

ENGAGEMENTS WITH NATURE: AGEING AND WINDSURFING

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Introduction

Research evidencing and advocating active leisure as a way towards healthy ageing is a positive strategy for individuals and society. However, without locating this research in the broader socio-cultural contexts of ageing and taking seriously the voices of a diversity of older people, we cannot fully understand what ageing actually means to different people, nor can we hope to create good practices for healthy ageing and flourishing communities. Discourses around ageing are largely out of touch with the experiences of many of the over-60s population. This chapter examines the potential for exploring the perspectives of active older people, to understand how they remain healthy and independent as they age. It draws upon ethnography, auto-ethnography and creative non-fiction to generate insight.

It is argued that not only are societies' and individuals' knowledge and understandings of being and becoming old significantly influenced by the power of discourses, contextual locations such as time and place also play a crucial part in this construction. The chapter thus explores the changing relationship of self, body, social and environmental contexts and the implication these have for meaning making, practices and expectations for later lives. Through a nexus of the ageing body, physical activity and nature through the medium of windsurfing, it attempts to 'trouble' stereotypes of ageing, drawing attention to the location and environment in which the activity of windsurfing occurs. The methodological approach is interpretative and draws together current socio-cultural understandings of the ageing body.

Discourses on ageing

I have argued elsewhere that older people are not a homogeneous group and nor are the leisure choices and activities of older people uniform. LSA

Publication No. 108, *Third Age and Leisure Research* [Humberstone (ed), 2010a] incorporates some key developments in researching leisure and ageing and contextualizes the research discussed here. In addition to recognizing the heterogeneity of older people and acknowledging 'old' and 'older' as discursive constructions, *Third Age and Leisure Research* also questions the medicalisation of ageing at the centre of much analysis of growing old. It challenges positivistic claims about leisure and ageing, calling for critical assessments of related sociocultural factors. It locates the significance of the 'Baby Boomer' generation born around the end of World War II (1945–1962) in advanced industrial countries as they retire. Popular discourse on ageing is largely out of step with the experiences of many of the over-60s population, many of whom have wealth, whilst a significant contrasting negative position faces those without such economic means. Furthermore, government is particularly exercised with the economic 'costs' to society of the increasing older population in terms of pensions and health and care services.

A 'third age' or 'early old age', taken as the period of life beginning around retirement (from full time employment) when many older people are relatively healthy and active is associated with the baby boomers. This suggests having time for leisure and the pursuit of personal satisfaction which could potentially last for a further 30 years. Windsurfing is a lifestyle physical activity which has much in common with lifestyle sports that emerged in the 60/70s despite only emerging in UK in late 70s. Dionigi's (2002, 2006, 2008, 2010) research focuses on meanings attributed by older Australian athletes aged 55–94 years and challenges medical and popular discourses around the ageing body, mind and sport. She engages an interpretative approach to identity construction and draws attention to the nexus between social-cultural contexts and older athletes' meanings. She argues that older athletes are not ignoring the onset of later life but rather are managing their identities through the pursuit of their sport. The actions and perceptions of these older athletes intersect with broader social discourses of sport, leisure and ageing, challenging what it means to become 'old'. This is also echoed in Harper's (1997) postmodern interpretations of 'subjectivities' of older persons. Spatial and locational contexts frame Sparkes' research (2010) that draws attention to the ways in which age and embodiment are inexorably interlinked and accomplished.

What then is evoked for older people who choose to windsurf? For windsurfing takes place in a fluid changing natural environment where the body is in constantly interrelating with the elements of wind and water through the material of the windsurf board and sail (Dant and Wheaton, 2007).

The activity of windsurfing

Windsurfing is identified amongst some social analysts as an 'alternative' 'lifestyle' sport included alongside other lifestyle sports such as skateboarding, snowboarding, surfing (Ormod and Wheaton, 2009; Wheaton, 2004a, 2004b; Wheaton and Beal, 2003). Lifestyle sports, it is argued, are associated with the 'countercultural' social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s and windsurfing, which emerged in the later 1970s in UK, evolved in opposition to dominant sporting cultures, and in particular the institutionalisation of sport (Wheaton 2004b). Windsurfing grew out of the activities of sailing and surfing cultures. Windsurfing as cultural activity cuts across the traditional adventure/outdoor activity and 'lifestyle' sports, for it has many of the characteristics of traditional sailing activity but with something of the youth sub-cultural factors of 'lifestyle' sports, evident in such activities as surfing, skateboarding and snowboarding. Like most outdoor adventure activities and cultures windsurfing, it is argued, are male dominated (see Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998; Wheaton, 2004a:113; Woodward, 2000). Yet as Wheaton's (2004a) research uncovered, windsurfing encompasses a competing diversity of masculinities. The actual activity of windsurfing, much research suggests, is somewhat exclusive to able-bodied, largely white middle class young males who are fairly wealthy.

