehr and Braskamp (1986) suggest that a certain tension exists when a task is left incomplete. There is also evidence to suggest that some individuals feel highly committed to structured exercise which can result in exercise dependence (Szabo 2000). At a more moderate level, it is possible to attain a *"feel good"* factor from exercise and feel unhealthy when an activity has been missed for a few days.

The dominant themes, paradigms and perspectives in the study of human motivation have shifted over time. Initially these behaviours were seen to be largely involuntary and fixed. Bandura (1986) proposed that in the social cognitive view, people evaluate their actions against some expectation of desire and therefore modify their actions accordingly. Trost et al. (2002) reviewed the demographic, biological, psychological and behavioural correlates of physical activity in adults. Psychological correlates were enjoyment of exercise, expected benefits, stronger intentions, fewer barriers and a positive mood. In addition, they found that greater self-efficacy and self-motivation were positive for activity involvement.

Understanding Participation

Research suggests that participation levels are increasing in many Masters' sports (Hodge et al. 2008). According to Amorose (2003), athletes with more positive perceptions of competence demonstrate greater motivation to train and participate in their sport. Despite the dominance of ability based theories of motivation, social aspects of motivation have been identified in a number of studies (Allen 2003; Allen 2005; Swanson et al. 2008).

Stevenson (2002) suggests that for Masters swimmers, there seemed to be two predominant processes by which their involvement in Masters swimming began. The first was a process of *"seekership"* whereby swimmers actively sought out Masters swimming opportunities. The second was through a process of *"solicited recruitment"* where there was an explicit attempt by another swimmer to persuade the individual to become involved in the activity. Prus (1996) argues that one of the key processes in the deepening of involvement in any activity is *"conversion"*. That is, participants progress from being outsiders to becoming insiders. They learn about the culture, they absorb its values and cultural ideology, and they begin to act in culturally appropriate ways and use its cultural worldview. Prus argues that, as this conversion process proceeds, the individual is drawn deeper into the culture, and begins to feel part of the group. In Masters swimming Stevenson (2002) argued that this conversion to the subculture of Masters swimming and experiencing the practices of that subculture, means that the swimmer becomes ever more embedded into it. As a result, there was substantial evidence of a willingness to make considerable changes to their own lifestyles and their families' lifestyles. In effect, Masters swimming became such an overwhelming priority that the swimmers were willing to make significant compromises to their personal routines, to their families' routines, and to their work routines. They were willing to sacrifice their relationships with their spouses and their children, and they were willing to confront their superiors and their work colleagues in order to pursue their involvements in Masters swimming.

What is interesting is that research supports the contention that social motives are of particular importance for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport (Hodge et al. 2008). Allen (2005) argues that participation in the social context of sport is a means to an end of social connection. Crucial to the social status and social recognition orientations is the fact that an individual has limited control over whether behaviour will be validated by others or not, and therefore individuals have limited control over whether secure and stable interpersonal relationships will be formed or indeed last. The value placed on social connections will be addressed in this research.

Contemporary Models of Exercise Behaviour

Understanding regular participation in exercise requires a fundamental understanding of the psychological constructs that predict and explain exercise behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). An exploration of some of the theories of social cognition and exercise behaviour is therefore essential. Most contemporary models of participation and motivation owe a considerable debt to the pioneering work of Deci and Ryan (1985). To identify a definitive starting point is not easy, but certainly McClelland (1961) and Atkinson's (1964) research on achievement motivation has made a significant impact on sport psychology from the 1960s onwards. This research was based on the earlier drive theories of motivation by Hull (1951) and Spence (1956).

The development of exercise psychology as a thriving research field has led to a whole host of theories. For example; there are theories based not just on beliefs and attitudes, but also on perceptions of control, perceptions of competence, stage-based theories and hybrid approaches. Belief and attitude theories test the links between beliefs, attitudes, intentions and physical activity. Evidence shows that intentions are predicted by attitudes and perceived behavioural control, rather than by subjective (social) norms (Hagger et al. 2002).

Competence-based theories focus on perceptions of competence and confidence as a prime driver of behaviour, such as self-efficacy approaches (Bandura 1997; McAuley and Blissmer 2000). One control theory that has been popular is the self-determination theory advocated by (Deci and Ryan 1985). Research shows that motivation for physical activity is likely to be more robust if it involves greater choice and self-determination rather than external control. Such an approach would then lead to feelings of greater well-being (Biddle and Mutrie 2008).

Understanding Active Lifestyles

Despite a substantial body of research utilising the cognitive approaches to physical activity, relatively little is known about the achievement motivation of middle-aged and older adult athletes. As mentioned, prominent theories relating to physical activity include; self-efficacy theory, self-determination theory and achievement goal theory. Self-efficacy is influenced by past performance, history of success and observing good models. It can be increased by encouraging athletes to set challenging achievable goals (Brophy 2004). From a theoretical perspective, achievement goal theory has proved useful in explaining the motivation that individuals exhibit in sport (Fox et al. 1994; Duda et al. 1995; Duda 2001). Consistent with achievement goal (Nicholls 1989) and self-determination theories (Ryan and Deci 2002), research indicates that a predominant task goal orientation is associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation and consequently higher levels of self-determination in sport (Duda et al. 1995). Those individuals who participate in sport over a long period of time can be characterised as having a high level of commitment (Scanlan et al. 1993), consequently it would seem logical that a predominant task orientation should be associated with greater commitment to sport participation. Further examination of the goal orientations of middle-aged and older adult adults therefore, could be useful in developing an understanding of adult motivation in sport.

The ASA is looking to promote swimming as an activity and increase participation figures. More specifically, with regard to Masters swimmers, British Swimming aspires to:

> *... enhance levels of health and well being; and to engage their interest through imaginative programming and to retain their involvement in the sport throughout their lives.*

(British Swimming 2011, p.9)

Research evidence confirming the long-term protection that regular exercise can afford seems irrefutable (Biddle et al. 2000; Richardson et al. 2004; Biddle and Mutrie 2008; Weir et al. 2010). These findings have resulted in health policy consultants recommending a degree of physical activity that is necessary for the maintenance of health. More specifically, in the field of swimming, in its vision for swimming, the ASA identified four key objectives to promote swimming as an activity and increase its participation figures. The second of these objectives is:

> *To offer everyone the opportunity to enjoy swimming, or water-based fitness activities for health and fun, throughout their lifetime.*
>
> (The Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) 2009, p.3)

Dionigi et al. (2011) suggest that Masters sport is an ideal context to test one's abilities. They found that lifelong athletes enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that they could take part in sport or *"still do it"*. Stevenson (2002) argues that conversion to the subculture of Masters swimming and experiencing the process of learning the practices of that subculture, means that the swimmer becomes an *"insider"*.

The *"Third Place"*

Having considered some of the theoretical factors relating to motivation, participation, active lifestyles, I turn my attention to the literature on *"Third Place"*. Essentially, the term *"Third Place"* is being used increasingly to describe the building of social capital in an environment distinct from home and work where people can meet together in good company on a regular basis (Harris 2007). For centuries, older adults have habitually gathered in public places - forums, theatres and amphitheatres. In contemporary society, these public places are portrayed as coffee houses, cafés, bookstores, bars, bistros, garden shops, restaurants and leisure settings (Oldenburg 1999; 2001). Oldenburg (1999) identifies that there are differences between *"Third Places"* and other settings of

daily life. While home and work (the first and second places) are important sources of support, they may not necessarily be appropriate places for personal expressions or for people to engage in behaviours and conduct outside the boundaries of their formal social roles. Ray Oldenburg's (1999) research on the concept of the *"Third Pace"* is the most influential work to date explaining why *"Third Places"* are crucial for civil society and their unique importance as focal points of community life. Even though Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) suggest that the physical, psychological, and social outcomes of sport for older adults are worth examining, as recently as 2011, Dionigi et al. (2011) argued that we still know very little about the value of sport participation on health and functioning of older adults, particularly with reference to the concept of the *"Third Place"*.

Perspectives on "Third Places"

According to Oldenburg (1999, p.43), precious and unique benefits accrue to those who regularly attend *"Third Places"* and who value those forms of social intercourse found there. The *"Third Place"* is largely a world of its own making, fashioned by talk and quite independent of larger society (Oldenburg 1999). Furthermore, as noted in chapter two, being a member of a social world can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment (Dionigi 2002).

Habitus

Linked to the concept of the *"Third Place"* is the idea of personality structure or habitus (Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 1992; Atkinson 2008). Habitus offers a means of understanding how corporeal engagement in the day to day practice of sport and physical activity operate to embody the interacting dynamics of class, gender and culture. According to Bourdieu, habitus is composed of:

... systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

(Bourdieu 1990)

Habitus relates to the way people feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them (Wacquant 2005). Furthermore, habitus is created through a social, rather than an individual process leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Consequently, habitus is not fixed or permanent as it can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long period (Navarro 2006).

Wacquant (2011) claims that habitus indicates that sets of dispositions vary by social location and trajectory. Consequently, individuals with different life experiences will have gained varied ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Bourdieu maintains that, in simple terms, habitus can be considered as cultural background where a multitude of tastes, styles and manners constitute a form of cultural identity (Wellard 2009). Bourdieu goes on to describe social worlds and the way individuals achieve understanding through bodily practice (Bourdieu 1990). He also describes how individuals can gain a sense of understanding through *"a mastery acquired by experience of the game"* (Bourdieu 1990, p.61).

Social interaction

Although Oldenburg (1999) argues that the features and inner workings of the *"Third Place"* have remained virtually undescribed at a time when they are sorely needed, they generally share common and essential features. He identifies *"Third Places",* or *"great good places",* as public places on neutral ground where people

can gather and interact. In contrast to first places (home) and second places (work), *"Third Places"* allow people to put aside their concerns and simply enjoy the company and conversation around them. *"Third Places":*

> *Host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work… It is neutral, brief and facile.*

(Oldenburg 1999, p.16)

Oldenburg suggests that beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafés, coffeehouses, post offices, and other *"Third Places"* are the heart of a community's social vitality and the foundation of a functioning democracy. They provide a setting for grassroots politics, they create habits of public association and they offer psychological support to individuals and communities. Furthermore, he reasons that there is far more than escape and release from stress involved in a visit to a *"Third Place"*. For example; they promote social equality by levelling the status of guests.

Communitas

Oldenburg (1999) highlights the fact that the structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. For a growing number of older people, leisure provides an alternative to a life of feeling isolated and lonely. Kelly and Godbey (1992) argue that the most important aspect of leisure is its ability to promote social bonding, or communitas, through intense and ongoing relationships that leisure creates. Communitas is characterised by a sense of equity, belonging and group devotion to a transcendent goal (Arnould and Price 1993). More recently, Edginton et al. (2006) have suggested that such relationships stabilise communities giving them a common focus. From a social viewpoint, Sharpe (2005) has argued that

community enhancing experiences in leisure are indicative of communitas, and thus important to the effective functioning of society.

Oldenburg maintains that:

> *The third place is a force for good. It affords habitués the opportunity for more decent human relations than prevail outside, and it is their habit to take advantage of that opportunity.*
>
> (Oldenburg 1999, p.78)

My thesis explores one particular social world and I use Oldenburg's theoretical perspective of the *"Third Place"* to correlate social interaction and human relationships within the Masters swimming community. Within the context of Masters sport this will allow me to understand what human beings feel, perceive, think and do in a natural situation.

Escaping to Another Place

A key concept of the *"Third Place"* is that of escape from the first two places of home and work. The desire to find a diversion or escape from daily routines is one potential motivation for being involved in organised sport (Wann 1995; Wann et al. 1999). Swanson et al. (2008) suggest that individuals dissatisfied with aspects of their lives and looking to forget their troubles or take a break from routine could find escape through participation in sport. In this way, people taking part in athletic endeavours could enjoy themselves by engaging in an activity viewed as a departure from the normal routines of everyday life (Goodwin et al. 2004). Wann (1997) argued that the use of the escape motive might be particularly prevalent during personally difficult or stressful times. More recently Wann et al. (2001) suggested that participation in an activity provided a diversion and therefore individuals were able to temporarily forget their troubles. Although some authors

have suggested that some people use sport as a means of escape from the boredom and monotony of everyday life, i.e.; under stimulation, others have maintained that sport serves as a distraction from stress and anxiety, i.e.; overstimulation, (Wann et al. 2004). Hence, the desire to find a diversion or escape from daily routines is one potential motivation for being involved, such as within organised athletics (Swanson et al. 2008). Segrave (2000) suggests that one of the sources of sport's appeal is that it provides a brief, intoxicating escape from the complexities and confusion of everyday life. Perhaps the most obvious way in which sport is detached from real life is that it is played in a place specifically set out for such purposes. In particular, he argues that the world of *sport* is built on several important ontological features, including space, time, community, order, purpose, and self. Segrave (2000) addresses each of these features using literary figures and stories to highlight both the power and danger of *sport* as *escape.*

The Ageing Swimmer

Across many Western nations people are living longer (Baker et al. 2010). In particular, in the UK there is evidence of an increasingly ageing population. Although the statistics continue to emphasise the association between advancing age and decreasing physical activity levels, one type of physical activity that has increased in popularity over the past two decades is involvement in competitive sport (Weir et al. 2010). Consequently, there are more opportunities to be involved in leisure activities and increasing numbers are now participating in Masters sport (Baker et al. 2010; Dionigi 2010). Masters athletes are viewed as being unusual as they continue to train and compete well into old age (Baker et al. 2010). Furthermore, older endurance athletes represent an ideal model to determine successful ageing due to their participation in high intensity exercise (Hawkins et al. 2003; Lepers and Cattagni 2012). Tanaka and Seals (2008) concur that Masters athletes are a positive example of exceptional ageing who provide a rich source of insight into a person's ability to maintain peak physical performance and physiological function with advancing age. Whilst the health benefits of exercise have been acknowledged, this acceptance does not always

equate to regular involvement (Baker et al. 2010; Lepers and Cattagni 2012). For example; Ory et al. (2003) noted that 98% of adults over the age of fifty recognise the importance of physical activity in maintaining health, yet only a small minority of these adults meet the minimum daily physical activity recommendations. Data released by Dorset County Council revealed that in East Dorset (the geographical area of this study) in 2008/2009 only 16.6% of respondents aged 55 and over took part in the recommended minimum of 30 minutes moderate activity three times a week (Dorset County Council 2011). Consequently, the gap between what people know to be important and their actual health behaviours remains a critical concern for both researchers and policy makers.

According to Pike (2011) older people are often construed as dependent and over-burdening societal resources, with many consequently experiencing marginalisation, discrimination and social isolation. Given the negative typecast towards ageing and the elderly that prevails in Western society, the tendency of older people to avoid physical activity and sport is not surprising (Grant 2001). Research suggests that seniors themselves internalise these negative attitudes and stereotypes (Baker et al. 2010). In turn, this can influence their decisions on whether or not they take part in physical activity, sport, and other health promoting behaviours (Levy and Myers 2004). In particular, many older women believe that activities that involve exertion and that are physically fatiguing are too risky for their health. Consequently, they tend to avoid sport and exercise (O'Brien Cousins 2000).

Older people who stay active above and beyond recommended levels may perform an important social role, as they can alter public expectations of what it means to grow old. For example; the Canadian long distance runner, Ed Whitlock set a world record for being the oldest person to run a marathon in less than 3 hours at the age of 69 (Starkes et al. 2003). The American swimmer, Dara Torres swam in her first Olympic Games at the age of 17 in Los Angeles in 1984. Twenty four years later, at the age of 41, she became the oldest swimmer ever to

earn a place on the U.S. Olympic team competing for the United States in the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and winning three silver medals. It could be argued therefore, that these athletes are a somewhat select or privileged group who possess the time, ability, health, desire, and disposable income to regularly train and travel to competitions. More recently, Otto Thaning swam the English Channel at the age of 73 (BBC News Europe 2014). Following the swim he said:

> *My wish was basically to promote the idea that people over the age of 70 can do things like this if they look after themselves and work hard.*

In the past, developmental theorists argued that growth and character building happened primarily in childhood and adolescence; hence, sport was considered important for young people and not necessary for older people (Coakley and Pike 2009). Others have argued the potential benefits of leisure involvement to healthy development in later life. In particular, sport participation is promoted to older people as a means to regularly compete, enjoy competition, have fun and maintain their health, well-being and fitness (Dionigi 2006; 2008; Baker et al. 2010). Wellard (2014) maintains however, that fun and enjoyment are central factors in whether a sporting activity is experienced positively. Although researchers examining human development have typically focused on adolescent populations, Holt (2008) argues that development occurs across the lifespan. Given this information, the physical, psychological, and social outcomes of sport for older adults are worth examining (Phoenix and Sparkes 2009). Masters sport provides opportunities and outcomes that extend beyond regular involvement in physical activity. For example; it allows older people to compete against their peers within a similar age range. Irrespective of the label, be it: Seniors, Masters or Veterans, there are now more people than ever participating in sport. Throughout the 1990's, a large number of sporting bodies reported that, in terms of participant numbers, the Masters level was the fastest growing area in their sport and remains one of the fastest expanding sectors of sport (Dionigi 2008; 2011). More specifically, in relation to swimming, this rising trend is evident in regional, national and international events (British Swimming 2013). The growth in

participation is paralleled by an increasing number of organisations promoting healthy living in communities (Cardenas et al. 2009). Despite competition being inherent in Masters sport, Dionigi (2008) argues that the core values and social discourses underpinning Masters sport participation are primarily: "*fun, friendship and fitness*". For example; participants described the rigorous training schedules they undertook to maintain their health and fitness and perform at their peak (Dionigi 2008), as well as opportunities for travel as a result of Masters competition, the establishment of ongoing friendships and regular social interaction (Dionigi et al. 2011).

Theories Relating to Ageing

An increasingly ageing society has led to more focus given to the development of an active and successful ageing population (Minhat et al. 2013). Studies have shown that elderly populations that are actively involved in leisure activities are likely to have a better quality of life and life satisfaction (Cheung et al. 2009). Researchers also believe that there is a continuity pattern linking the activities currently performed by the elderly with what they had done when they were younger (Atchley 1993; Agahi et al. 2006; Cheung et al. 2009; Minhat et al. 2013). Maintaining patterns of thought, activities, and habits is the most common strategy for adaptation as people age (Agahi et al. 2006). Prominent ageing theories reinforcing the ageing well notion include: the activity theory, the continuity theory and the model of successful ageing (Chapman 2005). An understanding of these three theories is significant. Firstly, activity theory (Havighurst 1963) suggests that activity is a key component to what could be constituted as a successful old age. Havighurst (1961) maintains that a good sense of self-esteem for older persons hinges on continued active involvement with the world. Secondly, the continuity theory of normal ageing states that adults will normally maintain the same activities, behaviours, personality traits and relationships as they did in their earlier years of life (Atchley 1993). Change is linked to the person's perceived past, producing continuity in inner psychological characteristics as well as in social behaviour and in social circumstances.

Continuity is therefore an adaptive strategy that is promoted by both individual preference and social approval (Atchley 1993). Thirdly, an early examination of successful ageing proposes that successfully ageing individuals have minimal or none of the physiological detriments associated with ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1987). This definition was later modified to classify individuals as ageing successfully if they have absence of disease and low risk of disease and high cognitive and physical functional capacity and are actively engaged in life (Rowe and Kahn 1998).

Researchers have identified an array of motives for older adults participating in sport, including the desire to actively resist the dominant negative stereotypes associated with ageing (Flatten 1991), the desire to delay the negative effects of old age for as long as possible (McIntyre et al. 1992) and the need to feel empowered to live a fulfilled and healthy life (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). From a physical perspective, active older adults can reduce or prevent functional declines linked to ageing through improved cardiovascular functioning, reduced risk of osteoporosis, reduced risk of falling, and reduced loss of muscle mass and strength (Goggin and Morrow 2001). The appeal of community and having a sense of belonging is also a key motivator for older adults who participate in sports (Biddle and Smith 1991; Cuskelly and Boag 1996; Adair and Vamplew 1997). In her research into ageing and sport, Dionigi (2004) has argued that sport for older people is multifaceted:

> *The phenomenon of older people competing in sport may be more complex than either resistance, feelings of personal empowerment, or an expression of the undesirability of deep old age. This participation may instead represent a simultaneous interaction and negotiation of all these dimensions.*

> (Dionigi 2004, p.184)

Masters sport has become part of the existing health promotion and successful ageing or ageing well discourses (Dionigi 2010). In the UK, the potential for

Masters sport participation to affect positive development across the lifespan has been recognised. British Swimming's mission for all those adults participating in aquatics is to:

> *... engage their interest through imaginative programming and retain their involvement throughout their lives.*

<div align="right">(British Swimming 2011, p.9)</div>

Although Kluge (2002) sheds some light on the experiences of physically active older individuals in sport, few studies have specifically explored the experience and meaning of sport involvement for older people. According to Grant (2001) the study of active ageing should consist not only of reports about so-called facts and scientific explanations about physiological and psychological processes but also about the meaning people attribute to their experiences of physical activity. Consequently, he argues that although there is a great deal written about such things as physical performance, functional capabilities and psychological state, those aspects considered ineffable and non-quantifiable have been omitted.

The Serious Swimmer

A central theme of this study is that of the *"serious"* swimmer (Stebbins 1992). The *"serious leisure perspective"* is the theoretical framework that synthesises three forms of leisure, known as serious leisure, casual leisure and project-based leisure. Serious leisure research began in 1974 on the first of these, and has continued since that time, while work on casual leisure and project-based leisure came subsequently (Stebbins 2008). Stebbins identified six qualities that distinguish serious from casual leisure. The six qualities are; perseverance, having careers in their endeavours, the requirement of significant personal efforts, durable individual benefits, the unique ethos that exists within the activity, and identifying strongly with the activity. Serious leisure is defined as:

The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and experiencing its special skills, knowledge and experience.

(Stebbins 1992, p.3)

By contrast, Stebbins (1997) describes casual leisure as an immediate, somewhat transient activity that is pleasurable, intrinsically rewarding, and can be enjoyed with little or no special instruction or training. Stebbins (2005) ongoing observations of contemporary leisure revealed a third form identified as project-based leisure. Although probably less common than casual leisure, and perhaps even less so than serious leisure, Stebbins argues that it is sufficiently prevalent and important for those who pursue it. Project-based leisure is a short term, moderately complicated, infrequent and creative undertaking carried out in free time. It requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge, but for all that, is neither serious leisure nor intended to develop as such.

Stebbins (2001) denotes three types of *"serious leisure"* participants: amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers. Since this thesis is considering the culture of Masters swimmers who engage in a leisure activity as amateurs, it is appropriate to consider the serious leisure perspective in more detail. One of the few qualitative studies that has examined Masters competitors' views about playing sport was conducted by Grant (2001). His research determined the significance of *"serious play"*. In his view this theme describes how the participants value an appropriate level of competition, fairness, success and winning. Grant defines competitiveness and success in a number of ways including; personal satisfaction of achieving goals; testing oneself against others; and trying to win. Moreover, Olson (2001) demonstrates the competitive nature of track and field athletes and the strict regulations associated with competitions. Olson discusses older athletes' stories about training regimes and the thrill of winning, being awarded trophies, breaking a world record and of achieving a personal best. These earlier findings suggest that older athletes are in fact serious about sport and competition – even

though it is played down and despite there being no legitimising discourse available for this behaviour. The conflict between friendly participation and serious competition is a key aspect of Masters sport. Dionigi (2004) argues that the participation of older people in competitive sport is potentially a highly complex and contradictory phenomenon that requires further and more rigorous exploration. This thesis addresses the *"serious"* disposition of Masters participants and examines their views on competition, success and winning.

Stebbins (2008) argues that a social world must be seen as a unit of social organisation where there is an internally recognisable constellation of actors, organisations, events and practice which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants. In addition, research on serious leisure has led to the discovery of a distinctive set of rewards for each activity examined (Stebbins 2001). These rewards can develop into thrills or high points. Stebbins (2008) suggests they are important because they motivate the participant to stick with the pursuit in the hope of finding similar experiences over and over again and because they demonstrate that diligence and commitment may pay off. These thrills compare to the exceptional instances of the flow experience. Thus, although the idea of flow originated with Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Stebbins research has shown that flow can happen, depending on the activity, and is therefore a key motivational force (Stebbins 2005).

Stebbins' (1992; 2001) research on serious leisure has included the ethnographic study of amateur scientists, comedians, athletes, singers, thespians and more. Other research into serious leisure has addressed bass fishing (Yoder 1997), amateur ice skating (McQuarrie and Jackson 1996), dog sports (Baldwin and Norris 1999; Gillespie et al. 2002), motorsport events (Harrington et al. 2000), and soccer fandom (Jones 2000). With regard to Masters swimming, Hastings et al. (1995) found that leisure motivation related to enjoyment, skill development, fitness, achievement, sociability and tension release. More recent research has addressed the serious leisure perspective and post-compulsory education (Jones and Symon 2001), college football fandom (Gibson et al. 2002), computer gaming

(Bryce and Rutter 2003), Civil War re-enacting (Hunt 2004), museum volunteering (Orr 2006), quilting (Stalp 2006), dancing (Brown 2007), community (Gallant et al. 2013) among others. In summary, participation was found to be voluntary, and was characterised by intrinsic motivations such as friendship, relaxation and personal growth. In a study of Masters sport participation, McIntyre et al. (1992) found that for some, participation was a casual experience. For others, it was a central life focus influencing their friendships, the way they saw themselves and the image they made. For those who were *"serious"* about their leisure, participating provided them with a sense of fulfilment that was not available in other areas of their lives. Enjoyment was also a factor along with stress reduction and physical health benefits. Interestingly though, relaxation and stress reduction do not feature in Stebbins' framework. As already stated, there are six distinctive qualities associated with serious leisure: and I will refer to them briefly here.

- Quality 1: There is the need to persevere in the activity and to overcome difficulties.

The quality of perseverance may be through adversity and obstacles such as fatigue, anxiety, injury, freezing cold or embarrassment. It may therefore be perceived as a goal-directed behaviour over time (Gould et al. 2008). According to Tenenbaum et al. (2005) effort is required to persevere in a task that involves extremely hard physical and environmental demands. Tenenbaum et al. (2001) suggest that goal orientation and self-efficacy, together with task-specific psychological components such as readiness to expend effort, determination, commitment, and self-perceived exertion, are the major determinants of perseverance in tasks that pose hard demands on the performer. Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007) found that distance running is intimately connected with endurance; tolerating fatigue, and that discomfort and pain constitutes an integral part of everyday training routines. The suggestion of normalisation of pain has also been noted in elite sport by (Young and White 1995); boxing (Wacquant 1995); classical ballet (Turner and Wainwright 2003). Wiese-Bjornstal et al.

(1998) note that athletes learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain, and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete in competitive sports. Normalisation of pain and injury is not, however, unproblematic, and the hazards of a culture of risk have also been highlighted (Safai 2003).

🞜 Quality 2: The tendency for individuals to create careers in their endeavours.

The second quality is defined as a personal course, or passage, in a leisure role shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement or involvement (Stebbins 2001). These stages reflect a continuum of changing patterns related to skills, knowledge, and abilities. Stebbins (1992) indicated that contingencies reflect unintended or chance happenings that affect progress or decline in the career, whereas turning points are those moments which influence the nature or direction of a career. Several inquiries have focused on leisure career in terms of career stages (McQuarrie and Jackson 1996), skill development (Kane and Zink 2004), career motivations in swimming (Hastings et al. 1995) and parallels in work careers (McQuarrie and Jackson 2002).

According to Jones (2006) serious leisure activities tend to demonstrate a progression through stages of achievement or competence. McCarville (2007) noted career progression from short events to a full Ironman triathlon. Therefore, this theme can be discussed in terms of progression in ability or involvement for example; from novice to intermediate events, or the mastery of a particular element of the activity (Shipway and Jones 2007). Ryan and Trauer (2005) created a framework that explains the motives of those athletes involved specifically in Master games competitions. They conclude that many Masters Games athletes will develop a career as an athlete. Furthermore, while performance assessment is a key component, the games enthusiast will also evaluate the social functions of the games. In short, Masters athletes may work hard to achieve, continue to challenge themselves and others, but the key to participation is the winning (Ryan and Trauer 2005).

Hastings et al. (1995) argue that serious leisure careers have histories of entry, involvement, exits, dormancy, resumption and re-involvement and in some cases, withdrawal or retirement. Consequently, pursuing a serious leisure career, participating in its social world and immersing oneself in its ethos may engender an identity rooted in the activity as well as produce a peculiar lifestyle.

🞣 Quality 3: The significant personal effort required which leads to the development of special knowledge, training, and skill.

The third quality relates to the exertion of significant personal effort to obtain and develop special knowledge, skills or abilities. Depending on the activity, it is possible to allocate enough effort to acquire all three. Consequently, a serious career is shaped by the effort and energies devoted to the pursuit. This proposition fits neatly with the need to persevere (Stebbins 1982).

Ryan and Trauer (2005) suggest that skill acquisition in sporting endeavours requires time spent in training, which intrudes upon family relationships. However, the degree of commitment to that training can be justified by the attraction of the pursuit, which has both physical and psychological benefits and therefore compensates for the time not spent in other activities.

Kane and Zink (2004) suggest that the acquisition of knowledge, training and skills, perseverance and stages or turning points are characterised as signifiers in a commitment to a career in serious leisure. Simple participation in a recreation activity cannot satisfy the needs of some recreationists who want to pursue a deeper involvement in recreation. Scott and Shafer (2001) propose that progression rather than experience serves as the crucial index of specialisation. They suggest that the progression of specialisation can be understood in terms of three dimensions: a focusing of behavior, the acquiring of skills and knowledge and a tendency to become committed to the activity such that it becomes a central life interest. The expression and acquiring of skills and knowledge is a commonly

used indicator to assess recreation specialisation (Tsaur and Liang 2008). Scott and Shafer's (2001) research on the progression of recreation specialisation also noted some links between serious leisure and recreation specialisation. Firstly, recreation specialisation progresses both from the desire to acquire and also from the actual acquisition of skills and knowledge. This notion is consistent with the significant personal effort described by Stebbins (1992). In marathon running, Shipway and Jones (2007) concluded that once identity was obtained then individuals would make the effort to maintain that identity. This characteristic is significant as Stebbins (2001) suggests that casual activities requiring little in the way of skill are unlikely to provide a valued social identity. Tsaur and Liang (2008) conclude that the development of skills coming from past experience and the acquisition of knowledge coming from centrality-to-lifestyle resulted in people participating longer in an activity.

- Quality 4: The provision of eight durable benefits: self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, renewal or regeneration of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products resulting from the activity.

Stebbins (1992) focused on the classification of outcomes in terms of costs and benefits. In a study of Masters swimmers, Hastings et al. (1995) considered skill acquisition and technique as indicators of self-actualisation and self-expression. Stebbins (2001) indicated that self-image is enhanced through the expression of unique skills, abilities and knowledge. Durable benefits can be evidenced in terms of fulfilment. The distinguishing characteristic between serious and casual leisure is the depth of satisfaction and fulfilment found in the activity. Stebbins noted that at times, serious leisure may be no fun at all and that the rewards for participation are not necessarily immediate. As a result, being valued meant being identified as a sports person whose very participation in sport is seen as an achievement. This finding is consistent with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of fulfilment of needs; which leads to a feeling of relevance and life purpose.

Biggs (1993) and Grant and Stothart (1999) suggest that participation in meaningful leisure pursuits in later life can contribute to one's identity and individuality, and assist one in adjusting to retirement. It would seem logical therefore that individuals need to feel accepted and cherished by others and to feel valued. This concept is linked to the strong identity of an activity in terms of self-esteem and confidence. It is also consistent with the findings of Heuser (2005) so that through their strong identification with a leisure pursuit and its related culture, people receive such durable and tangible benefits such as increased self-satisfaction with the practice itself and the camaraderie that made their efforts so worthwhile.

In their study on Masters sport McIntyre et al. (1992) found that Masters games athletes rated enjoyment and self-expression as the most important reasons for participation. They also rated centrality as being important which meant that they saw it as being more important than work commitments. Participants viewed Masters sport as a means of expressing their identity and self-image and to a lesser extent focused much of their lives around participation. In swimming, Stevenson (2002) found that self-confidence increased as a result of mastering a complex and difficult skill. The swimmers also valued the social identities which they were able to appropriate, develop and maintain. As a result, others saw them as *"active persons"*, as *"fit persons"* and often turned to them for advice in matters to do with health, fitness and exercise.

In terms of a group outcome, the social reward of group attraction is defined as participation in, and association with, the social world of a serious leisure activity. Stebbins (2001) suggested that group outcomes are derived from associating with other serious leisure participants. For group accomplishments, outcomes are derived from the effort of completing a project or goal and provide for the participant a sense of being needed. The social aspects of serious leisure have been addressed as comradeship (Hunt 2004), as sociability (Hastings et al. 1995), and friendships (Gibson et al. 2002).

Social motivation has been identified in a number of studies investigating sport across varying age groups (Wylleman 2000; Allen 2003; 2005). Research supports the idea that social motives are particularly important for middle aged athletes (Brodkin and Weiss 1990; Ashford et al. 1993). Ashford et al. (1993) found that middle-aged athletes rated well-being as a more important participation motive than younger athletes. More recently, Allen (2003; 2005) has proposed that social goal orientations and perceptions of belonging are the two central constructs to explain social motivation in the context of sport. As a result, sport provides individuals with opportunities to satisfy their needs for social connection and belonging.

<div style="margin-left:2em">+ Quality 5: The formation of a strong identity with the activity.</div>

Snow and Anderson (1995) have made a useful distinction between social identities and personal identities. Social identities are defined as those we attribute or impute to others, situating them as social objects, whilst personal identities refer to the meanings we attribute to the self. These forms may of course be in opposition. Goffman (1969) has noted the importance of leisure in the construction of personal identity, including the use of props such as clothing or even cigarettes (Wearing and Wearing 2000). For serious sports participants, whether professional or amateur, body image is often central to athletic identity, and there can be both positive and negative consequences of this (Allen Collinson and Hockey 2007). According to Shipway and Jones (2007), social identity theory has gained increasing prominence in terms of its ability to explain behaviour. Social identities provide a sense of belonging. Jones (2000) suggests that social identity theory proposes that people do not simply relate to each other as independent, isolated individuals but instead, as members of a social group. This in turn, can have important consequences for the individual's self-esteem. This argument is supported by Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007), who suggest that from a psychological viewpoint, individuals with a strong athletic identity often exhibit greater signs of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem when their image

and athletic self-identity are disrupted by a traumatic event such as a career-threatening injury.

Jones (2006) suggests that social identities are important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they provide the individual with a sense of belonging or membership of a wider social group. Secondly, they offer a valued place within that environment. Thirdly, they enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Casual leisure, however, is unlikely to provide a significant social identity (Stebbins, 2001). Jones and Symon (2001) suggest that serious leisure can provide individuals with a positive social identity that their work or other roles may not. Dimmock and Gucciardi (2008) support the notion that social identity theory invokes a link between self-esteem and the search for group membership. According to Hastings et al. (1995) people share identities as swimmers, be they casual, regular or serious. As a result, they use swimming jargon and use swimming terminology that is unique to the sport. Furthermore, they may know the calendar of competitions and are involved in the social rhythm of the club or the team (Hastings et al. 1995).

- Quality 6: A unique ethos that grows up around the activity and leads to the development of a special social world.

Stebbins (1992) found that in a serious social world, participants tend to develop subcultures composed of special beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards.

Prus (1996) offers a useful definition of subculture:

> *The term subculture signifies a way of life of a group of people. Denoting communities within communities, subcultures are characterised by interaction, continuity, and outsider and insider definitions of distinctiveness… it is useful to envision subcultures with respect to the*

perspectives characterising their members, the identities people achieve as participants, the activities deemed consequential in that context, the bonds participants develop with one another, and the sorts of commitments the people involved make with respect to the setting at hand.

(Prus 1996, p.85)

Research supports the contention that 'social motives' are particularly important for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport (Ashford et al. 1993). Females consistently attach more importance than males to the social experience associated with leisure and sport (Gould et al. 1985; Hastings et al. 1995). More recently, Allen (2005) developed a model of social motivation as a means to understand how people satisfy their need for social connections and belonging. Gallant et al. (2013) argue that serious leisure is strongly associated with a sense of community and social cohesion. Consequently, serious leisure participants carry on with their interests within their own social worlds. Despite the dominance of ability-based theories of motivation, social aspects of motivation have been identified in a number of studies investigating participation in sport across varying age groups (Allen 2005). However, little is known about social goal orientations for adult sport participation and how this relates to the importance of belonging. This research will bring meaning to the multi-faceted elements of serious leisure as expressed through Masters sport.

Pushing the Boundaries

According to Stebbins (2008), studying deviant leisure is extremely important for leisure research. With regard to the serious leisure perspective, he also suggests that deviant leisure mostly fits the description of *"tolerable deviance"* (Stebbins 2008, p.65). Deviance among athletes, coaches, agents and others connected with sports has attracted widespread attention (Cowley 2004; Pike 2004; Waddington 2006; Coakley and Pike 2009). Norms in sports differ from the norms in other social worlds. For example; athletes are often praised for their extreme actions that risk health and well-being, and inflict pain and injury on others, whereas non-

athletes would be defined as deviant for doing so. Coping with pain is a key principle of what sport sociologists have termed the "*sports ethic",* a set of ideas that together comprise the norms of athleticism. Also incorporated in the "*sports ethic"* are the beliefs that athletes make sacrifices for the game, that they always strive for distinction, and that they refuse to accept limits in the pursuit of their dreams (Hughes and Coakley 1991). Athletes who adhere to the "*sports ethic"* must focus on proving themselves and making sacrifices. Improvement comes through hard work, which, according to the "*sports ethic"* necessitates enduring and even learning to welcome pain.

Much is now known about athletes' attitudes toward pain and injury and how others within the sporting world enforce the sports ethic and make it possible for athletes to play through the pain (Nixon 1992; 1994; Safai 2003; Waddington 2004). Although a good deal of the research on pain and injury focuses on elite athletes (Waddington 2004; Malcolm 2006; McKay et al. 2008; Theberge 2008) there is evidence to suggest that it is also manifest in non-elite sport (Liston et al. 2006). Hughes and Coakley (1991) propose that living in conformity to the sports ethic is likely to set one apart as a *"real athlete"* but it creates a clear cut vulnerability to several kinds of deviant behaviour. Consequently, athletes often go to extremes in their dedication to sport and their willingness to pay the price, play with pain and live their dreams. According to Stebbins (2007) this is important since, whichever form of deviant serious leisure a person participates, he or she will find it necessary to make a significant effort to acquire its special belief system. In other words, deviant lifestyles are evident, not just in elite sport, but also in amateur sport.

The sociological literature on pain and injury in sport underscores how athletes generally avoid, disavow or privately manage suffering during competition (Young 2004). According to Atkinson (2008) while the ability to withstand and inflict pain as a competitive strategy is lauded in particular sport settings, few people enter into recreational sport with the expressed purpose to physically, emotionally and psychologically hurt. Atkinson (2008) proposes that training

sessions provide participants with ordered contexts for self-exploration. Consequently, athletes who come to relish intense physical and cognitive agony in their sport share a socially learned personality structure (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1991).

Exercise Adherence

Stebbins (2008) reasons that serious leisure experiences can have a negative side that must not be overlooked but so far it has been impossible to develop a consensus since the rewards and costs tend to be highly specific to each leisure activity. Nonetheless, he ascertains that the costs are not nearly as commonly examined as the rewards leaving a gap in knowledge that must be filled.

Literature offers broad support for the role that exercise can play in the promotion of mental health (McAuley 1994; Martinsen 1995; Biddle and Mutrie 2008). Researchers have identified the positive relationship between exercise and psychological health, most especially among clinical populations (Lavallee et al. 2004). Equally though, there is evidence to suggest that there are motives for engaging in exercise which are less than healthy. These motives move beyond habit to abuse or even addiction, more commonly referred to as exercise adherence (Loumidis and Roxborough 1995). Recent trends show that exercise may become harmful for those who exercise excessively with no regard for possible negative effects such as injury, resulting in addiction (Hausenblaus and Downs 2002). According to Hausenblaus and Downs (2002) there are seven components of exercise dependence including, withdrawal, tolerance, continuance, lack of control, reduction in other activities, time and intention. The symptoms are similar to those seen in other dependence disorders relating to drugs and alcohol. Excessive exercise may serve as a compensatory behaviour for calorie intake, and in combination with the reinforcing effects of mood improvement and weight loss; this can lead to the risk of eating disorders (Blaydon et al. 2004). These unsafe levels of exercise dependence have been found to be particularly prevalent among college students (Schultz et al. 2009).

Aidman and Wollard (2003) explored mood changes in competitive runners who abstained from exercise versus those who were not asked to abstain from exercise. The results showed that those who were asked to abstain reported more withdrawal symptoms including depressed mood and increases in tension, anger and fatigue. Characteristically, athletes are different to non-athletes because they are expected to maintain a high ability level by their coaches, teammates and fans (Kjelsas et al. 2003). However, little is known about how the pressure to stay fit may impact upon exercise dependence (Schultz et al. 2009).

With regard to gender, Lavallee at al. (2004) put forward that the gendered nature of physical activity should not be disregarded because women are more likely to engage in activities such as aerobics or keep fit, which in turn may serve to reinforce the cult of thinness and femininity. Women consistently score lower than men on measures of self-confidence regarding their bodies and physical competence (Biddle et al. 1994). Not only may exercise be associated with body dissatisfaction, once undertaken it may play a more sinister role in the perpetuation of eating disorders and weight control (Lavallee et al. 2004). Davis (1999) has described how exercise can sustain the cyclical and repetitious nature of eating disorders. Although traditionally discussion of these issues has focused on women there is evidence to suggest that men are also at risk of exercise–related disorders, in particular muscular definition (Olivardia and Pope 2000).

Lavallee et al. (2004) suggest that there is no consensus of opinion to explain the psychological effects of exercise. Furthermore, it is not sensible to aspire towards consensus, given the wide diversity of psychological and physiological processes which intertwine in determining the relationship between physical activity and psychological well-being. This notion will be explored in this research as it considers active participation, standards of performance and practice and the demands that swimmers put on their ageing bodies.

Summary

In summary, Weinberg and Gould (2007) suggest that the social environment in which a person functions has important implications with regard to achievement and competition. Research supports the contention that social motives are particularly important for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport (Ashford et al. 1993). Stebbins (1992) found that in a serious social world, participants tend to develop subcultures composed of special beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards. This research will explore the Masters swimming culture, its beliefs and its values in detail in order to understand the distinct interaction between the Masters swimmer, the swimming environment and the activity itself. In the next chapter I outline my research approach and my reasons for conducting a qualitative piece of research. I subsequently present a profile on each swimmer and reflect upon a number of ethical considerations in conducting ethnographic research.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents and justifies the research approach as well as the individual methods used in this thesis. It discusses the analytic techniques applied, and offers an evaluation of the research. At the outset, a qualitative approach was chosen as I looked to provide an in-depth study of both the collective and individual, subjective experience of the Masters swimming culture. For this reason, I felt that the inductive approach of qualitative research was more fitting. Primarily, although I had a "guiding framework", I did not know what findings would emerge from a study that aimed to portray the insider's view. Hence, my research sought to build on inductive knowledge. In particular, it looked to advance the ASA's primary objective to increase participation in Masters swimming.

