ABSTRACT

MEANINGS OF CRAFT AND EXERCISE FOR WOMEN IN MID-LIFE

By Diana Ecker

This thesis examines the perceptions and experiences of five women in mid-life who are serious about a craft and dislike exercise. Qualitative interviews were conducted with each woman, seeking to understand why they preferred their craft to exercise. The themes that emerged indicated that, for these women, their craft could be something they loved, a means to connect with other people, an opportunity to express themselves, a way to relax, and an opportunity to challenge themselves. In regard to exercise, the primary theme that emerged was obligation. Other themes included unpleasantness, something that had been done in the past or was done by others, inconvenience, and for one woman, training and victory. These themes are addressed separately and together, as well as in light of related research, with the goal of identifying theoretical and practical implications for making exercise more appealing and enjoyable.
MEANINGS OF CRAFT AND EXERCISE FOR WOMEN IN MID-LIFE

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Diana Ecker
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
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Advisor _____________________________
Valeria J. Freysinger

Reader _____________________________
Susan Cross Lipnickey

Reader _____________________________
Thelma S. Horn
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The benefits of physical activity, and exercise as one form of physical activity,\(^1\) are well documented, from increasing longevity, particularly in people at risk for cardiovascular disease (Richardson, Kriska, Lantz & Hayward, 2004) to maintaining cognitive function in later life (Richards, Hardy & Wadsworth, 2003). It is no wonder then that researchers and health promotion professionals are eager to bring the benefits of exercise to as many people as possible, particularly as many of them have likely experienced these benefits – and others – for themselves. However, as health professionals issue prescriptions and proclamations, admonish and encourage, the targets of their efforts may end up feeling guilty and alienated (Drew & Paradise, 1996) or simply reminded of things they already know (Morrow, Krzewinski-Malone, Jackson, Bungum & FitzGerald, 2004). Currently, an estimated 59% of adult Americans report engaging in no vigorous physical activity at all (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2005). In general, this figure is higher for non-whites and increases with age (CDC, 2005). Further, while non-participation in exercise is found in both men and women, non-participation is more likely among women (CDC, 2005). For example, Trost, Owen, Bauman, Sallis and Brown (2002) reviewed 38 studies of participation in physical activity published since 1998, and found that “physical activity participation was consistently higher in men than in women” (p. 1998).

Women’s non-participation in exercise is a complicated issue, with numerous multidimensional connections to history, culture, environment, and other factors. Dworkin (2003) asserts, “Sport and fitness are complex sites of multifaceted gender, race, class and sexuality dynamics” (p. 133). That is, there may be compelling reasons for non-participation that go well beyond the common assertion that females “just aren’t as interested” or explanation that “I guess I’m just being lazy,” the latter mentioned by, among others, focus group participants in a study by Young, Gittelsohn, Charleston, Felix Aaron and Appel (2001). For example, women at both middle age and adolescence have been shown to limit their participation in public physical activity, such as swimming in pools, due to a reluctance to make their bodies visible to others because of their perception that they are being evaluated (James, 2000; McLaren & Kuh, 2004). Those women who do make it as far as the gym or the exercise class often find an environment that does not facilitate participation, or facilitates the development of a
new set of stressors. Frew and McGillivray (2005) describe these sites as “factories of fear” (p. 173). Dworkin (2003) notes that ten of the eleven women she interviewed volunteered their perceptions that the weight-lifting room at their gym was “an ‘intimidating’ space where they do not feel comfortable” (p. 140). Currie (2004), who studied the effects of an exercise class on 28 women who were also mothers, describes a double-edged sword: “At the same time as escaping home and mothering obligations, the mothers in this study willingly or unwillingly entered a new trap: the body trap. They increasingly became aware of bodily defects that had to be improved or removed” (p. 238).

How, then, can health professionals constructively facilitate non-exercising women’s participation in exercise? Researchers in both the health and leisure fields have described a need to explore uncharted topics both for understanding why people do and do not participate in physical activity and exercise, and for exploring methods that might address their reasons. In a discussion of their qualitative research with Native American and African American women about exercise, Henderson and Ainsworth (2001) argue that “(R)esearchers must not shy away from determining imaginative and sensitive ways to examine the meanings that individuals and groups attach to activities” (p. 32). In a review of psychological mediators of physical activity, Lewis, Marcus, Pate and Dunn (2002) conclude that, “(S)tudies examining new theories…are needed to move the field forward …It is likely that a plethora of theoretical constructs, including those extending beyond psychosocial domains (e.g., program-specific or environmental domains) that have not been previously examined will significantly contribute to our understanding of physical activity behavior” (p. 34). Researchers have also argued for exercise promotion research and interventions that are specific to particular groups or types of physical activity. Casperson, Powell, and Christenson (1985) write, “Physical activity is a complex behavior…we think it is likely that the different subcategories of physical activity have different determinants, may relate to very specific aspects of physical fitness and health, and may require different intervention and promotion strategies” (p. 130). This mission is in the spirit of Vertinsky (1998), who notes, “A new alternative, then, might be to quest for a real commitment on the part of health and exercise advocates to listen to the experiences of women’s lives, understand these experiences in words women choose to express them, and negotiate mutual actions to improve those situations that women would like to alter” (p. 100, citing Labonte, 1993).
This project endeavors to better understand women’s dislike of (and, in many cases, non-participation in) exercise by exploring their perceptions and experiences of exercise and comparing those experiences to a reference point in their lives that is familiar and enjoyable to them: their participation in a hobby. Like exercise, a hobby takes time, effort, knowledge, and expense. And yet for some women, the hobby is a source of great enjoyment, while exercise is dreaded, disliked, or avoided. Understanding non-participation in, or dislike of, exercise against the contrast of participation in a hobby is intended to shed light on future directions for the facilitation and promotion of exercise participation. Hence, for this project I identified participants who are non-exercising, middle-aged women who have a hobby, such as quilting or knitting, and who self-identified as having a dislike of exercise. If health professionals can understand the meanings and experiences of participation in a hobby and how those meanings and experiences may not be present in exercise, perhaps they can develop new standards for exercise – how they think about it, talk about it, and develop programs for it. That is, this study was undertaken in order to contribute constructive and specific ideas to people who actively work with non-exercising mid-life women as well as to people who study these women. The research problem posed in this study, then, is: How do women who dislike exercise describe their perceptions and experiences of their hobby and of exercise? Why do they participate with pleasure in the former and dislike the latter? And what are the potential implications of this? Given the complexity of this topic and the fact that it has been explored as much, if not more, by researchers in the fields of leisure studies and sport sociology as those in the field of exercise psychology, this project was informed by multiple disciplines and perspectives. These diverse concepts and findings are presented in the following chapter (Review of Literature).

Several common terms are used here; for the purposes of this project, their definitions are specified. Casperson, Powell, and Christenson (1985) provided definitions of physical activity and exercise two decades ago that have been widely relied on since. Caspersen et al. note that “the term ‘exercise’ has been used interchangeably with ‘physical activity,’ and, in fact, both have a number of common elements” (p. 128). However, they are distinct. The authors define physical activity as “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure” (p. 126), while exercise is “physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive, and purposive in the sense that improvement or maintenance of one of more components of physical fitness is an objective” (p. 128). Those components are cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular endurance, muscular strength, body composition, flexibility, agility, balance, coordination, speed, power, and reaction time (p. 128). They point out that their definition of exercise is deliberately structured to focus on “improvement or maintenance” of physical fitness.
goals rather than “achievement,” thereby creating a definition that includes people at varied levels, abilities, and limitations.

ii In regard to hobbies, there is a dearth of research on this topic (Shaw, 1999). For this reason, in the present study a hobby is defined as “serious leisure,” a term described and studied by Stebbins (1999). He offers this definition of serious leisure: “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 centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). In this case, career is intended not to indicate a paid profession, but an area of sustained interest.

iii The definitions of exercise and hobby, or craft, used in this study framed the criteria for the recruitment of study participants. This process is discussed further in Chapter 3 (Methodology).
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

In this project, I seek to better understand why some mid-life women who enjoy and participate in a hobby do not like (or necessarily participate in) exercise. By comparing the two, factors can be identified that are present or perceived to be present in the hobby that can be carried over to programming, environments, and promotion of exercise for these women. My research questions are: How do women who dislike exercise describe their perceptions and experiences of their hobby and of exercise? Why do they participate with pleasure in the former and dislike the latter? And what are the potential implications of this?

Understanding women’s participation and non-participation in exercise is a complex endeavor. Vertinsky (1998) contrasts women’s increasing presence in athletics – in aerobics classes, on snowboards, even on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (p. 83) – with evidence that women are still less active than men in the United States, in terms of both duration and intensity. She adds that factors such as race and age exacerbate this difference. Some researchers have been more impressed with the impact of these other factors on physical activity participation than the impact of gender (Plotnikoff, Mayhew, Birkett, Loucaides & Fodor, 2004). However, in a review of 38 studies, others found that “physical activity participation was consistently higher in men than in women” (Trost et al., 2002, p. 1998).

To address issues of women and exercise, it is essential to consider the many factors that compound, maintain, and establish the status quo. Far from taking place in isolation, women’s participation and non-participation is integrally related to context. Vertinsky (1998) argues that “involvement in healthy exercise is closely intertwined with the social, economic and health status of women, disempowering stereotypes of the female body and the issue of control over women’s bodies” (p. 85). Shaw (1999) describes an area of leisure studies called “gender relations,” which examines gender and leisure in ways that do not stop with disparities between men and women, but take a more nuanced, contextualized approach: “(R)esearch within this tradition goes beyond the simple analysis of gender differences to understanding the social context, and the changing social context, of women’s lives” (p. 272). She identifies three topics in this area that have emerged as central themes: “activity participation,” “the gendered nature of
leisure constraints,” and “the gendered outcomes of leisure” (p. 272).

In this review of literature, theories of exercise and health psychology are discussed. Then, the three areas identified by Shaw (1999), activity participation, the gendered nature of leisure constraints, and the gendered outcomes of leisure, provide the basis for the second, third and fourth sections of this review of literature. The results of research using focus groups composed of exercising and non-exercising women follow, and research on hobbies, particularly quilting, conclude the review of literature. The purpose of this review is to establish both precedent and rationale for the research questions and approach to those questions.

Theories of Exercise Psychology

Research on participation and non-participation in exercise that has come out of the field of Exercise Psychology has provided information on the cognitive processes that predict exercise behavior. This section examines some traditional and emerging paradigms. The first three theories, Self-Efficacy, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and the Transtheoretical Model, are related primarily to the individual. The fourth, Self-Determination Theory, relates to the individual, but in the context of that individual’s environment. The fifth construct, the Ecological Model, is related primarily to environment. Finally, a call for research that utilizes these theories with greater care, combines theories and approaches, or explores new ones altogether, is discussed.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, the confidence one has in achieving a desired effect or performance, is a construct that has been extensively examined in relation to exercise behavior. Lox, Martin, and Petruzello (2003) describe how Bandura (1997) developed the construct of self-efficacy, a “situation-specific form of self-confidence” (p. 37). They emphasize that self-efficacy is inherently situational, and that the same person may have a higher level of self-efficacy for one task than for another. The authors list the four origins of self-efficacy: “past performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological arousal” (p. 37).

McAuley, Jerome, Elavsky, Marquez, and Ramsey (2003) found a strong relationship between self-efficacy and the maintenance of physical activity. In their study, 174 sedentary adults (ages 60 to 75; average age of 66) participated in either six months of walking classes or “stretching and toning” classes, both of which met three times a week (p. 111). The participants
were evaluated six and eighteen months after the end of the classes. McAuley et al. (2003) note that “self-efficacy at program end was (positively) predictive of activity level at 18 months. This best-fitting model accounted for 40% of the variation in long-term physical activity maintenance” (p. 116).

In contrast to the results demonstrated in the previous study, Lox, Martin and Petruzello (2003) warn that “the influence of the efficacy construct is greatly reduced (or eliminated) as exercise behavior becomes well learned and habitual” (p. 41). Belief in one’s capacity to complete a task is less relevant to motivation after a certain point in the learning process. The idea of self-efficacy is also important in the theory that follows, although in that form it is referred to as “perceived behavioral control.”

The Theory of Planned Behavior

Before describing the Theory of Planned Behavior, it is necessary to first describe the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). Lox et al. (2003) explain how Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) developed the TRA, which dictates that a primary predictor of participation in an activity is “intention, (which) is determined by two cognitive processes: (1) attitude and (2) sense of the subjective norm” (p. 41). Lox et al. (2003) describe how Ajzen (1985) added the construct of perceived behavioral control, or “the degree of personal control the individual believes he or she has over the behavior in question” (p. 44). The construct of perceived behavioral control is actually similar to self-efficacy, described previously. With the addition of perceived behavioral control to the TRA, Azjen (1985) named the new construct the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

In a review of studies examining both the TRA and the TBA in the context of exercise behavior, Hausenblas, Carron, and Mack (1997) cite Maddux (1993) to assert that these two theories have “guided the majority of the research on health and exercise behavior” (p. 37). Hausenblas et al. (1997) also note that, in contrast to previous reviews on this topic, their review involved not merely counting the number of studies that did or did not show a significant relationship between TRA or TPB and exercise behavior, but “appl(ied) the statistical power of meta-analysis” (p. 39) to 31 studies, 40% of which were based on the TPB, while 60% of which were based on the TRA (p. 41). The authors concluded that “attitude has a large effect on
intention to exercise” (p. 44), and that the TPB, with its added component of perceived behavioral control, was more predictive of exercise behavior than TRA.

Hausenblaus and colleagues (1997) identified both limitations of the TPB and the TRA, as well as directions for future research. They note that future research should look at the impact of variables such as gender, because these variables have not been examined adequately in regard to the TRA and the TPB. They also recommend that the long-term “predictive ability” of TPB needs to be explored, something that was lacking in the research they analyzed. Perhaps most importantly, Hausenblaus and colleagues point out that the TRA “is based on the assumption that people behave in a sensible and rational manner by taking into account available information and considering the potential implications of their behavior” (p. 37). Lox et al. (2003) also caution that the TRA “may not be appropriate for behaviors that are continuing or repeatable, such as in the case of exercise” (p. 44).

The Transtheoretical Model

The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) integrates the constructs utilized in the TRA and the TPB, as well as other theories. Prochaska, Redding and Evers (2002) describe how the model, which is now applied to a wide range of health behaviors, was in fact first developed by studying how smokers tried to quit smoking. They explain that TTM “uses stages of change to integrate processes and principles of change from across major theories of intervention; hence, the name transtheoretical” (p. 99). At each stage, a person is at a different level of “readiness” for adapting a certain health behavior and thus would benefit from a different approach to facilitate movement to the next stage. The five most commonly cited stages are precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. A sixth stage, termination, is rarely referred to (Prochaska, Redding & Evers, 2002).

If at-risk populations can be identified and receive information or assistance appropriate to their current stage, they may be more likely to advance to the next stage of change than if they receive advice geared to someone at a different stage. Adams and White (2005) offer a critique of TTM, in which they cite the results of their own “non-systematic, critical review” (p. 239; Adams & White, 2003) of TTM-based exercise interventions designed to increase physical activity. They also rely on a review of TTM-based exercise interventions conducted by Riemsma
and colleagues (2002) as well. In these reviews, they found a high level of effectiveness in applying the TTM to short-term (under six months) adherence to physical activity recommendations. However, they found a much lower level of adherence for time periods in excess of six months.

Adams and White (2005) offer some explanations for TTM-based interventions’ inability to influence long-term behavior, arguing that “(e)xercise behaviour is a complex of different behaviors, not a single behavior such as cigarette smoking” and “(e)xercise behavior is influenced by numerous external factors not considered by the TTM” (p. 240). For instance, they describe how physical activity may be pursued in a variety of arenas, and the framework of a TTM intervention may be too restrictive to allow for that (see Caspersen et al., 1985). They also assert that when the TTM is the foundation for a physical activity intervention, other crucial factors are not addressed: “the model simplifies true behavior patterns beyond the realms of what may be helpful for both understanding and intervention development” (p. 241).

Brug, Conner, Harre, Kremers, McKellar & Whitelaw (2005) describe other limitations with relying on the TTM; each researcher offers an individual critique. McKellar, for example, argues that the “nebulous” nature of goals such as increased physical activity render the TTM “particularly inappropriate” (p. 252). Whitelaw argues that while the TTM is compelling and convenient, the studies described by Adams and White (2005) demonstrate “the relative paucity of affirmative evidence, the weakness of evaluative designs and the existence of conceptual inconsistencies in the structure of the (TTM)” (p. 253).

**Self-Determination Theory**

Ryan and Deci (2000) describe Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the way in which intrinsic motivation is constrained by an environment. Specifically, SDT states that human beings have an inherent drive to take part in certain activities. However, a given environment must provide opportunities for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) for that inherent drive to be fully manifested. Ryan and Deci’s (2000) description of SDT also addresses a spectrum of motivation that not only differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but also distinguishes among different types of extrinsic motivation. They describe four types of extrinsic motivation: “external regulation,” in which a person participates in an
activity to avoid a punishment or receive a reward, “introjected regulation,” which relates to “internal rewards and punishments,” “identified regulation,” in which the activity relates to a person’s values, and “integrated regulation,” in which the activity provides opportunities for “synthesis with self” (p. 72). Intrinsic regulation is separate from these four, and it relates to a person participating in an activity due to its “inherent satisfaction (p. 72).

Landry and Solmon (2002) investigated how SDT could be used to understand research on women and exercise, and later (2004) applied SDT specifically to African-American women and exercise. In their review of literature relating to women’s exercise behavior, the authors argue that SDT encompasses other theories of health behavior. They also suggest several different possible lines of research in this arena. Landry and Solmon (2004) gave two surveys to 105 African-American women who were “patients at a public hospital” (p. 462). One survey was the Stages of Exercise Scale, based on the Transtheoretical Model (described previously in this review of literature). The other was the Behavior Regulation Exercise Questionnaire, which measured four of the five types of motivation described in the previous paragraph (integrated regulation was excluded). The questions on both surveys related to participants’ behaviors and beliefs regarding their own physical activity or lack thereof. In comparing participants’ results on the two surveys, Landry and Solmon (2004) found that “behavior regulation becomes more self-determined as one moves across the stages of exercise change” (p. 464). They also note that “coercion by significant others....guilt or shame....(and) urging individuals to exercise out of a sense of guilt or obligation” all appeared to have no effect or even a negative effect on participation (p. 465).

One inherent limitation with SDT is that it presumes an inherent desire to participate in the activity in question, which can then be facilitated or limited by one’s environment. However, in regard to exercise, it is conceivable that not every person has this inherent desire. (The formation of preferences itself is discussed in a subsequent section of this review.) Landry and Solmon (2004) recommend qualitative interviews as a way of moving forward with their findings. Landry and Solmon (2002) also provide examples of how SDT could be incorporated into future research, such as looking into social support and how it is experienced by women in regard to physical activity. Landry and Solmon (2002, 2004) also argue for more research that relates to
women, particularly minority women. The section that follows examines ecological and social-ecological models, which offer an approach that differs fundamentally from those theories that have already been discussed.

**Ecological/Social-Ecological Models**

Sallis and Owen (2002) explain what is entailed in an ecological approach to physical activity: “(E)cological models consider the connections between people and their environments….In ecological models of behavior, environment simply means the space outside of the person” (p. 462). The hallmark of ecological models is that they extend beyond the individual. Lox et al. (2003), citing McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler and Glanz (1988), explain that “social ecological models take the approach that…individual-level factors are only one of multiple levels of influence on behavior” (p. 75).

The research in this area is different from the previous theories, in that it is not experimental. Rather, researchers evaluate and describe environments, and assess relevant consequences for the local population. For example, Frumkin (2002) describes urban sprawl and its effect on health and health behaviors. He notes that “for suburban dwellers, most trips, even to buy a newspaper or a quart of milk, require driving a car” (p. 201), whereas in an urban environment, errands might require walking. He addresses urban sprawl’s effect on physical activity, noting that “by contributing to physical inactivity and therefore to overweight and health problems, sprawl has negative health consequences” (p. 205). The links between environment and physical activity have been widely established. In a review of 19 studies examining the correlation between physical activity and environmental factors (or perceptions related to these factors), Humpel, Owen and Leslie (2002) determined that “accessibility (of recreation opportunities), opportunities (for recreational activity), and aesthetic attributes (of one’s neighborhood or recreation facilities) had significant associations with physical activity” (p. 188).

Humpel, Owen and Leslie (2002) note that the research they reviewed represents “a relatively limited set of studies” (p. 196), clarify that they do not wish to present a “‘premature synthesis’ of findings” (p. 197), and note that in some cases they may be measuring correlation but not causal relationships. However, they express optimism that future research “has
considerable promise for the purpose of identifying significant and potentially modifiable influences on physical activity behavior” (p. 198). Frumkin (2002) describes the need for further study of design, policy, and behavior in regard to increasing physical activity in the environments where people live (p. 205). Those who study intrapersonal factors leading to exercise behavior have become increasingly intrigued by an ecological approach. Rather than abandon their theoretical paradigms in favor of an entirely environmental approach, some have proposed bringing the two areas together. The next section discusses one such proposal.

**Calling for Interdisciplinary Approaches**

In reaction to the health problems caused by inactivity, and the inability of existing research to provide satisfying solutions, King, Stokols, Talen, Brassington, and Killingsworth (2002) call for combining intrapersonal theories with ecological theories, as well as for dialogue and interaction between experts in each area. They note that “(t)he vast majority of (physical activity) theories used have focused on the cognitive, affective, and social influences surrounding the individual and his/her choice to be active (i.e., personal-level perspectives)” (p. 15). They add that “the mediators that have been most frequently studied have been generally found to explain a relatively small percentage of the variance in physical activity levels” (p. 16). The authors argue that study design is partly a factor, pointing out that an “over-reliance on cross-sectional and other observational designs has limited our ability to make causal inferences…which are essential to the advancement of effective interventions in the field” (p. 16). King and colleagues conclude that the mediators studied, and the ways in which they have been studied, are not enough.

Lewis, Marcus, Pate and Dunn’s (2002) review of twelve studies of exercise interventions with adults and children also suggests that understanding the connections between such mediators and behavior is a challenging undertaking, although for somewhat different reasons. The studies Lewis and colleagues used had to clearly examine the mediating effect of a variable (not merely a correlational effect) or the effect of an intervention on the mediating factor. They also had to be written in English and, for adults, to examine only one risk factor. Lewis and colleagues were interested in studies that were designed to show “whether interventions change postulated mediators and whether mediators influence physical activity behavior” (p. 26). In the studies of adults, these mediators included behavioral processes of change, cognitive processes of change,
self-efficacy, decisional balance, social support, and enjoyment. After completing their analysis, the researchers concluded that, based on the limited number of studies that met their criteria and the somewhat varied results, “definitive conclusions about the importance of mediators in theoretically based, physical activity-intervention studies are not possible at this time” (p. 33).

King et al. (2002) advocate combining intrapersonal and ecological approaches, arguing that “both perspectives need to be taken into account in designing interventions and initiatives that will reverse current population-wide activity trends” (p. 23). “(W)ithout such concerted bridge-building efforts across disciplines,” the authors warn, “the greater challenge of stemming the physical inactivity epidemic will remain increasingly out of reach” (p. 24). Lewis et al. (2002) argue for greater methodological rigor in intrapersonal research, insisting on careful choice of exercise scales for different populations. They also argue that

(S)tudies examining new theories (e.g., social ecologic)…are needed to move the field forward to better understand how interventions influence physical activity behavior….It is likely that a plethora of theoretical constructs, including those extending beyond psychosocial domains (e.g., program-specific or environmental domains) that have not been previously examined will significantly contribute to our understanding of physical activity-behavior change (p. 34).

The authors’ frustration is palpable; the research that is being done to advance their part of the field does not seem to translate effectively into guidelines for future interventions.

This frustration expressed by leading researchers in the areas of exercise and health psychology makes the examination of exercise participation through the lens of leisure studies research all the more compelling. Being able to view the topic of exercise participation through the paradigms offered by leisure studies research opens up new avenues, topics, and questions that may lead to perspectives not present in existing exercise psychology research. The three sections that follow review leisure studies research, particularly in regard to exercise and women, through the three categories of gender relations research identified by Shaw (1999): activity participation, the gendered nature of leisure constraints, and the gendered outcomes of leisure.

Activity Participation

Measuring participation in a leisure activity can be a complex undertaking, particularly in regard to gender. For example, Shaw (1999) describes how research on men and women’s leisure
activity participation arrives at different conclusions based on the way participation is measured. When researchers investigate participants’ feelings about their participation in an activity, or “connotative definitions,” their findings in regard to women’s participation are different than the findings of researchers who just keep track of what the women appear to do. Some activities that may be traditionally categorized as leisure actually may feel more like work to the participant. Shaw (1999) cites Hunter and Whitson (1992) for an example: “family-related work includes the emotional work of creating leisure experiences for other family members” (p. 273). Thus, an activity like taking one’s children to the park might be understood differently by men and women. The next section addresses different theoretical perspectives on measuring and assessing participation in activities.

*Theoretical Perspectives on Participation*

Researchers in the field of Leisure Studies have emphasized the importance of understanding how participants view their experiences. For a given woman, is exercise an activity that she undertakes freely, through which she can express herself? Or is it an activity that she undertakes out of a sense of obligation, and one in which she feels she must hide her true self? According to Samdahl (1988), these questions are essential. The answers determine whether she would classify that woman’s exercise as “pure leisure,” an “obligatory task,” or somewhere in between. The classification does not come from the name of the activity (i.e., “exercise”) or from a popular perception of how that activity is typically categorized.

Samdahl’s (1988) work is based on symbolic interaction theory, in which “an individual’s reality is based upon personal perception and interpretation of actions and events” (p. 29). In one study, Samdahl provided 18 participants of different ages and backgrounds with pagers, and alerted them at random times throughout the day for about a week (i.e., experience sampling method). When the pager went off, a participant completed a survey about the activity in which he or she was engaged. The surveys addressed four categories: role constraint, self expression, leisure and affect. She found that two of these categories, role contraint and self expression, provided the most useful basis for classification. “Pure leisure” was characterized by low role constraint and high self-expression. Meanwhile, “enjoyable work” was characterized by high role constraint and high self-expression, “anomic leisure” by low role constraint and low self-
expression, and “obligatory tasks” by high role constraint and low self-expression (p. 36).

This application of symbolic interaction theory provides a useful way to compare participation in two different activities; see the Discussion for an explanation of how this approach is helpful in interpreting study results.

