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# Older women, embodiment and yoga practice

BARBARA HUMBERSTONE\* and CAROL CUTLER-RIDDICK†

## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we consider the ageing body and the ‘body techniques’ practised by older women within their yoga classes. The paper emphasises the importance of exploring alternative definitions of the human condition, how these are shaped and assembled through particular embodied practices which are realised personally and socially. Taking a contextualised phenomenological approach, older women’s experiences are made visible through interview and participant observation. Unlike much sporting practice, the body techniques managed by the women did not emphasise sporting prowess but provided for an integration of body and mind. In the process, biological ageing was accepted yet the women maintained control over the process, troubling prevailing narratives of ageing, declining control and increasing weakness that are taken for granted in much of Western society. The paper highlights the significance of socially rooted ontological embodiment in understanding the ageing body and particular bodily practices.

**KEY WORDS** – physical activity and ageing, embodiment and ageing, women, mask of ageing.

## **Introduction**

This paper draws attention to the embodied experience of older women practising yoga. It focuses upon the ways in which the older body engages with alternative understandings and purposes of physical activity to create a narrative of the ageing body which is not one of decline and lack of control but of mutable accomplishment and integration of body and mind. We begin by drawing attention to discourses on ageing and the ways in which narratives on ageing may affect and effect how people approach later life. Biological narratives of the body are then challenged through examining sociological studies of sport and physical activity that take seriously the body, embodiment and the senses. We then consider studies which draw attention

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to the ontology of ageing and notions of body–mind integration, showing that age and embodiment are inexorably interlinked and more particularly accomplished within particular contexts and cultures. Thus we highlight the argument for a ‘socially rooted ontology’ for understanding ageing and physical activity. Next we turn to our inquiry on yoga and women who practise yoga later in life, providing details of context and characteristics. In order to locate the empirical findings we give a brief historical background to yoga in which we present philosophical and spiritual practices which are mediated through Western cultures. We then provide narrative of the second author’s experience of her yoga class, giving something of the location, atmosphere and interaction within which she was embedded; whilst, the first author narrates her emplaced and embodied experience of a specific yoga class. Next we discuss the findings from an analysis of older women’s experience of yoga classes, considering why the women chose to attend yoga classes and continue with their practice. We then consider the body techniques of the yoga practice and the significance of body–mind integration practised in the classes observed. We show that through body and breathing techniques, body reflection and relaxation practices, on occasions, body–mind dualism was resisted and a reconfigured ontology of body–mind integration rehearsed through which the women reconstructed an alternative embodiment of ageing. Thus challenging the persistence of the dualistic tension of inner self and outer body conceptualised as the ‘mask of ageing’. Finally, we emphasise the importance of exploring alternative definitions of the human condition through taking seriously the subjective interpretation of older people and their embodied practices.

### **Ageing, embodiment and physical activity**

Early old age, taken as the period of life beginning around 60 years when many older people are relatively healthy and active, is associated with the post-war peak in births. People in this group are generally termed the baby boomers and the 21st century is known as the ‘silver century’ (Magnus 2008). With the increase in life expectancy in advanced industrial societies, people now living to celebrate their 60th birthday can expect a further 25–30 years for leisure and the pursuit of personal interests. The 2011 census gives the proportion of those aged 60+ years as 16.4 per cent, which accounts for one in six people in United Kingdom (UK). It is estimated that by 2020 a quarter of the UK population will be over the age of 60 years (Office for National Statistics 2012). According to evidence from a variety of disciplines, including physiology, exercise science, leisure and psychology,

a physically active life-style throughout life, and in later life, provides for independence in and quality of later life. Being physically active in later life has much to offer in combating a variety of physical and mental-emotional illnesses (Betts Adams, Leibbrandt and Moon 2011; Chaudhury and Shelton 2010; Cutler-Riddick 2010; Dorgo, Robinson and Bade 2009; Dupuis and Alzheimer 2008; Hughes *et al.* 2006; Wilcox *et al.* 2006). However, popular and 'expert' discourses around ageing may discourage older people from being physically active and may not necessarily represent all that older people can do. For example, many older women offer menopause and 'weak bones' as a reason for not taking part in or for moderating their participation in physical activity (Humberstone 2010; Vertinsky 2002). As a consequence of a variety of discourses, including the sport science curriculum, Phoenix and Sparkes (2006a) provide compelling evidence of the negative way in which the older body is perceived by young athletes. Further, Grant and Kluge (2007) highlight the ways in which ageing bodies frequently are labelled as 'over the hill' or a 'financial burden' in Western societies, thus subtly undermining the quality of the ageing process and marginalising older bodies.