Through 'lifestyle' activities, different youth sub-cultures find spaces for themselves to resist dominant mainstream cultures by creating their own alternative lifestyle (Gelder and Thornton 1997). Lifestyle sports participants are seen to resist mainstream sporting values by an emphasis on different rituals and behaviours such as participant control and opposition through style (Beal, 1995).

More recently McRobbie (2010) critiques sub-cultural theory in calling attention to the power of neo-capitalism to appropriate young people's cultures. Whilst post-subcultural research suggests that subcultures rarely resist the dominant culture and moreover attachment to a particular (youth) subculture is brief with members moving from one trend to another (see Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). Research also points to contradictions in lifestyle sport such that whilst on occasions they may provide resistant to and challenge of mainstream 'sport' ideologies, they may also incorporate into these values the contradiction of 'buying' into mainstream capitalism ideologies (Coates *et al.*, 2010). More particularly participants of these sports may have a passionate attachment to their particular 'lifestyle' sport as opposed to countercultural values.

Dant and Wheaton (2007) make a significant point that people who are passionate windsurfers not only need to be fairly wealthy to acquire the material capital, that is the board and kit but also need to possess significant 'embodied capital'. Windsurfing, they argue, "requires a degree of strength and agility that does mean that age and gender affect those

who can and might wish to sail a board. Hence”, they assert, “the embodied capital required is high and is affected by changes over the life-course” (p. 10). Yet currently the windsurfing community is made up of many folk from the Baby Boomer generation and earlier who are passionate about windsurfing, engaging in their sport either independently and/or as a member of a veteran’s club such as the Sea Vets. The *SeaVets* organisation claims that it “promotes responsible and sociable windsurfing for the ‘not so young’. Membership is open to those over 35 years old”¹; the average age currently of Sea Vets’ members is 60-plus, with one longstanding member in his late 90s (Thompson, 2009).

Consequently, I hope to ‘trouble’ ageing, exploring through ethnography and auto-ethnography (auto/ethnography) older people and windsurfing and assessing the significance of place based locations to their lifestyle activities.

Exploring place-based being and becoming older

Ethnography and auto-ethnography can provide for unique insights into the embodied experiences of the life-worlds of being and becoming older. These inter-related methodologies provide particular insight in understanding when the body, grounded through its senses, makes sense of and interacts with its surroundings. Place, the natural environment, is all important in windsurfing. To ‘know’ what it is to windsurf, one arguably needs, with some senses, to experience it. To ‘know’ and understand what it is to age, one arguably needs to experience this process of being and becoming reflexively and/or to engage empathically with the life-worlds of older people. Auto/ethnography has been understood for many years as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 739). I would add it also uncovers connections between the body, the emotions and the senses as the (ageing) body engages with natural elements.

Auto/ethnography has much in common with reflexive ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), the ethnographic approach that takes seriously not only the every day understandings of participants in a situated context, but also the experiences, ethical dilemmas and personal account of the researcher (see Humberstone, 2004; 2009). Marcus (1998, p. 401) points out the equivalence of autobiographic accounting with reflexivity in critical research, highlighting the deconstruction from within and the principle of contextuality and partiality of truth claims. Reflexive ethnographies build upon personal experiences; exploring situated experiences, reflexive ethnographers attempt to make sense of their feelings and selves. They may use their personal experiences and relation with other participants in the research context to understand the life-world and participants’ experiences. In auto-ethnography, the self (auto) is

positioned at the centre of the research, rather than centring other participants. Examples of auto-ethnographies include narratives of illness told by someone who has experienced the illness (Ettorre, 2005a,b) or grieving (Ellis, 1995). Auto/ethnographers meanwhile, according to Reed-Danahay (1997), place different and varying emphases on its different elements; auto (the self), ethnos (the culture) and graphy (the research process). In this way, drawing upon the self's story and feelings, connections between personal experience and particular life-worlds unfold. In auto/ethnography, I would suggest, there is a combination of auto-ethnography with ethnography so that 'others' and relations with others move in and out of the centre of the research as the self moves fluidly from centre to periphery of the research.

A shift from reflexive ethnographic work to naming and acknowledging auto-ethnographic work in sport has been occurring over the last few decades (see Rinehart, 2005). The embodied experiences of the teller are often the focus of these tales. Such stories are not primarily about the body but are tales told through the bodies of the teller (Denison and Markula, 2003; Sparkes, 2002). Making sense of stories at both a personal and contextual level, a reader can identify in different ways with the author. At one level, there may be resonance with the author and their bodily experience; at other levels the author's situated experiences become more accessible. Such stories concerned with physical activity and embodiment include Duncan (2000), who writes of her life-story associated with physical activity through her bodily experiences, and Sparkes (1996), who tells the story of embodiedness and emotional experiences of serious injury suffered by a previously a top class athlete.

