

Growing old and still practising competitive sports

- An exploration of acting-space and sense-making
processes among old women and men

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To Minna

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List of original papers in the thesis

Paper I

“Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes”. Published in *Nordic Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 2011.

Paper II

“The complexity of physical capital: how old male athletes relate to body and health”. Submitted to *International Journal of Men’s Health*.

Paper III

“Breaking down barriers: women (re)producing athletic identity in old age”. Submitted to *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*.

Paper IV

“The role of sports in making sense of the process of growing old”. Submitted to *Journal of Aging Studies*.

Abstract

This thesis explores how the way athletically active old men and women make sense of their acting-spaces affects their participation in competitive sports, and conversely how their participation in competitive sports affects their sense-making processes and acting-space. It emphasizes the sociological point of intersection of three different research fields: sports science, critical gerontology, and gender studies. Concretely, it is inspired by grounded theory research design and based on interviews with 22 athletically active men and women between the ages of 66 and 90. The thesis consists of four articles that together show that in the context of competitive sports men and women experience certain constraints of acting-space, which seem to be related primarily to norms of age and gender. At the same time, the thesis shows that through practicing sports old adults, especially old women, are able to transgress these constraints and possibly to challenge dominant constructions of age and gender.

Keywords: the process of growing old, sports, gender

Enkel sammanfattning på svenska

Bakgrund och syfte

Många forskare och policyskapare lägger idag allt större tonvikt på aktivt åldrande, vilket av många anses vara en lösning på de demografiska problemen relaterade till den åldrande västerländska befolkningen. Gamla personer förväntas att ta hand om sin hälsa och att vara fysiskt aktiva, till gagn för både samhälle och eget välmående. Samtidigt ökar också andelen idrottsligt aktiva bland de gamla i många länder. Den framväxande forskningen på detta område indikerar dock att det finns sociala och kulturella komplikationer med att utöva idrott som senior. Det har under 1900-talet och under början av 2000-talet funnits många föreställningar och normer kring hur gamla personer ska och bör bete sig, vilket enligt tidigare forskning påverkar gamlas möjligheter att delta i fysisk aktivitet och idrott. Till exempel har det länge funnits en djupt rotad uppfattning i västerländska samhällen att åldrandet är en ensidig process av försvagande och förfall och att det därmed är olämpligt för gamla personer att ägna sig åt fysiskt ansträngande idrottsliga aktiviteter. Denna syn har som sagt utmanats av mer hälsoinriktade diskurser, såsom aktivt åldrande, på senare tid. Men det anses fortfarande mer åldersadekvat att som gammal person delta i "lagom" ansträngande fysiska aktiviteter med fokus på social interaktion och hälsa, snarare än att ägna sig åt tävlingsinriktade och fysiskt utmattande idrotter.

Att vara idrottsligt aktiv som gammal person är gränsöverskridande på många sätt. Faktum är att en del forskare menar att idrottsligt engagemang i hög ålder kan utmana begränsande sociala uppfattningar om åldrande. Det är dock inte bara normer om åldrande som kan påverka gamlas möjligheter och begränsningar i en idrottslig kontext. Den socialgerontologiska forskningen har i allt högre utsträckning visat att åldrande är en könad upplevelse, att dominerande normer kring åldrande samverkar och ibland konkurrerar med normer kring genus. Forskningen kring idrottslig aktivitet och åldrande har emellertid inte inkluderat genus som en central del av analysen i någon högre utsträckning. Det saknas också studier som blottlägger hur idrottsligt aktiva män och kvinnor i hög ålder förhandlar kring de kulturella, sociala och fysiska komplikationer som kan uppstå – och vad som gör att vissa avstår från att vidareutveckla idrottsligt engagemang medan andra expanderar det i hög ålder. Ytterst handlar det om handlingsutrymme, vad är möjligt att göra utifrån samhällets förväntningar på gamla personer? Och vad mer är: vad är möjligt att göra som gamla män och gamla kvinnor i Sverige idag? Eftersom tävlingsinriktad och fysiskt ansträngande idrott blir ett spänningsfält då den utövas av gamla utgör detta en utmärkt kontext att studera denna fråga. Denna avhandling syftar därför

till att å ena sidan utforska hur meningsskapande av handlingsutrymme bland idrottsligt aktiva gamla män och kvinnor påverkar deras deltagande i tävlingsinriktad idrott, och å andra sidan hur deras deltagande i tävlingsinriktad idrott påverkar deras meningsskapande processer och handlingsutrymme.

Metoder

För att uppfylla studiens syfte har jag valt att använda mig av grundad teori. Detta är en explorativ, och initialt induktiv, metod som syftar till generera teori utifrån empiri. Eftersom jag använder mig av en mer konstruktionistisk form av grundad teori ligger fokus på att *konstruera* teori på basis av empiri. Genom sin öppna design är grundad teori lämpad för utforskande av meningsskapande processer; forskningsdeltagarnas tankar och erfarenheter får en central och ledande plats i forskningsprocessen.

Den grundläggande forskningsfrågan för grundad teori är: vad händer här? Mot bakgrund av den konstruktionistiska ansatsen i avhandlingen ligger fokus snarare på hur forskningsdeltagarna själva förstår vad som händer. I det initiala skedet av forskningsprocessen ville jag därför öppet utforska hur svenska gamla män och kvinnor förstod sig på kombinationen av att bli gammal och utöva tävlingsinriktad idrott. För att uppfylla detta syfte utfördes intensiva intervjuer med 22 idrottsligt aktiva män och kvinnor mellan 66-90 års ålder. Intensiva intervjuer är en datainsamlingsteknik som ger en mer aktiv roll till intervjuaren, som kan ifrågasätta, återkomma till intressanta frågor och på ett djupgående sätt försöka utforska forskningsdeltagarnas tankar och känslor. Intervjuformen gör också att forskningsdeltagarna försätts i en expertposition. I detta fall kunde männen och kvinnorna i egenskap av erfarna idrottare upplysa och inviga mig i de specifika idrotter som de utövade: simning, skidåkning, friidrott och så vidare. De transkriberade intervjuerna analyserades genom initial och fokuserad kodning, samt genom memos relaterade till de koder och kategorier som urskiljdes.

Resultat

Utifrån analysen av det empiriska materialet utkristalliserades fyra fokusområden: (a) hur processen att bli gammal påverkade de könade självbilderna hos idrottsligt aktiva gamla män, (b) komplexiteten i hur gamla manliga idrottare förhöll sig till kropp och hälsa, (c) konstruktionen av starka idrottsliga identiteter bland gamla kvinnor och (d) hur meningsskapande processer av åldrande bland gamla män och kvinnor påverkades av utövande av sport. Var och ett av dessa fokusområden utvecklades i en artikel.

Den första artikeln, som kallas "Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes" visade att männen omvärderade sitt förhållningssätt till tävlingsinriktad idrott i åldrandeprocessen eftersom fokus på tävling inte ansågs vara åldersadekvat. Istället valde männen att utveckla fyra andra vägar i livet som kunde både uppfylla normer kring hur en framgångsrik man ska vara och hur en gammal person bör bete sig: att vara fysiskt aktiva, att vara en ledare, att vara upptagen och att vara en familjeman. I artikeln relateras dessa nya livsvägar till Connells (1983) teori om hegemonisk maskulinitet och till de dimensioner som är centrala för uttrycken av denna form av maskulinitet: sport, arbete, faderskap och sexualitet (återfanns dock ej i studien). Genom dessa livsvägar kunde männen konstruera framgångsrika maskuliniteter i hög ålder.

Resultaten av den andra artikeln "The complexity of physical capital: how old male athletes relate to body and health" åskådliggjorde det komplexa förhållningssättet som de idrottsligt aktiva männen hade till kropp och hälsa och som utmärktes av (a) användningen av fysisk kontroll som en kapitalform, (b) en ambivalent attityd till kropp och hälsa, och (c) beskyddande av den egna fysiska autonomin. Artikeln relaterade männens komplexa förhållningssätt till kropp och hälsa till påverkan av tre olika, och delvis motstridiga, normsystem knutna till maskulinitet, idrott och åldrande. Genom att betona vikten av att upprätthålla fysisk autonomi, som var en gångbar strategi i alla tre kontexter, kunde männen ägna sig åt kropp och hälsa i en idrottsligt aktiv kontext.

Den tredje artikeln "Breaking down barriers: women (re)producing athletic identity in old age" visade att gamla kvinnor kan bryta ner de ålders- och genusrelaterade barriärer som ofta utgör ett hinder för idrottsligt engagemang i hög ålder genom att utveckla en stark idrottslig identitet. Artikeln blottade också hur denna identitet formades av kontinuerligt manligt stöd, livserfarenheter av att vara idrottare och av att hantera identitetskrockar mellan att vara kvinna och idrottare under livets gång. Genom att vara idrottsligt aktiva kunde kvinnorna också bygga starka band med andra kvinnor och utmana synen på "den gamla kvinnan" som skröplig och svag.

