



Ageing well? Older Adults' Stories of Life Transitions and Serious Leisure

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Abstract

This (auto)ethnographic case study documents two intertwined stories. The first traces the author's evolutionary path from a post in full-time teaching and management to lifestyle entrepreneurship as an exercise instructor for older adults. The second arises from the experience of the participants in those classes and their interaction with the author. As the stories merge life experiences are shared and compared. Identity is formed and reformed. This is an original study covering a period exceeding fifteen years. Offered as a piece of Creative Analytical Practice the stories aim to show rather than tell how serious leisure is allied to the concept of ageing well. The work invites readers to respond and question in the light of their own experience. Attention is especially drawn to periods of life transition, for example retirement or confinement due to COVID-19. Data is drawn from doctoral and post-doctoral research supported by longer term personal diary entries. The events involved, the timescale covered and the authenticity of the interaction document a unique trajectory and an example which other older adults are being encouraged to emulate.

Keywords Lifestyle entrepreneurship · Retirement · Ageing well · Identity · Serious leisure · COVID-19

1 Introduction

1.1 Sociological Background

The stories in this manuscript arise from a number of sources. They are linked by intersecting themes relating to leisure and ageing well. The author draws on personal diary entries collected over a period exceeding 25 years to interpret her own experience. Other stories were collected during doctoral and post-doctoral research case studies. The most recent have been documented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The majority of the stories arise as a result of interaction with the author during engagement with physical exercise. The author leads exercise groups for older people in Exercise to Music (ETM), Tai chi and Pilates. Some of these groups have been together for 15 years and many of the original members formed part of the reference group for earlier research. These people have been aware of the author's developing transition to lifestyle entrepreneurship. In entirety the stories arise from association with well over 100 people, the majority of whom are women between the ages of 55 and 91. The few men who attend the groups are also aged between these parameters. Some of the men attend with their wives.

Under normal circumstances the exercise groups meet in village halls within a 20 mile radius of the author's home in the south-east of England. The area is mainly rural with a few small towns. There are two larger towns, which are ethnically diverse and which lie within the London commuter belt. Participants of the exercise groups are retired and would all consider themselves to be middle class but derive from a variety of former work backgrounds ranging from office workers to the higher echelons of business and medical professions. Some diversity is reflected in the membership of exercise groups.

1.2 Methodology

The (auto)ethnographer uses qualitative research methods, viewing reality as mutable (Silverman, 2002) contingent upon relational, temporal and cultural conditions. The researcher is the instrument of the research, positioned at its centre, causing data to arise from the relationship with the participants as lived experience (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As all data passes through that single lens, trustworthiness is ensured by thematic analysis and rigorous cross-checking, using diverse methods of data collection from multiple sources: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, diary entries and existing documentary evidence in the form of enrolment forms and monitoring tools. Hence a conceptual framework is established within which the inter relationship of serious leisure; active ageing and the impact of life transitions on identity can be examined. The paradigm is particularly suited to exploring older adults' experience of exercise from the perspective of leisure rather than from a medical or neoliberal perspective (Grant and O'Brien 2001).

Data in this manuscript is presented via Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) to promote further layers of interpretation. The paper is firmly rooted in doctoral and post-doctoral research exercise projects with older adult peers, conducted with approval from university ethics committees and is supplemented by ongoing exercise activities. It is blended with data from the author's personal records detailing her professional trajectory. Informed consent was acquired from all participants and pseudonyms are used when citing their words. CAP shows how the themes of the two sets of stories intersect and intertwine. The researcher is able to move in and out of the centre of the research, sometimes moving to the periphery (Humberstone, 2013) to reflect on her own experience compared with that of others and to apply a temporal perspective; finally inviting a personal response on the part of the reader. Richardson (2000) refers to the process as 'crystallization', in which the writer tells

the same story but from different points of view, thereby creating a fuller picture and allowing the reader to make up his/her own mind. Thus CAP aims to raise questions in the reader's mind, challenging the received wisdom surrounding exercise and ageing well and enabling current practices to be reconsidered and possibly reconfigured. The following section details how the paper is structured to facilitate the reader's response.

1.3 Structure of the paper

The paper is constructed chronologically, beginning with a description of the author's professional background and the context in which she made the transition from teaching and secondary school management into lifestyle entrepreneurship. Teaching is not normally a business conducted in isolation so the shift towards devotee work leads naturally towards the incorporation of other people's stories; how aims were socially constructed and shared in the process of leisure activities. The inclusion of these stories in the second part of the discussion helps to cast light on the author's transition to retirement and has several functions. Set against the perspective of time elapsed, the comparison helped her to reflect on and gain deeper understanding of the feelings and circumstances surrounding her own experience of transition to retirement. Set in the context of the superficial desire to 'stay fit and healthy' and the feelings embodied in the specific choices of exercise activity that were illuminated by a doctoral research project, the stories cast light on the meanings involved in ageing well. According to Phoenix et al. (2010), the autoethnographer analyses 'self' while studying the 'other'. This last highlights the interrelationship of casual and serious leisure and the centrality of purpose and legitimacy to this relationship. Whereas an exercise class may be seen essentially as casual leisure for its short-lived and immediately intrinsically enjoyable nature, each of the classes discussed in this paper has its own culture involving specific skills and knowledge. In addition, ethnographic research suggests that when groups meet together over time commitment to a group ethos develops. The desire of many members to improve skills, extend knowledge and share experience with newcomers suggests facets of serious leisure, inspiring confidence and competence. At the very least, the features of casual and serious leisure complement each other; participants develop a group identity and experience improved wellbeing. Green and Jones (2005) demonstrate that participation in a serious leisure pursuit enables the individual to acquire a positive sense of identity. At times of life transition, such as retirement from the workplace, the search for a new identity becomes fundamental to ageing well.

The final part explores the unexpected life transition imposed by the pandemic upon the participants of these stories and how resilience has been necessary to continue to age actively and well. Bowling (2008) demonstrated that there is no popular consensus on the meanings of the terms active ageing and ageing well, though they tend to encompass notions of maintaining physical and mental health; of social relationships, contacts and activities. The terms are often used interchangeably (Boudiny, 2013). A similar phenomenon is reflected in the stories quoted here. For clarity, I turn to Laz's metaphor of a stream (2003) where the water, like ageing, is

unstoppable and finds a natural course around any obstacles in its path. However, unlike water, human beings generally need to act agentically to surmount the obstacles that occur if these are not to continue to present barriers. For the purpose of this paper I equate active ageing with the process of acting agentically and ageing well as the outcome of that action. Leisure can provide meaningful opportunities for continued engagement in life; for negotiating the obstacles and can facilitate ‘being, becoming and belonging’ (Dupuis & Alzheimer, 2008, P91). However, the pandemic with restrictions on movement (see Institute for Government, 2021) presented an unexpected intervention. Until March 2020 each individual exercise class represented a separate social world with shared aims and values. The movement to online exercise had limited effect in seeking to preserve these worlds but the learning required to manipulate the system and the novelty that it inspired had the power both to disrupt and to innovate, giving rise to new, creative ways of working with diverse impacts. Given increasing numbers of older people worldwide the final part provides some insight into the processes involved in helping people to age well.