According to Jones et al. (2013) an inductive approach allows researchers to let the data take primacy. In my case, I knew that Masters swimmers were committed to the activity, but I did not know what the consequences of the activity would be. The research focused on a group of Masters swimmers who swam at a leisure centre in Dorset. My choice of an ethnographic approach allowed me to gain the perspective of the insider and make it meaningful. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) ethnography is one of the many approaches that can be found within social research today. Brewer defines ethnography as:

> *The study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting…*

> (Brewer 2008, p.6)

Sands (2002) argues that ethnography is separated from other qualitative social science research methods by its emphasis on intensive, focused, and time consuming participation and observation of the life being studied. In addition, an ethnographic approach enables researchers to explore both the structures and interactions within their cultural context, and the meanings that participants give to their cultural environment (Holloway and Todres 2003). Moreover, it provides immediacy to the account given by participants so that readers can gain a picture of their experience, motives and expectations (O'Reilly 2005). It also provides *"truthfulness"* which affords the degree to which the researcher reflects the participants' perspectives. A table of ethnographic characteristics is outlined below:

Table 1: Characteristics of Ethnography

1	They investigate human behaviour.
2	The ethnographer studies the group on its' own ground, observing natural behaviours in a natural setting.
3	The ethnographer will use a range of methods to collect the data over a period of time.
4	The ethnographer is generally more interested in taking a holistic perspective rather than focusing on individual aspects.
5	Considerable amounts of time are spent with the group in order to develop trust with those being studied, and gain an understanding of what is happening.

(Gratton and Jones 2010)

A sports-related ethnography is a flexible methodology because the collection of data is often semi-structured or unstructured, unplanned and sometimes unexpected (Gratton and Jones 2010). In the last twenty years, sport ethnography has been used effectively in broadening an understanding of sport (Tsang 2000; Wheaton 2000; Allen Collinson and Hockey 2001; Sands 2002; Sparkes 2002; Granskog 2003; Hockey and Allen Collinson 2006; McCarville 2007; Sugden

2007; Allen Collinson 2008; Atkinson 2008; Purdey et al. 2008; Dyck 2012). Brewer (2008) argues that the justification for ethnography comes from the humanistic model of social research. According to Hughes (1990) the humanistic model of social research is premised on the methodology of naturalism. Naturalism is an orientation concerned with the study of social life in real, naturally occurring settings; the experiencing, the observing, describing, understanding, analysing of the features of social life in concrete situations as the occur independently of scientific manipulation. The focus on natural situations leads to this orientation being described as naturalism, and it is signified by attention to what human beings feel, perceive, think and do in natural situations (Brewer 2008). These naturally occurring situations are also sometimes called *"face to face"* situations, mundane interaction or everyday life. According to Hill (2001) the humanistic model celebrates the individual. This approach to research abandons natural science models of research practice, such as, hypothesis testing, deductive analysis, and measurement in favour of understanding naturally occurring behaviour in its own terms. Hence, it is possible to be true to the natural phenomena and provide *"thick description"* and *"deeply rich"* data. The research approach and choice of one particular setting are justified on the grounds of my immersion in that setting and its potential to typify the situation of the majority of leisure centres in England that offer Masters swimming sessions.

Adopting a Qualitative Approach

Initially, researchers are confronted with a host of research approaches when starting their study, the choice of which will depend on subjectivity, culture and the preferences of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Brewer 2008). Qualitative research is often exploratory and descriptive and stresses the importance of context, setting and the participants' frames of reference. Qualitative studies typically focus on individuals, groups, processes or organisations (Marshall and Rossman 2006). Historically, qualitative methodologists have tried to explore, explain or describe a phenomenon in an

attempt to understand and develop the complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature.

A qualitative approach was employed in this research as I was seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of sport culture as well as identifying the everyday routines shared by swimmers. Ethnographies are, almost always, qualitative in nature due to what they are trying to determine. Qualitative research uses non-numerical data and analysis to describe and understand feelings, thoughts and practices (Gratton and Jones 2010). This approach allowed me to focus on individuals' lived experiences and explore the Masters swimming culture. More specifically, I studied the setting, the people and the everyday traditions, roles, values and internalised notions that occurred. In turn, this enabled me to understand the complexities and deeper perspectives that can only be captured through face to face interaction. Indeed, according to Wolcott (2009), ethnographers start by *"experiencing"* the social world of participants before systematic enquiry and examination can begin.

Conducting an Ethnographic Study

If human actions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur; then it is essential that the research is conducted in the setting where this complexity operates. This research focused on the lived experience of swimmers which enabled me, as an ethnographer, to understand the deeper perspectives of the swimming culture. Brewer (2008) proposes that ethnographers must locate their data in the context of the social processes that brought them about, and recognise the limits of their representation of reality. Since there is no perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the social world, Brewer (2008) argues that reflexivity on the part of the researcher assists in identifying the contingencies that produced his or her portrayal of it. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) concur that instead of trying to eliminate the effects of the ethnographer, it is necessary to be reflexive in trying to set the data against the context. As a researcher and professional in my field, I was within the world that I sought to analyse however,

I did not underestimate the importance of reflecting on my own identity and sense of voice and perspective when considering the assumptions and sensitivities of my research.

Writing Ethnography

According to Holloway and Wheeler (2010), ethnography is the direct description of a group, culture or community – in this case Masters swimming. It incorporates however, both a process – the methods and strategies of research, and a product – the written story as the outcome of the research. As a consequence, people *"do"* ethnography. They study a culture, observe its members' behaviours and listen to them. As a result, they produce *an ethnography*, a written text which is the ethnographic account, thus ethnography is both a process and a product. Bell (2005) suggests that ethnographic researchers attempt to develop an understanding of how culture works. According to Lutz (1986) many methods and techniques are used in this type of research including participant observation, interviews, mapping and charting. Sands (2002) suggests that participating and observing produces a wide-angle view of cultural behaviour and at the heart of any ethnography are the pencilled notes taken by the ethnographer in everyday field situations. In general, ethnographic data is collected over a long period of time and an understanding of the group is obtained through examining their behaviour (Gratton and Jones 2010).

Holt and Sparkes (2001), suggest that it is easier to study a group if the researcher is already a part of the group or team. Ethnographers also use the constructs of the informants and apply their own scientific conceptual framework, the *"emic"* and *"etic"* perspectives (Harris 1976). Firstly, the researcher needs an understanding of the *"emic"* perspective. That is the insider's or native's perceptions. Insiders' accounts of reality help to uncover knowledge of the reasons why people act as they do. Secondly, ethnographers convey the outsider's perspective or the *"etic"* view, in order to recognise patterns and ideas of which the people in the setting

are not aware. They also translate the insights and words of the participants into the language of science (Holloway and Wheeler 2010).

For the purpose of this research, I explored active participation, involving in-depth one to one interviews with 13 key informants and overt observation of a group over a two year period. My observations began in January 2010 and concluded in December 2011. In a coaching role, I observed training sessions four times a week. I also accompanied the swimmers to various competitions and social events. On other occasions I opted to swim with the group which enabled me to both observe the setting and also to gain experience first-hand. As my research evolved, I had the opportunity to adopt the role of *"insider"* which provided a more holistic description of events and behaviour.

Setting and Sample of the Research

The Setting

Spradley (1980) recommends the following criteria in choice of setting: simplicity, accessibility, unobtrusiveness and permissibleness. Marshall and Rossman (2006) argue that a realistic site is one where; entry is possible; there is a high probability that a rich mix of processes, people, programmes, interactions and structures are present; and where the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relationships with the participants in the study. According to Brewer (2008), all ethnography involves case study research, which focuses on the particular but not necessarily at the expense of the general (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In this study the setting was a leisure centre situated in Dorset in the south of England. The centre was chosen for its capacity to portray the experiences of Masters swimmers. It was also my own place of work and therefore by nature it provided the opportunity to have regular contact with the swimmers. Closeness to the people and the phenomenon through intense interactions provide subjective understanding that can greatly increase the quality

of qualitative data (Toma 2000). I did not underestimate the role of pragmatic considerations in choosing a pool-based setting and as an ethnographer; my research does not attempt to account for Masters swimmers who practice exclusively in swimming clubs and outdoor environments although some of the swimmers featured in this research combined their open water swimming with pool-based sessions during the winter months.

Entering the Setting

Grills (1998) suggests that entering the setting is a crucial stage in ethnography. To all intents and purposes, my choice of setting came first in this research since I was carrying out the ethnography in my own place of work. My association with the group originally began in January 2005 and progressed over a nine year period. Prior involvement meant that I was able to gain access to the group so that I could take on the role of an *"insider".* I found that this worked to my advantage for a number of reasons. Firstly, the setting was geographically close to where I lived and was easily accessible. Secondly, I was able to submerge myself in the culture by *"going native"* and at times, adopt the role of a swimmer. This resulted in expressions of surprise: *"I didn't know you could swim!"* which allowed me to understand the values and perspectives of the swimmers so that I could identify with them. Thirdly, being immersed in the culture meant that I was less noticeable as an observer. Finally, this was a natural setting and therefore it provided the opportunity to observe everyday life. There were also disadvantages in conducting the research in a leisure centre setting. Firstly, it was not possible to give an exhaustive account of the locale. Secondly, although it was my intention to conduct the research solely in a leisure centre setting it was not possible to contain the research within the boundaries of the setting. Hence, there were occasions when it was necessary to go outside to collect information on certain aspects of the research topic. Thirdly, the process of identifying and defining the *"case"* under study had to proceed side by side with the refinement of the research and the development of the analysis. Finally, by *"going native",* I was aware that I could not lose my sense of focus by becoming too indoctrinated and involved, thus losing objectivity and neutrality. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out

that it is hard to expect honesty and frankness on the part of participants and informants, while never being frank and honest about oneself and there were times when I had to decide how much self-disclosure was appropriate.

The Sample

Holloway (1997) suggests that in qualitative research sampling is generally purposive or purposeful. In purposive sampling generalisability is less important than the collection of rich data and an understanding of the ideas of the people chosen for the sample. Ethnographers mostly use purposive sampling, selecting a specific location and informants (Daymon and Holloway 2002; Williams 2003). This means that sampling issues are straightforward as the sample includes all those involved in the setting, although central to ethnography is the use of key informants – those research participants with expert knowledge in the field – with whom ethnographers work to produce a cultural description (Fetterman 2010). Consequently, my sample choice was relatively straightforward since I was observing an entire group. Gratton and Jones (2010) suggest that it should be the aim of the researcher to understand social reality and emotional associations from the insider point of view. Therefore, in conducting my research, the whole context of Masters swimming was considered, along with an overview of participants within the setting and the relationship between these active sport participants. This included observing the interaction between the swimmers; their norms and behaviours; their behaviour patterns; as well as listening in to their conversations. Daymon and Holloway (2002) suggest that the sample in qualitative research tends to be small because there is a focus on deep exploration. With regard to interviews, I had to consider what information I should collect and from whom it should be gathered. The nature of the research was initially discussed with the swimmers as a group in December 2009. Jones et al. (2013) propose that researchers should choose their informants carefully to make sure that they are suitable and representative of the group under study. Consequently, at the outset of my research, twelve key informants agreed to be interviewed on an ongoing basis following a meeting with them in December 2009. In addition, the entire

group were observed over a two-year period between January 2010 and December 2011. I also interviewed an additional informant who joined the group part way through the research. In order to provide worthwhile information, I had to work hard to establish and maintain a good rapport with each swimmer which required both thought and respect.

Selecting Participants

For the purpose of this research twelve members of the Masters swimming community agreed to be interviewed because of their association with the culture being investigated. As a newcomer to the group, an additional informant was interviewed part way through the research, making thirteen informants in all. In purposive sampling researchers seek to gain as much knowledge as possible about the context. This means that the sampling is not fixed in advance but is an ongoing process guided by emerging ideas. (Holloway 1997). In addition, immersion in a culture makes a large sample size unnecessary, particularly as qualitative researchers rarely seek to generalise. Participants who agreed to be interviewed included eight male swimmers and five female swimmers. The swimmers were considered to be Masters swimmers if they were aged 25 and over however; the swimmers interviewed in this research were all over 40 years of age, with the majority being 50 and over. The non-probability sample did not focus on a particular lane group, but instead included a selection of swimmers with varying abilities, backgrounds and goals. I decided that a random sample of swimmers who swam casually and intermittently would not provide valuable information. Thus, swimmers were suitable key informants if they fulfilled certain criteria. Firstly, they were aged forty or over - as the majority were. Secondly, they had the ability to swim lengths in training. Thirdly, they were committed to attending Masters swimming sessions on an ongoing basis. The choice of these criteria are justified on the basis that my research was exploring older Masters swimmers who were physically active. Experience with, and weekly commitment to swimming varied across the thirteen key informants included in this study. They trained between one and six times per week and devoted an average of between

one and seven hours to training each week. The level of participation also varied, with the number of competitions entered per year ranging from between zero and ten. Throughout this study, the three terms *"sprint swimmer", "endurance swimmer"* and *"leisure-oriented swimmer"* will be interspersed. For clarification, in the context of this study and the swimming backgrounds of the participants, these terms refer to swimmers who train and participate in events ranging from sprint (50/100/200 metres), endurance (800/1500 metres or more) and leisure (non-competitive) swimmers. According to Unruh (1980) there are four levels of social world analysis derived from the comparative frequency and magnitude of actors, organisations, events, and practices occurring in a geographical space. Within those social worlds are four kinds of social actors, each identified by their relative closeness to the activities and knowledge vital to the continuance of the social world. Closest in proximity are the insiders, who organise the activities and hold the knowledge that are central to their social world. Nearby are the regulars, who are the consistent participants, committed to the continuation of their social world. Further out are the tourists, who limit their involvement in the social world to entertainment, profit, or diversion. Finally, at the periphery are the strangers, who influence some aspect of the social world; however, they are not involved in the interests of the social world (Unruh 1979). The rationale behind my interest in this research is to portray rather than impose how the social world of swimmers might be recorded. My own experiences and perceptions of swimming as both competitor and coach are an integral part of the research as I have been part of it, reflecting on and relating the personal to the cultural aspect of active sport participation. A brief profile of each informant is offered below and pseudonyms are used so that the swimmers cannot be identified.

Swimmer profiles

Becky is a female distance swimmer who enjoys competing in open water events. She began swimming at the age of nine in Kent. As a junior swimmer she competed at club and county level but gave up swimming before taking her 'O'

Levels. Although she took up swimming again in her late teens, it was not until six years ago that she began to participate seriously on a regular basis. (Age 50+)

Bernie is a self-taught swimmer who loves to compete in open water and endurance events. (Age 50+)

Dan learnt to swim at the age of five, reaching county level at the age of ten. He is married with three daughters and has recently taken up triathlon training which complements his swimming. He refers to swimming as his *"comfort blanket"*. He enjoys competing in sprint and middle distance events but more recently he has taken up the challenge of swimming open water long distance events. (Age 40+)

Dennis's main sport is cycling which he took up at the age of thirteen. He learnt to swim at the age of forty-two and he started to improve his swimming in order to support his triathlon training. He describes his swimming as *"useless"* until he went on a Robin Brew[2] training course which improved his swimming dramatically. He now enjoys triathlon and open water swimming and in 2002, in a team of four, he swam the English Channel in a team relay. (Age 60+)

Elsa learnt to swim at the age of eight. She was brought up in Germany. She has an interest in philosophy and attends bible classes. She regularly swims four times a week. (Age 60+)

Jane is a sprint swimmer. She was taught to swim by her father in Sheffield at the age of six, going on to represent Yorkshire schools at the age of fifteen. She stopped swimming for forty-three years and came back to swimming following surgery. She now competes as a sprint freestyle swimmer in the 50m and 100m events at county, regional, national and international level. (Age 70+)

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[2] Robin Brew represented Great Britain at the 1984 Olympic Games and is now a swimming coach.

Megan enjoys the freedom that swimming offers and likes to compete and take part in charity swims. (Age 40+)

Patrick considers himself to be an all-rounder, but particularly enjoys squash. He took up swimming six years ago because he was beginning to pick up injuries. (Age 50+)

Paul was brought up in London and has always enjoyed sport. Paul took up serious swimming at the age of thirty to help improve his fitness for surfing and paddling. He enjoys competing in sprint events. (Age 40+)

Roy learnt to swim at the age of ten. He took a break from swimming after he got married and began swimming again with a group of work mates. Although he is now retired he feels he is now swimming better than ever before. In 2011 he entered his first competition for over 50 years and surprised everyone by setting a new club record in the 50 metres Freestyle. (Age 70+)

Simon learnt to swim at the age of eighteen. He enjoys open water swimming, cycling and running. (Age 40+)

Tina is a distance swimmer who learnt to swim at the age of seven. As a youngster her main sport was athletics. Her athletics career ended unexpectedly when she suffered an Achilles injury during a school hurdling event. She took up swimming seriously fifteen years ago, at the age of twenty-seven, and now swims in endurance events. (Age 40+)

Will was born in South Africa but now lives in England. He is married with a young son. Will enjoys both endurance open water and sprint swimming. (Age 40+)

The Researcher's Role: Issues of Entry, Reciprocity and Ethics

In qualitative research, the researcher's role is fundamental to the methodology (Marshall and Rossman 2006) and a more traditional qualitative researcher maintains a stance of neutrality (Patton 2002). Critical and postmodern researchers though are not neutral since their ultimate purposes include advocacy and action. Marshall and Rossman (2006) recommend that, rather than trying to be inauthentic by adopting a contrived role, researchers be true to themselves, their social identities and their interest in the setting. Whether the research is sustained and long-term or relatively brief the research brings a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues that do not attend quantitative approaches (Locke et al. 2000). The researcher can be involved in the research at varying levels. These levels can vary between full participant at one extreme or complete observer at the other extreme. All mixes of these roles along the continuum are available to the researcher (Marshall and Rossman 2006). For the purposes of this research, I adopted a participant as observer role.

Ethical Responsibilities Towards Swimmers

The need and moral duty of researchers to protect participants in the research process is well documented (Williams 2003). According to Mason (2002), qualitative research raises a number of ethical issues which should be anticipated in advance. In this way, the researcher can consider how their actions may affect participants, and also maintain the integrity of sociological enquiry as a discipline (Brewer 2008). Brewer (2008) states, covert methods are defensible when access is likely to be closed, but if access is granted, there is no need to be covert. Patton (2002) advises full and complete disclosure. I was aware that the leisure centre was managed by a private company in partnership with a local authority and Masters swimming sessions were accessible to any member of the public who paid to swim. The leisure centre was not run as a privately owned club used exclusively by its members. As access was granted by the management, there was no reason for my research to be done secretly and I chose to conduct overt

observations on the swimmers. That said, some individuals had little or no knowledge of the research being undertaken. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) recommend that the value of pure sociability should not be underestimated as a means of building trust. On my part, this required finding neutral ground. This centred on mundane small talk which helped to establish a good rapport and to build trust.

Gratton and Jones (2010) advise that it is important to consider your sample depending on the research objectives. Additionally, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) propose that it important for the ethnographer to assess the most appropriate sample. Given that the researcher is the main data collection instrument obtaining valuable data depends on the researcher/participant relationship (McNamee et al. 2006). In this research the swimmers who agreed to be interviewed were provided with an information sheet which informed them about confidentiality, their rights to withdraw from the study, and the anonymity of data. I also sought approval from the whole group at the outset of my research and promised that pseudonyms would be used, and that private information I obtained would not be disclosed. This meant that trust was an important consideration and I was conscious of maintaining an open and honest relationship with the swimmers throughout. On at least two separate occasions, during interviews, I gave my reassurance to informants that personal matters would not be divulged in my thesis.

Ethical Issues in Coaching

Throughout the research process, I was aware of my responsibilities towards the swimmers and therefore it was necessary to consider my professional duty towards athletes. According to Lumpkin et al. (2003) professional responsibility is an outward behaviour that comes from our inner beliefs. Furthermore, moral values and principles include: honesty, honour, truth, respect, sincerity, justice and duty (Lumpkin et al. 2003). In my view, athletes should be treated as individuals because each one has different abilities and needs and in essence, I

adopt an athlete-centred approach. According to Martens (2004) it is a coach's duty to understand each swimmers' needs and to help them fulfil those needs. In order to do this I spent time getting to know each athlete as an individual.

During my research, I was able to share in their triumphs when they achieved their personal goals and ambitions. Crucially however, when confronted with ethical dilemmas, the rights of the swimmers were seen as outweighing my own rights as a researcher to conduct research. That said, there were times when my advice went unheeded as I witnessed swimmers pushing themselves and their bodies to the limit. These issues are discussed in detail in chapter eight.

Research Methods

According to Spradley (1980), the dimensions of social settings focus on the features which catalogue ideas about observation as outlined below:

Table 2: The Dimensions of Social Situations.

Actor: the participants in the setting – *Masters swimmers at the leisure centre*
Activity: what is being done – *Engaging in Masters swimming*
Objects: the material objects present in the setting – *The swimming pool, poolside conditions and swimming paraphernalia*
Act: single actions that persons in the setting carry out – *Swimming training, standards of performance and practice*
Events: related activities and happenings - *Swimming in competitions, training and attending social events*
Time: sequencing and length – *When do they swim? How long do they swim for and how often do they swim?*
Goal: what people are aiming to do – *Improve technique, swim faster, swim further, continue to swim, swim at a higher level, compete at a higher level*
Feeling: what people feel and how they express their emotions – *Swimmers persevere, relax, cope with injury, pain, and the pressures of everyday life*

Adapted from Spradley (1980, p.78- 82)

During this ethnographic study, I was committed to the use of more than one research method which included both observations and a series of interviews. I also kept detailed notes on my personal reflections which allowed me to record emerging themes, methodological notes and personal observations.

My research diary recorded data and a detailed analysis of each training session, attendees, progressions, training programmes, competitions, challenges and topics of interest. I found that this was a useful way of obtaining information about both the personal and the private. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) maintain that a diary can be used to record data that might not be forthcoming in face to face interviews or other data collection encounters. I also recorded minutiae of day to day activities. In this way, I was able to gather information about personal issues in everyday life and keep an audit trail. Dependability can be demonstrated through an audit trail, where others can examine the inquirer's documentation of data, methods, decisions and end product. Reflexivity is central to the audit trail, in which inquirers keep a self-critical account of the research process, including their internal and external dialogue (Tobin and Begley 2004). Throughout this study, I make use of data collected from interviews, opportunistic conversations, and observations, as well as my research diary and up to date literature.

My research explored swimming culture from the inside as an integral member of the group, where observations took place in a natural sports setting. The ease with which I was able to move around the location extended the research as I forged a relationship with swimmers. At times, I opted to practice and compete with the group under the direction of another coach, which leant itself to a better understanding of the swimming culture.

The Research Process

My observations took place at training sessions on a weekly basis and on the occasions that swimming and social events were attended over a two year period

and the initial analysis of my data guided further work. To begin with, I recorded detailed notes in my research diary on attendance, effort, commitment, attitude, swimming technique, endurance, speed and progression. I also recorded the content of each session in terms of objectives and distances swum. Periodically, I also used a digital recorder and a camera so that I could observe the complexities of training sessions and competitions. This enabled me to take advantage of naturally occurring events and discussions on warm ups, training sets, travelling to competitions, social events, visits to physiotherapists, sport psychologists and other professionals. I also observed group interaction, progression, lane dynamics and training etiquette and was able to reflect on the processes and intricacies of how and why events happened.

I found that one of the most interesting elements of the research related to the conversations and discussions on what I refer to as *"swimming talk"*. This related to injuries, illness, aches and pains, fatigue, competitions, training, tapering, technique and races. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) it is often well into the process of inquiry that one discovers what the research is about. Furthermore, the development of explanations and theories involves a narrowing of focus and a process of abstraction. As my research evolved I was able to build a clearer picture of the leisure routines of each swimmer and the place each individual had in the group. In turn, this revealed how serious or casual swimmers were about their leisure participation.

Data Collection

Unless a study is quite narrowly construed, researchers cannot study all relevant circumstances, events, or people intensively and in depth (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The study used a selection of data collection methods with the aim of developing a more contextually grounded assessment of the subject. Initially, I gained a broad picture of the group within the setting, observing behaviour, and listening to the language that was used. After this initial observation it was possible to focus on key issues which seemed important, before

the writing became a detailed analysis and interpretation of the culture being studied. As my research progressed, I found that I was able to acquire rich narrative descriptions of the culture. As researcher, coach and occasional participant within the setting, I was able to spend a considerable amount of time with the swimmers – both individually and as a group and this enabled me to share the experience. My immersion in the setting permitted me to see, to hear and to experience actuality from the swimmers perspective.

Participant Observation

Participant observers enter the setting without wishing to limit the observation to particular processes or people, and they adopt an unstructured approach. Usually observation progresses from the unstructured to the more focused until eventually specific actions and events become the main interest of the researcher. Gold (1958) identifies four types of observer involvement in the field which most qualitative researchers still describe:

- The complete participant
- The participant as observer
- The observer as participant
- The complete observer

According to Sands (2002) the main fieldwork method in ethnography is observation. Gratton and Jones (2010) suggest that participant observation is an essential element of ethnographic research in gaining an empathetic understanding of the group. Furthermore, the researcher experiences, rather than observes what is going on, and it is this experience that provides the data for the researcher (Gratton and Jones 2010).

Training sessions took place at the centre four times a week on: Monday evenings, Wednesday and Thursday mornings and Friday evenings. Working with the group as a coach enabled me to become immersed in the group and observe this particular subculture. In this study I acted in a participant as observer role, as I had negotiated my way into the setting, and as a participant observer I was part of the group under study – albeit in a coaching role, on the edge, looking in. Holloway and Wheeler (2010) argue that this is a good way of doing research, as the researcher is already involved in the situation. The advantage of this type of observation is the ease with which researcher/participant relationships can be forged or extended. Researchers can move around in the location as they wish, and thus observe in more detail and depth. Being immersed in the swimming culture, I found that I was able to move around in the location without appearing to be intrusive or out of place. In addition, as an overt observer, I did not need to hide my identity which allowed me to experience rather than observe what was going on. Gratton and Jones (2010) draw attention to the fact that experiential ethnography would seem to have strengths in uncovering sport experiences. However, it can be easy to simply become autobiographical. They also suggest that the danger of *"going native"* or taking on the beliefs of the group may be an issue and so the key for the researcher is to be *"objectively subjective"* in being able to assess conflicts between the role of participant and researcher (Gratton and Jones 2010). However, Strauss and Corbin (1998) see participant observation as qualitative research "*par excellence*" because it provides access not only to the social context, but also to the ways in which people act and interact. For this reason, I decided that, from time to time, I would participate with the group so that I could understand by *"doing"* as well as observing. This enabled me to capture and understand through a lived experience. Sands (2002) suggests that the ethnographer must record these experiences on paper so that, back from the field, he can produce an authentic and valid text. According to Gratton and Jones (2010) field notes are a summary of the observations made by the researcher, and follow a less structured format. More importantly, they should be descriptive, detailed and reflective. Through following these methods, I was able to gain an empathetic understanding of the group's behaviours.

Interviews with Swimmers

Interviewing can provide a rich source of data as it may allow the researcher to gather information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise – both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies. At the same time, it should be noted that there are distinct advantages in combining participant observation with interviews; in particular the data from each can be used to illuminate the other (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Sometimes the difficulty in gaining access to informants determines who will and will not be interviewed. But usually there is a choice of potential interviewees – in this research there were thirteen informants in all. Usually in ethnographic work the interviews take place over a lengthy period of time. In addition, ethnographers interview a range of people and some of these may be interviewed more than once.

According to O'Reilly (2005) unstructured interviews are most common in ethnography allowing participants a greater voice and minimising the influence of the interviewer (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). Brewer (2008) argues that the qualitative researcher values the unstructured type of interview because it gives access to people's meaning-endowing capacities and produces rich, deep data. Unstructured interviews require great interview power skills and the interviewer needs to be able to know when to prompt, when to listen and when to remain silent. They also rely on a good relationship between interviewer and respondent. I decided that the best way to gather the detailed information I needed, was to adopt a series of unstructured one to one interviews. The interviews were carried out either at home or in the training room at the leisure centre in comfortable surroundings. The interviews, with agreement from the participants, were recorded onto a digital recording device and later transcribed. In order that the interviews did not dry up, I adopted a flexible approach, allowing the discussion to flow in a way that seemed natural. I also spent a considerable amount of preparation time in understanding the swimmers so that the interviews were quite often more like conversations. Personal reflections became an integral part of my

overall data collection and I would often contemplate the many conversations that took place throughout my research. Glesne (1999) argues that personal reflections provide the researcher with new vantage points and with opportunities to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

Spradley (1979) suggests that ethnographic interviewing elicits the cognitive structures guiding participants' worldviews. The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture through the participant's perspective and through first-hand encounter (Marshall and Rossman 2006). In this way the participant's perspective on the phenomenon should unfold which provides an *"emic"* perspective on the culture. Central to my research was the rapport between researcher and swimmer which developed over time as the swimmers began to trust me. Gratton and Jones (2010) refer to this as *"learning the ropes".* Unstructured interviews involved conversations about age, background, lifestyle, education, history and involvement in sport, reasons for participation, personal challenges, goals and successes. As an ethnographer, I always had a research agenda and a list of open questions in my mind based around a broad topic area. Equally, my relationship with each individual varied so there was a need for flexibility. Some interviews were so informal that they took the form of natural conversations. I found that as I explored each swimmers history, a range of topics began to emerge and I was able to probe further. For example; it was only in the interview situation that the detailed dimensions regarding: *"Third Place",* escape, ageing, injury, pain and exercise dependence were discovered. I also learnt that one swimmer had endured a difficult childhood. On occasions, I had to show concern regarding personal problems relating to; health issues, injuries, redundancy and even marriage breakdowns. As an ethnographer, I found that the unstructured, in-depth interview was a means to access life on the *"inside"* and to represent my findings accurately. Reassurances were provided to each informant about confidentiality, thus complying with the ethical responsibility of the researcher to guarantee anonymity (Mason 2002; Brown 2008). This meant that the informants were willing to divulge information and express opinions that they may not otherwise have done. After each interview, I painstakingly embarked on my transcription and analysis. I found that this was a lengthy process which took

up to six hours per interview to carry out. By and large however, this was a worthwhile process as it brought me closer to the informants. Also, it was possible to pay heed to their comments and be certain that I did not overlook what was revealed.

My Research Diary

My research diary was an essential part of this study, as I recorded personal notes and observations. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that written accounts such as diaries are especially useful ways of obtaining information about the personal and the private. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that as we are part of the social world being studied, the data collected and interpreted are influenced by our own biases, which is of relevance to the study. In their research on student midwives Davies and Atkinson's (1991) research diaries served as a kind of personal confessional, often addressing the researcher directly about private anxieties, sources of anger, and frustrations. I found that by keeping a diary, I was able to subject my research to rigorous analysis whilst picking up the minutiae of day to day social action.

The diary is an acknowledgement of the interplay between the ethnographer and the study. The researcher impacts on the study, which in turn impacts on the researcher, with implications for professional practice and personal development. My diary also allowed for reflection as I recorded changes in my coaching practice and philosophy. Refining one's thinking is for Mason (2002) as important as reading and writing, and just as time-consuming. Brown (2008) contends that the best writing is often done after a period of reflection. I therefore had to account for myself and my relationship with the swimmers. Brewer (2008) argues that reflexive ethnographers should account for themselves and their social relations, as well as the substantive findings and construction of the text. Some researchers are known to be overwhelmed by the demands of the taxing nature of ethnographic data collection and analysis, and the amount of energy needed to sustain rapport with interviewees (Mason 2002). In order to assess my position, I

made notes in my research diary in order to evaluate the truth of my findings. In this way, I was able to account for myself as well as recording the substantive findings and the construction of the text. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) quite rightly point out, the ethnographer must try continually to be aware of how his or her presence may have shaped the data.

Data Analysis

In ethnography, the analysis of the data is not a distinct stage in the research. In many ways it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems and continues through to the writing process (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Analysis can be defined as the process of bringing order to the data, organising what is there into patterns, categories and descriptive units and looking for relationships between them (Brewer 2008). Formally, it starts to take shape in analytic notes and memoranda, informally; it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As I began my research, I found that my fieldwork was a demanding and time consuming activity. I was aware that some level of reflexivity had to be maintained. I was also aware that some reflection on the data collection process was essential. The development of themes and explanations involved a narrowing of focus and process of abstraction. Typically, my notes took the form of open-ended verbal descriptions in my diary and field notes, which were later developed into a set of categories. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that underpinning the process of analysis is the necessity to know one's data. In the early stages the aim is to use the data to think with and look to see whether any interesting patterns can be identified and how this fits or contrasts with previous theory or knowledge. Coding is a time consuming task, as it involves reading and re-reading notes and repeatedly listening to tapes and reading through transcripts until certain phrases occur repeatedly in the text and themes begin to emerge (Brewer 2008). The process of coding the data was a recurrent one, as new categories began to emerge; previously coded data was read again to see whether it contained any examples of new codes.

I am aware that there are various programmes that facilitate the process of analysis. After careful consideration, I chose not to use computer software because I did not want to become unthinking and mechanical. Seidel (1991) argues that a lack of scrutiny might prevent the researcher from seeing the real meaning of the phenomenon under study. Similarly, Coffey et al. (1996) contend that computers risk losing the ethnographers feel for the data and thus threaten the humanistic intent to capture the phenomenon in its own terms. The practice of coding and analysis was time consuming as I searched for general statements and underlying themes and built on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1997). It was therefore a process of bringing order and structure to a mass of data which required; explanation, analysis and interpretation. I used a notebook to identify different categories in my research diary and assign appropriate codes. These codes were then noted and organised along with notes and memos. The process was repeated with my interview transcripts and updated as my data collection continued. I then used various coloured pens to identify recurring words. At the end of the data collection period, I was able to analyse and organise interview and observational data into relevant chapter sections which reflected my research categories. Although this was a lengthy and monotonous process I felt that I was "*in tune*" with the place and the people

The five main themes I opened with have already been outlined in chapter one. They included: *"Third Place", "embracing an active lifestyle", "the ageing swimmer", "the serious swimmer"* and *"pushing the boundaries".* Using these five categories, I was able to become more analytical and look for patterns and explanation in the codes. Brewer (2008) likens these patterns to building blocks, which are assembled and re-assembled in different ways until the finished product is complete. Advocates of computer-assisted analysis use the analogy of a tree to describe the same process. For example; inside the *"serious swimmer"* code, the following sub codes were identified which related to: perseverance, achievement, benefits, identity, career and active lifestyles. Once codes and categories have been identified, the ethnographer can undertake qualitative description, defined as vivid descriptions of behaviour and talk, which reflect the identified category and codes (Brewer 2008). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that analysis

needs to examine the forms and functions of talk which includes the analysis of stories and narratives. In developing categories that make sense of data, my focus was on actions, the meanings that underpin and infuse them, and the wider situations that these actions respond to and shape. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) quite rightly point out, all of these aspects are intimately related. There are a number of techniques that can be used to validate interpretations (Bloor 1997). One particular method of doing this is to ask those being investigated to judge the analysis and interpretation themselves. Gratton and Jones (2010) concur that member validation is an important tool to the qualitative researcher. As a result, participants are able to provide feedback on the accuracy of categories. In addition, as already discussed, I tried to adopt a reflexive approach to my interpretations. Brewer (2008) suggests that respondent validation represents one kind of triangulation: the checking of inferences drawn from one set of data sources by collecting data from others. Also, I was able to assess the validity of inferences between indicators and concepts by examining data relating to the same concept from various sources which included: participant observation, interviewing, diary notes, behaviour and comments on what was said. In this way, I was able to make sense of the data and focus on particular aspects and examine my findings more closely.

Credibility of the Research

According to Gratton and Jones (2010), reliability is a prerequisite for any successful research project. Brewer (2008) argues that humanistic ethnography seeks to reconstruct the reality of the *"insiders"* world and construct accurate descriptions of this as if from the inside. This sort of data analysis allows the humanistic ethnographer to believe it is possible to convey with accuracy the meanings of people in the field under study by remaining true to the meanings themselves by *"telling it like it is"* in members own terms. In this way, reality is captured more objectively by means of greater attention to the subjective meanings of people. Hammersely and Atkinson (2007) suggest that people's reactions to the ethnographer's analysis will be coloured by their perceptions of

the research act. Whether respondents are enthusiastic, indifferent or hostile, their reactions cannot be taken as direct validation or refutation of the observers inferences. Rather, such processes of so called validation should be treated as yet another valuable source of data and insight. In triangulation, data produced by different data collection techniques are compared. To the extent that these techniques involve different types of validity threat, they provide a basis for checking interpretations. In qualitative research, validity - often referred to as trustworthiness, means that the real world of participants is presented and that those studied must recognise the social reality depicted (Brewer 2008; Fetterman 2010). The preferred criteria for demonstrating and judging quality in qualitative research are trustworthiness and authenticity (Daymon and Holloway 2002). Guided by the interpretive paradigm, these criteria are based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness and authenticity are shown by the researchers' careful documentation of the process of the research and decisions made along the way. For this reason, member checks are invaluable (Daymon and Holloway 2002), whereby the data from the interviews or the summary of the data from one informant is taken back to that informant.

Evaluation of the Research

The strength of this thesis lies is in the lived experience of two years spent with a group of Masters swimmers. During that time my position gradually changed as I was accepted as a member of the Masters swimming culture. As a member of the community, I observed and participated in many diverse activities including: training sessions, competitions, parties, social gatherings, informal get-togethers, discussions and meetings with other professionals. As an ethnographer, I came to appreciate the complexities of the status and situated identity hierarchy that exist in a Masters swimming environment, particularly within each lane group. Through my immersion in the culture my objective was to see the world from the cultural member's point of view.

This study seeks only to represent my findings from this particular culture. It acknowledges that other groups may be different and to a certain extent, I concede that as both coach and swimmer personal biases may have influenced the research process. It also acknowledges, that being so close to the culture being studied, I was engrossed in the setting, however, at all times, as a professional coach, I had the interests of the swimmers at heart and I adhered to the code of ethics laid down by British Swimming. Sports coaching is a process and in order to be effective a coach needs to consider the practical realities of athletes, operate an athlete centred approach and act as a facilitator (Cross and Lyle 1999). In adopting the role of a swimmer, I understand that the experience of participation and competition cannot be translated through sight or verbally communicated to others, especially non-athletes. I found that I matured into the culture and my own sport experience involved me in a rite of passage. Indeed, de Garis (1999) argues that sport ethnography brings to the field of investigation an opportunity to develop a method that makes lived experience real to others' perception of sport experience. As a result, my own body's lived encounter with performance and competition not only allowed me to access sensations of pain, elation, anxiety and emotion but it also brought me closer to the cultural practices of the swimmers I so admired.

CHAPTER FOUR: The *"Third Place"*
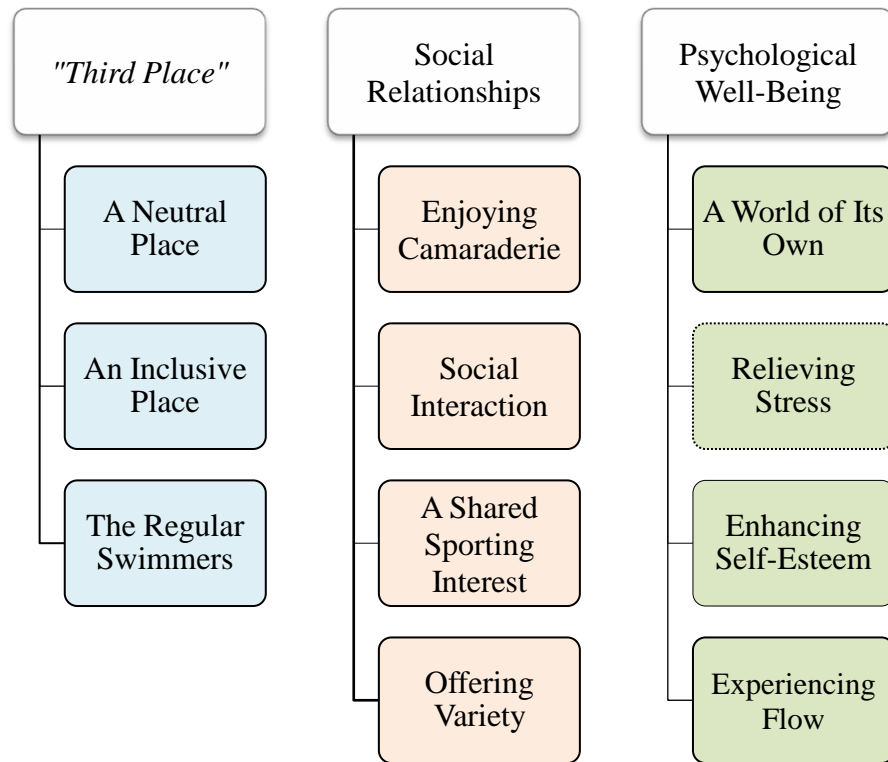
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of a *"Third Place"*

Introduction

The dominant theme of this study is the *"Third Place"* as illustrated in Figure 1. The following chapter explores the concept of *"Third Place"* within the social world of the Masters swimmer and explains its value in community. In his book, *"The Great Good Place"*, Ray Oldenburg (1999) coined the term *"Third Place"* to denote places other than work (first place) or a person's home (second place). Oldenburg (1999) describes a *"Third Place"* as being typically plain. A great building is just a building and a place is just a space unless the people are right to make it a living space. The purpose of this chapter is to explore a sport culture as a *"Third Place"* or *"meeting point"* and bring meaning to the importance of *place* in Masters swimming. It will then consider social relationships within the *"Third Place"* and subsequently explain the psychological benefits of attaching to that

place. Place is a predominant component in the thesis that will re-emerge throughout the following chapters. According to Stebbins (1999, p.71) a social world consists of a subculture with "*a unique set of special norms, values, beliefs, styles, moral principles and performance standards*". Social worlds involve individuals either singly or in networks pursuing an activity or some aspect of that activity perceived as sphere of interest (Hastings et al. 1995). Being a member of a social world can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment (Dionigi 2002). The NGB for swimming proposes that:

> *The social aspect of Masters swimming is the key selling point which can be utilised to persuade the many swimmers who swim for exercise that they should join a cohesive unit.*

> (British Swimming 2011, p.6)

I begin this chapter by considering the Masters swimming community as a *"Third Place"*. As an ethnographer within the field, my research focuses on the Masters swimming culture. At the outset I explore what constitutes a *"Third Place"* and subsequently consider the Masters swimming setting. Within the setting, I consider the lived experience of the Masters swimmer as I aspire to reveal the swimming culture, its structure, roles, norms and values. My interest lies in sport culture, people, personalities, practices, roles, responsibilities and values. Through exploring the Masters swimming world, I seek to illustrate its importance in community as an indispensible place which contributes towards freedom and contentment. More importantly, I want to understand how a Masters swimming community can become a *"great good place"* by welcoming its members and creating a convivial atmosphere. The following discussion elaborates on these points. In so doing, I shed light on the implications of interaction and belonging experienced by older adults who participate in Masters swimming.

The Nature of *"Third Places"*

A Neutral Place

> *Where neutral ground is available it makes possible for far more informal,*
> *even intimate, relations among people than could be entertained in the*
> *home.*
>
> <div align="right">(Oldenburg 1999 p.22-23).</div>

In this research the neutral ground is provided by a 1970s built leisure centre situated in *Fallwood*[3] in Dorset. The centre houses a four lane 25 metre swimming pool where people can gather together. Masters swimming sessions are offered on a weekly basis, four times a week and are open to all. Consequently, the sessions do not function on an official membership basis. The sessions usually last an hour, and are typically scheduled in the early mornings or in the evenings. According to Hastings and Cable (2005), Masters swimming programmes foster a sense of community and maintain affective social ties through the common goals of the work routine and competitive performances.