Slutligen visade den fjärde artikeln "The role of sports in making sense of the process of growing old" att utövande av sport påverkade mäns och kvinnors meningsskapande processer kring åldrande genom att de började (a) i mindre utsträckning förstå åldrande utifrån dimensioner som t.ex. utseende, (b) istället förstå åldrandeprocessen genom att fokusera på fysisk kapacitet och (c) i viss utsträckning tillskriva åldrandet nytt värde genom att fokusera på fysisk kapacitet. Artikeln visade att genom sitt idrottsutövande kunde många av kvinnorna utmana bilden av åldrandet som en process av förfall, eftersom de utvärderade sin fysiska kapacitet via andra dimensioner än männen.

Slutsatser

Den övergripande slutsatsen av avhandlingen är att mäns och kvinnors meningsskapande kring framförallt genus- och åldersnormer påverkade deras deltagande i tävlingsinriktad idrott. Men det påverkade dem på väldigt olika sätt; kvinnorna blev i högre utsträckning sporrade att utöka sitt idrottsliga engagemang medan männen generellt sett tonade ner sin tävlingslust och drog sig undan från tävlingsinriktad idrott.

Kvinnorna hade under sina idrottsliga banor blivit vana vid att möta och förhandla kring genusrelaterat motstånd riktat mot deras idrottande. När de blev gamla mötte de liknande invändningar, dock främst på åldersrelaterade grunder, och de kunde därför använda sig av de strategier som de utvecklat under åren. Dessutom såg de sig själva som en del av ett starkt kollektiv bestående av idrottsligt aktiva kvinnor. Tillsammans med den positiva värderingen av sin fysiska kapacitet genom fokus på process och kompetens, snarare än resultatlistor, stärkte de sig själva som idrottare i hög ålder.

För många av männen krockade istället föreställningar om den framgångsrika mannen med föreställningar om åldersadekvat beteende för gamla i en idrottslig kontext. Deras idrottande hade varit förhållandevis konfliktfritt under de tidigare livsfaserna och de saknade därför erfarenheter av att möta motstånd riktat mot deras idrottande. Till skillnad från kvinnorna, tillägnade många av männen sig synsättet på åldrande som en process av förfall. De såg sig ofta som tillfälliga undantag från denna regel och avskilde sig från åldrandekollektivet snarare än identifierade sig med det. Detta individualiserade synsätt bidrog dock till känslan av att de förr eller senare skulle förlora fotfäste som framgångsrika män i den idrottsliga kontexten på grund av det oundvikliga åldrandet. Många av männen fokuserade också på egna idrottsliga försämringar, avspeglade i resultatlistorna, som de upplevde bekräftade detta synsätt på åldrande.

Med andra ord påverkade männens och kvinnornas deltagande i tävlingsinriktad idrott också deras meningsskapande processer och upplevelser av handlingsutrymme. Både män och kvinnor uppvisade handlingskraft i de situationer som de befann sig och det var få som ville acceptera det begränsade handlingsutrymme som åldrandepositionen ofta innebar. Istället lyckades de flesta återskapa sig själva som framgångsrika män och kvinnor i en åldrandekontext. Dock verkade kvinnorna i högre utsträckning än männen att ifrågasätta, utmana och överskrida de genus- och åldrandenormer som primärt satte gränserna för deras handlingsutrymme. Avhandlingen visar därmed att idrottande i hög ålder har potential att utvidga gamlas handlingsutrymme ur både genus- och åldrandesynpunkt.

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Anders, my love, for everything and beyond – thank you.

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Josefin Eman

Introduction

“When you are participating in a race, what do you think about?” I ask the woman sitting in front of me. It is late summer, but the warmth in the air has lingered on. She is suitably dressed for the weather; wearing a top and shorts that display her tanned muscles. I am far more covered up, hiding the absence of mine. Her reply is instant: “I think about winning.” She smiles and continues:

I am focused. And I participate in a lot of races. I enter in every race from 100 to 10 000 meters, and I run the marathon. At European and World Championships I run maybe six or seven different races. Those are intense days, finished off with a marathon.

This quotation reflects the narrative of an elite athlete. We get a sense of her athletic ambitions, passion for running, her discipline and stamina. Few of us would be able to replicate these physical and psychological achievements, so many of us are amazed. Yet there is a detail that has not yet been mentioned: this elite athlete is over 70 years old. On learning this, our view is likely to be expanded, as our preconceived ideas about athletes confront our understandings of old adults, or in this case old women.

Since the late 19th century the biomedicalization of aging has fostered images of frail old adults, particularly less physically capable old women (Vertinsky, 1991). Although we have gained access to alternative images of seniors in recent decades, competitive sports and physically demanding athletic activities are not discursively connected to the senior population (Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). Therefore, we might interpret the situation of the elite athlete in terms of contradictions and empowerment. Indeed, it might make us wonder what it is like to grow old in the context of competitive sports, and whether gender matter within this process. That was the starting point of this thesis, which focuses on the sociological point of intersection of three different research fields: sports science, critical gerontology, and gender studies. It is a qualitative thesis based on interviews with 22 athletically active old women and men.

The findings will be presented in four articles. Articles I and II are focused upon athletically active men. Article I, “Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes,” explores whether and how the process of growing old affects the gendered self-images of Swedish male athletes, and article II, “The complexity of physical capital: how old male athletes relate to body and health” focuses on how these old male athletes relate to their bodies and health in the process of growing old. In article III, “Breaking

down barriers: women (re)producing athletic identity in old age,” emphasis is put on studying how old women were able to form and reproduce a commitment to sport over time and translate this commitment into resilient strategies in old age. Finally, article IV, “The role of sports in making sense of the process of growing old,” explored whether practicing sports in old age could affect old adults’ make sense of oldness and the process of growing old in a way that challenges stereotypical thoughts about old age. In this first chapter, the findings, methods, and theories of the four articles will be presented following a brief description of athletically active seniors in relation to the growing societal emphasis on active aging (Walker, 2010).

Active aging

Currently, physically active old adults are situated in a policy-making, academic, and public hot spot. The recent focus on old adults leading a physically active lifestyle can be related to “active aging,” an emerging concept that focuses on productive aging as well as physical and mental well-being among people as they age (Walker, 2002). It is a concept ripe with seductive promises of agelessness (Andrews, 1999) and of solutions to severe demographic issues related to aging populations. Active aging has de facto been acknowledged as the dominant strategy in global policies concerning aging populations that stress health and well-being in the European context and productivity in the American (Walker, 2008). In fact, the European Commission has named 2012 the “European Year for Active Ageing” in order to promote attention to active aging among policy-makers (European Commission, 2010). Similarly, the concept plays a central role in current academic understandings of the process of growing old. It is a part of the discourse of positive aging that has largely replaced the discourse of decline that dominated gerontological images and understandings of old age during the first part of the 20th century (Dionigi, 2006). Consequently, there are many studies advocating active aging and proposing strategies of enabling old adults to become active agers (Marshall & Altpeter, 2005; Naaldenberg et al., 2011; Ory et al., 2003; Plouffe & Kalache, 2010).

The massive break-through of active aging in current research and policy-making on aging can easily be accounted for: it is economical. Whether featured in academic journals or in governmental campaigns, active aging is promoted as a sustainable solution to aging Western populations and their associated and increasing health expenses (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut, 2008; 2009; Walker, 2000; Walker, 2010). Not least, active aging is advocated in the Swedish governmental context, because next to Japan Sweden has been recognized as the country with the oldest population (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut, 2009). In issuing recommendations concerning physical

activity for Swedish older adults focus is put on moderate physical activity, gained through for instance brisk walks (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009).

In addition to economic reasons, a plethora of studies have emphasized the physical, physiological, cognitive, and social advantages old adults can gain through active aging (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009; Nadasen, 2007; 2008; Nelson et al., 2007; Venturelli et al., 2010). These findings correspond well with the fact that people in industrialized settings are raising their expectations of later life to exceed aspirations of mere longevity. Öberg (2005) argued that aging has become a more individualized experience in which people are encouraged to lead reflexive, self-realizing, and active lives.

Among active agers, there is a subset of old adults who are involved with more intense experiences of physical activity: the athletes. In Western societies, these constitute a rapidly growing group, largely as a result of the marathon boom and the growth of the veteran sports movement (Dionigi, 2006; Tulle, 2008b). In Sweden 12% of the men and 5% of the women in the ages of 60-70 years old engage in sports and sports competitions (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2004). For Swedish adults in the ages of 50-70, the most popular sports to compete within are golf, shooting, gymnastics and skiing (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009). Although the athletically active old may be regarded as extreme members of the senior population, they are living evidence that the wishes and needs of active aging can be realized at both the individual and societal level. From this point of view, athletically active old men and women are the trailblazers of active aging. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that they have explored, to a greater extent than others, the social, cultural, and physical boundaries and opportunities through which we might gain insight about the process of growing old and about our dominant constructions of aging. In fact, it has been shown that through the practice of competitive sport old people may challenge norms of age-appropriateness (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Tulle, 2008b). One of the major contributors to the field of aging and sports, Tulle (2007), writes: "Ageing embodiment can help to illuminate wider social processes and refine existing theoretical systems. Ageing athletes expose the ways in which broader discourses serve to constrain agency and dispositions" (p. 342). This thesis focuses on these constraints and opportunities within the context of aging people involved in competitive sports.

