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To cite this article: Annie Woube (2018) Racing against age? Gender, age, and body among senior participants in women-only sports races, *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, 41:2, 297-310, DOI: [10.1080/07053436.2018.1482672](https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2018.1482672)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2018.1482672>



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Published online: 20 Jul 2018.



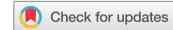
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## Racing against age? Gender, age, and body among senior participants in women-only sports races

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*(Received 17 March 2017; accepted 31 May 2017)*

The purpose of this study is to investigate experiences and meaning-making of exercise and participation in races for women-only among Swedish senior women. Positioned within the framework of discourse theory, post-structuralism, and feminism, the article contains an analysis of how the intersection of gender, age, and the aging body affects articulations of meaning among senior participants in written accounts, interviews, and ethnographical fieldwork on women-only races in Sweden. The study shows that the senior women participate in women-only races in relation to (1) an aging, deteriorating body, (2) a health and exercise trend in Western society, (3) a desire for a single-gendered social context, (4) their own imagined physical (in)capability, (5) male-connoted capacities of physical strength, speed, and stamina, and (6) other senior female athletes who function as role models.

**Keywords:** gender; age; body; single-gendered races

Cet article étudie l'expérience des compétitions réservées aux femmes ainsi que le sens que revêt leur pratique pour des femmes âgées suédoises. Ancré dans la théorie du discours, du poststructuralisme et du féminisme, cet article démontre comment l'intersection entre genre, âge et corps vieillissant affecte les articulations du sens données par les participantes âgées dans les entrevues et récits écrits ainsi que dans l'analyse ethnographique de compétitions pour femmes en Suède. L'étude a révélé que ces Suédoises participent aux compétitions réservées aux femmes en relation : (1) à un corps vieillissant et déclinant; (2) à la tendance « vie saine et sport » en vogue dans la société occidentale; (3) au désir d'un contexte social exclusivement féminin; (4) à la perception personnelle de son (in)capacité physique; (5) aux capacités physiques de vitesse et d'endurance connotées masculines et (6) à d'autres athlètes âgées fonctionnant comme modèle.

**Mots clés :** genre; âge; corps; compétitions unisexes

### Introduction

Sporting events for women, sometimes called women-only races, are an important part of the Swedish sports movement today. In Sweden, hundreds of thousands of women join women-only races every year. This type of sports event is popular in the rest of Scandinavia and in other countries too. In the marketing of women-only races, phrases such as companionship, festivity, and happiness, 'without rush and stress,' occur. It is evident that this is a successful arrangement, attracting large numbers of participants of all

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ages. Yet, there is limited and dated research conducted about recreational sporting events for women in Scandinavia (see Brandt Madsen, 1996; Fasting, 1995; Stråhlman, 1994). In the ethnological research project *Women-only Races as a Cultural Phenomenon – Conditions for Women's Sports*, the project group is studying what sporting events for women in Sweden involve, who participates and why, as well as how femininity is constructed in relation to women-only races during the 1980s and onwards.<sup>1</sup> From a feminist perspective and in line with discourse theoretical methods, this article's focus is specifically on participants who are 60 years of age or older. They constitute around 7–8% of the total number of participants, according to the organizers of the sporting events. For example, in the women-only skiing race 'Tjejvasan' (30 km), participants in the age category mentioned amounted to 850 of the 9927 women who completed the race.

The article begins with the experiences of 75-year-old Anna, which she tells me about in a paired interview with a much younger participant in women-only races, who I will here call Klara, and who is 40 years old.<sup>2</sup> Both have long experience of taking part in various types of sports events, women-only races, as well as mixed races for women and men. They are active women, doing regular training several times a week. During the interview, I ask them why they enter the women-only races, and Anna answers as follows:

To be honest, I think that it is a good thing to have a goal for whatever you are doing. I go running, perhaps three times a week almost all year round, and it is good to have this to think about. Then again, I just get worse and worse all the time. But, I can still do it anyway. And every time I stand at the start of a race, I thank my lucky star that here I am again. Because, after all, there are not many who can do it at my age. I know that. (75 years old, participation in women-only races since 1987)