Older people may begin to shape their own ageing process through these ageists and oft times medical establishment discourses. The experience of the body in ageing is embedded in such discourses that impose what is socially and culturally acceptable and may become inexorably connected with one's sense of self. Becoming older is accomplished through the process of embodiment, learning 'body techniques' (Mauss 1973) to become an older self. The older body is frequently pathologised and biologicalised through prevailing discourses and so is framed as a 'threat to social and self-identity' (Tulle 2008: 4). Social theorists have argued that the constitution of the older body is a site of conflict between a youthful inner self and this ageist society (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; Turner 1994). Further, Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) propose that the ageing body is conceived as an increasingly inflexible 'mask' in which ageing prevents social participation in the modern world of conspicuous consumption. They represent this dualistic tension between the 'inner self' and the 'outer body' as the 'mask of ageing'. Perspectives of ageing have been underpinned, for the most part, by a notion of mind-body split present in Western thought.

Nevertheless, there is much evidence of older people's involvement and commitment at various levels of physical activity. What people say about, and discourses around, ageing can influence the ways in which individuals approach later life and physical activity.

Harper (1997) and Victor (2005) call for research into ageing to take seriously interpretations of subjectivities of older persons within social

contexts. Likewise, Tulle (2008: 17), who explores physical activity and ageing, also calls for understanding the ageing body and the sense of ageing selves within a ‘socially rooted ontology’. This reflects the call to centre the body in social theory (Shilling 2005). Further, Wainwright and Turner maintain the sociology of the body,

is characterised by an abundance of theorizing, but systematic empirical research tradition is lacking ... Research on the body has been chastised for privileging theorizing, of bracketing out the individual, and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment. . . (2006: 238)

Much medical research on the ageing body has adopted a biological, empirical approach to enquiry. But as Phoenix and Grant (2009: 366) maintain, ‘(t)he older body is more than a stimulus–response machine, and there are a variety of ways to research how aging shapes our experiences of physical activity’. They go on to argue for a phenomenology of embodiment approach to explore the intersection of body, society and ageing. Wainwright and Turner’s (2003, 2006) research involving ballet dancers exemplifies how an ontological embodied approach can be significant. Sport sociologists, including Hargreaves and Vertinsky (2007), Hockey (2006) and Sparkes (2003, 2005, 2009), point to the lack of attention paid to the corporeality of the sporting body in social analyses and report studies they have undertaken underpinned by phenomenological approaches to embodiment.

The sentient body in sport has been the focus of a number of studies. For instance, Woodward (2009), Hockey (2006) and Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) examine the aural, visual, olfactory and haptic senses. They highlight these senses’ significance in the analysis of embodiment in runners, signalling the sensory aspects of sporting experiences in constructing self-consciousness. Sparkes’ (2010) narrative, which emphasises spatial and location contexts of his embodiment, (re)presents the visual and olfactory dimensions of a modern gym in the accomplishment of the ageing body and has relevance for this study since it draws attention not only to sensoria and perceptions of ageing, but also to the places in which the ageing body is constructed. A number of scholars concerned with the social analysis of ageing have emphasised the significance of place and social and material contexts in the accomplishment of ageing identities (Faircloth 2003; Laz 2003). Further, Holstein and Gubrium (2004) argue for greater attention to relationships between self, body and social context in which ageing is constructed, urging researchers to examine how, where and by whom everyday life is shaped and framed in specific contexts and locations. More generally, place or emplacement are shown as crucial in the accomplishment of identities (Taylor 2010) and in attempting to understand and research

everyday phenomena (Pink 2009) and, we argue, in understanding and researching physical activity and the ageing body.

Whilst Sparkes' (2010) autoethnographic narrative focuses on the male ageing body, it points to the importance of how the body feels and senses exercise as it accomplishes ageing and to the potential invisibility of the ageing female body in this type of exercise location. Furthermore, Humberstone's (2011a) storied narrative provides for the celebration of the senses and bodily capabilities of older women whilst windsurfing that on occasion 'trouble' discourses on ageing. We have argued that age and embodiment are inexorably interlinked and more particularly accomplished within particular social and environmental contexts and cultures. Thus, of particular interest here in undertaking this study is not only a phenomenology of embodiment approach to exploring older women's experience of yoga (see Allen-Collinson 2011), but also attention to emplacement (Pink 2009: 25). A background to the practice of yoga is provided below to contextualise the findings and to give a sense to the reader of the 'space' into which these women enter when practising yoga.