Aim of the thesis

Inspired by the grounded theory research design of Charmaz (2006), I initiated my research into aging and competitive sport in an inductive manner. Consequently, neither the purpose nor theoretical frameworks were constructed a priori. Instead, I attempted to explore openly what it is like to grow old in the context of competitive sports and whether gender matters

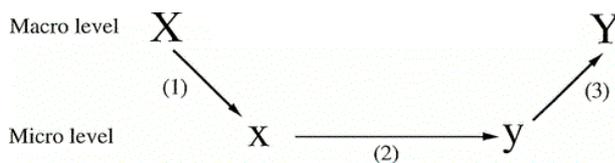
within this process. While conducting the research, I gradually crystallized four specific research aims, which each were explored within an article:

- Article I aimed to investigate whether and how the process of growing old affects the gendered self-images of Swedish male athletes.
- Article II aimed to explore how old male athletes relate to their body and health in the process of growing old.
- Article III aimed to explore whether and how old women are able to form and reproduce a commitment to sport over time, and translate this commitment into resilient strategies in old age.
- Article IV aimed to explore whether and how the practice of sports can affect old adults' processes of sense-making¹ about old age and the process of growing old in ways that challenge dominant constructions about old age. Thereto, the study aimed to explore if and how gender has an impact in this process.

Together the articles explore a space within the context of competitive sports that I refer to as acting-space. The acting-space sets the limits for how men and women can act, experience, and express themselves without overstepping the boundaries of what is considered to be appropriate behavior, in this case in relation to age and gender. The overarching purpose of this thesis is to explore how the way athletically active old men and women make sense of their acting-space affects their participation in competitive sports, and conversely, how their participation in competitive sports affects their sense-making processes and acting-space.

In doing so, I am doing my own take on the “Coleman boat”² (Coleman, 1990), which posits three main questions: (a) how a factor X at the macro level creates constraints and resources for actors, (b) how actors at a micro level (x) act under these constraints and make use of their resources (y), and (c) how these actions accumulate at a macro level (Y).

Figure I: The Coleman Boat



¹ By "sense-making" the study refers to a process of attaching meaning to, assessing, and valuing certain experiences or phenomenon.

² The thesis does not adopt the theoretical standpoints of Coleman, but merely makes use of his metaphorical boat. It should also be noted that the presented figure is a modified version of the Coleman Boat.

More precisely, in this context, X represents macro level structures that produce certain constraints and opportunities for athletically active old men and women. This thesis does not explore X, but rather explores how men and women interpret and make sense of the constraints and opportunities that they feel affect their participation in competitive sports; i.e. how they perceive that their acting-spaces are constructed within the context of sports. The x-y axis represents how old male and female athletes act under these perceived constraints and possibilities, and Y represents how their participation in competitive sports affects how they make sense of aging, sports, and gender, which may result in the reproduction of the perceived acting-space (X) or the introduction of altered acting-spaces (Y).

In relation to the Coleman boat, articles I and II focus primarily on how perceived constraints of acting-space among male athletes affect the way they relate to themselves in the process of growing old and in the context of competitive sports. Articles III and IV also encapsulate these aspects, but focus as well on how women's and men's sense-making processes partly enable them to transgress the boundaries of what they believe to be gender-appropriate or age-appropriate behavior.

Organization

This introductory chapter will first briefly outline the concepts of growing old, sports, and gender as used in the thesis, and review existing research on those intersecting fields of study. Before presenting the four particular research questions, theoretical concepts, and empirical findings of the individual articles, the research methods of the thesis will be discussed. This order is in accordance with the grounded theory research process in which data is collected and analyzed before it is theorized. Finally, a discussion will sketch the conclusions and contributions of the thesis.

Definitions

In this chapter I outline my theoretical and practical relationship to the three cornerstones of my study: the process of growing old, gender, and sports. Of these three pillars, gender is the only one I had formed an opinion on before I began working on the thesis; I developed my theoretical and practical approaches to aging and sports during the research process. From existing research (Arber, Andersson & Hoff, 2007; Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Twigg, 2004) as well as my own research experiences, it is clear that the process of growing old, gender, and sports are intertwined in many respects, but for reasons of clarity I have chosen to present them separately.

Growing old

First of all it should be recognized that aging and old age are temporally and culturally diverse phenomenon; that is, their meanings vary across time and space. Blaaklidge (2007), for example, has shown that meanings of aging have differed greatly over time. According to her, perspectives on aging can be divided into three groups: pre-chronologizing, chronologizing, and post-chronologizing. Blaaklidge argues that pre-chronologizing perspectives on aging emanate from pre-industrial societies, in which time primarily is perceived as cyclical rather than progressive. In pre-chronologizing societies everyone contributes to the survival of the collective, and therefore there is less need to distinguish between particular age groups, although age concepts do exist. With industrialization, a new perspective on aging—chronologizing—emerges. Time is now perceived as progressive, and chronologic age becomes a ground for social organization. Blaaklidge argues that societal understanding of aging is now moving towards a post-chronologizing perspective, in which age and life course are becoming flexible concepts.

In current gerontological research, both chronologizing and post-chronologizing perspectives are used to understand old age, and definitions are based on physical, psychological, and social processes. One chronological definition of old age that is broadly shared in gerontology is the distinction between young-old (65–74), middle-old (75–84), and old-old (85 and over) (Atchley, 1987). However, chronological definitions, in particular open-ended age categories, have been critiqued for homogenizing old adults in a way that reproduces the systematic devaluation of and discrimination against the old, i.e. ageism. Rather than focusing on date of birth, it has been suggested that researchers should focus on images and models of aging, transitions, and self-definitions of age (Bytheway, 2005). Subjective age identification, based on the age people feel and the age group they identify themselves with, has become a popular way of making sense of age (Steverink et al., 2001). For example, Öberg & Tornstam (2001) make use of subjective age identification by introducing the concepts of look-age (how old people think they look), feel-age (how old they feel), and ideal-age (how old they wish they were).

The body has also become a dividing line within the aging population, separating what Laslett (1991) refers to as third agers, that is healthy old adults, from dependent fourth agers. Other concepts based on the body such as physiological age, which measures physiological status and estimated lifespans of individuals are also gaining currency (Seward, 2011). Many contemporary scholars seem to agree that aging is a social, as well as a physiological, process (Arber, Davidson & Ginn, 2003; Calasanti & King, 2005); however, some researchers such as Bytheway (1995) claim that old age is a cultural invention that reinforces ageism and should therefore be

challenged. Andrews (1999), on the other hand, has pointed out that eradicating the concept of old age will not automatically erase ageism. She argues that although all life stages are social and cultural constructions, age is still a meaningful resource that should be acknowledged: “Years are not empty containers: important things happen in that time. Why must these years be trivialised? They are the stuff of which people’s lives are made” (p. 309). In fact, Andrews believes that when old adults disassociate themselves from old age by claiming agelessness they are participating in an erasure of themselves, which indirectly confirms the validity of ageism.

When the terms “old” and “growing old” are employed in this thesis they refer to a multi-dimensional process involving both social and physical dimensions. However, I agree with Andrews (1999) that disassociation from old age fosters ageism and that vague definitions of the process of growing old, based upon factors such as fitness and activity, allows people with extensive social networks, high cognitive abilities, and functional bodies to position themselves as “youthful old” or “successful agers” at the expense of less fortunate members of the senior population. Therefore, I argue that old age should be defined by chronological age as a way of diminishing such disassociation from old age. I have chosen the age of 65 to signify the beginning of old age³, as it marks the general age of retirement in Sweden, but I do not distinguish between categories of old age. By leaving old age as open-ended category beginning at age 65, I avoid a potential hierarchy of aging categories, while simultaneously recognizing that years are more than “empty containers” (Andrews, p. 309).

Gender

Similar to age, gender is a key concept in the social order that can be interpreted through a number of objective and subjective “truths.” In this thesis, the complex concept of gender is understood as both relational and a product of recurrent performances, in line with Zimmerman & West’s (1987) idea of “doing” gender. More specifically, the thesis adopts Zimmerman & West’s view that: “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p. 126). By viewing gender as something people “do” the thesis recognizes that what constitutes gender is in flux—that its meanings are constructed through sets of relations between men and women, women and women, and men and men. These gender interactions reproduce a hierarchical system of relations, referred to by Connell (2000) as the gender order. Through the gender order, gender not only becomes something people do but also something people are held accountable for (Zimmerman & West, 1987). In other words,

³This should be understood as a socially constructed age limit.

men and women are expected to conform to what is considered gender-appropriate behavior in line with dominant constructions of masculinities and femininities.