The message Anna conveys in the quotation is that she spends a lot of time on sports doing her ordinary training. She does her training almost every day and still she says, 'I just get worse and worse all the time.' Anna is not the only person with experience of a body that no longer performs well. Many of the senior women in this study spend much of their spare time training and participating in races, but they point out that their own aging body hampers them. Other research work also indicates that a prime expression for aging is to experience a weakening body that hinders and limits corporal movement and mobility (Alftberg, 2012, p. 44). Accounts of working against age, when doing sports, often appear in the empirical material and turn out to be common among participants in women-only races, aged over 60, who do regular and frequent training all year round. This article is about why these women take part in sporting events for women which require training all year round, even though they express that they are gradually becoming less able to perform. What is their motivation? What significance do the women-only races, and the training in preparation for these, have for them in relation to an aging body? I will study their situation as women practicing sports; I will also examine the socio-cultural, political, and historical conditions surrounding their physical training.

### ***Theoretical framework***

The theoretical framework of the study is positioned within discourse theory, post-structuralism, and feminism, with influences primarily from Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Judith Butler (see for example Butler, 1990, 1993; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). By analyzing the empirical material as *articulations of discourses* about women-only races, women who do physical training, age, and the aging body, the aim is to find out

which kinds of meaning are established and which are excluded when different elements are set in relation to each other in specific ways (and not in other ways). Through the identification and deconstruction of chains of signs and meaning, the intention is to study matters that appear natural and objective matters in relation to sports and gender – and instead regard them as politically and culturally created (cf. Lindelöf, 2012).

In accordance with the tradition of political (or post-Marxist) discourse theory, all social or cultural phenomena are regarded as discursively constituted (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014). Thus, discourses do not only consist of oral statements and abstract concepts, but all kinds of signs in the form of concrete practices, feelings, materiality, etc., which are filled with content and meaning when they are set in relation to, or associated with, other signs. In such a way, they also provide certain central concepts or phenomena with meaning, in this case for instance, ‘senior women practicing sports,’ ‘women-only races,’ and ‘elderly bodies.’ Furthermore, matters that occur outside a certain discursive field influence the way a sign or phenomenon can be understood within the discursive field; the surroundings function as a *constitutive outside*. This implies that the meaning of specific women-only races is created, for example, in relation to other kinds of sports events or races, or other types of gender-segregated women’s contexts. Analytically, the article highlights discursive fields that surround women-only races, and the social, cultural, and political consequences of linking different significances and meanings with each other.

The study is also based on an intersectional perspective (Krekula, Närvänen, & Näsman, 2005; Lykke, 2003, 2005). The purpose is to be able to highlight different ways of understanding the participation in women-only races, beyond a uniform and collective setting. The article will show how gender and age, particularly, combine, interact, and set the conditions for the participation of the senior women. In addition, it analyzes how the participants establish various meanings to the women-only races and the training in preparation of them in relation to age, gender, and an aging body. The study will not only point out discursive norms and normality within the sports movement in society, but also illustrate the super- and sub-ordination that emerge through practices and discourses concerning the elderly female body engaged in physical training.

The body is yet another analytical starting point to enable the understanding of how discourses about the physical training of the senior participants are created in a material-discursive concreteness of lived reality. This occurs symbolically through cultural notions, but also in abilities and limits experienced by the material body. The purpose of the study is to show that various meanings of a gendered body and gendered embodiment are changeable and that they are specific for senior participants of women-only races in the present time. Several researchers have pointed out that an analytical focus on the body has the potential to illuminate the close relationship between experienced materiality and discourses concerning the body (Butler, 1998; Connell, 2005, p. 58; Woodward, 2009, p. 178). In this article, cultural notions that center on the bodies of older women who do physical training will be studied, and how these notions are incorporated, become embodied, and are experienced by the participants (cf. Woodward, 2009, p. 32).

### **Literature review**

The physical training of senior women and aging bodies practicing sports is a research field very little attended to in cultural studies and social sciences. However, the field of research addressed in this article touches upon and brings together such topics as feminist research on leisure and recreation, feminist research on sporting bodies, research within

cultural studies, and social science about old people who practice sports, as well as age and aging as a social and cultural construction.

According to Karla A. Henderson and Heather J. Gibson (2013), feminist studies of women's practices and experiences of leisure are few within leisure research, although the research field has grown steadily (see for example Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson, & Bialeschki, 2013). Within leisure research, studies concerning women's sports events constitute an even smaller field of research (cf. Brandt Madsen, 1996; Fasting, 1995; Stråhlman, 1994). Nevertheless, a few studies have addressed women's sports in recent years, on topics such as women's physical experiences of canoeing in nature together with other women (McDermott, 2004), women's accounts of competing in triathlon (Cronan & Scott, 2006), and the relationship between dance and femininity (Laine & Gurholt Pedersen, 2006). Further studies concern the relation between body images and physical exercises for senior women (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010).