### **Situating the yoga experience historically, philosophically and contextually**

Yoga emerged originally from India and was introduced to the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, largely by charismatic male yogis. Even today, in India, learning and practising yoga is heavily male dominated, with few women encouraged to participate (Nagla 2006). The Sanskrit word *yuj*, from which the word yoga seems to have been derived, means 'to join' or 'to yoke', 'to apply oneself' (Roebuck 2003: 502). Original Indian yoga is the underpinning practice and philosophy by which one may gain union of personal spirit (mind in body) with universal energy. There is a long history of the spiritual and physical paths which have led to current yogic forms (see Coates 1996; Phillips 2001). Today yoga has a variety of meanings and practices amongst diverse peoples and cultures, and arguably provides the West with an alternative physical activity and ways of being in the world (Leledaki 2007). There is currently a variety of 'schools' drawing from teachers who brought yogic ideas from the East to the West. A major influx to the West of yogic practice and philosophy was in the 1960s, when many of the women in this study were in their teens or early twenties. Many people in the West first attend yoga classes for the physical benefits it is said to give them through stretching forms of exercise; this is corroborated by the stories told by the women of our study.

Yoga is largely a male activity in the near distant Indian past. Nagla's (2006) research highlights the still patriarchal culture pervading the

province in India where she undertook her research into women's experience of attending yoga camps specifically for health reasons. In the West, yoga as a physical activity is taken up mostly by women as it is often represented as a female activity in various media. The main schools of yoga commonly practised today are Hatha yoga, Iyenga yoga and Raja yoga (Chen *et al.* 2007). Hatha and Iyenga yoga emphasise physical postures and breathing. In particular, this kind of yoga focuses on gaining strength, flexibility and balance by adopting stationary positions that contract and relax different muscle groups, as well as paying attention to diaphragm breathing and deep relaxation. Iyenga yoga makes use of many props to help the practising yogi achieve the postures correctly. Raja yoga, also known as 'classical yoga', is concerned principally with cultivation of the mind using meditation. Hence, with raja yoga, the focus is primarily on mental and spiritual mastery. Dru yoga, a very recent interpretation in Britain, emphasises graceful flowing movements, direct breathing and visualisation. The aim of dru yoga, like all yoga schools, is to work on body, mind and spirit. Thus, the foci of dru and other forms of yoga are to improve flexibility and strength, create core stability, build a heightened feeling of positivity, and promote deep relaxation and a sense of rejuvenation. All of the teachers of popular forms of yoga in UK draw upon the philosophies outlined in classical Indian texts (such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavada Gita; *see* Mascaro 1962, 1965). These ideas were originally articulated around 600 BCE in Patanjali's sutras or eight limbs of yoga, a derivation of Samkhya religious philosophy. Essentially, the philosophy espouses a holist approach to physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. Patanjali's text teaches that humans are subjected to a variety of negative influences in their lives but they can help themselves move toward complete wellbeing (or liberation) through specific practices and ways of living in the world. It is asserted that by practising the eight limbs of yoga, it is possible to reach 'fulfilment/enlightenment'. According to Patanjali, the eight limbs or practices of yoga are: various forms of spiritual abstinences relating to attitude to others, objects and the world around (yama), observances (niyama), posture practice (asana), control of breathing (pranayama), withdrawal of the senses from external and internal objects (that is not fixing thoughts but allowing them free range without judgement), concentration, meditation and, finally, oneness or fulfilment (*see* Prabhavananda and Isherwood 2007).<sup>1</sup> A topical book purporting to take a scientific look at the practice of yoga world-wide, has examples of acute yoga-related injuries which arguably have emerged through the more recent, commercialised yoga 'schools' (Broad 2012). This commercialisation of the yoga embodied practices is worthy of further research. However, the yoga classes in which we participated were small private or local authority run.

## **The research study – methodological approach**

We decided to research yoga for a number of reasons. First, the first author has participated in and explored a variety of physical activities, mainly outdoor, nature-based sport, for some considerable time and took up yoga in her early fifties in order to maintain general fitness and reduce stress. The experience had a profound and surprising effect and promoted a desire to find out more about yoga and its impacts at a social ontological and embodied level. Second, the opportunity arose to undertake collaborative research with the second author visiting from the United States of America (USA), whose research interest is ageing and leisure. Third, we were fortunate to be able to access and research classes in which we were both participants.

The inquiry was therefore designed to explore the bodily and mental experience of yoga participation in older women and to attempt to understand the nexus of embodied experience, subjectivity and ‘exercise’ process. We adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to the research which, as Avis (2005: 5) notes, in relation to qualitative researchers in health care, ‘they will start with a broad research question’, which for us was simply, what are the views and experiences of older women who take part in yoga? Avis (2005: 5) goes on to say, ‘and after negotiating access . . . they will develop their plan for sampling, data generation and analysis as the study progresses’. We already had access to yoga classes and our reason for selecting the particular practice of yoga rather than any other physical activity was as a consequence of the first author’s observations of yoga classes and its apparent affects/effects on herself and the other participants, together with the opportunity for a joint research project with a colleague who was on sabbatical leave and visiting from the USA. Both authors, who were in their early sixties at the time of the interviews, were participating in yoga class, thus enabling data to be collected through participant observation and significantly from the perspectives of older researchers in their sixties. Our approach to data collection involved interpretative interviews with older women along with participant observation of yoga classes through the authors’ continued participation in classes. The first author, who has undertaken ethnographic research for nearly 30 years on education and physical culture, continues to participate in the yoga class from which the interviews and participation observational data were collected. The second author was not able to continue her yoga class when she returned to her own university in the USA. Following the interviews with participants, the first author undertook a two-year yoga teachers’ course headed by the teacher of another class she attended.