My observations revealed that although Masters sessions were run by the leisure centre on a pay-as-you-go basis with access to a professional coach, it was the swimmers themselves who shaped the community by showing an interest in each other:

> *Sometimes when the chips are against you and you're thinking I really*
> *can't be bothered to go swimming tonight. And you think well hang on, if I*
> *don't go, you know, I'll be letting the side down...*
>
> <div align="right">Simon</div>

Consequently, a shared collective of people assumed responsibility for the continued existence of Masters swimming sessions, as Simon pointed out:

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[3] Fallwood is a fictional name

I think we all accept that we are the membership, we are the group. It's not a centre run thing. It's not, you know, you take part in some Pilates groups or something and you're just over there. But the difference with swimming is I feel, that there's a real community in, well I like to think, a real ownership in the group. That it's not your session, it's not a pool session, it's OUR session.

Oldenburg (1999) stresses that there must be places on neutral ground where people can gather to allow individuals to come and go and feel comfortable and at home. Unless these places exist in community then association outside the home is impoverished (Oldenburg 1999). In this research there was evidence to suggest that the leisure centre provided the neutral ground required for social relations to be built. Being on neutral ground meant that swimmers could come and go as they pleased and there was no requirement to play host. In the context of the daily involvement in Masters swimming, I observed that there was little difference in terms of allegiance between recreational and competitive swimmers, since any given lane group had a mixture of both, all working with a structured programme. Furthermore, camaraderie from sharing goals, social encouragement to take risks in learning new skills, and the esteem earned from good performances were essential. This was evidenced through their enthusiasm and regular attendance. The shared experience made it easy for members to talk to, understand and enjoy each other's company. This discovery corresponded to Hastings et al. (1995), who found that that camaraderie and social involvement were important motives in pursuing a swimming career. Jane, who competed regularly, revealed:

I like to feel that I'm within the loop and keeping going.

Oldenburg (1999 p.36) suggests that the physical structure of the *"Third Place"* is *"typically plain"* and for the most part they are *"unimpressive looking"*. For this group, the facilities at *Fallwood* satisfied their needs confirming the plain exterior of the *"Third Place"*. Any swimmer looking for a state of the art, deck-level pool would not choose to train there. This was evidenced a year into my data collection when the pool had to be closed down so that major refurbishments could be

carried out. The revamp included a new ceiling, improved lighting and an upgraded ventilation system. On seeing the new lighting and having an improved air flow on poolside, I realised how inadequate the facilities were throughout the course of the first year of my data collection. In spite of these imperfections, it was the significance of the neutral ground and the relationships, interactions and activity to which it played host that were of the essence.

An Inclusive Place

A key feature of a *"Third Place"* is that people feel comfortable.

> *There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which no one is required to play host, and in which we all feel at home and comfortable.*

> (Oldenburg 1999, p.22).

In determining what was unique about the sessions on offer, Paul pointed out:

> *Fallwood is quite unique in that it offers four sessions a week with a trained coach who can tailor programmes to suit the audience. This is done on a pay as you go basis. It promotes coached swimming outside the traditional club environment...*

He also revealed that the attraction of being part of the group related to its friendly and inviting atmosphere:

> *You know from the minute I walked in here, I think the first person I ever met was Sam the fireman. And hello and hello and there's people actually welcoming you into the lanes whereas at other sessions it's, you know, it's very much who's that? You know, no interest. You have to sort of bide*

your time for people to even talk to you. So whatever is the clique here it is very welcoming. I think everyone feels comfortable down here Jan. I really do... and you can see people wanting to come back.

Oldenburg proposes that:

A place that is a leveller is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion... Within Third Places, the charm and flavour of one's personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts.

(Oldenburg 1999, p.24).

During the course of my interviews, I was able to build up a personal history on each swimmer. In so doing, I found that their occupations were surprisingly diverse. For example; they included: an airline pilot, a retired aviation executive, an air traffic controller, a sports development manager, a helicopter pilot, a computer programmer, an electrician, a community nurse, a retired teacher and a check out operator. Oldenburg (1999) advises that:

Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals.

(Oldenburg 1999, p.25)

It was apparent that social status did not intrude on the *"Third Place"* association. For example; Megan swam with Patrick and Jane but their lifestyles were very different. Consequently, a sense of equality existed whereby the individual qualities of each person took precedence over their status or station in life:

What I love about it is that swimming seems to encompass everyone... you come from all walks of life... Take Jane as an example. She lives in a beautiful house and they've obviously done very well for themselves. But Jane doesn't portray that in the pool. You wouldn't know... we all are one. We are all at a level... and I like that. I like that. It's a real leveller and I find that quite comforting to know that there isn't that competitiveness before you've actually entered the water.

<div align="right">Simon</div>

Newcomers were also embraced on equal terms irrespective of status. In addition, pure sociability was a comfort to both newcomers and established swimmers. Will was introduced to the group as a newcomer but he soon felt at ease within the group:

The group session is probably key. I would say that certainly benefits everybody. 'Cause I look at everybody and they're all in the same boat as me. They all work, they've all got family to a certain extent and I think coming down with each other just makes it so much easier and enjoyable... Nobody puts their chest out any more than the next person who goes: "Well I'm the fastest". So we know our boundaries. We know who the quick ones are. We try to beat them or copy them. But nobody is arrogant at all or anything like that which makes it even better. So it's just a nice bond of people. Like-minded people just pushing themselves. But it's that group concept that I really enjoy because there's no room for slacking you know. Which is great.

In general, the sessions were upbeat and cheerful. That is not to say that the swimmers did not have personal problems, in fact quite the reverse was true. Tina commented on the benefits of being able to leave behind the stresses and strains of home and work:

So if I know I'm going to the pool. I will go there and I can de-stress.

And so, the main purpose of training was to enjoy the company of fellow swimmers who shared a common interest and therefore the reality of taking part in a coached session meant that personal problems were set aside.

The Regular Swimmers

Of the thirteen swimmers who attended morning training during the first week of my data collection in January 2010, eleven continued to train on a regular basis attending three or four sessions each week whenever possible. It was these swimmers who were at the heart of the community – the regulars. Oldenburg (1999) suggests that it is the regulars who give a place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the group will be there. And so, it is the regulars who set a tone of conviviality and acceptance.

> *What attracts the regular visitor to a Third Place is supplied not by the management but by fellow customers. The Third Place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars.*

> (Oldenburg 1999, p.33).

Elsa told me that she had swum in conventional public swimming sessions until Roy suggested that she attend Masters sessions. As a result, she gradually stepped up into attending four sessions a week. Simon had also been welcomed into the group by Roy. Simon confirmed that, having started off as a newcomer, he too was now a regular. Consequently, a practice of permanence and stability was generated as newcomers became regulars.

I just turned up. It happened actually to be on a fairly quiet evening as well. So I think, kind of, Roy took me under his wing. And I hope that I'd do the same for when other people turn up, and try and welcome people.

<div align="right">Simon</div>

Paul made reference to other leisure centres in the area. In particular, he liked taking part in coached sessions which were open to all. In his view, the sessions at *Fallwood* were inclusive and accommodated everyone including: "*pool swimmers, open water swimmers and health and fitness swimmers*".

The Swimming Culture - Roles, Norms and Values

Over a prolonged period of time, I monitored Masters swimmers gathering three or four times a week to train together. More often than not I observed them as a coach. The pool was set out with red white and blue anti-wave lane lines and a pace clock. Coloured "*backstroke*" flags were draped across the pool at either end. Pullbuoys, hand paddles and kick boards were also available. What was crucial for the smooth functioning of each lane group during training was that everyone should be in their correct place in the lane according to their relative abilities. So, within each lane group there was a customary hierarchy. The swimmers who were recognised as being the strongest swimmers took the lead positions, while the other swimmers sat behind depending on abilities. Learning where one stood in the lane hierarchy was an important component of learning the culture. Each swimmer knew which lane they should to be in, depending upon speed, endurance and aptitude. The "*top*" lane was an enthusiastic mixed group who were extremely competitive. They would often set group challenges and targets during a set of swims. There were usually six swimmers in this lane. The two "*middle*" lanes were a mix of male and female swimmers who were less competitive but would motivate and encourage one another. The "*slower*" lane comprised of a mix of swimmers who either wanted to improve their fitness or had come into swimming at a later stage.

Arguably, the sights and sounds of the swimming pool could prove intimidating to the new recruit. Yet within the world of Masters swimming a considerable amount of enjoyment could be found which kept people coming back month after month. When I asked Roy what he enjoyed about swimming he commented:

> *The variety. I think it, it's the fact that erm, it's not the same thing all the time. We, we have variety. You've obviously got plans for us because things have changed. And that's noticeable. Over the period it has changed. We swim farther now...*

Among the various cultural practices which had to be learned were those associated with scheduled group swimming. The process of learning these cultural practices links to the literature of Stebbins (2001) as he discusses turning points and stages of achievement and involvement in a serious leisure career. For some participants in this study, reaching certain age barriers represented the start of a new stage in their career. This will become more apparent in chapter five, whilst exploring the *"ageing swimmer"* and the unique ethos of Masters swimming whereby the onset of age is adopted in a positive way. And so, there existed a community - a social world in which there was a sentiment of value and worth. Being an individual within the social group involved an emotional significance which generated many good feelings. Consequently, the popularity of Masters swimming sessions resulted in individuals experiencing a meaningful social connection within the community.

Social Relationships

The involvement of individuals in particular leisure activities has been the focus of an increasing number of studies (Stevenson 2002; Allen Collinson and Hockey 2007; McCarville 2007; Shipway and Jones 2007; Atkinson 2008). In this research there was evidence to suggest that being part of a Masters swimming group involved firstly, positive social relationships and secondly, psychological

well-being. According to Gould et al. (2008) the social reward of group attraction is defined as participation in, and association with, the social world of a serious leisure activity. My findings indicated that swimmers felt that they belonged to a group of athletes who were important to them. In addition, they were engaged in a physically, socially and active lifestyle that provided them with a sense of community. This was evident in the shared emotional connection between swimmers. This theme was conceived by McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of membership which describes how feelings of community derive from a shared sporting interest (Lyons and Dionigi 2007). This interest was continued in their desire to remain healthy, active, and competitive.

Enjoying Camaraderie

Throughout my research, there were occasions when newcomers would arrive on poolside looking hesitant and unsure. Usually their first question was: *"which is the slow lane?"* On other occasions they would say: *"I'm not sure about this"* or *"I'm not sure I'm good enough".* Having recently joined a local gym, I could understand their concerns. I recall that on my first visit, I was left to my own devices with weights clanging, exercise machines humming and loud music playing. Other gym users ignored me and carried on with their work outs. I exercised for about half an hour and left. The experience was uncomfortable. The atmosphere was soulless. A friendly word in my direction could have made such a difference. Instead, I felt awkward and ill at ease. With hindsight, the experience proved invaluable as I realised that in order for people to feel welcome and make progress, they need to feel at home, especially in a new environment.

Stevenson (2002) has argued that an athletic career begins with a process of introduction to a sport, followed by various interdependent processes of ever deepening commitment. Throughout the processes of *"conversion, entanglements, commitments and obligations* and *reputations and identities",* the prospective athletes are making choices, are being reflexive, and are motivated above all by a desire to do what is the best for themselves or whatever they discern that to be.

Early on in the involvement, the athlete becomes converted to the worldview of the sporting subculture and is entangled relatively quickly in a subtle but ever increasing series of commitments and obligations. Of the six characteristics put forward by Stebbins (1992; 1999) that distinguish the serious from the casual leisure career, two are especially notable here. Firstly, individuals derive various durable benefits from serious leisure. Secondly, they participate in the unique ethos, the subculture and social world of that leisure activity. According to Stebbins (1992) durable benefits include rewards which include:

> *The camaraderie that develops around the pursuit, the appeal of talking about it, and the exhilaration of being part of the scene and group accomplishments – shared fun associated with collective accomplishments of team or other members ...*

<div align="right">(Stebbins 1992, p.94-95)</div>

One of the qualities that differentiate serious leisure from casual leisure is the unique ethos of the group. Research supports the contention that social motives are particularly important for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport (Ashford et al. 1993). Several of the participants in this study made reference to the importance of companionship. Becky said:

> *Not all but a lot of my social life is part of my training really 'cause a lot of the social activities are with the same people.*

In training for endurance events she liked to train with others and referred to the importance of *"camaraderie"*. She remarked that fellow participants could *"understand each other"* and referred to sport as being *"a bit of a family thing"*.

Familiarity between swimmers was conveyed in a good-humoured way with the mood being light-hearted. As a consequence, the atmosphere was in harmony with that of a "*great good place*".

> *Whether pronounced or low key, however, the playful spirit is of utmost importance. Here joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation.*

(Oldenburg 1999, p.38).

Wellard (2014) maintains that an embodied approach to fun and enjoyment in sporting activities cannot be ignored since they have an influence on continued participation. He also argues that it is necessary to acknowledge the broader dimensions of the experience whereby sporting activity is influenced by a range of competing and conflicting factors. Dennis concurred with this view as he maintained that the most important characteristic of Masters swimming was fun:

> *I enjoy the camaraderie in the various Masters sessions. The number one word is fun. In all the training that you do, er you've got to enjoy it or you just wouldn't do it and because of the physical exercise it can be hard work. But at the end of it, if you've enjoyed it, you've enjoyed the relationships and the camaraderie. That makes it. You look forward to the next session.*

It was evident too that the swimmers appreciated one another's company.

> *As the chaps said this morning, your hour session just flies by because we have a bit of a laugh.*

Will

They also recognised each other's strengths and weaknesses. They encouraged each other to persevere through friendly banter which would often continue throughout the sessions.

> *You get a bit of bravado a bit of kind of banter if you like going on. But I feel that that's part of it. It's part of the bonding.*

Simon

For example; I remember Sam teasing a latecomer one evening: "*Come on, we're getting out in a minute*". Similarly, when swimming behind a powerful South African swimmer on a kick set Joe commented: "*Blimey, it's like being in the Atlantic out there*".

I deduced that an easy friendliness extended to newcomers demonstrating the potential of Masters swimming in drawing people in. Over time, an air of familiarity developed in each lane group so that swimmers knew their place:

> *And you know, well I think you get to know each other's strengths. I think you get to know who's good at the kick sets. I think you know who's good at the 50's, who's good at the longer stuff you know.*

Dennis

My research highlighted that the social context of sport provided individuals with opportunities to satisfy their need for social connections and belonging. Through creating a welcoming and friendly environment, participants continued with their interests within the swimming community.

Social Interaction

> *Neutral ground provides the place, and levelling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of Third Places everywhere. That activity is conversation.*
>
> (Oldenburg 1999, p.26)

Research shows that *"Third Place"* patrons who have an attachment to the establishment do so as a result of receiving life-enhancing social support from customers and employees in the establishment, including emotional support, companionship and instrumental support (Rosenbaum et al. 2009). Within the diminutive world of a leisure facility, swimmers revealed the character traits and values they shared in common. Each lane would know who should lead the set, depending on whether it was a speed set, a pull set, a kick set or an endurance set. Everyone swam in a circle, up one side of the lane and down the other side and swam in the same direction; that everyone allowed the swimmer ahead a five or ten seconds start; everyone understood about moving aside if necessary so that faster swimmers could overtake. Other cultural practices included reading the pace clock to determine interval times, learning practice drills and understanding training sets. These idiosyncrasies were unique in this context. The established swimmers knew their strengths and weaknesses and encouraged each other through the harder sets of swims. Usually, the swimmers would rotate throughout a session in order to get more rest as leading the lane was more difficult. Consequently, an informal hierarchy existed within each lane group which would be negotiated over a course of weeks or even months. Although the term hierarchy is inconsistent with the notion of equality in the *"Third Place"* it did not intrude on the *"Third Place"* association.

At the beginning of a training session, social support was surprisingly minimal as I discerned that familiarity was exchanged in nonchalant, mostly non-obligatory ways. For example; on arrival, conversation centred on idle talk. Topics of conversation were kept general and inconsequential in nature and related to everyday matters - the weather, the training programme or even current affairs.

Social interaction existed for its own sake and was not spoiled by deep significant or emotional investment. When a serious topic of conversation was brought up it received little attention from the group as a whole and the mood was generally upbeat and optimistic.

> *Actually one thing that we do is none of us tend to bring our problems to the pool. Is that we don't talk work in the pool with anyone. We might in the changing rooms say how's work, but it's all very kind of superficial.*

Simon

Stevenson (1999) argues that most of the interpersonal interaction experienced by swimmers occurs within the limited group of people who regularly occupy a particular lane of the pool. This was substantiated as I perceived that responses to any potentially weighty problems were discussed within lane groups or in discussions at the end of training sessions. On these occasions participants would linger at the shallow end of the pool in small groups and the atmosphere became more contemplative and absorbed. For instance; there were occasions when conversations were reflective and personal. Dennis expressed his concerns about the prospect of being made redundant. Jane conveyed her sorrow following the untimely death of her brother-in-law. I also recall the day Dan disclosed that his house sale had fallen through as he agonised about finding another buyer. Historically, anthropologists have considered gossip as a tool to maintain group interests (Gluckman 1963; Haviland 1977) whereas psychologists have tended to consider the use of gossip to advance individual interests (Dunbar 1996; Nicholson 2001; McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002). Kniffin and Wilson (2005) suggest that gossip can be used within groups to enforce norms, both negatively and positively. This study affirms that individuals used gossip as a tool to defend and avow group-beneficial norms in a positive way.

As well as idle talk I observed what Stevenson (1999) refers to as motive talk. During training, the ideal is that each lane group is organised so that swimmers are of a similar ability. What is crucial therefore is that everyone should be in their

correct place according to their relative ability. There are comparisons here with Stevenson (2002) who noticed that identities and reputations are typically claimed and created during the ongoing interactions within the lane. I observed that during training sessions the lead swimmers would change and so there was a hierarchy within each lane group. Consequently, the lead position conveyed a status of situated identity. Throughout a training set there was a continual shuffling as each swimmer negotiated their correct place. Simon considered himself to be: *"a shepherd as opposed to a sheep"*. His inclination was: *"to lead and not follow the crowd"*. Other swimmers preferred to swap around depending on the training set:

I do enjoy leading the guys and at the same time I also enjoy chasing as well to get that sort of competitive edge going as well. If Alex is leading, like, I'll give him the five seconds but I will hunt him down and then stick on his toes.

Dan

When there's six of us in a lane you'll notice that various people swap and change around. Larry will do the pull, he will lead a pull and Jane will come behind Larry on a pull and I'll come down you know, Naomi will always be behind me... on the pull. But, not on swim, not on swim. On pull we'll swap. Kick, Naomi will lead the kick and then we'll put Megan in if we can... (pause while we laugh). *Well, because it works that way, they go faster. They kick faster so you shouldn't hold them up. You, you shouldn't. If they've got clear water in front of them they can kick as hard as they want to. They can go at the speed they want to. You can go at the speed you want to and you're not holding anybody up. And that way the lane works and you can just keep swapping and changing around.*

Roy

During my research I observed leadership traits within lane groups albeit in an easy and informal way as the lead swimmer would often direct each lane group through a set. Standing on poolside, I would often hear words of encouragement

from the lead swimmer: *"Come on, two to go, stay on my feet". "I'm hurting"* and then *"so am I"* would come the response from the two swimmers following behind. Stevenson (1999) noted that in the context of lane negotiations, motive talk plays an important, though ambiguous, part in justifying and substantiating the shifts in position. This was authenticated by Dennis:

> *Especially you know like this morning. I'm hanging on for grim death to Sam with his 1.18's or his 1.19's or whatever he was doing. And erm, I wouldn't be able to do that on the front. So I was happy to sit on the back today.*

I determined that swimmers had the option to immerse themselves in the activity if they so chose. It was noticeable too that the swimmers at the back of the lane had less responsibility as demonstrated above by Dennis who was able to endorse his motive in swimming at the back of the lane.

Offering Variety

When considering why these individuals sought out Masters swimming sessions, they confirmed that they enjoyed the variety offered through structured training sessions. Elsa explained that she enjoyed the discipline presented through coached sessions. Consequently, Masters sessions provided a more structured experience as swimmers looked to the coach to offer variety and interest:

> *Well what I do like about it is the programme you know, is somebody telling you exactly what to do. And getting through the programme which is VARIED and therefore it is INTERESTING* (said with animation).

Elsa

Paul agreed that he benefitted from the variety offered in Masters sessions:

I like the variety we do down here and I think you have a very hard job trying to please a lot of people.

The swimmers' involvement deepened as they made progress. Stevenson (2002) argues that there is a definite processes through which involvement is deepened: *conversion, entanglements, commitments and obligations,* and *reputations and identities*. Elsa recognised this:

I find it more interesting when other people do it as well. And you feel a little bit of competition so that you do want to get on and get further or perhaps a bit faster or a bit more consistent.

She also expressed her thanks:

Well I'm very grateful for you doing these sessions and that (we laugh). *You know it has helped me a lot. I mean I think otherwise. I think without these sessions I probably would not really know to set myself any kind of goals. 'Cause you vary the programme so much that it is more inspirational than doing it myself sort of thing you know? That is erm, I think, that is why these sessions are so very very good. Because they give you an idea on what one can do in the pool.*

A Shared Sporting Interest

Prus (1996) argues that the more that one becomes entangled in the everyday affairs of the activity, the deeper one's involvement becomes. McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of "*membership",* describes how feelings of community

derive from sharing a common interest. I found that there was evidence of allegiance which tied the swimmers into the activity as Becky pointed out:

> *Yes there is a bit of a bond. We understand each other. When someone's injured or unwell we text and have conversations to chivvy them along. If we haven't seen someone at training for a while we will text them.*

In addition, there was an indication showing an interest in the affairs of other swimmers. This was apparent as they socialised together in the outside world through dinner parties or in sharing a beach hut during the summer months. The focus on continuing to be healthy and active provided the foundation for a sense of emotional connectedness to a unique community of active older people but it was the activity itself that was the key motive for participating. Consequently, the social world developed through the sport as they met with like-minded people who could relate to one another:

> *Well I've never been a very supple person but I think that it's helped me. In fact it's helped quite a lot... because my work takes me away a lot. Erm and the people I work with, the friends I've got at work live all over the place. I actually haven't got a huge amount of friends in this area so the social side of swimming has improved my sort of social life quite a lot.*

<div align="right">Patrick</div>

Dennis spoke about the bond they shared:

> *My best friends are swimmers you know. They understand me, they understand what I do. And I think sometimes people outside the sport perhaps don't understand how, how that bond develops.*

There was also evidence to demonstrate making considerable adjustments to their lifestyles in order to maintain the routine of being a Masters swimmer:

I think it all comes down to looking at a guy like Roy who is 70 odd but yet he's still willing to push himself and still does a damned good job of doing it as well. You know we've all got the same attributes or the majority of us have got the same attributes that will come out because we all want to achieve the same things.

Will

The continuing commitment to the sport forged a central life interest for many participants. It was clear that, for many of the swimmers, swimming was such a high priority in their lives that other matters often took second place. As a consequence, they had to modify elements of their lifestyles to accommodate swimming, including adapting to the schedule of Masters practice times, making preparations for morning swims, taking care of outside obligations and adjusting their work commitments.

We've all got diaries haven't we? We've all got blocks that we're working. Whatever we're doing. And it's a case of well ok, I've got a window there and if it suits then I'll do it.

Simon

For the swimmers who were retired, maintaining a training routine was much easier as the following comment suggests:

Everything gets put round training. Yea, and now it's easy for me to actually work around the training because I'm not doing the work. If I was trying to do this twenty years ago it would be impossible because of the amount of hours I used to put into working.

Bernie

There was substantial evidence to suggest that the Masters sport setting enabled them to feel valued and accepted by others who respected them for what they did and for who they were. This contributed to a sense of unity with other athletes who also considered themselves to be Masters swimmers. Of course, the conversion into the Masters swimming subculture only happened through attachment. As the swimmers learnt about the cultural ideology, and as they began to act in culturally appropriate ways, then they were drawn deeper and deeper into the Masters swimming subculture.

Psychological Well-Being

The emotional reactions associated with exercise have a potentially important role to play in physical activity and health promotion and the benefits of physical activity on psychological well-being have been well documented (McAuley and Rudolph 1995; McAuley and Blissmer 2000; Ruuskanen and Ruoppila 2001; Netz et al. 2005; Biddle and Mutrie 2008). In particular, sport participation is now promoted to older people as a means to maintain health and well-being (Baker et al. 2010). If physical activity is seen as positive health behaviour to be encouraged and promoted then research into how people feel during their leisure time may be critical in determining their continued involvement.

A World of Its Own

> *The character of a Third Place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres.*
>
> (Oldenburg 1999, p.42)

Individuals dissatisfied with aspects of their lives and looking to forget their troubles or take a break from the monotony of routine can find escape

through participation in sports (Swanson et al. 2008). As a participant observer, Waquant (1992) trained with boxers and entered the ring as part of a three year ethnographic project in a gym in Chicago. He maintained that the gym provided a focus of support and a protective shield against worldly temptations and risks by creating *"another world of its own"*. This was made possible because of an unspoken code according to which the boxers did not carry into the gym their obligations and problems from outside.

> *Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the Third Place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends.*

> (Oldenburg 1999, p.42)

Both the home and workplace provide a highly predictable world that does not allow for novelty and diversity (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982). On the other hand, the *"Third Place"* is populated by a shifting diversity of inhabitants. In harmony with Waquant's (1992) research, I found that the pool offered a comparatively self-enclosed site where swimmers could find respite from the pressures of everyday life. Consequently, a home away from home was created. In addition, there are comparisons to the findings of Shipway (2010) who uncovered long distance running to be as much a mental as a physical escape, to a *"Third Place"* away from the serious everyday world. Shipway (2010) proposes that when participants dress into their running shorts and running vests, they are changing from their everyday clothes that exist in the *"real world",* and into another detached uniform, which reflects their long distance running identity, and the social world attached to that identity. In this research participants made reference to *"escape"* and being in another world when swimming. Tina commented:

> *I am definitely in my own world when I'm there... I don't know whether you've noticed but I go under water quite a bit and sometimes when I'm just down there and I'm looking round and you're just floating and you could be anywhere. Absolutely anywhere.*

Dan commented on the unique quality of being in water:

> *I think there's sort of a psychological side as well ...there's something with water that you almost you just ...I find that when I'm in the water I can be anywhere in the world.*

Similarly, Patrick commented that by swimming it was possible to avoid everyday problems:

> *It's sort of like an escape from work. 'Cause when I come home from work, sometimes if I've had a flight where we have had some problems it does go over in your mind quite a bit. But if I can come home and go for a swim it helps release you from that.*

Several swimmers commented that it was possible to experience a sense of independence and freedom as they escaped from the pressures of life in modern society:

> *You're untouchable, you're untouchable. There's no mobile phones, there's no email. You know, it's like going to the cinema... and swimming is the same or exercise on the whole is the same. Especially swimming because you can't take your phone with you. In a gym your phone can be with you. You can listen to your music, or it rings and you can pick up an email or whatever but I mean swimming, you're just completely, practically naked and no phones, you're just away from the world for that time and you're untouchable so it's great.*

> Will

This study highlights how swimmers were able to meet in a *"Third Place"* which provided an escape from the real world. I discovered that the *"Third Place"*

attachment to the establishment came as a result of receiving life-enhancing social support from others. This included emotional support, companionship and to a lesser extent, instrumental support. My research complemented that of Rosenbaum et al. (2009) who concluded that the importance of these three types of support on human well-being cannot be understated. Swimmers in this study indicated that they found swimming to be of benefit both mentally and physically. My findings confirm that participants value the brief respite spent in training, which affords the place and opportunity to enhance their personal well-being.

Relieving Stress

Oldenburg (1999) argues that the effect of the *"Third Place"* is to raise participants' spirits and it is an effect that never totally fades. In the words of Georg Simmel (1971) the qualities relate to joy, vivacity and relief. Joy is the emotion evoked by well-being, vivacity suggests that the tempo is lively and relief implies a release from duty or the breaking of monotony. Daniel Wann (1997) suggested that the use of the escape motive might be particularly prevalent during personally difficult or stressful times. Wann and Rochelle (1999 cited Wann et al. 2001) explored the use of sport as an escape from either overstimulation or under stimulation. As a result, sport can either serve as a relief from boredom or as a relaxation from tensions. More recently Wann et al. (2001) suggested that participation in an activity provided a diversion and therefore individuals were able to temporarily forget their troubles. A characteristic of the *"Third Place"* is that personal problems are left at the door. Several participants made reference to leaving their personal problems behind:

> *It's a form of relaxation in a way 'cause you're taking your mind off what might be causing you stress at work or at home so you're totally focused on keeping your body doing what it needs to be doing. So it is a form of relaxation and stress busting.*
>
> Becky

I know that if I didn't turn up and have that, that time to relax and actually some of it's 'me time' where I can just sort of forget about you know what's happening at home or what's happening at work or I can think it through or sometimes you can talk it through.

Tina

Well, definitely, I do like to come away from home sometimes. For, you know, difficult reasons and for difficulties perhaps at home when there's a bit of trouble and that.

Elsa

As I have already noted, the mood in this *"Third Place"* was upbeat and cheerful. This was the case even when the individual had gone through a bad day:

And there are times when I turn up on poolside and I can just say I've had a bad day, just don't mess with me. Yeah, I just need to let this all go and I just need to relax. Er... and I will thrash it out as go up and down there and think things through. And er... Yeah just sort of work everything through and I come out a different person and by the time I arrive through the door I think I'm quite nice.

Tina

According to Oldenburg (1999) one of the reasons why the home and the place of work are not as fondly anticipated is because people must often remain there when they would rather be elsewhere. I found this to be true, in that being part of the swimming world meant that their individual roles and responsibilities were lifted. Hence, Sophie was no longer a mother, Elsa was no longer a wife and Sam was no longer a fireman. As a consequence, life on the outside was lost bringing liberation and relaxation:

I use the water as what I call my slipper... you know you put a pair of slippers on and you kind of feel at home and water can do that for me. It can almost like sort out the problems and just make things better.

Simon

Whilst carrying out this research some swimmers were able to share their personal troubles with me. Concerns of everyday life included: redundancy, bereavement, ongoing illness, financial difficulties and injury. Interestingly, the swimmers appeared to train relentlessly through these difficult times. Sally underwent knee surgery but returned to training after only four weeks instead of the usual six weeks. Dan enjoyed physical activity because his job was mentally stressful and he was able to "*switch off*" when he was training. Tina commented: "*I'm definitely on my own when I'm there… you're just gliding… and I don't want it to finish".* For some, swimming acted as a form of therapy and relaxation. Equally, for others, the physical nature of the activity served as a kind of stress relief.

Swanson et al. (2008) suggest that individuals dissatisfied with aspects of their lives and looking to forget their troubles or take a break from routine can find escape through participation in sports. In this way, people taking part in athletic endeavours can enjoy themselves by engaging in an activity viewed as a departure from the normal routines of everyday life (Goodwin et al. 2004). Masters participation was voluntary, and was characterised by intrinsic motivations such as enjoying friendship, relaxation and personal growth. Above all, the shared experience of swimming made it easy for swimmers to understand and care for one another. The swimming pool was a place where all were welcomed into the fold and compassion and support were evident in the swimmers interactions. *"Third Place"* friendships complemented more intimate relations with immunity from the outside world.

Enhancing Self-Esteem

If physical activity is associated with psychological well-being, it seems logical to suggest that an element of enjoyment of physical activity must also be present. Enjoyment is an important element of motivation, particularly when physical effort might be required (Biddle and Mutrie 2008). Physical exercise in old age increases positive emotional experiences (McAuley et al. 2005), improves body self-concept (Stoll and Alfermann 2002), self-esteem and quality of life (Elavsky et al. 2005). According to Williams (2006) enhanced self-esteem is significant because it provides a feeling of value or worth. Biddle and Mutrie (2008) propose that self-esteem is often seen to be the most important measure of psychological well-being. According to Jones (2006) having a social identity can provide the individual with a sense of belonging or membership of a wider social group, a valued place within that environment, which enhances self-worth and self-esteem.

My findings support Stevenson (2002) and Shipway and Jones (2007), where there was a reciprocal relationship, in that the activity needs to involve a degree of effort in order to provide a valued identity within the group. Consequently, swimming is particularly suited as a serious activity that is typically contrasted with *"casual"* or *"unserious"* leisure, which is considerably less substantial and offers no career. Stebbins (2005) argues that every serious leisure career both frames and is framed by the continuous search for rewards, a search that takes months, and in many sports, years before the participant consistently finds deep satisfaction. I found that self-esteem was strengthened by the status and recognition that the swimmers received from others. The swimmers also described being relevant to others, not only in terms of being an inspiration, but also in terms of being an integral part of a group in which they were important to other swimmers:

> *The others encourage you... the good thing as well is you get a lot of feedback from them, which I find is very useful. 'Cause some days if you're not swimming that well, they'll tell you. You know, pull your finger*

out! And days when you are swimming well they're like yeah, fantastic swimming and to have that feedback is really important I find.

Dan

Other benefits related to healthy living and physical well-being which in turn promoted their self-esteem:

I enjoy looking around and seeing people of my generation very unfit and I think that helps motivate me, that I'm never going to look like that.

Dennis

Any form of exercise I get that feel good feeling out of it. But from swimming, I think you're exercising all the muscles in your body, you are using most muscle groups, so you're getting a real good workout in the water, whereas with running it's just your legs, your heart, your lungs, your upper body doesn't get that workout that you do with swimming.

Dan

It's just the most amazing feeling. That's what I do it for, the feeling of physical achievement and I know I'm doing my body good, my mind good and I know that I've achieved something that morning and I'm quite happy.

Will

My results were consistent with the finding of Stevenson (2002) in that participants valued the social identities which they were able to appropriate, develop and maintain through swimming. Hence, self-esteem developed as they recognised and valued their own abilities in being able to participate in a Masters sport programme:

> *If I didn't have sport as actually my release I don't think I would have had any self-esteem, self-confidence and I definitely don't think I would have had the job that I have now.*
>
> Tina

I found that involvement was a requirement of the everyday routine to the extent that continuing with the activity was vital:

> *I miss it if I don't do it. I, I feel as if I've copped out you know as if I've missed something you know? It's difficult to explain but I don't like missing it.*
>
> Roy

> *It would be a shame if it was sort of not going on anymore. I would really miss something.*
>
> Elsa

Most swimmers were able to rationalise their commitment to the activity as Simon commented:

> *Yea, although Jenny* (his wife) *says to be frank that I'm always swimming. And that I'm always exercising, out doing something. But take the Friday night swim, well she's out with the girls doing their dancing thing so I would only be sitting at home so that's taken that one. And then the Monday night one, well everything's calm at home so I might as well go swimming.*

Stevenson (2002) suggests that the respect that is afforded to Masters swimmers is largely derived from their identity as a person who is both physically fit and

active and also from their identity as perceived experts in the fields of health, fitness, and sport generally. My findings would support this view as swimmers saw some value in the meanings associated with the cultural practices of the sport.

Experiencing Flow

Stebbins (2008) suggests that there are occasions in leisure time which stand out in the mind as thrills or high points. Stebbins (2008) argues that it is the high points that motivate the participant to carry on with the pursuit in the hope of finding similar experiences again and again. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to these high points as the flow experience or psychological flow. Flow is a form of optimal experience or a sensation where time is truncated and there is a complete sense of control. Perhaps more importantly, it is perceived as an optimal psychological state which leads to an enjoyable experience. Although the flow framework has since been developed and differentiated within the realm of psychology, it owes much of its intellectual heritage to phenomenology and the writings of Husserl and Heidegger (Csikszentmihalyi 1975/2000). Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework has been extensively utilised, providing perhaps the leading explanation for positive subjective experience in the study of leisure (Elkington 2010). Both Csikszentmihalyi (1992; 1997) and Stebbins (1992; 2008) have been key contributors to the belief within leisure research that "*good leisure*" needs to be much more than simply a pleasant or diversionary experience. Typically, athletes describe flow as an involuntary state; the more they seek it, the less likely it is to be achieved. Much of the research on flow has concentrated on high level performers but my research proposes that some of the psychological characteristics of flow can be achieved in non-elite sport, for example; Masters swimming.

For the more accomplished swimmers the appeal of swimming was reflected in the effect it had on them. For example; it was evident that there was a sense of enjoyment to the point where they could concentrate their attention, lose their sense of time and experience a sense of control:

And you can just… any sort of worries, troubles, stresses just disappear, just forget. It's almost, it's like rehab type of, sort of feeling on it, it's just you know, I can go in there and lose myself.

Dan

Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) proposes that people who enjoy what they are doing forget their personal problems, lose their sense of time and have a sense of harmony and union with their surroundings. And so, Masters swimming provided an opportunity to escape, and become part of a different world, where they could get away from the problems of the day. This was reflected by Dan as he recounted:

There's something about water on the body that's very relaxing. Even if I'm training hard just being in the water has some property that… I can't explain. That actually is a form of relaxation…I think it's just the weightlessness that you can actually have, that it takes all your pressure away really.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that flow is a state in which people are so involved in the activity that nothing else seems to matter. Jackson (2000) argues that when athletes are in flow they experience total and complete concentration on the task in hand. The sensation of being in control is central to flow resulting in time seeming to stand still as the participant literally becomes absorbed in the activity. Of the swimmers I interviewed, six made reference to a form of flow experience through being totally wrapped up in the activity. Interestingly, they were more proficient serious swimmers who enjoyed competing. Tina a competent endurance swimmer explained:

I mean sometimes the feeling when you go through the water, I mean it's just you, you put your hand in, you pull it back and you're just gliding.

And you know you breathe to the side and everything's moving past and it just feels very gentle.

For some the high points continued after training. Jane recounted that she felt stimulated after training:

Actually I don't know that I feel relaxed, I feel, I feel stimulated. I think it's more, it's the opposite actually. I feel quite on a high after training.

As did Tina:

Sometimes I come back from a training session and I'm still up on such a high. That we have to go for a half hour walk because I can't come down. And quite often I'll go to bed about midnight because I'm still buzzing and it feels great. It feels absolutely fantastic.

My continued research into the nature of flow in Masters swimming revealed a wide variety of descriptive accounts of flow related leisure. There was evidence to suggest that experiencing the qualities of flow made the encounter memorable. Informants described it as:

The most fantastic feeling in the world.

Will

Sometimes when it's getting to the end of the session I don't want it to finish.

Tina

I concluded that through concentrating on the activity at hand, the individual in "*flow*" could temporarily lose awareness of self that often encroached upon everyday life. Consequently for the more proficient swimmers, it was possible to attain a sense of freedom that could not be attained in everyday life. This topic requires further consideration and I will address this in more depth as I look at active lifestyles, serious leisure, exercising to excess and pushing the boundaries.

Summary

This chapter has considered the Masters swimming community as a *"meeting point", "Third Place"* or *"great good place".* Furthermore, it has sought to gain a deeper insight into the world of Masters swimming by observing a unique social world and the relationships that exist. There are similarities with Waquant's ethnographic research on boxers who enjoyed boxing for what it provided them: social atmosphere, the adrenalin high, personal recognition, financial reward and status. Boxing encompassed many different areas and a number of different players, including crucially the coach (Waquant 1992). As a coach in a different environment, I concluded that in this sport culture these swimmers were all different, and yet had something in common with one another – a love of swimming. Unlike younger swimmers, they did not give in, they persevered. They attended regularly, even through the winter months. The psychological sensations experienced during training included: "*buzz", "adrenalin rush", "feel good factor", "euphoria"* and *"personal achievement".* Some swimmers referred to the body feeling "*clean*" after training. Others said that it was a huge part of their daily routine. More importantly, it was the example of the older swimmers who provided inspiration. I found that it was through acceptance and mutual respect that amicable relationships were formed and so a common bond was shared. According to Oldenburg (2001) all of us have an innate need to find, enjoy, and maintain enduring relationships with other people we like and respect. *Fallwood* provided a neutral place in the community to meet a mix of people where Masters swimming sessions broke down age, status, gender and occupational barriers to create what Oldenburg (2001) refers to as a *"great good place".* During my data

collection newcomers were welcomed in making it an inclusive place. Furthermore, a warm welcome extended to anyone interested in joining in, and the openness went across gender, age, and status lines. Consequently, an ethos of harmony, social interaction and mutual respect was created. In conclusion to this chapter, I make the case that the unique ethos of this community offered the opportunity to bring about the best in others whilst sharing the best of oneself. Above all, I concluded that the swimming pool provided a sense of belonging, an escape from everyday life irrespective of personal circumstances and mood. The regulars provided the nucleus, a constant that made the sessions work. In summary, I finish with Paul's synopsis of the Masters sessions on offer at *Fallwood.* In Paul's view the sessions were unique in that there was no requirement to pay expensive ASA or club membership fees as the sessions were run on a *pay as you go* (PAYG) basis. He also enjoyed the *human interaction* from the coach which contrasted with *Swimfit* sessions he had attended. *Swimfit* is a workout programme for the swimming pool, developed by the ASA where swimmers can choose from a variety of *Swimfit* session cards ranging from 10 lengths to 120 lengths (British Swimming 2013). Typically, *Swimfit* cards are made available on poolside or simply written up on whiteboards. Paul also benefitted from the ease of access to a trained coach who could help to improve his technique and skills. In his appraisal he wrote:

> *There should be encouragement to mass participation in Masters swimming via the Fallwood model. This PAYG model encourages people to maintain swimming for much longer periods... Being a proper coached session is far better than a Swimfit session. Even where there is a person on poolside during a Swimfit session they are quite soulless and merely written up on boards. There is no attempt to correct stroke or tailor programmes to the audience actually attending during Swimfit sessions. Swimfit is a top down approach that does not take into account the audience. If people are competing in events (pool swimming, open water, triathlon etc.) then the Fallwood model can be tailored. Swimfit does not.*

If Oldenburg is correct, and society thrives on conversation and contact, then leisure centres are perfectly positioned to become the next great good places. In concluding this chapter, I maintain that the social context of Masters swimming provides older adults with opportunities to satisfy their need for social connections, recognition, engagement and belonging. Consequently, as *"insiders"* within a *"Third Place"* they are able to carry on with their interests and adopt a serious approach to swimming. That is not to say that the *"Third Place"* detracts from an individual's home and work life, but rather it complements it. Hence, association in the *"Third Place"* envelops participants in a temporary world within an ordinary world. My next chapter will consider active lifestyles and health issues in more detail. I will subsequently offer chapters on additional topics which interrelate pertaining to both ageing and being a serious swimmer. I will also dedicate a chapter relating to the positive and negative outcomes derived from being a Masters swimmer with reference to standards of performance and practice, exercise adherence and pushing the boundaries.

CHAPTER FIVE: Embracing an active lifestyle

Introduction

Having considered the significance of *"Third Place"* in chapter four and the requirement for social connections and belonging, this chapter explores the concepts of physical activity and lifelong participation. Across the UK, the ASA seeks to promote swimming as an activity and increase participation figures. More specifically, with regard to Masters swimming, the ASA aspires to:

> *Make Masters swimming competitions, clubs and coaching programmes available to all those adults participating in aquatics; to seek to improve their swimming skills and enhance levels of health and well-being; and to engage their interest through imaginative programming and to retain their involvement in the sport throughout their lives.*

> (British Swimming 2011, p.9)

My results reveal a wide range of individual reasons why participants adopt an active lifestyle. Central to this ethnography is a sense of enjoyment, challenge, inspiration and appreciation of life with regard to the ageing body. Hence, my findings point towards the importance of maintaining a degree of fitness in later life. In addition, participants' words and actions are consistent with a positive ageing approach. That is, these swimmers set themselves apart from people who are inactive. This assumption is summed up in the words of Will:

> *Life is good. Life is what you make it.*

In chapter one, I indicated that a better understanding of the needs of sport and leisure participants could potentially enable sport and leisure providers and NGBs

to provide more effectively for their clients. This assumption is based on providing an in-depth appreciation of the participants themselves. In chapter four my research considered the *"Third Place"* or *"great good place"* (Oldenburg 1999) and the benefits of attaching to such a place or *"meeting point"* through exercising together. This chapter advances the research as it investigates the relationship between health and personal well-being and physical activity in modern day life. To begin with, I consider what motivates swimmers to adopt an active lifestyle. Secondly, I examine why there is a need to exercise and how active lifestyles are developed and maintained. Thirdly, I look at the benefits of swimming including individual challenges, goals and achievements. Fourthly, I reflect on appreciation of life for those individuals who are older. Finally, I briefly explore the dilemma older swimmers face as they manage a decline in performance. These themes correlate to the core values the ASA has identified in: *"A Strategy for Masters Swimming in England"* (British Swimming 2011) as outlined in chapter one.