I begin with a description of the circumstances which led to me renegotiating my professional identity and becoming a lifestyle entrepreneur.

2 Background to the Job I Loved

I have always loved learning. Sharing knowledge intellectually and practically with others enhances the experience and adds to the enjoyment, so a career in teaching was always the obvious choice. Even when a series of disruptive and agonising changes made the job exceedingly challenging I gave no thought to resigning my position in secondary school management and modern foreign language teaching. On the contrary I felt I had no right to complain about the situation. The changes were prompted by the reorganisation of local secondary schools. The closure of our school had led to many of my colleagues being obliged to accept redundancy or early retirement whereas I was transferred to another prestigious local school along with the remainder of our pupils. Cultural differences did not favour a smooth transition for any of us. My own position was complicated by the fact that there was not an existing substantive post for me to fill, but because my skills and experience were valued my high salary was protected for four years giving me time either to find ways of adjusting to the needs of the new school, innovating, or to seek a post at another school. In retrospect I now see that, considering the major reconstruction which had just taken place, there were serious barriers to either option occurring.

At the time I was too involved in the processes of secondary school reorganisation to realise that the closure of my school pointed to a major downturn in my career. So I spent the following ten years finding ways of fitting in with the needs of the school, from setting up a peer support mechanism, instituting citizenship projects such as a mock trial competition, child care education using virtual babies, to teaching subjects that were new to the curriculum as well as new to me – most of which I enjoyed. That the school should need to make further budget cuts came as a complete surprise. There was much interest amongst colleagues to volunteer for redundancy but few could meet the criteria offered

– teaching in either the science or modern language departments or being the holder of a managerial post. Despite minimal time for consideration or preparation, it seemed to me intuitively, that volunteering for redundancy accompanied by a request for early retirement was the right thing for me to do. I did not consciously go through the five stages of decision-making that typically accompany the process leading to retirement (Anderson et al., 2020). It was a leap of faith but turned out to be probably one of the best decisions I have ever made.

It was only after I had left that I realised how much time and energy I had expended in constantly adjusting to apply my skills and experience to the ever-changing circumstances that obtained in the school – not least rushing from one teaching block to another, carrying complex equipment. Looking back at contemporary diary entries from the perspective of fifteen years I am astonished at the content and pace of my life at that time. Sadly, it was the irritations that tended to dominate. Versatility had been a quality that I had relied on for my professional survival but the amount of work generated in addition to the full-time teaching and administrative load had been exhausting.

3 Managing the Transition to Retirement

3.1 Obligations and Opportunities

Generally teaching staff retire at the end of the summer term so the long summer holiday gave me the opportunity to recuperate and begin to address some of the most pressing issues. I needed to find a way of supplementing my pension as I still had a mortgage to pay on the house. Secondly, I wanted to establish an exercise routine to keep me fit and prevent weight gain now that my job was less physically demanding. Fortunately, another local school needed a Spanish teacher for two half days per week so that resolved the financial situation whilst also keeping abreast of developments in education. Freedom from management duties meant that I could once again concentrate on the business of teaching and engendering high quality classroom relationships and interaction. I was able to achieve my second aim by training as an exercise instructor for older adults. This new role would provide another useful outlet for my teaching skills. Besides, the ability to conduct exercise classes with peers would give me the bonus of not having to pay for gym membership and so help me to cope with a newly restricted budget. I continued to attend the art group that I had joined whilst still working full-time to help me to relax and discovered that I could further pursue my long – term interest in psychology by enrolling in a course at the local university. The terms of my redundancy meant that I could not take up a new teaching contract until mid-October, so a touring trip in France at the point when schools began the autumn term marked my freedom and the beginning of my new life.

3.2 Other People's Experiences of the Transition to Retirement

Working as I do now, with older adults, has caused me to compare my experience of the transition to retirement with that of others and to see what happened to me in a new light. I learnt how two interviewees had had diametrically opposed experience. There is often a discrepancy in the meanings attached to retirement between those who are still in paid employment and those who have retired (Ekerdt & Koss, 2016). Paula had worked for a well-known company who had provided preparatory activities that had helped her to consider essential issues that may not occur to someone in full-time work, for example, that establishing a personal routine can be helpful in adjusting to a new lifestyle and so reach sovereignty over personal time. The company had also encouraged her to sample new leisure time pursuits. By comparison, her friend, Petra, had worked for a charity. She said.

I was just - lost for quite some time. I'd worked for a small company so there was no support, just - well - BYE! and thank you very much. Didn't know what to try. Several people made suggestions and I tried out several groups but they just didn't gel (Petra).

Such experiences indicate the need for some form of pre-retirement package to ease the transition, instead of the tacit assumption that retirement is such a sought-after prize that it is sufficient in itself alone. Expectations pre-retirement tend to be founded in established stereotypical visions of retirement being, for example, a well-earned rest or period of slowing down, mitigated by the fear of impairment, disease and death. This is consistent with disengagement theory (Hochschild, 1975) and harks back to an era of lower life expectancy. Ekerdt and Koss (2016) show how individuals pass through a period of transition lasting approximately two years post-retirement. The period of transition involves complex processes of experimentation with new activities, different approaches and shifting priorities (Genoe et al., 2019). Preparation for the transition tends to be restricted to financial planning (Osborne, 2012). For those who have loved their jobs retirement has been likened to bereavement (Osborne, 2012). Often these people take up a job with less responsibility or shorter hours, 'bridge employment' (Schultz & Wang, 2011; Wang & Schultz, 2010) which is argued to be beneficial for both physical and psychological wellbeing. Regardless of the actual work involved, the routine imposed by work has the effect of framing the day or even the life pattern. Zhan and Wang (2015) suggest that bridge employment may serve as a coping mechanism in adapting to retirement; thereby preventing the adverse effects of abrupt loss of work role. Thus, continuity in lifestyle patterns is preserved and impact on identity lessened. Van Solinge and Henkens, (2008) argue that there is a difference between adjustment to the changes brought by retirement and satisfaction with life in retirement which is represented by contentment in those changed circumstances. My departure solved a problem for the school but presented me with many questions about the future. The transition appeared simply to evolve, driven by how I was going to continue to pay the mortgage and what opportunities I would be able to grasp by having so much free time. On reflection those four years that I spent teaching Spanish part-time fulfilled the

function of bridge employment for me, allowing me to develop alternative interests and see myself in a different role.