Women were recruited for interview in one of two ways. The first author first asked one of her teachers as well as women in her yoga class about their



willingness to participate in the study. The second author interviewed her yoga teacher as well as relying on her to recruit possible participants. The latter teacher taught classes in six different locations. To be part of the project, a woman should be at least 50 years of age, involved in yoga practice at the time of the study and have at least five years of yoga instruction or be a yoga instructor. We chose 50 years of age as the minimum age, despite 60 years generally taken as early old age as for most women this can be a significant time of biological change which can affect physical activity participation (Vertinsky 2002). Accordingly, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 women. Two-thirds of the women were retired or semi-retired, living in urban High Wycombe and semi-rural South of England.

The dozen participating women ranged in age from 50 to 72 years old, although all except one participant was over 56 years at the time of the interview, and had participated in yoga for between five and 34 years. Important data were also collected through participant observation. Through ethnographic participant observation we, as older women, were able to gain unique insights into the embodied experiences of the life-worlds of being and becoming older through the yoga class. In this way, through our bodies, grounded through our senses, we experienced an understanding of the bodily practices and how bodies interact with others and contexts (*see Humberstone 2011a*).

The classes in which data were collected were led by teachers trained in the conventional hatha schools of yoga. Hatha yoga takes a holistic approach to yoga practice based upon Pantanjali's eight steps described earlier. Consequently, the classes focused on learning the postures (within the students' physical capabilities), mindfulness and relaxation. The yoga teachers involved in this study were female whilst the students in their classes were predominantly female.

We, as co-authors, approached together the interview questions from a 'lived experience perspective'. Thus, a flexible framework using open-ended questions was drafted that proposed asking the women to describe their own stories behind why they had taken up yoga classes, what it means for them practising yoga, what sorts of effects/affects yoga has on their personal and work lives, both inside and outside the home. Rather than mentioning the ageing process directly, interviewees were asked about any 'physical, mental and emotional benefits (as they defined these)' or changes they experienced from their yoga practices. Participant observation of the yoga classes provided for our corporeal understanding of the actual physical activities and how they were made available and accessible to the women in the actual locations.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. Interviews were conducted by one of the two authors, following an agreed schedule.

Permission was sought and attained from all the women interviewed to permit the tape recording of the conversational interview. The research followed the ethical codes of practice set out by the British Sociological Association. The co-researchers were careful to reduce any risks to the women before, during and after the research process, ensuring that anonymity and confidentiality were maintained (*see* Mauther *et al.* 2002).<sup>2</sup> The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed whole or in part. The data were coded according to prior and emerging categories and, together with participant observation data, sorted into themes (Lincoln and Guba 1985). A number of inter-related themes emerged from the conversational interviews and observations, including taking responsibility for one's health, integration of body and mind, sensitivity of teachers to individual needs and positive images of older women. We begin the interpretation of the findings with narratives from both researchers of their experiences of being in a yoga class.

## Findings and interpretations

### *Being in the yoga class – situating the yoga space*

Taking part in the yoga classes gave us the opportunity to capture through our own embodied experience something of processes, feelings and social relations embedded in these group practices. It also enabled us to experience bodily, emotionally and sensorially the particular yogic embodied practices and the interactions occurring (Pink 2009). Here we offer a (re) presentation of the yoga class in which the second author presents her reflections on her embodied experience. Having had no yoga experience before undertaking this research, she describes here something of her own embodied feelings of the yoga class, its atmosphere, physical dimensions and interactions. This narrative, created out of moments in the yoga hall, is given to highlight what it feels like to be one older woman taking part in this activity with one particular yoga teacher.

I enter the large school hall with its glass doors and windows allowing in natural light which I like. The class was small with usually no more than seven people attending, three women including myself, in their late fifties, early sixties, the rest of the class made up of university students around 20 years. The class lasts for about an hour.

Anna (pseudonym) greets each student by name with a huge smile. I'm feeling very comfortable with her and sense she is a 'genuine' person. On arriving at the hall we set out our mats and lie on them, closing our eyes. In response to Anna's direction, we stretch out, 'disconnecting' from the real world. 'Don't think about work or any issues.'