Adopting an Active Lifestyle

The significance of the *"Third Place"* underpins much of this study. Stebbins (1992) suggests that serious leisure participants are separated from non-participants through the unique behaviours, language and values related to the *"social world"* of the group. Donnelly and Young (1999) have paid special attention to how people become accepted members of social worlds. Coakley and Pike (2009) argue that socialisation is an interactive process in which people actively connect with others, synthesize information and make decisions in life and the social world in which they live. Within the context of the Masters swimming world, my findings would support this view. Furthermore, my findings demonstrated that having a clearly defined social identity indicated a sense of belonging to the group, seeing events from the swimmers' perspectives and being like other participants within the *"Third Place"*. Consequently, as the swimmers became serious about their leisure they went through a process of involvement where they converted and subsequently gained the identity of a swimmer.

Accordingly, as ageing athletes, it was obvious that these swimmers were not passive. Instead, they sought to maintain a degree of physical fitness. For some participants, this was demonstrated through their ongoing interest in training and competition.

In chapter four it was evident that the swimming pool provided a vital *"Third Place"* for participants to enjoy an active lifestyle. Will indicated: *"I know for a fact that I couldn't go without exercise"*. However, Will's attitude does not apply to the population as a whole. As a nation, research suggests that we are becoming less active. Active occupations have become more sedentary, motorised transport is the norm and most people enjoy more leisure time than ever before (Coolican 2007). In the UK life expectancy and age of death have risen steadily and significantly in recent years (Office for National Statistics 2012). Advances in medicine and associated technology, along with developments in health and social care have been responsible for the rise (Blackwell 2007). Although people are living longer, Coolican (2007) argues that the UK is entering a period of unprecedented ill-health. I make the case that swimming on a regular basis could help to alleviate some of the issues which Coolican (2007) has highlighted.

The Need to Exercise - Motivating Swimmers

According to Biddle and Mutrie (2008) the discussion of any sort of physical activity inevitably touches on the subject of motivation. Theories of motivation abound and I have outlined several of these in chapter three. One question I was interested in throughout my research was why participants were inclined to exercise. Studies of socialisation into sport must take into account ways in which sports participation is related to individual development, the organisation of social life and the ideologies that are prevalent in a culture (Kirk 2003; Jarvie 2006; Coakley and Pike 2009).

Motivating individuals to become physically active is one of the major tasks confronting those who wish to promote good health through participation in physical activity (Soos et al. 2007). Motives for participating in sport are influenced by a host of behavioural factors that are different for each person and may shift across the lifespan (Hastings et al. 1995; Vallerand and Losier 1999). Previous research into the motivations of swimming participants focused on describing individual motivating factors (Hritz and Ramos 2008). These influences were recognised as motivation for maintaining or building fitness, adding to skill development, achievement, status, experiencing a challenge, being with a team, being with friends, having fun and enjoyment (Gill et al. 1983; Gould et al. 1985; Klint and Weiss 1987; Brodkin and Weiss 1990; Wellard 2014). Hritz and Ramos (2008) argue that the underlying motivations behind sport participation are complex and varied, especially for adult participants. Coakley and Pike (2009) agree that the relationship between sports, exercise and health is complex, particularly when there is a shift from self-controlled exercise to competitive sports. I established that for these individuals the motivation to take part in sport was indeed complex. This was evidenced by a competitive sprint swimmer.

> *People say goodbye as they leave the changing rooms and I think that gives them the motivation to come back again. So it's not just the drive to keep the waistband in size 34 jeans. You know, I think it goes outside that.*

> Paul

Although the health-related arguments in favour of regular exercise were apparent, there was a shared desire to improve and progress. I deduced that a combination of theories including self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985), achievement goal theory (Nicholls 1984) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura 1977) were relevant.

Firstly, self-determination theory is crucial when considering how learners decide to act on their environment and how they make choices or decisions. Hence, it is

concerned with what are perceived to be innate psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness. Further, self-determination theory proposes that participants have an innate and spontaneous desire to display competence, autonomy/self-determination and relatedness in our sport behaviour (Ryan and Deci 2000). Bernie explained his frame of mind towards training:

> *It's knowing what benefits me really, I think is the thing. And definitely the longer the distance, the harder it is the better I am. Whether that's mentally or physically - well I suppose it's a bit of both. The body's got to be able to take it but you've got be mentally fairly strong to do it as well and that's why I do train so much. And I do think, especially at my age, I think you've got to keep pushing and pushing and training as hard as possible.*

Bernie's remarks clearly indicate that self-determination is an important motivator that involves both intrinsic motivation and the need for competence. As a result, the requirement for both competence and autonomy is self-regulated. Biddle and Mutrie (2008) highlight the potential importance of self-perceptions of autonomy in motivated behaviour. Hence, it seems to make sense that perceptions associated with self-determined effort will increase motivation. In other words, it is essential that participants have the ability to fulfil what is asked of them so that, in turn, they will reap the benefits. For health providers, this points towards encouraging the process of activity by reinforcing participation.

Secondly, self-efficacy theory is invaluable in understanding why performers are motivated to continue performing in a domain where they have experienced success (Cashmore 2008). Bandura's model of self-efficacy (1986) proposes that physical self-efficacy is the first cognitive link between higher order psychological constructs and actual behaviours. Bandura (1986 p.391) defines self-efficacy as:

> *People's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with judgements of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses.*

Bandura has always differentiated between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. My findings indicate that outcome expectations are necessary for continued involvement as explained by Jane:

> *I like to feel on top of it and I like to feel tired. I like to feel I've given it everything. And I'm focusing on, probably focusing on an event that's to come, so I'm thinking how am I doing and I thoroughly enjoy it. I really do. And it's more a personal thing. It's how I'm feeling.*

Biddle and Mutrie (2008) propose that verbal and social persuasion from others is likely to influence perceptions of self-efficacy. Given the potential for regular contact between exerciser and instructor, verbal persuasion was manifest in this research. Consequently, as a coach, I sought to provide feedback that was both formative and relevant through providing supplementary sessions. As a result, I found feelings of confidence were initiated towards maintaining physical activity.

Thirdly, achievement goal theory has proved useful in explaining the motivation that individuals exhibit in sport (Duda 2001). Considerable research supports the use of achievement goal theory to examine levels of intrinsic motivation in sport (Fox et al. 1994; Duda et al. 1995). Throughout this research it was evident that swimmers had personal goals and targets and I will develop this point later in this chapter. According to Hodge et al. (2008) goal orientations are useful for understanding the motivation of middle-aged and older adults participating in sport.

Scott and Shafer (2001) propose that the progression of specialisation can be understood in terms of three dimensions: a focusing of behaviour, the acquiring of skills and knowledge and a tendency to become committed to the activity. As a result, the activity becomes a central life interest. Career progression is consistent with Stebbins' (1992) creation of a serious leisure career. For Elsa, the progression was as a gradual process:

> *Yes, yes and gradually I'm getting there you know. Things like however many metres I go down the pool or whatever. Or how fast I can do it. I tend to set my own sort of little goals sort of thing.*

Kane and Zink (2004) suggest that the acquisition of knowledge, training and skills, perseverance and stages or turning points are characterised as signifiers in a commitment to a career in serious leisure. They argue that simple participation in a recreation activity cannot satisfy the needs of some recreationists who want to pursue a deeper involvement in recreation and I will focus on some of the challenges, goals and achievements swimmers accomplished in this chapter. With regard to training, my findings showed that swimming regularly provided opportunities for participants to structure their training. It also gave participants a purpose to continue with their exercise. This finding is consistent with Pelssers et al. (2013) who confirmed the benefits of a structured training programme for older people. I found that having a stopwatch with me in training sessions was crucial. For example; in training, I spent innumerable periods of time working with swimmers on pacing 25 metre, 50 metre and 100 metre swims in order to achieve the exact pace on longer swims.

> *I'm incredibly motivated by times. I'm not here just to be fit... and I get a real buzz from doing good times in the sessions Jan and get the technical stuff. 'Cause I know the technical stuff is just to drive me towards it... I want to be the best in my age group in Dorset. And that's what really drives me Jan. It's not a sole fitness thing you know. It's nice to, you know, keep that in check as we get older. But it's really the, the love of sport and*

actually maintaining a high standard inside a sport that actually motivates me.

<div align="right">Paul</div>

My findings suggest that the majority of participants were highly motivated individuals and that motivation was intrinsic rather than extrinsic. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is important (Coolican 2007). Intrinsic motivation is where a performer is primarily motivated to participate in their sport for enjoyment and personal satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards and incentives (Coolican 2007). This means that participation is done for reasons that are internalised rather than for reasons that others had imposed on them.

In earlier chapters I made reference to Robert Stebbins's research on flow. Stebbins has shown that optimal experience "*flow*" can happen, depending on the activity, and is therefore a key motivational force (Stebbins 2005). Flow is a total focus on an activity in which time and the external world seem to disappear. The sense of "*flow*" related to an almost unreal quality of being in water which Dan described:

> *I find that the water…there's something about water on the body that's very relaxing. Even if I'm training hard just being in the water has some property that I can't explain.*

When I asked Jane if she had ever experienced a feeling of "*flow*" she acknowledged that almost unknowingly she had, as she made reference to a competition she had done where she felt as if she was: "*Riding on top of a wave*".

Benefits of an Active Lifestyle

Maintaining health and fitness was crucial for the swimmers who were interviewed:

> *Well I think swimming helps maintain your health. If you don't do it too stupidly you know. If you don't try and do too much I think it maintains your health. I think that's why some of the older people are healthy because they've kept on swimming, kept going. 'Cause you're exercising all your body and the intake of oxygen and everything. The exercise, it is good.*

> Megan

It was interesting that the majority of participants had played sport during their younger years but had stopped participating in organised competition after leaving school. For some this was not a complete withdrawal as they continued to be involved in sport in different ways during part of their adult life. Grant (2001) made a similar observation in his research on playing sport in later life. He argues that having the desire, and knowing how to manage the ailing body, helped provide a sense of self-worth, identity and empowerment. Grant's view was echoed by these participants as they assumed a valued identity as a Masters swimmer. I deduced that reasons for coming back into swimming were diverse but maintaining a degree of fitness was a priority, especially to those swimmers who had sedentary occupations. One Friday evening, I observed Patrick arrive just in time for the evening training session. He explained that he had come straight to training having driven for nearly 3 hours. In his interview he explained:

> *I try to come as regularly as I can, you know, to keep the standard there. But it's also more sort of social life as well. Meeting people. Which is good. I, I sort of like the challenge of it. I see the programme. I think right,*

you know, I like the challenge. I like to get through it. I don't think I've ever not completed it.

<div align="right">Patrick</div>

Regular participation was of the essence in life and a driving force in individual lifestyles:

There's no peer pressure to come down and train. It's definitely an individual motivation for me.

<div align="right">Paul</div>

Some swimmers were exceptionally active while others exercised on a less regular basis. Irrespective of the level of intensity, swimming in particular had a perceived positive effect on the body. As Dan explained:

Yeah, any form of exercise I get that feel good feeling out of it. But from swimming, I think you're exercising all the muscles in your body, you are using most muscle groups, so you're getting a real good workout in the water. Whereas with running, it's just your legs. Your heart, your lungs, your upper body doesn't get that workout that you do with swimming.

With regard to the ageing body and growing older, the swimmers explained how their involvement was sometimes inhibited by illness and injury. Even so, they located themselves in the discourse of good health.

So swimming for me is the ideal thing I think. Roy used to always say, you know, it's the easiest way of moving because you don't have any weight on you.

<div align="right">Elsa</div>

Developing Swimmers

Although the swimmers' sporting backgrounds were wide-ranging they constantly inundated me with questions on training, fitness, technique and dealing with injuries. Consequently, they made improvements to the way they performed some of the skills specific to their sport. This involved developing technique and working on the ideal body position, breathing pattern, leg kick and arm action. Montgomery and Chambers (2009) suggest that experienced swimmers are able to maintain a balanced body position which enables them to cut through the water with minimal effort. I recall my time spent working with Jane in preparation for the GB Masters Championships in June 2010. Jane was concerned that, in comparison to others, her freestyle turns were slow. This followed a disappointing performance in the Guernsey Masters in April 2010. In order to help her I searched out a video which demonstrated the basics of performing open turns. When I told Jane that I had discovered a solution to the problem her response was: *"Praise the Lord"*. The solution included a four step sequence of practices which included: *"collapse, fall back, let go and turn"*. We spent many hours working together performing hundreds of turns until the sequence was perfected. In my field notes I noted that Jane had no inclination to stop practising until she got the turns right. In training she went through the sequence: two hands, left hand, right hand, push off on the front, the back and then push off on the side. On a number of occasions, Jane was already in the water rehearsing her freestyle turns when I arrived on poolside. Jane's attitude to training was noteworthy. Her actions were consistent with self-determination theory as she showed a spontaneous desire to display competence, autonomy/self-determination and relatedness in her sport behaviour (Ryan and Deci 2000). It was apparent too that although this was a leisure activity the pursuit of excellence stood out as being a critical factor.

I had frequent conversations with swimmers on individual performance and success. The ideal way to make improvements was to spend more time training and I dealt with this issue early on in my research as I looked to find additional water time. In April 2010, the leisure centre agreed that I could coach an

additional Masters session on Thursday mornings. Following discussions with the swimmers, it was agreed that we should use the session to work on skills and technique (See Appendix 3 – Sample of field notes). Montgomery and Chambers (2009) propose that Masters swimmers should have a coach who watches to see if their strokes are correct and efficient. In turn, this will help to prevent injury, improve efficiency and make swimming successful. Consequently, the sessions tended to include a longer warm up followed by a skill set. As an illustration; my diary notes on 13th May 2010 documented:

Warm up: mixed set 1400m.

Main set: 4 x 25m underwater kick with fins, 4 x 25m drill with fins, 4 x 25m alternating right arm then left arm with fins and 8 x 25m freestyle with fins working on a fast arm pull.

The feedback following the session was especially positive. *"I enjoyed that"* said Roy but it was *"hard work".* By using fins I found that the swimmers flexibility improved tremendously and they commented on the fact that their legs ached following sessions using fins. I also introduced training sets using hand paddles. At first the hand paddles felt strange but the swimmers soon got used to them. To begin with, they used them on short 50 metre swims and gradually built up to 200 metre swims. Again, the swimmers commented that their shoulders and arms ached following these sets. However, the general health benefits were acknowledged as Elsa commented:

I do find myself becoming stronger with my muscles and the strength, especially in the shoulder muscles.

I also introduced kick sets, swimming 25 metre kick on the front, back and side without a kick board. One morning Paul commented: *"Jan, that was so hard, but it was great. I could feel the burn in my legs".* Paul also remarked that he *"loved"* the technique sets we had introduced as his stroke continued to improve. As a

coach, I was interested in adapting training sessions so that they were progressive and interesting whilst gradually building an aerobic base. In my field notes I noted how important it was to *"ring the changes"* in order to work on the finer points of swimming with good technique so that the sessions were more enjoyable. It also meant that I was meeting the ASA's aim to: *"improve swimming skills"* and to: *"engage the swimmers interest through imaginative programming"*.

Physiological Benefits of Swimming

From my research findings I concluded that as individuals, participants were aware of the physiological benefits of swimming. For those interviewed in this study, the pursuit of good health was about being positive and proactive. Consequently there was a sense of determination and commitment. Research evidence confirming the long-term protection that regular exercise can afford is irrefutable (Biddle et al. 2000; Richardson et al. 2004; Biddle and Mutrie 2008; Weir et al. 2010). These findings have resulted in health policy consultants recommending a degree of physical activity that is necessary for the maintenance of health. In its vision for swimming, the ASA identified four key objectives to promote swimming as an activity and increase its participation figures. The second of these objectives is:

> *To offer everyone the opportunity to enjoy swimming, or water-based fitness activities for health and fun, throughout their lifetime.*
>
> (The ASA 2009, p.3)

Several swimmers commented on the physiological benefits of swimming in comparison to other sports which were considered to be more demanding on the ageing body:

And it's got a lot going for it. I mean it's not like pounding the road when you're running. I've done that and I can't do that anymore. So that crucifies your joints. So overall, the older you get all your joints and that can't take the bashing that they used to. But swimming is comfortable on your joints, easy on your joints and that you know. Erm your muscles might not be able to do everything you want to but I think swimming is one of those things you can carry on doing a lot longer than most other things.

<div align="right">Roy</div>

Grant (2001) makes the point that there is a wealth of information to be had about what a healthy lifestyle supposedly includes. With regard to well-being, Ereaut and Whiting (2008) propose that it is a cultural construct that is not fixed. Consequently, well-being is always shifting. What it means depends on the weight given at that time to different philosophical traditions, world views and systems of knowledge. More recently, Wellard (2014) argues that it is more fruitful to develop an understanding of how participation is "*enjoyable*" as well as health-enhancing and contributing to well-being. It is not surprising therefore; that many older people are confused about what one should or should not do in order to maintain a healthy existence. The notion that swimming was easy on the joints is consistent with earlier research into Masters swimming conducted by Hastings et al. (1995). Specifically, statements related to concerns about physique, unwanted weight gain, age related skeletal joint problems and loss of muscle tone. This shared view echoed the extensive body of research which suggests that regular physical activity makes a significant contribution to one's state of well-being and quality of life in the later years (Rowe and Kahn 1998; Grant 2001; Biddle and Mutrie 2008).

The study of active ageing consists not only of reports with reference to scientific explanations about physiological and psychological processes, but also descriptions of the meaning people attribute to their experiences of physical activity (Grant 2001). Becky commented:

I participate for selfish reasons 'cause I'm not competitive. I compete against my own times and get cross with myself if I think I could have done better. You beat yourself up if you could have done better. I don't want to beat anyone else or their time but do my own. I want to make sure I finish if its endurance or beat my time.

Participants acknowledged that through swimming regularly significant changes had occurred in their physical capability. As Roy commented:

So, yes swimming does help. It's got knock on effects in a lot of ways. I'm definitely healthier, I'm fitter and I can eat most things I want to eat.

Consequently, participants made positive comments regarding the benefits they experienced from being physically active and how this was essential for maintaining a good state of health and fitness.

Personal Goals and Achievements

In its vision for swimming the ASA aims:

To ensure everyone has the opportunity to achieve their different personal goals throughout their lifetime.

(The ASA 2009, p.2)

According to Dionigi et al. (2011) Masters sport is an ideal context to test one's abilities. They found that lifelong athletes enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that they could take part in sport or "*still do it*". Consequently, sport was about pushing the body to the limit. This line of reasoning was endorsed by Tina as she commented:

> *I love a challenge... I like a challenge that I know mentally I'm going to have to talk myself through and push myself*

Likewise Will said:

> *You're buzzing, you're excited, you've just accomplished something and your body feels beaten but in a nice way. It's that physical activity beaten. You know by 2 o'clock you may be fading a little bit but it's just the nature of being up since 5.*

Stevenson (2002) argues that conversion to the subculture of Masters swimming, experiencing the process of learning the practices of that subculture, means that the swimmer becomes an *"insider"* who learns and experiences the process of learning the practices of the subculture. Consequently, the *"insider"* increasingly values that subculture and becomes ever more embedded into it. In this group swimmers had to learn swimming etiquette, by moving aside if necessary so that faster swimmers could overtake. Other cultural practices included learning how to use the pace clock to determine set times, understanding the different practice drills, training sets, learning how many lengths of the pool made up 100 metres, 200 metres or more. Research suggests that positive experiences will have beneficial effects on motivation. Likewise, a negative experience will have a detrimental effect on motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985). Consequently, both positive internal and external influences combine to motivate swimmers to perform well in competitions (Hritz and Ramos 2008).

During this research the swimmers performed test sets working on specific timed swims so that they could see how they were improving in readiness for a competition. I established that each person was able to find an appropriate degree of competition which was dependant on their previous experience in the sport. Paul commented:

> *I want to become a faster swimmer and a technically better swimmer. And so that's what really drives me to the galas.*

Grant (2001) defines competitiveness and success in a number of ways: the personal satisfaction of achieving goals; testing oneself against others; and trying to win. Hence there are opportunities for social comparison with regard to sporting ability.

> *There's definitely a spring in my step because you've achieved. You've pushed your body, you're healthy and you've done something that's not impacting or aggravating your body.*
>
> Will

Gill et al. (1996) found that women were more interested in fitness and health issues, while males were more inclined to compete to win. In this research, I was unable to substantiate this finding because both men and women were keen to compete provided that it was done at a suitable level. Furthermore, the nature of this *"Third Place"* created an ethos of equality in which the individual qualities of each person took precedence regardless of gender. In terms of ability, levels ranged from GB international level to fitness swimmers but the majority, irrespective of gender, considered themselves to be serious swimmers. In addition, both men and women were eager to progress as Megan commented:

> *I just keep on swimming. There's always room for improvement.*

As a result, my findings corresponded to earlier literature from Hastings et al. (1995) as I discovered that for adult Masters swimming participants, their past experience with the Masters swimming programme and number of swimming competitions completed in that year affected their motivation substantially. Similarly, I concurred with Amorose (2003), who argues that athletes with more

positive perceptions of competence demonstrate greater motivation to train and participate in their sport.

A key component of serious leisure is career development. The serious leisure theme will be explored in detail in chapter seven however it is fitting to reflect on it here when considering the psychological benefits of an active lifestyle with regard to goals and achievement. Grant (2001) determines the significance of *"serious play"* which describes how participants valued an appropriate level of competition, fairness, success and winning. The *"serious play"* finding was endorsed by Tina:

> *I like almost the extreme now. Which I think is why I like to do things like Brownsea[4] where you can't compare your times or necessarily your placings. You know. It just may be where you are compared with the sort of people you're swimming with. But actually you know as long as I'm within a couple of places of people like Bernie or Rachael then I've probably done it to the best of my ability.*

From a serious leisure perspective, Stebbins (2001) defines career development as a personal course, or passage, shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement or involvement. According to Jones (2006) serious leisure activities tend to demonstrate a progression through stages of achievement or competence. Tina's comments indicate that there is a requirement to set realistic goals and challenges that are achievable and of a personal nature.

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[4] Brownsea Island is situated in Poole Harbour and is owned by the National Trust. The Brownsea Island charity swim is organised by the Royal Life Saving Society and takes place in July each year covering a 4.6 mile course around the island.

The Attraction of Masters Sessions

Researchers employing achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1989) have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of motivation in sport; however, they have largely ignored the desire for social connections as an additional goal of action underpinning behaviour in sport. According to the sport's NGB, as a non-weight bearing activity, swimming has a vital role to play in encouraging people to take part in physical activity and Masters swimming, as a contributor to this, plays a parallel role in encouraging people who are already taking part to continue in physical activity by presenting them with both a challenging and social environment (British Swimming 2011). Despite the dominance of ability based theories of motivation, social aspects of motivation have been identified in a number of studies (Allen 2003; 2005; Williams, 2006). In chapter four, I found that the social context of Masters swimming provided older adults with opportunities to satisfy their need for social connections, recognition, engagement and belonging. Consequently, as *"insiders"* within a *"Third Place"* they were able to carry on with their interests and adopt a serious approach to swimming. In parallel to Loic Waquant's (1992) ethnography bringing meaning to the social logic of boxing, I concluded that the swimming pool provided a relatively self-enclosed site for a protected sociability where swimmers could find respite from the pressures of everyday life. This collective closure made life in the pool possible and went a long way toward explaining its attractions. A nucleus of *"regulars"* formed the backbone of the membership of the group. Several of the *"regulars"* trained tirelessly in order to compete. Others trained in order to keep in good physical shape and keep in touch with like-minded swimmers. And so the culture was egalitarian in that all participants were treated in the same way irrespective of status. This was demonstrated in the previous chapter when I looked at the *"Third Place"* as being *"inclusive"* and a *"real leveller"*. This was summed up by Simon who reflected that:

> *A lot of it is the swimming, that's why you go. But it is just so nice to see those faces again. Yes, so that sort of social side is important too.*

Consequently, structured Masters sessions allowed for the foundation of ongoing friendships and regular social interaction. It is interesting that research supports the contention that social motives are of particular importance for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport (Hodge et al. 2008). Ashford et al. (1993) found that middle aged athletes rated socio-psychological well-being as a more important participation motive than younger athletes. Simon commented that he preferred to swim with others and benefitted from having the interaction with a coach:

> *I've done sessions where it's written on a board and go. XXXX do one on a Sunday morning. And I don't like that to be honest. 'Cause you just feel like you're rattling through. Erm I like it when you* (the coach) *get involved. Where you say right ok let's take 30 seconds where I want you to concentrate on this. And this session's about pace or speed or building or whatever. So I like that kind of mental aspect to the swimming rather than just that's your set, go!*

Allen (2003; 2005) developed a model of social motivation that specifically addresses the social aspects of motivation in sport. As with other motivational theories, this perspective views motivation as a psychological process, but the motivational goal in the social context is the desire to develop and maintain social bonds or connections with others. Allen (2005) argues that participation in the social context of sport is a means to an end of social connection. More specifically, Allen's qualitative research is concerned with adolescents. This research extends her research as I have developed our understanding of older athletes who report social reasons for their involvement in sport.

Declining Performance

It was evident that for the majority of participants swimming provided something more than simply being fit and healthy. As Tina commented:

I love the feeling of being fit but there's definitely, definitely far more to it than that.

However, there was some concern expressed regarding how some swimmers dealt with a declining level of performance. This matter will be explored thoroughly in chapter six when I consider the ageing swimmer however I will reflect briefly on it here as I explore the dilemma experienced by some members of the group in maintaining an active lifestyle. Some swimmers expressed their fears about being ill or not being able to swim anymore. Dennis commented:

It is a way of life. And if it's taken away, it's the one thing I dread. You know a serious injury, a stroke, something like that. That's the type of thing I dread. 'Cause then everything stops.

In essence, this remark signals a potential dilemma for all older people irrespective of whether or not they are physically active. Hence, there was ambiguity between the future and the quality of life they were presently experiencing. As a consequence, they were mindful of what the future may hold. Pike (2011) suggests that where some aspect of a person's identity is inconsistent with the norms and values of society it can become a source of anxiety. My findings showed that participants in this study hoped that swimming would help them to continue to be independent and maintain control over their health and well-being. Even so, there was a hint of uncertainty:

I want stay fit and I want to… (sighs), *I want to stay as I am* (laughs). *It sounds pathetic but I want to feel that I can keep going for as long as possible. Whether I'm competing or not.*

<div align="right">Jane</div>

For the swimmers in this study frequent participation was an important part of life. Some were extremely active while others swam on a less regular basis. Nonetheless, continuing activity was an important part of life which they would not give up. Consequently, they considered themselves to be in good health. However, they were aware of the possibility that this could change and were heedful of the possibility that life could change for the worse. Overall, their views supported the extensive body of knowledge which suggests that frequent physical activity makes a significant contribution to one's state of well-being and quality of life in the later years (Rowe and Kahn 1998; Grant 2001).

Making the Most of Life

The value of being physically active was summed up by Will:

> *Life is good. Life is what you make it.*

This comment points towards an appreciation of life and the value placed on making healthy lifestyle choices. Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) suggest that the notion that the responsibility for making the most of life rests largely with the individual, and the individual alone. In other words, it is expressed as a feeling of self-actualisation and gratitude for what you do have, as opposed to do not have. Elsa used these words to summarise this:

> *Always to do the BEST you can do with your life.*

For Will, being fit and healthy was of the essence as he was self-employed. This meant that if he was unable to work then he suffered financially:

I need to make sure I'm healthy because if I miss days through bad health or injury it's money I'm losing as well. So I do literally think about that aspect to go okay, you need seriously to be careful here or you lose out. On a career and money you know? It's just overall. I couldn't see myself being unhealthy. It's never been the case and I would like to think it won't be the case ever. Unless I can't physically do anything about it. Hopefully it's not going to happen any time soon.

In the UK, the recommended requirement is 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity all days of the week (Coolican 2007). A survey completed in 2008 revealed that the level of compliance is particularly low among women and older people. The lack of physical activity leads to almost 80,000 more hospital stays a year at a cost of £3,215 each – with the most common reasons being Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. The figures also revealed that in England more than 40 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women are classified as overweight or obese, costing the NHS £5 billion every year. The Chief Executive of Nuffield Health, said:

Each and every person can help to reduce the burden on the NHS and improve their own health and well-being by spending just 12 extra minutes exercising

(O'Grady 2013)

Research suggests that older athletes appear to be a somewhat select or fortunate group who possess the time, ability, health, desire and disposable income to regularly train and compete (Grant 2001; Tulle 2007; Dionigi 2008). However, not all older people are in this position and those who cannot or do not want to participate in sport should not feel pressured to do the same (Dionigi 2011). The sessions offered at *Fallwood* were relatively inexpensive and open to everyone. Unlike private membership clubs everyone was welcome. For those who did attend it was described as being: *"great", "stimulating"* and *"fantastic"*. If

swimmers failed to attend they felt as if they have *"copped out"* or *"missed something"*.

As a coach, I chronicled stories of enjoyment, individual achievement, empowerment and satisfaction. Many of the swimmers experienced the buzz of serious competition. In the words of Will:

> *It's just the most fantastic feeling in the world.*

Equally, others enjoyed sport in the context of inclusion, gratification and personal progression.

> *I like being fit... You know I hate being unfit and that... just a week out and you just feel horrible. Erm I like the endorphin feeling of when you, you've done something and you feel better.*
>
> Simon

An overriding characteristic of the sport was the feeling of being at home in water as Simon reflected:

> *It can almost like sort out the problems and just make things better. Whether it's literally the kind of buoyancy thing of swimming or whether it's placebo and mental and just me... Whether it's physical in terms of endorphins actually helping whatever pain's there. But I really do feel that the stimulation of water makes me feel better.*

Summary

In concluding this chapter, I deduce that these participants experienced a personal satisfaction that they saw as a direct benefit of their involvement in Masters swimming. This finding underlines the actuality that active participation contributes towards making the *"best"* of life. Furthermore, older athletes perceive themselves to be individuals who are enjoying life, being health conscious, being capable of success in competition, and deserving the respect of their fellow athletes. Masters sport provides distinct benefits to participants above and beyond those gained from general physical activity. Questions relating to engagement in swimming in later life raise issues about how NGBs, policy makers and practitioners might best encourage, support, and make appropriate exercise provision for older athletes. This chapter goes some way to answering these questions by providing answers on active lifestyles, health, enjoyment, goals and achievements. One issue that has been referred to during this chapter concerns the ageing body. Phoenix and Grant (2009) comment that *"every body's"* story needs to be considered and developed if we are to realise how various aspects of ageing and physical activity; physiological, psychological, and sociological, can be best represented in the literature. In the next chapter I will investigate ageing more fully in order to bring meaning to the composite issues relating to positive development in older persons through sport.

CHAPTER SIX: The Ageing Swimmer
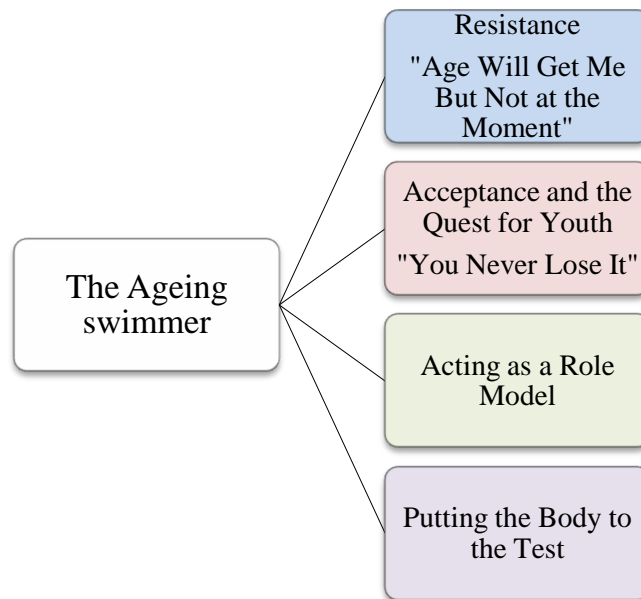
Figure 2: The Ageing Swimmer

Introduction

In chapter four, I determined that *Fallwood* provided a neutral place in the community to meet a mix of people where Masters swimming sessions broke down age, status, gender and occupational barriers to create what Oldenburg (1999, p.19) refers to as a *"great good place"*. The question remains however, what does it mean to age well? Furthermore, how can older people be encouraged to age well? In order to answer these questions, this research extends knowledge on ageing as it is expressed and experienced by older athletes. In so doing, this chapter continues and advances the active lifestyle theme discussed in the previous chapter as it unveils the issues relating to positive development in older persons through sport. The four dimensions I consider are illustrated in Figure 2 above as I search to develop a deeper understanding of the ageing swimmer.

Ageing and Physical Activity

In the domain of the Masters swimmer, my research uncovered four significant age-related themes. Firstly, the ageing process was negotiated in a positive way as Bernie commented: *"Obviously age will get me, but not at the moment"*. Secondly, involvement in Masters sport meant that swimmers were empowered to persevere and keep going: *"You never lose it"*. Thirdly, Masters swimming was relevant in terms of status: *"Older athletes as role models"*. Finally, Masters swimmers enjoyed challenges: *"Putting the body to the test"*.

Resisting Old Age

"Obviously age will get me, but not at the moment"

The biomedical approach to ageing typically cultivates the image of the frail older adult (Vertinsky 1995; Tulle 2008b). Furthermore, the majority of research into the physically active ageing body favours a post-positivist/deductive approach and so there is a need for more "in-depth" descriptions of the rich experience of older adults engaging in physical activity (Dionigi 2006; Grant and Kluge 2007; Phoenix and Grant 2009).

Rowe and Kahn (1998) define successful ageing as an individual's ability to avoid disease and disease-related disability and maintain an active engagement in life for as long as possible. Rowe and Kahn (1998) summarised their approach to successful ageing with a model of overlapping components which comprises of: avoiding disease, maintaining high cognitive and physical function, and engagement with life. Where all three components overlap successful ageing is fully represented. The definition of successful ageing has evolved over the last 50 years from addressing early theories of activity and disengagement to theoretical approaches that focus directly on successful ageing. Some approaches focus more on physical, other approaches more on psychosocial components of successful

ageing. More recently, successful ageing approaches attempt to integrate both into a biopsychosocial approach (Martin et al. 2012). In other words, active engagement in later life is concerned with taking action to avoid being a burden on society (Dionigi 2010). Rowe and Kahn (1998) argue that taking on some of the responsibility for one's ageing is potentially an empowering experience. Individual empowerment refers primarily to an individual's ability to make decisions and take control over their personal life. Thousands of people aged 60 years and over compete in and train for physically strenuous individual or team sports such as athletics, cycling, swimming, long distance running, triathlon, tennis, squash, hockey, football, and basketball at Masters and Veterans tournaments (O'Brien Cousins and Burgess 1992; Spirduso 1995; Olson 2001). This rising leisure trend presents an intriguing context for exploring how older people negotiate ageing and physical activity when they talk about their experiences in sport and when they actually compete.

> *… exercise and leisure can be used by older people as a way of resisting the narrative of decline, restoring their social position and constructing valuable ageing identities.*

> (Tulle 2008b, p.14)

With regard to ageing the most dominant theme was identified in the words of endurance swimmer, Bernie: "*Obviously age will get me, but not at the moment*". This theme points to the intricate feelings of control, recognition and personal empowerment. In other words, the swimmers were taking action to resist the onset of old age. My observations revealed that the participants' words and actions were consistent with the positive ageing approach. In particular, the "*regular*" attendees in the group were resisting the traditional stereotypes of ageing. Traditionally, older people have been discouraged from participating in vigorous activity as it was thought to be too dangerous for their ageing bodies (Grant 2001; Dionigi 2011). By contrast, swimmers in my research were experiencing a sense of agency and competency. Participants in the study indicated a desire to manage

the ageing process through keeping going in sport for as long as possible. In his interview Roy commented:

> *I don't think about stopping. I don't see that. Stopping I don't see as an option. Being forced to stop - maybe. I mean nobody knows what's gonna happen tomorrow. But even if I only came in and swam in the slow lane and went up and down I think I still would do that. Because I just feel I've got to do it because that's the only way I keep fit. And so I've got no thoughts about stopping.*

As highlighted in chapter five, my findings also pointed to the importance of being fit and healthy. Resisting old age was essential for maintaining a state of good health and well-being.

> *Keeping fit stops you to a certain extent from being old. You might be old but you don't feel old... I think you've got to try and fight it for as long as you can.*
>
> Bernie

Whatever the reason, there is a need to challenge the traditional view of old age by taking life easy. Bernie located himself in the discourse of good health and was resisting the notion that ageing was a biomedical problem. Other participants in this study endorsed the contention that age should not be used as an excuse for being physically inactive. These swimmers were refusing to accept their age and promoting the benefits of physical activity and the importance of self-responsibility in maintaining a degree of healthiness in later life as Megan who was in her forties pointed out:

> *As I say you just keep going. I'd like to carry on and I mean I hope to be swimming like Jane and Roy when I get to that age* (over 70).

Some participants expressed a desire to contest the ageing body and continue to take part in sport until they were no longer physically capable.

> *Tina* (Bernie's training partner) *thinks I'll still be on poolside at the age of 100. Yea, I'd like to be.*
>
> Bernie

Gilleard and Higgs (2002) refer to a socio-cultural emphasis on regular exercise as a strategy for resisting the ageing body. In her research on elite athletes, Tulle (2007; 2008b) showed how athletes demonstrated some ability to control their aging identity by embodying themselves as being both ageful and competent. Corresponding to Tulle's work (2007; 2008b; 2008c), it was evident that the idea of not being able to exercise was agonising for these participants as their words and actions revealed:

> *I'm definitely fighting my age... I don't want to grow old.*
>
> Bernie

Their responses demonstrated a determination and resilience to defy or postpone age-related complaints and keep going. Paul had recently returned to training following a back problem:

> *I don't want to accept at the age of forty that I can't swim. I want to get back to the pool and I want to be in the top lane and I want to be competing.*

The continuing commitment to early morning training was evident on a daily basis. Having been active at a young age there was a reluctance to abandon an active lifestyle. This was true for all participants irrespective of whether they

learnt to swim at a young age or through their teenage years. In addition, they conceded that they had the desire to persevere and carry on. In my diary notes on 12th May 2010 I noted that Sam arrived late. Having cycled to training he explained that he had been delayed because of a bike puncture. Instead of taking the easy option to turn round and go home he had stopped to repair the puncture and then carried on his way so that he could train.

My findings suggest that the swimmers were attempting to maintain their identity as swimmers by proving that they could use their bodies in later life to good effect. Megan explained:

> *I think that you're worried that you're going to lose it. My mother told me: "You're too old to swim now," but I could never understand her in that direction. And she always related it to the way I used to swim but she didn't realise that you could still do it but more relaxed...*

Accepting the Inevitable

"You can't odds it"

My research highlighted concerns related to growing older. In the case of Masters swimmers who were not attempting to disguise their age, this related to a sense of not being able to control the ageing process and so there was an acceptance or even celebration of their older body as Roy commented:

> *Nobody likes to think that they're slowing down but you have to... in your mind you have to accept that you are going to. You can't odds it. So over a period I think I've gone up and sort of now flattening off and maybe tapering down a bit. But I'm still quite happy with what I can do.*

In their own words some swimmers expressed unease concerning the future:

> *I was looking at myself in the mirror and I had low self-esteem because I didn't like what I saw and I thought to myself that I've got to pull myself together.*
>
> Bernie

For some, keeping going was a cause of anxiety as the words of Elsa illustrate:

> *I must keep doing it because if I don't move then I'll end up in a wheelchair I presume.*

Others contemplated the possibility of a serious illness:

> *It is a way of life. And if it's taken away, it's the one thing I dread. You know a serious injury, a stroke, something like that. That's the type of thing I dread. 'Cause then everything stops.*
>
> Dennis

> *Yea, that's the day that I fear the most that I can't either get up, swim or run or walk or whatever. I may be able to find a way around it with technology.*
>
> Bernie

In essence, these comments reflect a potential dilemma for older people. These swimmers believed that swimming would help them to remain independent and in control. Although currently enjoying what was described as a good quality of living, there was a feeling of uncertainty regarding the future and what might happen tomorrow. Hence, most believed it was worthwhile to continue until

something unforeseen caused them to stop. Endurance swimmer Becky commented: *"It is part of my life and if I couldn't do it, it would cause a huge change"*.

In expressing these concerns, there was evidence to show that these swimmers were being proactive. In so doing, they were contributing to their quality of life by maintaining their physical activity levels for as long as possible. Erikson et al. (1986) argue that older adults are likely to do their utmost to empower their ageing bodies to remain active. In other words, for these swimmers participating in sport was about taking a constructive role in extending their life expectancy.

> *I feel that I'm swimming better now than I ever did. Not as fast maybe, but I'm swimming better now than I ever did.*
>
> Roy

Consequently, sustaining an active lifestyle contributed towards enjoyment, camaraderie, social relationships and personal empowerment. Following a training session, 72 year old Roy expressed his viewpoint:

> *I like to feel I've done something. I walk out of here and I feel that… I don't know what it is really… invigorated and your adrenalin's going. As against, if you don't come, you feel sort of let down, you feel not right, you don't feel good with yourself if you don't come. I can walk up those steps in the morning thinking why am I doing this and then walking out thinking I know why I'm doing this. You know that the benefit of coming down sets you up for the day.*

This statement underlines the value of Masters swimmers attaching to a *"Third Place"*. It was evident that camaraderie, social encouragement and self-esteem earned from good performances were meaningful. Roy was aware of an overall

"feel good" factor in knowing that he could come to the pool and mix with like-minded people who shared a common interest. The shared experience made it easy for members to appreciate and enjoy good company as Roy pointed out: *"We're not going off somewhere else and swimming, you know, under another coach or anything... It's good we all enjoy it. No doubt about it".*

The Quest for Youth

Ageing is an unavoidable biological process in that the body irreversibly declines after maturity. Coakley and Pike (2009) suggest that it is the social significance of this corporeal process which has bearing. It also remains the case that, for many, the ageing process is experienced as a betrayal of, and by, the body (Pike 2011). This may be understood through the idea of the stigma of actual and perceived frailty and dependency (Goffman 1963). In Goffman's view, social interactions can fail when individuals look or act in a way that deviates from social ideals. In this case the idealised self. Human ageing is parallel to what Goffman (1963) terms the discredited stigma. This is where some aspect of a person's identity, for example; the ageing body, is conflicting with the norms and values of society, for example; the value placed on youthful appearance. This conflict can affect a person's social identity and serve as a source of anxiety (Pike 2011). For Paul, the value placed on being youthful was crucial:

> *You know the hair is gone but in my own head I'm not old. You know, outwardly looking I'm still twenty... I don't think I'll ever accept I'm old in my own head. I can see in my face I'm physically old but you know in my brain I'm never old.*

The desire to resist social norms and redefine their experience of ageing was based on their own terms such as a sense of enjoyment, autonomy, pride, success and self-expression.

