‘Last goal wins’: Re/engaging women of a ‘forgotten’ age through football?

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Abstract

This paper explores the physical activity experiences of a group of women based in England, and who are over the age of 30. This particular age group represent a 'forgotten' age, that is, they are largely ignored in academic scholarship, policy and physical activity provision. The paper explores how this group of women 're/engaged' in physical activity after a sustained period of inactivity. The study is situated in a weekly football initiative (Monday Night Footy) based in the north of England, managed and organised by a group of women for women to train and play five-a-side football. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and the use of photo-biographical boards with 11 women, all of whom are regular participants to the football sessions. We use a middle ground feminist lens and Archer's notion of 'fr/agility' to help make sense of the women's experiences. From these women's stories three key findings emerge: (a) Biographies of (in)activity – the ways in which relationships with physical activity can be characterised by fractures and fissures despite seemingly positive early physical activity experiences; (b) Pathways of re/engagement – the motives and enablers to these women once again participating in physical activity after a sustained absence; and (c) Monday Night Footy as a space for re/engagement – the ways in which this context contributes to these women's continued involvement in football and broader physical activity. The paper concludes by offering policy makers and physical activity providers some recommendations alongside considerations for future research.

Key words: Women; Aging; Gender; Physical Activity; Football; Re/engagement

Introduction

Historically, women and girls have been viewed as a 'problematic group' in their physical activity engagement (The Sports Council, 1988, 1993) and this outlook continues to dominate contemporary thinking (Sport England, 2017; The Cabinet Office, 2014, 2015). As such, women continue to be targeted through various initiatives and programmes (for example Sport England's 'This Girl Can' campaign). Research too has taken an interest, particularly in relation to teenage girls' relationship with school Physical Education, and their 'dropping out' of physical activity on leaving secondary school (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006; Kirk & Oliver, 2014). Similarly, older women (60 plus) have been highlighted as a cause for concern and this has contributed to popular discourse of ageing as a process through which individuals become sedentary, immobile, and dependent (Dallaire, Lemyre, Krewski & Gibbs, 2012). That said, a growing number of critical scholars are challenging this view and have conceptualised older adults as having positive experiences as they enter the 'third age' (Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Dionigi, 2002, 2006). This is a period of time following retirement, and which precedes the 'fourth age', the last few years of a person's life (Dionigi, 2006; Humberstone, 2010). This distinction is useful in enabling new understandings of older people as healthy, active participants in physical activity. Like Griffin (2017), we believe older women do not suddenly become a 'problem' group, nor do they miraculously develop motivations and a desire to be active. Yet interestingly, there remains very little research that explores women's relationship with physical activity in between leaving school and entering the 'third age' (Lenneis & Pfister, 2017). We believe this 'forgotten age' (typically between 25 and under 60) can provide valuable insights regarding the complexity, fluidity and multiplicity of barriers, challenges, and motivations that influence engagement, disengagement and reengagement in physical activity.

One of our early motives when setting out on this research journey stemmed from our own experiences. All three of us were actively engaged in physical activity extensively throughout childhood, competing in traditional team sports, thriving on school PE, and regularly engaging in recreational activities. On leaving school we maintained an involvement in physical activity, overcoming the risk of dropping out in those critical post-secondary school years. Yet despite these positive experiences, all three of us disengaged for a prolonged period at some point. A further commonality emerged during our discussions in terms of our re-engagement, the significance of a weekly five-a-side[i] football session. This is organised and delivered by women for a range of women (16 years and over) to participate; a session that the participants fondly refer to as 'Monday Night Footy' (MNF). In reflecting on MNF and the demographics of the participants, we realised this setting represented an unusual physical activity space for various reasons. All of the women fall within the 'forgotten age' (early 30s to early 50s). Some had played football previously and at a competitive level, others had played recreationally as children, whilst some had never played before. Many of these women were beginning to take up physical activity, in the form of football, after a sustained period of inactivity. For some, this was their only form of weekly physical activity, for others it formed part of a broader exercise regime. Often tired from a day at work, and faced with the temperamental English weather, these women would turn up, week in, week out, suitably attired and ready to kick a ball around. MNF had become a valued and regular part of their routine. Our reflections seemed more significant given that the focus of the session was football; a sport that is widely acknowledged, in its mainstream capacity at least, to be a bastion of discrimination (Caudwell, 2011).