There is a long tradition of research about the body from a feminist perspective. In regard to what has been termed the corporeal turn, there is a newly awakened focus on the materiality of the body and the meaning of physicality, often in the intersection between biological body and discourses about bodies. This enables feminist research to illuminate physicality and the role and function of bodies in processes of inclusion/exclusion, norm and normality, as well as the borderland between object and subject (Bromseth, Käll, & Mattsson, 2009). Topics that have been studied particularly within feminist sports research include sports as an embodied and athletic experience (Woodward, 2009), athletic women's bodies in relation to male sports norms (Butler, 1998), and women and sports during the twentieth century (Cahn, 2015; Tolvhed, 2008).

There are studies within cultural studies and social sciences that focus on age, aging, and aging bodies as social and cultural constructions, based on how aging is manifested in everyday life through cultural norms and values (Alftberg, 2012; Katz, 2009). Other studies have concentrated on cultural conceptions of women/femininity in relation to age/aging (Krekula, 2006; Persson, 2010), cultural perspectives of life as a pensioner and retirement (Ronström, 1998), as well as cultural representations and experiences of the aging body (Faircloth, 2003). The research of the sociologist Emmanuelle Tulle (2003, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2015) is specifically concerned with age, aging, and aging athletic bodies.

In this article, by bringing together the research fields mentioned above, I will examine senior women's experiences of the athletic aging physical body. I will also consider the relation of their experiences to discourses about aging female bodies and their training in preparation for women-only races and during the course of the race, as well as the significance of this for the participants of the study. The article will moreover deal with political and social conditions and consequences of senior women's physical training before and during the women-only races.

### ***Method and material***

Based on a qualitative research tradition within Swedish ethnology/anthropology, the empirical material for the article largely consists of written accounts from 24 senior participants in Swedish women-only races; these were collected through a questionnaire from The Nordic Museum (Nordiska Museet), Stockholm, during the years 2011–2013. The material also consists of ethnographic fieldwork including material from websites and mass media, as well as interviews with six senior women. Further, participant observations was carried out at the following women-only races in Sweden during the years 2014–2016: Våruset (running

5 km), Tjejmilen (running 10 km), Tjejvätterm (cycling 100 km), and Tjejvasan (skiing 30 km). The project group also monitors sports events in other countries.

In their written accounts, participating women have related their experiences of women-only races. They answered a number of open questions and could write their own answers without restraint (cf. Hagström & Marander-Eklund, 2005). In this way, the material was varyingly explicit, since some wrote lengthy accounts in great detail and others wrote brief and concise answers. Such a variation may thus demonstrate the complexity of participants' experiences, although in some cases quite scanty descriptions are conveyed. The accounts were steered by the questions of the questionnaire about why the women participated in a women's race, what kind of training they do, who they enter the races together with, how they arrange their journeys to the races and during the races, etc. This provides general and common tendencies. In the questionnaire, the women could say if they were interested in taking part in a follow-up interview on the same theme. For practical reasons, informants who were interested were divided into pairs according to geographical areas in Sweden. I interviewed six pairs of women of different ages who were not acquainted with each other previously. The length of the interviews was around two hours and took the form of an interactive conversation. This involved an exchange of common and differing experiences of the women-only races, often through associations from the other person's story or through shared experiences. The pair interviews generated socially produced knowledge; the stories were negotiated when the informants could test their ideas on each other about their experiences, or question the other person's conclusions. The method gave depth to the discussion, since the complexity and nuances of the subject matter emerged in the interaction between the participants of the discussion (cf. Montell, 1999). I have based this article on interviews with six senior women who took part in paired interviews.