Anna is sitting on her mat at the front of the room facing us. We begin with a few minutes of relaxation with eyes closed. Then slowly I warm up with stretching

exercises, standing and then seated. Anna is continuously watching us, adapting poses for different individuals and/or when she introduces another pose, demonstrating two or three versions of the pose, 'If you have a dodgy hip or foot, you might try this...' she says. I'm delighted she remembers I can't bend my foot for this pose. She says, 'You might find doing this pose more appealing by doing...' and '...a variation of this pose is...'. I feel serenity flowing from her. I simply like being around her. She has such calmness about her... soft voice, happy face (smile and eyes), a warm glow. We finish with relaxation and breathing exercises. Finally, we sit up with feet together and hands in prayer like position. We say goodbye, Anna saying, 'Om Shanti'.

The first few times I went, I was sceptical about the class... in terms of thinking it would be an okay experience but not something I would really, really enjoy. When we closed our eyes at the end of the session, I initially thought this was kind of a stupid exercise. Anna would say, 'Open the top of your head, and let your worries float away.' I don't know why between this and the breathing exercises I would feel so, so relaxed. Absolutely amazing discovery about myself and the power of yoga, I always left the class refreshed, rejuvenated.

Although having many years more experience of yoga than the second author, the first author can identify with the bodily sensations expressed and the interactions of the yoga teacher provided in this narrative. Further, the women interviewed expressed similar sentiments regarding their experiences of yoga classes. As an example JP, 64 years old (26 years of intermittent yoga practice), explained:

I started [yoga] originally for the exercise... After the yoga class I'm totally relaxed – chilled out – completely takes you away from everyday things and you can just concentrate on the postures and somehow [it] calms you right down.

The first author offers her auto-ethnographic account of a yoga session, highlighting the importance of the senses and embodiment in the holistic experience of yoga and the place of the yoga mat:

The sun breaks through the autumnal mists, highlighting the reds and oranges of the leaves still on the trees. It is a Saturday morning. I drive through the New Forest and after a short diversion find the wooden barn with large South-facing windows. I enter with trepidation as I appear to be early and take off my shoes to pass into the hall, partly flooded with sunlight. On one side, a yoga mat with cushions and a mat in front, to its right, there is a flip chart with WELCOME enclosed in a cloud. To the left are two red seated chairs. I see the sun beaming into the hall, 'I could be walking in the forest', I think. So I hesitate but then decide to place my mat in the beam of light to the left of the teachers' mat and chairs. More people, all women, arrive intermittently and form a semi-circle around the focus mat. The male teacher, Lawrence in his sixties, wants to start on time but Gill, one of two woman teachers in her late sixties, says to wait. 'The clock is fast', I offer agreement. Lawrence mentions the closure of the pyramids on the 11th day of the 11th month of 2011 to prevent a possible group-pyramid hug. The third teacher woman, Marion, sits alongside Gill on one of the chairs. I feel uncomfortable and want to be outside. We lie in savasana, become physically and mentally relaxed, becoming 'the here and now'. I had decided to

attend this one-off class to experience dru yoga, which joins the asanas through flowing movement. Dru yoga, a recent British interpretation, emphasises graceful flowing movements, direct breathing and visualisation. The aim of dru yoga, like most yoga schools, is to work on body, mind and spirit. Thus, the focus of dru yoga, according to Lawrence, is to reach stillness (Dru) through flowing movement to find the centre of a moving wheel. Time passes and I feel at ease bathed in the beam of light.

We end the class by performing a simply beautiful sequence to music led by Marion.

We move through the four corners, moving deep into the sequence and reach far out to our side. We flow through the movement totally engaged with the bodily and emotional sensations; turning first West, then North, then East and then South in each direction.

We all follow the movements of these older teachers, feeling lost in the flow of the moment.

We become one with the movement.

### *Entrance to the yoga practices – why practise yoga?*

*Taking responsibility for one's health.* One theme that emerged from our interviews was that the women typically took up yoga often as a consequence of illness, concern over diminishing physical capabilities, and/or to eradicate mental or emotional disease. Furthermore, we show how the women in this study found their own pathways into yoga practice, identifying with the integrated body–mind yoga teaching which was provided for them. Nagla (2006) points out that even in India the patient receiving modern medicine often has to do nothing, whereas in the yogic system, which takes a holistic approach to recovery including attention to diet, the participants of her study need to be fully involved in their cure.

The health and fitness discourse which emerged in the 1960s promoted the notion 'of a concern with illness prevention and health maintenance, the achievement of which was associated with the pursuit of sports, representing a shift from institutional to individual responsibility' (Tulle 2008: 9–10). This individual responsibility for health may well have influenced these women since their narratives indicate that they made their own decision to take up yoga practice.

Here we present some of their reasons for beginning yoga practice and continuing with it. CB, 64 years old, describes why she returned to yoga and the effect it had upon her:

I started getting arthritis in my hip and I kept thinking 'I must go do some yoga'. And that has helped me so ever so much . . . It seems to [help] . . . well I don't have trouble with my hip now.