Personal empowerment was understood as individuals having a sense of perceived control over their body and their lives. These feelings of empowerment were central to the ways they negotiated the relationship between sport, identity, and the body. For example; they were living their lives to the full firstly, by remaining active and secondly, by pressing ahead and keeping going:

I want to be in the top lane and I want to be competing... In my own head, I'm not forty - I'm still twenty...

Paul

According to Pike (2011) the older person is presented with the dilemma of how to negotiate their ageing body: accept it as their fate or as their fault. In turn, this creates a dilemma either to age naturally, or to attempt to disguise ageing. By comparison, Dionigi (2008; 2010) highlights how sport participation can assist in the management of an ageing identity. The themes to emerge from her research were common with participants, regardless of individual differences including: age, gender, event and exercise history. In Dionigi's view, the participants' words and actions relating to the management of ageing reflected two broad and interrelated themes in relation to their experiences of Masters sport: "*I'm out here and I can do this!*" and *"Use it or lose it"* (Dionigi 2010). Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) use a comparable phrase: "*Life is what you make it".* As a result, the responsibility for making the most of life rests largely with the individual and the individual alone.

In parallel with Dionigi (2010), my findings demonstrate that both older men and women identify themselves as sportspeople who are expressing their identity through their continued involvement in Masters sport. In other words, taking part

in sport provides participants with the knowledge that they are coping with the ageing process.

"You never lose it"

According to Dionigi (2010), ageing and being older is primarily presented in the literature from a physical science or biomedical perspective which emphasises the declining body. Focusing on my observations of older participants, my findings point to an alternative meaning of the ageing body. In addition to Dionigi's two interrelated themes I uncovered a third dimension: "*You never lose it*". This added perspective was voiced by one participant following an early morning training session in August 2010 and related to capability. In other words, once swimming was learnt it was never forgotten. In order to demonstrate this I draw upon the sporting histories of men and women of varying ages. I also rely on my own experience through 50 years of swimming and competing. For me and others swimming was part of our childhood which conjures up so many memories. I recall the National Championships in Blackpool, the smell of liniment, my trip to the USA in 1970 with the Yorkshire team, racing at Yale University, the open air pool at Scarborough, the love of water. When I swim now, over 40 years later, I still feel at home in the water and my thoughts drift back to the pool in Harrogate where I spent hours training. Dan was able to identify with my fond memories:

> *I think the term cradle to grave is such an apt phrase really. There is something with swimming, yeah. It's the one thing it's never left me. I played rugby and that's part of my past now, the rugby, I've finished that. And basketball, those sort of things, they're done, they're dusted. Whereas swimming has never left me and it's really weird that. And I can still see myself when I was a young lad back at Ebbw Vale, where mum and dad first put me in the pool there, going in the water, coming out of the changing rooms, I can still see myself coming out with my arm bands and all that. It's such a strange thing that it's such a powerful sport.*
>
> Dan

It is noticeable that the ASA, who are looking to promote lifelong participation in swimming use Dan's exact words: *"cradle to grave"* (British Swimming 2011, p.2) in their Masters swimming strategy. Will told me that he was brought up in South Africa where competitive sport was part of everyday life from a very young age:

> *It was just in our family really that there was always a sporting background. Everything was conducive to the lifestyle that you live in South Africa as well with the weather on your side and things like that. There was always a beach or outdoor activity. Especially, it wasn't, back then, the country wasn't as developed as it is now so it was a lot of bush, you know, outdoor living kind of thing. So from day dot it was always a, just a physical life in a good way. I did competitive lifesaving from the age of six I think. Dad was the head coach, so there was always, every weekend we were down for that doing lifesaving duty and competing in sports as well. School was a very, very competitive school and very big on sport. Winter and summer sport. In fact dad was the coach of the swimming team as well 'cause there wasn't a teacher available, so there was a family influence and school influence as well so... it was the enjoyment of competition rather than the enjoyment of winning if that makes sense.*

Paul had been involved in lots of different sports:

> *I can't remember a time when I didn't do sport. From a very early age I just got a kick out of running jumping kicking balls and everything else. I've always played structured team sport. But also always swum and done individual sports as well so I've never really pigeon holed into just playing football or just running or swimming. I've never been brilliant at anything but I can naturally pick up any sport. I would always be involved in any school team going.*

Jane learnt to swim at the age of six:

> *Father taught me to swim when I was about six and then at junior school used to go swimming once a week. I obviously showed some kind of promise. And moved up and I think I then started to compete in the Sheffield City Junior Championships and I started to win from about I suppose the ten to eleven age groups onwards really.*

There were also some late starters. Simon had learnt to swim at the age of eighteen. He explained:

> *My dad would never go in the pool so we never had holidays based around a pool. So there was never the want or the need to come to the seaside so we never went in the sea... At about 18, I took over as Captain as one of the Boys Brigade groups and I was looking after about 50 boys. And that opened up new doors for example on how we came into swimming. The reason that I'm swimming was that we planned a holiday to go on a narrow boat up in the Norfolk Broads. And there was three other staff and 9 boys and I suddenly thought hang on I need some sort of aquatic first aid. So I went to our local pool and said what can you recommend so I ended up doing my Bronze Cross, my Medallion and actually from that my, my Pool Lifeguard as well... but at the age of 18 I couldn't swim anything really.*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, competition is a component part of Masters sport. I was able to endorse this myself when I decided to compete in the Dorset Masters in March 2010. The experience reminded me of the thrill of competing and the nervous tension I always felt on the day of a competition as I looked forward to racing. Through personal experience, I established that competing in sport helped to keep you "*young*" by socialising with and competing against other people and being fully engaged in life.

For other swimmers, feelings of competency generalised into an overall perceived benefit which was summarised as being useful both mentally and physically:

It's just the most amazing feeling. That's what I do it for, the feeling of physical achievement and I know I'm doing my body good, my mind good and I know that I've achieved something.

Will

The sense of personal empowerment and overall control came as a direct benefit pertaining to their involvement in a Masters sport community. Interestingly, several athletes including Bernie, Roy, Paul and Elsa conceded that they were fitter in their later years than they were in their former years. This finding indicates that Masters sport participation is associated with self-determination and a life well-lived. The underlying motives for involvement in sport were beliefs that Masters swimmers were enjoying a better quality of life by remaining active, setting new challenges and being in control of their own destinies. At the same time, sport was viewed as a means to avoid or delay the potential threats of old age. For example; they were resisting the risk of ageing by remaining active and competing in sport until a factor beyond their control prevented them. In negotiating the ageing process, I found that as individuals they defined their own personal challenges which made it easier to "*age well*".

Older Athletes as Role Models

Discussion on positive ageing refers to research, theories, attitudes and images about celebrating later life as a period for fun, friendship, good health, independence, challenge and enjoyment rather than decline (Chodzko-Zajko 2000; Kelly and Freysinger 2000; Grant 2001; Dionigi 2006, Pike 2011). Governments and policy makers have used the knowledge base gained from a positive ageing agenda to justify the appeal of health and fitness campaigns (McPherson 1994; the ASA 2009). The dominant intention is that older people

should take preventive measures to remain physically active for as long as possible (Dionigi 2006). This trend reflects an emerging cultural emphasis on the link between physical activity and resisting the ageing body (Gilleard and Higgs 2002).

My research confirmed that the motivation to swim was exhibited as making the most of life. To illustrate this I draw on the accounts of four swimmers who recalled a period in time in their former years which caused them to restructure their lives. I begin with Jane (70+), an international Masters swimmer. Ingrained in Jane's outlook was a sense of appreciation for life. Jane was brought up in Sheffield. She had learnt to swim at the age of six and had shown much promise going on to represent Yorkshire schools in her teenage years. She had given up swimming at the age of fifteen. After a break of 43 years she had returned to swimming following a life-saving operation. She explained:

> *After I had my operation I was thinking that I needed to get fit again 'cause I'd been pretty poorly. Even walking the dog had been an effort. And Phillip* (her husband) *had bought me one of these sticks to make a little seat so that when I walked the dog I could stop and sit on my seat for a bit to get my breath back. And so I started to swim again and I thought well I can do that and I'd heard about the transplant games, so I thought well perhaps I could do something like that and get back to my swimming again... I felt like a beached whale to start with and swimming a hundred metres was a bit of an effort. But I got back into it. It was a huge effort but I was determined to do it.*

Jane subsequently went on to enter the GB, French, Spanish, European and World Masters championships. In her interview she expressed her feelings of gratitude as she reflected on her illness:

I can't bring myself to express how I feel (Jane cries at this point)... *because I'm so grateful. It's a terribly sort of emotional thing really as well and I can't, you know I can't begin to think. But you know, I suppose I wouldn't have lived really but it's just terribly emotional and I get that feeling sometimes when I've competed. Once in Manchester when I'd done terribly well. I'd had two fantastic swims in Manchester and I was just absolutely crying buckets afterwards. And it was only because I thought my God, you know, I never dreamt that I would get to this stage.*

Endurance swimmer, Bernie (50+), turned his life around in his early thirties. He explained:

I left school at fifteen. I went to work and that was it really. I basically drank, womanised, smoked, and worked and that was it. I put on a lot of weight and that was my life then until I got to about thirty and then decided that it was killing me. The smoking was killing me. I'm sure it was killing me and so I stopped smoking there and then. I started squash and then smashed up my knee skiing funnily enough. That stopped me doing the squash which I loved and then decided to go and do a bit of swimming... and now I just enjoy the water.

Bernie acknowledged that he was now fitter than ever:

O God yeah, there's no comparison. I'm probably fitter now than I've ever been to be fair.

Roy (70+) gave up swimming at the age of 24 but subsequently took it up again at the age of 56 after a break of 32 years:

I went for a company medical and I weighed nearly 13 stone. I had cholesterol problems and all sorts you know. I, I dread to think what sort of state I'd be in now because I like food and I eat and enjoy it. So, yes swimming does help. It's, it's got knock on effects in a lot of ways. I'm definitely healthier, I'm fitter and I can eat most things I want to eat. So it's a win-win situation.

Paul (40+) reflected:

I'd say Jan for pushing ten years really didn't do much at all. Just sat behind a desk getting older and more unfit and I suppose the key to where I currently am is in 2004 I gave up smoking properly. And in 2005, I started doing some sprint triathlons. And that's how I sort of progressed to where I am now really.

And so, the feelings of gratitude for what the swimmers had - as opposed to what they did not have, was maintained through the use of social comparison. This required not only the awareness that there was always someone worse off, but also the understanding that given the chance that person might appreciate and make the most of their life to a greater extent.

Paul continued to swim because he wanted to emulate others:

Now I actually don't need to win. I actually need to strive to be as good as the next person I can see. You know, that's what actually motivates me.

In many respects, Masters athletes appear to be ideal role models both for society as a whole and for other seniors (Horton 2010). However, it remains the case that stereotypes of the elderly continue to be predominantly negative (Levy and Banaji 2002; Ory et al. 2003). As already stated, Rowe and Kahn (1998) propose that

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taking on some of the responsibility for one's ageing is potentially an empowering experience. Horton (2010) argues that finding ways to effectively minimise and counteract the most negative aspects of ageing stereotypes remains a pressing social concern. In this social group, it was apparent that older athletes in particular acted as positive role models to those around them - both old and young:

> *I still like to put a pair of Speedo's on and sit on the beach and not feel embarrassed about my shape you know... And at 61, I can still boast a 30/31 inch waist and a 44 chest. And usually it's the other way round.*

> Dennis

In addition, these swimmers had both knowledge and expertise regarding exercise that they could share with others. Bernie commented that being 56 was unimportant. Rather, the fact that others saw him as a "*decent swimmer*" was what mattered most. Likewise, as a professional in Sports Development, Tina saw herself as being a role model to those around her as she was keen to inspire others:

> *If I didn't have sport as my release I don't think I would have had any self-esteem, self-confidence and I definitely don't think I would have had the job that I have now. And I think that's what spurs me on in my work capacity as I want to give other people that opportunity. So I think in some ways I've got to be a role model... I do want to be a bit, you know, that sort of role model. That I'm actually doing things. And I'm very proud to do that and that's where the open water swimming comes in particular. That it's a challenge and people say... What? Really? You did that?*

The two oldest "*regular*" swimmers in the group were Roy and Jane who were both in their seventies. Both Roy and Jane were a source of inspiration to the younger swimmers in the group:

I'd like to be still swimming like Jane and Roy at their age.

<div align="right">Megan</div>

When you look at Roy and Jane you just think how can I moan that I'm tired? You know Roy's in his seventies. It's stunning! And I have to bang myself every now and again and say that guy is thirty years older than me. It's staggering. And you know Jane and what she achieves in her own age group is just massive motivation. There's people at their age Jan, that you know long since, twenty years since have given up the ghost.

<div align="right">Paul</div>

I think it all comes down to looking at a guy like Roy who is 70 odd but yet he's still willing to push himself and still does a damned good job of doing it as well. You know we've all got the same attributes or the majority of us have got the same attributes, because we all want to achieve the same things.

<div align="right">Will</div>

I suffer in the sprint sets because I, for whatever reason, I don't have that, that power. Which, you know the likes of Roy does. You know Roy is incredibly quick. I don't think he realises how quick he is.

<div align="right">Simon</div>

Ageing and Identity

My research into ageing and identity led me to the work of Biggs (1993) and Grant and Stothart (1999) who suggest that participation in meaningful leisure pursuits in later life can contribute to one's identity and individuality. This was evident in my interviews with swimmers as they openly discussed their individual

backgrounds and sporting histories. With regard to his identity Bernie commented:

> *I would say I'm a good endurance swimmer* (thinks)... *I'm a very good endurance swimmer. Yea, I don't mind blowing my own trumpet. Er... one day I'll be wrong but at the moment I think I am a pretty good endurance swimmer for my age.*

Goffman's work is considered to be informative on key aspects of the ageing experience (Pike 2011). A central tenet of Goffman's work is that identities are constructed through interactions between social actors and others in a dynamic social process (Goffman, 1969). This process is ongoing, and identities develop and will need to be (re)negotiated, for example; at various stages of the life cycle (Pike 2011). Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) reinforce the notion that the responsibility for making the most of life rests largely with the individual, and the individual alone. With regard to Masters sport, Dionigi (2006) proposes that Masters athletes are negotiating the psychosocial processes of an ageing identity. Dionigi (2006) argues too that the process is not straightforward but rather it is a more complex combination including resistance, feelings of personal empowerment, and an expression of the undesirability of deep old age. Hence, participation may instead represent a simultaneous interaction and negotiation of all these dimensions. The intricacies of Masters sport were confirmed as these athletes expressed a strong, energetic, vital and active image that contrasted with the conventional passive dependent view of being old.

Bernie who was in his fifties commented on how others saw him:

> *My friends see me as a swimmer, yes, they definitely see me as a swimmer. Well that's what I've put an awful lot of effort into.*

Endurance swimmer, Becky had stepped up her swimming in order to complete a gruelling ironman triathlon:

> *I was often not good at things in my life and it has given me an identity with other people. It has helped people identify with me – Becky's done ironman. I have a necklace with the ironman logo which people recognise! It is quite nice. It is a lovely feeling to have done it but now I move on.*

Several of the swimmers in this study acknowledged that their sporting practices challenged that of the stereotypical older person. For example; they understood the disparity between themselves and other older people which contributed to a sense of pride and identity management. In particular, Dennis (age 60+) said:

> *A relaxing swim is different from the relaxing swim of the average man in the street. Like the rest of them in there now* (points at a group of casual swimmers in the pool). *But that's fine they're happy with that. I wouldn't be.*

My findings demonstrated that irrespective of age and ability, both men and women identified themselves as sports people. In addition, they clearly identified themselves with the activity of Masters swimming, confirming the idea that certain forms of active sport participation can provide a valued social identity. Social identities are important for a number of reasons as they provide the individual with a sense of belonging, a valued place within their social environment and a means to connect to others. They also present opportunities to enhance self-worth and self-esteem (Shipway and Jones 2007). Social identity theory is significant in terms of its ability to explain group behaviour in a variety of contexts (Shipway and Jones 2007). Stebbins (2001) argues that casual leisure is unlikely to provide a significant social identity. By contrast, serious leisure activities have the potential to do so (Green and Jones 2005) and taking part in sporting activities is likely to make the sporting identity more salient (Shipway

and Jones, 2007). The serious leisure theme merits more consideration and I will explore the concept of serious leisure in detail in the next chapter. At this point, I assert that the very act of attending training sessions and Masters swimming events allowed the swimming identity to become clearer, and more enduring than other identities. For example; the use of words and actions such as: *"swimming has never left me"* (Dan), *"it's part of* my *life"* (Tina), *"it's given me an identity with other people"* (Becky) and *"it's what I do every day"* (Paul) are consistent with traditional notions of identity as self-integration or the real me (Dionigi 2010). My observational data supported this finding, with self-presentation of being a Masters swimmers clearly evident since Masters sport was identified as the dominant identity for these athletes.

Putting the Body to the Test

The participants' words and actions were consistent with positive ageing and health promotion approaches. That is, they set themselves apart from people who were inactive. This provided a meaningful insight into Masters sport participation, as they acknowledged that if they stopped participating they would age badly. This idea is consistent with Dionigi's *"use it or lose it"* theme which is often driven by fear of the alternatives – to keep exercising is to avoid loss of health, independence, sense of self and even life (Dionigi 2010).

In particular, the language used by the swimmers demonstrated that they perceived themselves as being an exception to the rule. They also expressed pride in the conviction that they were different to the stereotypical older person.

> *I think keeping fit stops you to a certain extent from being old. You might be old but you don't feel old.*
>
> Bernie

There was evidence to suggest that through training regularly they were committed to an active lifestyle and a regular routine from which they benefitted. In turn, this meant that they set personal challenges and entered competitions. The act of racing brought out their competitive edge. This was true for both sprint and endurance swimmers as Jane (sprint swimmer) and Dan (sprint and endurance swimmer) commented:

I'm highly motivated in everything that I do. I'm sort of... totally taken up by it

Jane

My times are coming down... like the 400 swim I'm desperate to go under the five minute mark so I'd like to get a good four minute something for that.

Dan

More specifically, the endurance swimmers described how they liked to challenge themselves and push the boundaries to the limit in order to benefit from their participation in Masters sport. This was apparent from both a physical and mental perspective. Bernie made reference to this in his interview:

My body can just seem to keep going now. Don't know why but it just seems to, hour after hour, just keep going.

The tougher, the harder, the better. The worse the conditions the better I am at it...

Consequently, there was evidence of taking control in that they were resisting the ageing process and continuing to enjoy a better quality of life through being fit

and able-bodied. Their responses also demonstrated the determination and resilience to defy or postpone age-related disability or disease, and keep improving.

The guys that I swim with are constantly trying to push you. Tina and Bernie with their long distance and they're constantly on your toes trying to push you. And Alex as well, he's a good sprint swimmer. I really like that nature... I've noticed that everybody is pushing each other to try and get better. So I love that aspect of it... The good thing as well is you get a lot of feedback from the others, which I find is very useful. 'Cause some days if you're not swimming that well, they'll tell you. You know, pull your finger out! And days when you are swimming well they're like yeah, fantastic swimming...

Dan

This latter interpretation sees these participants contributing to their own quality of life by being physically active for as long as possible. As Roy explained:

Your muscles might not be able to do everything you want to but I think swimming is one of those things you can carry on doing a lot longer than most other things and so I've got no thoughts about stopping...

Dennis (age 60+) had undergone open heart surgery but he still chose to train every day. In his interview he acknowledged:

Eventually the body's going to give up, which it's done a few occasions. It gets close now and again you know. But if I start to have problems I just go and see the doctor...

Despite his ill health, Dennis looked forward in a positive way:

Hopefully, injuries permitting I'll still be stronger when I'm in my 80's than most people.

In his approach to training Bernie commented:

The longer the distance, the harder it is, the better I am, whether that's mentally or physically. Well I suppose it's a bit of both. The body's got to be able to take it but you've got be mentally fairly strong to do it as well and that's why I train so much. And I do think especially at my age, I think you've got to keep pushing and pushing and training as hard as possible otherwise I'll just keep falling off the precipice as it were.

These comments demonstrate what Stevenson (2002) describes as *"entanglement"* in the swimming network, in that swimming provides a significant dimension in the lives of those who are able to commit to regular participation. According to Stevenson (2002) the more that one becomes entangled in the everyday affairs of the activity, the deeper one's involvement becomes. As mentioned in chapter four, such entanglement creates commitments and obligations to the social group, which in turn, provides the basis of an enhanced reputation and social identity. Hence, the notion of challenge portrayed Masters swimming as an ideal context to test one's abilities. Open water competitions provided space for older competitors to be involved in sport in later life on a par with other athletes. Bernie (age 50+) commented:

The oldies don't count really. It's the youngsters. I always aim to be in the top ten percent. It doesn't matter what age group. Overall in the top ten percent. And I like to be obviously first in my age group. But usually the vets (veterans) *are over forties, so it's a bit of a problem. Because I'm giving them nearly twenty years.*

As enduring athletes the swimmers enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing they could still compete or as Dionigi (2010) refers to it: *"I'm out here, I can do this".* For example; Bernie declared:

> *I want to do the Lake, Lake Zurich at 60 and I want to see whether I can beat my PB* (personal best), *which is doubtful I think somehow. But I want to get close to it.*

Fifty year old endurance swimmer Becky competed in the Brownsea Island swim every year:

> *It's four and a half mile swim which is quite an endurance event for me. Then you've got the tides and the weather to contend with so I do that every year. It's a personal challenge.*

The above quotes reveal that participants were ageing well and making the choice to remain physically active and socially engaged. In addition, their words and actions are consistent with continuity theory (Chapman 2005) and the model of successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1998) in that they were maintaining an active lifestyle.

A common concern of many of the swimmers was the avoidance of weight gain. Several participants in this study maintained their swimming as a combative measure against ill health:

> *My food intake is horrendous. And I like a beer, not a lot, but I like a couple of pints on an evening, go out – four or five pints. And of course I put on weight. I love my chocolate in the evening which I eat an immense amount of - we have a serving dish for me* (laughs). *So I can do all this*

without having to worry that I'm putting on weight or getting unfit because I know that my training's counteracting everything.

Bernie

Health is key for me and I put on weight quite easily if I'm not careful... putting on weight is what we all don't want to do essentially. It's not good for us but... It's the health aspect of trying to be healthy but the competition aspect of my mind versus my body I think that really drives me the most.

Will

It would be easy to suggest that swimming was easy but this was not the case. For example; throughout my research I worked tirelessly with Jane as she strived to replicate the times she had set at the Welsh Masters in Swansea in March 2009. Jane had some good swims at the Welsh Masters in 2010 but what followed was a sequence of poor performances and inconsistent swims. She dealt with a series of injuries, including knee, hamstring and shoulder problems, ill health and family concerns. In June 2011, she spoke to me about her 200 metre Freestyle swim at the GB Masters as she explained: "*I'd nothing left at the end*". In September 2011 she commented that she was "*worn out*" as she coped with looking after her daughter who was going through a difficult pregnancy. She even questioned whether or not she was good enough but declared: "*I want to swim, I don't want to stop*". In my concluding diary notes on 15th December 2011, I noted that Jane arrived late for early morning training. She had slept in. She had been looking after her granddaughter. Instead of finishing early she stayed on to complete the training set. On 20th December I met with Jane so that we could set her goals for 2012. Our final session was completed on 22nd December 2011. It was a 2400 metre set and I called it the *"Twelve days of Christmas"*. The set comprised of: 12 lengths freestyle, 11 lengths choice, 10 lengths freestyle, 9 lengths backstroke, 8 lengths freestyle pull, 7 lengths breaststroke, 6 lengths freestyle, 5 lengths kick, 4 lengths freestyle, 3 lengths double arm backstroke, 2 lengths freestyle, I length sculling. Once the swimmers had finished the set, I said: "*OK, it's Christmas you*

can finish early". Some swimmers chatted at the end of the pool, others left early. Interestingly though, Jane swam an extra 10 lengths.

Summary

The lifestyles of many of the swimmers cited here contrast with the perceived burden of dependency and social isolation of the ageing population. I began this chapter by asking firstly, what it means to age well. In answer to this question, I concluded that these swimmers were challenging the negative ageing stereotype. It was clear that these athletes were adapting to the ageing process by experiencing a sense of enjoyment through setting new challenges in the context of Masters sport. Hence, they did not consider themselves as old; instead they searched for ways to stay young. Consequently, it is evident that Masters sport can help older persons to both contend with and accept the ageing process in a positive way. Participation in Masters swimming has the potential to help in negotiating the ageing process. I also questioned how older athletes could be encouraged to age well. I make the case that Masters swimmers should be encouraged to embrace an active lifestyle. As older athletes, they should be given the space and time by leisure providers to meet together in the local community. In this way they can act as role models for both old and young. As such, they should be offered extensive Masters training programmes and competitions. This research on athletes aged forty and over can lead to an improved understanding of the role physical exercise has in the *"ageing well"* discourse. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Masters swimming can provide what the ASA are looking to achieve in seeking to both engage and retain Masters swimmers on a long term basis from *"cradle to grave".* Some of the issues uncovered in this chapter relate to serious (as opposed to casual) leisure. In the next chapter I will explore this theme in more detail as I search for the ways in which Masters swimming can benefit older participants.

CHAPTER SEVEN: The Serious Swimmer

Introduction

Throughout chapters four and five there is evidence to suggest that these participants demonstrate a serious attitude to exercise. Whilst the concept of serious leisure has been applied to a variety of contexts, it has yet to be comprehensively applied within a Masters swimming environment. This chapter explores the concept of the *"serious swimmer"* within the Masters swimming community.
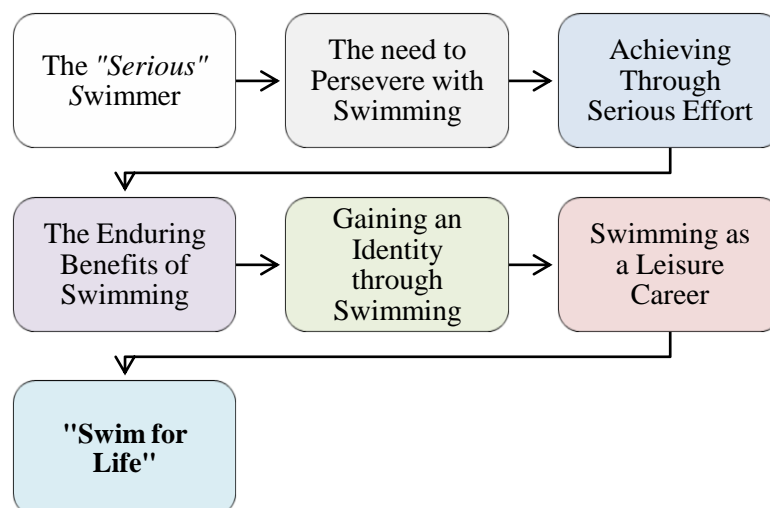
Figure 3: The *"Serious"* Swimmer

In exploring the boundary negotiations used by participants in cultures of commitment, leisure, like work, is socially constructed, complex, and constrained (Gillespie et al. 2002). It is bounded in the sense that it operates within a set of pre-existing power relations in a certain historical time. It is shaped by its location in a particular economic structure with a particular ethos (Bourdieu 1984). Csikzentmihalyi (1990) suggests there is an additional dimension which he refers to as *"flow"*. Flow is the psychological state in which people are so intensely involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. What is more, it is the

experiential consequence of a perceived balance between personal skill and situational challenge. Hence, flow is a form of optimal experience and it clarifies how and why a particular activity becomes meaningful (Heo et al. 2010; Elkington 2011). The reason for this is that the experience itself has to be central. If our developed skills can be matched to clear challenges then we are likely to be deeply involved with the experience. As a result, it is the experience that draws us back to the activity and to a career of involvement. According to British Swimming:

> *Masters swimming is basically swimming for adults. It encompasses the whole range of ability from casual fitness swimming to highly organised competitive swimming...*

> (British Swimming 2013)

The term "*serious swimming*" stood out as a dominant theme which constantly emerged throughout this thesis. This theme related to the serious, almost professional approach adopted by the participants towards their training and overall attitude regarding participation in the sport. Consequently, swimming was not simply about "*swimming for adults*" as British Swimming (2011) promote. Rather it was complex and intricate. Each participant was unique and yet they played a significant role in the swimming community. For example; I found that each individual had a personal tale to tell and aspired to achieve their challenges and goals which were often personal. I also discovered that for some swimmers, their interest in the sport was so important to the point that it was described as: "*a way of life*". Since people typically hold multiple identities, most theorists assume that some role-identities are more salient for individuals' self-conceptions than others. Salience refers to the subjective importance or value that persons attach to the various roles that they accept as self-defining (Thoits 2012).

Dennis, who was in his sixties and semi-retired, acknowledged that his life revolved around his training. For others, including Elsa, Dan and Will, Masters swimming provided the opportunity to escape from everyday life and the

pressures of home. As my research evolved, I was able to observe this complex world first hand as my position changed from that of an *"outsider"* to that of an *"insider"* to the extent that I became so engrossed in Masters swimming that I took up training and competing again.

The "Serious" Swimmer

The following section explores the serious nature swimmers adopt towards their preparation for, and participation in Masters swimming. A key feature of my research showed that participation provided a gateway into an environment of like-minded people. As a result, participants were exhibited as serious, committed, and activity driven, thus fulfilling the criteria by which Stebbins (1992) distinguishes serious from casual leisure. My findings demonstrated that serious swimmers went through a process of involvement whereby they were converted and subsequently gained an identity as a swimmer. By going through this process participants maintained an active lifestyle to *"Swim for life"* as detailed in Figure 3 at the beginning of this chapter.

Periodically, casual participants would come and go however; this tended to be either when trying something new or whilst training for a particular event. This meant that they would drift away from the community and not be seen again for several weeks or even months. My observations also demonstrated that casual swimmers were considered to be *"outsiders"* and tended not to fit in. Stebbins (1992) notes that serious leisure participants are separated from non-participants through the unique behaviours, language and values related to the social world of the group. Within the context of Masters swimming, my findings would support this view; hence new swimmers were expected to assume a resolute attitude, especially in their outlook on training. For example; they had to learn existing routines, new techniques, read a pace clock, understand training schedules and develop new-fangled skills in order to fit in – often in a short space of time. Training sessions required a comprehension of coaching principles on: training sets, stroke rates, endurance swims, heart-rate sets, streamlining, underwater kick,

sculling, hydration and lane discipline. To an outsider *"swimming drills[5]"* meant nothing but they were quickly learnt as they were explained by more experienced swimmers in the lane. Some would even demonstrate the drills to newcomers in the group. Typical swimming drills included: *"catch up", "finger drag", "single arm", "back tap"* and *"fists".*

The serious approach adopted by these swimmers was demonstrated in their commitment to early morning training. Prus (1996) refers to this notion as a like-minded group of mutually oriented and cohesive agents. This commitment was bewildering to those outside the Masters swimming community. Dedication was evident at the outset of my research in January 2010 as I wrote detailed notes in my research diary. The following diary notes represent a *"serious"* approach to leisure.

Reflections on Early Morning Training: January 2010

(Taken from my Research Notes)

> 5.25am. I am awakened by the sound of the shipping forecast on Radio 4: *"Selsey Bill to Lyme Regis, north east backing north later, occasionally five to seven... Squally wintry showers..."* I close my eyes and think about going back to sleep but I'm already mindful of the day ahead. Gradually I stir myself, turn on the light, open the curtains and peer outside to find that it is cold, it is dark and it is sleeting. I shower and dress as quickly as possible, make myself a hot drink, pull on a thick fleece and head out. As I start the car and turn on the lights, my dashboard is displaying an outside temperature of 1.0° centigrade. Still half awake, I take the short drive to the leisure centre and make preparations for the morning training session. Thirteen swimmers arrive at the pool. Included in the group are an unusual mix of men and women. The group include: an International Masters swimmer, county swimmers, open water endurance swimmers and *"Swim*

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[5] Swimming drills are used by swimmers and coaches to break down the stroke in order to improve technique and efficiency in the water

Fit" swimmers. This morning there is a stark contrast between the outside temperature and the stifling atmosphere on poolside. The four-lane 25 metre pool is adequate but by no means luxurious. There is an overpowering smell of chlorine on poolside so I open up the doors to circulate the air. Most swimmers accept that this pool satisfies their needs but any swimmer looking for a state of the art, deck level (where the level of water is same as the level of surrounding pool deck) and eight-lane pool would not choose to train there. The pool is still, undisturbed and I contemplate how quiet it is. Usually, the pool is set out with anti-wave lane lines and backstroke flags. The pool offers no natural light. Two of the lights above the pool are not working which makes the pool look gloomy and uninviting. On this particular morning, two of the anti-wave lane lines are awaiting repair, hence; the swimmers have to contend with old fashioned lane lines which do little to absorb the waves. One by one, the swimmers appear on poolside and acknowledge their fellow swimmers with a quiet *"good morning".* I reflect on how dedicated these swimmers must be in order to turn up to train on such a morning as this. The majority have their own swimming kit which includes a hat, goggles, pullbuoy, hand paddles, kickboard and fins. As swimmers, this identifies them as being serious about their swimming, but swimming kit is not essential as the leisure centre does provide training equipment. The swimmers also bring their own drink bottles which usually contain water or weak fruit juice. For training purposes the pool temperature is far from ideal. It is too warm for training - especially for any open water *"endurance"* swimmers who enjoy sea swimming. I write the training schedule for the morning on a whiteboard at the end of the pool. It consists of a *"warm up",* a *"main set"* and a *"cool down".* The swimmers understand that there is a particular direction of swimming which is dependent on the lane they swam in so that the lane direction alternates from lane to lane - clockwise or anti-clockwise. These unwritten rules form part of the subculture of being a Masters swimmer. I watch to see how each swimmer enters the water. It is interesting how much they vary – each to their own routine. Some jump in, some dive in, whereas others ease themselves in slowly in a more measured way. During the *"warm up"* the swimmers take a quick

drink in their rest periods in order to rehydrate. Their training session is planned in advance as part of an annual training plan. During the winter months the emphasis is on distance and technique. In the spring and summer months there is a change in focus to sprint work as the more competitive swimmers prepare for racing. Part way through the warm up Dan asks me for advice on his technique: *"Am I pulling too wide Jan, my stroke doesn't feel right?"* As his coach, I watch him. I can see that his hand entry is too wide, so we work together throughout the rest of the warm up to correct the fault. In the hour long session the top lane - Lane 1, swim 3000 metres, which consists of a mixed 1200 metre warm up and a 1000 metre *"main set"* of 10 x 100 metre Freestyle swims. Noting down times on poolside, I hear words of encouragement from the lead swimmer in the top lane as the set gets tougher: *"Come on, two to go", "Stay on my feet".* Bernie begins to slow down, *"I'm hurting"* he says... *"So am I"* comes the response from Tina. I scribble the word *"resilience"* in my research diary. I also draft my thoughts on the continual noise which echoes around the pool and builds as the swimmers start to work harder so that I have to speak up in order to be heard. Across the four lanes I perceive an unspoken respect between the swimmers in that each swimmer plays their part. From time to time the lead swimmer changes but not one swimmer gives in and they all complete a demanding main set. Lanes 2 and 3 complete 2600 metres and lane 4 swim 1700 metres. At the end of the session, I tune in to a conversation between two endurance swimmers who are discussing their thoughts on entering a 1500 metre pool swim. Eventually, they turn to ask my advice on the event itself and the best way to structure their training. They also share a few comments on the session they have just completed. *"Dan was flying this morning"...* *"That was hard, really hard"... "Those 100's were awful".* As I prepare to leave, I acknowledge that these swimmers share a common bond in being a Masters swimmer. Perhaps, more importantly, they have completed a tough session which heightens their self-esteem and they leave poolside with an animated: *"See you tomorrow..."*

A constant request from the swimmers during the course of my research was: *"Can you open the doors Jan?"* My research diary often made reference to resolve and perseverance regarding the effort required to train hard in a leisure centre pool. The pool was designed for leisurely swimming rather than serious training. In the course of my research there were times when the pool chlorine levels were so high the swimmers ended up coughing and unable to breathe well. On other occasions the pool temperature was so high that I had to abandon my session plan completely and concentrate on shorter swims on technique and skills. There were even occasions when the swimmers had to be turned away from morning training by the duty manager because the chlorine levels were considered to be unsafe. Having prepared for an early morning training session, this was not well received. Part way through my research, the pool was closed in order to carry out major refurbishments. At the swimmers request, during the two week pool closure, I was asked to find an alternative pool so that the swimmers did not miss out on valuable training time. Fortunately, we were able to utilise a small 20 metre school pool in the area which served as a temporary *"Third Place"*.

Of the thirteen swimmers who attended the early morning training in January 2010, eleven continued to train on a regular basis and it was these swimmers who were at the heart of the Masters swimming community – *"the regular swimmers"* (Oldenburg 1999). More importantly, it was these swimmers who influenced others in terms of their attitude to training sessions. The other two swimmers had to take time out because of illness. One developed a serious heart problem and was advised not to swim by his consultant and the other suffered from glandular fever. Issues relating to ageing have already been discussed in detail in chapter six and will be continued in chapter eight as I explore injury and illness more thoroughly. Interestingly, both of these topics were recurrent underlying themes and were of note in being a serious swimmer. At this point, I must add that other swimmers attended evening training sessions on a regular basis but were unable to attend early morning training sessions because of family and work commitments. In addition, there were swimmers who attended on an irregular basis but were considered to be what Stebbins (1992) describes as *"casual"* swimmers. For example; Rose began a university course in September 2010 therefore she could

not train during term time. There were also swimmers who attended whilst being on holiday and several of them commented that pools in their area did not provide coached Masters sessions. In August 2010, Tina brought an old school friend to training with her who lived in Brighton. At the end of the session she commented *"This is ideal, this is just what I need"*. Other swimmers attended when there was a competition on the horizon in order to fit in some additional training sessions and although these swimmers did not attend regularly, they were a component part of the *"Third Place"*.

Having coached and observed hundreds of sessions throughout this research, I concluded that there was nothing casual about the commitment of the swimmers who attended regularly. For active participants, training required serious effort and dedication and a positive attitude towards their participation in the sport – not just for themselves but for those around them. Throughout my research there were times when it proved difficult to deliver a quality training programme in pool conditions which were less than adequate. When I subsequently questioned the swimmers about their commitment to training, Paul remarked:

> *Why would any sane person get out of bed before 6 o'clock in the morning and by 6.35 have their lungs burning? I mean is it just the fact that because you do sport there is always a level of discomfort?*

These questions implied that in order to be a *"serious"* swimmer it was necessary to make an effort and experience a certain amount of suffering.

From the preliminary stages of my data collection, I discovered that serious Masters swimmers do not simply drift into the sport. Rather, as Prus (1996) suggests, they are a like-minded group of mutually oriented and cohesive agents who share common subcultural perspectives which are learnt over a period of time rather than occurring spontaneously. This like-mindedness not only reflects their collective constructions of the need for meaningful community affiliations

through sport, but also long-term historical trends that encourage cultural associations between social distinctions. The group affiliation was summed up by Roy:

We've got a great crowd out there that we swim with you know. It's good.

And by Becky:

Not all, but a lot of my social life is part of my training really 'cause a lot of the social activities are with the same people.

In training for her endurance events Becky referred to the camaraderie: *"It's a bit of a family thing, we understand each other".* Similarly, Tina believed that the social side of swimming was the reason she turned up. Hence, it was at the pool that she saw her friends who knew everything about her. She liked the mix of people where everyone was equal, irrespective of age and background. When considering the characteristics of a *"Third Place",* Oldenburg (1999) advises that:

Worldly status claims must be checked at the door in order that all within may be equals.

(Oldenburg 1999, p.25)

Hence, it was apparent that status did not intrude on the *"Third Place"* association. One of the things Tina liked about her training was the reliance on each other and having the motivation to take on new challenges which were sometimes extreme. For example; her motivation to take on the gruelling endurance swim across Lake Zurich was one of her peers showing his confidence in her to complete it. Having established the serious element to swimming, I considered why these swimmers continued to persevere with swimming.

The Need to Persevere with Swimming

Perseverance was a constant underlying sub theme within this study. My findings led me to literature associated with perseverance, and most notably Stebbins (1992; 2001; 2008) and Duda (2001). Considerable research supports the use of achievement goal theory to examine levels of motivation in sport (Fox et al. 1994; Duda et al. 1995). Nonetheless, despite the substantial body of research utilising achievement goal theory, relatively little is known about the achievement motivation of middle aged and older adult athletes. According to Tenenbaum et al. (2005) effort is required to persevere in a task that involves extremely hard physical and environmental demands. Furthermore, the quality of perseverance may be through adversity and obstacles such as fatigue, anxiety, injury, freezing cold or embarrassment. Therefore, it may be perceived as a goal-directed behaviour over time (Gould et al. 2008). According to Tenenbaum et al. (2005) goal orientation and exercise self-efficacy are considered instrumental to physical effort perseverance; however, other factors are more task specific. These other factors include: task-specific perceived ability, determination and commitment levels, and readiness to invest effort and energy. They concluded that task-specific motivational components, in particular the confidence in one's own performance and the readiness to invest effort in the physically demanding task, are the main determinants of physical effort perseverance.

As an older athlete, Roy summed up the attitude of perseverance:

> *If I have a lay off, it's hard, it really is hard, and when I come back I'm gritting my teeth to get back in the pool, and I know it's going to hurt.*

My research confirmed that there were similarities between Masters swimmers and participants who were training for other endurance sports including triathlon and distance running. Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007) found that distance running is intimately connected with endurance; tolerating fatigue, and that

discomfort and pain constitutes an integral part of everyday training routines. This theme is consistent with the training routines of the distance swimmers and triathletes who coped with high training volumes, a variation of water temperatures ranging between 10°C and 30°C and conditions from ocean surf to lake calm (Dallam et al. 2005). The next chapter will explore the consequences of injury, pain and deviant lifestyles in swimming in greater depth.

Endurance swimmer, Tina, conceded that she was *"totally driven to train"* and would push herself to *"the absolute limit"* to the extent that she liked to *"hurt".* She confessed that training helped her to cope with the pressures of work and home life. In February 2010, she aspired to complete the twelve-hour International self-transcendence swim in Zurich. Her training schedule progressed from two to eight hours of swimming a day completing distances of up to eight kilometres a day and forty seven kilometres a week. For a 40 year old athlete this was an incredibly testing schedule. Even more remarkable was the support she had from her training partner Bernie, who competed with her who was in his fifties.

In July 2011, having been the fastest woman to complete the 4.6 mile Brownsea Island swim for the previous three years Tina, and her training partner Bernie, were challenged to swim around Brownsea Island twice. This was a tough challenge made even more difficult by the tides. Moreover, it was uncharted territory as it had never been done before. Bernie completed this three hour feat of endurance without too many problems other than ingesting salt water which caused abdominal problems. Throughout the swim Tina suffered from severe bloating, nausea and sickness from the half-way point onwards. She also suffered from chafing on her neck from her wetsuit and cuts and bruises from being pushed into the rocks. Despite these problems however she went on to complete the challenge but suffered for the next ten days. On explaining her motives for persevering with the challenge she declared:

I like a new challenge and anyway now I can say I'm the first woman to do it.

Research indicates that task goal orientations are associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation and consequently higher levels of self-determination in sport (Duda et al. 1995). Here, however, Tina demonstrates motivation that is both intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsically, she was motivated to participate for enjoyment and personal satisfaction, whilst extrinsically her motivation was driven by external rewards and incentives (Coolican 2007).

The word *"challenge"* appeared regularly in my diary notes and throughout my interviews with key informants. Swimming was about setting new challenges. This was evident with Becky who also competed in the Brownsea Island sea swim every year and was prepared to contend with the tides and the cold water which she referred to as a *"personal challenge"*. In 2010 she challenged herself to swim the event in the non-wetsuit category which took over two hours to complete. Following the race she suffered from hypothermia but persevered with the swim. In her interview she described herself as having a *"stubborn tenacity"*.