This paper focuses on the voices of 11 of the participants of MNF to explore its role in 're/engaging' women in football and physical activity. We use the term 're/engagement' in this paper to refer to the role of MNF in promoting women's *re*-engagement with physical

activity, their *re*-engagement with football, or in some cases their initial *en*gagement with football for the first time in their lives. More specifically, the following objectives are addressed: (1) to explore the nature and significance of physical activity in the biographies of these women; (2) to establish the place and meaning of football in their lives; (3) to track their motives for participating in football and broader physical activity; and (4) to provide an understanding of alternative ways to organise, deliver and participate in football. This paper begins by reviewing the literature relating to the intersections of age and gender and physical activity experiences. After this, the methodology outlines the context of the research, the positionality of the researchers and their relationship to MNF, the use of photo-elicitation in generating data, and data analysis. The key findings of this study are then discussed: (a) Biographies of (in)activity; (b) Pathways of re/engagement; and (c) MNF as a space for re/engagement. The paper concludes by highlighting a number of key issues and recommendations that policy makers and physical activity providers should consider when supporting the forgotten age to be physically active.

Gender, age and physical activity

Historically within England, concerns over health and low levels of physical activity participation have led to particular groups being categorised as failing to reach recommended guidelines (The Sports Council, 1988, 1993; Sport England, 2017). Women, ethnic minority communities, disabled people and older people have been targeted through policy and additional resources to help address these concerns. For example, through interventions and strategies from The Football Association unprecedented numbers of women and girls are now playing football at grassroots level in England (2.05 million women and 900,000 girls[ii]). However, it would appear that the FA's latest strategy, 'The Gameplan for Growth' (2017), is

aimed at particular kinds of women and girls. Indeed, the wording of the policy exclusively focuses upon girls, or when adults are mentioned it is usually in relation to young women[iii].

One of the consequences of viewing women as a homogeneous target group in policy is a failure to recognise the barriers, challenges and opportunities that different kinds of women experience. In recent years, researchers in sport and physical activity have begun to consider the intersections of gender with other identity markers and the influence on experiences (for example gender and disability (Stride & Fitzgerald, 2012), gender and sexuality (Drury, 2011), and gender and ethnicity (Stride, 2016). What appears to be less researched is how different age groups of women experience physical activity. Instead, research has tended to focus on young women, including those at school (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, 2006; Kirk & Oliver, 2014) and older women (typically over the age of 60), particularly in relation to aging. In this latter research, the focus is typically upon physical activity as a means of preventing disease and reducing the risks of age-related ill-health (Dionigi, 2006; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017). Other work on older women has tended to explore the experiences of those involved in elite level, Masters' competition (Dionigi, 2002, 2015; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012, 2013).

Across this extant research there are some commonalities in relation to women's motives for engagement, benefits of being physically active, and the challenges faced. For example, making new friends, developing a broader social network with like-minded others, and being part of a 'community of players' emerges as an important motivator (Dionigi, 2002; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, 2006; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012, 2013; Pfister and Lenneis, 2015). For some women, the promise of losing weight, improving fitness or returning to a previous state of health has led them to take up physical activity (Carmichael, Duberley & Szmigin, 2015; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Pfister & Lenneis, 2015). Others have emphasized

the significance of winning and competition as a contributing factor in their engagement (Dionigi, 2002, 2006; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012, 2013). In relation to challenges, Lenneis and Pfister (2017) note the limited opportunities available for middle aged women to participate in team games, especially those who lack sport specific skills, and/ or those not interested in competing but wishing to train. Others have highlighted the illusory gaze of others, fear of embarrassment and perceived social risks as intimidating (Carmichael et al., 2015; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Griffin, 2017). Lenneis and Pfister (2017) and Grant (2003) note how societal expectations around the behaviour of older women can act as a barrier. Yet, a recurring theme across this research is women's agency in refusing to be positioned in particular ways. These women's involvement in certain physical activities and practices challenges gender and age related norms leading to feelings of pride, increases in confidence and enhanced self-esteem (Dionigi, 2002, 2015; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012, 2013).