CB had taken yoga whilst travelling abroad 30 years earlier and had intermittently taken yoga classes since then. She was one of the few who had started yoga practice at a relatively young age.

Another woman, CC, 61 years old, who had also begun yoga through her own initiative and continued practising throughout her life, is now a leading yoga teacher trainer in a traditional hatha school. She describes how suffering from chronic asthmatic episodes for a number of years had caused her, at 15 years of age, to have to stay 'in bed for six weeks during the summer'. CC noted she:

found a book on pranayama [yoga breathing] and worked on that . . . I worked on my breathing and cleared my asthma.

She also explained that she took up yoga because of her

driving interest in the healing process and working with whole being . . . I believe yoga can cure anything.

Although these two women (CB and CC) began yoga at a relatively young age, they both took responsibility for their own health independently from the medical system. Indeed, all the women whom we interviewed took individual responsibility for their physical and mental wellbeing by first finding a yoga class and then regularly taking yoga practice. Many, like the second author, mentioned the ways in which the yoga practice calmed them and made them feel less stressed in their everyday lives. For CB:

it is the breathing exercises that help you . . . help your mental state, help calm your mind. And I did think it really does help.

### *Yoga, identity and body technique*

*Integration of body and mind.* The classes focused not only on the physical body but also the mind and emotions. Although hatha yoga philosophy centres on spirituality, rarely in the classes observed was spirituality as a goal mentioned.<sup>3</sup> For JC, 75 years old, this is as she wished:

As soon as I started the class, I knew it was perfect. She does say 'Om shanti'<sup>4</sup> at the end, which I like . . . I don't mind that. We don't do much of the philosophy stuff, which suits me. I'm not into the mystique of yoga. To me it isn't mystical; it is a way of keeping flexible and relaxing.

Despite the limited mention of yoga philosophy or spirituality by the teachers in the classes observed, the bodily practices taught were underpinned by traditional yoga philosophies that focus on the integration of body, mind and spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Much sporting embodiment involves 'body techniques' that focus on separation and hierarchical comparison through competition against others

(e.g. the fastest runner, the winning team) or improvement of performance or shape. The former body technique is generally associated with masculine discourse, whereas the latter is viewed as a predominantly feminine discourse (see Clayton and Humberstone 2006; Messner and Sabo 1992). Yoga practices, which draw from Eastern traditional philosophies, eschew competitive acts. Instead, many schools of yoga teach ego detachment (or other ways of being in the world). This distinction between sporting and yogic practice is articulated by a young male Canadian respondent, quoted in Atkinsons' North American study, who muses:

if you try to practice ashtanga [yoga] like a hockey player, you will hate it. Forget what you have learned about sport, and see this as a completely different space. Athletic they both are, but the purposes and outcomes are completely dissimilar. (2010: 1258)

*Sensitivity of teachers to the needs of the students.* This distinction is borne out by our observations and the comments of the women interviewees. The yoga practices took place on individual mats and the focus was not on comparison or competition but upon being in the moment and feeling the movements in the body, whilst focusing on the breath. Few of the women talked of achieving a perfect posture or performing better than any other person in the group. Observations made in the classes attended by the two authors highlight this. Furthermore, the teachers responded sensitively to the differing needs and physical capabilities of the women. Both authors' teachers would suggest alternative postures or modifications of the posture, using a variety of encouraging comments, 'if you feel [the posture] is not for you now' or 'if you have some problem in the back today' 'I'll give you an alternative posture', and would provide a modified asana for the women to choose to practise. However, it was observed in both researchers' classes this was never expressed as a fixed 'problem' but 'how the body feels right now', providing for understandings of the fluidity of bodily capabilities which could alter from day to day. LW, 59 years old, who has 'compromised' knees and feet, compared her previous experience of sport with her yoga practice:

whereas in yoga there is a way around your infirmities . . . so bad knees, bad feet, . . . um a problem neck occasionally, um I could [get] around those and still feel I get a good workout, a good stretch.

The postures and movements learnt in class provided for opportunities for the women to embody positive experiences of exercise. The yoga classes were also providing the women with space to think about being in their (ageing) bodies without being judged or making judgements.

Constantly, we, the co-researchers observed in class yoga teachers asking the women to reflect upon their bodies during the asanas, with words such as

‘think how your body feels, don’t make judgements about your body’. When in the standing posture of ‘mountain’ where the body is in a comfortable standing position and is in alignment, the focus is on the breathing with the teacher encouraging the women to practise holistic embodiment with comments like: ‘feel the balance of your mind and body’. We would suggest that the findings, including the co-researchers’ sentient experiences, show that the practices holistically experienced are strongly influenced by the sensitive approach of the teachers.