Auto-ethnographic narrative is generally first-person writing. Some auto-ethnographers express their feelings and emotions through poetry (see Spry, 2001). Other types of narrative or stories may draw on fictional devices for making the telling the story more evocative or rich. Fictional representations as in ethnographic or creative fiction "can affect readers at an immediate and emotional level" (Frank 2000: p. 483). In this chapter, I have chosen to represent a water-based place and a windsurf 'rescue' occurring there through a fictional techniques. The creative non-fiction tale of the 'rescue' hopes to elicit in the reader some idea of the sensuousness, dangers and emotions when wind surfing, highlighting an embodied engagement with nature.

Exploring place-based being and becoming older: narratives of windsurfers

I am a committed recreational windsurfer; I learnt to windsurf on a board with a removable wooden dagger board and a bamboo boom over 28 years ago. I have also been an ethnographer for most of that time and an ethnographic and more particularly an auto/ethnographic approach to explore

embodiment, location and nature seems 'natural'. The main place I wind-surf and where I conduct this research is relatively safe (although as the reader will see later there are hazards depending upon the wind and tide state) and a very accessible location at the mouth of Southampton water. Here there is access to the water on three sides of a kilometre long shingle and earth spit, on which a centre, which once housed sea planes during the 40s and 50s, and now is a thriving outdoor activities centre, stands. At most states of the tide, except a few hours around low water, there is a small lagoon (the pond) with usually flat water. The spit looks to the Solent waters and Isle of Wight on one side and a massive chimney and oil refinery on the other.

I sail there regularly during the summer months and have spent much time there on and off the water over the last thirty years. For a conference on 'experiencing water' and to evoke a sense of place and the sensuous engagement with nature of windsurfing for me, I wrote my own feelings of windsurfing (Humberstone, 2010b: p. 57):

*I feel the water rushing past my feet and legs.
The wind in my hair.
I sense the wind shifts in strength and direction and move my body
in anticipation to the wind and the waves. I feel the power of the
wind and the ability of my body to work with the wind and the
waves. The delight and sensation when surfing down a small wave
with the sail beautifully balanced by the wind.
Seeing the sea birds and the fish jump delight further.
The smell of salt and mud.
The small seal that made its home on the tiny pebble spit.
These are some of the beauties of windsurfing in this liminal space
even with a monstrous power station chimney hovering in the
distance and the occasional smell of sulphur from the large oil
refinery when the wind blows from the north east.*

Recently, in the summer of 2010, a seal, possibly the original I refer to above, grown much larger, returned but didn't stay. It played around the 'pond' looking for fish whilst we, an intergenerational group of mainly male windsurfers, ages ranging somewhere between 7 and 68 years sailed backwards and forwards across the entrance trying to spot the seal in order to both see it and avoid hitting it; a glorious sunny day, the reflected sunshine making the small waves shimmer and dance. With the wind coming from the North West, this was an unusual direction, enabling this sailing in this particular direction.

On another day, I spoke with a regular windsurfer in her mid 60s, who told me about her recent experience on a low volume board she had just bought. Below I use creative non-fiction to tell her tale. In this way I hope to create a nexus of body, senses, elements (nature) and feelings.

Telling tales — Being rescued: A creative non-fiction exploring older windsurfers' perspectives

It was Sunday and a pleasant day with a steady South Westerly blowing. Kitty, a member of the Sea Vets, had just bought a new smaller volume board and was determined to try it out. She was used to sailing with a larger, more 'floaty' one having security of more buoyancy when needed should the wind drop off suddenly. The tide was flowing in and up Southampton water. The 'pond' was mud filled and still too shallow to venture into. Out front, however, the water was rising and there was easily enough water to sail. Kite surfers whizzed forwards and back, outwards and inwards from the sandy shore looking like multicoloured butterflies undecided on where to land. Other windsurfers were out on the water enjoying the steady breeze. Kitty put on her wetsuit, helmet and harness looking forward to sailing this new board for the first time. She set out eagerly to join the kite surfers and windsurfers flying to and fro. After some 20 minutes of enjoyable sailing and at her furthest point from the beach the wind died. Kitty turned the board to head to shore, knowing that she needed to get back before the wind became too light, as she did so Kitty's sail fell from her hands into the sea. 'No problem', she thought, 'I'll water start'. After a number of attempts she realised this wasn't going to work. There was now insufficient wind to fill the sail to lift her back onto the board. 'I'll have to up haul' she said to her self as she tried to climb onto the board. Easy with her old board, it would float when she was standing on it to pull up the sail. But this wasn't her old board, this was her new, superlite smaller board and it didn't behave in the same way. Checking points on the shore she realised the tide was taking her closer and closer to the shipping channel and further away from the beach. Being Sunday, the channel was particularly busy with weekend motor boaters racing up and down, the fast Isle of White ferry passing every half hour and numerous Sunday sailors out on their yachts for the day. A tiny insignificant person with a small board and rig at sea level was not easy to spot from these vessels. 'Oh dear' she thought anxiously. Feeling rather foolish, she tried to draw the attention of the people on the beach by waving with one arm. She could not use the conventional signal 'I need rescuing' where both arms cross continuously above the head. She knew that she must not let go of her board and rig. If she did she would become separated from them and be in much greater danger.