Some of this research offers useful recommendations regarding conditions that enable women to be physically active. For example, Griffin (2017), Grant (2003) and Liechty, Genoe and Marston (2017) highlight the need for pleasurable and enjoyable opportunities that encourage lifelong learning. Others add that mastery of a game, competency, developing technical skills and feelings of control over fitness can lead to increases in self-esteem, and personal empowerment (Dionigi, 2002, 2006; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Pfister & Lenneis, 2015). Lenneis and Pfister (2017) emphasise the need for safe spaces where all feel included, the outcome of the game is decentralised, and mistakes can be made without fear of reprisal. The women in this study also noted how the success of their session relied upon attendance and this awareness operated as a mechanism to ensure on-going participation. Dionigi and Lyons (2010) conclude that for any programme of physical activity to be successful it must be personally meaningful, freely chosen and valued. In this regard, Griffin and Phoenix

(2016) note the importance of recognising physical activity contexts as relational spaces where participation is enhanced through knowing each participant's goals, motivations, and insecurities, and acknowledging attendance and absence in a supportive manner.

Despite this body of knowledge, it would appear that women of a particular age (25 to 60) remain marginalised within research and policy (Griffin & Phoenix, 2016; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017). Yet like Griffin (2017), we argue that women of different age ranges can provide important insights about their relationship with physical activity across the life course. We concur with Griffin (2017) that women do not enter the 'older' age range as a problematic group. As Tulle (2017) notes, an individual's biography, or the 'weight of history', must be taken into account. In so doing, she considers the ways in which individual biographies intersect with socio-cultural contexts and structural forces to provide more sophisticated accounts of physical activity engagement throughout the life course. Like Tulle (2017), we have explored how structural influences and gender power relations operate in the lives of women and girls in relation to their involvement in physical activity (Stride, 2016). Similarly, we also recognise the utility of drawing on 'middle ground' feminism (Archer, Hutchings & Leathwood, 2001) to better understand the ways in which women and girls navigate these inequalities in their quest to be physically active.

In adopting a middle ground approach, we draw from different feminist perspectives. For example, we acknowledge the work of Black and poststructural feminists in highlighting resistance, difference and moving beyond the unitary category of gender. Yet, we note Hargreaves' (2004) concerns that such approaches must not detract from those group experiences that underline the enduring nature of discrimination. A middle ground lens acknowledges how women can be both placed in particular discursive configurations imbued with relations of power, whilst being active agents in challenging dominant discourses. To

reflect the difficulties associated with negotiating power relations, Archer's (2004) concept of 'fr/agility' is used within this paper. In combining notions of power and weakness (conveyed through the concept of fragility), with agency and action (conveyed through agility), fr/agility acknowledges the enduring nature of power relations and inequalities alongside the existence of resilience and resistance. Having offered an overview of the research and theoretical resources informing our study we next discuss the methodological considerations underpinning our study.

Methodology

Research context

MNF aims to be an inclusive footballing opportunity, organised and delivered by women for a group of women (age 16 and over) to train and play five-a-side football. Established 17 years ago, MNF meets once a week at a local university's Multi Usage Games Area (MUGA) and seeks to develop skills and improve fitness in a fun and supportive environment. Women pay a termly fee to cover the costs of the MUGA and the sessions are run by two volunteer F.A. licensed coaches (one UEFA C and the other UEFA B qualified). All of the women that were participating on a weekly basis at the time of this research were interviewed. The 11 women ranged in age from 30-50, all were in full time employment, and over half had participated in MNF for over five years. As highlighted earlier, their experiences of playing football and levels of footballing skills and fitness varied considerably, with some playing competitively and others never having kicked a football until their involvement with MNF. Their recruitment to MNF had typically occurred through word of mouth and personal contacts. Participants varied in terms of age and sexuality, but were less diverse in relation to social class and ethnicity.

Researcher positionality

At the time of undertaking the research, two of the authors were involved in MNF, Annette as a coach/ participant and Hayley as a participant. Scarlett had been a participant but had not attended MNF for two years prior to the research taking place. To some extent Annette and Hayley can be considered as 'insiders' or akin to Adler's and Adler's (1987) notion of 'complete member researchers'. That is, they were already members of the group being researched. Annette's and Hayley's positionality was significant in gaining support from the other participants, whilst also providing a means for having a detailed understanding of the context. Like Berger (2013), we acknowledge that this insider status is not unproblematic. For example, participants could have felt obliged to take part in the study. To help address this concern, Annette and Hayley consulted with the women about their research ideas. They were clear that they would only proceed with the research if the women themselves felt this was a worthwhile study; and, that there would be no repercussions for themselves if the research did not take place, nor for the women if they did not want to participate. Annette and Hayley also explained their reasoning behind using a research assistant, unknown to the women, to undertake the interviews. That is, should they act as the data collectors this could affect the nature of the women's responses and future relationships at MNF. However, it was also articulated that should any participant prefer to be interviewed by Annette or Hayley, they could request this.