The context in which an activity takes place is a rich source of meaning, as well. Rojek (1985), like Samdahl (1988), argues that activities are not meaningful when they are viewed in isolation. However, he emphasizes that context is the key to understanding participation in an activity, arguing that “the concept of free time has no intrinsic meaning. Rather, its meaning always depends on the social context in which it occurs” (p. 13). The social context cannot be separated from the activity itself. Rojek (1985) traces the work of other researchers who have examined the gendered nature of leisure participation, pointing out that “leisure time” is understood and experienced differently by men and women. For instance, he argues,

Women’s leisure experience is dominated by the consciousness that they are on display as potential life mates or as the “better halves” of their husbands or boyfriends….Their consciousness of the need to maintain and reproduce a feminine persona in public is also continuously accentuated by a capitalist industry through its representatives in advertising, fashion, and women’s magazines (p. 18).

Rojek (1985) does not state that a woman needs to define her experience in these terms, but that the context defines the experience.

Since Rojek (1985) wrote the previous lines, media sources have ballooned. A window on the context of exercise and exercise discourse in the early 21st century may be found not only through advertising, fashion, and women’s magazines, but through infomercials for weight-loss products. In fact, the connections between weight loss and exercise, and between weight loss and attractiveness, are broadcast in a uniquely gendered way on television. In an analysis of six early-morning infomercials related to weight loss and appearance, Blaine and McElroy (2002) identified a marked trend in selling both weight-loss products and ideals to women. They explain, “That the cast of characters in weight loss infomercials is largely female, including the host and ‘satisfied customers,’ suggests to viewers that weight is a woman’s concern” (p. 354). The authors add that these infomercials “exaggerate both the ease associated with weight loss and the amount of weight that can be lost” (p. 355).
These infomercials represent just a small portion of the context in which women experience exercise and thinking about exercise. The next section addresses efforts to increase participation in exercise in a culture already saturated with messages about participation in exercise.

_Efforts to Encourage Participation._

Vertinsky (1998) states, “The deeper issues of stereotyping and powerlessness should be of central concern to those designing exercise promotion strategies” (Vertinsky, 1998, p. 93, citing Sharpe, 1995). As discussed earlier, Dworkin (2003) refers to sport and fitness as “complex sites of multifaceted gender, race, class and sexuality dynamics” (p. 133). Exercise promotion efforts and recommendations are similarly complex sites, and the effectiveness of such messages is controversial. Critical scholarship of these messages has described their effects as ranging from ineffective (Morrow, Krzewinski-Malone, Jackson, Bungum, and FitzGerald, 2004) to harmful (Vertinsky, 1998; more broadly, Drew & Paradice, 1996) to irrelevant (MacDougall, 2003; Vertinsky, 1998). For example, disseminating knowledge about the benefits of exercise, a popular focus of promotion efforts, has been shown to have no positive effect. Morrow et al. (2004) found that more than 90% of 2,000 participants in a telephone survey could describe types of physical activities that would improve their health. However, this knowledge did not correlate with participation.

The negative effects of recommendations to exercise resonate in modern times as well as historically. Drew and Paradice (1996) argue, “Popular self-help messages merely increase women’s feelings of guilt and inadequacy because they fail to find time to look after themselves” (p. 566). Such recommendations also have historically reinforced male power dynamics: Vertinsky (1998) states that “(e)xercise prescriptions represented a nineteenth-century attempt to impose order upon the female body for the larger good that was assumed to be male” (p. 83).

By their very nature, these prescriptive approaches also continue to reinforce a power dynamic that favors the entity delivering the message. While exercise recommendations could conceivably serve a constructive purpose, the complexity of the issue of exercise for women – as it includes gender identity and role issues, body and weight issues, historical context, and societal constraints, to name a few – makes the providing of exercise recommendations a minefield. The
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide the following recommendations on their consumer website:

Adults should engage in moderate-intensity physical activities for at least 30 minutes on 5 or more days of the week. OR Adults should engage in vigorous-intensity physical activity 3 or more days per week for 20 or more minutes per occasion

(http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations)

The medical benefits of these duration, intensity and frequency recommendations are beyond the scope of this review of literature. Rather, here the recommendations are examining the context in which they were created, and the context that they subsequently become a part of.

Vertinsky (1998) notes that “(P)rofessional physical activity directives many times tend to be disassociated from everyday lived reality – especially the embodied experiences of women and girls in our society” (Vertinsky, 1998, p. 97). The cheerful message that prefaces the CDC’s recommendations illustrates this disassociation:

There is good news for all Americans. Scientific evidence shows that physical activity done at a moderate-intensity level can produce health benefits…. Many Americans, for whom the term “exercise” brings up negative images and emotions, can celebrate the good news by setting a new personal goal - achieving and enjoying the benefits of a regularly active lifestyle that includes a variety of moderate- and/or vigorous-intensity activities.

(http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations)

The token nod to “negative images and emotions” does not adequately address fundamental issues relating to non-participation in exercise (the next section, The Gendered Nature of Leisure Constraints, will explore these issues in greater depth). The text does not appear to reach Vertinsky’s (1998) standard of “everyday lived reality.” Do CDC employees actually believe that Americans will “celebrate” the news that moderate activity leads to health benefits – with exercise, no less?

MacDougall (2003) sought to understand how “regular people” process experts’ recommendations about exercise. He used focus groups to examine how 121 members of pre-existing groups, such as church groups, made sense of “expert” theories about health and physical activity. While participants considered expert theories, they changed them: they “qualified and
added to what initially appeared to be close copies of expert theories” (p. 391). He also found that “rational presentation of the health related benefits of physical activity (in preventing illness or disease) was but a small part of ordinary theorizing” (p. 392). In regard to participants’ “lived reality,” MacDougall (2003) observed that, while expert theories tended to describe how much exercise was enough to achieve certain benefits, ordinary theories focused on how much existing capacity participants had – how much exercise they would be capable of. While MacDougall did not measure participants’ participation in exercise, this finding suggests that people ultimately use their own perceived physical limits to develop parameters for revised exercise recommendations. The comments noted by Wilcox, Oberrecht, Bopp, Kammermann and McElmurray (2005), who conducted focus groups with middle-aged and older women about exercise, reflect MacDougall’s (2003) finding as well. (This study is discussed in greater detail in a later section of this review of literature, “Focus Groups with Women.”)

While people can, and do, adapt expert recommendations to fit their own physical limits, the recommendations – and their effects – are not just about the physical aspects of exercise. Vertinsky (1998) cites a striking quote from Ralph S. Paffenbarger, Jr.’s article in the New England Journal of Medicine (1995), in which he recommends ways to integrate physical activity into a woman’s life: “Ideally, you should stand on your feet for at least an hour a day…chasing the kids, vacuuming or climbing stairs.” She adds, “In a few words he trivializes women’s issues and difficulties” (1998, p. 82). This type of recommendation widens the gulf between the expert and the recipient.

Both MacDougall (2003) and Vertinsky (1998) question the emphasis placed on exercise promotion messages in general. MacDougall (2003) argues that sometimes, “physical activity is but a small part of the broader story of life – there is more to life than considerations of health and physical activity” (p. 393). Vertinsky (1998) points out, “Feeling more capable, more powerful and a greater sense of belonging may be more important to a woman’s physical health than whether she exercises more” (p. 100). Rather than abandon the area of physical activity, or look at Vertinsky’s (1998) criteria as an either/or proposition, this project attempts to show that the elements she describes are integral to exercise programming and promotion. In the next section, the topic of constraints to leisure is examined, with special attention to how lack of time,
negative body image, getting older, and the exercise environment can function not only as constraints to exercise participation, but as constraints to feeling “more capable, more powerful, and (having) a greater sense of belonging.”

*The Gendered Nature of Leisure Constraints*

The idea of “constraints” has evolved over time in the field of leisure studies. This evolution provides a conceptual basis for how participation and non-participation in leisure activities have been studied in different ways. Jackson and Scott (1999) trace the process from its early stages in the 1960s, when researchers focused on identifying practical explanations for why some people did not take part in certain activities; these factors were known as “barriers.” There was an underlying assumption that lack of access to necessary recreation resources was the major cause of non-participation (p. 302). By the 1980s, constraints research developed theoretical constructs as researchers looked for reasons beyond limited access to resources that might explain why people did not participate in a particular activity. Jackson and Scott (1999) note that the research at this time was still “essentially quantitative and survey based…(and addressed those constraints that) inhibit participation or some other aspect of leisure engagement once a preference or desire for an activity has been formed” (p. 302).

Scholars in the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the current decade have taken the concept of constraints even further. This evolution is reflected in both terminology as well as what is studied and how it is studied. The authors note that “the conventional terminology is now ‘constraints to leisure’ (rather than ‘barriers to recreation participation’)” (p. 300). This change from “barriers” to “constraints” represents a paradigm shift. In fact, the theoretical basis for this thesis project can be linked back to this fundamental change in defining constraints to leisure.

Jackson and Scott (1999) continue: “(this was) a change which represents much more than a semantic difference; it is indicative of three fundamental shifts in focus and conceptualization” (p. 300). These three shifts are, first, a move toward acknowledging that issues of constraints can be relevant in situations besides those where a preference already exists; second, broadening the field from recreation per se to leisure; and third, acknowledging that participation and non-participation are two extremes on a continuum rather than a binary choice (p. 300). Samdahl’s (1988) work, discussed previously, is an example of how participation might
be defined on such a continuum.

Jackson (2000) articulates a related and significant change in leisure constraints theory which also relates to the change from “barriers” to “constraints.” He explains that “constraints may shape the realization of leisure goals and benefits, but they do not necessarily preclude it….For example, it may be more productive to think of time and costs as antecedent constraints than as intervening barriers” (p. 65). He cites Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993) to explain that constraints are “negotiable,” not “insurmountable” (p. 65). This idea is central to the discussion of specific constraints research that follows in subsequent sub-sections addressing time, body image, fear, and aging. Many individuals face one or all of these constraints and exercise nonetheless. It is likely, however, that these constraints have some effect on their experience.

Jackson (1997) offers a current definition of constraints: “factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (p. 461). Thus someone’s perception of a constraint, or the constraint itself, may have an effect. One prime example of this concept is fear of violence as a constraint to leisure participation. In a study of college women’s fear of violence, Whyte and Shaw (1994) found that most of their participants adjusted their participation in leisure activities or found their enjoyment decreased due to a fear of violence. The authors note, “(F)or this small sample, fear of violence did not result in the cessation of activities. Fear, however, was a factor in the women’s leisure constraints negotiation process resulting in altered and sometimes reduced participation in solitary activities” (p. 18). Several other constraints that have been studied in regard to women and exercise are addressed in the sections that follow.

*Lack of Time*

The topic of time, or lack thereof, recurs frequently in discussions of women and leisure or exercise. In the literature, it is cited both uncritically and critically. For instance, Harne and Bixby (2005) identify “time management” as the missing link revealed by their research on exercise and college-age women. After surveying 100 college-age women on the benefits and barriers they perceived in regard to exercise, they found no difference in regard to knowledge of
benefits between the 50 who strength-trained regularly and those who did not strength-train at all. However, those who did not strength-train reported more barriers, the most frequently reported of which was “time/effort.” The authors suggest that to address this disparity, “(I)nitiatives to encourage young women to participate in and maintain a strength training program should focus on overcoming time-effort barriers through the use of goal setting and time management” (pp. 163-164). Yet they provide no evidence that college-age women who participated in goal setting and time management training would actually make lifting weights a higher priority, or use newfound free time to lift weights. Perhaps more significantly, they frame the “lack of time” problem as an individual issue without considering the cultural meanings of the phrase or the contextual conditions that might contribute to lack of time.

Samdahl and Jekubovich (1997) also describe how participants in a study of leisure constraints indicated that lack of time was a constraint to their leisure. In a critical published response to their study, Henderson (1997) argues for an expanded view of the “lack of time” conundrum:

I don’t consider time a constraint because it isn’t descriptive. Time isn’t the problem as much as priorities underlying circumstances such as family and work. The real constraint isn’t time but something else that is taking the time. (p. 455)

Henderson (1997) extends the discussion of time beyond its traditional connotation. Shaw’s (1999) discussion of leisure constraints for women address the roots of some of the other priorities highlighted by Henderson (1997), particularly “the ethic of care.” This phenomenon refers to how many women put others, notably family members, before themselves. This happens in response both to their own sense that such prioritizing is correct, and in response to external demands that are consistent with such prioritizing (p. 275). Time is simultaneously the most finite resource available to us as well as one of the most amorphous. Jackson (1997) noted that the perception of a constraint can itself function as a constraint. Even if sufficient time for an activity such as exercise could be “made” or “found,” the perception that this time is not available is meaningful and functions as a constraint.

**Negative Body Image**

The issue of body image as a constraint to leisure, particularly exercise and other forms of
physical activity, is complex and pervasive. In the preceding section, Henderson (1997) extended the traditionally regarded constraint of time beyond the individual. In the same article, she argues that “the problem with constraints negotiation is that the onus is almost always on individuals…Antecedent constraints (such as) body image are examples of social constraints that are difficult for an individual by oneself to overcome” (p. 457). When it comes to body image, then, the individual and the context can blur.

Research by McLaren and Kuh (2004) illuminates the widespread nature of negative body image among middle-aged women, and the effects it has on participation and non-participation in a variety of activities, including exercise. They surveyed more than a thousand 54-year-old women about their body image and their behaviors and perceptions related to weight loss and health. To better understand how these factors related to participation and non-participation in different activities, McLaren and Kuh (2004) also asked “whether they avoided any of the following situations because of how they feel about their body weight or shape: ‘public changing facilities,’ ‘physical activity where others may see you,’ ‘wearing bathing suits or similar clothing,’ ‘social situations,’ and ‘physical intimacy’ (p. 39).

They expected to find that, in line with previous research, women at this age were happy with their bodies. However, they found that “Nearly 80% of (the) women wished to lose weight” (p. 41). Faced with this striking statistic and others, the authors stated, “It would appear…that dissatisfaction is sufficiently normative in our sample, across all body sizes, to conclude that it constitutes an unnecessary source of distress for many women” (p. 50). They also found that the women who were not dissatisfied with their weight tended to criticize their appearance in other ways: “Perhaps what is the norm is for women to feel dissatisfied about some aspect of their appearance” (p. 51). The researchers point out that “self-rated health was unrelated to ‘trying to lose/maintain weight’ in these data, suggesting that women who were trying to change or maintain were not doing so for health reasons” (p. 51).

The finding of greatest significance to this review of literature relates to the costs of body dissatisfaction in terms of non-participation in physical activity and avoidance of arenas or attire linked to participation:

A negative consequence of body dissatisfaction shown in this study was that women
with poor body esteem, regardless of their body size, tended to avoid various daily scenarios including public change rooms, wearing bathing suits, physical activity…this finding in itself provides sufficient rationale for interventions designed to alleviate normative dissatisfaction (p. 51).

In light of these findings, McLaren and Kuh (2004) argue for a new direction that echoes Henderson’s (1997) argument that negative body image should not be reduced to an individual problem:

“The high prevalence of body dissatisfaction coupled with its negative health correlates...support a view of body dissatisfaction as a public health problem, and we suggest that future research consider this conceptualization. This perspective shifts the focus away from individuals and implicates features of the social or physical environment…as targets for intervention” (p. 52).

Rather than appearing as an aberration or a uniquely self-critical cohort, the limiting behaviors undertaken by the mid-life women surveyed by McLaren and Kuh (2004) bear a strong resemblance to those of the teenage girls interviewed by James (2000). James’ (2000) research on teenage girls and their experiences at swimming pools suggests that body dissatisfaction and its accompanying pressures and challenges are a profound constraint to leisure.

James (2000) cites her own previous (1995) work, which found that teenage girls felt particularly self-conscious in “school basketball courts, public swimming pools, health clubs and beaches” (p. 264) and other arenas where exercise and other types of physical activity traditionally take place. In her 2000 study, James focused on the public swimming pools, seeking to understand how teenage girls’ “situational body image...(and) desire to swim” interacted and affected participation and non-participation (p. 266). She relied on participants from her 1995 survey, holding four focus groups for them as well as 16 interviews.

James (2000) notes that “all (of the) girls expressed an awareness of their presentation of self at both public and school swimming pools” (p. 269), and for most of those girls that awareness was negative. She adds that “for many, a feeling of being watched contributed to their discomfort” (p. 269). One participant, whose comment also generated the title of her article, said, “You can feel them looking at you. They’re probably not, but you always feel like they’re looking at you” (p. 270). In this way, the participants’ experience of being at the pool was
Some participants found active ways to negotiate this sense of being scrutinized, leading James (2000) to utilize a method of categorizing developed by Henderson and Bialeschki (1994). This approach distributes participants into five categories, based on their perceptions of constraints and the way in which they work around them. The five categories are:

1. Achievers, who in this case perceive no problems at the pool and go swimming;
2. Rationalizers, who “talk themselves into joining in”;
3. Compromizers (sic), who “have developed coping mechanisms”;
4. Spectators, who “are on the fringes of participation”;
5. Avoiders, who do not participate when they can help it (p. 271).

Some of the Compromizers used coping strategies, or ways of negotiating constraints, such as wearing T-shirts over bathing suits, despite how the shirts inhibited swimming; not playing in the pool for fear of attracting attention; or traveling to pools where they would not be recognized. The “Avoiders,” on the other hand, simply refused to take part, even if it meant unpleasant consequences.

Just as negative body image stands between some women and participation in physical activity or causes them to adopt new behaviors so they can participate in spite of how they feel, it can also facilitate a kind of obligatory participation. In a study on body image as a constraint in aerobics classes, Frederick and Shaw (1995) found that while young women’s body image did not prevent their participants from attending the classes, it did seem to decrease their enjoyment of the classes. They determined that body image concerns “were shown to be an important factor motivating participation. Because participation often continued despite discomfort and lack of enjoyment, body image can be conceptualized as a constraint into participation” (p. 71, emphasis added).

That negative body image is a constraint that extends beyond the individual (Henderson, 1997), that it affects so many mid-life women that it can be described as “normative” (McLaren and Kuh, 2004, p. 50), and that it significantly constrains the exercise-related leisure experiences of both mid-life women and teenage girls (James, 2000) have been discussed. The pervasiveness of negative body image and its multifaceted causes and effects may seem overwhelming.
However, a growing area of research offers a potentially pivotal footnote. Both quantitative and qualitative research have indicated that negative body image and related constructs are situational, not dispositional. This means that changing aspects of a situation, such as an exercise setting, can change how a woman feels about her body and, subsequently, how she participates in exercise.

Kruisselbrink, Dodge, Swanburg and MacLeod (2004) looked at how participants’ situational social physique anxiety in a health club might be affected by the gender of their fellow exercisers. Instead of seeking to assign a single measure of social physique anxiety to each participant, per conventional research on the subject, they wanted to understand how a given situation could affect a participant’s anticipated workout duration. The researchers altered an existing brief survey of social physique anxiety and added a multiple-choice question, “How do you think this setting would affect the length of your typical exercise workout?” (p. 618). Each participant filled out a questionnaire, imagining a scenario at their gym with all women, with all men, and with an equal distribution of women and men. Data from 61 women (average age of 37) and 35 men (average age of 33) were analyzed. The researchers found that, overall, “situational SPA (social physique anxiety) was higher for women than for men” (p. 620), and that

(W)omen feel most anxious about their physique in the presence of men, although physique anxiety is reduced when the exercise scenario also includes women…. The gender composition of exercise settings appears to have no effect on the physique anxiety of men (p. 620).

The women who indicated that they would shorten their workout in that scenario had higher-than-average social physique anxiety scores, although social physique anxiety was not the sole determinant of whether women would shorten their workout in the all-men scenario.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the study, such as that their conclusions are drawn from survey answers as opposed to observed behavior. However, this study is still informative. That there was variation in female, and not male, participants’ responses to different hypothetical settings suggests that women’s expectations and experiences can be changed by altering their exercise environment. This is a useful point for establishing a case against an “all-or-nothing” perception of exercise, and building a case in favor of finding ways to optimize conditions. If conditions were more appealing to potential users, this study suggests,
participation would increase. It is also a reminder that a constraint, or a perception of a constraint, is notably altered by context.

Focus group research conducted by Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, and Stiles-Shipley (2001) supports the view of the perception of one’s body as situational, as opposed to dispositional. The authors asked 18 female college students to participate in focus groups discussing their body image. Participants included both college athletes and independent exercisers. Nearly every participant expressed “constant scrutiny of her body and a focus on how it can be improved” (p. 45). More significantly, the researchers found that every participant’s body image was actually “transient, or state-like” (p. 46). Again, this conclusion lends credence to the theory that modifying exercise-related environments could affect how women feel about their bodies, as well as their choices and experiences within those environments. The next section addresses how both aging and discussions of aging can function as constraints.

Getting Older

Perceptions and attributions related to aging can act as a constraint to exercise. Fear of falling, for instance, is a significant factor for older women, including those who are not at high risk. In a study of 1,500 women between the ages of 70 and 85, Bruce, Devine, and Prince (2002) found that “(f)ear of falling is common in healthy, high-functioning older women and is independently associated with reduced levels of participation in recreational physical activity” (p. 84). They also found that fear of falling had effects similar to those found in the previously discussed research on negative body image: “fear of falling was independently associated with being sedentary…. (and) associated with nonsedentary women obtaining reduced amounts of recreational exercise” (p. 88). Sattin, Easeley, Wolf, Chen and Kutner (2005), who studied the effects of a Tai Chi class on fear of falling in older adults, describe how “an escalating cycle of fear and falling or falling and fear can lead to decreased physical activity, decreased functional ability, and decreased quality of life” (p. 1168). This means that fear of falling as a result of getting older functions as a constraint to physical activity in two ways: first, by facilitating avoidance of those activities to prevent falls, and second, by creating conditions that can limit eventual mobility and bring about the physical deterioration that can lead to falls.

O’Connor, Rousseau, and Maki (2004) looked at how perceptions of aging overall affect
people’s physical activity. They note that

(D)espite (the) well-established objective benefits of exercise, much less is known about peoples’ awareness and experience of the changes that take place in their bodies with age and physical exercise…a better understanding of these phenomena would facilitate the design of more effective interventions (p. 178).

The authors consider the issue of attribution, or how people explain physical changes as they get older. They hypothesize that “inactive people who experience negative changes in their bodies may be overly ready to attribute the changes to ‘aging’ rather than to their sedentary lifestyles” (p. 181).

In their study, O’Connor, Rousseau and Maki (2004) gathered data via questionnaires from 407 male and female participants ranging from ages 26 to 95, with an average age of about 54. The questionnaires addressed topics related to exercise beliefs, practices, and motivation and reflections on their own health and quality of life, including categories such as increases or decreases in “energy level” and “feeling out of breath” over the past year (p. 183). The results confirmed the researchers’ original belief that sedentary participants “are aware of their sedentary lifestyles, but that they also tend to believe that physical exercise is increasingly risky, unnecessary, and/or futile with age” (p. 198). Those who engaged in little or no exercise and had experienced negative changes in the past year “reported lower life satisfaction, lower self-esteem, poorer physical health, and…(a perception of being) less youthful” than those who exercised more. The researchers discuss the improvements that they believe sedentary people would feel if they exercised more:

(Sedentary participants) are apparently unaware that minimal increases in physical activity could result in dramatically different bodily experiences and noticeable improvements in perceived health and well-being. Furthermore, once individuals begin exercising more, the negative attributions to aging are likely to evaporate (p. 198).

These conclusions, while thought-provoking, are best interpreted cautiously. The authors acknowledge that “(C)ausal attributions for the associations between physical exercise and outcome variables were clearly not possible” (p. 199). Their prediction that increased exercise would lead to a change in attribution is not actually supported by the findings. The assumption
that a change in awareness of the benefits of exercise would lead to increased exercise is also not supported; in fact, Morrow et al. (2004), discussed earlier, demonstrated that this is not the case.

To discuss constraints to participating in or enjoying exercise is a potentially troubling endeavor, particularly when those constraints relate to age or to gender. Gibson (1996) addresses the backlash that can come from too much discussion of “problems” related to age and gender, specifically in regard to older women. She argues that, when defined by their age and gender, older women find themselves defined as defective and deficient – living “too long,” compared to a male norm, for example. She argues that a restrictive definition of women in these terms can lead to a potentially negative framing: “(T)here is a danger in viewing old women only in terms of those problems, and hence, there is a danger of taking the short step to constructing old women as a problem for society” (434). Her argument sounds a note of caution for those who want to acknowledge and address problems faced by certain groups of people in order to fix them; one runs the risk of defining a group of people solely by their fears and the challenges they face, as opposed to their accomplishments, their relationships, their interests and hobbies, their work, or their potential. Shifting the critical lens from the individual to one’s environment, as the researchers in the following section do, not only addresses some of Gibson’s (1996) concerns, but serves to illuminate significant issues in those environments.

The Exercise Environment

This section addresses how a traditional exercise environment may act as a constraint to exercise. Compelling studies by Dworkin (2003) and Frew and McGillivray (2005) are discussed in depth. The former involves a year-long examination via on-site participant-observation in a university gym in the United States, combined with interviews with female graduate and undergraduate students. The latter is a critical analysis of Scottish fitness clubs via interviews, focus groups, and observation. Though separated by an ocean, both Dworkin (2003) and Frew and McGillivray (2005) describe environments with strikingly similar characteristics that lead participants to feel unwelcome, unfulfilled, isolated, and self-hating.

Dworkin (2003) conducted extensive on-site participant-observation in a university workout facility as well as interviews with eleven female graduate and undergraduate students. She sought to understand why many women avoid strength-training, asking, “Is fitness truly
empowering for women on site, or is it highly constraining? Is it both?” (p. 132). Acknowledging the many different factors that are part of the gym environment, Dworkin (2003) argues, “Sport and fitness are complex sites of multifaceted gender, race, class and sexuality dynamics” (p. 133), adding later, “This project attempts to reveal that there is little that is arbitrary about women’s fitness decisions” (p. 150). In her account, she describes how certain constraints facilitate outcomes, which in turn facilitate the nature of participation.

Just getting in the front door of the weight room, Dworkin (2003) learned from nearly all of her interview participants, is a significant obstacle itself. Women were in the minority in the weight room she observed: “(T)he fact that this is male terrain quickly becomes clear. The proportion of men to women in the weight room at any given time is approximately eighty/twenty or ninety/ten” (p. 132). Simply entering the part of the gym where people lift weights is an unappealing prospect for the women Dworkin (2003) spoke with. Apparently, this was such a compelling part of their experience that they articulated it unbidden: “During interviews, ten of the eleven women offer an unprompted description of the weight room…it is an ‘intimidating’ space where they do not feel comfortable” (p. 140).