### **Aging bodies in women-only races**

Anna's introductory words about deteriorating fitness as a characteristic of growing older become a recurrent theme in the empirical material. When the senior women talk about their training and participation in women-only races, they relate to their age and their aging body. Some of the participants have expressed this in the following way:

The best part of the women-only races is that it [...] at my age [is] a challenge – how long will I manage the 10 km and still enjoy it? [...] I would not like to take part in a race for men and women. You would have to be younger than I am to do that. I know my limits. (75 years old, 29 years of participation in women-only races)

You get results from training, physically and mentally, even if you are no longer in your best years, quite frankly. (60 years old, 1 year of participation in women-only races)

Well, it gets worse and worse, the results. [...] yes, slower and slower for each year. [...] It's the age of course but I exercise more than ever. (67 years old, 15 years of participation in women-only races)

It is evident here that in spite of aches and pains that occur much more easily, the participants exercise and do their training even if they do not necessarily become more fit. It appears to be an achievement to complete the race or the training. Perhaps the women want to convey that the purpose is not to improve or to compete with anybody, just simply to manage it, to cope with the whole race, all the way through it. In these accounts, the participants equate old age with a deteriorating body, which hinders their athletic

achievement. They discuss their body as an unpredictable limitation. A body that deteriorates with old age stands out as the most central condition for them as women who practice sports, which illuminates the relation between the body as lived materiality and discourses about the body (cf. Butler, 1998; Connell, 2005, p. 58; Woodward, 2009, p. 178). It is a cultural notion that old age leads to an unpredictable and weakened body, but this is also a discourse that can be felt through the body as a loss of energy, aching legs, or slower movements. When the participants, together with society at large, repeatedly link old age with physical deterioration, then weakness and illness are seen as something given by nature and an expected part of aging and old age (cf. Persson, 2010, pp. 114, 168–169).

### Conceptions about the aging body

The participants' understanding of their own aging body corresponds to a biomedical discourse that defines old age as a phase of illness; this is largely manifested by a gradual weakening of the body. A common notion in Western society is the idea of old age as a generally negative phase in life, making the individual passive and appearing to be an encumbrance for society (Blaakilde, 2007, pp. 34, 37ff; Krekula *et al.*, 2005). Simultaneously, gerontology has problematized the biomedical discourse by introducing a division into a third and fourth age.<sup>3</sup> The participants of this study belong to the third age, encompassing people between 65 and 79 years of age who do not have any great need for health services, unlike the fourth age, comprising people older than 80 (cf. Torres & Hammarström, 2007, p. 54). Instead, the material shows that the women live thoroughly active lives with reference to both physical training and other leisure-time activities. Their level of ambition in the women-only races may vary, but they all train regularly all year round. Some participate at a leisurely pace in the races, while some compete for the best times in the Women's Classic. The Women's Classic involves completing four races within a year: skiing, cycling, swimming, and running.<sup>4</sup> For some, 2011 was the first time they had entered a women's race, when there was a call for responses to the questionnaire specifically directed to participants of the women-only races covered by the project. Others had participated ever since the first all women-only races started in Sweden in the 1980s.

The physical training of the participants appears to be conducted in line with the way the third age is defined and characterized. Research on the third age has been dominated by a focus on the good life, on productive and successful aging, which is achieved through a meaningful, interesting, active, and healthy life (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Laslett, 1989). Instead of associating aging with illness and infirmity, successful aging implies that the individual should actively maintain their health, living in such a way as to generate a sound and healthy body. This type of conception about the importance of individual health affects people in all parts of the late modern, neo-liberal society (Andreasson & Johansson, 2015). This has brought about a contemporary training trend in Sweden. The strong focus on health and wellness has also given rise to various types of training activities for elderly people (Tulle, 2003, pp. 233–236; Tulle & Dorrer, 2012), commonly denominated senior training, senior gym, senior swimming, etc.

The training trend empowers consumption, and requires considerable resources. Many of the participants in this article regularly spend a lot of money paying for registration fees, gear, journeys to the races, and accommodation for the weekend of the race. Critics of the fitness and health trend consider that a healthy lifestyle is reserved for the privileged middle class, who have the ability and means to take part in the prevailing

body and anti-age culture, involving beauty products, training equipment, as well as membership cards for gyms and spas (cf. Sandberg, 2008).