I feel I was fortunate when I consider the experience of another colleague who retired from teaching science at the age of 70. Reginald did not want to retire but felt overburdened by the administrative work that reduced the time and energy available for working in the classroom. Five years later, he reflects:

I could have gone on for another two or three years. I wanted to, but I couldn't bear all the bureaucratic crap that kept me away from the actual job of interacting with the kids.

Initially like Petra, quoted above, he was lost and a period of inertia developed causing problems for wellbeing and adjustment to a new lifestyle, consistent with the findings of Ryff (1989). According to Havighurst's (1963) activity theory transition to retirement is effected when two simple processes are achieved. The resultant wellbeing is associated with a) higher levels of participation in social and leisure activities and b) role replacement when existing roles are relinquished. Reginald now recognises that he lost track of his identity when he left teaching, he passed through a short period of clinical depression and had to work hard at finding a new role and meaning in life. He now volunteers his skills with his local visiting nurses' association, mentors students who need help with their science and is active on his local Commission on Ageing. Though the lifeworld may shrink in terms of formal roles e.g. parent or breadwinner, renegotiation of identity tends to expand the domains via which identity can be expressed (Teuscher, 2010). Innovation theory supports this positive perspective of later life as a time of growth and opportunity (Nimrod, 2008). The trajectory of Reginald's transition matches the two year process identified by Ekerdt and Koss (2016). These authors demonstrate how free time can initially be hard to manage but that once people develop their interests or find new ones they begin to be as protective of their time as they were when they were working.

3.3 Next Steps

By comparison my own transition took a lot longer but was nothing like as traumatic, possibly because I unconsciously recognised that I was not doing the job as I would have liked to do it and was presented with an opportunity to escape and reinvent myself – a behaviour pattern recognised in innovation theory (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007). Initial uncertainty was blended with excitement about the opportunities the future might hold. The journey gained momentum as possibilities took on the shape of 'likelihoods' and the baseline activities that replaced full-time work not only took on a life of their own but continued to evolve. My renewed interest in psychology led to gaining a post graduate diploma in that discipline. Simultaneously, once I had qualified as an exercise instructor, my first job with adult learning led to further openings to learn and later teach tai chi for health and, later on, gentle Pilates. Though unplanned, the rhythm of change reflects that recommended for a smooth transition into retirement by way of 'partial', 'phased', 'gradual' or

‘working’ retirement (Vickerstaff, 2015). By comparison, my next door neighbour who was then approaching his 50th birthday, was baffled by my industry. He could not understand why anyone who had quit a full-time job would become so busy. Our vision of retirement did not align with each other; further evidence of the discrepancy in the meanings attached to retirement between those who are still in paid employment and those who have retired (Ekerdt & Koss, 2016). The stereotypes of rest, as implied by disengagement theory (Hochschild, 1975), leading to degeneration into decline and death that might have been the case a century ago when people needed to work for as long as possible just to support themselves financially no longer obtain. Depending upon personal, social and cultural capitals, increased longevity in the 21st Century offers multiple opportunities to capitalise on skills, experience and time available. For me the irritations of the workplace had been stripped away and I was free to pursue teaching and learning in the form of ‘serious leisure’ (see Stebbins, 2007).

The combination of all this activity stimulated my thirst for learning yet further. The more I learnt as an exercise instructor, the more effective I became. Once I was established I wanted to explore how older adults engaged with exercise and to understand the interaction between us in our classes: how and why the relationship worked; how it might be improved, and furthermore, how the knowledge could be used to reach out to other older adults with a more sedentary lifestyle. So it was during the process of doctoral research that I discovered the concept of ‘serious leisure’ and was drawn to see the salient theories of ageing reflected in my own life and in the behaviour of the people I worked with.

I feel fortunate to have had a career that I love, regardless of the vicissitudes, constraints and obligations of the labour market. Nevertheless, I was astonished to learn that it is estimated that only 13% of people actually enjoy going to work (Crabtree, 2013). Research comparing the meanings that people attach to work and leisure (Bryce, 2018, 2021) offers insight to explain this statistic. Meaningful work is characterised by not-for-profit or self-employed occupations where the main output is helping others with their lives. Jobs that combine professional autonomy with having a direct impact within the context of a trusting relationship are found to be the most meaningful and worthwhile. The findings evoke Stebbins’ (1997, P. 17) view of serious leisure which is ‘venerated for its worklike character’. It makes me all the more determined to share my good fortune with my peers by leading them in exercise. In the following sections I examine the underlying features that make this work so enjoyable.

3.4 Purpose, Value, Legitimacy

My intrinsic love of learning has already been clearly demonstrated in the actions taken after withdrawal from full-time teaching. I find the act of transmitting knowledge to another human being transformational in that I am obliged to analyse and assess the knowledge for suitability of transmission to the prospective audience and to make decisions about how best to deal with the process. For example teaching English to five year old French nationals was completely different from teaching

French to British 18 year old advanced level students. Reactions of students also cause the teacher to reflect on the knowledge as well as the mode of transmission. The deeper understanding of the nature of the knowledge itself that can result has brought personal satisfaction as well as leading to innovation in teaching approach. Thus, as a result of the initial purpose – teaching – the value of the knowledge is increased and the whole process is legitimised, for me, by production of positive affect: it is both enjoyable and satisfying. This is consistent with the findings of Dolan and Kudrna (2016) who state that work is perceived to be most worthwhile when it is experienced along the two dimensions of purpose and pleasure. Clearly my aim is to share such positive experience with my participants. However, for those in school, the learning is also legitimised extrinsically by the more formal process of public examinations. Baumeister (1991) provides some insight into the process by means of explaining the stages experienced when moving towards self-actualisation. He indicates four essential needs that individuals seek to satisfy in finding a meaning to express the self. Firstly the need to find a purpose either that is intrinsically satisfying in that it provides pleasure or extrinsically satisfying in that it provides a sense of achievement. Secondly the activity should be valued; that it should be justifiable or promote a sense of legitimacy. Thirdly that it should engender a sense of efficacy; that the individual should feel competent about performing the activity and fourthly the person should feel confident about what s/he does. The values involved are consistent with the dimensions of serious leisure. Actions associated with this process have been described as producing eudaimonic wellbeing (Bryce, 2018), that is to say they promote a sense of meaning and purpose. Personal choice dictates what the activity might be but options are limited by resources and personal circumstances. Moments of personal transition such as retirement tend to intensify the focus on how one defines self, as in the cases of Petra and Reginald quoted above. Movement through this process might be described as active ageing.