In line with Connell (1995) the thesis does not only recognize the cultural character of gender, but also the centrality of the body in interpretations of gender experiences. Connell argues that constructions of gender are dependent on physical dimensions, that physical inability can result in destabilization of gender, and therefore that bodies are indispensable in analyses of gender relations and practices. Connell recognizes competitive sports, for instance, as an essential physical context in which gender relations are displayed and primarily male dominance is bolstered.

At a practical level the thesis makes use of the concepts of gender as well as of the categories “men” and “women.” The usage of these terms should not be interpreted as support of the idea of biologically stable sexes, but as practical devices for explorations of gender practices.

Sports

In this thesis sport is recognized not only as a context for potentially pleasurable physical experiences, but also as a cultural institution which bears the potential for both preserving as well as dissolving dominant social constructions of age and gender (Roth & Basow, 2004; Tulle, 2008b). Concretely, in the thesis sport is understood as a gathering of what Engström refers to as body-practicing cultures (1999, p. 15), conscious and voluntary practices related to the body in contexts regulated by social rules. Engström distinguishes between seven different body-practicing cultures: physical training, competition and hierarchism, play and recreation, challenge and adventure, skill practices, esthetic activities, and training focused on movement and concentration (p. 18). Engström stresses the complexity of body-practicing cultures by arguing that a particular body practice may be interpreted and understood from different point of views.

The culture of body practice I have chosen as a context for this thesis is competitive sport. According to Engström (1999), this activity consists of two primary elements: competition and hierarchy. However, this activity must be understood in relation to—and should not be excluded from—other body-practice cultures: The practice of competitive sport might have originated in play, for example, or the sport itself may function in the everyday lives of its participants as recreation or a method of concentration as well as being a vehicle for competition on those particular occasions when the competitive element is paramount. In the thesis the research participants are primarily referred to as old athletes or athletically active old men and women.

Previous research

This section presents a brief review of previous research and theoretical and empirical gaps in the intersecting fields of aging, gender, and sports.

Previous research has shown that dominant constructions of age and aging limit old athletes' opportunities to participate in competitive sports (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Grant, 2001; Tulle, 2008a; 2008b). However, these studies have also shown the emancipatory potential of sports—how old athletes are able to transgress and challenge common images of old age through exerting their bodies (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Tulle, 2008a; 2008b).

Studies of old women, aging, and physical activity indicate that gender matters in the creation of women's opportunities to lead a physically active lifestyle (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005; Kluge, 2002). Similarly, research on gender and aging have shown links between these two fields, not least that norms of gender transform in the process of growing old and are blended in with norms of aging (McVittie & Willock, 2006; Smith et al., 2007). However, constraints and opportunities related to gender have not been a central part of the analysis in studies focusing on competitive sports and aging.

In the Swedish context many studies have focused on two of the three intersecting fields of research, aging, sports and gender, but very few have considered all three dimensions. Within sports research, gender is emphasized in a number of studies, combined with themes such as disability (Apelmo, 2006; Wickman, 2004), team sports and youth studies (Andreasson, 2005; Apelmo, 2005; Fundberg, 2003), and historical perspectives (Hedenborg, 2009). These studies demonstrate the necessity of interpreting the sport context from a gendered perspective. When the aging process is included, Swedish scholars combining sport and gender tend to focus on the process of growing into adolescence rather than the process of growing old (Andreasson, 2005; Fundberg, 2003). Some studies have, however, focused on old age, physical activity, and cognitive health. Lindwall, Rennemark, & Berggren (2008) and Lindwall, Larsman, & Hagger (2011), for example, found that moderate exercise could help to prevent depression among old adults.

In the Swedish context, gender processes studied in the field of aging and old age have for instance focused on ethnicity (Al  x, 2007), work and caring (Snellman, 2009), and embodiment and identity (Krekula, 2006). Although some studies, like Snellman (2009), have found that participation in physical activity among old people may be connected to norms of successful or good aging, the context of sport is yet to be explored in relation to aging and gender. The research process described in detail below was initiated with the intention of contributing to the knowledge from previous studies.

Research design

My dissertation project was initiated in 2007 when I joined the research program Welfare and Work in an Ageing Society, funded by the Swedish Research Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS). Prior to initiating research into aging, I had undergone a semester of research preparation during which I had begun to explore the research fields of disability, gender, and embodiment. Through these explorations, I had become convinced of the centrality of gender and embodiment in social and socio-physiological processes. When acquainting myself with aging studies I realized that it was a developing field of research, and that scholars called for more intersectional theoretical connections, not least between aging and gender (Arber et al., 2003) and aging, gender, and body (Twigg, 2004). From both a theoretical and a personal point of view I therefore decided to explore the gendered processes of growing old in an embodied⁴ context.

In search of such a context, one of my closest friends, who was at the time a handball player and coach, suggested that I should study athletes. I was now in the humbling position of entering a research field that was largely unfamiliar to me, but also in need of intersectional development. Because of these two conditions, I decided to employ an exploratory method that would offer general guidelines for developing theoretical analyses from the data: grounded theory.

The founders of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967), originally took the objectivistic stance that grounded theory is a method in which theory emerges from empirical data. I chose instead to follow Charmaz (2006), who approached grounded theory as a method of constructing theory:

My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it. Research participants' implicit meanings, experiential views – and researchers' finished grounded theories – are constructions of reality (p. 10).

Glaser (1978) argued that a grounded theory researcher should open-mindedly ask: “What is happening here?” In line with the reasoning's of Charmaz, I seek to explore what people *perceive* is happening in their lives. Therefore, when entering the field I aspired first and foremost to be open in

⁴ Embodiment is a concept that stresses that the body is not only a physical object, but also a central site for subjective experiences (Robertson, 2007). In this thesis embodied processes are implicit, rather than explicitly described, as the empirical results indicated that it was a less salient category than first expected.

exploring the athletic lives of old men and women; but, in line with the research design of Charmaz (2006), I do not presume to capture the exact experiences and actions of old athletes, but rather present interpreted images of how they understand and construct their reality. All four articles are inspired by Charmaz's grounded theory research design, and the data was gathered using the intense interviewing method she describes as useful in the grounded theory exploration of particular experiences.

Following a description of the sampling process and the research participants, I will discuss the interviewing process, including the development of the interview guide and the actual interview situations. Finally, I will give examples from my coding processes when presenting the analyses.

Sampling

I decided to do the first study with athletically active old men, as the literature I came in contact with initially focused on the relative invisibility of men in studies of aging and gender (Fleming, 1998; Thompson, 1994). Therefore I set up a basic criterion to interview men over the age of 65 who were athletically active. On the basis on this criterion, I came in contact with and interviewed five men during the autumn of 2008. In line with grounded theory design, I began coding as soon as sampling was initiated. On the basis of the analysis of the first round of data collection, a second round of sampling, i.e. theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006), was conducted during the autumn of 2009. In the first round of data collection both elite and amateur athletes had been interviewed, and in both groups there was a tendency to withdraw from the competitive context. I first thought that it might be because of lack of athletic commitment in the amateur athletes, on the one hand, and a wish of elite athletes to maintain an unblemished record of success, on the other. To explore these ideas I decided to include middle-range athletes in a second round of sampling, but the further sampling and analysis showed similar patterns of withdrawal from sport among all three groups. In total, 10 men between the ages of 68 and 90 years were interviewed. They were athletically active in the sense that they practiced one or several sports, for example running, skiing, or track and field, and all but two had participated or did still participate in athletic competitions in old age.

After articles I and II, which focused on athletically active men, I decided to study athletically active women to allow comparative explorations of gender. As in the first round of sampling of athletically active men, the initial sampling criterion was athletically active women over the age of 65 who had participated or did still participate in athletic competitions in old age. Consequently, a third round of sampling was conducted during the autumn

2010 and resulted in 12 interviews with qualified women. These 12 interviews are the basis of article III.

In total, 22 research participants between the ages of 66 and 90⁵ were interviewed, 10 men and 12 women. Article IV is based on all 22 interviews. Contacts with the athletically active men and women were mediated through colleagues, sports clubs, and lists of competition results. Apart from interviewing, I also visited a two-day veteran sports competition, the Swedish Veteran Masterships in track and field, in 2009. A colleague of mine functioned as a gatekeeper and introduced me to old participants and volunteers. I observed particular competitions and interactions between old athletes, talked with participants and volunteers, and was able to get closer to the emotional and physical experiences of participating in a competition.

The research participants

For a qualitative study to be considered trustworthy, information about the participants should be presented to make the findings more transparent and assessable. It is also, however, of utmost importance to protect the identities of research participants who have been promised anonymity. Because there are a limited number of people, especially women, over 65 who are athletically active or competitors in the Swedish veteran sports movement⁶ I have tried to balance these competing principles by limiting details of the participants to their athletic involvement, ages, geographical locations, and civil status, and not to include any more detailed records that could risk allowing the identification of any of my participants.