Based on her observations, Dworkin (2003) found striking differences in the atmosphere of the weight room (used mostly by men) and the cardiovascular room (used mostly by women), in terms of the noise, the level of interaction, and the resulting moods. The men seemed to enjoy a social atmosphere lifting weights, while the women seemed isolated in the cardiovascular room:

Whereas the weight room seems to buzz from talking, laughing, grunts, and the clanging or swishing of weights and weight machines, the most prominent noise in the CV room is often the whir of Stairmaster motors. Several fitness participants wear Walkmans, and few talk to one another (p. 138).

The contrast between the two rooms is striking. Why do the women choose to exercise in the cardiovascular room? One possible explanation is the “gendered knowledge gap” that Dworkin (2003) describes, that may drive feelings of intimidation in regard to the weight room. She explains, “That is, those who enter the weight room later in life and with a lack of knowledge are likely to be women….Women must often therefore frequently ‘catch up’ in the space before entering – find out the ‘how-tos’ of the equipment, formal and informal rules, etc.” (p. 140). Like
many other researchers (see Morrow et al., 2004), Dworkin (2003) notes that women seem to be able to articulate the benefits of weight training, although they do not participate: “recognition of the benefits of weight lifting does not necessarily translate into doing it, or doing it more” (p. 141).

Additionally, Dworkin (2003) is mindful of the way in which preferences may be formed or affected by a variety of constraints, and thus uses quotation marks to emphasize that her participants’ choices do not necessarily tell the whole story. She writes, “all eleven of the women I interviewed currently ‘choose’ to do heavy doses of cardiovascular work when they go to the KCF gym” (p. 136). The language that gym members use to talk about exercise also does not seem freely chosen. Dworkin’s (2003) description reflects her perceptions of the quickly predictable nature of the responses from fellow exercisers: “When I ask women at KCF why they work out, many of the interviewees immediately engage with a health discourse….I note the similarity in health talk across different women, and how it slides effortlessly out of their mouths like a cultural mantra” (p. 138).

The participants’ descriptions of their cardiovascular exercise also may be responsible for the less joyful and interactive atmosphere of the cardiovascular room: “(S)everal say they work out when hungry, sick, or injured, that they ‘bind’ themselves to Stairmasters or bikes, or ‘force’ themselves to go to aerobic classes. A few women equated their long cardiovascular workouts with torture” (p. 138). Dworkin (2003) also explores the assumptions that underlie why some of the women drive themselves so hard, including what she perceives to be distorted self-image and pressure to improve it. After discussing with interview participants their ideal body, Dworkin (2003) notes, “Ironically, half of them seem to already look like the body they claim not to have” (p. 140). This estimate recalls the findings of McLaren and Kuh (2004), in which more than half of the participants who met the researchers’ standard for an “’acceptable’ weight” were still attempting to lose weight (p. 42). Dworkin’s (2003) attention to her participants’ choice of words like “torture,” and the high levels of dissatisfaction she observed, bring to mind a related argument by Wolfe (2002) regarding the seriousness of women’s participation in such activities and the common response of minimizing it:

“Beauty’s” pain is trivial, since it is assumed that women freely choose it…when
A class of people is denied food...or repeatedly cut open and stitched together for no medical purpose, we call it torture....it is illogical to conclude that there is a different quality to blood or hunger or second-degree burning because it was “chosen” (Wolfe, 2002, p. 257).

Although Dworkin (2003) did not interview women who did not frequent the fitness center, it is conceivable that some of them might also equate exercise with “torture.” To avoid such an experience, then, may be viewed as a rational behavior.

In their examination of health clubs, Frew and McGillivray (2005) also identify sources of unpleasant feelings and experiences that one might logically wish to avoid. The authors focus on the constraining aspects of three health clubs in Scotland, having observed their interiors and materials, interviewed managers and personal trainers, and conducted focus groups with members. They were curious about how staff interacted with members, the beliefs and practices that were responsible for these interactions, and the implications of the interactions. A number of themes emerged from their work, including the presence of formal and informal critical scrutiny in the health club setting, and all-or-nothing attitudes on the part of staff, which came out in comments to and about members. The contempt that pervades a number of the comments from staff members contributes to the authors’ characterization of health clubs as “factories of fear” (p. 173).

The staff members’ critical, and apparently unchallenged, scrutiny and judgement of members’ bodies also contributed to this characterization. The practice was compounded by the staff members’ deliberate display of their own physiques. The authors quote one of the trainers on this topic: “We’re in the body business....Hey, there are mirrors everywhere and nobody can tell me they don’t look. It’s no big deal” (p. 166). Frew and McGillivray (2005) describe this watching and being watched as “nonchalant ocularcentrism” (p. 166). New members were subjected to such scrutiny in a ritualized manner. The intake process for new members was made up of assessment and measuring. Staff members explained, “Fitness testing is a standard procedure throughout the industry” and “It gives them a start point, helps them set personal goals” (p. 167). However, other aspects of the intake process emerged as well. One trainer said, “I mean I never actually say to them ‘you’re fat’ but I make sure they know they are” (p. 167).
Another said, “Listen, by the time I’m finished with them they’re whimpering to join-up. You get them to focus on how they look….Then you put it to them how they’ll look in six months if they don’t do something now” (p. 168). Sharpe (1995) identifies a similar phenomenon experienced by older women in healthcare settings, which she describes as “subtle humiliations” (p. 10).

Frew and McGillivray (2005) also discuss other aspects of client-trainer interaction. They describe the generally svelte appearances of the trainers, and how the trainers thought it was normal and appropriate for health club members to want to look like them. However, the authors note that “some of the empirical evidence accrued suggests that the physical capital of staff might, paradoxically, represent a barrier to consumers” (p. 168). Further, the trainers were also found to be pessimistic about the members’ capacity to achieve a body transformation: “It hurts and they don’t like it,” “Very few understand what’s involved,” and “They want the body but they just can’t handle what it takes to get it” (p. 170). Another trainer asked rhetorically, “I’ve seen them leave here after a hard session and go into the chip shop across the road. It’s daft but what can you do?” (p. 170). These comments make an implicit contract more explicit: that fitness is an all-or-nothing proposition within the health club. Either one embraces a rigorous lifestyle, or one’s choices are viewed as contradictory and “daft.”

Frew and McGillivray (2005) describe the vicious cycle that they believe keeps health clubs in business:

Rather than providing satisfaction for the aesthetic desires of consumers, many health and fitness clubs simply act to create and reinforce discontent. Formal processes of objectification and mediatized imagery, as well as the embodied labour of staff, often work to frustrate rather than enable the attainment of physical capital” (p. 172, emphasis added).

They argue that “with the priestly announcements of personal trainers, objective attendance, testing, and programmes, (the consumers) essentially subjected themselves to an endless embodied penance where every sin was laid bare” (p. 173). They suggest that striving for physical capital means that “embodied states spiral into infinite subjective projects” (p. 173), and call those who engage in this quest “the modern day Sisyphus” (p. 174). Avoiding an environment in which one will be scrutinized, criticized and measured, where one’s
dissatisfaction will be heightened in order to retain one’s business, again, appears to be a rational response.

**Gendered Outcomes Regarding Exercise**

As addressed earlier, Shaw (1999) describes three main areas in gender relations research. The first two, “activity participation” and “the gendered nature of leisure constraints,” have been discussed. This section focuses on the third topic, “the gendered outcomes of leisure” (Shaw, 1999, p. 272). Here, the topic of gendered outcomes looks at what happens as a result of women’s participation, or non-participation, in exercise. Shaw (1999) explains, “Leisure activities, behaviors, and experiences, then, can function to reproduce and reinforce, or alternately to challenge or resist, patriarchal ideologies and dominant gender relations” (p. 276). This idea of outcomes is not limited to post-participation, but includes “interactions with others during leisure” (p. 276). The outcomes may be a byproduct of negotiating constraints, and may, in turn, influence future constraints, opportunities, and perceptions of individuals, organizations, and society. She emphasizes a need for further research exploring the effects of leisure participation on gender. This section addresses outcomes through a number of different lenses, many of which are part of an outcome-constraint negotiation cycle.

**The Forming and Expressing of Preferences**

Jackson (1997) defined a constraint in part as a factor which “limit(s) the formation of leisure preferences” (p. 461). In other words, simply asking people what leisure activities they would like to take part in overlooks the complex process of how those preferences were formed. Gobster (1998) examined this notion when he studied the attitudes of African-American men and women in Chicago toward golf and a local golf course. Over the course of 35 different focus groups, Gobster (1998) found that participants were generally not interested in participating in golf. He asks the question, “(S)hould substantial resources be devoted to developing and/or maintaining golf opportunities in locations where apparent preference is low?” (p. 61). In other words, should preferences be accepted at face value? The context of these questions is important. Gobster (1998) needed to make recommendations about allocating resources to recreation facilities that would best serve the community. A more theoretical undertaking, such as this thesis, provides an opportunity to step back and examine how preferences were formed and how
they might change. The tension, however, between believing what people say they do not want to do and examining why they might not want to remains. An example of a related kind of dissonance is addressed in the section that follows: how participation in exercise can result in an unpleasant outcome (Currie, 2004). Following that, the stated preferences and experiences of exercising and non-exercising women gathered during focus group research are addressed.

An Unwanted Outcome: Creating New Problems

Currie (2004) explored the experiences of 28 mothers taking part in an exercise class twice a week for 12 weeks. In addition to leading the classes, she conducted interviews with the participants at their homes. Over the course of the program, she investigated how the class both decreased and increased stress for participants at different points.

On one hand, Currie (2004) found that taking part in the exercise classes provided participants with a welcome outcome: “a new space that can be reserved just for the leisure of the mother herself” (p. 226). As Ann, one of the participants, explained, “Well, once the music starts, and I get into the exercise, I just find that I am in a totally different, you know, space, rather than at work” (p. 231). Another participant talked about the class as a break from a particularly stressful set of circumstances:

“(T)o be honest I have a brother who I don’t see or hear from due to a feud. Another brother with a life-threatening disease. My husband’s brother has cancer….the class does help to a degree, I can come here and forget who I really am and escape to another being, another person” (Julie, p. 231).

This “escape,” and the chance to “forget who I really am” could potentially explain the cardiovascular room depicted by Dworkin (2004), filled with women who each seem to be in a private universe, each on a separate cardio machine and not interacting with each other. The participants attributed a decrease in their stress to “gaining a space of their own, time-out from assigned tasks and roles, and feeling as though one was doing something to improve one’s body” (p. 228). One mother, Samantha, said about the classes, “Yes, I think they gave me an outlet because I think I felt I was really heading for a breakdown towards the end of last year; it was becoming so much….I just felt that (the classes) were something I could channel all my energy into” (p. 233).
However, these benefits were not the only effect of taking part in the classes. Currie (2004) notes that, while the traditionally reported drop in stress levels after exercise was found here, “a few mothers stated that this effect was short-lived. They reported feeling tension and stress returning a few hours later once they returned to the usual routine of housework and childcare” (p. 229). Currie (2004) adds that three mothers found childcare and other logistical arrangements relating to the class to be a source of additional stress.

For many of the women, their stated purpose in coming to the class was not necessarily an act of resistance against the parameters of motherhood, but an effort to “exercise the fat away” (Geraldine, p. 234) and alter their appearances. Currie (2004) notes that the participants spoke very specifically about parts of their bodies that were either being positively affected by the class or neglected: “(this class) may need a few more thigh exercises” (Geraldine, p. 235), and “I need a lot more work on my stomach, I wish we had more stomach toning specifically” (Maxine, p. 237). Currie (2004) describes a pivotal change she observed as the classes went on:

Concerns about body defects and questions on how to ‘rid’ oneself of them were only reported to the researcher approximately half way into the program. To the researcher, this was the moment when she sensed a power shift, or loss of empowerment….A mother questioning the instructor about how to ‘get rid of’ a flabby stomach had a tense, less happy expression on her face… (p. 235)

Currie (2004) summarizes: “At the same time as escaping home and mothering obligations, the mothers in this study willingly or unwillingly entered a new trap: the body trap. They increasingly became aware of bodily defects that had to be improved or removed” (p. 238). Thus one outcome of taking part in exercise classes for some of the participants was a new negative awareness. Just as it would be logical to avoid an exercise that some participants describe as torture in Dworkin’s (2003) account, so could it make sense to avoid a process that could lead one into a heightened awareness of one’s perceived bodily defects. Avoiding such classes could be a rational response, as could seeking out such classes to enjoy their benefits. Currie (2004) captures this seemingly contradictory idea: “(T)he study’s findings revealed a paradox between the freedom or leisure aspects and the self-surveillance or constraining aspects associated with the exercise classes” (p. 239).
Understanding why people perceive themselves to exercise or not exercise is a task that has been addressed through a variety of methodological approaches. In the first part of this section, the recent work of Kendzierski and colleagues (2002, 2000) in regard to self-schema and attributions for exercise lapses is examined. In the second part, two studies are discussed, each of which looked at multiple focus groups with women who did and did not exercise regularly.

**Self-Schema and Exercise Lapses**

Kendzierski and Sheffield (2000) surveyed 156 undergraduate participants (102 women, 54 men) in regard to their experiences with lapses in intended exercise as well as lapses in phone calls they intended to make. Participants were classified as exercise schematics or aschematic based on their answers to a questionnaire developed by Kendzierski (1998). An exercise schematic views and defines him- or herself as an exerciser; an aschematic does not hold that view of him- or herself. Participants in this study recalled instances in which they had failed to follow through on a specific intention to exercise or to make a phone call. They then wrote down the reasons for these lapses, and used Russell’s (1982) Causal Dimension Scale to classify these reasons in regard to “stability,” i.e. how likely they were to remain the same over time. When data for the telephone calls were analyzed, no significant differences were found between exercise schematics and aschematics. However, the exercise schematics rated their reasons for an exercise lapse as less stable (i.e., more temporary or likely to change) than did aschematics. In a related follow-up study, Kendzierski, Sheffield and Morganstein (2002) analyzed survey results from 453 undergraduates and recent graduates (270 women, 183 men) in which participants were asked to read about a scenario about “Linda,” who intended to exercise but did not. They were then asked to provide reasons for her lapse and rate those reasons for stability. Participants were asked to complete the same tasks for a scenario in which they imagined themselves as the central character who failed to exercise. Once again, exercise schematics rated their own reasons as less stable than exercise aschematics did. Exercise schematics rated the reasons for Linda’s scenario as more stable than the reasons for their own; aschematics rated the reasons for Linda’s scenario and their own scenario as similarly stable.

Both studies suggest that people who view themselves as exercisers are less likely than
people who do not view themselves as exercisers to attribute a lapse to a permanent or unchangeable cause. The work of Kendzierski and colleagues (2002, 2000) suggests that the thought processes of people who identify as exercisers differ from those of people who do not identify as such in regard to interpreting (though not identifying) the reasons for a lapse in their own routine. This research illuminates a link between self-definition and attribution for sporadic non-participation in exercise.

Focus Groups With Women

What do middle-aged and older women actually say about their own participation and non-participation in exercise? Wilcox, Oberrecht, Bopp, Kammermann and McElmurray (2005) conducted six focus groups with African-American and white women in a rural part of South Carolina. To qualify for a focus group, the participants had to report a low level of physical activity. The average age of the participants was about 68. The focus groups were divided by participants’ race and led by moderators of the same race as each group, who discussed a list of topics with the group. Themes that arose during the groups included customization of exercise guidelines, an awareness of one’s age in regard to one’s physical capacities, and the issue of how exercise related to one’s gender, race, or family history.

In response to prescribed guidelines, participants felt that recommendations should be customized to the individual, or that generic recommendations would subsequently be customized by the individual. One participant explained, “I think you have to do what you can. And then when you can’t, then you don’t” (p. 42). As noted in Dworkin (2003) and elsewhere, these participants, all of whom reported a low level of physical activity, easily described the health benefits of exercise. At the same time, participants in every group mentioned their age and associated perceived limitations in regard to exercise. Representative comments included “(S)ometimes…you’re trying to keep up with everyone else, but your body’s not quite able to do that, you’re a bit, you know, intimidated. And you want to do the same as everyone else, possibly. And, ah, that could be a risk” (p. 44) and “I mean, I don’t know how much is good, but I just figure at 65 you can overdo it, too, though. I don’t want to make myself look stupid” (p. 44). These comments also include allusions to others – “everyone else,” who set the standard in an exercise setting, and those who might judge the speaker as “stupid.” This concern reflects a
construct that Samdahl (1988) describes, citing Cooley’s (1922) idea of the “looking-glass self,” or the perception that a person holds of how others view him or her. In regard to aging-attributed health concerns, two of the groups of African-American participants brought up the risk of having a heart attack as a result of exercise, and two of the groups of white participants brought up “the risk of breaking bones, falling, muscle strains and ‘hurting yourself’” (p. 45).

Participants identified a range of other issues and explanations. Drawing on a limited pool of energy was also an issue. Further, some participants called exercise “boring” or not enjoyable, and described themselves “as being ‘lazy’ or lacking in ‘commitment’” (p. 45). Lack of time was cited as a barrier by participants, as was a lack of role models. An African-American participant explained, “I mean, I can’t picture my mother or grandmother exercising. I mean even thinking about exercise” (p. 46). Another African-American participant said, “There’s a cultural thing there too. It would probably have to start out as a black woman’s thing or church thing because…if it’s a white thing. We ain’t gonna do that” (p. 46). Finally, lack of transportation and environmental hazards involved in travel were cited as additional barriers to getting to exercise sites: one participant (race not provided by the researchers) offered, “The sidewalk is on one part (of the road). On the other part it isn’t….you have to be careful ‘cause if you hit a rock, you’ll fall down. And stray dogs, of course, you got rottweilers and those pitbulls, and so, you’ve got to…go where it is half-way kind of…safe” (p. 47).

The participants seemed optimistic about the potential for social networks to motivate them. One white woman explained, “I have a next door neighbor that three people come to her house at six o’clock in the morning and they walk for an hour. You have three people show up at your door, it’s hard to say, ‘no, I’m not going’” (p. 48). Some of the groups talked about the benefit of the focus group itself, and “indicated that additional such groups would be useful” (p. 48). Several participants also described a need for some low-key guidance: a white woman summarized, “We just need somebody to teach us exercises and we need a place where someone can teach us” (p. 49). Wilcox and colleagues (2005) conclude that the qualitative data they gathered would be useful in developing interventions; they offer examples such as “(p)roviding…age-appropriate instruction (and) emphasizing activities that are perceived as safe and age-appropriate” (p. 51).
Young, Gittelsohn, Charleston, FelixAaron and Appel (2001) analyzed transcripts from four focus groups that were held to better understand the motivation of African-American women in regard to exercise and weight loss. One focus group was composed of regular exercisers, one of sedentary women, one of women who had lost at least ten pounds and kept it off, and one of women who had lost weight and gained it back. In addition to increasing theoretical knowledge, their observations and conclusions were made available to others planning interventions with the same population. The focus groups were guided by a moderator who used a list of predetermined questions as a guideline and also showed images of different African-American women and different foods to stimulate discussion about exercise and diet.

One topic that was addressed was why the exercisers had started exercising, and what might compel the non-exercisers to begin exercising. The regular exercisers cited recommendations from doctors, family members, and friends, as well as “health,” “gaining weight,” “and clothes didn’t fit” (p. 233) as catalysts. This quote from a transcript includes several elements:

I talked to my doctor and he said “Have you ever thought about walking?” I said “I’m not walking nowhere” to myself. So he said “Well, go ahead and try to walk.” And once I started the walking (and other exercises), that stress level started to disappear. My blood pressure was running 160 over 70 and now [it’s down] to 110 over 60. (pp. 233-234)

The researchers explain, “In general, more than one factor motivated these women to start exercising, such as repeated advice from doctors and peers, health problems….In many cases, there appeared to be a circumstance that occurred that finally pushed them to start to exercise (e.g. clothes didn’t fit, life too stressful, a hospitalization)” (Young et al., 2001, p. 233). This quote and others illustrate that despite an initial strong rejection of walking, if walking is begun, it may be experienced as beneficial and thus continued. However, the researchers do not explore what moved the participant quoted above from “I’m not walking nowhere” to “I started the walking.” The quote does suggest that one’s own resistance can be successfully negotiated – perhaps without being eliminated initially – in beginning exercise.

When the sedentary women were asked what might get them to start exercising, they focused on social support, describing a gym that might feel “nice, like a little family” (p. 233) and fellow exercisers who could “encourage one another, don’t be downhearted or put each other
down, say, ‘That’s okay, we’re going to make it, we’re going to continue on’” (p. 234). Some of
these sedentary women who had been active in the past cited health conditions, such as arthritis,
as reasons for stopping exercise. The authors note, however, that these “were conditions in
which regular physical activity is not contraindicated” (p. 242). These issues suggest that
perceptions of a type of safety net for negativity or despair, and actively addressing the
physiological and psychological difficulties posed by the onset of conditions such as arthritis,
were not perceived by group members as part of available exercise environments or programming.

One striking and informative difference between the exercising and sedentary groups was
the way in which they responded to images of other African-American women of different sizes
when asked to guess whether or not the women in the pictures exercised. In both groups, the
women perceived “a high level of energy and self-esteem” in the women to whom they attributed
regular exercise habits. However, women who were regular exercisers did not use the size of the
women in the pictures in deciding if they exercised, whereas sedentary women did. Speculation
beyond the scope of the authors’ analysis would suggest that this association between size and
the habit of exercise may act as a constraint for the sedentary women, who may view their own
size as incompatible with the practice of exercise and its attendant characteristics. Data on the
weight of the participants in the exercising and sedentary groups were not collected by the
researchers.

The authors note the contrast between the “strategic” comments the weight-loss group
participants made about food versus the “all-or-nothing” comments made by those who had
regained weight. Although these comments related to diet, they are significant to a discussion of
exercise because they may shed some light on participants’ mindsets. According to Young and
colleagues (2001), whereas a member of the weight-loss group responded to a picture of a
breakfast with a proactive and personalizing approach, saying, “I would take off the sausage, and
eat the scrambled eggs and the fruit, and drink the coffee, and I would be good to go,” the weight-
regained group’s members took a more passive and resigned stance, saying “When we go out we
just pig out” and “That’s the thing, I can’t break (a brownie) in half, I have to eat the whole piece
if I’m eating it” (p. 238). Young and colleagues (2001) note that these comments contain a sense
of inevitability and powerlessness, both of which may act as a barrier to any type of personally
initiated change. Whether the tone of these comments was a reflection of the feelings of accomplishment and failure, respectively, or indicative of mindsets that had guided their processes, however, was not explored or discussed by Young et al. (2001). The power of such beliefs (whether they reflect accurate or inaccurate perceptions) should be investigated. At the same time, the environmental and societal factors that help form and maintain empowering or disempowering beliefs also warrant investigation and consideration.

Thus far, research regarding many different aspects of women’s participation and non-participation in exercise has been discussed. The following section addresses the rationale and related literature for understanding this participation and non-participation in a comparative context.

Hobbies: A Reference Point for Participation

The premise of this study is that viewing non-participation in, or dislike of, exercise in a comparative context can illuminate it in ways that viewing it by itself cannot. In this review, studies comparing exercising and non-exercising women (Young et al., 2001) and African-American non-exercising women with white non-exercising women (Wilcox et al., 2005) have been discussed. The purpose of this project, however, is to take that type of comparison a step further, by comparing participants’ accounts of non-participation in exercise with their accounts of participation in a hobby. Both exercise and hobbies, broadly defined, require time, the learning of new skills, effort, and expense, and both affect one’s identity. This study asks women who devote time, effort, expense, and so on to a hobby and not to exercise to discuss their choices. It also looks at how this knowledge be used to make exercise programming, environments, and promotion more appealing to these women.

There is a surprising lack of research on the topic of women and their hobbies. Shaw (1999) explains that attitudes toward gender are a component of gender-relations research – and lack thereof – on activity participation, adding that “(L)ittle research has been directed toward understanding the gendered nature of passive leisure, such as…participating in hobbies and crafts” (p. 273). Thus, this section addresses, first, the work of Stebbins (1997, 1999, 2005) who is well-known for introducing the terms serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure into the scholarly dialogue. It then addresses two studies that have been conducted on women
and hobbies, specifically quilting.

Understanding “Serious Leisure”

In 1982, Stebbins introduced the term “serious leisure.” Stebbins (1999) offers a definition that he published ten years after introducing the term: “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 centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (citing Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). He defines six categories of hobbyists: “collectors, makers and tinkerers, activity participants…players of sports and games…and enthusiasts in one of the liberal arts” (p. 70). He also outlines six defining aspects of serious leisure:

- the need to persevere
- finding a career in the endeavor
- significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill
- (experiencing) a number of durable benefits or rewards
- identifying strongly with their chosen pursuits
- (and its) unique ethos

The particular “durable benefits” that Stebbins identifies include “self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of activity” (p. 71). He adds that “(P)ure fun…plays a minor role in serious leisure” (p. 71). In a study of 41 people who engaged in organized leisure, Stebbins (2005) interviewed participants in groups including a historical society and volunteers for the local zoo. He states that participants identified few, if any, constraints to participation in their group activity. They also identified “self-enrichment, self-actualization, and self-expression as the top three rewards” (p. 197).

Looking over Stebbins’ (1999) list of durable benefits, such as “social interaction and belongingness,” recalls instances in studies that have been discussed in this review where quite the opposite was in evidence. For example, this particular benefit stands in strong contrast with ten of the eleven research participants described by Dworkin (2003) who told her that they felt unwelcome in the weight room of their gym, or the vivid picture she paints of the social isolation in the cardiovascular room. “Regeneration or renewal of self” and “enhancement of self-image” recall the participants in Currie’s (2004) exercise classes who increasingly grew to focus on the
parts of their bodies they hated. And Frew and McGillivray’s (2005) analysis of fitness centers – which they described as thriving on maintaining a cycle of dissatisfaction characterized by Sisyphus (p. 174) – seemed to allow scant opportunity for self-actualization, self-expression, or feelings of accomplishment.

Stebbins’ (1999) list of benefits of serious leisure should not be the only criteria with which participation in exercise can be considered. However, it is a framework which does begin to help articulate why participation in certain hobbies may be more appealing to some women than participation in exercise.

Since coining the term “serious leisure,” Stebbins has written on the topics of “casual leisure” (1997) and, most recently, “project-based leisure” (2005). He notes that he cautiously defines casual leisure – leaving room for other scholars to amend the definition – as “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (1997, p. 18). He also suggests six categories of casual leisure: “play, relaxation, passive entertainment, active entertainment, sociable conversation, and sensory stimulation” (p. 18). According to Stebbins (1997), “when participation in active entertainment requires a significant level of skill, knowledge, or experience, it ceases to be casual leisure. Depending on the activity in question, it is better described as a hobby or an amateur activity” (pp. 19-20).