Jane had taken up Masters swimming following a debilitating illness. She said of her training: *"I'm disappointed in myself if I haven't had a good session and I like to feel I've given it everything"*. At the age of 70, she said, *"I want to keep going for as long as possible, whether I'm competing or not"*. Jane's comments reinforce my findings in chapter six relating to resistance and old age. As her coach, I can recall a period of time, where Jane struggled in training, but somehow kept going. She said she *"felt foul"* but *"still wanted to train"*. In her interview she became emotionally upset and referred to keeping going following life-saving surgery: *"I suppose I wouldn't have lived really"*. During the course of this research Jane set two new GB Masters records in her age group for the 50 metres and 100 metres Freestyle.

The perseverance theme is connected to the requirement of significant effort whereby there is an unmistakeable demonstration of exercise adherence and addiction to swimming. Exercise dependence was first defined as a *''positive addiction''* because it was thought to produce psychological and physiological benefits (Glasser 1976). For Glasser, exercise dependence was an enjoyable activity that produced extreme pleasure, increased mental strength, and provided mystical self-transcendence. The general thinking was that excessive exercise made people *''feel good''.* The perceived view was that positive dependence does not dominate a person's life and its consequences are beneficial, contrary to harmful chemical dependence (Allegre et al. 2006). By contrast to the generally positive definition of exercise dependence, Morgan (1979) presented exercise as a *''wonder drug''* and based his definition on *''negative addiction''.* Morgan argued firstly, that the individual must require daily exercise in order to exist or cope. Secondly, if deprived of exercise, the individual must manifest various withdrawal symptoms for example: *"depression, anxiety or irritability''* (Morgan 1979, p.5). In this research Becky conceded: *"I will admit it. I am addicted".* Furthermore, none of the swimmers liked to miss training sessions. This was apparent as life revolved around training and competitions. Tina had begun swimming in what was referred to as the *"duffers lane"* and had gradually progressed into the *"top lane".* She had come first in a 12-hour marathon swim in Zurich, which illustrated the progression she had made. Jane, who could hardly walk following a life threatening kidney disease, set two British records in February 2010 and Dennis completed his first Ironman[6] triathlon with Becky.

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of self-determination was demonstrated by Tom. Tom was a long distance runner who had suffered with knee problems. Tom joined the group in order to maintain a degree of fitness while he was unable to run. When I first met Tom, he could barely swim 200 metres. Through pure determination, he persevered with his training and would regularly swim 2000 metres in a one-hour training session. Tom persisted with his training and periodically he would ask me to time him over 400 metres. Over the two years of

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[6] An Ironman distance triathlon includes a 2.4mile swim, followed by a 112 mile bike ride, finishing with a 26.2 mile run.

data collection his 400 metre time improved from 11 minutes to 7 minutes. This was a remarkable improvement. In August 2011, Tom was challenged to complete seven triathlons in seven days, finishing with an Ironman distance triathlon. In his synopsis of the challenge he wrote:

> *Not knowing how much the week would demand from my body was a blessing in disguise as it did not put me off the challenge... And so for Sunday... an Iron distance triathlon! Nervous is an understatement as I donned my wetsuit for the 3.8km swim, but the fact that Neil was alongside me the whole way and that Ray, Sean and Keith were all in the same boat (not literally... that would be cheating) was a comfort and I was able to settle into my pace and having learnt some lessons in sighting earlier in the week I kept nicely on course!... I was constantly reminded to drink, eat and relax and the miles flew by, even a niggle in my knee from tendonitis was pushed to the back of my mind! The sense of achievement and pride that flowed through as I crossed the line was incredible and a feeling that I won't forget.*

The American basketball coach, John Wooden suggests that friendship, loyalty, and cooperation along with enthusiasm and industriousness are the cornerstones of building success (Perez et al. 2014).

Achieving Through Serious Effort

The demonstration of significant effort was apparent from my research findings and I continued to refer to Stebbins's research (1982; 1992; 2001; 2008). For example; I found that the acquisition of knowledge and skills can be based on a long-term serious effort by the swimming participant to understand Masters swimming from those already involved in the sport. According to Stebbins (1982) a serious leisure career is shaped by the effort and energies devoted to the pursuit. Ryan and Trauer (2005) suggest that skill acquisition in sporting

endeavours requires time spent in training. In turn, this intrudes upon home and family relationships however; the degree of commitment to that training can be justified by the attraction of the pursuit, which has both physical and psychological benefits and therefore compensates for the time not spent in other activities. The relationship between home, work and leisure and the concept of leisure as a *"Third Place"* were explored in chapter four. Kane and Zink (2004) suggest that the acquisition of knowledge, training and skills, perseverance and stages or turning points are characterised as signifiers in a commitment to a career in serious leisure. They argue that simple participation in a recreation activity cannot satisfy the needs of some recreationists who want to pursue a deeper involvement in recreation. This idea has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of recreation specialisation. Hence, the individual effort differentiates amateurs and hobbyists from dabblers and the public (Tsaur and Liang 2008). Scott and Shafer (2001) propose that progression rather than experience serves as the crucial index of specialisation. They suggest that the progression of specialisation can be understood in terms of three dimensions: a focusing of behaviour, the acquiring of skills and knowledge and a tendency to become committed to the activity such that it becomes a central life interest.

The requirement for significant effort was evident among those swimmers who were committed to the group and had already spent time acquiring skills and knowledge. This was manifest in their training schedules which were often complex. For the serious swimmers training schedules were a priority and most swimmers kept logbooks so that they could be analysed as they looked to improve and progress. Roy, whose goal was to swim 300 miles a year would invariably ask: *"How far did we swim today Jan?"* As a coach, I constantly monitored the swimmers goals and targets for competitions which meant that it was sometimes necessary to modify training schedules. For example; in July 2011, some swimmers were preparing for the Brownsea Island endurance swim whereas the sprint swimmers were preparing for a Masters Open meet in Aldershot. This meant that some swimmers required aerobic training sets including 200 metre swims, whereas others trained on specific anaerobic sets

including 25 metre and 50 metre swims along with skill training on starts and relay takeovers.

The range of events entered was extensive in both capability and distance. Competitions entered included amongst others: the South West Masters ASA Championships, Dorset ASA Masters Championships, GB Masters Championships, European Masters Championships, World Masters Championships, the Bournemouth Pier to Pier swim, the Brownsea Island swim, the 3.8k RNLI Long Swim Series, the 3.8k Seahorse swim, the 3.8k River Arun Ironman swim, the 26k Lake Zurich swim, Masters Open Meets, charity swims, World Lifesaving Championships, National RLSS Lifesaving Championships, Sprint distance triathlons, Olympic distance triathlons and Ironman distance Triathlons. Some swimmers chose not to compete but instead, showed an interest in supporting those who chose to do so. Others were encouraged by their peers to enter a competition for the first time by swimming in a relay team event, an open meet or a charity swim so that as their knowledge and skills developed, their involvement in the sport evolved and so they became more engaged in the activity.

My enquiries into progression led me to the work of Scott and Shafer (2001) who noted some links between serious leisure and recreation specialisation. Firstly, recreation specialisation progresses both from the desire to acquire and also from the actual acquisition of skills and knowledge. This concept is consistent with the need for significant personal effort described by Stebbins (1992). Secondly, recreation specialisation can be measured based on personal commitment and inner conviction that the activity is worth doing for its own sake. This idea is consistent with Stebbins' (1992) ability to identify strongly with the activity. Thirdly, progression can also be thought of in terms of stages of involvement, career changes, and turning points, which is consistent with Stebbins' (1992) creation of a career. More recently, Shafer and Scott (2013) acquiesce that specialisation signifies a channeling of interests whereby participants, over time,

acquire skills and knowledge, develop commitments, achieve goals, acquire status, and advance to higher levels of participation and/or competition.

Jane, an international sprint swimmer, particularly enjoyed competing and during my research she travelled extensively. Her regular trips to competitions were all self-financed and had a significant impact on her life in terms of commitment, time and personal effort. Our discussions included detailed analysis relating to technique, performance profiling, competitions, sport psychology issues and tapering. We also made several journeys to Bath University in order to access a 50 metre pool and studied videos clips using underwater cameras. The two endurance swimmers who took on the challenging 12-hour Lake Zurich swim were also carefully monitored as their training programme gradually increased to eight hours training per day, and for them hydration and nutrition were a major concern in both training and competitions to the extent that they studied triathlon and swimming magazines such as 220 Triathlon and H2Open. The requirement for personal effort was also apparent as Neal worked on different training sets in preparation for the New Forest Ironman event. For nine months his life centred around training for this event which took place on a blazing hot day in June 2011. Having successfully completed the event which included a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike followed by a 26.2 mile run he turned up for early morning training. As he arrived on poolside, I knew that he had completed his challenge but there was no need for boasting. He simply smiled, tapped his forehead and said: *"I've done it. It's up here"*. Neal was happy that he had completed his first Ironman distance event and he even recounted that he was capable of going even faster. Equally though, he was content in his mind that he had achieved his goal and could finally: *"Get on with some DIY"*.

The requirement of personal effort was also obvious in my research diary notes on rest, recovery time, metreage swum, training sets, technique, drills, dealing with muscle cramps, problems with water temperature and the ongoing problems with the humid atmosphere and lack of quality air flow on poolside. Ditton et al. (1992) hypothesise that persons participating in a given recreation activity are

likely to become more specialised in that activity over time. Bryan (1977) suggests that recreationists tend to move into the specialised stage as they spend more time participating in the activity. More recently, Tsaur and Liang (2008) conclude that the development of skills coming from past experience and the acquisition of knowledge coming from centrality-to-lifestyle resulted in people participating longer in an activity. I found that this was evident in the way new swimmers quickly adjusted to the different training sets they swam. For example; Hayley, a newcomer to the group, laughed at herself disparagingly one morning as she was about to put on a pair of hand paddles for a set of 50 metre swims: *"I've learnt that I have to put my goggles on first ... Thank you for being so patient with me"*.

I concluded that swimming, as an activity, needed to involve significant effort in order to provide swimmers with an identity within the group. Therefore, there was a requirement for Masters swimmers to understand training sets and swimming drills: *aerobic, anaerobic, catch up, finger drag, recovery, underwater, 25's 50's 100's,* which made no sense at all to the uninitiated. Shipway and Jones (2007) drew similar conclusions in their research on distance runners and concluded that once identity was obtained then individuals would make the effort to maintain that identity. This characteristic is significant as Stebbins (2001) suggests that casual activities requiring little in the way of skill are unlikely to provide a valued social identity. I concluded that it was for this reason that Masters swimmers became serious swimmers as they persisted with the activity and therefore took on the identity of a Masters swimmer in the swimming world.

The Enduring Benefits of Swimming

The enduring benefits of swimming were evident throughout my interviews and observations. The benefits of being part of a community in which these swimmers shared a common bond with one another were developed through swimming with like-minded people who understood each other. The communal benefits were wide ranging and included collective themes: health, fitness, social recognition,

camaraderie, fulfilment, well-being and enjoyment which have been discussed in previous chapters. More specific individual benefits were: achieving personal challenges, a heightened sense of identity, self-esteem, coping with pain, enjoying freedom, escaping from reality and testing the mind and body to the limit. In summing up his reasons for participation Dennis commented:

> *But at the end of it, if you've enjoyed it, if you've enjoyed the relationships and the camaraderie... that's it! You look forward to the next session.*

Being valued as a group member meant being identified as a sports person whose very participation in sport was seen as an achievement and is consistent with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of fulfilment of needs wherein there is a feeling of relevance and life purpose in being part of the group. This sense of purpose was further reinforced by the status and recognition that swimmers received from others. For example; the swimmers described feelings of being relevant to others, not only in terms of being an inspiration, but also in terms of being an integral part of a group in which they were needed. This was manifested in the continuous banter I witnessed between swimmers which was always light hearted and good natured. Tina surmised one morning: *"I love the banter! It's what we come here for, to be abused"*. Roy said: *"It's good. We all get on well. There's a lot of banter goes on in the lanes... and between the lanes as well... it's not just our lane"*. Simon felt that the banter added to the camaraderie and helped the swimmers to connect and break up the monotony of training: *"The banter is a good thing... Especially if you get somebody like Sam, some of the comments are quite hilarious..."*

For some members of the group swimming was not just an activity but rather an obsession which *"outsiders"* did not understand. In my interview with Dennis he reflected that his ex-wife had been unable to cope with his interest in sport and his need to exercise. Sadly, this had eventually led to the breakdown of his marriage as he acknowledged that his social life revolved around sport:

If you go out for dinner, you all talk about your split times. You know, nobody's talking about what's happening in the world. You know, has anybody shot Gaddafi yet? Nobody's interested in anything like that. You don't sit there and philosophise. We talk about, you know, sport... and racing and training and I guess that's what we all enjoy doing.

Becky said:

I need to do it… there is this obsessive, addictive behaviour in what we do.

Endurance swimmer, Tina, was also *"addicted"* to her training and admitted to *"overtraining"* on occasions. If she missed a training session she was *"awful to live with"* because training was such a big part of her life. When asked if she could ever see herself stopping training she replied: *"No, never, the idea scares the living daylights out of me"*. When I questioned her further she confessed that without her training she would not be happy. Jane demonstrated how swimming provided fulfilment and a relevant life purpose; *"I want to stay fit and to keep going for as long as I can, whether I'm competing or not"*. She found the training *"totally"* fulfilling and said: *"I don't know what I will put there if for any reason I can't swim anymore"*.

Grant and Stothart (1999) suggest that participation in meaningful leisure pursuits in later life can contribute to one's identity and individuality and help in adjusting to retirement. Arguments based on ageing were explored thoroughly in chapter six. Whilst reviewing the literature in this area, I observed that Green and Jones (2005) suggest that serious leisure may result in one or more of the following: the enhancement of the self-concept, self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self-image and self-esteem, and social interaction. Several of these dimensions emerged during this study and this led me to consult the literature connected with some of these themes and in particular, the work of Stevenson (2002), Heuser (2005) and Dionigi (2008;

2010). I deduced, that for these swimmers, the Masters sport setting enabled them to feel accepted and cherished by others who valued them. This concept was linked to the strong identity with the activity in terms of self-esteem and confidence. I also concluded that whilst casual leisure activities may provide a sense of entertainment and enjoyment, the results from this study illustrate that it is only through *"serious swimming"* that a strong sense of social identity is gained. Heuser (2005) argues that it is through a strong identification with the activity that participants receive such durable and tangible benefits which make the effort worthwhile. My findings were consistent with the research of Stevenson (2002), because for these swimmers self-confidence came from mastering a complex and difficult skill. They recognised and valued their own abilities, in being able to swim in excess of 3000 metres in a one-hour training session and in being able to push their bodies harder than they would have thought possible. Also, they valued the social identities which they were able to appropriate, develop and maintain. As a result, others saw them as being fit and active people who often turned to them for advice in matters to do with health and fitness and physical exercise.

Gaining an Identity through Swimming

My findings from being immersed in the Masters swimming community have served to illustrate that swimming provides swimmers with a sense of social identity. For these swimmers, having a social identity within their own group either in training or in competitions is significant in developing confidence and self-esteem. Observational data within this research found that serious participants clearly identified themselves with the activity of Masters swimming. By contrast, those swimmers who drifted in and out of the community and were casual about their leisure were unable to identify with the activity. According to Shipway and Jones (2007), social identity theory has gained increasing prominence in terms of its ability to explain behaviour. Jones (2000) suggests that social identity theory proposes that people do not simply relate to each other as independent, isolated

individuals but instead, as members of a social group and this in turn, can have important consequences for an individual's self-esteem.

The consequences of possessing a valued social identity have been explored within a variety of contexts, beginning to demonstrate that they are outcomes of a valued social identity (Jones 2006). Gillespie et al. (2002) identify traditional sources of social identity are linked to work, family or religion, however the findings of this study start to illustrate that *"serious"* participation in swimming can also provide a positive social identity that may otherwise be unavailable through work or other areas of life. This is a re-emerging theme which originally came to light when exploring the *"Third Place"* and the role of the swimming identity in relation to work, home and leisure environments.

My findings also go some way to support those of Stevenson (2002) and Shipway and Jones (2007), whereby there is a reciprocal relationship, in that the activity needs to involve significant effort in order to provide a valued identity. My results also led me to the research of Shamir (1992) who argues that a leisure related identity comes about through affirmation and social recognition. This was apparent in the minimum amount of equipment that Masters swimming required. In fact, the minimum requirements were a swimming costume and a pair of goggles. Interestingly, this was revealed in my interview with Simon. He reasoned that Masters swimming was all inclusive because you were *"literally stripped bare"*. Simon liked the fact that in training everyone was equal, hence; there was no need for expensive equipment: *"a fantastic tri-suit, running vest or uniform"*. He commented:

> *I find it quite comforting to know that there isn't that competitiveness before you've actually entered the water.*

Hence, acceptance and social recognition came about purely through the identity with the sport. My observations also confirmed that as well as gaining a social

identity, these swimmers gained individual identities from the activity. So that, in each lane there were the *"kick", "pull", "freestyle", "breaststroke" or "backstroke"* specialist which provided the opportunity to take on an additional identity. And of course there were the perceptible results of swimming, which often caused amusement to *"outsiders"*. For example; the wet hair, the goggle marks around the eyes and the unmistakable hint of chlorine. It was evident too that Masters swimming provided a worthwhile social outlet in the lives of some swimmers. Becky said: *"I was often not good at things in my life and it's given me an identity with other people".* She also talked about how much she enjoyed meeting other people when she went abroad to do competitions, and talked to like-minded people.

Tina who enjoyed open water sea swimming in temperatures of 17°C referred to being one of the: *"Nutters who turn up on a Sunday morning".* She talked too about sport being important to her: *"if I didn't have sport then I probably wouldn't have the confidence and self-esteem".* Hence, she identified herself as a swimmer, as she talked about explaining a set of 100 metre swims she had done in training:

> *I'm talking to Ian* (her husband) *and he's looking at me as if I'm talking another language. You know, we did these 100's and they were all under 1.20... so.... be pleased.... be impressed...!*

I deduced that being identified as a Masters swimmer developed over a period of time and was deepened through a sense of belonging and through ownership. I surmised that this can be explained through social identity theory which is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, Masters swimming provided each individual with a sense of belonging. Secondly, it provided a valued place within the environment. Thirdly, it provided a means to connect with others and provided the opportunity to use valued identities to enhance self-esteem.

Throughout my research the mix of individuals in the group was somewhat diverse. They included amongst others: teachers, office workers, pilots, firemen, nurses, businessmen, company directors, computer specialists, sports development managers, farmers, solicitors, teaching assistants, supermarket checkout assistants, air traffic controllers, retired engineers, retired businesswomen and retired teachers. Despite these varied backgrounds, each individual in the group identified themselves as a Masters swimmer who had a passion for swimming and could identify themselves through saying *"I am a swimmer"*.

Swimming as a Leisure Career – "Swim for Life"

My research into career development led me to the work of Prus (1996). Prus's model of career-contingency has been useful in examining the careers of elite athletes but does not address how "*non-elite"* athletes, for example Masters swimmers, become involved in and continue their involvement in their athletic careers. Prus (1996) suggests that an individual's initial involvement in an activity occurs by means of one or more of three critical processes: seekership, recruitment, and closure (Prus and Irini, 1980). That is, people seek out involvement in an activity in order to satisfy some sort of felt need or because of an attraction. Subsequently, they are recruited to the activity in a variety of direct and indirect ways. Hence, people feel forced and pressured and therefore they have no other option but to become involved in an activity.

Stevenson (1990) proposes that an athletic career begins with a process of introduction to a sport, followed by various inter-dependent processes of ever deepening commitment. Throughout these processes of conversion, entanglements, commitments and obligations, and reputations and identities, prospective athletes are motivated above all by a desire to do what is best for themselves. Prus (1996) argues that one of the key processes in the deepening of involvement in any activity is conversion. That is, they progress from being an *"outsider"* to becoming an *"insider"*. They learn about the culture, they absorb its values and cultural ideology, and they begin to act in culturally appropriate

ways and use its cultural worldview. As a result, as this conversion process proceeds, the individual is drawn deeper into the culture, and begins to feel part of the group. This was of particular relevance to me as an individual as I began my research as an *"outsider"* who had done very little swimming in recent years. However, as I witnessed the benefits that these swimmers gained from the sport, I was encouraged to start training and throughout the course of my research I was even challenged to compete again. This meant that I took on the identity of a Masters swimmer and eventually became accepted as an *"insider".* As a result, I underwent an identity transformation where I too became serious about Masters swimming.

From a serious leisure perspective, Stebbins (2001) defines career development as a personal course, or passage, shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement or involvement. Jones (2006) argues that serious leisure activities tend to demonstrate a progression through stages of achievement or competence. McCarville (2007) noted career progression from short events to a full Ironman triathlon. Therefore, career development can be discussed in terms of progression in ability or involvement for example from novice to intermediate events, or the mastery of a particular element of the activity (Shipway and Jones 2007).

I found that through experiencing the practices of the Masters swimming subculture swimmers became ever more committed to the activity. As a result, there was substantial evidence of a willingness to make considerable changes not just to their own lifestyles but also to their families' lifestyles. For some, Masters swimming became such an overwhelming priority that they were willing to make significant compromises to their personal routines, to their families' routines, and to their work routines. In addition, they were willing to sacrifice family relationships and they were willing to confront their superiors and their work colleagues in order to pursue their involvements in Masters swimming.

From a coaching perspective this research covered two annual training plans. As a result, my research diary notes showed that the weekly metreage increased over the two year period. My findings also demonstrated that regular attendance was high. Over the course of the two years, several key informants commented that entering a new event was a "*major step up*", thus for some this was an important career marker for the less experienced participants and it also raised their credibility as participants with the more practised swimmers. It was also an important motivator for them in terms of personal identity and acceptance within the group. In terms of both motivation and career progression, the swimmers had a desire to improve. For some, competing in an open water event or County event for the first time was a huge career progression. For others, career progression developed over a long period of time. Small progressions were also important as Dan said:

> *I know where I am at the moment and now, to get to the next level, it's going to be a small progression and it's those small progressions that keep you interested.*

When I asked Dan about his individual goals he responded:

> *I'd like to get some PB's, like the 400 swim, I'm desperate to go under the five minute mark.*

As well as being a good sprint swimmer Dan also proved himself to be a good endurance and open water swimmer. In July 2010, he competed in the Brownsea Island sea swim for the first time. He had been challenged to enter the event by Tina and Bernie. Dan had always had an ambition to complete the swim but in the weeks leading up to it he recounted in training that he wished he had not entered. *"I'm not ready"* he said. However, in the final week of preparation for the event his doubts began to recede and he told me: *"I'm just going to try and enjoy it"*. Following the event I received a text message from him which read:

Completed it... in 1:26.00. Loved it. Want to do it again next year.

Dan entered the event the following year and improved his time by over 2 minutes to finish in the top 5 in a time of 1 hour 24 minutes.

Other instances of career progressions were demonstrated by Janet who decided to enter a meet in Poole for the first time. Her times proved to be so impressive that she was selected to swim for the Dorset ASA Masters team in the Inter-County Masters competition later in the year. Another example was born out by Ken C who set himself the challenge of swimming a 3.8 kilometre sea swim. His first challenge came in coping with a sea temperature of 14°C. He began by swimming for approximately 10 minutes a day and gradually increased to an hour in the water. He interspersed his sea swims with two pool sessions where he swam longer distances by repeating some 400 metre and 800 metre sets. Leading up to the event he too had doubts about the event itself and his ability to cope in cold water. We spoke at length of the need to set process goals and not worry about problems that may not happen. Following our discussions he sent me an email which read:

Thank you for your input last week. I trust that you enjoyed your break? Friday's session went well. I didn't find it as strenuous as the previous session and recovered better this time judging by Saturday morning's swim. We swam 47mins on Saturday, about 1800m and a further 51mins on Sunday which covered around 2200m. The distances might not seem to correlate but the currents have a major influence. That would bring my weekend total to over 6000m which I'm very happy with. I put in an hour and half last night at XXXX, at a slow pace (especially after work) and counted my distance as 2000m during the 55th and 60th minutes. I only stopped very briefly if for 5 seconds to sip, on two occasions and estimate that it could have on average, around 3600m. That is 200m short of target but I might have been going a little quicker than 40m/min over the first

hour. I felt quite comfortable at the end and could have carried on. I hope
this update helps?

Ken went on to complete the 3.8 kilometre swim in a time of 1 hour 30 minutes and in a later email to me he wrote:

I would just like to thank you for all your help. I had a really tough week last week, involving two return visits to the dentist (now resolved!) amongst other things and couldn't make training on Friday. However the race went really well. Matt and I stuck together the whole way in some really beautiful conditions, making me think that I could have possibly swum it without a wetsuit however it was easier not having to consider those doubts except for the rash provided after 800m. The ladies overtook us before we reached the first sight buoy (approx. 400m) but we finished ahead of at least 18 other swimmers excluding the DNF's. Our time was a comfortable 1:30.11 each for the 3.8km's. I will be back at Masters though if not this Friday but hope to stick to a regular regime.

I noted in my research diary that the psychological issues relating to self-esteem, anxiety, relaxation, self-confidence, motivation and the processes involved in swimming and training as individuals become more involved in Masters swimming and the psychological benefits of Masters swimming on the ageing swimmer were recurrent themes throughout.

Summary

In summarising the Masters swimming world it was evident that the majority of swimmers were not casual swimmers. Instead, they were serious swimmers who had their personal targets and goals. Learning how hard to push oneself in training was difficult for many of the swimmers in a number of different ways. Some

spoke about learning the hard way, by starting off too fast and suffering for the rest of the set, or for the remainder of the session. For example; Janet said:

> *I think that you have to learn to pace yourself and know what your reserves are.*

Similarly, Alex commented:

> *I think that's a real continual exploration of how hard you're pushing yourself, how hard you could go.*

Thus, as Stevenson (2002) suggests, experiencing the process of learning means that the swimmer becomes an *"insider",* and so increasingly values that subculture and becomes ever more embedded into it.

In my introduction to this chapter, I described leisure as a complex process. It is evident that if our developed skills can be matched to clear challenges then we are likely to be involved with the experience. Having explored the Masters swimming community, my findings support the contention that social relations are particularly important for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport. The social context of Masters swimming provides individuals with opportunities to satisfy their need for social connections, an identity, recognition, engagement and belonging. Consequently, as *"insiders",* serious leisure participants carry on with their interests within their own social world. In turn, this leads to lifelong participation. In conclusion, I make the case that the unique ethos of group swimming provides opportunities to develop the essential skills and techniques in order to remain physically active and *"swim for life".* And so, there is a correlation here between my findings in chapter six on ageing in that involvement in Masters sport meant that swimmers were empowered to persist and keep going which links to the *"you never lose it"* dimension which I uncovered in the last chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Pushing the Boundaries

Introduction

A crucial part of this study is to understand what drives the serious Masters swimmer to endure the evident punishment of training and racing and the resulting practices, which make it such a unique experience. This chapter advances the premise of the *"serious swimmer"* within the Masters swimming community or *"Third Place".* In the last chapter, I considered serious leisure (Stebbins 1992) and explored the extent to which Masters swimmers were involved in the sport within a leisure centre environment. In so doing, I found that swimmers not only attained success but they also gained the identity of being a Masters swimmer. I also established that *"serious"* swimmers showed perseverance, determination and dedication. Consequently, in making a commitment to the sport they made a significant undertaking to embrace and maintain an active lifestyle as evidenced in chapter five. I have already established that fun and enjoyment are factors that contribute towards sport participation. On the other hand, tolerating fatigue, discomfort and pain constitutes an integral part of everyday training routines in endurance sport. Since Stebbins (2008) acknowledges tolerable deviance as being part of the serious leisure perspective, this is an issue that needs to be considered.

In this chapter I investigate the consequences which result from being a Masters swimmer. The focus here will be on the negative outcomes of being involved in Masters sport which have come to light through observations and interviews as swimmers push the boundaries. I begin by looking at deviant behaviour, taking into account the sports ethic and the resulting consequences of swimming. I subsequently explore injury and illness and the way swimmers negotiate pain and suffering in their devotion to sport. Later on, I consider excessive exercise in the cultural world and explore how an endless passion for the activity manifests itself as an exploitation of the body.

Deviant Behaviour and the Sports Ethic

As my research progressed I sought to discern why seemingly well-adjusted people could engage in leisure which was painful and at times obsessive. McCarville (2007) asks at what point a healthy activity becomes self-destructive. Recent trends show that exercise may become harmful for those who exercise excessively with no regard for possible negative effects such as injury and addiction (Hausenblaus and Downs 2002; Schultz et al. 2009) and abnormal or deviant lifestyles (Coakley and Pike 2009). The concern for a moralistic stance is incorporated in the general definition of abnormal leisure as: *"pushing the limit of experience so that it threatens the self or others"* (Rojek 2000, p.176). I also sought to identify why Masters swimmers were willing to make personal sacrifices in their lives and everyday routines. I found that the answer lay within the significance of the cultural world itself, the *"Third Place",* or the world within a world and the athletes' commitment to that world. The answer also laid in the sports ethic which Coakley and Pike (2009, p.186) describe as: *"an interrelated set of norms or standards that are used to guide and evaluate ideas, traits and actions in a social world".*

To understand the connection between the sports ethic and Masters sport it was obvious that swimmers had to conform in order to feel accepted. In so doing, they demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their sport by meeting the expectations of fellow athletes, making sacrifices in order to swim and by facing up to difficulties. The four primary norms of the sports ethic include firstly; showing dedication to the sport, secondly; striving for distinction, thirdly; pursuing all possibilities and fourthly; accepting the risks by enduring pain and fear without backing down from challenges (Coakley and Pike 2009). Coakley and Pike (2009) argue that the norms of the sports ethic are widely accepted in cultures in which people believe it is important to be dedicated to improve and make sacrifices to achieve their goals. In addition, they suggest that it is expected that those who wish to be accepted in sports cultures will conform to these norms.

Within sports cultures, athletes are expected to live by a code that stresses dedication, sacrifice and a willingness to put one's body on the line for the sake of sport (Coakley and Pike 2009). Following this code to an extreme degree is seen as being a mark of a true athlete and one who is respected by their peers (Malcolm and Sheard 2002; Waddington 2006; Murphy and Waddington 2007). According to Malcolm (2006) athletes who adhere to the sports ethic must focus both on proving themselves and on improving their abilities as described by Tina:

> *There are occasions when I look at some of the guys and I think yea you're not going to get the better of me, you're really not going to get the better of me and I talk my way through it thinking they're hurting twice as much as am 'cause they're twice as big... but I do like that feeling of being out of breath, legs burning...*

It was evident that for the majority, lengthy training sessions formed part of their everyday routines which moved beyond what was necessary to acquire the basic health benefits of regular exercise. This was demonstrated by their devotion to the activity which was described as: *"a buzz"* (Will), *"a state of euphoria"* (Paul), *"obsessive addicted behaviour"* (Becky), *"a drug"* (Dan), *"my passion"* (Bernie) and *"a complete way of life"* (Dennis). This devotion to exercise is particularly significant when considering the difficulty some people have with maintaining minimal exercise routines (Ogles and Masters 2003).

Unwarranted deviance is often dangerous and yet people often overlook its negative consequences regarding health, relationships with family and friends and overall well-being (Coakley and Pike 2009). Much of the research on pain and injuries in sports suggests that managing pain is crucial for an individual to claim an athletic identity. Sometimes, the decision to continue participation despite an injury is driven simply by a desire to maintain one's sense of self as an athlete (Pike and Maguire 2003; Pike 2004). In this research the normalisation of pain is evident in Masters sport. As a consequence there is confirmation which points

towards deviant behaviour. This supposition is explained by endurance swimmer Tina:

> *I like the feeling in a training session where I have pushed myself almost to the absolute limit. And I do like feeling, I, I like to hurt actually.*

The sociological literature on pain and injury in sport underscores how athletes generally avoid, disavow or privately manage suffering during competition (Young 2004). According to Atkinson (2008) while the ability to withstand and inflict pain as a competitive strategy is lauded in particular sport settings, few people enter into recreational sport with the expressed purpose to physically, emotionally and psychologically hurt. Atkinson (2008) proposes that training sessions provide participants with ordered contexts for self-exploration. Consequently, athletes who come to relish intense physical and cognitive agony in their sport share a socially learned personality structure (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1991). The personality structure configures instances of voluntary suffering in athletics as exciting and personally significant (Atkinson 2008). This judgement was affirmed by Bernie as he explained:

> *And definitely the longer the distance, the harder it is the better I am, whether that's mentally or physically. Well I suppose it's a bit of both. The body's got to be able to take it but you've got be mentally fairly strong to do it as well and that's why I do train so much. And I do think, especially at my age, I think you've got to keep pushing and pushing and training as hard as possible otherwise I'll just keep falling off the precipice as it were.*

For athletes who are fully committed to the sports ethic, little distinction is made between minor body aches associated with rigorous physical exertion and more serious pain that signals the onset of a potentially debilitating injury. In this research pain was recognised as being a necessity as swimmers learned to approach minor injuries with stoic courage. It was evident that some swimmers

were inclined to tolerate pain and compete while injured. Proving that they were willing to swim through the pain barrier enabled them to maintain their athletic identities and win the respect of their fellow swimmers.

The Consequences – Troubled Relationships

Research shows that deviant over conformity is a significant problem in sports (Coakley and Pike 2009). Almost thirty years ago, Ewald and Jiobu (1985) studied competitive distance runners. They found that men trained so often and so intensely that family relationships, job performance or physical health deteriorated, yet they never questioned what they were doing. Coakley and Pike (2009) suggest that athletes today are just as likely, if not more likely, to ignore normative limits and do anything to train and participate in sports. Problems relating to family relationships and sport were authenticated by three individuals in this research. Dennis acknowledged:

> *I'm divorced. I've had three marriages now. The first two never came to terms with it. So when I did meet Paula* (Dennis's third wife), *which is fifteen years ago now, I sat down on the second day and said look this is my way of life. This is what I actually do. So I'm out training. I'm out on the streets most days in lycra* (he laughs) *or in the pool or in the gym, you know, so you'll know where I am. I don't go on the bike to get away from you. I go on the bike 'cause I want to go on the bike and it's as simple as that you know?*

When I questioned Bernie about the attraction of sport, he explained that his marriage had also broken down because of the attraction of sport and exercise in his life:

> *B: My wife had a real problem with it. Real problem. And it eventually just pulled us apart I think to a certain extent.*

J: And do you think she resented it Bernie?

B: Yea, I do. Well, I'm sure she did. We got to a level and she just wanted to stay on that level and she still is. She lives up in Canford Cliffs - does the Canford Cliffs lifestyle (Canford Cliffs is an exclusive and affluent area close to Sandbanks in Poole). *That's fine. I didn't want to do that anymore. I wanted to do the sport. I was having far more fun with the sport people than I was having with her...*

Simon also commented on the attraction of sport and its effect on family life:

Jenny (his wife) *says to be frank, that I'm always swimming. And that I'm always exercising, out doing something. But you know the swims I do in London, well I'm working up in London, so there's no other option there. And to take the Friday night swim, well, she's out with the girls doing their dancing thing so I would only be sitting at home. So that's taken that one. And then the Monday night one, well everything's calm at home so I might as well go swimming. But then what happens is suddenly, well you're swimming four times a week, and Jenny says well that's all you ever do. You don't spend any time at home.*

The Consequences – Taking Risks

The social sources of sports-related injury and pain, in particular the social relations that condition athletes' responses to the culture of risk in sport are well documented (Malcolm and Sheard 2002; Pike 2004; Malcolm, 2006; McKay et al. 2008). Research has considered socialisation to this culture (Messner 1992; Curry 1993), their understandings of various forms of risk (Pike 2004) sources of strain (Giacobbi et al. 2004; McKay et al. 2008) as well as the motivations for playing through injury and pain (Charlesworth and Young 2004; Roderick 2006). Others have questioned the health values of sports altogether, given that the injury risks

associated with some competitive sports are so high that participation often creates more health care costs than benefits (White 2004; Young 2004; Waddington 2007).

In my observations, I noted that the appeal of open water swimming was considered to be an extreme challenge:

> *I think you've got to be sensible because the sea will always, always kill you if you've got any disrespect for it. But I think, generally speaking, I think that is very true, yea. I know I can get into this and come out so yea, I think it is a challenge of the elements without being too stupid. You know, I've been on some swims that have been really, really horrendous and a couple that I've thought...* (takes a deep intake of breath) *this is pushing a little bit too far you know?*
>
> Bernie

The demands of open water swimming are already noted in the literature. Dallam et al. (2005) report that medical problems commonly encountered in open water swimming include: muscle cramping, heat illness, postural hypotension, excessive exposure to ultraviolet radiation, musculoskeletal injuries and trauma, gastrointestinal problems as well as post-race bacterial infection and psychological exhaustion (Dallam et al. 2005). Normalisation of pain has been noted in elite sport by Young and White (1995); boxing (Wacquant 1995); classical ballet (Turner and Wainwright 2003). Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) note that athletes learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain, and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete in competitive sports. Normalisation of pain and injury is not, however, unproblematic, and the hazards of a culture of risk have also been highlighted (Safai 2003). More specifically, with regard to the swim segment of triathlon competitions they argue that an individual's rate of heat loss while swimming is also related to body composition, the length of time spent in the water and the metabolic work rate. The inability to consume fluids during the swimming portion of a triathlon and the possible resulting dehydration may

compromise the athlete's ability to thermo-regulate effectively throughout the rest of the race. I was able to endorse this as I observed Becky's inability to maintain her core temperature following an open water competition in which she opted not to wear a wetsuit. Similarly, in her first open water event which was a 4.6 mile swim around Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour, Tina reminisced:

> *I got pulled out half way. Umm... and after that I decided maybe I should learn to sea swim properly because it absolutely panicked me.*

Negotiating injury: Swimming Through the Pain

Conventional understanding on sport and health has been critically examined in discussions of the health benefits of sport participation (Theberge 2008). As Ivan Waddington (2000; 2004) has discussed, governments often promote sport involvement on the basis of its presumed beneficial impact on sport participants. Indeed the strategy for Masters swimming in England states:

> *There is a close fit between swimming for health and Masters Swimming and Masters Swimming needs to draw new members from this swimming community...*

> (The ASA 2009, p.10)

To a certain extent I agree with this statement, however Coakley and Pike (2009) take the view that the relationship between sports, exercise and health is complex. Clearly, there are health benefits attached to Masters swimming which were explored in chapters four and five. On the other hand, I argue that this simplistic view overlooks the darker side of swimming as I have witnessed swimmers who swim with injuries, swim through pain and who impose a degree of abuse upon the body. In addition to the benefits of Masters sport, my research puts forward that there are detrimental consequences attached to being a Masters swimmer. I

also maintain that there is a fine line between swimming for health and a degree of exploitation of the body. Swimming for health is commendable in firstly, embracing and secondly, maintaining an active lifestyle. Conversely, a shady feature of swimming is echoed in the words of Tina who: *"Pushed herself almost to the absolute limit"*. Examples of deviance and over conformity are evident in the Masters sport setting and I propose that this is a consequence of the sport which ought to be acknowledged by NGBs and leisure providers.

Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007) propose that fatigue, discomfort and pain constitute an integral part of the everyday training routines of distance runners. Further, the normalisation and routinisation of pain have been noted within the literature regarding a spectrum of physical activities including boxing (Wacquant 1995), classical ballet (Turner and Wainwright 2003), and triathlon (Atkinson 2008). Wiese-Bjornstal et al. (1998) suggest that athletes must learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete in competitive sports. This definition is also applicable to non-competitive sports and physical activity when undertaken as serious leisure. With regard to endurance sport, Atkinson (2008) argues that triathlon training is configured as a context where meaningful and enduring social connections between people are fostered, and where emotions not typically experienced in everyday life may be cathartically released through endurance sport rituals. In agreement with Atkinson (2008), I found that swimmers who come to relish intense physical and cognitive agony in sport share a socially learned personality structure or *like-mindedness.*

Pushing the Boundaries: Suffering through Sport

It was evident throughout my research that being a swimmer is both a social experience as well as a physical experience. It was apparent too that special bonds were developed through swimming as swimmers strived to dedicate themselves to achieve in the face of significant challenges. According to Tenenbaum et al. (2005) effort is required to persevere in a task that involves extremely hard physical and environmental demands. Furthermore, perseverance comes through

adversity and obstacles such as fatigue, anxiety, injury, freezing cold or embarrassment. Linked to the perseverance theme I noted that the more serious swimmers made reference to the significance of suffering through sport. In order to illustrate this, I document my reflections on three individuals who coped with pain and injury during 2010. I begin with Dan (sprint and endurance swimmer). I subsequently look at Becky (endurance swimmer). Finally, I consider Jane (sprint swimmer).

Dan – Sprint and Endurance Swimmer

In my field notes on 1st March 2010 I noted:

> *Dan is struggling with a knee problem which is affecting his ability to kick. Tonight he's training on pull using a pullbuoy[7]. He told me: "I went out for a run on Sunday and I've put my knee out". Part way through the warm up he had to stop because his arm started hurting too and he couldn't pull properly. Dan I said: "You need to get a doctor or physio appointment and get it looked at". In the end, Dan got out early. He looked tired and frustrated because he knew he had been swimming really well.*

On 3rd March 2010 Dan returned to training. Although his arm was better he was still having problems with his knee and so he trained for most of the session on arms only using a pullbuoy. From previous conversations, I was aware that Dan aspired to set a new county record for the 200 metres Freestyle at the Dorset ASA Masters Championships. His aim was to swim under 2 minutes 17 seconds. He also knew that any time spent out of the water would make it harder for him to achieve his goal. On 21st March 2010, Dan set a new Championship Best Time.

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[7] A pullbuoy is a training aid which supports the legs and allows swimmers to exercise the arms

Dan continued to train relentlessly throughout April putting in some excellent times in training and preferring to swim at a higher intensity than I had planned for him. In reality, he was pushing too hard and on 26th April 2010 he pulled up during training. He felt some pain in the warm up but carried on swimming as he led his lane group throughout the main set. During the final set of 25 metre swims on Butterfly he had to stop and admit defeat as he was unable to get his breath. The pain was just below his ribs at the right hand side. Once again, he was annoyed as he was intent on pushing harder and harder. Dan sent me a text message the following day explaining that he was still finding it hard to breathe deeply and so he reluctantly decided to take a few days off.

In my diary notes on Bank Holiday Monday 3rd May I wrote:

> *Dan is still struggling with the injury he picked up last week. He texted me earlier to see if training was on tonight. He was still feeling the injury in his chest but wanted to see if he could put in a reasonable session. I suggested he try the warm up set to see how he felt. The warm up consisted of: 200 metres swim, 150 metres pull, 3 x 50 metres kick, 100 metres swim (whole set x 2). Dan started the 200 metres warm up swim including some backstroke but was still feeling pain from his back and round into his chest. He only managed 350 metres in total including some frontcrawl, backstroke and breaststroke. There was no point in carrying on as he had pain and tightness. He had already arranged to see Kieran (his sports massage therapist) on Wednesday morning to assess what damage had been done. We discussed the possibilities – gardening, a previous cycling accident. Dan went into the jacuzzi and called it a night.*

When I questioned Dan in his interview about his injury problems he explained:

> *It's frustrating not being able to do things. When I did my foot, from the home side of things, I could do very little for Jen with the kids. I couldn't*

pick the kids up and you felt a little bit useless in some respects 'cause I do help Jen and that. And then not being able to swim as well having just got yourself to a standard. And you know you can't do anything about it and you just think next time I go in the water I'm going to have fallen back by two weeks or whatever and it's hard. But the only way to look at it then is OK, I've got to accept that. But, I've now got to… when I go in the pool I've got to train that extra bit harder to get myself back to where I was and then try and push on again. But if I haven't done any training I'm like a bear with a sore head, as I say it is a drug...