Most of the men and women had been athletically active in a competitive context throughout their lives in sports such as skiing, track and field, and swimming. Some had been involved in team sports such as football or handball in their youth, but as the men and women grew older they tended to switch to individual sports⁷. In old age the majority of the men and women had participated or did still regularly participate in athletic competitions, and all were physically or athletically active at the time of the interview.

When interviewing the men it became clear that there was a great variety of athletic success within the group. To enable a comparison of these groups, I constructed three athletic status positions: amateur athlete, middle-range athlete, and elite athlete. Amateur describes those participants who relate to sport as a hobby and participate in local competitions; middle-range

⁵ Most participants were aged 70–80.

⁶ Organized sports that feature competitions for people from the age of 35 and up. Veteran competitions are based on five-year age groups.

⁷ The switch from team-sports to individual sports was for many women related to the fact that they needed to find athletic activities which were more easily combined with child-care.

describes those who participate in major national competitions, and elite refers to the athletes who participate and distinguish themselves in major international competitions. The analyses of articles I and II, however, showed no major differences between the groups. Because the women's athletic participation was less diverse than the men's, this division was not applied to them.

Over their life course, most athletes moved from one category to another: from elite in their youth, to amateur in middle-age, and back to elite status within the veteran sports movement. When elite status was achieved it was either in youth or old age. Unlike the men, the women had fewer opportunities to distinguish themselves as elite athletes during their youth; however, a few women were successful middle-range athletes in their youth.

Although both men and women tended to describe themselves as healthy, some also had experiences of illnesses such as cancer or heart conditions, or injuries such as broken, sprained, or strained limbs. But over all the men and especially the women were rather privileged members of the senior population. They were generally living in what appeared to be financially and socially stable conditions. All were situated in the northern or middle part of Sweden, and most were living with their spouses.

Developing the interview guide

The questions on which the interviews were based were in part constructed a priori and in part created mid-interview in response to what each participant talked about. The development of the interview guide was therefore continuous, and its description includes segments from the actual interviews as appropriate.

When constructing questions for the interviews, I was inspired by fundamental grounded theory research queries beginning with Glaser's "What is happening here?" (1978) and Charmaz's "What are the basic social/social psychological processes?" (2006).

One fundamental process can easily be identified in answer to the question, "What do people perceive is happening here?" in relation to old athletes: the process of growing old while practicing sports. Charmaz (2006) points out, however, that it is important not to ascribe more significance to a particular process than the participants themselves attribute to it. Therefore, I thought it vital to include open-ended questions such as "What does your current life situation look like?" and "What are your driving forces in life?" that allowed the participants to define what was important to them to discuss and to set the agenda of the interview.

In sharing their lives the participants often generated material for follow-up questions concerning their athletic involvement or their lives in general, which I posed directly or wrote down and saved for a more appropriate

moment during the interview. Generally the participants themselves brought up the issue of how their interest in sports emerged and developed. In other cases I would follow Charmaz's (2006) suggestion of posing questions concerning the emergence of central processes, by asking for instance: "How did you get involved with sports?" and "Could you tell me more about if there is someone in particular who has had an effect on your practice of sports?" When the research participant had begun practicing sports and begun competing at separate times, which was usually the case, I would ask: "How did you get into competing?" or "What does the competitive element mean to you?"

Charmaz (2006) also suggests exploring whether there have been any changes in how people act or attribute meaning to the fundamental processes, and how and when these changes have occurred. In following this recommendation, I asked questions such as "What would you say practicing sports is like nowadays compared to practicing sports when you were younger?" and perhaps "Could you tell me more about when it started feeling different?" Generally these questions would also initiate discussions about growing old if this topic had not already been raised.

On the topic of growing old, I generally let the participants themselves choose how they wanted to speak about old age, as I did not want to impose my interpretations upon their understandings. When aging was mentioned by the participants, I would return to the issue by saying, for example, "We have talked about growing old a bit, could you tell me more about how you feel about it?" If the participants themselves had referred to themselves as old, I would use that concept to enquire: "Could you tell me about a specific time when you felt old?"

Concerning gender there were no pre-constructed questions that were generally used, however follow-up questions were constructed in the interview situation when participants brought up gendered issues themselves. During the interviews women tended to bring up gender explicitly, while men did so more implicitly by characterizing sports and themselves in gendered terms. The following extract shows an example of how a gendered issue was raised during an interview and the follow-up questions that were posed to elicit more information:

Woman: I generally do not tell people that I am a shot-put thrower.

Interviewer: How come?

Woman: No, it is more of a... People don't understand how fun it is to be a thrower. It has a lot to do with womanliness and manliness of course.

Interviewer: How do you mean?

Woman: Well, it was the same thing when I was a little girl... [...]

Later on in the interview I asked her how she felt about other people's reactions and whether she thought shot-put was a manly sport and so on. In asking relatively open questions concerning gendered issues, I attempted to limit my own theoretical preconceptions regarding gender in favor of the opinions of my research participants.

The interviews

In the initial contact with potential research participants they were informed that participation in my dissertation project was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was explained that the interviews would be used as the basis of my thesis, and that although quotations from these interviews might be presented, they themselves would be anonymized and their identities protected.

I chose to perform what Charmaz (2006) refers to as intense interviews. Charmaz describes the structure of intense interviews as ranging from open explorations to semi-structured queries. It is based on the active curiosity of the researcher and it facilitates expertise roles among the participants. Instead of passively listening to the research participants, the researcher should display interest, enquire about feelings or thoughts, and ask for more information on certain topics. As I was soliciting information about an unfamiliar world in which the participants were experts, this technique was well suited to my outsider position.

The interviews generally lasted 1 to 2 hours and took place in the homes of the men and women, except for three that were conducted at an athletic arena and a cafeteria. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Confessions of an outsider

When I started working on my thesis I was 24 years old. When I began interviewing athletes I had aged a year, but I was still not old enough to escape the epithet "young." Many of my research participants were more than 50 years my senior. Age was, however, not the only aspect differentiating me from the men and women who participated in my studies. These were people with a lifelong interest in sport, while I was neither athletically active nor particularly interested in athleticism beyond the theoretical interest my thesis had awoken. Therefore, I was framed early on

as an outsider researcher—especially in relation to my male research participants— by colleagues, friends, and some of the research participants themselves. Some questioned my ability to understand the men’s lives by arguing that I was too distanced from them. This was a reasonable concern considering that one of the recognized difficulties in being an outsider is the problem of gaining access to the world of the research participants (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Indeed, it has been argued that the researcher needs to be a member of the group being studied. Oliver (1996), for example, argued that non-disabled researchers should not study disabled people as they are hindered by their stereotypical understanding of what it is like to be disabled. Others viewed my outsider position as a definite advantage in the interview situation, arguing that the men in particular would not view a young woman as a potential threat or rival, so that as a consequence of my position, I could “fly under the radar.”

Whether or not my outsider position acted as an advantage or a disadvantage, I believe, in line with Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), that no researcher, regardless of membership status, can avoid having an impact on a study. Consequently all scholars should undertake the task of reviewing their position in relation to their participants. I intend to do so for three significant reasons. First, it might increase the transparency of my work. With a deepened knowledge of how my outsider position might have affected the results, readers will have a greater ability to understand and assess my studies. Second, I hope to make a contribution to the methodological research concerning the outsider-insider discussion in the field of aging. Finally, it will show how entering the research field made me rethink my own preconceptions and allowed me to gain new perspectives.

In particular I wish to focus upon the cross-gender *and* cross-generational interview, e.g. my interviews with the athletically active men. I did not experience my position as a young non-athlete as problematic in relation to the women I interviewed. We shared a gender position and many of the women referred to me in an inclusive manner (“us women”). Furthermore, the men were the first to be interviewed, and it was during these first interviews that difficulties arose that were related to my outsider position— or more precisely to my attempts at rejecting the outsider position.

Prior to initiating my interviews, I had primarily considered my outsider position as a potential problem that could hinder the athletically active men from talking freely in the interview situations. As the insightful interviewer I imagined myself to be, I took some precautionary measures in an attempt to erase the differences between myself and my research participants in my initial two interviews. Ironically, these measures created difficulties in the interviews instead counteracting problems. For my very first interview, I attempted to narrow the age difference by constructing a “field body,” a common physical strategy for outsider researchers (Lee, 1997; Skrinjar,

2003). To make my youth less evident, I traded contact lenses for glasses, put up my hair, and chose a conservative outfit prior to the interview. When I arrived at the man's home I was instantly offered coffee, with the remark that young people seldom drink it. Determined to conquer this marker of adulthood and convinced that it was rude to decline a friendly gesture; I readily accepted a large steaming hot cup of coffee. As it happens, I was not an experienced coffee drinker—to be frank, it was my very first cup. Unfortunately, I was not able to drink more than a few sips, which my research participant noticed and joked about recurrently throughout my visit. This incident may well have given the participant the impression that I was trying to “play grown up” and may explain why he thereafter treated me more or less as a grandchild, for example by asking me the sort of questions that are often directed towards children and require very little knowledge to answer. Unable to break free from this role, I rather adopted the character of the interested and naïve grandchild. On the one hand, this role increased the supply of information, since the man seemed to feel the need to explain situations and phenomena to me in greater detail, but on the other hand, the role of the grandchild constrained me against asking follow-up questions about injuries and death that the participant seemed to be sensitive about.