Finally, Stebbins (2005) describes “project-based leisure,” a third category to accompany the already existing “casual leisure” and “serious leisure.” He explains, “Project-based leisure is a short-term, moderately complicated, either one-shot or occasional, though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free time…(it) is neither serious leisure nor intended to develop into such” (p. 2).

One issue that bears mention is that, throughout his work, Stebbins does not satisfactorily address issues of race, class, and gender in his descriptions of leisure. For example, he discusses a woman who bakes cookies in mass quantities for her family without addressing the gendered nature of her participation, or the unpaid nature of a significant amount of women’s labor/leisure. He also does not address why people do not participate in certain activities, or the formation of preferences or inclination. However, as discussed throughout this section, the
frameworks Stebbins provides, while not inherently critical or context-based, can and will be applied to a critical understanding of the context of exercise participation and non-participation. The next section turns from a discussion of types of leisure activities to one in particular: quilting.

The Case of Quilting

The topic of women’s engagement in quilting has been addressed in depth by Piercy and Cheek (2004) and Stalp (2006). Piercy and Cheek (2004) conducted semi-structured interviews about quilting with 10 Amish, 10 Appalachian, and 10 Mormon women who were serious quilters. Specifically, the researchers sought to understand how quilting connected the participants to other people. In some ways, quilting was so central to these women’s lives that it might be insufficient to call it a hobby. In fact, the line between work and hobbies has historically been blurred for women. For example, Henderson and Rannells’ (1988) qualitative study of 27 farm women found that, for participants, “work and leisure were not separate but were infused in the daily routines” (p. 49).

The authors address the link between induction into the quilting community and the participants’ identity, citing Cerney, Eicher, and Delong (1993) to describe what happens as a woman becomes part of a quilting guild: “(T)he members of quilt guilds undergo a socialization process that helps them to understand quilt traditions, identify as quilters, and affirm their female identities” (p. 18). Connecting a hobby to traditions, personal identification, and gender identity, an integral part of quilting for guild members, may be important in considering how and why individuals come to adopt and maintain participation in various activities, including exercise.

Piercy and Cheek (2004) provide background to illuminate other dimensions of quilting as well. They note that “(M)any contemporary quilters emphasize the craft or artistic nature of their work, often displaying (the quilts) for public appreciation or sale” (p. 18). The authors also cite research that addresses the importance among older-age women for social experiences with friends of experiences together that involve conversation (Roberto, 1996) and among older- and middle-age women for “considerable amounts of joking and laughing” (Jerrome, 1984; p. 21).

The social aspect of quilting also was mentioned in respect to peers and building friendships. One respondent, who taught quilting classes, explained, “People take classes for
different reasons. Sometimes you take them to get away from the house and kids, to meet a friend….They don’t take the class to make a quilt” (p. 30). This motivation, which stems more from social factor than task engagement per se, is similar to what Currie (2004) found as a prompting factor that motivated the mothers who signed up for her exercise classes. Another social arena that participants enjoyed involved quilting bees. One participant said a quilting bee was “a place for women to come together, relax, and be themselves, and talk about their families, and share their joys and their sad moments, too” (p. 30). Another said, “We just feel like it is a camaraderie that you just can’t get anywhere else….it will a lot of times…help people know that they are not alone” (p. 30).

Piercy and Cheek (2004) propose that one of the central aspects of quilting for the participants they surveyed is Erikson’s concept of generativity (Erikson, 1963; cited by Piercy & Cheek, 2004). They note that generativity “is expressed through teaching, leading, and nurturing the next generation” (p. 20). Teaching was a central aspect of quilting for some of the participants. One explained, “This is the part that brings so much happiness to me; is that I can share this with other people” (p. 26). Respondents also talked about how their quilting connected them to family members now, or how they anticipated their quilts’ role in maintaining that connection after they had died: “A way of leaving yourself when you are gone” (p. 28). Some also used their quilts to connect to their communities. One said, “I can’t go clean up the play yard, or I can’t build new equipment, but I can make quilts and serve my purpose. So that is what I do” (p. 29).

Stalp (2006) interviewed 70 quilters for her qualitative examination of their experiences. A quilter herself, Stalp (2006) selected participants based on their engagement a quilting guild and through snowballing that resulted from interviews with guild members. They came from seven different states and were not selected in order to represent particular religious or cultural communities. In her analysis, Stalp (2006) focused on two specific topics: how the quilters perceived and experienced time and space in regard to their quilting. She explains that these areas took place before a traditional family backdrop, which was integrally related (p. 105). As this study does, Stalp (2006) relies on Stebbins’ (1996) definition of serious leisure to provide a theoretical basis for understanding and identifying quilters.
The women Stalp (2006) interviewed described family members who resented the time that quilting took away from shared leisure time or other activities. Issues of space were also a concern; while the women frequently expressed a preference for some type of permanent quilting space, they often described temporary spaces or practices they engaged in to make those spaces less irritating to family members. In some cases, the preference to occupy more space seemed pronounced, and family members being the clear obstacle to that. When Stalp (2006) asked a participant named Sarah what would happen “if your husband ever goes away for the weekend,” she replied, laughing, “There would be fabric from one end of the house to the other” (p. 121). Most significantly, discussions of time and space constraints were irretrievably interwoven with discussion of family members. For example, participants described turning to portable projects that they could bring with them and work on during family time. Other themes, such as making quilts as gifts to express love to family members, echoed themes that had emerged in the work of Piercy and Cheek (2004).

Conclusion

The research described in this review addresses participation and non-participation in exercise from a variety of theoretical and applied perspectives. It raises questions about which modes and disciplines are most appropriate for predicting, discussing, and understanding women’s participation and non-participation in exercise. It also addresses what has been found in regard to women’s participation in exercise and provides a foundation for this study. In the Methodology section that follows, the theoretical basis for this project, the procedures that were used, and the limitations of that process are addressed. These areas are informed by the extant research described in this review.
CHAPTER THREE
Methodology

In this project my goal is to address the following questions: How do women who dislike exercise describe their perceptions and experiences of their hobby and of exercise? Why do they participate with pleasure in the former and dislike the latter? And what are the potential implications of this for creating more appealing programs and environments for exercise? The purpose of this section is to explain the methodology that guides this project. To establish a foundation for how I approached my research question, I first explain what makes qualitative research unique. I provide background for my own intellectual orientation, discuss the method I used to address my research questions, and describe the procedures I used as well.

What Is Qualitative Research?

Definition and Characteristics

When we hear the term “research,” we often think of measurements, variables, control groups, and, perhaps most importantly, testing a hypothesis. Qualitative research is unique in that it is a process not of testing a hypothesis, but of searching for meaning and comprehension of another’s experience.

Qualitative researchers do not believe in the idea of “objectivity” in the research setting. Even when we think we are observing a situation objectively, Schram (2003) reminds us, “we bring our questions with us to the research setting” (Wolcott, 1988, p. 17, in Schram, p. 21). Mason (2002) writes, “I do not think it is possible to gather data in a wholly unstructured way through a qualitative interview, because the decisions and judgements the researcher makes give some form of structure and purpose to the data generation process” (p. 69). Approaching a research question with an open mind is ideal. Yet approaching it with pre-existing assumptions, including those from published and established works, is inevitable and even in some ways desirable.

Qualitative researchers are open about their beliefs that relate to formal theories as well as their beliefs that are derived from personal experience. Not only do personal beliefs not detract from the research, but they may enrich it as well, by providing empathy, inside knowledge, or simply a thought-provoking perspective. The acknowledgment of one’s beliefs also helps avoid the illusion of objectivity where it does not exist.
**Distinction Between Data Collection and Data Generation**

The quantitative scientist sees him- or herself as “collecting” data, such as taking someone’s blood pressure. In a sense, however, he or she helps “generate” that data – the scientist’s manner may affect the blood-pressure reading by relaxing or agitating the subject. A qualitative researcher, however, understands and acknowledges his or her role in the construction of data. Mason (2002) addresses this difference: “(W)hether or not they acknowledge it, all researchers do have…positions which get…expressed in their research decisions and judgments” (p. 68). Therefore, they do not objectively “collect” data, but are active participants in creating it with their participants. This is not somehow “less accurate,” but it does acknowledge the depth and complexity of the data and the process by which it is brought into being.

**Validity**

Without the more commonly accepted and understood conventions of validity that are the hallmark of quantitative research, what makes qualitative research more or less “valid”? The goal of generalizability that one frequently finds underlying a quantitative study is not present here. The aim is to comprehend and describe, often in a vivid and detailed way, how a particular person perceives a particular experience. In other words, “the very essence of unstructured interviewing (is) the establishment of a human-to-human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain” (Fontana & Frey, 2003, p. 57). That said, there are ways to gain trustworthiness in one’s work. Participant feedback can be useful for identifying gaps and misunderstandings. Peer review can also prove effective, with a knowledgeable colleague providing a second opinion and an informed perspective. A third way to increase trustworthiness is to engage in the reflexive contemplation and disclosure described above.

**Incorporating Theory**

Schram (2003) argues that theory can contribute to a qualitative researcher’s claim in several ways. One way is through connectedness: linking the claim to an existing, accepted theory joins the new work to some larger issue or body of knowledge rather than requiring that it exist on its own as a unique and unexplored entity. Using theory in one’s research can also offer a critical perspective by directing attention to doubts or concerns the author may have had with a previous study. Theory can also link broader principles and perspectives. “The common assumption,” he writes, “is that we need theory, at some level, to lend a certain legitimacy and purpose to what we do as researchers” (p. 42). Schram notes that theory can range from “a
formal explanatory axiom...to tentative hunch...to any set of general ideas that guide action” (p. 42). He also adds that it may be advisable to read theories that are related to one’s work and see how they explain, or fail to explain, the observations of the researcher.

Mason (2002) also emphasizes the “connectedness” aspect of theory, recommending that a researcher “(U)se your questions to develop, use and problematize links between your own and other research and theoretical scholarship in your broad research area” (p. 20). Knowledge of existing theory, she points out, not only aids in linking to other research, but also in preventing duplication and establishing relevance of a research question in the context of what has already been published.

The Qualitative Interview

According to Mason (2002), someone who selects qualitative interviewing as a method may believe that “people’s knowledge, views…interpretations (and) experiences” will help address one’s research question (p. 63). This section addresses the rationale behind the choices I made in regard to interview format and my own role as an interviewer, as well as limitations of qualitative interviewing.

Interview format. A qualitative interview is one in which the interviewer seeks to understand an experience or perception, rather than to test a hypothesis per se. Mason (2002) lists four qualities of the qualitative interview: “an interactional exchange of dialogue…a relatively informal style….a fluid and flexible structure,” and a belief that knowledge is being “construct(ed)” or “reconstruct(ed)” rather than “excavat(ed)” (pp. 62-63).

I chose to use a qualitative, open-ended interview format both because I wanted to understand the experiences and perceptions of the participants, as well as because I wanted to look at not only what they say, but how they chose to say it in the context of a relatively supportive and open-ended conversation. Particularly because of the nature of the topic and the degree to which it is common to recite moral imperatives and canned phrases from magazines and other fitness sources (an experience described by Dworkin, 2003), it was important to me to use a qualitative format and create a relaxed, discussion-oriented exchange in which participants had a chance to explain themselves and possibly move beyond the standard answers.

A qualitative interview cannot be artificially separated from the people participating in it (both interview and participant), and such an interview is always a “social interaction.” Mason (2002) explains that the idea of “bias,” then, is not a useful construct in regard to qualitative
interviewing, but it may well be productive to try to understand how the interpersonal and contextual aspects of the interview affected the experience and what was said. In the interviews I conducted, I tried to be aware of my role as “exercise researcher.”

Role of an interviewer. Some of my decisions relating to this process stem from a stance articulated by Oakley (1981): “(W)hen a feminist interviews women...use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible” (p. 41). My approach to the topic of women and exercise as a whole, to the interviews, and to the analysis of those interviews incorporated Oakley’s (1981) idea that it is preferable to respond to questions first as a human being, rather than as a researcher per se. I decided in advance, for example, if I were asked if I ever felt uncomfortable in the gym, instead of turning it back on the participant and saying, “We’re here to talk about you,” I would answer, “Yes, I have.” I think it is possible to find a balance between keeping the interview focused on the participant and still responding honestly to relevant and appropriate questions from a participant. Although the interviews addressed past experiences and perceptions of exercise, I remained conscious that the interview itself was another experience related to exercise that became part of each participant’s perception of exercise in some way. I felt a responsibility to do my best to make that experience at least neutral, or, ideally, enjoyable. At the same time, Mason (2002) writes, “Of course the question of how we should ‘be’ is not always one that is easily resolved by making a decision and executing it…we must also remember that interviews are interactions, and how you can ‘be’ depends to a great extent on the situation and the other participants” (pp. 73-74).

Limitations. Mason (2002) cautions that “the interview method is heavily dependent on people’s capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember” (p. 64). I was mindful that the conversations that take place in qualitative interviews reflect and reconstruct participants’ perceptions. Every method of gathering or constructing data has advantages and disadvantages, and even with Mason’s words of warning, I believe that qualitative interviewing was an appropriate method for addressing my research questions at this stage.

Foundations for This Project

The choice to use qualitative inquiry reflects my goal of broadening the understanding of exercise non-participation in the same spirit as previous inquiry, described by Jackson and Scott (1999) in regard to progress made in the field of leisure constraints: “(I)t is precisely because qualitative methods have been used that some researchers have discovered constraints such as
sense of entitlement, ethic of care, and body image constraints to leisure (most notably among women) – constraints which likely would have been overlooked in the absence of naturalistic approaches” (p. 314).

Sharpe (1995) explains the benefits of qualitative research specifically in regard to older women and health-related topics: “(Q)ualitative research methodology….can reduce the objectification of research subjects and provide a broader perspective than clinical trials or survey research alone can achieve. These methodologies (can help participants) guid(e) the development of health promotion interventions that are perceived as relevant an appealing” (p. 18). It is also consistent with the health promotion theory Precede-Proceed, a hallmark of which is participation (Green & Kreuter, 2005). Green and Kreuter (2005) explain, “Intervention strategies…will have little chance of being effective without the participation and understanding of those who will be affected by the policy” (p. 19). They add, “This principle ensures the greatest relevance and appropriateness of the programs to the people affected” (p. 20). While qualitative interviewing is a substantially different process than health promotion planning, they share common ground in this respect.

Methodological. Schram (2003) describes a chief assumption of the phenomenologist: “The reality of anything is not ‘out there’ in an objective or detached sense, but is inextricably tied to one’s consciousness of it....Accordingly, you cannot develop an understanding of a phenomenon apart from understanding people’s experience of or with that phenomenon” (p. 71). I believe that part of what has kept non-exercising women excluded from participation in exercise is a tendency on the part of authorities, fitness professionals, and fitness media to sometimes rely on generalizations or experiences that do not fit those of non-exercising women. As a researcher, I attempted to combine the goal of identifying explanations for why the participants did not exercise with the goal of attempting to understand their explanations on their terms.

From the beginning of this project, I had intended to combine a focus on the women’s perceptions of their reality with interpretation. Throughout it, I remained mindful of the mandate of feminist constructivism, recognizing how statements can be a reflection of the culture in which one lives. In her study of Swedish women’s narratives of exercise, Thomsson (1999) explains, “(F)eminist constructivists assert the importance of language as a carrier of contemporary discourses. These discourses act like principles, enabling the reproduction of
social institutions as well as people’s ways of thinking and acting” (p. 37). That is, the language used to communicate carries personal or cultural meanings that complement, or even contradict, a more literal reading. For example, Dworkin (2003) describes the “health talk” that her participants rely on in describing their relationship to exercise as a “cultural mantra” (p. 138). This type of reading adds depth and has been utilized in this project.

Billig (1997) explains that in discourse analysis, “By and large, the offering of explanations is not socially neutral, but is a rhetorical act, in the sense that it involves justification and criticism and the attempt by the speaker to persuade hearers of their interpretation” (p. 42). An example of this is found in a qualitative study of women’s narratives of chronic pain by Werner, Isaksen and Malterud (2003):

> We read the women’s descriptions...as a moral plot and argumentation, appealing to a public audience of health personnel, the general public, and the interviewer...as a plot...as performance...as arguments....Behind their stories, we hear whispered accounts relating to the medical narrative about hysteria; rejections of the stereotype medical discourse of the crazy, lazy, illness-fixed or weak woman (p. 1035).

Werner and colleagues’ (2003) interpretation is an integral part of this approach. It is not a liberty taken by the researcher, but a responsibility. In my analysis, such interpretation is supported with excerpts from interview transcriptions and corresponding explanations.

Moral. My moral stance in this project is driven by a belief expressed by Schram (2003) in his discussion of why one might conduct qualitative research: “(T)hings are not right as they are or, most certainly, are not as good as they might be” (Schram, p. 32, citing Wolcott, 1992, p. 15). This belief has informed not only my research question and review of literature, but many of my methodological decisions. I hope to move forward in the spirit of Vertinksy’s (1998) recommendation, also addressed in the review of literature, “to listen to the experiences of women’s lives, understand these experiences in words women choose to express them, and negotiate mutual actions to improve those situations that women would like to alter” (p. 100, citing Labonte, 1993).

Procedures

In this section I explain how I located my participants, as well as how data was generated and analyzed. I also address the project’s limitations.
Sampling

Mason (2004) describes theoretical sampling as “selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions” (p. 124). She cautions that, while it may be informative to include a range of individuals, any range that exists among the participants should not be assumed to make the sample therefore necessarily representative of the population, or an individual with a specific characteristic representative of others with that characteristic. For this project, my goal was to recruit participants in the Oxford, Ohio area who fit four descriptors: female, in mid-life, a serious crafter (self-identified behavior and identity), and who disliked exercise (self-identified preference). I created two recruiting fliers designed to appeal to crafters (see Appendix C). The headlines, graphics, and explanatory text emphasized knitting or quilting. The fliers each featured a color photograph of crafting supplies and a headline that related to a craft. One had a picture of knitting needles and yarn, and read, “Are you a knitter?” Below that, in smaller letters, it read, “Are you a quilter? Are you serious about a craft?” The other flier featured bolts of fabric and reversed the order of the knitting and quilting questions. Below the photograph, the text read:

For my master’s thesis at Miami University, I am conducting a study of women born between 1946 and 1964 who are serious about a particular craft and do not like to exercise. If this describes you, I hope you will consider helping me with my research by taking part in this study.

The subsequent paragraph explained the logistical aspects of participation. Multiple copies were posted on local bulletin boards at the town’s post office and at local restaurants and businesses. The emphasis on the hobby was drawn from Stebbins’ (1999) discussion of “serious leisure.” Four women responded to the fliers by calling or e-mailing me as requested, and each emphasized her commitment to her craft (either in detail or by identifying as “a quilter” or “a knitter”). I also visited a campus office where I had seen decorations related to quilting. Three women in the office described themselves as quilters. Two disqualified themselves, one because she said she liked to exercise, and one because she said she was too old. The third agreed to take part in the study.

The decision to include women on the basis of whether or not they liked to exercise, instead of whether or not they actually exercised, arose from a desire to be consistent with the leisure studies concept of constraints (e.g., see Shaw, 1999; Samdahl, 1988; Jackson & Scott, 1999; Jackson, 1997, 2000). Rather than view participation as binary, this view would allow for
the inclusion of participants who exercised out of a sense of obligation, or those who did it and disliked it. It also allowed for a focus on preference, providing an opportunity to explore to some degree how participants believed their preferences had been formed. Finally, based on readings for the review of literature, it seemed likely that a certain degree of shame would be attached to not exercising. It was believed that allowing women to identify as people who did not like to exercise, versus simply not exercising, would allow them to retain more of their dignity.

The decision to restrict the pool of participants to those born between 1946 and 1964 stemmed from an interest in this general age group on my part, based on conversations with women of this generation that took place before and during graduate school. The years were identified in discussion with a second researcher, and were later confirmed to represent the age range that defines the Baby Boom generation (United States Census Bureau, 2007).

Data Generation

I explained to each participant in the recruitment flyer, the letter of informed consent, and verbally that their names would be changed and their anonymity maintained, that their accounts were for a thesis and may be published, and that they could end the interview or change the topic at any time. Participants were asked to sign a letter of informed consent (see Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent). During the initial telephone conversation or by e-mail, a meeting date, time and place were arranged. Early participants were offered the choice to meet in my office or at their homes. The first participant chose the office, the second (who worked on campus) chose the building where she worked, and subsequent participants were simply offered the interviewer’s office. Most were longtime local residents and were familiar with the building.

Four of the interviews were held in the interviewer’s private office, while one was held in the break room of a participant’s campus office, which was unoccupied for most but not all of interview. That interview lasted 30 minutes; the others lasted 50 to 55 minutes. The interviews were recorded onto a computer using an attached microphone. They were then burned onto CDs and mailed to a transcription company. Upon receipt of the transcripts, I checked them against the original audio, listening to any unclear sections multiple times and made any corrections as needed.

Per my expectations, the interviews fell somewhere between semi-structured and relatively unstructured, depending on the enthusiasm and loquacity of the participant. I brought a list of questions into each interview and referred to them when the conversation lagged (see
Appendix B: Interview Guide). In each interview, I relied on the responses of the participant to shape the remainder of the interview, using prompting questions that related to what she had said rather than to my list. This desire for an open space for participants to fill reflects the approach of other researchers who have engaged in qualitative inquiry regarding women and health or exercise practices. I did not go as far as Thomsson (1999), who took this approach farther than I did: “The aim was to have the interviewed women talk as much as possible without our asking questions….When the interviewers did ask questions, it was to clarify points that they had not properly understood, or to elicit more information about things mentioned by the woman being interviewed.” (p. 40) These interviews were more in the spirit of Grogan, Evans, Wright and Hunter (2004), who write: “We…wanted to leave space to allow women to talk about experiences that we had not predicted prior to the interviews themselves” (p. 52). I wanted to provide these opportunities, but it was also important to me to cover the intended topics. Each interview followed the same general format: First, we discussed the participant’s craft (beginning with her projects, if she brought them – something three of the five participants did). Second, we discussed exercise; third, I asked them to address some hypothetical situations that either combined the two topics (her craft and exercise) or sought an understanding of how exercise might be made more appealing. Finally, I asked if any topics had been overlooked, and we talked about whatever issue the participant raised.

Each conversation was shaped by my responses and feedback. The women’s knowledge that I found their perceptions and experiences of craft and exercise sufficiently interesting to warrant an interview certainly shaped the conversations as well. In the past, I had been concerned about how much of my personal experience to reveal, but participants in previous work seemed to accept my roles as graduate student and instructor and were not curious about my past experiences relating to the project, although they were curious about what I hoped to find. The same held true with these participants. However, even without discussing my own experiences at length, I am very conscious of my role in generating data. Mason (2002) articulates this awareness: “If you choose qualitative interviewing, you are highly likely to conceptualize yourself as active and reflexive in the process of data generation, and seek to examine this rather than aspiring to be a neutral data collector” (p. 66).

What Counted as Data

The interviews were audio-recorded, and the transcripts of the interviews make up the
data for this study. Conversation with participants before and after the interviews were not recorded or analyzed, but contributed to my understanding of the participants. Mason (2002) notes that “(a) semi-structured interview transcript made from an audio-recording…may be disorganized, eclectic, incoherent in places, and may or may not take the form of a sequential narrative” (p. 150). These adjectives seem to describe the transcripts in this study accurately.

When checking the audio transcriptions, I listened to difficult sections multiple times. Occasionally I was not able to be sure of the words that were being spoken; those instances, of which there are few, are represented by an underline symbol (____) in the transcript. In this approach I am bolstered by the words of Billig (1997): “It is not a good idea to make a ‘guess.’ If one does guess, it is possible to end up making detailed analyses from transcripts whose accuracy cannot adequately be trusted” (p. 46). I also used the convention of putting words or phrases in parentheses (following the convention noted by Potter & Wetherell, 1987) when I was nearly sure of what was said. In addition to the transcripts, the e-mails or telephone messages left by participants, as well as the conversation we had before and after interviews, and during any breaks due to equipment issues, also provide background and shaped my understanding of each applicant. In instances where the tone or volume of a participant was particularly noteworthy in a way that I believed contributed substantial meaning to what she was saying (for example, following a stated intention to exercise with a whispered, laughing disclaimer), I noted that in the transcript as well.

**Ethical Issues**

The questions I asked, and the topics we discussed, seemed to be more sensitive for some participants than for others. Participants themselves brought up a number of personal issues, such as the deaths of family members, medical problems, and guilt about their own behavior and unhappiness with their appearance. In order to preserve confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. No participant in the study had the same first name as any of the pseudonyms used.

In preparing for and conducting the interviews, I strove to remain mindful of the feminist communitarian ethical model, as defined by Schram (2003). This model “assumes personally involved, self-reflective researchers who hold themselves personally responsible for the political and ethical consequences of their actions” (Schram, 2003, p. 39). I believed that I had a responsibility in the conversations to not reinforce any negative self-concepts the participants
have about their non-participation in exercise. I originally intended to challenge negative statements they made. In actuality, this goal was not as simple as it sounded. I was torn between wanting to challenge negative statements and wanting to validate participants’ perceptions. In the end, I ended up challenging statements about physical potential (along the lines of “I’m uncoordinated” or “I’m lazy”), but not challenging statements regarding how the participants viewed their appearance (along the lines of “I need to lose 30 pounds”). I believed that my failure to challenge statements about exercise potential would be a passive endorsement of them. As a researcher, I viewed challenging those statements as the lesser of two evils. This was an imperfect solution to a difficult problem.

Efforts to Optimize Communication

I began the interview by thanking the participant for meeting me, re-introducing myself, and attempting to establish rapport. Because I wanted the participants to be able to feel authoritative, happy, and knowledgeable, the placement of their craft at the beginning of the interview was deliberate. My hope was that this discussion helped establish trust and a comfortable environment, so that by the time we got to the potentially less pleasant subject of exercise, the necessary groundwork had been laid for a productive conversation. Because I conducted every interview the same way, there is no way to say for certain whether this had the desired effect, but it is my sincere hope that it did.

Knowing that the meanings that I attribute to certain words and phrases may have been different than those of my participants, I tried to make a special effort to ask them to explain further, especially when they used terms that were of particular interest to either themselves or to me. In addition to providing interesting additional sources of information, my intent was to investigate if any of my assumptions (known or unknown) were significantly misguided: “If all the problems of question wording could be traced to a single source, their common origin would probably prove to be in taking too much for granted” (S. Payne, The Art of Asking Questions, 1951, in Fontana & Frye, 2003, p. 47). Every participant surprised me in some way (several left me astonished), which I hope is a testament to having explored beyond simply hearing what I “wanted” to hear.