Tracing those stages in my own transition to retirement, the first, sense of purpose, was fulfilled in several ways. Teaching Spanish was intrinsically satisfying through the sharing of knowledge and extrinsically satisfying in that it contributed to my financial stability. It was valued by the school and was legitimised for me by the payment of a salary and for the students in the form of success in public examinations. Their success showed that my teaching had been effective, demonstrated my competence as a teacher and gave me a sense of self-efficacy. It thus gave me the confidence to train as an exercise instructor despite not being naturally athletic, sporty or competitive. Now, working with older adults in an exercise class I can trace the same feelings intensified because they are totally intrinsically motivated. My exercise participants are not seeking to prove anything or win prizes. Several members of my classes actually confess to fleeing other exercise classes where they were required to set and monitor measurable targets. They perceived the process as irrelevant and meaningless to their lives, especially as it reduced the time available for the exercise they had paid for and marred their sense of enjoyment. Besides they resented 'being treated like kids' or as though they were irresponsible. One of the fundamental differences, of course, between working in schools and working with adults is that adults generally have internalised a code of acceptable social behaviour, so the teacher is freed from the stress and responsibility of imposing order in

the room and the relationship operates on a more even basis of mutual power. I draw on the concept of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1998) to describe the state of arousal and control experienced when an activity becomes so engrossing that all else is forgotten. It is a state that is often felt when individuals are totally consumed by a leisure pursuit (Standridge, 2020; Humberstone, 2011) and is consistent with the characteristics of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007).

Perceptions of flow took on many guises in interviews with exercise participants as part of doctoral research. These will be discussed more fully in the next section. In addition to participants' adherence to the classes their words provide powerful evidence of their commitment to, and the success of, the activity. The study revealed that working with adults is a socially constructed experience. Extrinsic motivations such as the one quoted below are common but take on a secondary nature when it comes to regular attendance at class. Lilian (79), a full-time carer for her husband, says of her ETM class 'It keeps me going. I need to stay fit to be able to look after my sick husband'. She enjoys the immediate, short-lived pleasure of exercising with a group of friends, but for her there is the deeper longer-lasting effect that the experience helps her to age well. It ensures her autonomy and assists her stated purpose of enabling her to care for her husband. From my own perspective, part of the joy of teaching is in understanding these motivations in order to ensure that they are complemented by the exercise experience. The feeling of being able to make a worthwhile contribution to other people's lives validates my actions and enables my own sense of eudaimonic wellbeing. In the following section I examine some of the evidence of the meanings that people attribute to their exercise classes that has been useful in enabling me to enjoy becoming an exercise instructor.

3.4.1 Becoming an Exercise Instructor for Older Adults

An understanding of eudaimonic wellbeing, in other words the outcome of the link between purpose and meaning, represented by pleasure in exercise, was central to my becoming an effective exercise instructor for older adults. On the one hand, the research that I undertook to achieve such understanding is evidence of my own emerging lifestyle entrepreneurship firmly rooted in serious leisure. On the other the methodology employed created situations for people to share views and experience and had the effect of building stronger relationships between the author/instructor, as ethnographer, and participants in the groups, as well as relationships between members within the groups. By enhancing individuals' understanding of their actions the process impacted positively on their identity as exercisers. They had a vested interest in the research and were keen to have the findings reflected back to them. Consequently, their initial experience of a casual leisure activity took on a deeper significance. In this section I discuss some of these insights.

When asked their reasons for engaging in physical activity participants would most often refer to notions of wanting to stay fit and healthy for as long as possible. Their answers were consistent with the meanings attributed to active ageing or ageing well (Bowling, 2008). Secondly, they would respond that their choice of specific exercise was linked to their experience of enjoyment. I pursued this second dimension as I felt that a deeper investigation of how enjoyment in exercise is experienced

would be useful in helping to persuade sedentary older adults to engage in exercise and further encourage active ageing.

There is already much evidence that enjoyment is a salient feature of physical activity for people of all ages. The most frequently chosen response from the eight options offered in The Active People Survey (2014), as reasons for taking exercise was 'just enjoy it', followed by 'keep fit'. A typology consisting of four categories of pleasure derived from an analysis of interviews with older exercisers provides more insight into the origins of their enjoyment (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). The categories identified were sensual, documented, pleasure of habitual action and pleasure of immersion. From my own study I am not aware that any of my participants tracked their performance or chose to document their exercise experience but there is ample evidence of the other three types of positive affect. Conversely, my findings showed overwhelmingly that, for many of these people, pleasure arises as a socially constructed experience; of meeting together at the same time every week, seeing the same people in a familiar place to learn and perform a sequence of exercise in the company of others (pleasure of habitual action). Our roles complement one another. Indeed, my own feelings of satisfaction could not exist without the participants of my classes. The importance of such habitual contact is further underscored during the restrictions imposed by the need to manage the pandemic. The enthusiasm for finding ways of meeting together for regular exercise in virtual reality will be discussed later. Nevertheless, there are discrete forms of pleasurable experience which are related to the specific genre of exercise performed and which help to account for the specific attributes valued in the choice of each of the three activities: Exercise to Music (ETM), Tai chi and Pilates.

The examples quoted below serve several purposes. First, they highlight the way that pleasure is experienced in the production of wellbeing. The existence of pleasure in exercise provides an indicator that the activity is considered to be worthwhile; that it warrants repetition and that the activity may have other longer lasting effects. Such outcomes are akin to the criteria which characterise casual leisure: that which provides an instant yet fleeting experience of pleasure. However I argue that for many participants the experience leans further towards that of serious leisure, involving commitment and personal development. The examples quoted are also testimony to my journey to becoming an effective exercise instructor. They provide legitimacy for the role that I fulfil. They also highlight the sense of satisfaction that I derive from doing the job that I love and provide evidence of the dedication and commitment which characterise serious leisure or lifestyle entrepreneurship. At the level of the participants they demonstrate fulfilment as well as a sense of purpose.

3.5 Evidence: Sensual Pleasure and Pleasure of Immersion

The importance of this and the next two sections is to demonstrate how the effects of, and feelings attributed to, exercise, has enhanced my ability to become an effective exercise instructor.

In the evidence I have gathered there appears to be some overlap between sensual pleasure and that experienced through immersion with the exercise. The

connection between these two sensations is reminiscent of the combined states of arousal and control necessary for finding flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1998)—also one of the attributes of serious pleasure. For example, in Pilates the pleasure experienced from working the body and through the body in a calm environment is united in feelings of wellbeing in which the individual feels totally removed from the worries of everyday life. Consistent with an experience of flow, the individual is transported physiologically and mind and body are united in the moment of the activity. Sheba (72) writes,

Although we sometimes work hard physically, it is a time of mental quietness. Cares and pressures seem to drop away as we concentrate on correct breathing, and the brain seems to rest in a soft cocoon of relaxation. My mind doesn't even wander, and think about a cup of tea, did I turn off the gas or do I need to go to the shops for something as it did occasionally when ringing church bells – sometimes causing me to lose my place in the order of ringing. Pilates time is a time for me and I finish the session feeling a nicer person.