On establishing the women's willingness, ethical approval was then sought and an internal University research grant was applied for to pay a research assistant to undertake the interviews. We (Annette and Hayley) also recognised that our physical and emotional relationship to MNF would implicitly inform the questions we asked, data generated, analysis process, and which aspects of these women's stories that interested us. Thus, we drew upon Scarlett as a critical friend throughout the research process to check and challenge our approach and research activities. Despite the challenges of being insider researchers we also

believed it important that our experiences as participants were not marginalised from the narrative of MNF and actively engaged as research participants in order that our own footballing biographies and experiences were accounted for within this research. As such, we use our own names where excerpts from our interviews have been used within the findings section of this paper. However, the remaining eight participants have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

Methods

Data generation involved the production of research artefacts and semi-structured interviews. We believed this approach would capture the significance of individual biographies and social structures, and develop more nuanced understandings of physical activity experiences (Harper, 2002; Orr & Phoenix, 2015). Prior to interview, the women were provided with a guidance sheet asking them to collect some 'mementoes' that reminded them of their relationship with physical activity over their life course. These 'mementoes' could include badges, certificates, equipment, kit and photographs. They were asked to take photographs of the physical mementoes and alongside the existing photographs create a physical activity photo-biographical board using Pic Collage[iv]. Examples of these can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Photo-biographical boards PLACE HERE

The interviews centred upon a number of issues including: (a) physical activity histories (b) the place and significance of physical activity and football currently in the women's lives and (c) current barriers, challenges, enablers and facilitators to engagement in MNF and physical activity more broadly. In asking the women for information about their past the photo-biographical boards acted as a 'multisensory artifact' (Pink, 2011, p. 608) to evoke memories (Harper, 2002; Orr & Phoenix, 2015). The photo-biographical boards were drawn upon throughout the interviews to prompt discussion, probe for detail, and provide additional

sources of information. At times they served as a rough interview guide, with the interviewee taking the lead in sharing their reflections of the photographs. Like the participants in Orr's and Phoenix's (2015, p. 463) study, these women ordered their images in ways that made sense to them, for example chronologically, or into groupings of activities, or in relation to significant people and/ or organisations. They then provided descriptive detail in their efforts to 'create a coherent narrative of their experiences'. They talked through their pictorial history in detail and with authority, pointing out people and incidences of significance. We attempted to support a research encounter where research participants felt valued, and were able to express thoughts and experiences. These are important features of a methodology informed by feminism (hooks, 1989; Hill Collins, 2000).

Analysis

Initially, Annette and Hayley separately reviewed each of the interview transcripts, repeatedly reading and annotating each transcript. This first phase took a relatively inductive approach in which Annette and Hayley attempted to allow the data to determine a series of initial 'themes'. These were discussed with Scarlett who facilitated the interrogation of the interpretations and the ways in which these may have been shaped by Annette's and Hayley's own experiences, biographies and positionality. These discussions were also guided by our theoretical framework. Here, we specifically considered the ways in which the participants' accounts reflected experiences of inequality and discrimination alongside examples of resistance and resilience. Our theoretical lens also helped us to better make sense of the complexities and contradictions present within, and between, each of the women's accounts. These discussions enabled us to begin to map out a more coherent number of themes. We revisited the literature to consider what our data had to offer existing insights before

finalising our themes: (a) Biographies of (in)activity; (b) Pathways of re/engagement; and (c) MNF as a space for re/engagement. We next discuss each of these in turn.

Findings

(a) Biographies of (in)activity

These data demonstrate a number of similarities between the women, with physical activity playing a significant part in all participants' childhood leisure time. Many shared stories of the freedoms associated with unstructured play and talked about friends, family and where they lived as instrumental to facilitating their opportunities for physical activity.

> We used to just have our summers just swimming in the water and exploring. This is the bay and across the road is the marsh. We used to have adventures, like dares of putting the reeds across to make people jump, because you would fall through and stuff. It was a kind of exploring ….. there was no kind of fear. As long as I was back for my tea, that was it. (Ciara)

Unlike the findings of previous studies, all women spoke positively of school. This is particularly notable given that the ages of the women meant that they would have experienced PE during an era in which it was known to be distinctly gendered and dominated by a limited programme of traditional team sports (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). The gendered aspect of their PE curriculum was commented upon by some of these women, but had done little to detract from their enjoyment.