Dan's injury problems continued for several weeks and yet he found it impossible to stop swimming.

In my diary notes 7th May 2010 I wrote:

Dan was back in training tonight. He is still struggling with the injury to his chest. He is still not sure what it is. He has seen Kieran a couple of times for a massage etc. He is frustrated at not being able to push himself and train hard. He swam for about 45 minutes though. He is also running and cycling to compensate for the time out. I advised him to take things easy for a week or so and let the injury heal as there is no point in pushing too hard and making the injury worse.

On 12th May Dan was able to complete a full training session swimming at a slower pace than normal including some kick work. Kieran had identified an intercostal muscle strain which he was able to treat with pain medication, ice treatment and gentle exercises.

On 26th June, Dan went on to complete the 3.8 kilometre swim River Arun swim finishing in the top 20 overall out of a field of 203 swimmers. He found the race extremely demanding on his body. Dan commented that at one point he *"lost it"*

mentally and went into a *"dark place".* He subsequently went on to complete the 4.6 kilometre swim around Brownsea Island in July 2010 finishing in the top 10 overall out of 100 swimmers in the Men's wetsuit category. In summary he told me that this race was a more pleasant experience for him.

Becky – Endurance Swimmer

One of the six qualities of serious leisure is perseverance (Stebbins 1992). Tenenbaum et al. (2005) propose that effort is required to persevere in a task that involves extremely hard physical and environmental demands. Furthermore, the quality of perseverance may be through adversity and obstacles such as fatigue, anxiety, injury, freezing cold or embarrassment. This was endorsed as I studied Becky, an endurance swimmer. In stature, Becky is tall and slim and therefore atypical of the conventional endurance swimmer with more body fat who is able to endure longer time periods in cold water. On 1st March 2010, I noticed that Becky was swimming at the back of the lane which was unusual. Becky had been unwell for a couple of weeks and it was evident that she was tired. In my field notes I wrote:

> *Becky has been struggling with her training for the past couple of weeks so I specifically asked her how she was. She said that her Hb* (haemoglobin) *levels were too low. She looks very pale. She is waiting for surgery. Not specific as to what this might be. "I'm struggling, it's hard" she said. I sensed a frustration within her. Once the session was over she stayed in and did some extra training on her own – pull with paddles.*

Despite being unwell Becky completed the 3.8 kilometre Seahorse swim in Studland Bay on 27th June 2010. After the swim Becky suffered from hypothermia and was unable to speak coherently. Datta and Tipton (2006) warn that a fall in skin temperature elicits a powerful cardiorespiratory response, termed *"cold shock,"* comprising an initial gasp, hypertension, and hyperventilation

following cold water immersion. Brannigan et al. (2009) argue that the two most important issues for organisers and medical support staff to consider in endurance events are race length and adequate insulation. They propose that races should have sensible cut-off times that are matched to the ambient conditions and the likely time of onset of hypothermia. In addition, they suggest that serious consideration should be given by the Federation Internationale de Natation Amateur (FINA – the International Governing Body for swimming) to a rule change to allow the wearing of wetsuits, despite the buoyancy they may provide. When I spoke to Becky, I was astounded to learn that she had completed the Seahorse swim without wearing a wetsuit. Subconsciously, I questioned why Becky was inclined to do this. The sea temperature for the swim was around 15° centigrade. All of her open water training had been done wearing a wetsuit. She also had an aversion to the cold. Showing even greater tenacity she went on to complete the 4.6 kilometre Brownsea Island swim on 31st July 2010 in the Ladies non-wetsuit category. Becky took over 2 hours to complete the swim which took a lot out of her body. In her interview she admitted:

> *I've done some cold sea swimming and I'm the coldest person out. In the Pier to Pier* (an open water swim in Bournemouth) *they had to call the paramedics as I couldn't keep myself warm so I gave up on that and now do sea swimming from May onwards wearing a wetsuit.*

Later on, I recounted that Becky went on to win a gold medal for the 30 yards Freestyle at the UK Cold Water Swimming Championships at Tooting Bec Lido in London in January 2011. The water temperature that day was a bitterly cold 3°C. Following the event Becky had to learn how to breathe without hyperventilating as once again, her body reacted badly to the icy conditions.

Becky continued to be unwell for several months. Later in the year she underwent surgery which resulted in a six week recovery period. On 19th November 2010 she was back in training. That night she trained on pull only as she was unable to kick

effectively following her surgery. In her interview Becky spoke about a previous injury she had suffered:

> *I've only ever had one, touch wood, one bad injury when I was training and I was off for six weeks in the middle of the training programme. I think initially you get really frustrated. You imagine all this fitness that you're losing and it will put you back so much. And I think obviously if you're injured or you can't train and you're not training... It's frustrating. The kids often say to me oh, you know, mum's obviously not gone to the gym today. So you obviously get a bit frustrated and tetchy. But I am quite a laid back person. But they obviously realise that it is something that does change my...* (pauses) *the way I cope with things.*

Becky's comments demonstrate the dilemma she faced in her approach to training as she found it impossible to miss out on valuable training time. Her comments also suggest that keeping fit provided a means of coping with her everyday routine.

Jane – Sprint Swimmer

The first major competition for Jane in 2010 was the Welsh Masters which began on Saturday 8th May in Cardiff. Preparations for the meet had gone reasonably well and Jane had put in some good sprint work before the event. She had also spent hours in trying to perfect her freestyle turns. When I spoke to her at early morning training on Thursday 6th May we made our final preparations and Jane promised to keep in touch over the weekend as I was unable to go with her. Over the weekend there were no updates from her. In my diary notes on Monday 10th May I wrote:

> *No news from Jane over the weekend. Saw her at training tonight. She had been ill over the weekend but had gone to Cardiff. She tried to swim the*

100m Freestyle on Saturday morning. She went out in 35.00 seconds but tired on the second length. She somehow managed to finish in a seriously slow time. She said she had no energy and didn't know how she managed to finish. She had "nothing" to give and felt lactic in her legs. She was "desperately disappointed" as she was "so up for it" and wanted to do well. She had come home after the 100m event as she saw no point in staying there. She had to lie down for a while after the race. I sensed so much frustration in her as she still hasn't swum well all year in competition. Her next event is the GB Masters in June. She trained OK tonight but felt cramp in her legs towards the end of the session.

It was clear that injuries and ailments were frustrating and inconvenient but at no time were they recognised as an excuse to disengage altogether. From my observations and diary notes it was apparent that Dan, Becky and Jane felt disappointment and frustration when they were unable to swim at their best. Jane's performances at the GB Masters in June were equally disappointing and she admitted to feeling tired. Seemingly, it was a requirement of the serious swimmer not only to push to the limits but to push beyond the limits of what was required of them. Atkinson (2008) argues that within a mutually identified community of athletes, the ability to withstand and relish in athletic suffering is embraced as a form of group distinction. This was evident as Roy discussed his approach to training within his lane group:

Other people are persevering. You know. I mean when you get to the end, I know Jane's gonna be out in front ... And I'm not gonna get near her but when you get to the end and Jane is breathing hard then I know I'm not doing too bad... Cos she's hurting the same as I am... But it's still the same thing it's about not holding people up and allowing yourself to swim at the pace you wanna push yourself. When we do the hard bits like the 6 x 100's tonight... I mean you will step into different places if you're feeling good and you wanna give it a go.

Putnam (1995) proposes that the ability to withstand and enjoy suffering is a form of "*bonding social capital*" that members value as a marker of their collective identity. This was affirmed by Roy as he professed: "*We don't lack grit!*"

Pushing the Boundaries: Exercising to Excess

Stevenson (2002) has explored the various phases of recruitment into swimming. He maintains that the process involves a course of conversion, participation and subsequent entanglement into the swimming world whereby swimmers eventually identify themselves to others as swimmers. Similarly, Ryan and Trauer (2005) suggest that skill acquisition in sporting endeavours requires time spent in training. In turn, this intrudes upon home and family relationships however; the degree of commitment to that training can be justified by the attraction of the pursuit, which has both physical and psychological benefits. Ron McCarville's autoethnographic account describes his personal leisure journey through an Ironman triathlon and sheds light on endurance events like the Ironman as a leisure experience. An Ironman triathlon requires extensive training to complete a two mile swim, 112 miles of biking, and the running of a marathon (McCarville 2007). His Ironman experience represents an effort to escape the ordinary within defined but extreme limits (McCarville 2007). His account explores why he was willing to devote months of often painful preparation to a day that promised to be even more painful. In training for the event he explains that he was willing to risk strained relations, stressed limbs and: "*a strapped bank account for a single leisure event*" (McCarville 2007, p.161), in a search for balance in his life. In summing up his Ironman experience he explains that it enabled him to escape and distance himself from everyday living and it was this escape from normality that made the event so special.

Several swimmers in this research did their utmost to adhere to the norms and practices of the group. This meant that swimmers experienced a sense of belonging where they could find deep fulfilment. Tina followed the norms of

swimming without question or qualification to the extent that missing a session was agonising:

> *I would say I'm addicted, I am yea, absolutely addicted I will admit it. I am addicted. Whereas Ian* (her husband) *will come in tonight and he hasn't trained for a couple of days and it doesn't matter to him. But for me, I do a bit of cycling I don't get the same feeling. At the moment it's purely the swimming. I can go out and I know I can push myself. If I come in and I know should have gone swimming I'll be really twitchy because I'll feel like I've missed it. But if I go out and I make myself hurt for twenty minutes by a hard run, I'll be alright. Or sometimes like last night, an hour and a half run that will, that will hurt me because it's a really, really long way. But yeah, I hate to miss a swimming session. And we've got a week up in Scotland and I'm going to be asking you later if you can write me out two training sessions. Or actually if you can write me out Monday nights' session because I'm already planning that I'm going to do two sessions whilst we're up there because I don't want miss out. Because I don't want to come back and have the likes of Bernie turning round to me and saying: "Oh you missed a good session …"*

The explanation for their behaviour lay in the exploration of the self and the unremitting drive for improvement, especially in relation to training and competition:

> *But there is also that, that slightly competitive side to us that you don't want to miss it and you know someone saying that it* (the training session) *really hurt...*

> Tina

My observations in this research demonstrated that serious training demanded considerable effort, dedication and a positive attitude towards participation in the

sport – not just for the individuals themselves but also for those around them. As a result, a major consequence of being an ageing Masters swimmer was that swimmers endeavoured to continue to swim whilst experiencing pain. This was particularly so for the open water endurance swimmers as Tina's comments demonstrate. Consequently, as enduring athletes they enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing they could compete or as Dionigi (2010) refers to it: "*I'm out here, I can do this*".

Ageing and Identity – A Dilemma for the Older Swimmer

Sport is an area in which issues associated with identity management can be played out. In this thesis, I make the case that the management of identity amongst older athletes hinges on the tensions between expressing one's competitive nature, negotiating the norms and performance standards of the older swimmer and resisting the ageing process in the longing for eternal youth. In chapter six, I established that feelings of empowerment were key in negotiating the association between sport, identity and the body as Will explained:

> *It's just the most amazing feeling. That's what I do it for, the feeling of physical achievement. And I know I'm doing my body good, my mind good and I know that I've achieved something.*

According to Weiss (2001) every human being possesses a series of identities. In other words, every human being develops a different identity in each social relationship they find themselves in. Consequently, human behaviour can be understood as a fundamental endeavour to confirm an identity. Indeed, regardless of any physical evidence of success, self-evaluation is always an evaluation in the eyes of others and self-recognition is not possible without the conviction that recognition is coming from others (Groves et al. 2008). This was apparent in the way swimmers valued each other:

Yes there is a bit of a bond. We understand each other. When someone's injured or unwell we text and have conversations to chivvy them along. If we haven't seen someone at training for a while we will text them. There is definitely a bit of a family thing socialising together.

Becky

Weiss (2001) maintains that it is not viable to have any self-awareness, or even self, when there is no contact with other human beings. Social recognition and the consequent reinforcement of identity are provided by a social group on the basis of the controlling values and norm systems of that group, and this is one of the reasons why sport and exercise are able to provide so many people with the opportunity to construct and maintain a desirable identity (Groves et al. 2008). From this standpoint, individuals have a core identity, which is understood by Erikson (1968) as the "*real me*".

In chapter seven, I explored swimming and identity as a quality of serious leisure. Some swimmers saw themselves as being young, as opposed to old, through their continued involvement in sport. Consequently they were seen to be managing their ageing identity. According to Goffman (1969) the social meanings attached to sport and the ageing body can become internalised and influence a person's sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-worth. This can be problematic for older adults showing physical signs of ageing or as Paul put it: *"the hair is gone".* This awareness may lower an older individual's feeling of self-esteem and self-worth, or alternatively encourage them to differentiate themselves from the negative stereotypes and attempt to hide their ageing in order to feel important.

Weiss (2001) puts forward that through exercise participation it is possible to obtain recognition and identity reinforcement through displays of dexterity, strength, knowledge, intelligence and self-control. I found that this to be true for the older athlete as Bernie explained:

I don't think there is such an age thing as long as you can do the job. I don't think there is an age thing.

Consequently, pursuing a serious leisure career, participating in its social world and immersing oneself in its ethos may engender an identity rooted in the activity as well as produce a peculiar lifestyle. This can be problematic for athletes when they are unable to take part. Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007) have explored the role of identity in sport. They argue that the dilemma caused by injuries can lead to a disruption of the self. In this research the dilemma of when to swim and when to rest was a constant cause of consternation. The dilemma became even more problematic when considering the ageing body. My findings indicated that a period of inactivity was a cause of distress when swimmers were unable to train or compete. As Bernie explained:

When I cut my finger and couldn't swim a 1500, I was pacing up and down because I couldn't swim. It was terrible. I had to watch Tina on the side of the bloody pool. It drove me mad, yea. Yea, I nearly got in that day I have to admit.

This period of inactivity had a profound impact on Bernie's perception of himself as a swimmer as he was unable to be physically active in the social world that was so important to him. In my diary notes I noted his demise as I watched him pace up and down poolside sipping at a cup of coffee. Goffman (1973) refers to this state of affairs as a spoiled identity which I likened to a disruption of identity (Allen Collinson and Hockey 2007). Pain and injury are prevalent in the Masters swimming world, and injury is very much seen as a threat to the swimming (athletic) identity. This finding was summed up by Dennis as he faced up to the problem of not being able to train:

Yea, it's difficult. Yea. As you say coping with it when you can't train. Trying to reorganise your life around not doing it if you know what I

mean. It's er, you know, you're used to getting up at six to come for a swim you know? And that's it. That's a routine like going to work you know? And it does become a routine and the only difference is you look forward to coming for a swim... Yeah, it is, it is a way of life.

Dennis's comments highlight that the issue of loss caused by injury is a symbolic loss of some aspect of the self. Hence, the significance of maintaining an identity through a continuing (psychological, physical and social) involvement in sport cannot be underestimated. This attitude is based on a desire to fit in and maintain an athletic identity through excessive dedication and commitment. In other words, having sacrificed so much time and effort, participants were not willing to give it up.

Ageing - "We All Want to Compete and Drive Ourselves"

Maintaining a degree of health and fitness and health in later life provided participants with a sense of personal empowerment as discussed in chapter six. In addition, I found that participants resisted the stereotype that ageing is defined by inability and deterioration. From my findings, I propose that in Masters sport there is a contradiction between having "*fun*" and wanting to compete and test oneself against others. The problem being that competition and competing in physically intense ways are not considered appropriate for older people in Western society (Dionigi 2004). Therefore, there is a paradox in that Masters participants are not just physically and socially active and having fun in later life, but more importantly they are competing. This was validated by Will:

We all want to compete and drive ourselves.

This opinion was critical in understanding why swimmers were willing to make personal sacrifices to compete and be the best:

I wanna be the best in my age group in Dorset. And that's what really drives me Jan. It's not a sole fitness thing you know. It's nice to, you know, keep that in check as we get older. But it's really the... the love of sport and actually maintaining a high standard inside a sport that actually motivates me.

Paul

In addition, the nature of competition allowed swimmers to compare themselves with others:

When we meet at competitions, the people that I see again at competitions say, you know, how's your training been going? Or somebody will e-mail me. And particularly one of the girls who's very competitive and she'll say: "Now I need you to do such and such a time in the relay, so how are you getting on? ... Are you getting there?" And, and there'll be things like sort of motivational e-mails come through.

Jane

This research affirms that Masters swimmers train hard, push the body to its limit and compete to win, whether it is against others or themselves. Furthermore, the desire to take on challenges and compete does not recede with age as Dennis explained:

It's hard. And I'm still finding it hard. You find it harder as you get older.

Clearly, these swimmers were willing to compete for life in the sense that they had no desire to stop competing. That is, they demonstrate that although it may get harder with age, a person is able to be serious about competing in sport. This was evident in chapter six when I established that involvement in Masters sport meant that swimmers were empowered to stay young and: *"Never lose it"*.

Consequently, I argue that serious competition in not just for the young but rather, it is valued just as much by those who are older. For example; Dennis who was on medication to control his heart rate still wanted to swim personal best times:

I said to my cardiologist the other week. I said I'm just getting slower. I appreciate age is an element to do with that. But I said I'm getting substantially slower. I can't get my heart rate above about 140, you know? It needs to be up at 160 to get the oxygen around to the muscles. My brain is calling for the muscles to work and the muscles just haven't got enough oxygen quick enough to respond. So it's just going lactic you know. So I've got to see another consultant next week - he's referred me to a specialist. They've now got a technique of atriofibrilation (AF) *where you can now burn the nerves. They've been doing it on other heart irregularities. But they've only just been experimenting on AF. And they scan the heart to see what nerves are firing out of sequence. And they go in and cauterise them and it sets your heart permanently and then the heart will then work for the rest of your life.*

When I questioned Dennis further about this procedure he confessed that he was desperate to go through with the surgery so that he could: "*Go faster in sport... but don't tell the NHS that*". This remark seriously challenges the discourse on older people as it demonstrates that older people are willing to strive to achieve and go to the extreme to gain as much as possible from their ageing bodies.

Overcoming Adversity in the Pursuit of Success

Pushing the body to achieve maximum performance is consistent with elite competitive sport (Waddington 2004; Malcolm 2006: McKay et al. 2008; Theberge 2008). In this research my attention was constantly drawn to the sometimes harmful aspect of physical activity as I observed the serious mind-set adopted by Masters swimmers. Engaging in regular exercise has been shown to be

useful in reducing negative mood symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Antunes et al. 2005; De Mello et al. 2013). The positive effects of physical activity have also been noted (Schulz et al. 2009) and are clearly evident in this research. However, recent trends show that exercise may become harmful for those who exercise excessively with no regard for possible negative physical effects for example; serious injury and signs of addiction, similar to overuse of a substance (Hausenblaus and Downs 2002). This phenomenon has been termed exercise dependence (Schultz et al. 2009). Hausenblaus and Downs (2002) suggest that exercise dependence is characterised as *"a craving"* for physical activity which results in uncontrollable excessive exercise behaviour that manifests in both physiological and psychological symptoms. A component of exercise dependence is when an individual often reports engaging in more exercise than they had intended (Hausenblaus and Downs, 2002). These symptoms of exercise dependence are similar to those of drug and alcohol dependency (Schultz et al. 2009). These Masters participants were pushing their bodies through competing in physically demanding swims:

I think you've got to be a good open water swimmer in some instances because you've got to know when the tide is changing and what's happening to it and I know Brownsea that well that I know when it starts chopping up on the back side of Brownsea it will get better. You know and you can feel the tide against you, so ease back a bit, don't fight it too much, then go with the tide when it's going. So I can sort of play the water to a certain extent. Push it hard when I need to push it hard and so on... Tina is constantly on the lookout for the next thing for me to do. There aren't that many big races that's the thing. The big distance stuff. There's the Jurassic coast but again that's only 10 miles.

Bernie

Words and phrases used to describe what swimming meant included; *"drug", "obsession", "addictive behaviour"* and *"insanity"*. These expressions gave the

impression of physical activity which went beyond normal exercise behaviour. In my interview with Bernie A he pointed out:

B: But I do get grumpy if I miss a session

J: Do you?

B: Yea. I find it easier to train every day of the week than to miss a day out. If I miss a day out – bad. If I have a cold and I can't go out, I am the worst person, I'm terrible. Absolutely awful. Even if my body is telling me no, I want to be up there in the pool. Yea. And I'll go in there feeling grotty sometimes because I just need to do the training. I just love it

J: So would you say there's a sort of obsession?

B: Yes, I think my whole life has been to a certain extent. I'm obsessed by things whether it's being successful, making money, training hard, being the best long distance swimmer, proving a point. Whatever. Yea, I'm a little bit obsessed with it.

Bernie's obsessive outlook towards training was substantiated in my diary notes on 21st September 2011. I arrived on poolside at 6.20am to find that the lifeguard had only just arrived and the pool safety cover was still on. This meant that the pool could not be used. The duty manager advised me that it would take about 15 minutes to get the pool ready. With 17 swimmers waiting to train I knew that potentially, this could cause a problem. Instead of waiting for 15 minutes, I proposed that we warm up on poolside with some stretching exercises. Everyone joined in with the exception of Bernie. At 6.45am we started a revised training schedule. Bernie swam a total of 3000 metres but the atmosphere between us was far from agreeable. At the end of the session following conversation ensued:

B: I can't stand inefficiency!

T: (Bernie's training partner): This is what I have to put up with. Are you going to apologise?

B: No!

T: That's not the way to make friends.

B: I don't have any friends.

With that final comment Bernie left as I concluded that, for Bernie, swimming was a release and a means of coping which he could not do without.

Tina confessed that she was compelled to train even when she was ill:

> *Well you probably remember before Christmas. Well for the first time in years I've been really really poorly, and I am bad and I do turn up still. Um and that's when people say you really shouldn't be here. And I go no, I'm gonna see how I go and people do look out for each other. But I, I have to train. There, there's something about a training session that if I don't get my fix almost. Then I'm back here* (at home) *and I'm a nightmare. We have to go for a walk. Sometimes I come back from a training session and I'm still up on such a high. That we have to go for a half hour walk because I can't come down. And quite often I'll go to bed about midnight. Because I'm still buzzing and it feels great. It feels absolutely fantastic.*

Tina's comments were characteristic of a number of swimmers who responded to questions about the health implications of their sport participation by citing both costs and benefits. The following comments from Paul capture just how complex the relationship between exercise and health and well-being are from the older swimmers perspective:

> *But because we're all sportsmen none of us actually want to take a day off. And so it's off to the physio, off to the consultant throwing money at it just to get back training a week earlier. And when you actually take a step*

back it's most demented isn't it. You know, I'm training on an injury here. Why am I doing this? But, no one's making us do it; it's our own heads making us do it. But I think there's just that, you know, especially with someone who's competitive and keen on fitness, it's just something that they have to do. It's this intrinsic thing where it's just, you know, it's what I do every day, it's what I do every week. It's year in year out whatever. You know. There's just something where I can't stop. I can't take time out. I've just got to keep going with this. Yes, and even to the point where I'm recovering from injuries and I'm having to swim in a slower lane or anything like that. And all I'm thinking in my head is the people who I know are slower than me when I'm fit is, I'm you know, I'm coming back. And I can't stand that. I'm having to swim slower than I know I should be. So it's that constant battle against injury. And you know that's only going to get worse. But you know, when you look at Roy and Jane, you just think how can I moan that I'm tired. You know Roy's in his seventies.

One of the most detailed accounts of the lifestyle implications of sport participation was provided by Jane who recounted how her sport involvement had contributed positively to her health and well-being. For Jane, her past experience of ill health had beneficial effects, mainly in the form of the changes she had made to her lifestyle through these experiences. In her interview, Jane recounted a past race:

The time that I thought I'd failed was in the Europeans last year when I had such a poor 50 metre sprint. And I was absolutely devastated. I could have wept buckets. And I just felt I'd let myself down terribly and it was just one of those awful things. I think I'd put all my energies into worrying about it in advance. Sitting there waiting for my event. Getting up and looking what, what heat we were on now. Or what event we were on and thinking ooh it's another half an hour. And, and by the time I swam, when I got to about 30 metres, I was tired. And erm, I just lost it. And I just felt terrible. It was just awful because there was the one thing that I was going

to do well at and I'd failed in my mind. Erm and a second, you know, could have been a mile really. And that was just awful. Erm, so I DO want to succeed.

Becoming competent at managing injuries required an understanding of whether to stop training and when to start training again. As I have already recounted, the urge to resume training is crucial to the serious swimmer. However, this may prove to be counterproductive as stopping too late or returning too early may damage the long-term health of the athlete. Hence the relationship between mind and body is in constant flux. One of the most reflective accounts on exercise behaviour and the implications of injury came from Paul. The following observations capture a number of the themes discussed above. The discussion began with Paul's observations on the effect of his injuries during the previous year:

That was annoying to say the least. Just every time I got close to fitness to coming back to fitness again there was just another kick in the you know, there was something. It was my back and then it was ribs and then it was my actual disc went again and you just want to... I think I'm actually an addictive person as well. I mean when I smoked, I smoked thirty cigarettes a day. And so I think whatever I'm going to do, it's going to be done (laughs) *to ... it's going to be done properly. Whether that's bad for me or good for me it's going to be done properly. Erm and so I think the temptation almost is to when I know I'm completely out of the game is ... I'll just fuck it almost. Eat what I want, eat and drink what I want. Erm but sitting in the background is this little voice of* (taps the table) *I want to get back again. I'll watch a football match on the TV or I'll see some swimming championships and I'll just say I wanna be back there. And it's just this innate motivation that... yes I'm injured but in a couple of months time I'm going to start again and I'll get there and then I'll get there and then I'll get there and that's, that's grown with age. I don't think I had that patience twenty years ago, even ten years ago. But now I have got*

that patience. I think that patience was really built via having for the first time in my life ever really a serious injury. I mean my disc slipping, was just really, you know. This isn't, this isn't just a pull or a strain or a tear. This is something that just floored me for months and... what motivates me to come down here in pain because for nigh on a year Jan it... it hurt. You know every time I got out towards the end of the session when I was tumbling. I could feel my back was aching. I'd get out and the first thing I would do was take an Ibuprofen tablet. And I done that constantly for nigh on a year, if not a bit longer. And then it slipped again. And it was only actually the injections I had in my back last September that for the first time in pushing two years that I was actually pain free. And it's like shackles being lifted. And erm it was wonderful. It was just a great feeling to actually swim er sort of pain free and I'm not sure why I was swimming through the pain to be honest with you. 'cause I should have just stopped, gone back to the consultant and said. But it was I just didn't want to accept. I think, I think, I didn't want to know what he was going to tell me. That, go and stop basically. So I just ignored it

The above account reveals the complexity of Masters sport participation. More importantly, it demonstrates the negative outcomes of intensive training. From my personal observations I likened the attitude of the serious swimmer to swimming at all costs as time after time, I witnessed a blatant disregard for the ageing body.

Grey Power: A Fresh Understanding of Ageing

Tulle (2008c) argues that there is a close relationship between embodiment, identity and habitus. Furthermore, any manifestation of frailty, illness or injury arising from the ageing body can threaten to affect our sense of self (Wainwright and Turner 2006). They ascertain that there is equilibrium between mind and body. Tulle (2008c) maintains that bodily ageing operates a break with our youthful past, and this is presented as detrimental to our sense of self. Consequently, injury has the potential to throw an athletic career and identity into

doubt. To a certain extent it was apparent that the swimmers were actively engaged in controlling the risk of injury, illness and age-related fatigue. Some spoke of learning through trial and error in understanding their bodies' capacities and limits, and how to respond to these constraints. This was determined in chapter six when I looked at successful ageing as I saw that swimmers were taking action in a positive way. For example; participants in the study indicated a desire to manage the ageing process through keeping going in sport for as long as possible. In particular, the *"regular"* attendees in the group were resisting the traditional stereotypes of ageing and experiencing a sense of agency, personal empowerment and competency. In his interview Roy commented:

> *I don't think about stopping. I don't see that. Stopping I don't see as an option. Being forced to stop - maybe. I mean nobody knows what's gonna happen tomorrow. But even if I only came in and swam in the slow lane and went up and down I think I still would do that. Because I just feel I've got to do it because that's the only way I keep fit. And so I've got no thoughts about stopping.*

Others talked about living with the consequences of the ageing body and learning the hard way as Simon commented:

> *I suffer in the sprint sets because I, for whatever reason, I don't have that, that power.*

Several of the swimmers in this study acknowledged that their sporting practices challenged that of the stereotypical older person in that they set themselves apart from people who were inactive. This notion is consistent with Dionigi's *"Use it or lose it"* argument which is often driven by fear of the alternatives – to keep exercising is to avoid loss of health, independence, sense of self and even life (Dionigi 2010). It is also consistent with Stebbins (1992) concept of serious leisure whereby there is a requirement for perseverance and serious effort.

Although these participants acknowledge that they will not have the ability to continue with their Masters sport participation without end, they are making the best of life while they have the skills and aptitude to do so. In other words, sports participation is about being positive rather than negative. In reality, they are seeking to maintain a physically active and socially engaged lifestyle for as long as possible. Furthermore, through taking action to maintain their independence and health was a justifiable and worthwhile experience

The participants in this study agreed that in order to be of any consequence, freely chosen physical activity must be personally meaningful and valued by the self. In examining this world, I argue that being involved in serious leisure and Masters sport is about having a sense of purpose in life. Involvement combines both significant leisure and skill investment which bring about both personal and social fulfilment. Serious leisure tends to command devotion. There are the social aspects which the activity provides in terms of interaction and meaningful relationships. There is also the investment of skill and commitment. Consequently, the activity cannot be given up easily. Hughes and Coakley (1991) propose that living in conformity is likely to set one apart as a *"real athlete"* in terms of identity. In addition, the swimmers enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing they could still compete or as Dionigi (2010) refers to it: "*I'm out here, I can do this*". In chapter six I unearthed a further theme: "*You never lose it".* In turn, this is problematic since it can lead to deviant behaviour.

Summary

The preliminary findings of this research increase our understanding of the experiences of older adults and their exercise behaviour. The discussion shows the complex and sometimes conflicting accounts of the relationship between sport participation, deviant behaviour, conforming to the sports ethic and the various ways in which swimmers view the effects of their sport participation on their health and well-being. The analysis also extends the well established understanding that injuries are normalised by exploring athletes' understandings

of the degree and manner in which they may intervene to reduce or manage the threats to their health posed by their sport experience. Perhaps more importantly, this research highlights both the negative, as well as the positive, side of exercise behaviour demonstrating insights into *"normalised"* deviant behaviours. The study presented here extends our understanding of the health implications of Masters sport by presenting an account of health that goes beyond injury and illness to a broader conception that addresses lived experience. Perhaps more importantly, there are similarities between older amateur athletes and elite athletes. I concur with Theberge (2008) that from a broader perspective, Masters athletes provide varying assessments of the health costs of sport participation. While a minority of participants in this research spoke of an unambiguous relationship between their sport participation and their health, whether positive or negative, most provided mixed accounts, citing both costs and benefits. My research extends Theberge's (2008) work by giving voice to our understandings of the lived experience of the athlete's health, in which injury and illness figure strongly. In many ways, for the ageing athlete, injury and illness should be expected. However, these findings question the rigidity of government and NGB guidelines for physical activity behaviour in older adult groups through demonstrating the compulsive nature some older adults adopt in their exercise regimes. In understanding why athletes engage in deviant lifestyles Coakley and Pike (2009) point out that playing sport is so exciting and exhilarating that athletes will do almost anything to stay involved. They also suggest that exceeding normative boundaries will increase the stakes associated with participation and bonds athletes together. In closing this chapter I make the case for the older athlete. What counts are attitude, action and resilience. Both men and women who continue to practise into old age make sense of the process of growing old. The academic and English Channel swimmer, Karen Throsby, has explored people's accounts of pleasure while swimming, as opposed to the more common representations of suffering that define sport. In summing up the demands of her Channel swim experience she refers to her experience of Channel swimming as pleasure and positive deviance (Throsby 2013). As a complex social phenomenon, sport exists in every corner of modern society. This research reveals that sport has the potential to be an effective channel for physical, psychological and cultural development. Moreover, as a widespread language, sport acts as a

dominant means for social change given that it contributes towards shared cohesion and personal improvement for the ageing participant in a way that very few activities can. As a consequence, participants have the capacity to *"Swim for Life"* as they have no desire to lose what they have invested so much time in.

CHAPTER NINE: Making Sense of Masters Sport

The aim of this research is to explore the Masters swimming culture. In so doing, it is my intention to bring meaning to the lived experience of the Masters swimmer. The findings obtained from this research will offer a more detailed account on the social world of the Masters swimmer with the intention of filling some of the gaps in understanding active sport participation. Culture consists of the ways of life that people create as they participate in a group or society (Coakley and Pike 2009). The problem is that these ways of life are complex. They are created and changed as people struggle over what is important in their lives, how to survive and accomplish everyday tasks, and how to make sense of their collective experiences. Brewer (2008) makes the case that the objective of ethnography is to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given field, in this case, Masters swimming. The aim of this chapter is to make sense of the Masters sport culture by providing a brief overview of its importance as a *"Third Place"* setting. The intention here is to provide an insight by allowing the athletes to give their view and considering the relationship that exists between coach and athlete. I will subsequently sum up my thesis and make my conclusions in the next and final chapter.

At the start of my research, I sensed that the focus of this research was on physical activity and leisure, I was wrong. The research is primarily about the people, that is, people who meet in a *"Third Place"*. So why has my thinking changed? Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski writes:

> *If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless.*

> (Malinowski 1922, p.8-9)

The Significance of the Cultural World

Stebbins (1992) proposes that in a serious social world, participants tend to develop subcultures composed of special beliefs, values, moral principles, norms and performance standards. Stebbins (2008) argues that a social world must be seen as a unit of social organisation where there is an internally recognisable constellation of actors, organisations, events and practice which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants. Being a member of a social world can provide older adults with opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment (Dionigi 2002). Furthermore, according to McCarville (2007), social worlds can provide and create a profound sense of community and belonging. Within the context of Masters swimming, my findings would support this view; hence, the Masters swimmers in this community adopted a serious attitude towards the activity.

In chapter four, I considered the social world of the Masters swimmer. I showed that *Fallwood* provided a neutral place in the community to meet a mix of people where Masters swimming sessions broke down age, status, gender and occupational barriers to create what Oldenburg (1999) refers to as a *"great good place"*. In examining the social world of Masters swimmers I also concluded that social support from peers was particularly important. I also made the case that the unique ethos of the community offered the opportunity to bring about the best in others whilst sharing the best of oneself. Above all, I concluded that the swimming pool provided a sense of belonging, and escape from everyday life irrespective of personal circumstances and mood.

Once the specialist skills have been acquired they must be maintained through use. More importantly, Stebbins argues that the core activity, which is of the essence of a person's serious leisure, is so attractive that this individual must therefore set aside sufficient time to engage in the activity. In other words, serious leisure often borders on being uncontrollable (Stebbins 2008). It therefore engenders a desire to pursue the activity beyond the time or the money available

for it. Stebbins himself acknowledges the reality of deviant leisure and refers to Chris Rojek's critique of leisure studies as having turned a blind eye to it (Rojek 1997). Stebbins maintains that studying deviant leisure is important for leisure research in order to understand how the rules which shape normal leisure practice operate. Consequently, he likens it to tolerable deviance (Stebbins 2008). My findings support this view as participants in this research exercise deviance which is both justifiable and tolerable.

This research has required close familiarisation with, and participation in, the setting and so there has been a continual requirement for thought and contemplation. Sitting in church one Sunday morning, I listened to the preacher deliberating on the need for reflection. In order to make his point he presented a striking picture of the sun setting on water. What was presented in the picture was duplication, a mirror image. In many ways this research is a mirror image, a manifestation of life. What is written here is an expression of what I have seen and witnessed with my own eyes. Watching people week in week out, with the water echoing around, I have seen life. In each ripple there has been emotion - pain, discomfort, joy and elation. Some swimmers learnt the hard way. For others it was easy. Either way it didn't stop the flow. Each participant added texture and richness. Their existence was reflected with each movement. As for me, I was neither insider nor outsider. Rather, as an ethnographer, I was on the edge, searching for meaning. What is revealed in this thesis are my reflections on life, life in the real world. They are written down here to be remembered and never forgotten.

Welcoming New Swimmers

In order to evaluate my thesis, I reflect on my relationship with two swimmers featured in the study, one male, Will, the other a female, Jane. I begin with Will, a relative newcomer to the group. Will is a big tall South African who had initially come over to the UK through his grandfather who was British. From the first time I met Will, it was evident that sport played an important part in his life. Stevenson

(1990) proposes that an athletic career begins with a process of introduction to a sport, followed by various inter-dependent processes of ever deepening commitment. Will was introduced to the group by Jonty, a fellow South African, who he had met through a local Surf Lifesaving Club. Oldenburg (2001) proposes:

> *What attracts the regular visitor to a Third Place is supplied not by the management but by fellow customers.*
>
> (Oldenburg 2001, p.33).

Will explained to me that he had been searching for an activity that would fit in with his job as a helicopter pilot. Having tried hockey and water polo with a lack of success he found that the swimming sessions on offer at *Fallwood* were just what he was looking for:

> *It was just, everything about it was just spot on there was no negatives and it fitted in with my lifestyle erm well in terms of before work and a couple of sessions after work which is key. Because as much as we'd all love to be professional athletes in one way or another and not have to work and just play sport - that would be the ultimate dream - it doesn't work like that you know. We have to work and maintain a living. Obviously now I'm in the middle of changing careers as well so it's an added sort of difficulty. The coaching sessions at Fallwood just fit in round lifestyle and work which is just fantastic. So now I'm getting the benefit of doing exercise and obviously working to make my career as well so it's a win, win in both aspects as far as I'm concerned.*

Cherishing the Regular Swimmers

By contrast, Jane was a regular swimmer. Oldenburg (2001) suggests that it is the regulars who give a place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the group will be there. And so, it is the regulars who set a tone of conviviality and acceptance.

> *The Third Place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars.*

(Oldenburg 2001, p.33).

I first met Jane in 2006. She had returned to swimming after a break of 43 years. She trained on a regular basis and very rarely missed a training session. Through spending time with her, I learnt to adapt what she was able to do with regard to training sets and distance. More importantly, I listened to her talk about her experiences, goals and limitations. When I interviewed her she told me:

> *I felt like a beached whale to start with and had the most inappropriate costume on, you know how you do when* (she laughs) *ha ha ha, when you're not desperately with sort of the scene at the time. And er I think sort of swimming a hundred metres was a bit of an effort erm but I got back into it.*

Having worked with Jane over the years it was apparent that she was highly motivated, determined, dedicated to training and capable of overcoming pain. Jane went on to enjoy success at both European and World Masters level:

> *I love my training. Absolutely love it! Um it's this huge sense of achievement. Erm, you know if I've swum well. Or if I haven't had a very good session, I think ooh gosh that was really disappointing. I'm*

disappointed in myself if I haven't had a good session. I like to feel on top of it and erm I like to feel tired, I like to feel I've given it everything. Erm... and I'm focusing on, probably focusing on an event that's to come so I'm thinking how am I doing and erm... I thoroughly enjoy it, I really do.

I would describe Jane as the most dedicated member of the group. During the research she went through some difficult times but showed no inclination of giving in. I recall her disappointing performance in the Guernsey Masters in April 2010. In order to improve her times, we spent hours working together in perfecting her freestyle turns which sometimes let her down. In my field notes I noted that Jane kept practising until she got the turn right and on several occasions, I arrived on the poolside to find that Jane was already in the water demonstrating qualities of a serious mind-set and perseverance which were a constant underlying dimension in this study.

Fostering an All-Encompassing Environment

Oldenburg (2001) tells us that a key feature of a *"Third Place"* is that people feel comfortable.

> *There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which no one is required to play host, and in which we all feel at home and comfortable.*

> (Oldenburg 2001, p.22).

In general, the training sessions at *Fallwood* were upbeat, cheerful and often challenging. The reality of taking part in a coached session meant that personal problems were set aside. The main purpose of training sessions was to enjoy the company of fellow swimmers who shared a common interest. Will commented:

"Everybody just gets on so well... we've all got the same attributes" and so he enjoyed the camaraderie:

> *Nobody puts their chest out any more than the next person who goes: "well I'm the fastest". So we know our boundaries, we know who the quick ones are. We try to beat them or copy them. But nobody is arrogant at all or anything like that which makes it even better. So it' just a nice bond of people. Like minded people just pushing themselves. But it's that group concept that I really enjoy because there's no room for slacking you know. Which is great.*

For Will, the pool offered a comparatively self-enclosed site where he could find respite from the pressures of everyday life. Consequently, he was conscious of the advantages of swimming:

> *I mean, it certainly is a release. I am happy to accept that. That it gets me away from the world. I really do feel that's my personal experience that it just gets me away from the world for that hour. Erm, in terms of actually what I think of during swimming erm, I think 70% of the time it's about my stroke or counting, breathing or what it is that we're doing or just actually counting what length we're on if it's a big set. But the other 30% is perhaps you do disappear in your thoughts to a certain extent which actually helps because you're then not thinking about the pain or the fact that you can't breathe, the length or whatever erm... you then disappear within your thoughts you know.*

On balance, Will agreed that the sessions had the right balance in that they were neither too easy nor too exacting:

The swimming session works so well because it's just, you are competing against yourself. With the attributes of the others floating in and out. But nobody's judging you.

From an early age swimming had played a big part in both Will and Jane's lives:

Funnily enough, now that I'm swimming, it's just when I look back upon my life it's, you know I've been swimming since we had a pool at the house when I was three and never really looked back. And I think it's now a sport that I've always realised has been probably my main sport that I've always enjoyed between sea swimming and obviously the pool. So, to find Fallwood through Jonty and Paul was just yeah, great.

Will

Similarly, Jane had been taught to swim at a young age by her father in Sheffield and had gone on to represent Yorkshire schools through her teenage years. Both Will and Jane commented that they were introduced to sport by their parents from an early age. Will's father was a long distance marathon runner and both of Jane's parents were sporty:

My father was brilliant, 'cause father was a sportsman. Well mother was really. I mean mother played tennis very very well. Erm and then she went on to be a single figure golfer in her later years. I mean she didn't start to play until she was forty. Erm but father had been a good sportsman, squash player and everything.

In summary, Will felt that his lifestyle was well balanced:

I think sport has a big attribute from my life... I've never really thought about the order but obviously family is important so that is out there but

they're all sort of on a level. I wouldn't put sport above family and I wouldn't put family above sport but they're all closely intertwined. They just flow nicely from one to another and it all just works out. It always does ha ha (he laughs).

In addition, he remarked that being fit and healthy was paramount:

I need to make sure I'm healthy because if I miss days through bad health or injury it's money I'm losing as well, so I do literally think about that aspect to go OK, you need seriously to be careful here or you lose out. On a career and money you know it's just overall I couldn't see myself being unhealthy, I just, It's never been the case and I would like to think it won't be the case ever. Unless I can't physically do anything about it. Hopefully it's not going to happen any time soon.

Will confirmed that the responsibility for making the most of life rested largely with the individual and the individual alone. In other words, feelings of competency generalised into an overall perceived benefit which was summarised as being useful both physically and mentally:

I just feel so good you know. You're buzzing, you're excited, you've just accomplished something and your body feels beaten but in a nice way. It's that physical activity beaten. You know by 2 o'clock you may be fading a little bit but it's just the nature of being up since 5. But it's just the most amazing feeling. That's what I do it for, the feeling of physical achievement and I know I'm doing my body good, my mind good and I know that I've achieved something that morning and I'm quite happy. I speak to the guys at work who've got out of bed at 8 o'clock, not had breakfast and sort of come to work and living their kind of normal lives.