Yet the state of immersion itself can also be described as producing sensual effects.

At the end when I stand up I just feel – ooo - wonderful. My body feels so much better and I realise I haven't been thinking of anything else for the past hour (Sarah, 63).

Sarah's 'ooo' is accompanied by gestures indicating sensual pleasure. The sensations that the two women refer to are reminiscent of what Wellard (2012) argues are body-reflexive pleasures. Similar comments have been made about the experience of performing a lengthy sequence in tai chi. People forget about their bodies but move in a state which some have called 'hypnotic' (Martha, 70) and others 'mesmerising' (Molly, 65). Molly also speaks of how feelings of calm wash over and throughout her body as she exercises. Nell, (70) speaks of being lulled and suddenly becoming aware of where she is and forgetting what point she has reached in the sequence. She looks to the other participants for a point of reference and to catch up. All the group testify to feelings of synergy, of feeling something embodied and difficult to describe from exercising together as a group. Yet this feeling is something extra, felt through, yet beyond, the body and which they do not experience when exercising alone. The effects extend even beyond the scope of the exercise session. Julian (81) reports that his wife tells him that he is a much 'sunnier person' when he returns home from his tai chi class. In ETM group exercise Angie (77) refers to this extra feeling as 'more than satisfying.' Participants in ETM speak of seeking an extra feeling in their exercise by proactively committing themselves to the rhythm of the music.

I like the dancing and I get a buzz from the music (agreement) and prancing about to the music (Cara, 72).

Of prime importance is the choice of music, which should be appropriate to the exercise and appeal to taste. Linda (68) finds the music liberating and says.

It makes me feel a kind of freedom while doing it [exercise] and the music takes me back to my youth and makes me feel younger (Linda, 68).

Pleasure is experienced at the level of the individual but it is created by coming together as a community. When individuals act and interact together they co-create the social environment within the physical location they are situated in order to achieve the collective requirements of the group (Cattell et al., 2008; Wiles, 2005). The awareness that I gained from the evidence quoted above confirms my legitimacy in the role of instructor and enhances my satisfaction in being able to perform that role. Understanding what is important to the individuals I work with is essential to my being able to fulfil the role of instructor effectively and for us all to achieve our communal aim of ageing well while having fun. The process is reminiscent of Wright Mills' work (1959; 2000) on the Sociological Imagination, where role and society are inextricably interlinked. This is further highlighted by our activities during the pandemic, which will be discussed later, but first, I explore group values in greater detail.

3.6 The Importance of Belonging: Pleasure and Enduring Relationships

Meeting the same people in the same place at the same time each week cuts across all categories of pleasure experienced through exercise except that of documented pleasure and highlights the importance of the relational dimension which Gergen (2009) argues is essential for experiencing feelings of wellbeing. Stillman and Baumeister (2009 p.249) emphasise that 'belongingness is an essential factor in creating meaning in life'. The sense of having something in common has been shown to facilitate strong social bonds and promote adherence to exercise in rehabilitation groups (Bidonde, 2005). The habitual meeting also calls attention to the importance of exercise having a social dimension as well. Sheree (70) says of her regular class.

It's sociable and welcoming and non-judgemental. We talk to each other and have a laugh during sessions. For me the social contact is just as important as exercise. Exercise makes me feel good and happy.

Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) argue that the need to belong 'is a powerful, fundamental and extremely pervasive motivation'. Besides, following retirement, people tend to resist the dissolution of existing bonds such as those formed in the workplace. The ability to forge new bonds relational to other people in a shared activity thus helps to smooth the transition towards negotiating a new identity. The focus on meanings and purpose attached to the activity is particularly significant in building new friendship networks as the individuals may not share any prior history as in the sense of workmates or neighbours (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980).

Evidence of what it feels like to exercise in isolation serves to emphasise the strength of support expressed for exercising in a group. Linda's (68) experience of getting bored in the gym reveals that place alone, devoid of other valued features pertaining to exercise, can also have a detrimental effect on pleasure. The example of her experience underscores by default the relational dimension of pleasurable exercise, as well as her difficulty in achieving a state of flow.

But you see you're not in a group there. You've got to motivate yourself to get there and you've got nobody to say hello to and have a nice day and what did you do? None of that, so it's all very insular and I don't like that (Linda, 68).

Reflecting on these testimonies to pleasure highlights the multi-faceted nature of exercise experience. Though it is possible to identify different sorts and sources of pleasure that vary from activity to activity and from person to person, there also exists some commonality. The features of exercise in which people find pleasure are intricately interlinked as well as being experienced in an embodied fashion (Humberstone & Stuart, 2016; Sparkes, 2010). Sheba's (72) writing particularly underscores the links and the complexity. Having already emphasised the feelings of calm concentration and relaxation that she values in her Pilates classes she adds,

A friendly atmosphere, largely determined by our tutor, makes our efforts more like fun than serious exercise despite the fact that our muscles are actually getting stronger.

Furthermore, the pleasure often extends beyond the limits of time and place of the actual exercise, providing a strong indicator of eudaimonic wellbeing. Many people across all cultures of exercise, ETM, Pilates and tai chi speak about the way that they feel after the class.

And also how it makes you feel afterwards, cos obviously it gets the old endorphins going and then you feel good and therefore you want to repeat that (agreement) There's nothing like feeling. I'm feeling lighter (Daisy, 67)
Afterwards I always feel more energised. And I always feel that I can go home and do things. I don't feel that I need to sit down and recover, which is nice. So, I think - It makes me feel more positive about the world in general. It gives me more of a sense of perspective on things (Hermia, 57).

Wellard (2014) turns to Sartre (1954) for an explanation of how embodied experiences of physical activity may differ while remaining part of an overall corpus of experience defined by positive affect. Embodied existential experiences stimulated through the senses allow the body to 'feel', become aware or conscious of its presence in the world. Exercise participants are aware that being physically active changes the way that the body feels (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). In the circuit of body-reflexive pleasure a reflection is an act of consciousness. Rooted in processes of reflexivity, memories of past enjoyment cannot be separated from current experience (Humberstone & Nicol, 2020) and are thus positively recruited in perpetuating engagement with the group and so driving adherence to exercise. Phoenix and Orr (2014) refer to the cyclic nature of pleasure in this process as 'habitual' pleasure. The regenerative cycle has a particular role in exercise engagement for older adults as attendance at a regular exercise session helps to frame the week, replacing the routines lost after leaving the labour market or the need to create a new routine following bereavement. In terms of disengagement theory (Hochschild, 1975) the phenomenon might be described as 'active ageing' as it demonstrates continued agency after leaving the workplace. However, put simply, people keep going to their exercise classes because the experience makes them feel good, so a better description

might be 'ageing well', thus reflecting the positive affect experienced. In the role of instructor, I too enjoy the exercise, but I also experience the added pleasure of preparing the classes, of seeing pleasure reflected in the faces and comments of my participants, and again, later, when participants express their appreciation. The existence of serious leisure is amply represented by my multi-faceted experience in the role as an exercise instructor.