> I played every sport really going ….. but if I reflected upon it, the range of activities, it was, "Girls, if you want to, you can run around the school," and they'd walk around the school and go for a fag (cigarette) or, "Boys, you can go and play five-a-side football" and myself and another girl used to stay with the boys and play five-a-side football. (Ciara)

Moreover, Hayley, Ciara, Annette and Erin demonstrate the various ways they exerted their agency within a gendered educational infrastructure.

> Well the girls didn't play football at school ….. me and a couple of other girls were quite

> disappointed that we didn't so we kind of spoke to the PE teachers and ….. they agreed that the following term we could play ….. with the boys. (Hayley)

> At primary school I used to beg my PE teacher to let me play football with the boys and she said no, you do netball, boys do football. And eventually, after like months of nagging I got them to let me play. (Annette)

> I loved doing PE and that, you know a lot of girls hate it ….. one of the male PE teachers actually said yes he would put some (football) lessons on so we had a six week block, we enjoyed it and that was it really. They had ticked that box to say they had done it and that was it. (Erin)

Whilst their fragility is reflected in their inability to make any long term deeper structural changes, these women's narratives reflect agility in the ways they questioned teachers' pedagogy, challenged activities offered and attempted to access masculine sporting domains. This agility may be attributed in part to their existing physical abilities and enjoyment of alternative physical activity experienced outside school.

Interestingly, the participants in this study did not report any disengagement during their teenage years. Whilst previous research reports adolescence as a prime period during which girls 'struggle' to maintain an interest in physical activity, a number of the women continued to thrive in either competitive extra-curricular school teams, local sports leagues or recreational activity. Jess' account is typical of those made.

> By the time I was like thirteen I was probably playing at least three times a week with competitions and stuff on a weekend. (Jess)

Post-school drop-out is often attributed to negative PE experiences (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006; Kirk & Oliver, 2014), but for many of these women school provided an opportunity to further develop their physical capital and involvement in sport and physical activity. Across the 11 women's narratives a wide variety of activities were experienced including running, swimming, football, hockey, netball, tennis, table tennis, badminton, basketball, horse riding, shooting, rowing, skiing, fishing, camogie, rugby, athletics, climbing, and martial arts.

Diversity was also demonstrated in the motives offered for continuing to be involved in physical activity. These included socialising and spending time with family and friends, and relieving pressure and stress (Dionigi, 2002; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012; 2013; Pfister & Lenneis, 2015). Others, like Ali explained how her involvement was driven by competition. Here, she proudly discusses her achievements featured on her collage.

> I think it's the competitiveness in me that I liked, I like to win [laughs] ….. that's just a collection from all the sports I've done over the years so it starts from the oldest trophy ….. which is a rounders one from school ….. and there's my badminton medals at the front ….. and it goes all the way up to the medals at the side from university. (Ali)

Others found sports and physical activity as spaces in which they could begin to develop their emerging identities.

> I felt that whilst I was doing PE I could be who I really thought I was, especially with my emerging sexuality. (Erin)

> Suddenly at year 8 or year 9 everyone's discovered make-up and heels, and that sort of thing, and I knew I was definitely quite tomboyish, so I kind of stood out in that sense, whereas I'd go to that football club and pretty much everyone was the same and would have the same attitude towards those girls in year 8 and year 9 who'd suddenly sort of decided that they thought they were about 16. (Scarlett)

Erin and Scarlett offer an alternative story to research that shows how sports and physical activity contexts tend to celebrate a narrow range of identities, typically male, heterosexual, and non-disabled. For Erin and Scarlett, their early physical activity spaces offered them opportunities to experiment with their gendered and sexual identities and eschew traditional notions of heterosexual femininity.

Despite these very positive childhood, adolescent and early adulthood experiences, this pattern of activity was not continuously sustained for the majority of women. All, apart from one of the participants, reported that they had experienced significant periods of inactivity at some point in their adult lives. For some, this was linked to injury, lack of time through work, and discovering other interests.

> I think it was kind of social life took over a little bit, erm, so I think I obviously just went out a lot more as an undergraduate as most people do, and that took over from sport. (Scarlett)

Others chatted about changing circumstances such as moving location, no longer having anyone to exercise with, or taking on additional caring responsibilities.