For both Will and Jane the sense of personal empowerment and overall control came as a direct benefit pertaining to their involvement in a Masters sport community. Jane commented that swimming had transformed her life:

I just think now I'm going to be like this forever.

Likewise, Will stated:

And there's just no reason to be negative because we have so much to be thankful and be positive for.

These remarks advocate that Masters sport participation is associated with self-fulfilment and *"a life well-lived"*. Hence, the underlying motive for their involvement in the sport was their belief that they were enjoying a better quality of life by remaining active, setting new challenges for themselves and being in control of their own destinies.

Being a Serious Swimmer

A key feature of this research is that participation provided a gateway into a social environment of like-minded people. As a result, participants were displayed as being serious, committed, and activity driven, thus fulfilling the criteria by which Stebbins (1992) distinguishes serious from casual leisure. My findings demonstrated that serious swimmers went through a process of involvement whereby they were converted and subsequently gained an identity as a swimmer. By going through this process they adopted an active lifestyle. As a newcomer, Will quickly assumed a serious approach to swimming. Over a period of weeks and months I gradually got to know him a little better and was able to watch him press on in training. He had set out in the second fastest lane with Jane but was

persuaded by Paul to step up and join the faster swimmers in the top lane. When I questioned him on what he enjoyed about the training sessions he told me:

> *I don't think I could do four sessions a week to this level on my own. You know I've trained on my own before but it would never be to this level... As the chaps said this morning, your hour session just flies by because we have a bit of a laugh. You're just bashing them out. You're watching the board and you're done.*

According to Stebbins (1982) a serious leisure career is shaped by the effort and energies devoted to the pursuit. Ryan and Trauer (2005) suggest that skill acquisition in sporting endeavours requires time spent in training. In turn, this intrudes upon home and family relationships however; the degree of commitment to that training can be justified by the attraction of the pursuit, which has both physical and psychological benefits and therefore compensates for the time not spent in other activities as Will pointed out:

> *I think it's important to work towards something. That's certainly how I see it. Because you know training is nice from a health aspect, the social group aspect, but you are training for something. We all train for any aspect in our lives. Whether it's mental training or physical training or training related to work. You're always training towards a final result of some description.*

Kane and Zink (2004) suggest that the acquisition of knowledge, training and skills, perseverance and stages or turning points are characterised as signifiers in a commitment to a career in serious leisure. This was apparent as Will's commitment to the activity became a central life interest:

> *Life's got to be kept mixed up. Life's got to be kept exciting and sport plays a big part of that because you don't need to sleep. Some sleep but*

> *I've got no issue waking up at 5. It hurts but I've got no issue with it to wake up at 5 to go swimming because I know that it benefits me physically and mentally... There's definitely a thought that crosses my mind about "this is great, I can't wait for the next one"* (laughs). *I'd like to do another one today...*

And for Jane:

> *I want stay fit and I want to… to…* (sighs), *I want to stay as I am (laughs), It sounds pathetic but I want to feel that I can keep going for as long as possible, whether I'm competing or not.*

Consequently, through experiencing the practices of the Masters swimming subculture, both Will and Jane became ever more embedded into the activity. As a result, there was substantial evidence of a willingness to make considerable changes to their lifestyles.

Making a Difference

My Relationship with Will and Jane

Throughout this research the primary focus has been on the athletes themselves. As a professional coach, however, I reason that my concern for the athlete's well-being is worthy of discussion. In order to understand athlete welfare it is important to appreciate the importance of the coach-athlete relationship. Mutual trust, respect, belief, support, co-operation and understanding are considered to be the most important relationship components that contribute to performance success and well-being (Jowett and Lavallee 2007). Conversely, lack of trust, lack of respect, excessive dominance, and blind obedience as well as verbal, physical, and sexual exploitation are considered to be components that undermine coaches'

and athletes' welfare. In bringing to light the routine occurrence of pain and injury in sport, Theberge (2008) has offered a powerful challenge to the view of athletes as exemplars of the fit and healthy body. In order to support the swimmers and help them to achieve their goals it was vital to listen to them as Will mentioned:

I'm driven from the point of view that you've got to make your own success in life, in work, in family, in relationships, in sport and there's no one else that can help you. People will assist you along the way. You will coach us, you will guide us, you'll put the sets on the board but only I can complete them. You know, only I can get in the water, bash out the lengths to the best of my ability and achieve what I want from swimming.

Pensgaard and Roberts (2002) suggest that athletes need a supportive surrounding social climate that is able to help the athlete shift the focus from outcomes and results to more task relevant and constructive matters. This should provide a positive long-term effect on the athlete's well-being (Duda, 2001).

In my search for truthfulness regarding athlete welfare in Masters sport Will commented:

You know, when you (the coach) *bring the stopwatch out there's something that changes inside of you* (the participant)... *You're not shouting at us and so you watch from the side. But when you* (the coach) *bring the stopwatch out your body and your mind-set just goes OK you know, I've got to drive myself harder to beat the time. And I think that you can't do that without a coach. Yea, you can sort of egg each other on but there's something about someone standing above you in a pool, with a stopwatch on, going right I want you to do this now and your mind says OK I can do this. Your body argues and says I can't but your mind says you've got to sort it. You're not going to die at the end of it so you make it happen. But it's not social from the aspect that we have a laugh but we all*

know why we're there and we all know that we want to better ourselves...
But that's what keeps the world going round. We just want to drive
ourselves and the coach there is someone to look up to and it keeps it
organised, keeps it structured and it keeps it disciplined even in an
indirect way. You're not a disciplinarian; we know that about you. But just
by you being there it keeps it disciplined.

Woodman and Hardy (2001) and subsequently, McKay et al. (2008) provide valuable information on supporting athletes to enhance their well-being and performances. Jackson (2006) suggests that an athlete's emotional, physical and social responses must be finely tuned if athletes are to perform at their best. Williams and Ford (2006) suggest that the challenge for the coach is to decide how to convey information, structure practice and provide feedback in a manner that is not overly prescriptive. Such an approach is more likely to develop adaptive and flexible performers who are able to cope better with the demands of high-level competition. Cassidy et al. (2004) comment that there is the potential in sport for unethical behaviour. Coaches and athletes constantly stretch the boundaries of permissible action in order to maximise performance (Lyle 2002). It is therefore morally important for coaches to look after their athletes. Shambrook (2006) supports this idea and suggests that a key concept in stress is the mutually important link between training and competition. According to Gummerson (2005) the key to successful coaching is the ability to relate to the athlete.

Concluding Thoughts

In concluding this chapter, it would be remiss of me not to take into account the negative consequences of swimming that were revealed in chapter eight. Will agreed that in order to be of any consequence, swimming had to be personally meaningful in order to bring about personal fulfilment.

Racing's the key. I don't like failure. I'm not some success driven sort of freak. But I don't like failing 'cause I believe that if it's within reason everything is achievable.

Hughes and Coakley (1991) propose that living in conformity is likely to set one apart as a *"real athlete"* in terms of identity. Consequently, the activity could not be given up easily. This was true for Will as he explained:

If I don't get to exercise for any real reason then I'm going to be a little bit disappointed about life.

In addition, Will enjoyed the satisfaction of knowing that he could still compete. Dionigi (2010) refers to this as: *"I'm out here, I can do this".*

It's the competitive nature. Not necessarily to be number one but I just enjoy pushing myself. Not in a sadist kind of crazy way, it's just I quite happily go right we've got 200 metres to go now, it's going to hurt just man up and deal with it. I just can't get any better buzz from life than that, which is just what it's all about for me really.

In summing up his thoughts Will told me:

There's just no negatives to it. There really isn't. Erm it's not, it's not just some, oh Jan's just put a thing (the training programme) *on the board and we'll all just bash it out. You can see people driving themselves; you can just see it in the eyes. You can see it the way they swim. It's just so much more than a just training session.*

When I asked Jane to elaborate on the sessions on offer her written reply stated:

The Masters sessions at Fallwood were restructured and developed by Jan from what were originally fitness sessions for mixed ability swimmers. This has resulted in a core membership of dedicated mature swimmers completing a programme of regular intensive training. Clearly this has had the effect of setting a standard beyond the capability of some, who participate once or twice but do not return, but at the same time encouraging others to stick with it and achieve beyond their original aspirations. I speak as one such person who returned to competitive swimming after 43 years and now competes at the highest level of Masters swimming both in the UK and abroad.

The planned sessions, which are tailor-made to the level of ability and endurance in each of the four lanes, can be interspersed with sprint lengths at the run up to competition. These are enjoyed by everyone as they serve to put markers down throughout the season and provide confirmation that speed is being maintained.

Bonds of friendship which have developed over the years provide further incentive to attend. Members maintain an interest in each other's families and activities, interacting socially and providing encouragement and support beyond the Fallwood pool. Jan knows everyone and is mindful of some of the constraints which inevitably affect training and performance, however her ability to motivate ensures members keep coming back for more.

Both Jane and Will's points of view demonstrate the complex and sometimes conflicting explanations of finding the right balance between physical activity and the effects that sport participation can have on older athletes.

It would have been easy to have captured this *"Third Place"* through a camera lens but it would not have showed the whole picture. Nor would it have conveyed

personal feelings and emotions. In closing this chapter I, once again, make the case for older athletes who are often looked upon as role models. The social context of Masters swimming provides older adults with opportunities to satisfy their needs to socialise, to feel valued and to be engaged. Consequently, as *"insiders"* within a *"great good place"* they are able to adopt and maintain their interest in swimming. That is not to say that the activity detracts from an individual's home and work life, but rather it complements it. As a result, their connection in Masters sport envelops participants in a temporary world within an ordinary world. More importantly, as demonstrated here, by both Will and Jane, both newcomers and regulars have the opportunity to fit in and belong.

CHAPTER TEN: Conclusion

Introduction

I began this thesis with a quote from D H Lawrence (2002):

> *Water is H2O, two parts hydrogen, oxygen one,*
>
> *But there is also a third thing, that makes water,*
>
> *And nobody knows what that is.*

This research is of consequence because studies on Masters swimming in this country are limited. Although the ASA are keen to encourage swimming *"A Strategy for Masters Swimming in England"* was conducted a number of years ago in 2007. That said, the ASA are currently conducting an online survey on Masters swimming entitled the: *"ASA Adult Satisfaction Survey",* however it is being carried out as a quantitative piece of research (The ASA 2014). As mentioned in my introduction, my research adopted a qualitative research design and was exploratory. To date, the majority of qualitative research into Masters swimming has been conducted in Canada (Stevenson 1999; Weir et al. 2002; Weir et al. 2010) and the United States of America (Hastings et al. 1995; Hastings et al. 2005). More recently, Pike (2011) used a multi-method approach which focused on sport involvement for Masters swimmers aged 60 years and over.

My aim in this research was to provide a detailed account of the social world of Masters swimming. By using a qualitative research design, I deduce firstly, that swimmers are closely affiliated to the social world they inhabit irrespective of gender, age and ability. Secondly, the rationale behind taking part in Masters swimming includes fun, resistance, feelings of personal empowerment, and an expression of the undesirability of deep old age. Thirdly, the consequences of the activity are diverse resulting in both positive and negative outcomes. Participants

offer mixed accounts, citing both costs and benefits. Consequently, there are conflicting accounts of the relationship between sport participation and the effects on their health and well-being, demonstrating insights into "*normalised*" deviant behaviours.

Evaluating my Findings

Through thorough exploration my findings move away from previous research by providing a deeper understanding of the shared experiences of swimmers. Using an ethnographic approach, the primary objective of the research was to explore the Masters swimming culture and the leisure experiences and practices of those Masters swimmers involved in the culture. In evaluating my thesis, my findings add to knowledge and benefit those involved with delivering active sport programmes by presenting my contributory themes and providing a Masters swimming framework. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of the research and propose recommendations for future research for those involved with leisure provision. Finally, I conclude my thesis by reflecting briefly on my research journey.

Through deep exploration my findings explored five primary themes which broadly related to the five core values for Masters Swimming in England. These values are recognised as being: *social and convivial - a meeting point for adult swimmers, healthy, challenging and target oriented, self-fulfilling and improving the quality of life and standards of performance and practice* (British Swimming 2011).

- In chapter four I demonstrated that Masters swimming in a leisure setting acts as *"a meeting point for adult swimmers"* or what Oldenburg (1999, p.19) refers to as a *"great good place"* by welcoming its members and establishing a convivial and inclusive atmosphere. This is accomplished by creating a warm and inviting atmosphere which takes place on neutral ground.

- My findings point towards the importance of maintaining a degree of fitness in later life as evidenced in chapter five. There are a wide range of individual reasons why participants adopt an active lifestyle but maintaining a degree of fitness is a priority. Irrespective of the level of intensity, swimming in particular has a perceived positive effect on the body. Consequently, the Masters swimming environment contributes towards health and well-being.

- In chapter six I considered the ageing swimmer. Central to this ethnography is a sense of enjoyment, challenge, inspiration and appreciation of life with regard to the ageing body. Older athletes are revealed as *"successful agers"* who are looked upon as role models by those around them, both young and old.

- My findings substantiate Masters swimming as a serious leisure activity. This theme was discussed in detail in chapter seven. Serious leisure qualities including; identity, perseverance and serious effort are evident in the unique ethos of this community.

- A continual desire to perform, practice and compete leads some swimmers to over conform and *"push the boundaries"* as discovered in chapter eight. This is discernible in their determination to sacrifice family relationships, swim with injuries, swim through pain and risk their health. The negative consequences regarding health, relationships and overall well-being should not be overlooked.

The themes and subsequent dimensions I have identified are original and new as they are not related to previous studies on Masters swimming. More interestingly, although the setting was small, the dynamics were far from simple, rather they were complex. Through continual exploration, I established that this social world provides a *"meeting point"* in the community to meet a mix of people where Masters swimming sessions break down age, status, gender and occupational barriers to create what Oldenburg (1999, p.19) refers to as a "*great good place"*.

Through thorough examination, I have created a framework depicting the culture of Masters swimming.

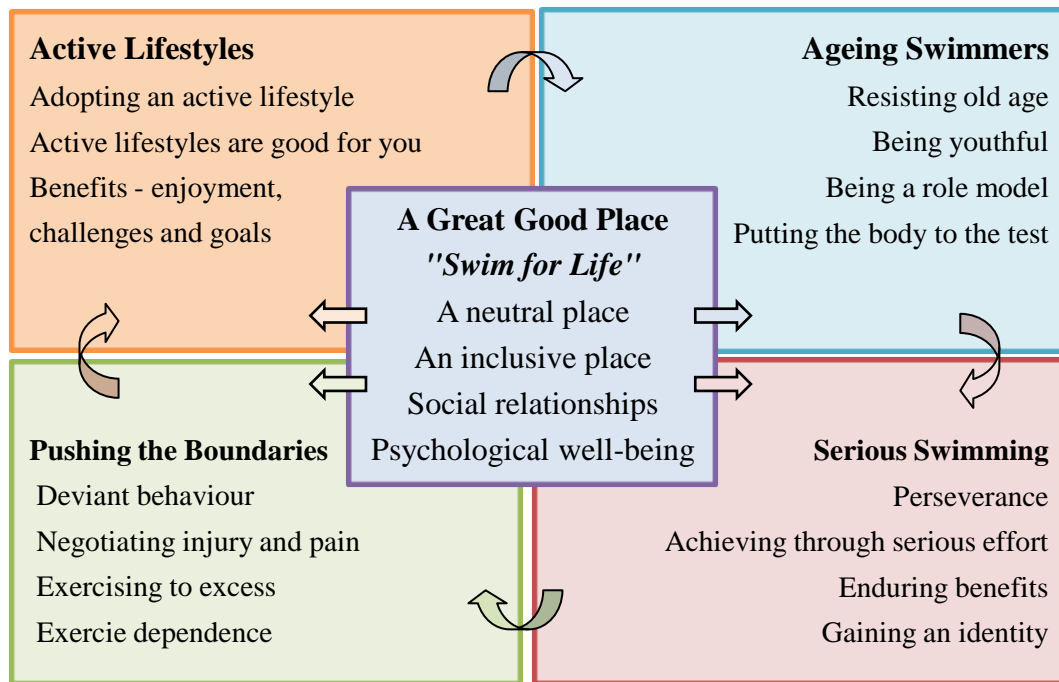**A Framework for Understanding a "Great Good Place" in Masters Sport**

Figure 4: A Framework for Understanding a *"Great Good Place" in Masters Sport*

The framework presented in Figure 4 illustrates my five primary themes. The main theme identified in the research is that of a distinct culture (*a great good place*). Within the culture I have identified four further themes which relate to active lifestyles, the ageing swimmer, serious swimming and pushing the boundaries. The first of these four additional themes demonstrates that in being part of the social world participants are able to adopt and maintain an active lifestyle which enhances their quality of life. The second relates to ageing. My findings suggest that older participants are minded to resist their ageing bodies and live satisfying and personally empowering lives. As a consequence older swimmers are looked upon as role models by others. The third theme relates to the

concept of serious leisure (Stebbins 1992) and the importance of the creation of a swimming identity. The fourth and final theme considers behaviour and the importance of practice and competition and the associated challenges this presents. Through exercise, swimmers are able to set their own challenges and goals and push the boundaries by over conforming and swimming through pain. As discussed in chapter seven when I considered the serious swimmer, the unique ethos of Masters swimming was far from simple as the themes intersected rather than occurred in isolation.

Contributory Themes in the Research

The primary theme in this research centred on a *"great good place"* and its value in community. Through meticulous examination I explored the leisure experiences of a Masters swimming group. The emerging themes resulting from my research led me to a deeper understanding of what it means to be an older swimmer. My findings are evidenced following a two year period of data collection, participant observation, interviews and note taking in which I built up a detailed account of the community and the participants themselves. These themes are now considered.

A Great Good Place

The main theme of this research explored the social world of *Fallwood* Leisure Centre. This theme was discussed in chapter four. According to Stebbins (1999, p.71) a social world consists of a subculture with: *"a unique set of special norms, values, beliefs, styles, moral principles and performance standards"*. The term *"Third Place"* is being used increasingly to describe the building of social capital in an environment distinct from home and work where people can meet together in good company on a regular basis. Ray Oldenburg's (1999) research on the concept of the *"Third Place"* is the most influential work to date explaining why *"Third Places"* are crucial for civil society and their unique importance as focal

points of community life. Despite Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) suggesting that the psychological, and social outcomes of sport for older adults are worth examining, as recently as 2011, Dionigi et al. (2011) argued that very little is known about the value of sport participation on health and functioning of older adults, particularly with reference to the *"Third Place"*. Consequently, the topic has been largely overlooked in sport literature.

Interestingly, research shows that *"Third Place"* patrons who have an attachment to an establishment do so as a result of receiving life-enhancing social support from customers and employees in the establishment, including emotional support, companionship and instrumental support (Rosenbaum et al. 2007). My research demonstrated that it was indeed the social context of the sport that provided participants with opportunities to satisfy their need for social connections and belonging. Hence, it was in the pool that swimmers spent time with like-minded people who understood each other and so a sentiment of camaraderie existed. During my research newcomers were welcomed making it an inclusive place on neutral ground away from home and work. Furthermore, a warm welcome extended to anyone interested in joining in, and the openness went across gender, age, and status with no regard to class, rank and profession. There was evidence to suggest that an ethos of harmony, social interaction and mutual respect provided long-lasting benefits for the athletes.

As well as the social benefits of attaching to the swimming world the findings suggest that there are also psychological benefits. In his research on serious leisure, Stebbins (2008) suggests that there are occasions in leisure time which stand out in the mind as thrills or high points. Stebbins (2008) argues that it is the high points that motivate the participant to carry on with the pursuit in the hope of finding similar experiences again and again. Consequently, Masters sessions provided a more structured experience as the athletes looked to the coach to provide variety and interest. One appeal of swimming was reflected in the positive psychological effects it had on swimmers. For example; it was evident that there was a sense of enjoyment whereby participants could concentrate their attention,

lose their sense of time and experience a sense of control. The unique ethos of the community offered the opportunity to bring about the best in others whilst sharing the best of oneself. The swimming pool provided a sense of belonging, an escape from everyday life irrespective of personal circumstances and mood. Through conducting this research, I determined that Masters swimming sessions broke down age, status, gender and occupational barriers to create what Oldenburg (1999) refers to as a *"great good place"*. Above all, it was the regulars who provided the nucleus, a constant that made the sessions work. Consequently, as *"insiders"* within the great good place they were able to carry on with their interests and adopt a serious approach to swimming. That is not to say that this place detracted from the individual's home and work life, but rather it complemented it. Hence, association in the great good place enveloped participants in a temporary world within their ordinary world.

Embracing an Active Lifestyle

In addition to the psychological and social benefits of participation, I concluded in chapter five that as individuals, participants were aware of the physiological benefits of swimming. For those interviewed in this study, the pursuit of good health was about being positive and proactive. Consequently there was a sense of determination and commitment within the group. In particular, all participants acknowledged that by swimming regularly significant changes had occurred in their physical competence. Participants made positive comments regarding the benefits they experienced from being physically active and how this was essential for maintaining a good state of health. I deduced that the reasons for swimming were diverse but maintaining a degree of fitness was a priority, especially to those swimmers who had sedentary occupations. Irrespective of the level of intensity, swimming in particular had a perceived positive effect on the body. I reasoned that these participants experienced a personal satisfaction that they saw as a direct benefit of their involvement in Masters swimming. This finding was confirmed by 72 year old Roy who stated:

Our sessions are varied, and all the strokes are used during the sets. The distances swum, and the pace are varied so it is interesting, and not just length after length of the same stroke at the same pace. There are sessions on technique and style which are so helpful... By swimming structured training sessions regularly each week I maintain my fitness, and I know that it is beneficial to my health and general well-being.

This finding underlined the actuality that active participation contributed towards overall well-being. Furthermore, as Roy's comments demonstrate, older athletes perceived themselves as being individuals who were concerned with enjoying life and being health conscious.

The Ageing Swimmer

With regard to ageing, this group of swimmers challenged the negative ageing stereotype where competing in physically demanding sport, is considered the domain of young, able-bodied and elite athletes. In the UK older people have been stereotyped as being weak and frail and dependent on the health care system (Tulle 2008a; 2008b). Essentially, older athletes who were involved in sport seemed to be doing so contrary to an ageist culture and an ageing body. In chapter six, I demonstrated that these participants were able to adapt to the ageing process by experiencing a sense of enjoyment through setting new challenges in the context of Masters sport. Participants internalised this message and indicated a desire to manage the ageing process through keeping going in sport for as long as possible. In particular, the *"regular"* attendees in the group resisted the traditional stereotypes of ageing by experiencing a sense of agency, personal empowerment and competency. Consequently, promoting and providing sport and leisure opportunities to older people has the potential to help them feel empowered and enjoy success and lead to a change in attitude towards older people. In other words, positive ageing reflects the emerging importance on physical activity and sport through refusing to accept the ageing body and negotiate old age.

Furthermore, I ascertained that Masters swimmers deserve to be given space and time by leisure providers to meet together in the local community. In this way they can act as role models for both old and young. As such, I argue that there is a need to provide a wide variety of Masters training programmes and competitions. This research on older athletes guides my understanding of the role physical exercise has in the *"ageing well"* discourse. In addition, it demonstrates how Masters swimming can be developed to achieve what the ASA are looking to do in seeking to both engage and retain Masters swimmers on a long term basis.

The Serious Swimmer

A central theme in this study was that of the *"serious"* swimmer. A key feature of my research shows that Masters sport participation provides a gateway into an environment of like-minded people. As a result, participants were exhibited as being serious, committed, and activity driven, thus fulfilling the criteria by which Stebbins (1992) distinguishes serious from casual leisure. Stebbins (1992) notes that serious leisure participants are separated from non-participants through the unique behaviours, language and values related to the *"social world"* of the group. Within the context of Masters swimming, my findings would support this view; hence new swimmers were expected to assume a serious approach, especially in their attitude to training. Having explored the Masters swimming community in chapter seven, my research supports the contention that social relations are particularly important for middle-aged and older adults participating in sport. Consequently, as serious participants they carried on with their interests within their own social world. As a result, the unique ethos of this group provided opportunities to develop the essential skills and techniques required to remain physically active and swim more often.

Pushing the Boundaries

My research shows the complex and sometimes conflicting accounts of the relationship between sport participation and the effects of sport participation on health and well-being. Out of the five key themes I identified four were useful in developing and maintaining a constructive lifestyle. Conversely and perhaps more importantly, this research uncovered a negative side of exercise behaviour demonstrating insights into normalised deviant behaviours. This topic was explored in chapter eight. The study extended my understanding of the health implications of Masters sport by presenting an account of health that goes beyond injury and illness to a broader conception that addresses lived experience. While a minority of participants in this research spoke of an unambiguous relationship between their sport participation and their health, whether positive or negative, most provided mixed accounts, citing both costs and benefits. My research extended Nancy Theberge's (2008) work by giving voice to the understandings of the lived experience of the athlete's health, in which injury and illness figured strongly. I also questioned the rigidity of government and NGB guidelines for physical activity behaviour in older adult groups through demonstrating the compulsive nature some older adults adopted in their exercise regimes. It was fitting that a sign around the edge of the pool at *Fallwood* read: *H2O = 2 parts heart, 1 part obsession.* In understanding deviant over conformity, Coakley and Pike (2009) point out that playing sport can be so exciting and exhilarating that athletes will do almost anything to stay involved. They also suggest that exceeding normative boundaries will increase the stakes associated with participation and bond athletes together. As a complex social phenomenon, sport exists in every corner of modern society. This research demonstrates that sport has the potential to be an effective channel for both physical and cultural development. Moreover, as a universal language, sport contributes towards social cohesion and personal improvement for the ageing participant in a way that other activities do not.

Providing an insight into sport culture

Brewer (2008) argues that the objective of ethnography is to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given field. As I have explored Masters sport, my study offers evidence that ethnography affords a valuable insight into sport culture. Using an ethnographic approach, I was able to recount what it means to be an active older participant. As a result, I was able to appreciate the diverse experiences and actions of a small and yet significant group of people. In recent years, leisure has evolved into a complex phenomenon which has many meanings for different people and groups. Kelly and Freysinger (2000) suggest that the spectrum of leisure motivations and satisfactions suggests dialectic between involvement and escape. There are both engagement and disengagement poles to this dialectic. There are choices and constraints. There are deep involvements and shallow entertainments. There is also boredom in leisure related to attitudes, values, and levels of involvement (Iso-Ahola and Crowley 1991). The results of this qualitative study concurred with Kelly and Freysinger (2000) as I revealed that the Masters swimming culture was indeed complex. Crucially, within the social world they inhabited it was apparent that there were both rewards and costs. Likewise, there were both seeking and escaping dimensions to choosing Masters sport. For some, their involvement in the sport was so deep-rooted that it was described as: *"a way of life"*. Furthermore, each individual had a personal tale to tell as they aspired to achieve their individual goals and ambitions. Consequently, the advantage of attaching to the swimming environment was paramount.

Implications of the Research

Dionigi (2010) found that participants' words and actions relating to the management of ageing reflect two broad and interrelated themes in relation to their experiences of Masters sport: *"I'm out here and I can do this!"* and *"Use it or lose it"*. Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) use a comparable phrase: *"Life is what you make it"*. As a result, responsibility for making the most of life rests largely

with the individual and the individual alone. In addition to Dionigi's two interrelated factors I uncovered a third dimension: *"You never lose it".* In other words, once swimming was learnt it was never forgotten. My research shows that sport can be as significant to the older participant as it is to the younger generation. Masters athletes are ideal role models for society as a whole and for other seniors. I make the case that Masters swimmers are exemplary individuals who have the potential to change the negative view which is often proffered towards older people.

In reviewing the Masters swimming world it was evident that the majority of swimmers were not casual swimmers. Instead, they were serious swimmers who set challenges and goals. As this research progressed it was evident that lengthy training sessions formed part of everyday routines which moved beyond what was necessary to acquire the basic health benefits of regular exercise. This was demonstrated by the participants' devotion to the activity. As Stevenson (2002) suggests, experiencing the process of learning means that the swimmer becomes an *"insider"* and so, increasingly values that subculture and becomes ever more embedded into it. I found that through experiencing the practices of the Masters swimming subculture, the swimmers became ever more embedded into the activity. As a result, there was substantial evidence of a willingness to make considerable changes not just to their own lifestyles but also to their families' lifestyles. For some, Masters swimming became such an overwhelming priority that they were willing to make significant compromises to their personal routines, to their families' routines, and to their work routines.

This study established that Masters swimming offered a complex mix of both positive and negative outcomes as I observed swimmers who admitted to being addicted to training. I also watched swimmers who attempted to train with injuries. Indeed, my findings fill a gap in exploring the link between injury and overtraining amongst elite and amateur athletes My study also offers the opinion that Masters swimming can provide participants with a channel for coping with routine problems and enhancing their self-esteem. A key part of this study

was to understand what drove the serious Masters swimmer to endure the evident punishment of training and racing and the resulting practices, which made it such a unique experience. Much of the research on pain and injuries in sports suggests that dealing with pain is crucial for an individual to claim an athletic identity. Sometimes, the decision to continue playing despite an injury is driven simply by a desire to maintain one's sense of self as an athlete (Pike and Maguire 2003; Pike 2004). In this research the normalisation of pain and dedication towards sport was evident in the Masters community. This was manifest in being a *"real athlete"*. Atkinson (2008) proposes that training sessions provide participants with ordered contexts for self-exploration that configures instances of voluntary suffering as being exciting and personally significant. Consequently, athletes who come to relish intense physical and cognitive agony in their sport share a socially learned personality structure (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1991). The personality structure configures instances of voluntary suffering in athletics as exciting and personally significant (Atkinson 2008). As a consequence there was confirmation which pointed towards deviant behaviour. Proving that they were willing to swim through the pain barrier enabled them to maintain their athletic identities and win the respect of their fellow swimmers.

My research confirmed that the Masters swimming community is a *"great good place"* at the heart of community where enduring relationships can be fostered and maintained. Given higher priority within both public and private sport settings there is evidence to suggest that *"insiders"* within a *"Third Place"* are able to maintain their interests through physical activity and adopt a serious approach to swimming. This thesis makes a unique contribution to understanding sport culture by applying key concepts which are relevant in other fields including triathlon (McCarville 2007; Atkinson 2008), the psychology of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Elkington 2011), distance running (Shipway and Jones 2007), serious leisure (Stebbins 2008) and boxing (Wacquant 2002), and bringing together insights from the participants themselves. The thesis also demonstrates how qualitative research can offer a new perspective on sport culture through working with participants. I maintain that qualitative research can help us to understand the

finer points and contradictions of the association which connects sport and the older athlete.

This research is of relevance to policy makers and leisure providers involved in physical activity and health promotion in the community at local, regional and national level. To begin with, my findings will be communicated to leisure centres at local and regional level. It will subsequently be delivered to the sport's NGB, the ASA, as a follow up to: *"A Strategy for Swimming in England". Fallwood* Leisure Centre is managed by a limited company. As a national leisure provider they propose that they have an interest in providing leisure facilities and activities which are at the heart of community. With hindsight, I am confident that I have been able to contribute to knowledge in searching for a better understanding of sport and leisure behaviour, within the context of Masters swimming. I anticipate that my findings will provide practical evidence that can be used to develop valuable sport and leisure programmes within the community with a view to understanding health, well-being and quality of life.

According to the ASA, as a non-weight bearing activity, swimming has a vital role to play in encouraging people to take part in physical activity and Masters swimming, as a contributor to this, plays a parallel role in encouraging people who are already taking part to continue in physical activity by presenting them with both a challenging and social environment (British Swimming 2011). In parallel with Loic Waquant's (1992) ethnography bringing meaning to the social logic of boxing, I conclude that the swimming pool provided a meeting point and relatively self-enclosed site for a protected sociability where swimmers could find respite from the pressures of everyday life. This collective closure made life in the pool possible and went a long way toward explaining its attractions. A nucleus of *"regulars"* formed the backbone of the membership of the group. The regulars trained tirelessly in order to compete. Others trained in order to keep in good physical shape and keep in touch with like-minded swimmers. And so the culture was egalitarian in that all participants were treated in the same way irrespective of status. Consequently, I deduced that these participants experienced a personal

satisfaction that they saw as a direct benefit of their involvement in Masters swimming. This finding underlined the actuality that active participation contributed towards swimming as part of a healthy lifestyle.

Throughout this thesis my aim was to give voice to the participants themselves and bring meaning to the complexities of the sport experience. Through continual probing and exploration I have endeavoured to reveal the athletes viewpoint in order that leisure providers, policy makers and other researchers can understand what it means to be a genuine athlete.

Lastly, this study has produced findings that have a direct bearing on the ASA and Masters swimming providers. Questions relating to engagement in swimming in later life raise issues about how NGBs, policy makers and practitioners might best encourage, support, and make appropriate exercise provision for older athletes. In particular, there is room for further exploration inside the social world of the more mature swimmer. The lifestyles of the swimmers cited in this research contrast with the perceived burden of dependency and social isolation of the ageing population. Hence, they did not consider themselves as old; instead they searched for ways to stay young. My findings illustrate that some of the primary experiences of older swimmers are linked to feelings of enjoyment, individual achievement, empowerment, satisfaction and lives well lived. Of particular interest would be a further exploration of how shifting demographic trends, such as ageing populations could bring about age-related changes in Masters swimming. The ASA proposes that Masters swimming caters for swimmers aged *"25 and over"* (British Swimming 2014). I maintain that swimmers aged twenty five are not old, especially when swimmers aged seventy and over are looked upon as being role models. It is evident that Masters sport can help older persons to both contend with and accept the ageing process in a positive way. Consequently, the definition of *"Masters"* needs to be revised. Scope exists to explore how swimming can be used amongst mature participants as a means of altering their age habitus (Bourdieu 1984) whereby participants can claim a persona that remains unaffected by the onset of age. Indeed, a far-reaching

research agenda still exists for the study of serious Masters swimmers as revealed in the results of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

In concluding my thesis, I acknowledge that there is latitude to further this research by conducting further studies into Masters sport provision across other sports. In retrospect, I acknowledge that the sample group in this research is indeed small. Conversely, therein lays its strength as it has provided rich holistic data in offering a detailed account of what unfolded through observations, interviews and note taking. All things considered, I accept that elements of the research may have been missed as I sifted through diaries and field notes. In addition, I acknowledge that my coaching philosophy assumes that athletes should be treated as individuals because each person has different abilities and needs, as I firmly believe in an athlete-centred approach. Taylor (1995) proposes that gaining an understanding of an athlete's needs can be accomplished through subjective or objective assessment and this was my intention throughout this research. As my research progressed, I sought to guard against any hint of bias on my part by providing a full and comprehensive representation of what it means to be a Masters swimmer. With hindsight, I would maintain that this could only be made possible through my knowledge and understanding of time spent in a sport which I am devoted to.

This study has provided rich data with the potential to inform both practice and further study, and has made a unique contribution in the field of qualitative research. It has also highlighted the need for further research into the subject of Masters sport in this country, specifically in terms of sport provision for older athletes. As I come to the end of my thesis, I contend that Masters sport deserves higher priority. Older athletes have the desire and determination to live life to the full as do their younger more agile counterparts. Masters sport is about personal empowerment, resistance and resilience and delaying the onset of old age. Irrespective of background, the information gathered in this thesis points to lives

well lived. On a personal note, I consider these athletes to be a remarkable group of people who demonstrate astonishing qualities of strength, determination, passion and enthusiasm for a sport I hold dear. The lifestyles of many swimmers cited in this research contrast with the perceived burden of dependency and social isolation of an ageing population. This is of particular relevance considering that Dorset has an elderly population which is well above average with 34% of the population aged 60 and over (Dorset County Council 2011). In addition, according to current population forecasts, the number of elderly will increase worldwide from 6.9% of the population in 2000 to a projected 19.3% by 2050 (Tanaka and Seals 2008). In summing up my thesis, I propose that older swimmers should be encouraged to embrace and maintain an active lifestyle. As older athletes, they should be offered space and time by leisure providers to meet together in the local community. In this way they can act as role models for both young and old. As such, they should have access to varied training programmes and unlimited competitions. This research on older athletes can lead to improved understanding of the role physical exercise has in the ageing well discourse. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Masters swimming provision can translate into what the ASA are looking to achieve in seeking to both engage and retain Masters swimmers on a long term basis. In order to do this, there is a requirement for leisure centres to provide Masters sessions, not just in Dorset but also in other centres around the country. The results of this study have the potential to raise our expectations of the older athlete, motivate future generations of older people, as well as establish a new standpoint that legitimises older people as being serious athletes. Although there is evidence that points towards society's older athletes as being deviant and over conforming they are at the forefront of an ever-increasing leisure trend.

My Research Journey

I began this research at the beginning of 2010 with the intention of researching participation and motivation in Masters swimming. As discussed in detail in chapter nine, as my research evolved, it became clear that the research was not so

much about the activity and the swimmers actions; rather it was about a place and the people in that place. Consequently, I became interested firstly, in detailing the value of the *"Third Place"* and secondly in understanding what the swimmers enjoyed about the place and why they spent so much time there. As my research progressed, I came to value each swimmer individually as a relationship of trust and respect was cultivated. I deem this was made possible through adopting a qualitative approach which allowed access to sensitive and personal issues. These issues related to: setbacks with injury, illness, self-doubt and family and marital problems. On balance, I do not think that the full extent of these issues would have emerged using a quantitative approach. Although the process was time-consuming, I am confident that a qualitative approach leant itself to uncovering extensive and rich data on committed and serious participants. Holloway and Wheeler (2010) propose that the insiders' accounts of reality help to uncover knowledge of the reasons why people act as they do.

Brewer (2008) argues that humanistic ethnography seeks to reconstruct the reality of the *"insiders"* world and construct accurate descriptions of this as if from the inside. This form of data analysis allows the humanistic ethnographer to believe it is possible to convey with accuracy the meanings of people in the field under study by remaining true to the meanings themselves by *"telling it like it is"* in members' own terms. As a professional within the Masters swimming world my aim was to offer a unique but essential insight on sport participation for NGBs, leisure providers and policy makers. This qualitative research was carried out at grassroots level. My ultimate aim in this research was to identify what the swimmers valued about Masters sport. As a result, it searched for the swimmer's perspective in order to increase the opportunities that participation in a leisure activity like swimming offers. In truth, if the information I have collected helps to guide and improve sport policy then I have achieved what I set out to do at the start of my research.

I conclude my thesis with the *"emic"* or insider's perception of a *"great good place:"*

Whilst spending a large part of my life partaking in many different types of sport for a lot of the time, I have never come across a set up as positive and keen as the Fallwood Masters Swimming Group. Everything about the group just makes you want to come back every time. The dynamic is fantastic; there is a mix of talents, abilities and personalities. I can't actually recall coming across a more welcoming, friendly and dedicated bunch of people.

Will

Will's words sum up the ethos of this group. Throughout my research journey I have learnt what it means to be a member of the Masters swimming world as I have come alongside the swimmers themselves through their anxieties, concerns, frustrations, delights and pleasures. This enabled me to identify with older participants as individuals irrespective of background and ability. I have also been able to vary the training sessions in order that they are inspiring, varied, interesting and relevant. Since beginning this research, *Fallwood* leisure centre has created an adult swimming pathway which provides adult swimmers with weekly learn to swim sessions and continues into twice weekly coached fitness and swimming technique sessions. Swimmers have the option to transfer or crossover into Masters or club based sessions as required and so there are sessions and opportunities for all levels and abilities irrespective of age. My understanding of Masters swimming has provided an insight into the complexities that exist within the sport. What counts are attitude, action and resilience as men and women who continue to train and compete into old age make sense of the process of growing old. My time spent with these swimmers has helped me to develop my skills as a coach as I have learnt to understand them. As for me, my hope is that in some small way I have made a difference to the lives of the swimmers I have had the good fortune to meet during the course of this research.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 – The Meeting Point

A *"Great Good Place"*

Appendix 2 – Sample of Informed Consent Form

Bournemouth University

PhD thesis

Student's name: Janet Hutchings

PhD title: An exploration into participation in Masters Swimming

1) I agree to take part in the above research ☐

2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time ☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Student's signature: _____

Appendix 3 – Sample of Field Notes

We agreed that she should look at the video online & then we would start the next day & practise them.

22/4/10

New am session from today at FLC. Eight swimmers turned up which was a good start! This Thursday Am session will focus on technique & skills rather than distance/endurance.

Jean did her warm up & then worked on the new turn for over 45 mins. Practise, Practise Practise – over & over again. She managed to master steps 1-3 really well. We still need to work on step 4. With Jean (see determination, & perseverance. She didn't want to give up until she had got it right. She had to have the momentum to get closer into the wall & then push away. The problem with her turn at Guernsey was that her hand kept slipping on the wall at the turn & she lacked confidence. In her training today she practised both hands on turn & push away on front. Left hand / Right hand & push away. Then on the back to push away. Then arms extended. She was able to push away underwater which will help with underwater phase of the stroke. Now we just need to master push away on the side & look at the wall rather than to the side or the front which creates drag in the water.

[Margin annotations: DETERMINATION, TRAINING, PERSEVERANCE, SERIOUS EFFORT]

Appendix 4 – Sample of Diary Notes

July 2011   15 swimmers   PAYE Week 15

18 Monday (199-166)   WEEK 29

200 F/c – 30 sec
150 Hc – 20 –
2 x 75m pull – 15
6 x 50m choice – 10 –
200 Hc

1) Phil o', Jeff
2) Elaine, Stuart B, Lawrie, Mel, Phil C, Rob, Nikki
3) Nigel B, Alex, Andy, Jamie – Paul
4) Janet, Kelly   lifeguard

10 x 50m F/c [full all

Kelly. Pier to pier cancelled –
Sunday. May run 4th Sept?
Janet – lifeguard. In warm up
it's far too hot – I've been
swimming in the sea
Phil o' Connor – pool's too hot.
It's blowing in hot water.

15m easy choice
10 x 25m 1st kick or b'sec
15m easy pull
10 x 2m 1st/ swim
150m easy pull
5 easy – All of them

19 Tuesday (200-165)
Andy got cramp in the
kick set. Janet found it
amusing. "If we can keep
going so can you". Ha Ha

to make 2450m off round
2500m

Jamie got out at 9.45 – This was his first session.

Lane 2 – Rotate lead – Men lead pull/swim
ladies lead kick. ie Elaine + Nikki
Nikki drops to the back on Hc swim
Lawrie went to the back on BR/s – 1st choice)
(25m)

Janet asked how far she had swum. She
missed 2 lengths in the kick but made up for it in the
pull. She is doing ½ way Bournsea – end of July.

20 Wednesday (201-164) PAYE Week 16   Cloudy but warm.
14 Swimmers
1) Barry, Tash, Phil o'
2) Lawrie, Jean, Mel, Rob, Nikki, Phil c.
3)
4) Janet, Esther, Linda, David, Helen

6 x 75m swim – 15 sec
6 x 25m kick – 10 –
6 x 50m choice – 10 –
6 x 25m pull – 10 –

Barry – "Can't you make these sessions
a bit later". "Ridiculous".
Can be impatient

100m pull – 15 sec }
50m choice – 10 – } x4
50m Hc – 10 – }

Helen tried my goggles – as hers leaked
last week
Phil – main set – "can't speak –
gasping for air."
Jean – "It's a 100m"
Lawrie's – pull
Mel – "We're going off 1.05 – not a min." Jean. "Sorry, sorry.

TOP LANE 8 x 75m 9my 1-20
2800m, 2600m + BARRY + TASH
15m, 100m 2653m