*Positive images of older women.* On a number of occasions the yoga teachers talked of older inspirational women yoga teachers. In one class that the first author attended, a 90-year-old nationally known teacher who could hold many challenging postures was talked about admiringly. In another class a local yoga teacher who had just celebrated her 80th birthday and was still teaching three yoga classes a week and who, according to the yoga teacher, ‘radiates wellbeing’ was celebrated by the class. In these classes, through these stories, dominant negative discourses of ageing are disrupted for these women. These references to healthy, positive and physically capable older women provide challenges to the predominant perception of continuous loss of control, increased bodily weakness and diminished power of the older body.

Despite her knowledge of physical weakening, in the following, an older woman can feel positive about her body and want to maintain her capabilities. RK, 72 years old, having started yoga to ‘keep fit . . . and supple’ was later diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. She continues,

I need to keep balance . . . try to keep it at bay. It [yoga] probably keeps me more agile . . . you know going up and down stairs carrying the vacuum cleaner . . . I mean if you don’t keep going . . . I think it is helping in lots of ways . . . I sleep better because of the relaxation and poses, it is being able to relax . . . it [asana practice] gets the blood flowing . . . I always come home rosy cheeked and warm and sleep well.

Whilst most of these women taking part in the yoga classes did not appear to see themselves as a part of a larger network or organisation, the interviewed yoga teachers envisioned themselves as a part of an organic whole or universally connected spirituality. They shared a common understanding that it was necessary to integrate in yoga practice, embodied activity and mindfulness which was often achieved through the way they managed the asanas. The teachers practised a pedagogy of integration through breathing, body reflection and relaxation techniques and, in this way, it was observed that body–mind dualism was resisted by the teachers and a reconfigured ontology of body–mind integration was rehearsed. Such acknowledgement and valuing of older women and their capabilities by the yoga teachers and by the women themselves turns on its head the



disrespect for older bodies as identified in the research of Phoenix and Sparkes (2006b).

### **Discussion and reflective comments**

Other interpretative research into ageing and physical activity has also highlighted a challenge to dominant medical discourses and to the body–mind split encompassed in the ‘mask of ageing’ concept. Dionigi’s (2002, 2006, 2008) interpretative research, which focuses on the meanings of sporting experiences evinced by older Australian athletes aged 55–94 years, draws attention to the nexus between social-cultural contexts and older athletes’ meanings. The older athletes are not ignoring the onset of later life but rather are managing their identities through the pursuit of their sport. Rather than adopting the ‘mask of ageing’ strategy whereby management of the ageing self may be through not recognising outer bodily signs of age, some of these athletes acknowledged and worked with their ageing bodies in continuing their athletic practice appropriately. Likewise, the older athletes and runners of Tulle’s (2008) research not only challenge popular discourses on ageing but also demonstrated how a sense of self can emerge from an integration of body and mind through their activity. Most narratives of ageing tend to separate body and mind, as conceptualised through the ‘mask of ageing’, but on occasions the runners of Tulle’s study accomplished through their running the body and mind acting ‘as one’, whilst, at other times, as the body tired the mind took over.

Exemplified in this paper are the ways through both discourse and practice in doing yoga, being on a yoga mat in a class, create spaces for the older woman where the norms of society regarding older women’s bodies and prefigured cultural identities about ageing can potentially be interrupted. Such spaces are constitutive of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which Atkinson (2010: 1258) refers to when he makes the comparison of yoga embodied practice with that of sport expressed by the yoga participants of his study. He maintains that they, ‘rather than using the athletic practice to strengthen the (super) ego and the constituent identities on which it is based (i.e., gender, race, class, etc.), the crisis heterotopia of the mat challenges one to decentre the thinking, rationalizing (athletic) subject’ (Atkinson 2010: 1258), and we would also emphasise it (the crisis heterotopia of the mat) dissolves constituent identity based on age. That is to say, the yoga space and discourses with which it is imbued, as interpreted here, suggest successful struggles against ‘normalisation’ of ageing. The yogic practice created within the space of the mat, its philosophies and practices afford a deconstruction of conventional notions of ageing. These classes, the yoga mat,



arguably constitute counter-sites (heterotopias)<sup>6</sup> which invert and contest the signs (dominant discourses and images) and conventions of dominant Western society on ageing and ideologies of sport. Signification of ageing is disrupted and arguably there is a transgression between signifier and signified and a dissolving of binary words and concepts such as that of the ‘mask of ageing’. On the yoga mat, the physical embodied practice and mental awareness become one, there are no longer dualistic messages regarding separation of body and mind or competitive desires. Through body and breathing techniques, body reflection and relaxation practices, on occasions, body–mind dualism was resisted and a reconfigured ontology of body–mind integration was rehearsed through which the women reconstructed an alternative embodiment of ageing. The tension between inner self and outer body was largely dissolved and mind and body integrated, evidencing something of a challenge to the dualism inherent in the ‘mask of ageing’ concept.