> I used to leave work at five o'clock on a Friday, I would drive straight home to my mum and I'd be looking after her until Monday morning. My life became work, PhD and my mum and literally that was it consistently like for three years. I didn't go out or anything because I didn't have that capacity to be able to, so there was no activity in my life at all, there wasn't space for it. (Hayley)

These women's experiences raise significant questions about how we understand patterns of physical activity participation. The establishment of good physical activity behaviours in childhood is often perceived as significant in establishing active lifestyles in adulthood, although note the work of Green (2013) who critiques this idea. As such, many policy and practice responses focus on overcoming or preventing inactivity in adolescent girls. The underlying assumption here is that those who *have* continued to participate in physical activity throughout adolescence and into early adulthood will continue to do so over the life course. On the contrary, these findings join that of Green (2013) in questioning the 'PE effect'; that there is no guarantee that positive PE experiences lead to lifelong physical activity participation. For the women in this study who succeeded within a narrow, gendered PE curricula, participation as adults became problematic and disengagement occurred.

(b) Pathways of re/engagement

Despite 'dropping-out' of physical activity, all of the women became what Dionigi (2015) labels 'rekindlers'; that is, they began to re-engage after a sustained period of inactivity. In many cases this re/engagement was through football and MNF. In discussing their pathways of re/engagement the women offered a range of explanations for their decision to 'rekindle the flame' of physical activity (Dionigi, 2015). For Alex and Sam, a desire for new social

networks was identified as an initial motivator (Dionigi, 2002; Pfister & Lenneis, 2015; Lichfield & Dionigi, 2012, 2013).

> My main motivation at that time I suppose was social reasons, try and meet some friends, get a bit of a network together. (Alex)

> Changes in friendship groups also made me think I need to make new friends. I was living on my own, so it was a way of meeting new people. (Sam)

Other women within the group noted concerns over their weight, health and fitness as instigating a desire to become physically active again, a recurring theme through much of the literature (Carmichael et al., 2015; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017).

> It was about trying to get fit again and me making a choice about something I was going to do in my life which was lacking at that point. (Hayley)

> Fitness levels and being able to run for the bus without wheezing. Just again, about weight, and body image, and consciousness about how I feel about myself and stuff like that. (Sam)

Others articulated benefits accruing from their ongoing involvement with MNF that extended beyond the physical. For example, some women highlighted the importance of learning and competency as motivators as previously identified by Griffin (2017), Grant (2003) and Liechty et al. (2017).

> I just fell in love with it straight away. I was like oh my god I can actually do this …. I'd mastered something, I'd got a skill that I didn't know I had, I could stop the ball, I could pass the ball ….. I'd put myself in quite a difficult position and I'd sort of realised I was quite good at something, gave me quite a lot of confidence. (Annette)

> I think as I get older I'm appreciating that it's harder to learn but actually it's more rewarding. (Hayley)

Josie was mindful that alongside her learning, she was challenging particular stereotypes through her engagement in football. Echoing the work of others (Dionigi, 2002, 2015; Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Litchfield and Dionigi, 2012, 2013), she acknowledged societal expectations for women of a particular age in relation to their physical activity pursuits.

> I like learning as well because we do bits of training and I like the fact that you have a sense

> that you might be improving a little bit ….. I quite like the fact that people don't think that at 50 ….. that you are going to be playing football. (Josie)

As these women discussed their re/engagement they often offered some explanations for their periods of inactivity. For Sam and Annette this was linked to wider structural inequalities within education and sport.

> I think at school you did netball or you might do a bit of athletics in the summer but no one really sort of showed you how to be physically active outside of school ….. If you had played lots of different things you've probably got the confidence to go and experiment but I hadn't. (Annette)

Similarly, a number of the other women recalled how lack of footballing opportunities for girls had led to their delayed relationship with the sport.

> I suppose there was no real opportunities back when I went to school to play it ….. It was only when I got to Uni that I started playing it competitively and actually thought, "Oh, you know what? I really enjoy this". (Alex)

In some cases, and understandably, these women were somewhat regretful that things had not been different when they were younger.

> I almost sort of wish you could live your time again, now that there is so much more opportunity for girls, erm you know like women's football has just gone off the scale now and there's girls' teams all over the place, whereas that just wasn't around when I was little. (Erin)

> When I started studying P.E. at GCSE and at A-Level we did modules around, like, social science and social issues in sport, I think that was when I first started to get annoyed. I thought why the hell is women's football treated in this way? Why haven't I been given these opportunities? (Scarlett)

What makes these women's stories interesting is that despite the 'weight of history' (Tulle, 2017), a history of experiencing inequalities produced through sport and education, these women have found a way to re/engage in football. Their re/engagement reflects their agency in their resistance and resilience to these exclusionary structures to take up physical activity in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. Their stories support the notion of physical activity being a relational process where structural forces and individual biographies

intertwine to create a fluid, complex and multidimensional relationship with physical activity (Dionigi & Lyons, 2010; Griffin & Phoenix, 2016; Tulle, 2017).