At the same time, simply following up on questions and trying to be open to the answers is not enough to remove all of the barriers to communication. Even when researchers take great pains to encourage female participants to articulate their experiences in regard to exercises,
problems can arise in that articulation. Henderson and Ainsworth (2001) recount some of the concerns and challenges that they and their colleagues faced in trying to conscientiously represent Native American and African American women’s perceptions and experience of physical activity for the Cross Cultural Activity Participation Survey. They asked a total of 200 women, all at least 40 years old, to collect records of their physical activity mechanically (through pedometers and other tools) and via a diary, and 56 of those women also participated in qualitative interviews. In their reflections on the process, the researchers convey frustration:

The women in this study had difficulty talking about the effect of their racial identity on their activity involvement. Perhaps we were asking these women to be sociologists….Perhaps we were asking questions that were too personal….We do not yet have any answers for this dilemma. (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001, p. 29)

I faced similar situations with some, though not all, of the participants when I asked questions that involved combining and contrasting their identity as a quilter or a knitter with their identity as a woman who did not like to exercise. Some participants responded to these kinds of questions with relish, others with bewilderment, humor, or hostility. In these situations, I found it helpful not to be bound to my original list of questions, but to be free to explore other topics. I also viewed the “difficulty” that Henderson and Ainsworth (2001) described as a meaningful response, rather than the absence of a response. Certainly their conclusion could be applied to this study, especially substituting “crafting and exercise” for “race”: “Meaningful studies about race and culture will require methodological imagination defined as openness to new designs and approaches” (p. 31).

Reading and Analysis

This section looks at both reading and analysis of the data. Rubin and Rubin (1995) outline the three main steps involved in analysis: coding, reassembling, and “figuring out the theoretical or policy implications” (p. 228). They describe coding as a process of going back and forth between the processes of identifying themes and assigning data to those themes. In this process, new themes are identified. Reassembling refers to a process of putting the themes together to create greater, more cohesive understanding of the topic. This section addresses coding and reassembling; implications are addressed in the Discussion.

Reading the data. Mason (2002) discusses three ways to read one’s data: literally, interpretatively, and reflexively. I incorporated all three approaches in my analysis of transcripts. In fact, the three areas often overlapped. Reading literally involved understanding the
participants’ experiences and perceptions as they expressed them. To a large degree, my analysis could be characterized as interpretive, as I attempted to make sense of what the participants said in light of the research discussed in this proposal and in light of what other participants said. In other words, I did not just take what the participants said at “face value.” Rather, I went beyond the literal, looked for the meanings of what was said, and brought relevant theory into the discussion. Mason (2002) describes interpretive reading as “reading through or beyond the data in some way” (p. 149, original emphasis). I also, to some extent, read the transcripts reflexively. This involved being conscious or aware of the fact that my understanding of what the participants said was shaped by my own academic, professional, and personal experiences in regard to exercise and culture. While I consciously linked ideas and grouped topics based on literal commonalities or interpretive themes, I am aware that my background and perspective shaped the themes I noticed or helped develop.

Coding. In the process of analyzing the data, transcripts were read many times. After reading and re-reading each transcript, my process of coding involved annotating statements, phrases, and topics with descriptive “codes” that took the form of words or phrases themselves. Anything that answered these questions was coded: How do women who dislike exercise describe their perceptions and experiences of their hobby and of exercise? Why do they participate with pleasure in the former and dislike the latter? And what are the potential implications of this for creating more appealing programs and environments for exercise? These codes were not formally standardized across interviews, although with each transcript, I became more familiar with the meanings that were emerging and likely more “settled” into how they were fitting together. Another researcher read the transcripts at this time and coded them as well. These initial analyses were then discussed and compared. This process of comparison continued throughout the analysis and served to both alter and confirm my initial analyses and the results, themes and sub-themes “found” in this study. The next set of processes, which together make up the “reassembling” aspect of analysis, was more involved.

Reassembling. I started by typing each raw code or descriptive annotation into a word-processing file, using font style (such as plain, italic, and bold) to identify different participants. I then cut out each raw code and began the process of what has been described as sorting and countersorting, a process of grouping raw data codes into higher order or level of meaning categories over the course of several days. This process of sorting and countersorting continued
until all of the codes fit together in a way that “made sense” – that is, told the story of these five women’s experiences of their craft and exercise as I heard it. In this process I literally began, first with handwritten notes and then with computer software, to try to develop maps that illustrated main themes and sub-themes. I then started the process of identifying quotes from each interview transcript that were the evidence of the themes and sub-themes. Because of the nature of the data, and the active role the researcher takes not only in generating the words that appear in the interview transcript, but the themes and sub-themes that “emerge” from it as well, it is essential to continually remain open to new ways of reassembling the data to tell the participants’ stories. For this reason, themes and sub-themes shifted during every step of this process. Even after drafting the Results section, it became clear through discussions with the second researcher about the section that there was still ample room to revise and rethink the categorizations or groupings. Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) description of this process as “reassembling” is very fitting, both literally, in terms of cutting up pieces of paper and putting them back together, and more conceptually, in terms of taking the interviews apart in order to put them back together to create a new whole that conveys the researcher’s understanding of what the participants said.

The next chapter reflects the results of the reading, coding, and reassembling of the transcript data. While evidence for each theme is provided, it is also the case that my beliefs, perceptions and experiences played a significant role not only in the interview, but in the construction of the themes.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter describes the themes and sub-themes that were identified from the interviews with five mid-life women who report that they are serious about a craft and dislike exercise. First, each woman is briefly described. After that, the central themes and any sub-themes that comprise them are described and pertinent passages providing evidence of these are presented. These themes and their component sub-themes often overlap; that is, the women did not compartmentalize their experiences in the way this analysis does. Thus, how the parts “fit together” to comprise the whole is depicted in the Figures (see Figures 1 and 2) that are presented in this chapter. Further, the themes are presented in an order that reflects the basic structure of the interviews: The women’s experience with, and feelings about, their craft; their experience with, and feelings about, exercise; and finally, their responses to hypothetical scenarios posed by the interviewer that combine the two topics. However, themes and sub-themes were constructed by looking for meanings (of craft and exercise) within each interview as well as across all of the interviews.

Participant Profiles

Patricia

Patricia, 52, is an artist by training and used to work as a professional photographer. After allergies to photography chemicals required her to leave photography, she eventually made the transition to quilting. Although quilting had been a family tradition for generations, Patricia herself only began to quilt in 1997, when she took a quilting class with an instructor whom she describes as “enthusiastic.” Since then, she has primarily done hand-quilting. Patricia brought part of a project she is working on to the interview: it is a four-panel series in which each panel represents one of the seasons. Patricia is a Quaker, and meets weekly with a group of other Quaker women quilters. In regard to exercise, Patricia walks regularly with her dog, and has tried out the college fitness center but does not currently use it. She reported having had a bad experience in the fitness center that stemmed from not knowing how to use an exercise bike, but she did enjoy an aqua-aerobics class she took there. Patricia was very receptive to the possibility of pursuing t'ai chi, and expressed an interest in archery as well, two activities that she feels fit her personality.
Nancy

Nancy, 47, learned how to quilt from her husband's cousin years ago, and she says that since then her interest has increased dramatically. After quilting on her own, Nancy eventually invested in quilting equipment and started her own home-based quilting business, in which she not only created quilts, but also consulted with customers on their own projects. She has done a considerable amount of teaching and lecturing on quilts and quilting, and reports that she has developed her expertise to the point where she can tell when an antique quilt was made just by examining it. Nancy closed down her business after she decided to work at the local university so that her children would have the option of free tuition. She currently works in a financial office on campus, and previously worked as a cook in a dining hall. Nancy reports that she does not exercise regularly, although she has lifted weights in the past. She says she now makes an effort to be active in her everyday life, and occasionally uses her daughter's stair-stepper.

Linda

According to Linda, 56, her interest in knitting, which she learned how to do as a young woman, was revitalized twelve years ago when she encountered a beautiful and detailed hand-knit sweater that inspired her. After completing a similar project herself, she went on to make scarves, shawls, and other items, several of which she brought to the interview. Linda used to have numerous athletic interests, including biking, cross-country skiing, and ice-skating, but does not participate in them currently. She reports that she does enjoy walking, particularly with a friend, and is a member of Curves. She is also a survivor of breast cancer, which she feels has affected her leisure interests. Linda currently works as a guidance counselor.

Barbara

Barbara, 57, has experimented with a number of different crafts, and currently knits. She brought several handmade bags to the interview, which she first knitted, then washed in a washing machine to create a "felted" effect. Barbara learned the basics of knitting from a friend, and reports that since then, she has used each new project as an attempt to acquire a new skill. She utilizes internet resources and books to familiarize herself with new techniques and patterns. Barbara says she walks with her dogs on a regular basis and does not engage in other regular exercise. She has a collection of fitness videos at home and seems frustrated by her own sporadic use of them. Barbara has fibromyalgia, a condition that affects her muscles and can be temporarily made less uncomfortable through stretching and other exercise. She is a homemaker.
who is also a mother, and she cared for her own mother as well. Before she married, Barbara worked as a high school teacher, a school librarian, and a caseworker.

Mary

Mary, 47, has been sewing since she was eight years old. She reports that she sewed her own clothing, and clothing for her sisters, for years. After her two sons were born, she decided that boys would not be as much fun to sew for as girls, and turned to quilting as a way to continue to sew. Her husband’s grandmother was learning to quilt at the same time, so they learned together. Mary eventually acquired a 14-foot long arm quilting machine, and began quilting professionally. She explains that she saw this as an enjoyable way to recoup the costs of the machine. Although her husband, who is a surgeon, did not engage with her quilting for many years, he now collaborates with her on quilting projects using the long arm quilting machine. When it comes to exercise, Mary says that the topic is integrally related to maintaining her very substantial weight loss (Mary reports having lost 120 pounds). She is a dedicated but, as she puts it, “resentful” fitness walker who walks on a treadmill in her basement daily and walked in approximately 20 road races in the past year. Mary works full-time in her husband’s medical office. She also lives on a farm with livestock, including sheep, whose wool she spins on her own spinning wheel.

The Meaning of a Craft

This section, “The Meaning of a Craft,” presents the themes and sub-themes of meanings of these women’s experiences of their craft. Five major meanings or themes were identified: (1) It’s What I Love vs. It’s Something to Do, (2) Connecting/Connections with Others, (3) Freedom of Expression and Extension of Identity, (4) Relaxation, and (5) Challenge and Commitment. A number of these major themes are comprised of several sub-themes, which are described when discussing each major theme below. Further, as noted previously, there is often overlap of the various themes and sub-themes in the quotes presented, and the extent to which these themes and sub-themes are porous categorizations is evident. Yet, for the purpose of coherently telling the story of these women’s experiences of craft and exercise, these divisions are necessary.

It’s What I Love vs. It’s Something to Do

This theme can be conceptualized as existing along a continuum, with one end of the continuum being “it’s something I love to do,” the middle being “it’s something I like,” and the other end of the continuum being “it’s a way to fill the time.”
For example, Patricia, Nancy, and Mary, the three quilters, were passionate about their feelings for quilting:

I’ve only been quilting since, as I say, ’97. But I love it more, and more, and more. (Patricia)

(M)aking up all the squares, figuring out which fabrics I’m gonna use, which patterns I’m going to use. I love that. I love sitting at my machine. (Mary)

Barbara demonstrated her passion for knitting through her willingness to undergo surgery in order to continue knitting:

(T)hat may drive me to surgery. I may have to have surgery for carpel tunnel (small laugh) if I can’t knit. (Barbara)

In some cases, simply being around and working with beautiful colors is what the women feel passionately about. Mary said, “I love color and the way things go together.” Patricia explained, “I’m a real color freak….I just do this just for the beauty and joy of it.” And Barbara stated, “I just do it because I like it. I like the colors.”

Toward the end of the interview, when Nancy was asked if there was anything else that should be discussed, she made sure that the importance of quilting in her life had been communicated:

(Y)ou kinda know how I feel about quilting now….That deep down feeling, you know? (Nancy)

The roots of “that deep down feeling” for some of the women were related to the extent to which they viewed their craft as an expression of their values or of the self, a theme that is presented subsequently. A discussion by Patricia presents an example of this. For Patricia, the four-panel series she was designing, in which each panel represented a different season, allowed her to express the part of herself that cared about nature in a way that felt right to her. She described it as “bringing together a consonance between what I do and what I feel”:

I’m an environmentalist. And, in a way, making “four season” panels is very soothing to my heart because it’s, you know, it’s a way of, in a very gentle, making a very gentle environmental statement…it’s satisfying because it’s – it’s a way of blending my, my deepest, those things that I love the most, the environment, nature, the world….into something I’m making with my hands. (Patricia)
All of the women described enjoying their craft. However, a difference emerged that divided the quilters from the knitters. Patricia, Mary and Nancy talked about either wishing they could get paid to do what they love (Patricia) or actually getting paid to do what they love (Mary and Nancy). In contrast, although they reported liking to knit, a theme emerged in the conversations with Linda and Barbara of knitting being something to do, to keep one’s hands occupied.

*It’s what I love.* The three quilters, Mary, Patricia and Nancy, all spoke about quilting professionally. Unlike Mary and Nancy, Patricia had never run a quilting business out of her home and had sold only one quilt. She also did not report ever having owned a quilting machine, and said that she did not particularly like even using a sewing machine. However, the similarity between the three quilters is that they seemed to have the same standard for what type of quilting they would consider doing professionally: doing what they enjoyed. Because she prefers hand-quilting and works relatively slowly, Patricia explained, she would not be able to make a living as a quilter:

(F)or me, it’s not fun to work by machine. It’s more of a job. And, of course, if I were to get *paid*, I might could do that. But I’ve only sold one quilt, a bed quilt, for $500….I would love to be a professional quilter. That would be making quilts and selling them. But as I say, three, you know, three years per quilt….couldn’t live on that. (Patricia)

In contrast, Mary and Nancy, who like machine quilting, both described enjoying their work. Mary currently quilts professionally, having acquired a 14-foot long arm quilting machine a few years ago. Nancy no longer quilts professionally, having sold her machine and closed her business a few years ago. Mary explained that she thought of her quilting business primarily as a “hobby,” rather than a “job”:

(T)he quilting is still a hobby, that I just – am trying to help pay off my machine, basically, is what it is. (Mary)

Nancy explained how she eventually decided she wanted to make money from her hobby, and how she felt about the outcome:

I quilted for a hobby because I stayed, I was a stay-at-home mom of three kids for quite a while, but finally decided I may as well start makin’ money at it, so I bought a machine quilter…. I did from A to Z in quilting, so it was pretty interesting. I enjoyed it. (Nancy)

She also emphasized that her autonomous work schedule allowed her the freedom to be the kind of parent she wanted to be:
It was an ideal business because, all right, I was also a Girl Scout leader, I was a 4-H advisor, I did coach baseball for my kids.... So, with my business I could get up in the morning, machine quilt a quilt, get it over there, get another one pinned up, shut down, go to the Girl Scout meeting, bring the kids home, do supper, go up, finish that quilt. It worked out. (Nancy)

In their role as professional quilters, both Nancy and Mary had experiences interacting in an expert role with people on the topic of quilting. Nancy described enjoying having been recognized as an expert:

I’ve taught a lot of people how to quilt.... I like it. It’s interesting. I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve actually taught anyone, and I still have people calling me asking advice and, “I got a quilt that I need to know how to set this in, and do that,” and I help her with it. It’s, it’s neat. You feel like you’re helping and giving to somebody... (Nancy)

Mary liked the consulting aspect that came with running a quilting business:

Sometimes people will bring me squares that they’ve made and they don’t quite know what to do with them. Or things that they’ve found, like, at a garage sale or estate sales, they’ll find pieces of things. And so we kind of talk and we figure things out. (Mary)

From their accounts, it emerged that Nancy and Mary did not merely enjoy the act of quilting professionally, but the expert role they held and the opportunity to share that expertise with others.

It’s something to do. For Linda and Barbara, crafting also meant using time constructively, or at least producing something tangible during a time when options for activity seemed limited by distraction (in front of the television), location (riding in a car), or energy level (experiencing fatigue). Linda particularly emphasized that, for her, knitting was “mindless yet constructive,” particularly in front of the television or while riding in a car:

For me, it is something to do while you’re watching TV or just – it keeps your hands busy when there’s something else to do. So some projects I like because they are mindless – you don’t even have to concentrate at all. And then there are others that you have to, you know, be counting stitches and that sort of thing... (Linda)

Like Linda, Barbara knitted in front of the television, explaining that when she did that, “I feel like I’m not completely wasting my time.” She also shared Linda’s preference for knitting in a car:
We recently, last weekend went to my son’s graduation and I knit a scarf in the car while we were traveling. So that’s a good time, there’s nothing else going on. You can still talk and converse, you know, with people in the car. Ah, but it, it, you’re accomplishing something, when there’s not much else you can be doing, so. (Barbara)

Crafting in front of the television or in the car was not entirely restricted to the knitters. Nancy explained that sometimes had the television on while she worked; she would listen to it but watched her quilting. For car rides, Nancy made sure to take a “travel quilt” with her on the road, too:

I always have a quilt that I call my travel quilt and if I’m in the car, and we’re going somewhere…I’ll carry it with me because you can do a little block at a time and work on it while you’re in the car. (Nancy)

However, Nancy also stated repeatedly that quilting was important to her on many levels. In contrast, Linda seemed to question whether her knitting was worthwhile, but did it anyway:

You can see that you’ve accomplished something, even though sometimes I look at it, and I think – and scarves are so big now. But I have scarves from my mother, and I have scarves from my aunt, and I don’t need another scarf. Nobody that I know needs another scarf. (Laughter). But you do it anyway… (Linda)

Linda cited a phrase used in her family, “idiot’s delight,” that one aunt used to describe another aunt’s propensity for “making centerpieces out of egg cartons” and other such endeavors. She seemed to be saying that there was a simple-minded pleasure in crafting items that were not useful, but occupied one’s hands and attention.

Linda also addressed the desire to be occupied even when her energy level was low. She explained that, after she was diagnosed with breast cancer, her medication made her tired. This made a quiet yet constructive activity such as knitting more appealing to her than it would have been otherwise:

I had breast cancer, too, and I’m trying to think how much that coincided. That might contribute to my – that contributed some to my fatigue – the medication afterwards. (Linda)

Connecting/Connections With Others

These women’s experiences of their craft were intricately connected to other people in their lives. Four sub-themes expressed this second major theme: (Not) Like My Mother, Links to Female In-Laws, Being Part of a Group, and Collaboration With Husband.
(Not) Like my mother. Every participant brought up multiple members of their immediate or extended family in the course of discussing their craft, particularly when they were discussing how they had learned their craft. All brought up their mother specifically, although three of the five women did so in order to explain that their mother had not taught them their craft. For instance, after accidentally dropping a silver thimble that had belonged to her mother-in-law, Patricia also made it clear that although her grandmother quilted, Patricia’s mother had not taught Patricia how to quilt:

(M)Y grandmother was a quilter. But my mother was not. She thought that buying fabric, and cutting it up, and sewing it back together [Interviewer laughs] was the biggest waste of time anyone could imagine. (Laughs) She did not do this for leisure, nor did she do it – when she needed something warm to put on the bed, she went to Penney’s and bought a bedspread. (Patricia)

Barbara volunteered that her mother had not taught her how to knit:

[Interviewer: How did you learn to knit?] 4-H. 4-H. My mother was an excellent cook. Wonderful mother. But not at all a crafter. Not at all. (Barbara)

Nancy first described how, as a mother herself, she taught her daughter to quilt. She then reported that she had taught her mother as well:

(T)eaching my daughter how to do it – I feel like I’m passing it on to her. Because, see, I didn’t learn from my mom. I taught my mom. (Laughter) ‘Cause she always just did quilts that you do together real quick and tied and that was it. I said, “Mom, we could hand quilt this,” and I started showing her how to do it and, oh, she’s gone crazy. She does it all the time now. So it’s kind of neat, you know? It’s like a reverse role. (Nancy)

Mary learned to sew from her mother:

I grew up sewing all my own clothes and things like that. [Interviewer: So that was even….before you were a mom?] Oh, I started sewing probably when I was eight years old. My mom taught me to sew.

When Linda was asked a general question about her knitting, her first reply was not about herself, but about her her mother, whom she later mentioned had passed away, and her aunt:

My mother knit, and my aunt knitted. My mother was a pretty much – I think pretty much a by-the-rule pattern person, you know, whereas my aunt maybe got more creative. (Linda)
Links to female in-laws. The women, all of whom were married, sometimes also mentioned their husbands’ female relatives in connection with their craft in some way. For Mary and Nancy, stories of how they learned how to quilt involved their husbands’ female relatives:

My husband’s grandmother and I kind of started quilting at the same time. She had never really quilted either. But because she was becoming a great-grandmother and…she decided that was something she wanted to do….So we would share books. And I’d, I would go to classes to learn new techniques and things like that. (Mary)

(W)hen you first get married you have to be nice to the husband’s family and his cousin says, “We’re gonna make a blue jean quilt,” and I’m like, (skeptically) “Okay”….So I had to round up old jeans and we cut squares out and we sewed them together and then we tacked them to a blanket and we put a binding on it and that was her blue jean quilt. (Nancy)

Being part of a group. Two of the women, Patricia and Linda, reported being part of a crafting group, although the groups to which they belong are very different. Patricia meets once a week with fellow women quilters, who, like her, are Quaker. They generally work on their own projects, but will work together when someone needs help:

(E)veryone got together to help me baste my last quilt about two weeks ago. And when you’re basting, you’re using around a three-inch needle…. (W)e all stuck ourselves. And I said, “That’s fine. Don’t worry. A little blood just shows how much you – your friendship means to me.” (laughs) (Patricia)

Patricia’s statement reveals the sacrifices that group members are willing to make for each other, as well as the high value she places on their friendship. The willingness with which group members will put aside their own work to help with a large-scale project of a member, such as basting the quilt, is notable in Patricia’s nonchalance in describing it.

Linda is the other participant who belongs to a formal group of sorts, although it meets less often and is more open:

It is a once-a-month thing that a couple of real veteran knitters started, and lot of it is helping novice knitters start. And it’s just sharing ideas, yarns, working while you’re there but conversing, a lot of conversation and new connections with people. (Linda)

While Linda’s group is not unified on the basis of religion, and meets less frequently than Patricia’s group, it is still a way for her to join with other people who share her interest in
knitting and to enjoy a sense of community. It also gives group members a chance to pass down their skills or to learn new skills.

Although Nancy and Mary did not describe belonging to formal groups, each one spoke about attending quilting shows or classes. Barbara was the only woman for whom crafting was primarily an individual experience, although she did seek out new information on knitting through books and the Internet:

Internet is a wonderful source.... I looked on the Internet and learned how to purl. And then, you know, any kind of question I have I can look at the Internet and find how to do it... you just Google it. You Google whatever the pattern says. I-cord. You Google I-cord. (Barbara)

Collaboration with husband. For Mary, her craft had recently come to mean regular collaboration with her husband. For many years he played no role in her quilting, but he developed an interest after the purchase of her long arm quilting machine and the departure of their children to college. His interest is focused on utilizing his existing professional skills (she explains, “He has very good eye hand coordination. He’s a surgeon.”) to effectively use the long arm quilting machine:

He really has watched me quilt and sew and hand-quilt for years, but never has wanted to participate in it. And now all of a sudden he’s really interested in this long arm machine... and he likes it. And it’s kinda neat because we’re doing it together. And, you know, it gives us an hour or two a night that we’re just workin’ out patterns and that kind of stuff. [Interviewer: That sounds really nice.] It is. (Mary)

When they are not working together on a project, they sometimes still talk while she works at her sewing machine. Mary says that when she is working in her sewing room, which is adjacent to the bedroom,

If he’s in (the bedroom) in the evening reading or watching the news or whatever, I’ll be just, you know, right through the doorway at my sewing machine. So we can still carry on a conversation, and I’m still, you know, in the vicinity.

Mary reported enjoying both the more active collaboration with her husband on quilting as well as the back-and-forth conversation that the proximity of her sewing room allowed. She noted, however, that when her college-age children were little, “my sewing machine was in the family room with them.” So neither type of interaction with her husband had used to be part of the meaning of quilting for her; this meaning had changed in recent years.
Freedom of Self-Expression and Preservation of Identity

The women experienced their crafts as freedom to express themselves and as a way to preserve both their own identity and that of other women as well. This major theme was expressed in three ways. First, their crafts meant being creative and displaying the results. The second sub-theme was communicating love. This was evidenced in the women’s discussion of spending much time and effort making personalized gifts for people who were special to them, and creating tangible evidence of how much they cared about the recipient and understood what made that person unique. Preserving other women’s identities and their own was the third sub-theme. Patricia reported using her quilting to express her spiritual side and her care for the environment, while Nancy described her strong awareness that quilting had helped preserve the identity of women for centuries, and explained her plan for how it would help preserve her identity as well.

Being creative and displaying the results. For these women, crafting was an opportunity to be creative, and then to display the results of that creativity. This was one very attractive aspect of crafting for them, and something in which they took pride. Being creative meant imagining projects and transcending rules and patterns. For example, the women talked about being able to use their imaginations to envision original projects:

I can picture the whole series complete, but no one else can, of course. (Patricia, describing her work-in-progress)

I think, to some extent, the creativity (is what I like), going in and just seeing the variety of yarns and imagining maybe what colors and patterns would go together….and how that can mesh with practicality. (Linda)

Creativity also meant the freedom to transcend rules and patterns. Patterns for quilting and knitting presented rules to be “modified,” “adapted,” and “played with.” The ostensible limits of a project were a source of inspiration, and sometimes a way to acquire and practice a complex skill. The women talked about patterns, or detailed project directions for quilting and knitting projects. Barbara and Linda spoke about moving beyond patterns:

I find a pattern….And then I adapt it, without any other pattern. And I just do what I want with it….Once I learn the basic skill, then I can use it for other things. (Barbara)

I tend to modify or play with (patterns) a little bit, or maybe the first time I’ll follow – if it’s something very new, the first time I did socks…I followed it
religiously. And then, as time goes on and you’re more familiar, you learn why you’re doing certain stitches in rows the way you’re doing them and what modifications you make, maybe to fit you more specifically. (Linda)

For Barbara, “it’s a way of expressing myself artistically.” Even the limits she set on combinations of different textures in a project could be considered self-expression, rather than limitations, because she set them herself:

(The combination of textures) can’t be too, too wild. I have, you know, my own limits as to what I feel will work artistically or not. (Barbara)

As a seasoned instructor, Nancy emphasized that she encouraged her students to transcend the “rules” of quilting and do what they liked:

(T)here’s people that will look at you and say, “A quilt’s not a quilt if you use a sewing machine.” And, “A quilt’s not a quilt unless it’s made out of old scrap material, you have to know where all that material comes from”…there’s people that set rules to it; to me there’s no rules in quilting, it’s just, it’s what works for you. (Nancy)

Patricia elaborated on having learned the same lesson for herself:

(A)s I get more and more confident, I just realize, well, I don’t have to stick to the rules. I can be just as creative as an artist with fabric…as I was working with paper… (Patricia)

And the following comment by Patricia expresses how the sub-themes of being creative – imagining projects and transcending rules and patterns – work together:

(N)ot only am I quilting it by hand, but I invented this myself and for me, quilting is very creative. It’s not just using someone else’s pattern and – and copying it. (Patricia)

Some of the participants felt that they were able to express themselves through their projects, in ways that enabled a part of themselves to be manifested in the world. One type of expression is distinct enough to warrant its own examination: Communicating love.