In the next section I investigate how these experiences have evolved during the periods of confinement at home, 'lockdown' (see Institute for Government, 2021), arising from management of COVID-19. Restrictions imposed on movement out of the home have sharpened the focus on what really matters to people in the exercise class and for me, as leader of these groups, has produced a finer appreciation of the values embedded in serious leisure.

4 Ageing Well During the Pandemic?

The World Health Organisation (2002) used the term 'Active Ageing' to set out its policy framework for encouraging people to adopt behaviours that would enable them to live long and healthy lives. However, restrictions imposed as a result of the fight against COVID-19 seriously compromise the ability to adopt some of these behaviours. A week before UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced on national television the need for everyone to stay at home (BBC TV, 23rd March, 2020) unless journeys were essential, he had imposed the same measures on all adults over the age of 70. Consequently, older adults, classified arbitrarily by their age, as a homogeneous group and vulnerable, were already confined to their homes and no longer had access to their regular exercise facilities. Tremain (2020) argues that vulnerability is not an inherent property of the older body, but the effect of forcing older people into isolation is to 'vulnerabilise' them. Henceforth their opportunities for remaining physically active are limited, as is their ability to take an active role in society. Within these confines the ability to express a sense of self is also reduced. However, as Nimrod and Shrira (2016) demonstrate, even when leisure constraints increase due to changes in health or physical capacity, leisure still contributes to quality of life. In similar vein this section documents how the author and her exercise participants rose to the challenges presented by lockdown restrictions to maintain their sense of self and to continue to express it by sharing experiences of exercise.

Laz (2003) sees life as a stream which is always evolving. The self is embodied and always in a state of 'becoming'. Life flows like the water in a stream, encountering obstacles but surging on ahead. Change is the default position in ageing well. Consistent with Nimrod and Kleiber's (2007) innovation theory which postulates that some adults seek out and engage in new leisure activities to reinvent or preserve a sense of self, Batcho (2017) argues that novelty is an antidote to boredom, stagnation and satiation. People who have already expressed a sense of agency in effecting a transition from work to retirement are likely to be able to demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of the disruptions caused by COVID-19. William James (1904) argued that life can be more emphatically experienced when in a state of

transition. In this section I discuss how myself and the participants of my classes see ourselves as moving from a position of active ageing to taking action to ensure that we 'age well', staying mentally as well as physically fit.

A good number of us have been exercising together for almost 15 years. During this time we have adapted our style to the needs of the group so the incursions of COVID-19 have failed to put a stop to our activity. We have just needed to be inventive. To explain further, my very first adult learning ETM class numbered fewer than ten participants but within five years enrolment swelled to 25 with a waiting list of additional prospective participants. Within the last ten years, having gained experience, I have been persuaded to set up classes on my own account. The participants of the subsidised classes with whom I began my career disliked the obligation to identify measurable targets against which to monitor improvement at intervals of ten weeks. Unlike patients seeking to rehabilitate, these participants were not motivated by challenge or competition. They saw the tracking process as time-consuming and irrelevant to their less deterministic aims, represented by the desire to maintain health and fitness for as long as possible and thus, to age well. Their commitment was clear in the length of their adherence to the class, so they perceived external methods of motivation to be an irritant. It was their commitment and trust which gave me the confidence to embark on the next stage of my career as a freelance instructor. Many of those early members are still attending my classes in ETM, tai chi or Pilates – sometimes more than one class per week. One member is now in her 90s and continues to be a beacon of agility for the rest of her ETM class. The stories following show how values related to purpose and pleasure in exercise intersect with our adaptive response to coping with the restrictions which attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Members of the demographic concerned are not 'digital natives' so confidence and competence with information technology varies across the population in the study. This is consistent with research identifying a 'grey digital divide' (Nimrod, 2016; Schumacher & Kent, 2020). Recent research also indicates that in advanced economies, such as U.S.A., Canada and Western Europe, more than sixty percent of older adults use the internet (Schumacher & Kent, 2020). However, regardless of their digital knowledge and experience, very few (including myself) were aware of the video-conferencing service, Zoom, which eventually became central to our ability to keep in contact and to exercise together. Initial use grew out of the desire to see, and talk to, one another in a more sophisticated manner than can be achieved by the dyadic relationships that phone calls can facilitate. The findings are supported by research with online Pilates participants (Taylor et al., 2020).

Though telephone and e.mail were already established pathways for communicating they did little to facilitate communal discussion. At the beginning we thought that lockdown would only last three weeks, so I sent out lists of YouTube clips to help people to exercise at home. Some individuals were also motivated by old exercise DVDs that they rediscovered at the back of cupboards. When the period was extended no one was sure how long we were going to be confined to our homes. Fortunately, the weather was good and the guidelines allowed individuals to leave the house to take exercise for an hour per day, but the monotony of walking round the local housing estate and of exercising alone soon began to pall and the desire to

reconnect with members of the exercise group became more urgent. It was a participant of a tai chi group, Paulina (76), who first investigated how to use Zoom, and inspired members of the group to sit in front of their laptops or smart phones with a cup of coffee at 11 a. m. every Thursday.

The success of this first enterprise led me to consider how I could adapt our ETM routines for us each to be able to perform them in front of a laptop or smartphone in a small space at home. My unsophisticated equipment and lack of space meant that people could not receive the whole body view that they expected to guide them in a normal exercise class. Though they were familiar with the routines I soon learnt that they copied my actions rather than followed my instructions. Trying to rectify the camera view was disastrous and necessitated the purchase of a new camera. Gradually I found more visual methods of explaining the moves we were going to do. Other problems to be overcome were caused by the delay in sound and by disruption to the visual image due to variable broadband speed. Barriers to gaining an understanding of these issues were presented by the fact that the person transmitting the message has no idea how it is being received until afterwards when contact is made by phone or e.mail. Consequently, it took us several weeks to understand these problems and to solve them collaboratively. Perseverance paid off. The result was a credit to us, though it took two months before we enjoyed 40 min' continuous activity which was relatively problem free.