### Searching for a context

Taking part in women-only races and training for them is often undertaken singlehandedly by the senior participants. This is expressed in the interviews and in the written accounts in the following way:

Many people don't really know very much about it. They know that I did running earlier, but I don't say much about it now, I keep a low profile. [...] But if you ask if I go running with my friends, the thing is that at my age nobody runs, none of my friends go running. (75 years old, 29 years of participation in women-only races)

I joined [the cycling club] because I thought I would go biking with friends, but I don't. [...] Mostly, the others are youngsters, or older men who have cycled all their lives and are good at it of course. (67 years old, 15 years of participation in women-only races)

To my mind, there are hardly any girls to talk to about this. Nobody is interested in how fast you run 10 km. (62 years old, 32 years of participation in women-only races)

The women are saying here that they only share their interest in sports with a small group in their surroundings. A possible interpretation of this is that they feel outdistanced and culturally deviating when they practice sports, in view of both gender and age. Therefore, they do their training alone or possibly together with a member of the family, with a husband, siblings, or their children. This better suits their own conditions and physical ability as they find the pace too fast in group training. There are, however, participants who travel to the races together with other women, as in the study circle 'Ladies on Skis,' engaging women of different ages in a rural region in southern Lapland in the north of Sweden. The common training sessions were rounded off with a trip to the women-only skiing race, Tjejvasan (30 km), in 2011.

An historical explanation for the senior women's experiences might be that the field of sports was regarded as a man's arena during the twentieth century in Western society. Cahn (2015) stated that men were supposed to learn masculine coded qualities and abilities, such as competitiveness, speed, stamina, and strength, when practicing sports during the twentieth century (p. 3). The taken-for-granted athlete was, and still is, considered to be a man. Females who practiced sports during the twentieth century were usually girls or young women (Cahn, 2015; Tolvhed, 2008). Girls or young women as culturally comprehensible or possible as sportspersons is still topical, which can be seen for example in invitations to the races or on pictures on the websites of women-only races in Sweden.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly noticeable in the Swedish name of the women-only races, *tjejlopp*, with the prefix connotative of young people, *tjej-*, meaning girl. A cultural understanding of the physically active woman as a young person is thus consolidated (Lindelöf, 2015). This phenomenon corresponds to research about elderly people in mass media and film, showing that older people, women as well as men, are inconspicuous or underrepresented (Öberg, 2003, p. 116). Accordingly, it is reasonable to think that the participants perceive themselves as deviating from the norm both in view of gender, since an athlete is coded as masculine, and from an age perspective, since athletic women are assumed to be young women. This makes senior female athletes culturally incomprehensible; they fail to do both their gender and their age in a comprehensible way, since they are too sporty. But at the same time, they are handling their aging in the *right* way, through

training, a healthy lifestyle, and being continually active according to current health trends and a successful aging ideology. The training trend has resulted in a current ideal involving a well-trained and slim femininity (Tolvhed, 2016). The participants seem to live up to this ideal.

Because the women seem to regard themselves as deviating from cultural norms in society, they keep their interest in physical activities to themselves. Rather than sharing their interest with friends and acquaintances, they join contexts that make them feel less odd and less different, such as women-only races and all the surrounding events that are associated with women-only races. Examples of this are training journeys and training weekends arranged especially for women, or traveling with the special ‘women’s train’ from Gothenburg via Stockholm to the women-only skiing race ‘Tjejvasan’ (30 km) in Dalarna, a province in the middle of Sweden. Stina, 71 years of age, is a pensioner and widow who is living on her own in Stockholm. She has had a professional career in her own business, and her time as a retiree is devoted to training all the year round. She participates regularly in the Women’s Classic. She tells me the following:

It is a good incentive you know. Women are there and you meet other women. It is such good fun. When you did the cycling race for instance, the Tjejvättern, you stayed at a bed & breakfast and there were other girls there and we have this in common, we say: ‘Oh have you done it’ ‘Oh is that all you have left to do’ and ‘oh wow.’ You know, this Women’s Classic, it is a real, real spur. (71 years old, 20 years of participation in women-only races)

As the quotation shows, women-only races appear to be significant as a social event, creating a feeling of companionship with other women, independent of age. There is an exchange of tips, training schedules, and encouragement through conversation with other participants who have similar ideas and who are interested in training and exerting themselves physically. This seems to create meaning for one’s own training and determines the choice of participating in a women-only race, and not a mixed race with both women and men. Companionship with the other women of the women-only races independent of age is articulated as a significant motivation for taking part. It appears to be a central point in being able to feel included in a female collective within which they can regard themselves as physically active subjects. Women-only races constitute one of the few arenas where their sports activities become comprehensible, when being performed together with other senior participants and among like-minded people with the same strong interest in physical training and sports no matter the age. It has been shown in research on single-gendered sports and leisure activities that participants greatly value the company of other women who share an interest in sports. Single-gendered contexts constitute supportive, non-competitive environments, making it easier for the women to perform physical activities and at times also to learn new things (see for example McDermott, 2004).