In my second interview I attempted to cover up my outsider position as a non-athletic person. Some of the athletes who I came to interview had been or still were successful and well-known athletes and this man belonged to the first category. However, due to my lack of interest in sports, though I knew of him, I was unfamiliar with his particular achievements. Before interviewing him, therefore, I tried to compensate for my inexperience of sports by reading about his prior accomplishments. This resulted in me asking the man questions like: “How does it feel to have been so successful?” The man, who up to that point seemed eager to prove himself, then became much more modest about his early athletic achievements. However, wiser from the experience of my first interview, I did follow through with more sensitive questions concerning his personal life.

After these two initial interviews I made the decision to operate from, rather than overcompensate for, my outsider position, which turned out to be a more sound and fruitful strategy. Both men and women soon became aware of my unfamiliarity with sports and most of them took a keen interest in explaining various details of their particular sport. It also allowed me to ask more basic and uninitiated questions concerning their exercise, competitive participation, and general involvement in sports. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) have argued that it is a fruitful strategy to allow the participants to act as experts, especially in cross-gender interviews when the interviewer is a woman and the interviewee is a man. By occupying an expert position in the interview situation, men can maintain a sense of control in a situation mainly controlled by the female interviewer.

Based on my experiences in cross-generational and cross-gender interviews, I would therefore recommend using the outsider position instead of viewing it as problematic. In order to compensate for eventual skewness in the material I made sure to avoid repeating those mistakes in subsequent interviews and to be aware in the coding process that the first interview lacked details concerning subjects related to death, and that the second participant was less eager to present himself as successful, so the final results were not affected by those distortions.

Furthermore, I would like to address the distribution of control in the outsider interview situation. This is an issue that has been widely discussed in studies of cross-gender interviewing, especially when the interviewee is a man and the interviewer is a woman (Lee, 1997; McKee & O'Brien, 1983; Skrinjar, 2003). Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) argue that male interviewees may experience the interview situation as both an opportunity and a threat. The interview provides them with an opportunity to present themselves as men in control. At the same time the interviewer might deprive them of control by setting the agenda and asking potentially self-disturbing questions. Therefore it is fairly common that male interviewees attempt to regain control from female interviewers. Cross-generational studies have also focused on the issue of power, but unlike cross-gender studies, old interviewees are in many instances regarded as disempowered. For instance, in her study of aging people Russell (1999, p. 404) assumed that the old interviewees would lack power, and she even questioned whether it was ethical doing conventional single interviews or whether it would be: "a hit-and-run intrusion into lonely lives." However Russell's methodological worries were not justified, as her old interviewees exerted considerable power in the interview situation.

My experiences in the matter are twofold. On the one hand, both women and men allowed themselves to relinquish control in the interview situation. Several of them talked about emotional and sensitive subjects, such as fear of death, low self-esteem, life crises, and so on. One man and several of the women allowed themselves to become teary-eyed, without feeling the need to excuse themselves. My outsider position as a woman might even have facilitated the men's ability and willingness to talk of more sensitive subjects. Indeed, McKee & O'Brien (1983) have found that male interviewees are able to talk more readily with women about certain topics.

On the other hand, neither men nor women were powerless in the interview situation, although like Russell, I had expected to be the relative bearer of power in relation to my interviewees. I imagined that I would partake in narratives about their faltering bodies while at the same time displaying a young and, even if not athletic, presumably able body. Considering the fact that my participants were athletically active and in general rather privileged members of the senior population, my presumption

in this matter is quite surprising and reveals my own ageist preconceptions about old people, which through the interviews were thoroughly dismantled. The participants were neither lonelier nor more disempowered than any other person—and they appeared at no time envious of my young untrained body, but rather quite happily situated within their own competent corpuses.

Analyzing the material

In grounded theory design, coding the data is of primary importance to the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Coding allows the researcher to categorize and make sense of larger pieces of data. Charmaz distinguishes between initial coding, which is explorative and often results in concrete and empirically close codes, and focused coding, which is more conceptual and synthesizes significant initial codes to categories. Grounded theory research often results in a core category; that is one category that has proven to be of central importance and to which all other identified categories can be related. In each the articles, one or several core categories were distinguished (see list below).

- Core category of article I: *Construction of successful old-age masculinities*
- Core categories of article II: *Physical control as a form of capital*, *Ambivalent approach to body and health*, and *Protecting one's physical autonomy*.
- Core category of article III: *Female aging athletic identity*
- Core category of article IV: *The emergence of capability-age*

To present the coding process and the construction of the core categories in a more transparent manner, Table 1 shows an example from the coding process of article II.

In the left column in Table I a number of codes are presented. These are products of the initial coding process, where meaningful phrases and sentences have been identified and turned into relatively concrete and empirically close codes. These codes were then sorted, and codes interlinked in meaning were synthesized to subcategories. In the table below it is shown how three subcategories create a core category: *protecting one's physical autonomy*.

Table 1: Example from the focused coding process for the third core category *protecting ones physical autonomy*

Codes (a selection)	Subcategories	Core Category
<p>Dislike group work outs, want to be in charge of my body, manage myself, more individualistic with age</p> <p>Doctors advice ineffectual, did not take my medicine, got healthy without medical care, self-expert at health</p> <p>Stay out of someone else's hands, must be healthy, anything can happen, more unpredictable body now</p>	<p>Managing body and health single-handedly</p> <p>Distrusting medical care</p> <p>The aging body as a threat against autonomy</p>	<p>Protecting one's physical autonomy</p>

Throughout the research process memos, i.e. analytic notes, were written in relation to the codes and categories. These memos also served a purpose when relating and comparing categories with one another. I also used what Charmaz (2006) refers to as “sensitizing concepts” through which I have been able to make sense of the empirical material. These are ideas sprung from the data that can be used as theoretical guiding devices. For example, in coding the first interviews with the women, it became evident that life course experiences were of major importance in understanding their present athletic involvement. To explore the meanings of their life course experiences further, I employed theoretical concepts from the life course framework as sensitizing concepts to make sense of the material. When sensitizing concepts have been used they have either been fully developed into theoretical frameworks later on in the analysis or exchanged for other theoretical ideas that were found to better explain the empirical findings.

The four studies

When interpreting the empirical results of the studies of men and women, I found four research areas particularly interesting: (a) how the process of growing old affected the gendered self-images of the male athletes, (b) the complexity of the male athletes' relations to their bodies and health, (c) how women were able to construct strong female aging athletic identities in old age, and (d) how practicing sports affected how athletically active men and women made sense of the process of aging. When developing each of these themes in the articles, I sought to discover how these empirical findings could contribute to existing research and how they could be understood through theoretical frameworks. In doing so I developed theoretical fusions and introduced additional theoretical concepts on the basis of the empirical results and in relation to four specific gaps in the research.

Article I: Constructing successful old-age masculinities amongst athletes

Article I (Eman, 2011) explored gendered self-images among old male athletes. The findings suggest that the old male athletes rethought their relation to competitive sports as they grew old. Being athletically competitive was not seen as age-appropriate, and as a result many of the men abandoned the competitive context. Instead, the men found and adopted more age-appropriate masculine pathways. Four such major pathways were distinguished: being physically active, being a leader, being a busy senior, and being a family man. The four themes were related to the four bodily practices that Connell (1983) considers central to hegemonic masculinity: sports, work, fatherhood, and sexuality. Except for sexuality, these aspects were all identifiable in the study. However, in the article I argue that Connell's four themes must be revised for the process of growing old and connected to successful aging to fully understand old-age masculinities.

Successful aging is a normative theory that describes successful adaptation processes in an aging context (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). It is based on three components: selection, optimization, and compensation, which together form the model "selective optimization with compensation." To become a successful ager, old adults are encouraged to utilize and maximize their resources, while compensating for their lost capacities (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). It appears that by combining successful aging and hegemonic masculinity many men were able to construct successful old-age masculinities.

In relation to existing research the article contributes by contextualizing one of the most influential concepts in the field of gender, Connell's (1995)

concept of hegemonic masculinity, in relation to age. Hegemonic masculinity represents the top of a hierarchical order of masculinities that grant power to men as a group in relation to women as a group (Connell, 1995). Although it has been shown that the concept of hegemonic masculinity varies temporally (Spector-Mersel, 2006) and is culturally diverse (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994), it has also been recognized that the concept is insufficiently explored within the dimension of age (Spector-Mersel, 2006).

Article II: The complexity of physical capital: how old male athletes relate to body and health

Article II focused on how old male athletes relate to their bodies and health in the process of growing old. Three core categories were differentiated from the empirical findings: physical control as a form of capital, ambivalent approach to body and health, and protecting one's physical autonomy. More specifically, the article shows how old male athletes use their bodies to gain physical capital. However, the athletes display a contradictory stance towards body and health, proclaiming care for the body as both significant and insignificant as they were affected by three different contexts: a masculine, an athletic and an aging context. The only category that seems to be valid in all three contexts is the protection of physical autonomy, which allows the men to care about their bodies and their health.