The experimental work was done with members of the ETM group who had been together longest. The strength of values, relationships and group cohesion that facilitated this achievement supports the empowering effect of 'belongingness' (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). Once we felt proficient enough, we were keen to extend the experience to members of other exercise groups with the result that the ETM Zoom session regularly includes 25—30 participants, though the actual composition of the group tends to vary.

Easing of lockdown measures over the summer (see Institute for Government, 2021) gave the opportunity for some of the tai chi groups to meet outdoors under strict social distancing rules. Such rules, requiring individuals to stay at least two metres apart, meant that village halls were often too small to accommodate an exercise group of more than ten people. Success with Zoom for ETM led me to compile a series of tai chi breathing exercises that could be shared on the digital platform. Over the autumn and winter, the popularity of this model has grown, to the extent that members of ETM and Pilates groups have also become tai chi enthusiasts. A second lockdown at the beginning of November 2020 also prompted people to search for something different to do with others which would occupy them on a regular basis. Since Christmas 2020 it has been possible for newcomers to join the Zoom tai chi session, attracted by adverts posted via volunteer community associations. By this method we have attempted to reach out to older adults over a wider geographical area, combat loneliness and provide a sense of community (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020; Nimrod, 2019). The tai chi session now reaches 40–50 people, many of whom are isolated.

Initially I had no intention of running a Pilates session on Zoom because most of those exercises are done lying on the floor. My unsophisticated webcam cannot cope with the view required. Nevertheless, pressure from members of my Pilates

group led me to develop a series of standing Pilates type exercises, which participants say they enjoy and which their adherence to the session suggests they find worthwhile. However, for safety reasons, I do not extend this session to anyone who has not already practised Pilates with me and has not learnt the necessary sequence for control of the core muscles. In an analysis of online Pilates sessions run by a professional studio, Taylor et al., (2020) found that the experience of this type of exercise at home was dependent upon prior exercise engagement, competency in the movements and trust in the instructor. Though I am now operating as a volunteer I still have a duty to lead a safe and effective exercise session.

Several individuals have raised the issue of payment for these sessions, but I argue that the benefits of sharing this experience far outweigh financial accounting. Empirical research in economics has begun to explore the idea that work represents much more than simply earning a living: it is a source of meaning (Cassar & Meier, 2018). My feelings are consistent with research suggesting that volunteerism provides a sense of purpose and meaningful social connections (Hood et al., 2018) as well as improving self-esteem and self efficacy (Brown et al., 2012). These are all essential elements at a time when isolation puts older adults at a greater risk of loneliness and depression (Huang, 2020). It has been claimed that people display more prosocial behaviour as they age (Mayr & Freund, 2020). I argue that the exercise session is not a commodity and has no direct exchange value, though governments often seek to express the wellbeing produced as a facet of GDP (Stiglitz et al., 2009). The shared purpose and meanings embodied in the session are mediated through serious leisure and are expressed as eudaimonic wellbeing (Bryce, 2018). I am proud to be able to unite 70–80 exercisers across three Zoom sessions per week. In addition, the experience pays dividends in terms of my own mental and physical health as well as theirs: active ageing embodied. Frequent comments are ‘They [Zoom sessions] give me something to look forward to’; ‘It’s a way of seeing people’; ‘It gives me a lift’; ‘I know the exercises and could do them on my own, but I don’t. It’s not the same’; ‘I scarcely see anyone otherwise’; ‘It raises the spirits’. There are also a great many questions relating to when and how we will be able to get together again ‘in the flesh’. The sentiments are echoed by participants of online Pilates classes (Taylor et al., 2020).

Zoom allows little opportunity for the inconsequential verbal exchanges that happen naturally when meeting in the same room. For this reason, from time to time, I have hosted extra sessions where people are invited to sit in front of their screens with a drink of their choice and chat to one another. In this way, a few new relationships have grown across the boundaries of the original exercise groups as people discover that they have hobbies in common such as learning a language, attending an art class, or have relations who live or work in the same area for example. Nevertheless this is still a strange interactive experience because, presented with an array of faces on the screen, it is often difficult to identify the speaker quickly enough to be able to pick up visual cues and facial expressions. Occasionally misunderstandings result. Besides, when speakers coincide, communication can break down. An unexpected level of awareness is evoked in the process as people learn to defer to one another in order to sustain conversation. Such sessions have become almost an exercise in social awareness

as well as a demonstration of newly acquired technical skills. Online communities can combat feelings of isolation (Son et al., 2020; Nimrod, 2016) and promote mental health (Taylor et al., 2020). Engaging in Zoom has had unexpected bonuses to add to the physical exercise that might originally have been deemed to constitute no more than casual leisure.

Conversely, there may have been drawbacks for the actual exercise experience. On the one hand, overcoming the barriers to transmission has added a novel aspect, but on the other, such barriers have limited participants' ability to achieve feelings of flow. For example, Cathy (67), ETM participant for ten years, is one of the former members who are just waiting for 'things to get back to normal', seeing no substitute for personal interaction 'in the flesh'. Others see no purpose in becoming 'tech savvy' because they perceive that they can do everything they want to do by traditional methods. Those with limited digital skills fear compromising the control they have over their devices by trying to introduce an additional application which they do not understand.

In contrast, ETM participant, Dee (73) and Robert (90) and his partner, Ivy (88) from a different ETM group, also eschew the use of Zoom, but displayed a more creative and independent use of their digital resources by asking me to supply them with a list of the songs that we were using for our routines before lockdown, in February, 2020. Confident in their ability to perform these routines they intended to access the music on their voice-activated cloud-based digital assistants, Alexa or Siri, take control of their exercise and customise it to their needs. Thus, they were able to demonstrate agency, using leisure as a way of expressing identity and attain wellbeing.

Within the scope of this study, competence or confidence in, or willingness to engage in digital communication is not age-related, though it often depends on the support of a friend or relative. As I have found with exercise, showing people what to do is often more effective than telling people what to do. Having a specific reason to engage is also empowering. Furthermore, the prospect of pleasure is a strong motivator.

The relationships built up in the course of becoming and being a lifestyle entrepreneur are central to all these stories. In the last section I take an overview of the chronological journey I have already outlined and attempt to draw parallels between transitional stages in the ongoing bid to age well.

5 Life Transitions

I draw on theories associated with retirement to highlight the similarities between the aforementioned transitional life stage and the evolution of coping strategies in the face of restricted life conditions during the pandemic. Rhona's words, quoted below, evoke Atchley's view (1993) that mental alertness and ageing well are facilitated by the practice of both continuing lifelong interests and embarking on new ones in retirement and the more recent Innovation theory, (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007) showing how new activities lead to personal growth.