### **Distance, setting, and physical ability**

Two of the women-only races are versions of mixed sports events, with sections for women and men. The original mixed races are the Vasaloppet, skiing 90 kilometers, and Vätternrundan, cycling 300 kilometers round Lake Vättern. Both races are marketed as the world’s biggest ski race and cycling race, respectively, and as a great challenge for the participants, requiring continual and persevering training. The women-only races are a third of the distance of the original races. They are marketed in an entirely different style through slogans such as ‘Vårruset – 5 km because you can do it!’; ‘Tjejmilen – A pleasant 10 km in Södra Djurgården’; or, ‘Tjejvättern – A race in good company.’ Instead of describing the women-only races in terms of *rise to the challenge, rigorous training and*

*careful preparation is needed*, as the original races are marketed, it is emphasized in the marketing of the women-only races that the races lead to movement functionality, that they are recreational and promote companionship.

The shorter distances and different setting cause an ambiguous attitude for the senior women. Maja, aged 67, is very physically active, training almost every day, she has done the Women's Classic 12 times with the aim of doing it 15 times. She says that people in her surroundings call the women-only races the *coward's version*. The interpretation of this is that people do not think the races are for real, they are not long enough to be taken seriously, they are intended for cowards who do not dare to participate in, or cannot cope with, the original race. This indicates that women-only races are a distinct form of sports, a shorter, but also less serious, version of the original race. In discourse theoretical terms, the original races could be described as the constitutive outside of the women-only races (cf. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2014; Lindelöf, 2012). Cahn (2015) argued that women's sports have been surrounded by various types of limitations and gender-segregating rules throughout the history of sports (p. 221). These have come into existence in order to restrict women's sports activities and to create cultural notions about women's limited physical capacity for sports (cf. Tolvhed, 2008).

Maja continues to discuss the women-only races as a cowardly version of the original races by saying, 'I myself really do think that it is cowardly not to take the challenge of the whole distance. But I wouldn't attempt it if it were longer. This is my level. I couldn't manage more.' Maja's statement gives us to understand that she thinks that the distances of the women-only races are fully sufficient and correspond to her capacity and ability to accomplish them. Here, we return to the theme about bodily limits and capacity. The empirical material is permeated with such questions. How much can my body manage and for how long? How far can I challenge my body? Will my body stand up to another race? Both gender and age are significant in these questions posed by the senior women. As previously discussed, the concept of aging emerges through discourses about a body that deteriorates and is weakened when growing old. Gender can be linked to discourses about the female body as vulnerable, not capable of performing sports, or even completely unsuitable for it. Indeed, even various types of ideas about sports damaging the female body or giving rise to illness have occurred throughout the history of sports (Cahn, 2015, pp. 7–30). Young (1990) argued for another type of explanation as she considered that women learn to be limited at an early age by a heterosexual objectification of women's bodies. This creates a feeling of self-consciousness which takes over and results in uncertainty and doubt as to what the female body can manage to do. Too much attention on the material form and expression of the body steals focus from how to perform the activity in hand. According to Young, at an early age girls learn close and minimized bodily movements. Such an attitude to one's body is said to make women underestimate their own physical capacity. McDermott (2004) has shown that uncertainty about one's own physical capacity plays a decisive part in the choice of engaging in single-gendered leisure activities for women in Canada. A similar frame of understanding could explain why some participants point out the size of the women-only races as significant; thousands of women who take part are considered a guarantee to dare an attempt, in a supporting and non-competitive context, involving a manageable distance. Anna, 75 years old, admits the following:

I don't want to be in a race where I might finish last, there must be enough people starting. Obviously I am among the last tenth of the race, but I don't want to be absolutely last [without the knowledge] that there are many after me. (75 years old, 29 years of participation in women-only races)

Statements like this appear to imply that the women perhaps, but not necessarily, participate to achieve good results, to improve, or for the sake of competition; but rather, they seem to join a sports event in which they can practice sports in a large enough context so as not to be too conspicuous. Their participation indicates that there are other ways of undertaking a sports event, as shown by Karin S. Lindelöf (2012, p. 38), which is different to the masculine coded modes of action involving racing, competition, technical refinement, and physical improvement.