Communicating love. All of the participants spoke of their craft as a way they used their skills and talents to create special gifts for people they care about. But the three quilters, Mary, Patricia, and Nancy, stood out in their commitment in this area. Specifically, the quilts they give as gifts are personalized, a fact in which they take great pride. Mary described what made a quilt that she would give as a gift so special:
(It’s) really personal. It’s something that I’ve put a lot of thought and effort into. And that I’ve chosen special things for them. Either their special color. Or their special flower on the fabric, or, you know, something like that. So it’s, it’s a very personal gift. It’s not only chosen for them but then it’s fabricated and made for them also. So from start to finish, it’s truly a personal thing. (Mary)

Patricia knew that her husband would be happy with the quilt she gave him for their 20th wedding anniversary. She explained, “He loves it. And he picked out the fabrics himself, so it was real special.” Nancy mentioned, however, that the degree of work that she does by hand on a gift quilt depends in part on how the recipient will treat it:

If I do hand quilting, that’s gonna be a quilt for somebody who’s getting married that I know will take care of the quilt. Now, if it’s a boy graduating from high school, he’s gonna get a machine pieced, machine quilted one because he’s not gonna take care of it. There’s, like, different degrees on gifts. (Laughter) (Nancy)

Preserving other women’s identities and their own. Some of the women spoke of their craft in terms of how it preserved and recognized their own and other women’s identity. For some, the craft provided a way simply to remember a woman, while for others the quilts had special significance in that they preserved the memory of a woman or women from a time when they believed women were often made invisible. An example of the former is provided when Linda described a current project that utilized supplies provided by her mother-in-law:

(T)his is - some of the yarn is yarn that my mother-in-law bought probably 40 years ago and never used and just found recently, when she was cleaning her house out. (Linda)

Patricia reported a strong sense of her craft as a way of recognizing the legacy of her female ancestors:

I like to think of it as my quilting inheritance, because it came from my grandmother…. I grew up among quilts and, you know, my grandmothers and great grandmothers have – have quilted all through the generations. (Patricia)

She explained that the quilts she had inherited from her mother and grandmother were special to her in several ways. They were not material reminders of those women, but a tangible record of their self-expression and volition:

I love the fact that...they were made all by hand, that some woman ancestor put her hands on the fabric and created something because she wanted to even if it was to be strictly utilitarian, to keep the family warm, it was creative, and she chose her fabrics, and she, I imagine that she derived a lot of satisfaction from it. (Patricia)
Nancy’s discussion of quilting was both consistent with this meaning and went even further. She talked about loving the way that quilts bridged the gap of centuries, preserving the identities of women throughout history who had quilted throughout history in a way that even their own headstones did not:

(H)ave you ever gone to cemeteries and look at headstones, the really old ones? It doesn’t have her name on it. She was either the wife of John Smith or the daughter of John Smith. Okay? That’s not even a legacy when you think about it. But, if you look at old quilts and if they’ve got the names on it….it’s so neat how they could go back and they could trace quilts back through the mothers, the daughter, the stuff by what they’ve signed on the back. [Interviewer: And they sign their own name?] The way they should sign is, okay, like my married name is Jones, my maiden name is Smith, I should sign it Nancy Elizabeth Smith Jones so they know that I was married, that was my maiden name and that was my given name. See, that’s the way you should do it. And the signature, you should always label the back of the quilts ‘cause that’s worth as much as the quilt. (Nancy)

In fact, Nancy herself intended to be remembered in the same kind of way when she was no longer living. She reported that her two children were already fighting over her “heritage quilts,” enormous handmade masterpieces that she made to be passed on to them after she died. But Nancy intended to leave a legacy that extended beyond her children to the next generation as well:

I read it in a book one time….It doesn’t matter how dirty your house is, how many dishes are in your sink, but when you die and that great-grandbaby drags out that quilt, you know you’re still remembered….I know that whenever I’m gone, my kids will still have my quilts, and probably my grandchildren will ‘cause I know they’ll have their own that I’ll make for ‘em. (Nancy)

Craft as preservation of women’s and one’s own identity – as tangible evidence of a woman’s conscious and expressive existence that is recognized by family members, customers, and yet-unborn great-grandbabies and unknown future generations – was an integral part of the craft for some of the study participants.

Relaxation

Relaxation was another theme that emerged from the data, and the relaxing aspect of quilting or knitting was central for four of the five participants. For example, in discussing machine-quilting, Mary stated:
I don’t know really what it is, but it’s very relaxing and calming for me to be in front of my sewing machine. (Mary)

Barbara disagreed with the characterization of her knitting as relaxing, correcting that it was just “appealing.” However, for the other participants, their craft was consistently relaxing, though in different ways. Two sub-themes comprised craft as relaxation. For some, their craft was a source of relaxation that provided *contentment and fulfillment*, while for others it was simply an activity that *took their mind off their worries*.

*Contentment and fulfillment.* For instance, for Patricia, hand-quilting was relaxing, both physiologically and spiritually:

> (W)hat happens when I get quilting by hand, I can *almost* feel my – my blood pressure slowing down and getting into that alpha state where you just are grooving and it’s completely relaxing to me. Even when I make a mistake and my thread knots up or, you know, I do something wrong, it’s very peaceful and very fulfilling. It’s absolute contentment when I’m doing this. (Patricia)

*Taking mind off worries.* In contrast, for Nancy and Linda, craft as relaxation was not so much about putting them into an “alpha state,” but taking their mind off their worries:

> It’s so relaxing ’cause you’re not worrying about what the kids are doing…or worrying about the bills or the appointments next week, you’re just getting those stitches straight and gettin’ things to look good. You know? And that’s the reason I like to quilt. (Nancy)

> (Knitting takes) you also away from worrying about your children or your parents, and you know, how is so and so going to do in his job interview, and how’s he going to get his stuff to where he’s going to move. (Linda)

However, the relaxation these women reported was also balanced with an enjoyment of challenging themselves to take on new projects, test their endurance, and develop new skills.

*Challenge and Commitment*

Crafting at an advanced level can be challenging, requiring an tremendous commitment of time and energy, and this very challenge seems to be relished by the participants. Linda spoke of a complicated sweater she knitted over the course of several years as her “magnum opus.” Both Nancy and Patricia related similar experiences of spending a great deal of time on a project, which in both cases was a special quilt to commemorate an anniversary:

> It takes me three years to make a bed quilt. I just recently finished one for my husband for our 20th anniversary. I gave it to him a few months before our 22nd anniversary. (Patricia)
(W)hen my mom and dad had their 35th wedding anniversary, that was a big project and I started it a year before. You know, you have to set time back to do all those, but yeah, there is a big difference. A huge difference. (Nancy)

Even while a crafter is working on a large-scale, long-term project, she may well be working on other projects at the same time. Linda explained that she tries “to have a couple going at once,” while Nancy elaborated:

Honey, a true quilter has, like, sixty projects going at the same time. *(Laughter)*

(Nancy)

For Barbara, who among the participants was the most self-taught, every project was an opportunity to deliberately increase the level of difficulty, and correspondingly, her own skill level:

Each project I try to find something new. A new thing that I have to learn. A new stitch. A new technique. Something. *(Barbara)*

All of the participants were cheerful about these challenges of time and skill, and not one of the women made a disparaging comment about the time or effort that went into acquiring the skills, working on projects, or obtaining the necessary supplies.

Summary: What Crafting Meant to the Women

Each woman had a unique history, and a unique relationship with her craft. However, similarities in the meanings and experiences of craft did emerge. The three women who quilted were so passionate about their craft that they talked about quilting professionally, one wistfully, one with happy memories from the past, and one who was happy about her current quilting business. The two women who knitted talked about enjoying their craft as well, relying on it as something to do. For most of the women, their craft facilitated connections with others, including immediate and extended family members and crafting groups. Their craft also provided a vehicle for them to express their aesthetic judgements and ideas, create personalized gifts that communicated to the recipient how much they cared, and serve as a record of their own legacy and that of other women throughout history. The majority of the women found crafting to be a relaxing endeavor, while at the same time describing it as both an engaging challenge, requiring the acquisition of new skills, and as something that required commitment of up to years at a time.

The next section looks at the meaning of exercise for these five women.
The Meaning of Exercise

When the participants were asked about their experiences of exercise, the topics they raised and the way they talked about exercise differed considerably from what they said about their craft. The flyer for the study sought women who “do not like to exercise” (emphasis added). For this reason, some of the women reported that they currently exercised, while others said that they did not. What they had in common was that they identified themselves as women who do not like to exercise. The seven major themes of meaning that arose when discussing why they do not like to exercise included (1) Feeling Obligated, (2) Unpleasantness, (3) What I Did in the Past, (4) Inconvenience, (5) Not Walking, (6) It’s What Certain Other People Do, and (7) Training and Victory. Several of these themes are comprised of sub-themes, which are described below.

The women’s discussions of their experience of exercise were largely stimulated by questions about hypothetical situations in which they were asked to envision more appealing exercise scenarios. Patricia and Nancy were asked what type of physical activity they would plan for a quilting convention, and Linda, for a knitting club. All of the women were asked how they would respond to a request from the college fitness center to provide recommendations for a new, custom-designed workout area. Their responses are reported in the sections that follow as evidence of the different themes and sub-themes.

Feeling Obligated

More than anything, exercise meant feeling obligated for these women. The theme of obligation in regard to exercise was present in every interview, and emerged as the dominant theme overall. The women expressed a sense of obligation both explicitly and less directly, through their choice of language. They also expressed it by citing factors that they described as necessary and linked to exercise. Five sub-themes that expressed the larger theme of obligation were what I need to do, what I should have done, what I resist (and feel frustrated by), what improves health, and what leads to or maintains weight loss. All of these associations with exercise were negative in one way or another.

What I need to do. One expression of obligation through language was the language of necessity in relation to exercise, both by women who currently exercised and those who did not. Barbara walked with her dogs, but expressed emphatically that there were other types of exercise she felt she needed to be doing:
I know I need to do it. I *desperately* need to do it. For any number of reasons. (Barbara)

Nancy reported having lifted weights in the past and making occasional attempts to use her daughter’s stair stepper, but did not currently exercise. She also used the word “need”:

(Y)ou need to exercise and you’ll feel better if you do, but I just, I don’t. (Nancy)

Mary, who exercised almost daily, shared this sense of obligation:

It’s just not something I get a rush from, or I look forward to exercising. Not at all. So, it’s just something I know I have to do, and I go down and do it. (Mary)

Mary later added, “It’s not a choice.” The language of obligation was also intertwined with participants’ stated intentions to expand their current exercise routine or begin a new one. For example, Linda described a two-part plan: she reported intending to eliminate sugar from her diet, a change that she described as “necessary,” and “hav(ing)” to “refocus” and attend Curves more frequently in the future:

(S)o now I have to just refocus and get there more often, which, which because this year I’m part-time at work, I can do now. (Linda)

Nancy reported her intention to utilize an on-campus fitness facility during staff-only hours, also using the language of necessity:

I’m gonna try to get into that this summer….Yeah, I need it. I need something. (Laughter) [Interviewer: *Why*?] Just because I, I feel out of shape. I mean, just even like climbing up the steps at home and coming down and back up and I’m like, I have to sit down, and I need to do something. (Nancy)

*What I Wish I Had Done.* The women reported being especially aware in the evening of whether or not they had exercised during the day. Barbara talked about the regret she felt at the end of the day when she had not exercised:

And then by the end of the day when it’s bedtime, and it’s really, you know, too late, I think, “Oh jeez, I wish I had spent, you know, half an hour on the (machine),” I think about it. And I wish I had done it. But I – it doesn’t get done. (Barbara)

Nancy drew on her memories of exercising in the morning to contrast that with the experience of not exercising, and feeling a sense of obligation while she quilted in the evening:

(If I exercise) in the morning before I go to work, I’ve got it out of the way and then when I get home and after I get the dinner done and the kids figured out what they’re doin’, which they’re not home anymore, they’re pretty well gone; then I
can sit down and quilt (laughter) and I feel good ‘cause I already exercised. 
[Interviewer: Ah! And you would enjoy it kind of even more.] Yeah! ‘Cause I know I’ve got that part done and now I can relax and enjoy the quilting instead of sitting there quilting thinking, “You know, I oughta climb on that stepper thing for a few minutes, but I wanna finish this block.” And that’s exactly how it is, too. 
(Nancy)

When Linda exercised in the morning, doing so enabled her to discharge her obligation:

I do go to Curves, and I find it better to go in the morning, and then it’s like, “Oh good, I can cross that off my list.” (Linda)

What I resist (and feel frustrated by). One corollary to feeling obligated is expressing or feeling resistance in regard to that obligation, a sentiment that some of the women juxtaposed with their expression of obligation. Every one of the women articulated resistance to exercise in some form, and for some, there was frustration with one’s resistance. In many cases, this sentiment was expressed with laughter or humor. For example, when Patricia responded to the interviewer’s question about what type of exercise might be appealing to quilters at a quilting convention, she warned that the wrong kind of programming would meet with resistance, even “mutiny”:

    (Not) you know, “50 – do 50 crunches now.” No way. That would be mutiny. 
    (Laughs)….Yeah, if it was just more work, no way. People would go down and stuff themselves on sandwiches and cookies. (Patricia)

Nancy reported an intention to exercise, but immediately followed it with a statement of her own resistance to the idea:

    I have got to start exercising, but (whispers) I don’t want to. (Regular voice) I really don’t want to. (Laughter) (Nancy)

Linda utilized humor to express resistance to the hypothetical scenarios that were posed. In response to an inquiry about what features she would like to see in a custom-designed wing of the college fitness center, her first response was, “Margarita bars?” In the same vein, when asked about an exercise-related activity that her knitting group might do together, she proposed a walk to the bakery – a location that is notable both for its function (sitting and eating baked goods) and its location (less than a minute’s walk from the meeting place of the knitting group). 

    Barbara, more than the other participants, repeatedly expressed frustration with her own reported resistance to exercise, in comments such as this one:
So it’s very frustrating. It’s very frustrating for me that I don’t do this, because I know it’s important, for my health, to do that. For my comfort to do it. (Barbara)

She even appealed to the interviewer to provide an explanation for her resistance:

I know that exercise and muscle strengthening and stretching is so important. And yet I’m not doing it. Maybe you can tell me why. (Barbara)

Mary, who reported exercising deliberately and near-daily, expressed her own personal resistance to it, describing herself as “somewhat resentful.” However, she reported that this feeling did not prevent her from exercising.

What improves health. According to some of the participants, and as expressed by Barbara (above), exercise meant better health. It was good for you, and thus one felt obligated to engage in it. But what did “better health” mean? For these women, “better health” was at times an amorphous and/or conflicted concept. For example, Patricia, Barbara and Linda described general health benefits of exercise:

(I)t’s good for my legs and arms, or heart, or something like that. Legs and heart, or some other part. Whatever. (Patricia)

(Exercise is preventive) not only from the cancer, but just all the other things, the diabetes and high blood pressure, which I’m really not affected by, but just all the things of turn- of getting 60 years old and up. (Linda)

I have yoga tapes and I have Pilates tapes, which I really should be doing for flexibility and ex- you know, muscle toning and, and muscle building, bone density, all that kind of stuff. (Barbara)

The specific meaning of exercise as improved health increased when the topic was a particular health condition. For example, Barbara reported having fibromyalgia, which causes her muscles to “shorten and gel up,” an unpleasant experience that she said could be alleviated through physical activity. As noted above, she expressed frustration with herself for her resistance, and for not doing the exercises that she stated would make her feel better:

I don’t get it done, unless I’m in a lot of discomfort and then I am forced to do it. But it would make life so much more comfortable on a daily basis if I would spend 20 minutes stretching - out in the morning. I would be much more comfortable, all day long. And, and I don’t do it. So it’s very frustrating. It’s very frustrating for me that I don’t do this, because I know it’s very important, for my health, to do that. For my comfort to do it. (Barbara)
What leads to or maintains weight loss. The topic of weight loss was never raised by the interviewer, but was a recurring theme among participants. Exercise meant weight loss. Weight loss was just as likely to be associated with not liking one’s appearance as with better health, and for these reasons, it was again seen as something that – as a woman – one was obligated to do. For example, for Mary, maintaining her weight loss was the sole reason she exercised. Mary used to be significantly overweight, and described her motivation for losing weight:

I was morbidly obese?...I had hit – just hit bottom. Couldn’t stand lookin’ at myself anymore. Didn’t – I was a slug. And I just – I don’t know. Something – I just – it clicked. (Mary)

She made it clear that the exercise she does now is solely for the purpose of maintaining her weight:

I lost 120 pounds. So. And I’ve kept it off now for two years….But the only reason I’ve kept it off, I believe – because I could go right back to those, you know, eating the way I did – was not just changing the way I eat, but keeping exercise in my life, too. (Mary)

Nancy did not discuss the topic of weight loss at length, but she did refer to herself as “overweight.” Linda reported exercising in order reduce estrogen-storing fat and lower her risks in regard to breast cancer. In describing why she went to Curves, she talked about the importance of losing fat to decrease her chances of getting cancer again:

[It was] the need to lose weight because of the – my cancer was estrogen stimulated, so I wanted to get, get rid of as much fat as I could, because the fat holds the estrogen. (Linda)

Linda later also noted that she found her stomach “not appealing,” a factor which prompted her stated intention to stop eating sugar. Barbara also wanted to lose weight:

I’m not gonna be model thin ever again. But if I could get down – I weigh about 150 right now. If I could get down to about 120, which is right in the medium BMI index range for my height, I would look and feel so much better. (Barbara)

Patricia, too, reported wanting to lose weight. When asked if there were any topics that had not been addressed in the interview, Patricia brought up losing weight – here, it seems that “us” refers to her friends and colleagues who are also quilters:

I don’t know if – if weight loss would be any part of it, but I know that, that the, all of us would like to lose weight. I know that. We – we like to eat. We like to cook. And we like to be hospitable. That’s part of our group, meetings is – is, you know – eating together. So, so it really does lend, you know, to weight gain. But,
and just regular exercise, I know, would make a difference – regular – and you would lose weight naturally without even noticing it. (Patricia)

**Unpleasantness**

The three sub-themes of *Unpleasantness* are the physical environment, other exercisers, and physical sensations. Each of these sub-themes relates to exercising in a formal exercise facility; the two that were discussed with the college fitness center (the “Rec Center”) and the local branch of the women’s-only fitness facility, Curves. All of the women had tried at least one of these two facilities, although three women mentioned that the cost of one or the other was excessive. For the most part, the participants’ criticisms of these exercise facilities related to the people and social situations found in the facilities. Patricia was the only participant to specifically addressed the physical environment in detail.

*The physical environment.* Patricia was asked to describe how she would design a new wing of the college fitness center, and her response addressed aspects of the sounds, the air quality, and the visual aspects:

I don’t know what you can do about that boomy sound that irritates me so much, boomy, basketball stadium, basketball – what do they call it? [Interviewer: The courts?] Yeah, yeah. That kind of sound booming off the walls. That’s, that you can’t relax when – when the big rubber balls are hitting the walls all the time. But of course, that’s why people go to the gym. So, yeah, I can’t complain about that. But that’s what keeps me out. So somehow an area that’s quieter. (Patricia)

An atmosphere with potted plants would be so nice. ‘Cause that would be friendly and it would in – it would imitate the environment outside. And it would also be pumping out some actual oxygen. Because the – usually the smell and the air quality inside the gym is, is just full of sweat and, and it – and that smell like wet rubber. *(Laughs)* It’s not very pleasant….We know it’s not moldy, but it smells sort of that way because it’s so humid. So, uh, some actually fresh plants would be nice, lots of them. (Patricia)

I hate the light in the gym with all those green fluorescent lights and not enough daylight, natural daylight, and the color of the walls is unfriendly. [Interviewer: *What – what (about it) is unfriendly?*] That greenish – there’s sort of a greenish, a white that picks up the – the light so that it becomes green – that fluorescent light sort of greenish, bluish, cool. A nice warm buttery – buttery yellow or buttery gold would be nice. Lavender isn’t too bad. It’s cool, but, but it would be, it’s – it’s a friendly color. It’s a gentle color. (Patricia)

Each of Patricia’s descriptions of the sounds, smells, and sights in the fitness center include the word “relax” or “friendly.” The overarching theme through her descriptions is that the fitness
center is not a friendly setting where she can relax. Although the other participants focused more on the people inside of the gym instead of the physical attributes of the environment, the idea of preferring a friendly setting where they could relax is a constant.

*Other exercisers.* The women expressed a keen awareness of the presence, and sometimes the behavior, of the other clients at the college fitness center or at Curves. Some of the women described the contrast they perceived between themselves and the other clients. For example, Barbara described herself as a “back-seat Baptist,” explaining that she preferred to hang back and not participate in many situations. She reported disliking the emphasis on social interaction in the exercise circuit at Curves:

> I just preferred to go in and do it, and there was always kind of a forced friendly chatter or banter….and a lot of the people knew each other and had school things and kid things to talk about too, so - I don’t know. It may have just been that I was looking for a reason not to go. (Barbara)

At the Rec, Barbara and Nancy commented on how the presence of more skilled or more physically fit users impacted their experiences. Barbara spoke of not wanting to try yoga even though a friend enjoyed the class, because of her own perceived low skill level:

> (T)hat’s not a real incentive to participate in the class, when you know you’re not going to be at that same either skill level or ability level as the other members of the class. (Barbara)

Nancy at first said she was pleased that college students used the Rec. However, she went on to describe the negative effect that their presence had on her own experience:

> (I)t seemed like all the college kids was there, but you know, it was good; I’m glad that they’re starting a good healthy work lifestyle instead of what I did. *(Laughter)* But that, that’s intimidating when you’re older, you’re overweight and you’re trying to exercise and here comes little Miss Perfect, you know? *(Laughter)* [Interviewer: Oh, yes, I do. *(Laughter)*] You know, it’s like, “Oh, why do I even try this?” (Nancy)

Linda also reported the delays that she encountered due to the presence of other clients during workouts with a personal trainer:

> The trainer had this agenda, and you would go to a machine and – because someone else would be using it, which is their – I mean, that’s fine. It’s their prerogative *(laughing).* You don’t reserve the machine. So we’d have to, “Oh, well, let’s, okay let’s maybe skip down here, and see, well, no, someone else is using that,” and then you’d get on, and someone else would be waiting, just like
Both Linda and Barbara commented on the overwhelming presence of male students in the designated weight-lifting area. Barbara described how it made her feel, while Linda described her perception of their behavior:

Ah, the weight room was always kind of difficult because there were big guys who were in there using the facilities a lot, and I always felt a little awkward. (Barbara)

It was like early evening (at the Rec), and one time, the, the person – the trainer that was helping me even like had to go and ask these guys, please stop grunting, you know when you lift the weights, just gross - [Interviewer: (laughs)] I mean, just absolutely gross. (Linda)

As addressed earlier with Patricia’s comments, the five participants were asked to imagine what they would propose if the college fitness center offered to build, decorate, and staff a new wing to their specifications. While Patricia commented on the physical environment, the other women focused on the presence of the other users of the facility. Mary, who only exercises alone in her basement, flatly refused to answer it, explaining that she just had no interest in working out there:

Well, I probably wouldn’t, simply because I would have to leave my home to come exercise? And that wouldn’t happen. (Mary)

Mary also explained that her best friend managed the local Curves, and she refused to go there. She explained that in the past, before she had lost weight, it had to do with being seen by other people and noticed for her weight and lack of skill:

Well, when I weighed 250 pounds it was because I was not going to put clothing on to show off my fat body. And go in front of other people and be very uncoordinated or, or whatever. (Mary)

She went on to explain that after having lost the weight, she still exercises alone. She exercises in her basement, and will not allow her husband or sons to be present while she exercises. She also explained that she used this private time and space while she exercised to reflect on her own thoughts or to watch a “chick flick” that her husband and sons would not have wanted to watch.

Nancy was also initially put off by the question of how she would design a wing of the fitness center, although her reaction was different. Nancy’s first response was to laugh, speechless. After being prompted a second time, she said, “That is intimidating, you know?”
However, her eventual response also focused primarily on the other exercisers: she went on to suggest that perhaps a situation in which employees, but no college students, were able to work out at a given time would be desirable.

When Barbara described her ideal exercise space in a hypothetical new wing of the college fitness center, she was asked who would be welcome to use the space:

Well, th- you get into the, you know, you don’t want to limit the people. It would be - [Interviewer: Well, if it was completely up to you?] People who are just interested in, not muscle building as a, as a muscle builder, weight lifter kind of thing. But just *health. Toning.* (Barbara)

Like Nancy and Barbara, Patricia also preferred the idea of exercising around people who were similar to her, saying that there should be an area “set off for noncompetitive people.” When prompted for clarification, she elaborated on what that meant:

Right, well, the – the people who will go in and now – now they’re going to do 20 laps, and they’re gonna do it power walking, and they’re – they’re gonna either push you over if you get in the way or, you know, make you feel like a turtle if - if they have to go around you. So there’s that attitude, real intense versus, you know, relaxed. (In a separate area) we wouldn’t be as intimidated by young, healthy people who are intensely, you know, keeping in shape.” (Patricia)

She went on to explain that it was not merely her own feelings she wanted to spare, but those of the more competitive exercisers as well:

(Y)ou also wouldn’t have to just feel like you’re slowing them down, which I feel bad. You know, when I feel, well, people are very serious about working out. And they – they’ve got this one hour, say, their lunch hour and then I’m in their way, I feel bad about that. So that’s not just intimidation. It’s really consideration. (Patricia)

*Physical sensations.* The sub-theme of *physical sensations* includes a range of physical sensations that the women connected with exercise and reported disliking. Nancy particularly disliked the sensation of feeling out of breath on a stairstepper, and in fact used it as her personal signal to stop exercising:

(W)hen I get to the point where I’m having trouble breathing, I get down quick, that’s enough, no more. So, it’s probably my stopping point. (Nancy)

Linda reported that feeling hot was a significant disincentive for her now, although it had not always been that way:
I don’t like to be hot, like really hot, sweaty, uncomfortable, like, I don’t tolerate that very well anymore. So if I’m like mowing the lawn with a push mower, it’s I think the heat I don’t like, more than the exercise. (Linda)

Linda attributed her increased dislike of heat to her age, explaining “the older I get, the less tolerant I am of it being hot outside.” Like Linda, Patricia did not like to feel sweaty:

Exercise is boring – tedious, boring, dull, and I don’t like to be all sweaty. (Patricia)

Nancy reported that becoming sweaty as a result of exercise was also something that she did not like about exercise, although her objection related more to logistics; she noted the necessity of showering after exercise before returning to work.