I think you've got to keep on trying new things though. It's very difficult - it's very easy to - do the same things all the time. If you do something different - you've got to get yourself out of your comfort zone (Rhona, 71).

Both theories are exemplified in our reactions to the pandemic. The desire to maintain contact with one another through our shared activities led to us exploring digital technology. The process impacted upon my teaching methods as I responded to participants' reactions. Together, we sustained our exercise identity whilst deepening our understanding of the exercise itself and the way that we related to one another.

The stories in this manuscript reveal how leisure has been central to managing identity in lifestyle transition. The scale of adjustment may vary with the individual concerned but the abrupt nature of the onset of lockdown was common to all. Older adults are more adversely affected in terms of mental health because of the ways that the pandemic is characterised by ageist discourses that marginalise their contribution to society and undermine self esteem (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Consistent with recent research recommending that regular exercise can offset such negative affect (Dominski & Brandt, 2020) members of the exercise groups regarded the implications of isolation and confinement as a spur to action. Besides, leisure can play an important role in social connectedness (Toepoel, 2013). As established communities of exercisers, we were determined to find ways of staying connected and maintaining the activities that we loved. Extremely few of the original c.120 members have not remained in contact. It may be significant that those who lost contact were relatively new members and had not had time to develop allegiance to the group or a feeling of belonging (Barnett et al., 2012; Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). Other research shows that being in a minority within the group can create a barrier to adherence to exercise (Hartley & Yeowell, 2014).

The basis for success in adaptation lay in the network of social contacts and the values shared by members of the groups. Research indicates that, in addition to moderate physical activity, there are protective effects from social engagement (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Furthermore, moderate physical activity increases the immune response to respiratory viral infections (Nieman, 2011; Nieman & Wentz, 2019). The desire to reconnect gave individuals the confidence to innovate, to understand how their broadband service worked and, if necessary, to find out how to adjust the settings. Earlier examples quoted, for example Petra and Reginald, show that the transition to retirement often lacks the dimension of community support. Lost work roles, the need to find new modes for self expression and social networks can hinder the pathway of a smooth transition to retirement. By contrast, the adaptations that the exercise participants have experienced, smack of a move towards lifestyle entrepreneurship. 'Loving what you do, doing what you love' represents a continuous expression of the purpose and meaning said to promote eudaimonic wellbeing (Bryce, 2018). The evidence suggests that interventions to promote exercise as serious leisure at the moment of life transition might help to prevent health problems occurring later as a result of sedentary behaviour.

Fundamental to this development is the goodwill of all concerned. We meet in virtual space for 40 min courtesy of Zoom. The experiences are not monetised

in any way. Neither are there requirements to monitor or report progress in exercise, though individuals often comment on how much better they feel for 'having done something'. Similar to findings relating to physical activity and transition to retirement (Liechty et al., 2016) outcomes from our Zoom meetings are valued because people find them meaningful. The sessions give structure to the week as well as maintaining social networks. The Zoom chatroom actually promotes conversation between members of the same group as well as those from other groups and newcomers. There are psychosocial benefits in the form of emotional support which is consistent with the findings of research amongst community-based groups (Hartley & Yeowell, 2014) which promote a sense of solidarity (Charles & Davies, 2005; Evans, 2009). Under the normal circumstances of the exercise class exchanges are cordial but limited and the opportunity to chat is rarely extended beyond the environment of the exercise class except between existing friends.

Commitment to the sessions is strong, often motivated by the opportunity to 'see' one another. Individuals often let one another know if they are unable to attend. Like them, I enjoy the exercise and would be hard pressed to do it on my own. Besides, the satisfaction I draw from being able to facilitate these sessions is boundless. Satisfaction extends beyond the confines of the exercise session into the periods of preparation and the phone calls and e-mails that brighten the hours of imposed solitude. The original pragmatic decisions – to remain financially secure while staying fit and healthy – that gave rise to becoming an exercise instructor and that formed the building blocks of this story, have become incidental in the stream of events that contribute to the process of 'Ageing well'.

However, the intrinsic nature of a transition, comprising changes in direction or false starts, can only really be appreciated in retrospect. At the time the experience may appear to be like the water in Laz's stream (2003) flowing gently or tempestuously, but nonetheless relentlessly. Obstacles may be negotiated unobtrusively, or navigation might prove difficult and appear not to make any sense. Either way identity is impacted. Inadvertently, times of transition provide opportunities for innovation (Nimrod, 2008) and learning about the self. Gergen (2009, p.76) argues that 'we exist in a world of co-constitution' drawing attention to the role of social and environmental factors in the process of generating and expressing identity. Projects that seek to capitalise on these qualities at times of transition might facilitate active ageing.

Uniquely, the pandemic presents a transition that involves everyone simultaneously. Placed under conditions of confinement and isolation, it seems to me only natural that social beings should turn to existing social networks for support and wellbeing. The stories express exercise participants' resilience and determination to age well and are unified by the relationships forged by lifestyle entrepreneurship. They highlight an agentic response to the unprecedented intervention of the pandemic, feelings of allegiance to the group(s) and a sense of solidarity. The evidence of this study suggests that leisure has taken up a more overtly serious position in people's lives as they have relied upon it to navigate the pandemic.

6 Conclusion

Two dominant themes emerge from this case study: serious leisure and ageing well. Both are socially constructed and the former gives meaning and purpose to the latter. This is especially evident at times of life transition when multiple aspects of life may be reviewed and reconfigured. It is a common process as people leave the labour market and, for the author, marked the launch into lifestyle entrepreneurship. The stress-busting, enjoyable exercise activities that offset a busy teaching career, providing a social dimension beyond the workplace, became the vehicle for a fulfilling life in retirement. For many of the participants of the exercise groups a shift of similar significance is represented by the experience of maintaining activities under lockdown conditions. Aspects of experience that are so deeply rooted that they are typically overlooked were disrupted by social isolation and ignited a sense of solidarity; an urge to unite against a perceived threat. Exercise participants refused to be confined by homogeneous ageist discourses but sought new ways of reconfiguring networks, as they did when they left the labour market.

Neither ageing well nor serious leisure can be construed as normalised concepts. Much has been written about the need to address sedentary behaviour by encouraging active ageing (WHO, 2002) especially amongst retired people. Our stories pose questions about the relationship between exercise provision and how improvement is monitored. While an understanding of how these classes take on the characteristics of serious leisure can only be appreciated from the dimension of time, actions during the pandemic confirm the role of exercise as serious leisure in these participants' lives. Just as my own journey into lifestyle entrepreneurship has been instrumental in revealing these developments, an innovative approach towards tackling sedentary behaviour in older adults might involve encouraging similar pathways at the moment of life transition. Our experiences are offered for reflection in the hope that the knowledge may be exploited for the benefit of others.

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