(c) MNF as a space of re/engagement

MNF was perceived by all participants to be a positive and inclusive space on a number of levels. One of the most significant aspects of this relates to what one participant described as the 'unspoken philosophy' of the club around ensuring players of all abilities feel welcome. Sam, for example, described how she enjoyed being 'in a community that accepts me for the standard that I am'. A number of the women discussed the different approach towards competition; whilst most sessions involved a game, the focus was on 'friendly' competition where few were interested in keeping score or winning. This was exemplified in the practice of 'Last Goal Wins' in the dying minutes of each session. This de-centring of competition meant that the women felt less pressure to perform skilfully and felt more included and valued as a consequence (Lenneis & Pfister, 2017). Particularly notable were the accounts of women who had had no previous football experience prior to attending the session. For example, Josie discussed how MNF had been

> Quite a revelation really because I hope that I'd play football in some shape or form now for as long as you know I'm not injured and can do it. Obviously I wish I had done it a long time ago ….. I like the people that are there ….. it's not really competitive in the sense that if you make a bit of a mess up you've not lost a cup or something. (Josie)

By contrast, some of the players within MNF had played football competitively for a number of years. During the interviews, these players made frequent comparisons between MNF and the ethos of more competitive league teams, describing MNF as a space they were free to enjoy without any commitment, or pressure.

> There's no pressure erm so in that respect it's different because any other teams, you are normally working towards playing a game on a weekend, or a competition, or whatever but with this we are just having a kick about and having a laugh and that's it. (Jess)

> It's probably the first time I've been involved in a team that is not competitive. We don't play any matches or any tournaments or anything like that erm but to be honest that's probably what I want at the moment. I don't want a massive commitment of training twice a week and games on a weekend. I kind of like my freedom now and I like having my weekends to do what I want. (Hazel)

Those who had played competitive football previously often compared the inclusive ethos of MNF with their dissatisfaction with or alienation from mainstream (men's) football culture. Ali, for example, described how the success of her previous women's team was responded to by the men's team, dynamics that were not encountered at MNF.

> We turned up on match day and the changing rooms would be locked and stuff like that or the bar wouldn't be open, or wouldn't have any drinks. (Ali)

For Scarlett, the tendency of her University football team to emulate the drinking culture embedded with the men's game, left her feeling somewhat disillusioned. Yet, this was not a situation replicated at MNF.

> I felt like the University clubs sort of ….. took on a little bit of what I would see in men's football ….. I just thought *[sighs]*, I'm not really into that, it seemed to be that to be in the little clique you had to be one of the best players ..... and there was lots of, I'm going to say drinking culture, initiation ceremonies. (Scarlett)

For those women who had little or no previous experience of playing football, their involvement in MNF was framed within perceptions of (men's) football culture more broadly. Many described the hostile atmosphere in the crowds at professional football matches where swearing, drinking, and sexist, racist or homophobic language were prominent points of concern, in comparison to the safety of MNF where such language is not tolerated.

> I've gone to live games - that's challenging because the language that you hear is just, you know, racist, sexist, homophobic, disablist, you know everything is there and if there's just two women amongst a massive crowd of drunk men you're not going to turn round and say anything, erm so that's a shame because it's something I really like doing. (Annette)

For some women, one of the unforeseen benefits of their involvement in MNF was that it had acted as a catalyst for further physical activity engagement. Sam and Annette

articulated how a new found self-confidence had prompted them to seek out alternative opportunities.

> I just started playing netball recently, I never played that before. (Sam)

> It gave me the sort of impetus really to start doing other kinds of activities so I started going to the gym, running a couple of miles. (Annette)

Hayley similarly described MNF as 'springboard' that had resulted in her taking up new activities such as boxing.

> It's probably enabled me to understand that I still could be physically active and still enjoy engaging in sport whether that's football or other activities as well. (Scarlett)

The wider implications of an enhanced physicality were also recognised by some of the women.

> (Joining MNF) made me think you know what, you need to just push yourself and so for about a year or two years after that I used to set myself a challenge every month ….. it made me realise that I can achieve stuff. (Annette)

> I get a sense of freedom, I get a sense of concentration I guess where you can just zone out from everything else that is going on in life. (Erin)

Despite the positives of MNF, this setting was not without its challenges. These centred upon the numbers attending each week to make the session viable. However, like the women in Lenneis' and Pfisters' (2017) study, this worked in positive ways. The women recognised their attendance was crucial to the success of the session which ensured their commitment.