In order to explain the contradictory results, the article draws on several theoretical concepts, primarily physical capital (Tulle, 2008b) and Robertson's (2007) don't care/should care framework of health and masculinity. Robertson's don't care/should care distinction focuses on the tensions between masculinity and health. Robertson acknowledges that men produce masculinity both by taking care of their bodies and health and by not doing so. The concept of physical capital, originated by Bourdieu (1984) and employed by Tulle (2008b) in relation to old runners, is useful to show the advantages of caring about the body. Tulle has argued that veteran runners are able, by working their bodies through running, to produce physical capital, which may be exchanged for social or economic capital.

Although existing research has recognized that a healthy body may constitute physical and social capital among old adults (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Tulle, 2008b), leading a healthy life is not straightforward process, especially not among men (Courtenay, 2000). It has been shown that in a help-seeking context, embodied health is underlined by intersecting norms of masculinity and aging (McVittie & Willock, 2006; Smith et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the experiences of relatively healthy and active men in the context of sports have not gained the same focus and the existing literature on the topic falls short (Tulle, 2008b). In an effort to fill that gap in the

research, therefore, the article contextualizes the concept of physical capital in relation to gender.

Article III: Breaking down barriers: women (re)producing athletic identity in old age

Article III focused on how old women were able to form and reproduce a commitment to sport over time, and to translate this commitment into resilient strategies in old age.

When interpreting the empirical findings, I combined Jenkins' (1996) concept of social identity with the life course framework of Elder (1998). Jenkins argue that experiences of uniformity, reflexive action, individuality, and a sense are essential components in the formation of self, while the life course framework enables us to understand how old adults' current living situations are molded by their previous life experiences, links to others, social and cultural contexts, and agency. In article III, the central life course themes of historical time and place, the timing of lives, linked or independent lives, and agency allowed explorations of how, on the one hand, the women were able to pursue their athletic interests, and on the other hand, they were affected by gendered and age-related constraints. Combining Jenkins' concept of social identity with themes from Elder's concept of the life course, the article explored how sports over time became deeply rooted and connected to their ideas of the self.

When combining the theoretical frameworks of social identity and life course perspective to interpret the results, it was found that the women were able to form and maintain a commitment to sport through (a) life course experiences of participating in sport, (b) life course experiences of identity clashes, and (c) continuous male support. By drawing upon these experiences, the women were able to construct female aging athletic identities through which they developed resilient strategies. Besides contributing to the understanding of how women are able to create commitment to sport in old age, it was also argued that these women might also challenge gendered ageism by constructing themselves as strong and enduring.

These findings tie in well with the third research gap, which concerns women's opportunities to take part in competitive sports in old age. Research on old women tends to center on constraints of agency and acting-space, not least in the context of physical activity, where focus is placed on the multitude of barriers preventing old women from being athletically and physically active (Brown & Miller, 2001; Bruce et al., 2002; Kowal & Fortier, 2007; O'Brien Cousins, 2000). Few studies, however, explore how old women transgress and challenge constraining images of age and gender in

the context of sports by focusing on how they are able to reproduce athletic commitment (Conn, Tripp-Reimer, & Maas, 2003).

Article IV: The role of sports in making sense of the process of growing old

Article IV explored whether and how the practice of sports in old age could affect old adults' processes of sense-making about old age and the process of growing old in ways that could challenge dominant constructions about old age. To that end, the study also aimed to explore whether and how gender mattered in this process. The results of the study seem to show that sports do have an effect on how old men and women make sense of oldness by (a) making appearance and subjective experiences less useful in making sense of oldness, (b) focusing on capability as a way to make sense of oldness, and (c) reevaluating the process of growing old and of oldness in relation to physical capabilities. In understanding the impact sports had on these men and women in making sense of oldness, the study introduced a new concept: capability-age. Capability-age represents a form of sense-making of old age which is assessed through comparisons of bodily experiences in relation to oneself and in relation to others. It should be seen as an addition to the concepts of look-age, feel-age, and ideal-age employed by Öberg and Tornstam (2001). In article IV it is argued that by reinterpreting oldness through capability-age, women were able, to a greater extent than men, to challenge stereotyped "thinking as usual" about old age.

In addition to the theoretical contribution of capability-age, article IV makes use of theories such as the mask of aging, the gaze of youth, and positioning theory when interpreting the results. The mask of aging refers to the phenomenon of old adults disassociating themselves from their aged exteriors, which are perceived as masks hiding an inner youthful self (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989). The gaze of youth refers to the devaluation of old bodies compared with youthful appearances. Twigg (2004) argued that old people themselves internalize this gaze and start to perceive themselves as distasteful. Lastly, positioning theory (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) enables understanding of how old people position themselves in relation to each other and to oldness.

Existing research has recognized that within the context of sport there lies the transformative potential to alter how old adults perceive the process of growing old at both the experiential and the discursive level (Tulle, 2008b). Existing literature, however, falls short on exploring the gender dimension, and although the sense-making processes of old age have been explored, they have not been thoroughly studied in relation to existing constructions of age (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Tulle, 2008b).

Reconnecting the articles to the overarching aim

In order to present the general conclusions I would like to reconnect these four articles to the overarching aim, which was to explore how the way athletically active old men and women make sense of their acting-space affects their participation in competitive sports, and conversely, how their participation in competitive sports affects their sense-making processes and acting-spaces.

Referring again to my adaptation of the Coleman boat (Coleman, 1990; see Figure 1), I will provide an overview of (1) how the men and women interpreted and made sense of the constraints and opportunities they felt affected their participation in competitive sports (how they perceived the construction of their acting-spaces within the context of sports), (2) how the men and women acted in relation to these constraints and opportunities within the context of competitive sports; and (3) how their participation in competitive sports affected their making sense of processes of aging, sports, and gender, which in turn could result either in the reproduction of the acting-space (X) or the introduction of an altered acting-space (Y).

Article 1: (1) Many men appear to be affected by ideals of hegemonic masculinity and successful aging, which narrows their acting-space within the context of competitive sports as they perceive competitiveness to be less employable. (2) The men acting under these constraints find new ways to behave, which are in line with both hegemonic masculinity and successful aging through which they construct successful old-age masculinities. In doing so, they distinguish themselves from other old adults. (3) They continue to use dominant constructions of masculinity and aging norms, which tend to reproduce X rather than produce Y.

Article 2: (1) Men appear to experience contradictory ideals of hegemonic masculinity, successful aging, and athletic ideals regarding the body and health, which in turn create contradictory acting-spaces. (2) In relation to body and health in the context of competitive sports, the men appear to find a way to combine the contradictory ideals by emphasizing their need to remain autonomous. (3) It could be argued that the men both employ the dominant constructions and transgress them at the same time, thus partly reproducing X and partly creating Y.

Article 3: (1) The “double whammy” of ageism and sexism poses potential constraints on the women’s opportunities to practice competitive sports. (2) The women acting under these constraints find that their previous life course experiences of encountering constraints actually creates opportunities for them to transgress them. (3) Drawing on life course experiences and male support, the women creates female athletic identities of aging that enable them to become empowered by the inclusiveness of a female collective and break down the barriers of the acting-space. In challenging the boundaries of

acting-space, the women may contribute to the production of Y rather than to the reproduction of X.

Article IV: (1) Men and women are confronted with stereotyped “thinking as usual” about age and the discourse of decline in which the aging body, perceived to be a body in decline, is expected to limit their acting-space in the context of competitive sports. (2) When practicing sports both men and women alter their sense-making of age by focusing on their physical capability and employing capability-age. As the men focus on athletic results in comparison to others, they mainly interpret aging as a downhill slope; the women, who focus more on their own athletic performance, however, view aging as a potential process of empowerment. (3) It may be argued that the men reproduce the dominant X construction of aging as a process of decline, while the women, to a greater extent, challenge the limitations of the dominant X and contribute toward the construction of a new Y.

Discussion

The concluding discussion will consist of three parts: the first will discuss the general conclusions; the second will present the limitations and contributions of the thesis and offer suggestions for future research; the third will be a concluding epilogue of final thoughts.

Acting-space and sense-making processes of age and gender

In our late modern societies, in which old adults are expected reflexively to construct active post-work identities and engage in self-realizing activities (Öberg, 2005), it is deceptively easy to presume that old adults may design their lifestyles precisely as they see fit, not least in relation to physical activity. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that there are cultural, social, physical, and gendered constraints limiting the acting-space of old adults, which among other things affect their abilities to take part in competitive sports. At the same time, however, the thesis shows that through the practice of competitive sport, old adults are in a position to transgress and challenge these constraints. How the men and women made sense of gender and aging norms appears to have an impact on their abilities to act within the context of competitive sports.