What I Did in the Past

As stated previously, all five of the women self-identified as not liking to exercise. However, for some of them, this self-identification did not preclude reporting enjoying past experiences with exercise and physical activity. For instance, Linda described enjoying cross-country skiing, ice skating, and especially bike riding, recalling, “There were times when I would spend…whole days on a bicycle.” Patricia reported having enjoyed an acquaerobics class:

Now two summers ago, I signed up for…aquaerobics. That’s what they are. That was fun. [Interviewer: Why was that fun?] Because you could get in water and float. It was just marvelous. It was like defying gravity. (Patricia)

The telling of past experiences was sometimes followed by a disclaimer, or an explanation for why the woman no longer engaged in the activity. Nancy described her past involvement with lifting weights, and explained what would be difficult about lifting weights now:

W)hen I first got married, I decided I was gonna get in shape and I didn’t have any kids, so I bought the weight bench and weights and my husband laughed at me, but I did for about six months, I did it every night faithfully….So, yes, weights are great and if you do ‘em, you know, do ‘em regularly and you watch how you do ‘em, they do work quite well, but it’s gettin’ myself up to do ‘em and that’s my problem. (Nancy)

Although Linda had talked about enjoying riding her bike, she reported having stopped as well:

(W)here I lived before was flat (laughs) and you have all the paraphernalia. You have the helmet. You have the hills. (Whispers) It just became, like, a big pain in the ass. (Linda)
No participant reported continuing to take part in the activities they used to enjoy. The next section examines an explanation for the ceasing of physical activity that was so predominant that it emerged as a unique theme: *Inconvenience.*

*Inconvenience*

The women reported that the additional time and activities required by participation in exercise was something they did not like. They offered these explanations particularly in explaining why they no longer took part in activities that they used to enjoy (also described above). For example, although Patricia reported having liked her aquaerobics class, she disliked the time and the preparation associated with getting ready for it and getting dressed afterwards:

> I found that it took up way too much time, because by the time I dressed out and found – got my hair bound up into a cap, and then showered, and then dressed back in, and then combed my hair, it was hours, three hours. That’s way – I – I can’t – I don’t have three hours a day for waste on exercise. (Patricia)

These topics – getting to the location, taking a long time to get ready or recover from exercise, or to transport necessary equipment – recurred especially frequently in Linda’s statements:

> I guess a lot of things I’ve given up just because, in my mind, it’s inconvenient, although I know it really isn’t. I know if I really wanted to kayak, like my friends do, I would buy kayaks and so on and so on. But, to me, you, you spend three hours preparing to do it, an hour doing it, and then three hours undoing it. *(Laughs)* So it just, I don’t know, kind of doesn’t make sense to me. But if, if I’m at a place where I can just get into a canoe, and canoe… I like that. Or just get on a bike, and bike around some nice little trail….*(L)ike horseback riding, jeez. If I can just get on a horse, I would enjoy that, but you can’t….*(Y)ou have to brush the horse down. You have to put the saddle on. You have to find the horse (laughs) – yeah. Sometimes you have to put it in a trailer and drive somewhere. (Linda)

Linda prized convenience and ease. When she was asked to describe her ideal fitness center, Linda proposed a way to make the process of going more convenient:

> *(C)lothes ready for me to change into that I can just give back to you, and I get clean clothes afterwards or, you know, whatever. You clean it, and then the next time I come, I get another little thing to change into so I don’t – and a, and a real convenient place just to hang your own clothes...* (Linda)

The issue of changing and transporting clothes seemed to particularly resonate for Linda:

> I don't know what it is, about changin’ clothes. Keepin’ track of them all, luggin’ them around, shleppin’ them around...* (Linda)
All of the women talked about walking. Most of them reported liking to walk, particularly when they had company. What was not clear, then, was whether they viewed walking as “exercise.” For some of the women, there seemed to be some overlap, in which walking was exercise, but they liked it in spite of that. For others, it was simply not considered exercise. Also, the type of company that the women preferred varied. Linda, for example, preferred the company of a friend:

I like to walk. I mean, I don’t like to exercise, maybe with the exception of walking? But then I want a companion, usually. [Interviewer: Why is that?] I don’t know…. (T)o me, it’s an opportunity to renew and keep a friendship going, and be healthy at the same time. It’s just kind of multi-tasking, I guess. (Linda)

Barbara and Patricia preferred the company of their dogs on their daily walks:

I have two dogs and we walk in the morning for about a mile and half maybe - a mile, mile and a half….And then I walk in the evening maybe, mm, three-fourths of a mile with the dogs. (Barbara)

I like walking. I do walk. I walk about two mile – two to four miles a day with my dog. But I do it outside, and I have a different course, and I walk on a sidewalk, and I enjoy the trees, and the – the smell of the air, and the flowers that I’m looking at, or the animals that go by. And I enjoy the dog. So I don’t consider that exercise. I consider that walking the dog. (Laughs) (Patricia)

Nancy did not currently walk her dog on a daily basis, but enjoyed it when she did and expressed an intention to do it more often:

(A)s far as wanting to get out and do it, we’re planning on moving into town here this summer, we got a house in town, and I have a Boston Terrier and I plan on walking him. Now, he’s a great dog and I love taking him for walks and I think to me that’s kind of appealing. (Nancy)

However, in keeping with the themes of obligation and resistance described previously, Nancy soon followed her intention with a whispered admittance of ambivalence:

You have to, that’s my plans, and I have got to start exercising, but (whispers) I don’t want to. (Regular voice) I really don’t want to. (Laughter) (Nancy)

The women also brought up walking when they were asked to imagine more appealing exercise venues. Patricia, Linda and Nancy suggested options that involved walking, with Patricia and Linda’s recommendations also including the same type of circuit-based training
found at Curves. Asked to envision what type of exercise would be appealing to attendees at a quilt show, Patricia declared that some exercise would be “a great break” there – provided, however, that it met certain standards for atmosphere, pace, and variety:

A walking course would be excellent. And I think that the quilters would be interested in taking a break and walking as long as it’s not competitive, which…would be not in the spirit. It would be annoying. And, uh, and intimidating. As long as…you have a slow pace, with places to stop, maybe places to stop and stations to do other sorts of things like arm lifts, or neck rolls, or weights, or jump ropes, or jumping jacks. Something like that. And, and of course, places where you can get water. (Patricia)

In response to the question about how she would design a portion of the fitness center, Linda’s first response was to propose margarita bars. After being prompted to consider alternatives, she proposed a pool that was not too crowded, and a track for walking, with stations that sounded like the one Patricia had proposed for the hypothetical quilt show:

(W)ell, like I said, I like walking. So some sort of track would be nice, and I suppose…wouldn’t this be nice if it were varied, maybe just not in a circle, maybe, some little steps along the way and little things just to break the monotony a little bit or to use different parts of your body than just walking. [Interviewer: Like, what would that be like?] Maybe some, some steps or some – inclines and then declines, you know, just to raise your heart rate. I suppose to have some things like right along the side, where you could do some pull-ups. (Linda)

Nancy described an experience she had actually had at a quilt show that involved walking and suggested that it could be replicated…although only on an annual basis:

(Q)uilt shows are fun and you’re walking around and you’re moving...I went to a quilt show one time that they had to set it up, set up all through the town...and you could have it set up on maybe a one mile, at least one mile walk. That’s what I would do. [Interviewer: That sounds really nice.] That would be good. That would be my, that’d be it, my exercise in for the year. (Laughter) (Nancy)

One of the women, Mary, described a very different relationship with walking than the other women. Her experiences with walking are described in a later section, Training and Victory.

It's What Certain Other People Do

The participants offered a range of theories as to why they did not like exercise, or why they did not engage in more physical activity. These explanations often included an indication of the kind of personality qualities or circumstances the women believed corresponded to people who did like to exercise.
Linda reported that she had not been attending Curves regularly, and explained that her non-attendance was the result of the loss of her mother, combined with a full-time work schedule:

(A)lmost a whole school year went without me going, maybe occasionally on the weekend, having to do with my mother passing away and just – [Interviewer: I’m sorry to hear that.] just working all day....so now I have to just refocus and get there more often, which, which because this year I’m part-time at work, I can do now. (Linda)

Linda also said that if she were currently married to an active husband, she would be more active herself:

My husband does not – he’s, he doesn’t exercise. He doesn’t recreationally exercise, so I’m sure that that makes a difference. If I was married to someone that enjoyed these things, which I was once – I would just go along and do it. (Linda)

Barbara’s experience was different from Linda’s. Barbara reported that her husband was athletic and likes to hike, yet she did not share his interests. She explained that if she were to exercise and lose weight, then she might be able to keep up with them:

I would have more energy to walk with my family. You know, they’re all forging on ahead, and I’m kind of – trudging behind... (Barbara)

Barbara also stated that she believed the determining factor in whether a person exercised was what their priorities were:

(I)t’s just a question of choice and time choice. How are you going to spend your time? (Barbara)

Patricia theorized that the reason some people liked to exercise and others did not had to do with different personality types. She explained that she watched people at quilt shows and noticed trends:

I go to quilt shows and I look at the people, as well as the quilts, you know. And the Type A personalities are likely to be skinny, are gonna be very tense, they’re going to be very competitive. They’re gonna be…looking at the quilts critically saying, “I could do better than this,” or, you know, “How’d they get in the show?” And they’re gonna be skinny, and intense, and they’re gonna drink nonfat lattes, you know, (laughs) and – and, and maybe, “Oh, I’ve got to go out, you know, I – I’ve got to leave now. I’ve got to do my running.” (Patricia)
The “Type A personalities” she observed were different from the people she liked to spend time with:

Whereas, the people that I’m comfortable with, you know, “Eh, yeah, well, you know, it’s their first effort. If it’s not perfect, that’s fine, you know. Let’s – let’s encourage them.” And no, I’m not gonna go running. I’m gonna have a cup of coffee and maybe a doughnut with my friend here, whom I haven’t seen in a couple of years. And we’re gonna just relax and talk.” It’s sort of a different type of personality, I think. (Patricia)

In addition to personality, Patricia also suggested that age was a factor in selecting appropriate exercise. When the subject of t’ai chi was raised by the interviewer, she responded with enthusiasm:

T’ai chi would be great. As a matter of fact, um, t’ai chi is something that, um, I – I’m personally interested in. And I used to do karate back in – when I was, uh, 30 – or 25. (Clears throat) And so now t’ai chi would be the – I’m 52 now. And t’ai chi would be the – the martial art so to speak that I – would be proper for my age. (Patricia)

Mary believed that her own preferences for not liking exercise, but liking quilting, were the result of the culture she grew up in. She reported seeing that exercise was not for girls: “Boys were sports.” Mary explained her theory:

I’m convinced in my case it was the way I was brought up. And it was a generational thing. Barbie dolls. You know, you don’t do that running around. You do that sitting down. And you know – gosh. I think gi- you know, girly type things. Cooking. Home economics. You know, that kind of stuff. Homemaking. That was what I was brought up on. You know, when I was going to be going off to college, the thought was, “Do you want to be teacher or a nurse?” ….It wasn’t, “Oh, girls can be anything they want to be” ….Even though my sisters don’t sew…they don’t exercise, either. And I, I just think it was our, our bringing – our upbringing and our time in society that girls didn’t do that. Boys were sports. Girls were, you know, calm, and didn’t raise a ruckus. (Mary)

Training and Victory

Four of the five women had described walking as something they found enjoyable, at least in theory, and as something they liked to do with company. For those four women, walking may or may not have been considered exercise. However, the fifth woman, Mary, described different experiences and perceptions in regard to walking. She reported walking nearly every day, explicitly for the purpose of exercise, and of strongly disliking it. As described earlier, she walked in her basement on a treadmill, and did not allow her husband or sons to be present while
she exercised. Yet Mary was the only participant to describe exercise in terms of mastery or a challenge. She reported that she challenged herself during her treadmill walking by training for upcoming road races:

I challenge myself, all the time, by keeping a race or two on my calendar that I have to go out and physically do….But that’s because then I’m training for something, so I feel like I’m forced – that I have to maintain that. Because I could easily say, “Oh, I’ll only do a couple of miles today. Or I’ll only do a couple.” But if I’m working toward a goal, then I feel like it’s, um, a little more worthy of my time. Does that make sense? (Mary)

Mary also talked about taking on bigger challenges, and described the sense of victory she felt on completion:

I just finished the half marathon at the Pig last week. Two weeks ago? Yeah, that was my first half marathon. Because I’ve only ever done 5Ks and 10Ks, and stuff. I’ll never do a marathon. Never. (Laughs) But I’ll do a half marathon again. [Interviewer: How was the half-marathon?] It was fine. I was – I was fine with it. I walked it. Ran occasionally….I was surprised actually how much I did jog during the thing? I really didn’t think I would. But it’s different outside than it is on a treadmill. And on the treadmill I do keep very good – I’m always trying to increase my speed. And I do play with the incline….So the half-marathon itself wasn’t bad at all. It was really – I felt very victorious at the end. (Mary)

In response to a question about how many races she had completed in the past year, Mary answered, “Probably 20,” adding, “And they’re usually fundraisers, for something. So, you know, that’s kind of fun to do.” For Mary, unlike the other women, exercise had come to mean training and victory.

**Summary: What Exercise Meant to the Women**

All of the women expressed feeling some type of *Obligation* to exercise, and this topic emerged as the dominant theme. Evidence of this theme was found in the language the participants used, as well as the linking to other concepts they related to obligation, such as improving health and losing weight. Exercise also meant *Unpleasantness*, which took different forms including unpleasant physical and psychological sensations. For some of the women, exercise was *What I Did in the Past*, something they had once done, but no longer engaged in. It also meant *Inconvenience*. For most of the women, exercise may or may not have included *Walking*. For some of the women, exercise was an activity linked to other specific people or to broader categories of other people, classifying it as *What Certain Other People Do*. Finally, for only one of the five women, exercise had also come to mean training over a long period of time.
and feeling victorious after succeeding in competitions: *Training and Victory*. The Discussion section addresses the implications of these findings, and compares them to the findings for the meaning of crafting for these women as well.
CHAPTER FIVE
Discussion

This section addresses the results of this project in light of relevant literature. In doing so, constraints the women faced in talking about exercise are first discussed. This is not so much a finding based on “what” the women said but rather “how” they said what they did about their experiences of exercise in relation to their experiences of their hobbies. Three significant dichotomies that capture the findings related to “what” they said about their experience of exercise in relation to their hobbies are then addressed: Obligation vs. Freedom, Learners and Leaders vs. Left Out or In the Way, and Relaxation and Peace vs. Stress and Inconvenience. A fourth, and false, dichotomy, Participation vs. Non-Participation, is also addressed. Limitations and implications for future research are also reviewed. Finally, a range of theoretical and practical implications of this work are discussed.

Constraints on Expression

Before discussing the meanings (including constraints) that the women talked about in regard to exercise, it is important to note that there were other meanings and constraints that they encountered and did not convey directly. Rather, these other meanings and constraints emerged during the interviews in the ways they spoke about exercise. These constraints affected what they were able to communicate and how they were able to communicate it. These constraints are divided into two main categories: being constrained from stating negative opinions about exercise-related topics, and being constrained to state the health benefits of exercise.

Constrained From Stating Negative Opinions

The first category of constraint in talking “about” exercise was demonstrated in different ways. For example two of the women whispered when first discussing their negative experiences or perceptions of exercise. Nancy said, “I have got to start exercising, but (whispers) I don’t want to. (Regular voice) I really don’t want to. (Laughter).” Linda did the same thing when she described why she stopped riding her bicycle: “You have the helmet. You have the hills. (Whispers) It just became, like, a big pain in the ass.”

Some women countered their own complaints by immediately following them with an argument for the rights of the other people involved. Linda described her frustration when she encountered other people using the exercise machines she wanted to use:
(Y)ou would go to a machine and – because someone else would be using it, which is their – I mean, that’s fine. It’s their prerogative (*laughing*). You don’t reserve the machine.

Barbara had preferences about with whom she would like to exercise, but was reluctant to bar other people from her imagined ideal exercise environment, saying, “(Y)ou don’t want to limit the people, you know?” Patricia explained that her preference to not exercise around very fit, intense exercisers was because she felt “bad” for “slowing them down,” adding, “So that’s not just intimidation. It’s really consideration.” She also expressed her strong dislike of the sound of the basketballs hitting the walls in the nearby courts as something that “irritates me so much” and prevents her from relaxing. Patricia then added, “But of course, that’s why people go to the gym. So, yeah, I can’t complain about that. But that’s what keeps me out.”

In her comments, Patricia succinctly references several key issues: an aspect of the gym made her not want to be there; other participants had a greater right to exercise their preferences that she did, even if it meant creating conditions that prevented her from using the gym; and, finally, that she did not have a right to “complain about that.” Many factors affect what is discussed in an interview; as stated in the Methodology section, the interviewer and the interviewee generate the conversation together. At the same time, it is necessary to understand their statements throughout the conversations on exercise as having been shaped by limits on how much they felt they could express a negative attitude about exercise or even other exercisers’ rights.

*Constrained to Recite Health Benefits*

A related issue was that some of the women seemed to feel obligated to recite the health benefits of exercise, and this also shaped the participants’ responses. Dworkin (2003) described this same experience in interviewing women at the college fitness center she studied:

> When I ask women at KCF why they work out, many of the interviewees immediately engage with a health discourse....I note the similarity in health talk across different women, and how it slides effortlessly out of their mouths like a cultural mantra (p. 138).

The ways in which three of the women in this project addressed the health benefits echoes Dworkin’s perceptions of the young women in her study. For example, in the current study, when she was explaining why she had considered buying a stationary bicycle for her home, Patricia said, “(I)t’s good for my legs and arms, or heart, or something like that....Whatever.”
Linda said that exercise helped prevent not only a recurrence of the cancer she had experienced, “but just all the other things, the diabetes and high blood pressure, which I’m not really affected by,” and Barbara said she should do her exercise tapes “for flexibility and ex- you know, muscle toning and, and muscle building, bone density, all that kind of stuff.”

Hence, “how” the women talked about exercise was as important as “what” they said about it. In fact, some researchers and theorists have addressed how ways of speaking around issues related to their bodies or health are shaped. For example, in her discussion of what she calls “body-shape industries,” including the diet and plastic surgery industries, Mason (1999) argues that “(their) real harm to women...is that they generate practices, painful disciplines, and discourses which choke out the active participation of women in definitions of women’s identity and well-being” (p. 244). This active participation in notably absent in the statements of the women in the present study described above, in which the women seemed unwilling to claim their territory in an exercise environment or put their needs ahead of others. Experts in exercise and related fields have also been found to shape the internal and verbal discourses, by undermining the experienced reality described by women. Sharpe (1995) identifies the “subtle humiliations” (p. 10) that older women face in healthcare settings, such as the “propensity of physicians to dismiss or diminish the importance of...women’s complaints” (p. 11). In the exercise realm, Dworkin (2003) describes how women’s concerns, and what they know to be true about their bodies, are undermined by “experts.” Specifically, Dworkin addresses the ubiquitous refrain delivered by fitness professionals that women cannot “get big” from lifting weights, which contradicts the personal experiences of women:

Most women stay out of the weight room for the common reason that they feel intimidated but also because they don’t want to ‘bulk’ or get bigger….I argue that it is not the case that women can’t get big muscles, but rather many know they can and frequently structure fitness activities so as to avoid this bodily outcome (p. 137).

When women are told that the things they are noticing, experiencing, and describing do not matter or are not actually happening, there are several possible outcomes. A woman who has one kind of sense, to borrow Mason’s (1999) terms, of her own “identity and well-being” in a realm where she is undermined may simply dismiss the person undermining her. However, it is rarely that simple or that contained. In areas where there is a strong culture of experts (the body-shape industries described by Mason, the healthcare setting described by Sharpe, the fitness setting described by Dworkin) a woman’s ability to talk about her needs, concerns, and dissatisfactions
may be seriously eroded by this discourse.

Henderson and Ainsworth (2000), who investigated women’s physical activity from a feminist qualitative perspective, even describe their participants’ description of lack of time as a reason for not exercising as “a common excuse” (p. 46). To describe it as an excuse instead of an explanation, a reason, part of a narrative, or another neutral yet accurate term conveys a message about the value of the response and the role of the women. An “excuse” is a reason not to do something that one should be doing, and it usually carries a connotation of illegitimacy. When we as individuals judge something to be an excuse, it carries with it a sense of greater knowledge or even moral superiority. When we as researchers publish with that language, we send a strong, if not intentional, message. The point of citing this is to indicate that even extraordinarily conscientious researchers may bring and perpetuate a hierarchical and morally superior attitude toward women who do not exercise.

One word in an article may seem like a small thing. However, what it represents may be quite serious. The language we use to describe people, and specifically women in mid-life who do not exercise, is emblematic of the cultural discourse that forms and continues constraints like those described above.

The literature reviewed for this project did not directly address the constraints that women who do not like exercising, or even women in general, encounter in discussing the topic of exercise. However, their voices are absent from much of the research. In fact, the lack of their inclusion in the research suggests that such constraints are not understood and/or do not warrant exploration. I posit that the ways that women are limited in voicing their preferences about their own involvement in exercise are fundamentally linked to their non-participation. It would be very interesting to explore the relationships between how women who like and do not like to exercise talk about it, and how changing the way they talk about it could affect their preferences.

It cannot be emphasized enough that all of the data for this project were shaped by these constraints on expression, and that their co-creation and interpretation were shaped by the researcher’s growing awareness of them.

**Dichotomies**

One of the central questions for this project was to understand why women who are serious about a craft and do not like to exercise prefer the craft to the exercise. The Results section addressed the themes that emerged in analysis of the interview transcripts. In this section,
selected themes are juxtaposed to explore why these women may have felt the way they did. Finally, I highlight what I argue is a false dichotomy: that of participation vs. non-participation. 

**Obligation vs. Freedom**

The most prominent theme in the women’s discussion of exercise was obligation. As discussed in the Results section, obligation took many forms. It was manifested as guilt, as resistance, and as relief when completed and simply as something that needed to be done but often was not. Mary, the woman who walked briskly on a treadmill every day to maintain her significant weight loss, said of exercise, “It’s not a choice.” Barbara described thinking at the end of the day about her exercise machine, “Oh jeez, I wish I had spent, you know, half an hour on (it)”...it doesn’t get done.” This theme of obligation in regard to exercise contrasted with the many types of freedom that the women described in regard to their craft. They used their craft to express what they saw as their unique creative ideas, their vision for a project, their personal values, and their love of friends and family members. Patricia could “picture the whole series complete, but no one else can, of course” and Linda reported enjoying “seeing the variety of yarns and imagining maybe what colors and patterns would go together.” When Mary made a quilt for a special gift, “It’s not only chosen for (the recipient) but then it’s fabricated and made for them also. So from start to finish, it’s truly a personal thing.” For Nancy, turning her craft into a business gave her the ability to earn an income while freeing her to participate in her children’s extracurricular activities the way she wanted to: “I was also a Girl Scout leader, I was a 4-H advisor, I did coach baseball for my kids, I mean, I was involved ‘cause I’m a parent that believes you don’t drop those kids off and go somewhere else and come back and pick ’em up; I stayed.” The women also described feeling free to transcend patterns and innovate. Patricia explained, “I don’t have to stick to the rules,” and Barbara would “find a pattern....And I just do what I want with it.”

Samdahl’s (1988) research utilizing symbolic interaction theory, described in the Review of Literature, uses a matrix with two variables, role constraint and self-expression, to separate activities into a continuum ranging from “pure leisure” to “obligatory tasks.” With its voluntary nature and opportunities for self-expression, for these women, crafting is pure leisure. Even in its for-profit incarnation, it is still, by Samdahl’s standards, “enjoyable work.” In contrast, exercise, for these women, is inherently obligatory. The limits they encounter in expressing their
preferences, as well as those that they they encounter in exercise environments, contribute to exercise’s continued status as “obligatory tasks.”

*Learners and Leaders vs. Left Out or In the Way*

The roles the women took on in their craft and in exercise were dramatically different. As quilters and knitters, they were enthusiastic learners, learning from family members, joyful teachers, peers, and the internet. Even as students, they were expert students, driven by inspiration, as when Linda was moved by a complicated hand-knit sweater years ago: “It was just beautiful, and I thought, I know – that’s a challenge. I know how to knit, so...I’m gonna try it.” They took pleasure in challenging themselves, as when Barbara described learning a new skill with each new project: “Each project I try to find something new. A new thing that I have to learn. A new technique. Something.” Nearly all of the women were also teachers, sharing skills and approaches through lectures, assisting clients and peers, or teaching family members (even instructing an interviewer!). Nancy, in particular, had addressed groups in the role of expert, both in regard to teaching quilting and to identifying antique quilts. The women also took on roles, in some cases, of preserving a legacy, continuing a family or historical tradition of their craft. Patricia referred to her “quilting inheritance,” and Nancy spoke about leaving quilts for her children and how, historically, women were able to preserve their names through their quilts.