In this paper, we emphasise the importance of exploring alternative definitions of the human condition. Adopting phenomenological interpretative approaches in our study, we complement medical and psychological methodologies to enable a greater understanding of how women make sense of their embodied yogic experiences and so how people are shaped and mobilised through particular embodied practices (*see* Humberstone 2011*b*; Mellor and Shilling 2010). We have presented findings from our research which explored older women’s corporeal experience of yoga classes with the view to understand the nexus of embodied experience, subjectivity and ‘exercise’ process, taking seriously the subjectivities of older women. A phenomenological research approach involving interpretative conversational interviews and ethnographic participant observation was undertaken by the co-researchers. The interpretative research paradigm which we adopted is informed by phenomenology and social constructivism. Such an approach enables us to go below the surface of the ageing process, providing knowledge and deeper understanding of bodily experiences in the context of yoga activity which have implications for healthy ageing. The findings of this form of research can better inform intervention programmes and the development of applied practice for ageing well.

The findings reported herein present narratives that run counter to prevailing stereotypes of the ageing body, specifically from the perspectives of older women engaged in embodied physical activity made available and accessible in the yoga classes. That is, the mature women interviewed viewed their bodies neither as in a state of decline, nor one that they could not control. Rather, older females practising yoga were seen to experience, and felt, the activities as channels for the integration of body and mind as well as providing them with sources of accomplishment. Unlike many of the older

and veteran athletes and runners of Tulle's (2008) and Doiningi's (2002, 2006, 2008) research, the women involved in yoga were not attempting to gain or maintain athletic achievements but rather to maintain a healthy body and mind so that they can deal with everyday life more effectively. Almost all of the women who were interviewed expressed the view that they had taken up yoga practice in order to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Practising yoga for these older women and for the co-researchers in some ways contested dominant dualistic body–mind ways of being and provided for an unsettling of inhibiting constraints in older age. Becoming an older self is accomplished by us (the co-researchers) and the women through the process of embodiment, learning 'body techniques' made available through the yoga classes. All the women were aware of biological ageing and its challenges yet did not imagine it would prevent them from continuing to practise yoga. There was in some sense a (counter) narrative constructed, particularly by the yoga teachers, which was observed and experienced by the co-researchers, that accepted biological ageing yet appeared to maintain control over its process; thus, providing contrasting stories to those prevailing in Western societies which represent ageing as declining bodily control and increasing weakness; thus, calling into question the dualist inner self–outer body tension underpinning the 'mask of ageing' concept.

We have shown in this paper that centring the body through situated phenomenological research with and by older women located within a socially rooted ontology provides for rich and illuminating knowledge about how older women make sense of ageing, their bodies and 'exercise', and recommend further phenomenological and sensorial-orientated research around ageing and physical activity. We suggest that our research has implication and relevance for the public health agenda in recognising the forms of exercise and approaches to exercise provision which might lead to a greater take up of physical activity participation in the 65+ age groups.<sup>7</sup>

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### **NOTES**

- 1 Becoming more popular particularly amongst young participants are yoga classes in which the postures are practised in ways which ensure aerobic breathing and are sometimes undertaken in 'sweat rooms'. These include some

- forms of ashtanga or power yoga, which promotes the use of aerobic exercise and emphasises increasing strength and flexibility, and bikram or hot yoga which takes place in a room heated to around 40 °C. These more recent practices eschew the spiritual and often the mindfulness espoused by yogic tradition.
- 2 At the time of the research there were no formal ethical procedures required of staff within the university for non-medical research and/or research with non-vulnerable adults. Nevertheless, the first author has some 25 years of experience of undertaking ethnographic research centred on ethical action and behaviour.
  - 3 The first author also spent time in a class taught by a younger teacher who did, on occasions, refer to some of the Hindu philosophy underpinning spirituality and mind–body interconnection.
  - 4 ‘Om shanti’ can be interpreted as ‘peace be with you’.
  - 5 The teachers in this study undertook two-year part-time study on recognised teacher training courses on aspects of yoga practice and theory.
  - 6 Foucault’s concept of heterotopia describes spaces that undermine stable relationships, disrupt conventions of order and negate normalised categorisation. Foucault’s concept of crisis heterotopia is concerned with spaces that are sacred or privileged places having no geographical markers, where time may stand still and where people may be in some way at odds with society (Foucault 1987). Thus, the yoga mat can be interpreted as a space where conventional notions of sport are resisted, along with ageing.
  - 7 The joint Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland issued exercise guidelines specifically for the 65+ age group in response to health surveys revealing that participation in physical activity decreases with age (National Health Service 2011).

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