Merely by participating in competitive sport, the women and men have been shown to resist and moderate ideas of age-appropriate exercise for active aging (Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007). Sport has also been found to be more empowering than other forms of physical activity because it provides more intense experiences of physical competence (Guthrie & Castelnovo, 2001). The important point seems to be that it is more difficult for people to entertain ideas of their own weakness in situations in which they are constantly reminded of their strength. Gender appears to be a salient aspect, however, in both opportunities and constraints relating to participation in competitive sport.

More concretely, the thesis has shown that the acting-spaces of old men and old women within the context of competitive sport have limits and are often regulated by contradictions or intersections with perceived norms of gender and age. Neither men nor women allowed themselves to be constrained by these norms, but constructed new pathways. However, the practice of competitive sports alters the sense-making process among women rather more than among men. As a consequence it appears that women are more likely to transgress the boundaries of an acting-space regulated primarily by norms of gender-appropriate and age-appropriate behavior, while men are more likely to use existing norms to recreate themselves in the process of aging.

In their study of disability management and physical activity, Guthrie and Castelnuovo (2001) draw on the Foucauldian concepts of “reverse resistance” and “resistance as freedom,” showing that these are useful concepts in the context of physical activity. While both reverse resistance and resistance as freedom obviously signify some form of resistance, the difference between the two concepts is that reverse resistance involves an element of reproduction of dominant discourses and resistance as freedom refers to activities of resistance that challenge power discourses. It could be argued that the athletically active women primarily engaged in resistance as freedom while the men were more involved with reverse resistance practices, indicating that although competitive sport has emancipatory potential, such emancipation is not automatic.

Considering that the athletically active men and women encountered comparable social, cultural, and physical constraints and had similar kinds of resources (time, supportive families, financial security) their different forms of resistance must be considered an interesting finding. In interpreting the gender difference, attention should be paid to three aspects in particular: (a) whether perceived aging and gender norms overlapped or contradicted each other, (b) whether athletic strength was collectivized or individualized in relation to the senior population, and (c) whether capability-age was assessed through individual performance or through athletic results and rankings.

Overlapping or contradicting norms

More than the women, the men seem to have experienced tensions between their various roles (as men, old adults, and athletes) that were difficult to resolve within the context of competitive sports. For example, athletic competitiveness was a highly functioning pathway toward hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) in their younger years, but as they grew old it became less employable, as shown in article I.

Unlike the majority of the men, many of the women had had their athletic involvement challenged continually over their life course with questions about whether it was appropriate or safe, or whether it interfered with their obligations as mothers and contradicted the ethic of care (Lewis & Ridge, 2005). As they grew old they were faced with similar reproaches, but primarily focused on their age. In other words, their acting-space as women was similar to their acting-space as old adults, as the gender norms and aging norms appear to overlap rather than contradict each other. Thus they were accustomed to the narrowness of their acting-space and could draw on their life course experiences to develop resilient strategies and break down the barriers they faced. It had not been easier for them than for men, on the contrary, but they had fought their main battles earlier in life. This is in line

with the findings of Wilińska (2010), who showed that societal expectations of old adults correspond well with expectations of how women should behave, but stand in direct contradiction to norms of masculinity.

Collectivized or individualized athletic strength

In order to engage with resistance as freedom as opposed to reverse resistance, Guthrie & Castelnovo (2001) emphasize the importance of collectivized strength. Their theoretical reasoning appears applicable to the findings of this thesis as well. Article III showed that collectivized strength played a major part in the women's development of the empowered female aging athletic identities that enabled them to transgress norms of aging and gender. Many of the women viewed themselves as members of an empowered collective of athletically active old women. By drawing on that collective strength, the women appear to have become more confident of their own strength as well. This corresponds well with critical feminist gerontology that has stressed the particular abilities of old women to create and use strong feminine ties as resources of empowerment (Freixas, Luque & Reina, 2012). In contrast, article I showed that many of the men tended to individualize their athletic strength, but collectivize their perceived weaknesses, in relation to the aging population. Thereby many of the men indirectly reproduced the dominant construction of aging as a general process of decline, whereas the many of the women challenged this notion.

Capability-age assessed with emphasis on athletic processes or athletic results

Lastly, as shown in article IV the sense-making processes of old age differed between men and women. Both men and women made sense of old age through assessments of their capability-age; however, the men did so primarily by considering their athletic results and the women did so mainly by considering their athletic performances. The men interpreted their athletic results as signs of the inevitable decline of aging, in line with dominant constructions of aging. In contrast, many of the women questioned the discourse of decline (Gullette, 1997) with reference to athletic process-oriented evaluations. In conclusion, through these three aspects women appear more readily than men to be able to use the emancipatory potential of competitive sports to resist dominant constructions of age and gender.

Contributions

This thesis contributes to the intersecting fields of growing old, gender, and sport by:

- showing the cultural, social, and physical constraints that athletically active men and women encounter and the resources they use to adapt to or to challenge these boundaries. Considering that in 1978 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization acknowledged participation in sport as a basic human right (Knight & Holt, 2011), it is important that these findings are made known.
- increasing understanding of how the acting-spaces of old adults are constructed, negotiated, or challenged in relation to gender and age. By illuminating the boundaries of acting-space, the tensions and intersections between these limits become distinguishable, and hence changeable. These findings are particularly sociologically relevant for those who aspire to create a society in which people are able to follow personal pursuits without being socially circumscribed by limiting norms and expectations.
- producing empirical and theoretical contributions to the growing field of aging and gender. The thesis has (a) contributed to contextualizing hegemonic masculinity in relation to age, (b) shown the complexity of physical capital among athletically active men, (c) shown the context of competitive sports as an empowering context for women, in what may be seen as contribution to critical feminist gerontology, and (d) introduced the new concept of capability-age, which may improve understanding of sense-making of old age among old adults.

Limitations

It must be recognized that the research participants were members of a relatively privileged white middle-class in Sweden. The women in particular had social and cultural resources that have enabled their athletic participation. The thesis must be interpreted in light of the participants' privileged social positions. There are reasons to believe that marginalized old adults may experience greater difficulties in adapting to or challenging constructions of active aging (Ranzijn, 2010). Future research should therefore explore sense-making processes and acting-space in a greater diversity of athletically active old adults, including those from the working-class and from ethnic minorities.

Epilogue

In their capacity as athletes many of the men and women who participated in this dissertation project achieved physical and psychological accomplishments in old age, such as practicing skiing every day during the winter despite of the weather, completing a “Swedish Classic,”⁸ or even becoming a world champion in their sport. People in their close or peripheral social circles were often amazed and impressed; some, however, also expressed worry about the participants’ health or made comments indicating that practicing sports in old age was nonsensical or childish behavior. Cautions concerning health may well be both appropriate and well-intentioned, yet these and other objections may also reveal dominant constructions of old age. All athletes may risk athletic injuries, yet we choose particularly to emphasize risk in relation to old adults, which likely expresses long-standing understandings of senior citizens as characterized by fragility (Vertinsky, 1991).

Apart from objections related to risk or childishness, however, I have noticed an implicit theme during my work on this thesis: how the athletically active men and women tended to present their athletic involvement as useful to other people in their surroundings. For instance, many men stressed their abilities to assist younger athletic talents, while some women said that they gained energy for care-giving through sports. In doing so, I think they were partly legitimizing their athletic involvement in response to (or to avert) comments such as “What good does it do?” as one of the swimmers was asked by her doctor.

On the basis of my new-found experience as a critical gerontologist, I would like to argue that there is an ethic of aging which postulates that old adults should strive primarily to be of use to others – a conclusion which can be supported by existing research. For instance, Wilińska (2010) found that caretaking is considered the primary role for old adults and for old women in particular. It has also been noted that retired old adults are influenced by a “busy ethic” that emphasizes the need for them to be useful and active after retirement (Ekerdt, 1986; Katz, 2000). In the context of physical activity it has also been shown that old adults are more motivated by messages that prescribe physical activity as means of helping others rather than oneself (Ory et al., 2003). Certainly, it can feel wonderful to be of use to others—and the veteran sports movement may be beneficial to society—but ultimately, when participating in a race, one should, like the woman runner in the opening passage, be able to do so with no other thought in mind – but to win.

⁸ In order to complete a “Swedish Classic” one must finish a Swedish classic event in the four disciplines of skiing, running, swimming, and cycling within twelve months.

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Appendix: Interview guide

I would like to start by asking you to tell me about yourself and your background.

What does your current life situation look like?

What are your driving-forces in life?

How do you feel about the future?

How did you get involved with sports?

How did you get into competing?

What does the competitive element mean to you?

Could you tell me more about why you have continued to practise sport?

Could you tell me more about if there is someone in particular who has had an effect on your practise of sports?

(How come you quitted practising sports? What made you take it up again?)

What would you say practicing sports is like nowadays compared to practicing sports when you were younger?

Could you tell me about how you feel about growing old?

Could you tell me about a specific time when you have felt old?

When you are looking in the mirror, what do you see then?