> Whether its cold, wet or whatever ….. people make the effort so you feel like you should make the effort as well and go there. (Erin)

> I wouldn't want to let people down on a Monday because we haven't got a massive amount of numbers so probably at the back of my mind is like, no stop being lazy, go so we can have like, you know, a good session all together. (Hazel)

For many women, MNF had contributed to them considering their future involvement in physical activity in positive and productive ways. These women all saw themselves

continuing their relationship with football specifically, many of them mentioning the new phenomenon of Walking Football[v]. In articulating these desires, these women reflect the ways in which MNF as an alternative sporting space offers opportunities to reimagine societal norms and disrupt expectations regarding the ways in which women should be physically active as they age.

Conclusions

These women's stories have important implications for policy, practice, and future research. The first relates to the importance of avoiding assumptions about women's physical activity behaviours or preferences. We cannot assume that positive early experiences of physical activity will equate to lifelong engagement. These women's stories demonstrate that despite high levels of physical activity during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, disengagement *can* and *does* still occur beyond the 'troublesome' post-school drop-out phase. Yet, this does not position such women as a 'lost cause', incapable or disinterested in re-engaging in physical activity later in life. From a policy and practice perspective there is a clear need for more physical activity opportunities to be directed towards this 'forgotten' demographic. Many of these women have demonstrated an ability to overcome significant barriers to re-engage in physical activity and their stories of how this is achieved and the conditions under which this became possible are important.

These opportunities need to be based upon what is relevant and meaningful for different kinds of women rather than narrow stereotypical understandings associated with age and gender, or the kind of activities undertaken prior to disengagement. These findings suggest that opportunities need to foster inclusive, positive and productive social dynamics between participants. In particular, accountability for the success of a session appears to contribute to ongoing commitment. The lack of emphasis on ability was also significant in enabling some

of these women to engage in football. This is particularly notable for a sport that is widely regarded as marginalising and trivialising their involvement. These women also enjoyed the opportunity to develop skills without feeling the pressure of having to perform. Whilst competition formed some aspect of the session this was described as healthy and friendly as opposed to a win at all costs mentality. Through the context of MNF these women were able to begin to positively experience physical activity again in their lives in ways that were different to their previous experiences. In so doing, their accounts illustrate that women are multiple, situational selves with changing motives, enablers and barriers (Carmichael et al., 2015).

This leads us to consider where future research may develop. In considering the relationship with physical activity as complex and fluid and the significance of biographies and the 'weight of history', we would argue for more longitudinal studies that develop understandings of women before they become 'a problem'. We are also mindful that what we present here are stories of women who have continued to re/engage over a significant period of time. However, over the years there have been women who came to MNF for an initial session never to return. Whilst it is difficult to engage these women after such a short period, they have important stories to tell. Finally, we recognise that we are a privileged group in terms of our ethnicity and socio-economic status. We argue that more research is needed that explores the experiences of disabled women, women from low socio-economic groups, and ethnic minority women re/engaging in physical activity to enable the development of policy and practice that takes into consideration different needs, goals, barriers and motivations.

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Notes

[i] Five-a-side is a small sided version of the 11 a side game with four outfield players and a goalkeeper. The game is played on a smaller pitch with smaller goals, and typically takes place on artificial grass in an enclosed space that prevents the ball from leaving the playing area and keeps the game flowing.

[ii] Taken from The Football Association's 'The Gameplan for Growth' - the 2017-2020 strategy for women's and girls' football.

[iii] We do acknowledge the efforts by some of the regional County Football Associations to attract women over the age of 30 to the game through 'veterans' leagues. However, these are not consistently offered around the country.

[iv] Pic Collage is a photo app that enables users to create collages from their digital images.

[v] Walking Football is a variation of regular Association Football. Aimed at the over 50's, the game has been adapted in a number of ways in consideration of the participants' age. For example, a different set of rules apply including an outlawing of all running, minimal physical contact between players, over-head height restrictions and indirect free kicks. Teams are either 5 or 6-a-side, with games typically played on artificial grass pitches. The game has been developed to either enable those who have played the sport previously to continue playing or to safely start playing again, or to introduce the sport to people who have never played before (see www.thewfa.co.uk).