These roles contrast with the ones the women described in the exercise realm. There, they were often actually left out, or simply ended up feeling like they did not belong. Barbara described what taking a walk with her family was like: “They’re all forging ahead, and I’m kind of – trudging behind.” Patricia described being able to identify exercisers at a quilt show as an entirely different, and distasteful, type of person: “They’re gonna be skinny, and intense, and they’re gonna drink nonfat lattes, you know, (laughs) and (say)...’I’ve got to do my running.’” Linda described the frustration of being shepherded around by a personal trainer from one already-occupied machine to another, and both she and Barbara talked about the presence of “big guys” who made Barbara feel “a little awkward.” Linda reported that her trainer “had to go and ask these guys, please stop grunting...just absolutely gross.” Some of the women expressed concern that they got in the way of other exercisers at the gym. Patricia described being on an exercise bike she could not control, pushing buttons in an effort to slow it down: “And then it turned out it was going too fast and when I got off, I fell over (laughs).” They felt ignorant, in
the way, alienated, and frustrated — slowing down fitness center users on the track, surrounded by more fit and younger exercisers, subjected to the off-putting sounds of certain young men in the weights area. Mary, who felt neither left out nor helpless in her regular exercise, had made a deliberate choice to restrict her workouts to her own home, and did not allow family members to be present while she exercised. She approached her workouts with a grim determination, refusing to even entertain the possibility of working out anywhere besides her home: “That wouldn’t happen.” These roles and feelings contrast significantly with those that the women experienced in their craft. Again, self-expression was constrained and exercise was not an enjoyable experience. Frew and McGillivray’s (2005) accounts of conversations with staff members in a fitness center suggest that the sense that patrons may feel of being not good enough (thin enough, attractive enough, competent enough) may be deliberately created or enhanced by staff comments and/or protocols. This contrasts sharply with the “belongingness” that Stebbins (1999) associates with serious leisure.

Relaxation and Peace vs. Stress and Inconvenience

Given the preceding descriptions, it may not be surprising that relaxation was central to the activity of crafting for the women, while stress — in many different forms — was central to exercise. The women described their craft as something that soothed them and distracted them from their concerns, even sometimes providing a sense of spiritual peace. Exercise, on the other hand, was understood to be anything but relaxing for these women. In addition to the sense of obligation and the highly unpleasant roles described above that often accompanied exercise, the women described the inconvenience of having to transport clothing and supplies. They described environments that were filled with sounds, sights, and people they did not like. Barbara talked about the stress of having to navigate the fake-cheerful conversations at Curves, and Linda talked about her frustration in having to wait for occupied machines. Stebbins (1999) describes the “occasional need to persevere” (p. 70) as a central aspect of serious leisure, and the absence of perseverance in the face of stress and inconvenience could be framed as a deficiency on the part of the women. However, they demonstrated this perseverance in many ways in regard to their craft, taking on projects that required years to complete, traveling to attend quilting shows or reach specialty fabric or yarn stores, or overcoming physical discomfort to complete their projects. What make the difference are the women’s perceptions and experiences of an activity as inconvenient or stressful, as opposed to relaxing or peaceful. To be told that exercise is
relaxing (as it is for many people) would be no more helpful, or effective, than Dworkin’s (2003) example of telling women that lifting weights will not make them bulky. The lived psychological and physiological experience of an activity as stressful or as relaxing overrides rhetoric.

**Participation vs. Non-Participation**

Although participation and non-participation appear to be a dichotomy, their relationship is actually more complex than it seems. In the Review of Literature, participation and non-participation are discussed, particularly in regard to the changes over time in how participation has been measured in the field of Leisure Studies (see Jackson & Scott, 1999). However, statements made by some of the women, as well as additional literature, indicate that even when someone does not appear to be participating in an activity, that person may still be involved in it. For instance, each participant who expressed guilt over not exercising can be thought of as participating in the cultural discourse surrounding exercise. They are spending time and emotional energy on exercise; not by doing it, but by thinking about it, measuring their behavior in light of it, and holding themselves responsible for doing it. This phenomenon most dramatically extends to a kind of “fighting back” described by Patricia, when she warned that telling attendees at a quilting convention to do “50 crunches now” would not be well received: “No way. That would be mutiny. *(Laughs)* … People would go down and stuff themselves on sandwiches and cookies.” If Patricia perceived that the attendees had a neutral relationship to exercise, she might have predicted that they would ignore such a directive. However, she predicted “mutiny” and binging on food. This prediction highlights the intense relationship that many women have with exercise, whether they physically participate or participate in it cognitively and emotionally. Acknowledging that the participation vs. non-participation dichotomy is actually incomplete is crucial for understanding those who do not exercise.

Whaley (2003) reports among her findings an observation related to this topic. In her study, she asked middle-aged women to brainstorm possible “future selves.” Although she did not stipulate that they should consider exercise at this stage in her study, participants envisioned future selves in regard to body image, health, and physical activity. However, nonexercisers and exercisers did not envision these types of future selves with the same frequency. Rather, the respondents classified as nonexercisers “chose significantly more possible selves in the body image category (than the other respondents)…. health-related possible selves and possible selves related to physical activity level also contribut(ed) significantly” (p. 8). That is, nonexercisers
were notably engaged with these topics, even without actually exercising. Both “hoped for” and “feared” future selves reflected this trend. Even in this imagined sense of self the nonexercisers, in contrast to the exercisers, were found to be engaging in a comparatively high level of thinking about their relationship to exercise and/or their body. Hence, to conceptualize participation in strictly literal terms ignores the complexity of this concept – and in terms of understanding exercise “participation,” renders the experiences of “non-exercising” women invisible. This type of conceptualization is not only perpetuates a false impression, but creates a serious disconnect when those promoting or marketing exercise treat such individuals as a blank slate.

Katz (2000) argues that “activity...shapes aged subjects within gerontological knowledge and research as knowable and empowerable, and inside care and custodial institutions as predictable and manageable” (p. 148). In light of this argument, a cautionary coda is warranted on the expanded model of participation described in this section. One can imagine the reaction of some at learning that those who do not participate in exercise may well still be participating with their thoughts and feelings: relief, along the lines of “Well, at least they’re thinking about it.” Those who are engaged with exercise actively are most manageable in the extension of this model; their engagement relieves the anxiety of those who would seek to “know” and “empower” them. It is important to remember that this engagement, or participation, is damaging in that it compounds the obligation these women already feel. Ignoring it is even more damaging.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are a number of limitations in this study. It may have been productive and illuminating to interview more than five women. However, the interview process was stopped at five for methodological and practical reasons. According to the method of qualitative research, data saturation – or the point, in data generation and analysis, when similar meanings and themes are heard and emerge over and over – is the time when one may stop data generation. In this study, data saturation was reached with five women. Further, from a practical standpoint, there were no additional candidates immediately available. Also, those qualitative researchers who, on the qualitative-quantitative continuum, fall closer to the quantitative end of the continuum, would also likely contend that it would have been productive to involve a third researcher in the process of analysis. This technique is known as “researcher triangulation” (Johnson, 1997, p. 283) and it is a technique that is believed to increase the trustworthiness of the results of data analysis. That the transcripts were not shared with the women in the study for their review, known as “member-
checking,” or that the conclusions were not discussed with them (Johnson, 1997) may also be seen as a limitation of this study. The women might have preferred that certain statements be excluded or that certain remarks be given additional context. They also might have challenged or contributed to the conclusions.

Future research can address these issues, and continue to explore topics that were raised in this project. It is recommended that future research continue to juxtapose exercise with a practice or activity that participants feel good about and are proud of. This practice enables the participants to be understood more holistically, and with more respect, by three important audiences: the researcher, the readers of published research, and the participants themselves. There is a need for more qualitative research that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their everyday lives and their lived experiences of (non)participation. More critical on-site work conducted in fitness centers, such as that published by Dworkin (2003) and Frew and McGillivray (2005), would benefit future researchers in this area. That work was especially valuable in setting precedent and tone for this project because they critically examined those things that are typically taken for granted, and emphasized the quality and nature of the experiences of people in those environments. Their on-site work and numerous interviews allowed them to substantiate their conclusions with detailed observations and quotes. Of equal importance is theoretical work such as that of Vertinsky (1998) as it provides a context for the interpretation of and a critical perspective on exercise participation and non-participation. Such perspectives require future researchers and theorists to be willing to re-examine their and their colleagues’ assumptions, and to explore the exercise experiences and perceptions of women of all ages, in particularly those in mid-life.

Seeking to understand and enhance the uneasy relationship that people who do not like to exercise have with exercise is not likely to be productive if the tools are traditional theories of exercise psychology and health behavior change. A number of these theories are addressed in the Review of Literature; in fact, the constraints faced by the participants in this project in talking about exercise pale in comparison to those imposed by many of these theories. The danger with these theories is not what they include, but what they exclude. Self-efficacy, which addresses an individual’s belief that they can accomplish something, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, which combines perceived behavioral control with attitude and perception of what is normal, focus on what a person believes she can do or should do. The Transtheoretical Model suggests
that one moves through different stages of readiness; this model also assumes some type of logical path toward a sensible goal. Self-Determination Theory, with its three components of competence, autonomy and relatedness, has the most in common with the findings of this project. At the same time, each of these theories presume either an external “should,” studying a behavior that someone “should” do, or an intrinsic drive to engage in that behavior. They also leave out too much, both conceptually and in their execution. There is no room for objections to be voiced when filling out a numbered scale. The absence of open-ended questions about one’s experience suggests that there are no relevant objections. Ecological models of exercise behavior are much needed in a field that has focused on “motivating” the individual for far too long; at the same time, it is worth noting that studying the availability of resources such as walking paths and recreation facilities is where Leisure Studies constraints research was decades ago. Certainly, the scope of this discussion does not comprehensively address these theories. At the same time, it does actively contest their right to be used to define and explain exercise behavior. In Brug et al. (2005), Whitelaw argues that the Transtheoretical Model is not “a psychological reality,” but a “more loosely constructed object whose roots lie in a wider social and cultural context” (p. 254).

Whitelaw reminds us not only to take a critical approach to traditional theories, but to remember that any behavioral theory is an artifact of its culture. It is necessary to abandon the collective vision of exercise as a health behavior, and of people as subjects who must be manipulated (or manipulate themselves) to fit into a culture that has represented obligation, unpleasantness, and a host of other challenges. Rather, those who are invested in change should improve the experience of exercise.

It is important not only to view exercise critically as a researcher, but to view the researching of exercise critically as well. Katz’s (2000) discussion of Foucault’s (1984) concept of problematizing areas of daily life addresses how a topic can become the subject of intense scrutiny and thought within a culture. Katz points out that within his discipline, gerontology, the problematization of activity (or lack thereof) serves to provide both “intellectual capital” for the researchers who study it, and “professional capital,” by “fram(ing) the relationships between the experts and the elderly” (Katz, 2000, p. 139). Researchers in the field of exercise may benefit from reflecting on how they, too, benefit within their intellectual community and in their relationships with the groups of individuals they study from the problematization of exercise, or non-exercise. The power dynamic created by presenting oneself as expert in an area where
people what to improve is not something that researchers should overlook. In addition, each study has the potential to carry a message about the assumptions of the researcher in many ways, from the assumptions that frame the study, to the manner in which it is carried out, to its completion and the way it is written up. Conscientious researchers will attempt consider every aspect of their approach and execution, remembering that their participants are people who deserve to be treated with dignity and fairness.

Implications for Practice

The implications of this project range from theoretical to practical. The most important practical implication is recognizing that the experiences that may deter mid-life women from exercising are legitimate. Together with that comes the recognition that many assumptions about exercise and the discourse of exercise may be wrong. This section addresses some of these assumptions, and then goes on to describe a number of practical implications including trading old assumptions for inventive solutions, making mindful hiring decisions, creating space for more authentic discourse about exercise, rethinking approaches to exercise promotion and education and understanding how they may compound feelings of guilt or obligation, rethinking the economic model that drives the exercise industry and making specific, technical information available to those women whose attempts to exercise are thwarted or held back by a lack of knowledge.

The Precede-Proceed theory of health behavior change (Green and Kreuter, 2005) identifies three essential elements to change people’s behavior: predisposing factors, which “provide the rationale or motivation for the behavior”; enabling factors, which “allow a motivation or environmental policy to be realized” and reinforcing factors, which “provide continuing reward or incentive” for the behavior (p. 147). It is important not only to help those who hold power in the field of exercise to consider that perspectives of women who do not like to exercise are valid and important, but to work with them to actually allow new policies such as the ones described below “to be realized.” In many cases, this will not be an easy task; however, it carries with it enormous potential both to disrupt the status quo and to level the playing field by making exercise more appealing and relevant to those who have long been excluded or have chosen to exclude themselves.

One assumption about exercise that requires rethinking is that the world of exercise and exercise discourse are neutral; that is, they do not have any particular negative effect. As
indicated by this project, the world of exercise and the discourse surrounding it may be highly charged for some individuals. For example, Fleming and Martin Ginis (2004) set out to test an entirely different hypothesis, but their findings ended up supporting this concept. Fleming and Martin Ginis (2004) wanted to test the effect of exercise video leaders with different physiques on viewers’ self-presentational efficacy and exercise task self-efficacy. They showed study participants videos with “perfect-looking, highly attractive, fit, trim” models and ones who were “more ‘normal’ or ‘average looking’” (p. 93). Their most significant finding, for the purpose of this project, was that “infrequent exercisers/nonexercisers experienced a decrease in (self-presentational efficacy) regardless of which model they saw” (p. 99, original emphasis). The authors attribute this to the bodies of the leaders (even though they were intentionally constructed as different); however, they miss the larger point. The models’ bodies may well have had nothing to do with the decrease in self-presentational anxiety. Instead the issue at hand is that watching exercise videos is not a neutral act for women who do not exercise or exercise infrequently. It may carry with it a host of negative feelings, memories, and associations.

At the same time, sometimes the assumptions that need to be re-examined belong to women who do not like or do not participate in exercise. For instance, Wilcox, Oberrecht, Bopp, Kammermann and McElmurray (2005) described how their focus group participants – older women who were not physically active – cited the potential power of social networks and exercise groups to motivate them. Young, Gittelsohn, Charleston, FelixAaron, and Appel (2001) heard similar responses from a focus group they conducted with sedentary women. However, research on mid-life and older women who do exercise regularly indicates that the majority exercise alone. Strawbridge’s (2005) survey of 103 women who were all former college athletes found that 60% of respondents exercised alone. Diehl et al. (2001) found in surveying 97 women that “the combination of high social discomfort and high social physique anxiety resulted in a pronounced preference to be alone” (p. 98). King and colleagues’ (2000) phone survey of approximately 2,900 women age 40 and older found that “62% of respondents rated exercise on one’s own with some instruction as more appealing than undertaking physical activity in a group with an exercise instructor” (p. 357). For that reason, King et al. argue that this “underscores the importance of continuing to fashion effective physical activity programs that are appealing to the two thirds of women who may not seek out participation in a community class or group” (p. 361). In short, the appeal and usefulness of groups may be overrated both by non-exercising
women and by those who create programming. At the same time, what this seeming inconsistency means should also be explored.

Other old assumptions, too, must be traded for new solutions. For example, exercisers are typically expected to wear clothing suited for exercise, to change in a facility with limited privacy, to exercise in a group setting where they may be visible to and judged by others, to be led, either in a group setting or individually, by an expert who is senior in regard to both appearance and expertise, and to accompany exercise with other health-related behaviors. This list seems, at first, to be generic and inoffensive. However, every item on it runs counter to what this project has indicated about why these women in mid-life choose to spend their time, resources, and energy on knitting or quilting. Jackson (2000) said of constraints research in leisure studies that “new substantive directions are also required, because the field cannot continue with ‘business as usual’” (p. 66). To make dramatic gains in this area, I argue that it is crucial to re-examine paradigms, such as those listed above. Fitness franchises geared toward women, such as Curves, have already re-examined and addressed some of these issues, which may account for some degree of their success. However, Curves was not seen by the women in this study as an entirely satisfactory answer. No participant spoke about it with pleasure, and even those women who had tried Curves still saw themselves as not liking to exercise. There is much uncharted territory yet to be identified. For this, not only is it useful to be willing to dispose of old paradigms, but to imagine new ones.

For example, one participant, Nancy, was deeply interested in the historical legacy of quilting. She was an expert at identifying when a quilt had been made, and had independently studied the subject. Why not a historically themed program, re-enacting the daily chores that women of another century would have performed? Carrying water and firewood, hand-washing a family’s clothing, growing a family’s food – these activities, which have historical significance for some women, could be transformed into a themed workout that is more enticing. And why not in some form of period dress? This specific direction may or may not be one to pursue, and may even sound absurd. However, I argue that this type of direction – imagining new approaches that integrate people’s interests and preferences – must be taken seriously. A pair of sneakers may seem neutral, but they are heavily loaded with meanings and associations, thanks to individuals’ own experiences throughout their lifetimes as well as advertising campaigns and media sources in general. Replacing apparently loaded cultural artifacts that we have taken for
granted, such as sneakers, with something entirely different and appealing to a targeted population could have unexpected results.

In the same spirit, institutions that are committed to change in this area should also commit to making more mindful and inclusive hiring decisions. It may not be possible for some fitness professionals who have been conventionally trained to be open to unorthodox approaches, even if they would benefit a wider audience. “Intervention programs,” Young et al. (2001) write, “are often developed from the majority cultures’ framework” (p. 241). By majority cultures, the authors are referring to race. However, I would argue that their statement’s utility goes beyond race. Health promotion and exercise professionals who develop interventions may include not only race-specific frameworks, but they must also question or critically reflect on assumptions that come from working in the health and exercise field and from their personal experiences of enjoying exercise and believing in its benefits. Even acknowledging that such a difference in perspective exists would surely serve to legitimize the difference as well as provide opportunities for learning and understanding more about those with whom the professionals are trying to connect.

James’ (2000) compelling work and her use of the framework developed by Henderson and Bialeschki (1994) speak to this point. James (2000) writes,

Many...recreation professionals chose their careers because they were Achievers during the adolescence and they may find it hard to see the world from the point of view of adolescent girls who may not feel so at ease with their bodies (p. 277).

This point is exceptionally important. If those who run fitness institutions would like to alter or expand their clientele, they must hire people who either have experienced the world of exercise in the same way as those whom they wish to attract, or who are capable of the empathy and open-mindedness necessary to recognize that others have such experiences and believe them. While this is not the only factor that is important, its absence necessarily precludes fundamental change. Such individuals must be both recruited and then supported by those who hired them.

Room must also be made and spaces constructed for more authentic discourse about exercise. The canned rhetoric referred to with such distaste by Dworkin (2003) must not be reproduced by responsible individuals in the field. Shifting the discourse of women’s exercise from weight loss to some type of “health benefit” that bears little connection to many women’s lived experience of wellness has not been a positive step. Its most damaging aspect, however,
has been to diminish our cultural ability to have a conversation about exercise that is productive and authentic. In the same vein, efforts to promote exercise that are not authentic, but rely on a flip tone, unrealistic recommendations, or contribute to feelings of guilt should be reconceived. It is noteworthy that the women in this study were, in many cases, active (although unconscious) collaborators in preserving this discourse and in countering themselves with laughter, humor, self-deprecation or assurances when they expressed a negative opinion about exercise. At the same time, however, their candid and congenial participation in this project and their willingness to have their statements recorded, transcribed, and analyzed made this argument possible.

The economic models that frame the craft and exercise industries should be taken into account in the forming of new programs as well. The key question is, “What is the financial impact on that industry when an individual successfully learns to express herself, yet feels no obligation to participate?” Harter’s (1982) concept of perceived competence provides a model for understanding an individual’s belief in their ability within a certain area. It makes distinctions both between different areas; i.e., an individual might have high perceived competence in one realm (such as quilting) and low perceived competence in another (such as exercise). In addition, the concept separates the idea of perceived competence from “general self-worth” (Harter, 1982, p. 88). Harter’s (1982) work, which focused on children, has relevance for women in mid-life as well. Specifically, how do the industry and culture of craft foster perceived competence, and how do the industry and culture of exercise fail to foster perceived competence, or even actively work against it? A corollary to this question involves economics: what is to be gained, financially, by these industries by pursuing these respective paths? Individuals with high perceived competence in a craft, whether that perceived competence relates to their skills or their ability to learn new skills, are more likely to become active consumers. They will purchase supplies. Conversely, the fitness industry is based around what Frew and McGillivray (2005) call “factories of fear” (p. 173). They describe a culture of shame and attempts to redeem oneself, while engaged in an endless pursuit of never being good enough. Most importantly, as long as fitness professionals reinforce the message that people are not competent and do not have the ability to be independent, those people will need to remain paying clients as long as they remain connected to the goal. There are exceptions to these generalities; instruction is offered in crafts, fitness gear and equipment constitutes and industry unto itself, and there are fitness professionals whose practices are driven by other models (i.e., referrals from satisfied clients who are now
independent). However, the women in this project had a high level of perceived competence in an area that stands to benefit economically from it, and a low level of perceived competence in an area that stands to benefit from it. The economic impact of fostering a high or low level of perceived competence should not be overlooked in the design of revised programs.

An argument can also be made for making some basic information more accessible. Simple tools and information could enhance some of the experiences described by the women in this study. A heart-rate monitor worn during walks could enable those women who walked regularly, yet remained frustrated about their lack of weight loss, to enhance their walks’ effectiveness on their own terms. Women such as Nancy, who described spending a few minutes on the stairmaster at home and then having to get off because she felt out of breath, or Patricia, who had the experience of being unable to control the speed of her stationary bicycle and subsequently fell down, could benefit from having accurate and user-friendly information about how to control those machines made available to them. Even better, the controls could be redesigned with the goal of improving the users’ experiences. These small technical solutions are by no means cure-alls, but that does not mean that they should be ignored either.

Throughout this project, I was struck by the fact that the women in the study displayed characteristics that are commonly associated with serious exercisers. They displayed a high pain threshold; the ability to take on daunting projects and teach themselves new and challenging physical skills or learn them from others; and the willingness to work patiently for a long time to achieve a goal, go out of their way to obtain the necessary supplies, and repeat the same motions over and over – in their craft. Yet they described exercise as physically uncomfortable, overwhelming, difficult to master, boring, inconvenient, and repetitive. Future efforts to promote exercise to groups with members similar to those who took part in this project must respect that such women already possess the necessary skills and mindsets that they and others consider to be necessary for exercise. Meaning, joy, expression, autonomy, freedom, preservation, communication – all of these are found by these women in their craft. Yet none of the women found these qualities in their exercise experiences. Efforts to enhance participation in exercise for such women that take this into consideration have great promise to be effective and result in success.
FIGURE 2

Diagram showing the meanings of exercise with various branches:
- Feeling Obligated
- Unpleasantness
- Training and Victory
- Not Walking
- Inconvenience
- It’s What Certain Other People Do

Branches include:
- What I need to do
- What I should have done
- What improves health
- What leads to or facilitates weight loss
- The physical environment
- Other exercises
- Physical sensations
- Not Walking
- Training and Victory
- Inconvenience
APPENDIX A
Informed Consent Letter

Overview
The purpose of this project is to better understand the experiences, preferences and beliefs of women who participate in a hobby and do not participate in exercise. A great deal of research has been done to gain insight into the social and psychological factors that facilitate or hinder participation in exercise. However, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, qualitative research that asks participants to examine their participation in a hobby and their non-participation in exercise, and then to compare and contrast the two, has not been conducted.

Participation
You are invited to participate in this study. If you participate, we will meet at a mutually convenient time and place to discuss your experiences with a hobby and with exercise. You can bring an example of your hobby if you would like. The interviewer will make an audio recording of each conversation, which will last between 20 and 60 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the session at any time or refuse to answer any questions. There is no monetary benefit to participating in this study.

Risks and Benefits
In regard to risks posed by your participation in this study, we will be sitting and talking. You will not be asked to do anything that exposes you to risks beyond those of everyday life. Some participants, however, might find the experience of discussing their participation or non-participation in exercise stressful. In regard to benefits derived from your participation, the researcher hopes to gain insights that could be used to improve exercise instruction and programming for women. You will have the opportunity to contribute to research that may help women who take part in exercise programs and classes. In addition, articulating your thoughts on a hobby and exercise may prove beneficial for you as an opportunity to express and sort through your experiences and possibly improve your future experiences in both realms.

Confidentiality
The audio recordings of the interviews and the transcripts will be kept in a secure location by the researcher. The transcripts of the interviews and any published accounts will substitute pseudonyms for participants’ names.

If You Have Questions
If you have further questions about the study, please contact Diana Ecker at 513-255-6963 or eckerd@muohio.edu, or Dr. Valeria Freysinger at 513-529-2710 or freysivj@muohio.edu. You may contact the Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at 513-529-3734 or humansubjects@muohio.edu for questions about your rights as a participant.

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I agree to participate in this study of hobbies and exercise. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that my name and identity will not be associated with my responses in transcripts or published accounts.

Participant’s signature _________________________      Date _________________________

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APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Understanding participation in a hobby
- Tell me about your hobbies.
- Which one would you say you are most involved in?
- How much time do you spend on it?
- What do you do?
- What do you like about it?
- Where do you do it? Who do you do it with?
- How did you get interested in this hobby? When?
- Why have you stuck with it? What does it add to your life?
- How does it feel when you do your hobby? How does it feel to talk about it?

Understanding non-participation in exercise
- Have you exercised before? What was it like?
- What is exercise to you? (i.e., how would you define it?)
- Do you like to exercise? What do you like or dislike about it?
- How much do you exercise these days?
- What kinds of things make you want to exercise?
- What kinds of things make you want to not exercise?
- What do you think could get you to like to exercise?
- How did you feel when you have exercised? How does it feel to talk about exercise?

Constructively comparing and contrasting the hobby and exercise
- If exercise were more like your hobby, would that make it better? How could it be more like your hobby? What would be different about it?
- If you were designing an exercise program for women who like to do your hobby too, what would that program be like?
- If you could tell people who set up exercise classes and programs how to do things better, what would you tell them?
Are you a knitter?
Are you a quilter?
Are you serious about a craft?

For my master’s thesis at Miami University, I am conducting a study of women born between 1946 and 1964 who are serious about a particular craft and do not like to exercise. If this describes you, I hope you will consider helping me with my research by taking part in this study.

Participating in this study would involve meeting with me at a time and place that are convenient for you, for an interview that would be audio-recorded. Your name would be changed in any published or unpublished reports. As a thank-you for your help, you would receive a $10 gift card to a craft or hobby store. Please e-mail or call me if you are interested or would like more information: Diana Ecker, eckerd@muohio.edu, 513-664-7168.
Are you a quilter?

Are you a knitter?

Are you serious about a craft?

For my master’s thesis at Miami University, I am conducting a study of women born between 1946 and 1964 who are serious about a particular craft and do not like to exercise. If this describes you, I hope you will consider helping me with my research by taking part in this study.

Participating in this study would involve meeting with me at a time and place that are convenient for you, for an interview that would be audio-recorded. Your name would be changed in any published or unpublished reports. As a thank-you for your help, you would receive a $10 gift card to a craft or hobby store. Please e-mail or call me if you are interested or would like more information: Diana Ecker, eckerd@muohio.edu, 513-664-7168.
REFERENCES