Almost into the shipping channel she saw a large 'gin palace' motor boat approaching and she hoped the skipper would take action to avoid running her down. Thankfully he saw her and came alongside. 'Are you OK' a woman on deck said, 'We can take you aboard'. 'Thanks, can you drop me off on the spit over there?' Kitty asked. 'No', came the reply, 'but we can take you up to Southampton'. Kitty declined this kind offer, not

wanting to end up miles away from where she had set off. The skipper of the motor boat, realising that the windsurfer needed to be kept out of the shipping channel, radioed for assistance and stayed along side her until after a few minutes a large motorised rib came roaring in from out in the Solent. It came along side her and two burley men lifted the board and rig into the rib while Kitty held onto the rope running around bulbous rubbery sides of the vessel. 'How am I going to get onto this' Kitty mused to herself knowing her arms couldn't pull her body up and over the side of the rib. She need not have worried as the two men leaned over, one on each side of her, lifting her effortlessly into their boat.

Later, wrapped in blankets and drinking copious cups of tea, Kitty felt a lot warmer and more comfortable. The rib had delivered her in a few minutes to the rescue station on the spit. Her personal details were collected for the record. 'Why hadn't she flares with her', one of the shore-based RNLI men asked. She thought to her self, 'they really don't understand windsurfing' and replied, 'I don't have gloves to hold a flare with and I can't let go of the rig to detonate it. My safety is in the board'. She is delivered to her non-windsurfing friend on the beach in an RNLI van. Looking up from his book her companion says 'Didn't see you come ashore. Did you have a good sail?'²

Troubling ageing? Some concluding comments

Why write a creative non-fiction story of a windsurfing event through the eyes of an older woman windsurfer? Why write creative non-fiction in research at all? Clough (in Goodley *et al.*, 2004) ponders, "If we are arguing for the use of narrative in research reports there has to be a critical questioning of the purpose of such accounts. We must ask: Who are these stories for? What effects do the stories have on whom?" (p. 184).

In response, my reasons for telling this non-fiction story is an attempt to represent the sensations, experiences and bodily engagements with nature and to render these senses and feelings accessible to the reader so that the reader may in some ways feel and sense something of what it is for this older woman to engage with nature in an embodied way. Taking a conventional approach, I propose, would render findings simplistic and void of the complex connections of body with nature. I hope, by the telling of these stories, to have created the sense of this place and the complexities of relationships with sea, senses and people. What then to make of the rescue tale? It is for the reader to make their interpretations of this story. Maybe it challenges, for the reader, ideas of what is possible for an older woman and what she might find enjoyable. Maybe it troubles dominant discourses on ageing. Certainly, it disrupts Dant and Wheaton's (2007: p.10) assertion that 'age and gender affect those who can and might wish to sail a board'. However, some readers might consider that

it reinforces such an assertion given the need for a rescue. Knowing the scene as I do, it is not uncommon for surfers (wind or kite) of all ages to be brought back to the beach by various craft when the wind drops unexpectedly. Finally, what relevance is this form of research to healthy ageing policy and practice?

Ageing is a complex and dynamic psychological, socio-cultural, biological process that, I suggest, can be expressed in a diversity of ways in different contexts. Dominant discourses on ageing are largely out of step with many older people's experiences. Interpretive, narrative research is important in the ways in which older adults interpret their lives and the society in which they live. Exploring windsurfers' engagements with nature; the ageing body, embodiment, senses and elements may provide new and challenging understandings of being and becoming old.

Notes

1. Sea vets website: www.seavets.co.uk
2. This story is also informed by my own similar experience the previous year when on the wind dropping and on a small board I too began to drift towards the shipping channel. However, I was brought to the beach by a small craft from a short distance off shore.

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