### **At odds with cultural sports norms**

Contrary to ideas and experiences of aging bodies in decline, the empirical material also contains accounts of experiencing strong and fit bodies that stand up to intensive training. The interviewees Maja, 67 years old, and Gun, 62 years old, account for this. Both have a background in teaching and are thoroughly active in sports, training several times a week. They point out that they think that the training does bring results:

Somehow I cycle in a different way and I have actually become faster in recent years [...] It is probably not only just [that I have changed bike]. I have done more training on it. I go training with the club now and again. And of course I go training on my own too.

Interviewer: You do not feel any resistance from your body?

No, that is the best bit of it, you don't have to carry around so much weight [when you cycle]. (67 years old, 15 years of participation in women-only races)

Along comes a 25 year old bloke and I run past him, and then I feel 'Dear God, I am 62 and I can overtake,' there is a good feeling about that. (62 years old, 32 years of participation in women-only races)

Both Gun and Maja talk about the positive experiences of their physical bodies when training and during a race. In the last quote, Gun's speed and strength during her running might be seen as breaking a norm in view of a cultural notion about two opposite sexes in which the male body represents strength, reliability, and physical capacity. This can be opposed to traditional ideas about the nature of a female body, in terms of weakness, (hormonal) unreliability, and physical incapacity (Dowling, 2000; Grosz, 1994, p. 14). In Gun's account, the possibility emerges that senior women practicing sports can outrun younger male runners on the running track. They can feel the strength and speed of their own bodies, beyond the male coding of physical capability. This can be interpreted as another way of doing femininity, according to Julia Rönnbäck's (2015) similar reasoning about women basketball players and their aggressive and fast play in matches. The quotation above also illuminates discursive bodily hierarchies, in which the young male body is considered superior to the old female body, and how this can be challenged, which highlights the constructed and discursive nature of the male sports norm. This is also true for the normative discourse associating sports with youth and masculinity. The accounts of Gun and Maja can be regarded in the light of an experience of speed, strength, and stamina of the female body. This can boost sports experiences when they lead to unexpected

deviation from norms of gender, age, and body. Such an interpretation is in line with late modern feminism, which emphasizes liberation and emancipation through the strength and capacity of the body; this becomes visible in the current health trend, which attracts many women (Tolvhed, 2016, pp. 90–91).

### **Women-only races legitimating senior women active in sports**

Yet another theme appears to be a dominant motivation for the women to participate in women-only races. This refers to the importance of other women of the same age who also participate in the women-only races. Many of the women point out that other senior women act as a good example, which encourages them in their training; one of these is the long-standing winner of the running race 'Tjejmilen' (10 km), Evy Palm. They also tell stories about situations when they realize that they themselves are encouraging examples for other women in the races, surrounding the races and outside them. This can be seen in the light of Judith Butler's (1998, 1990) reasoning the body needs to be understood in a cultural context to become an identifiable and comprehensible lived experience. Essentially, she is saying that 'what is imaginable to us is in many ways constrained by cultural norms that govern the limits of the imaginable' (Butler, 1998, s. 104, see also Butler, 1990). It might thus be considered possible to change discursive norms regarding physically active bodies participating in women-only races through the presence of other senior participants who can be recognized and who inspire others by their example. However, it does seem as if this requires a host of physically active senior women all recurrently participating together in the races, before sports activities of senior women are to be considered comprehensible and possible. The reason for this is that their physical training can be said to be at odds with the culturally expected behavior of senior women and what older women can spend time doing. Research on cultural expectations of older people stresses that there is a strong stereotype about what an older person should be engaged in (Blaakilde, 2007, p. 46; Tulle, 2003, pp. 242ff). In this case, the senior women broaden and extend the possible and acceptable ways of being a physically active woman through their repetitive participation in women-only races, particularly together with other senior women, in line with Butler's reasoning (1990, 1998; cf. Schwaiger, 2006).

### **Results and discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate experiences and meaning-making of exercise and participation in races for women-only among Swedish senior women. This has socio-cultural and political relevance, not only to broaden the knowledge about single-gendered sports events in a geographical part of the world internationally known for gender equality (Martinsson, Griffin, & Giritli Nygren, 2016). Also, the study has bearing in order to highlight and increase the knowledge of senior women's personal experiences of physical activity in relation to discursive norms of gender, age, and body. On the other hand, the widespread exercise trend currently in place makes room for even further investigation of the gendered conditions and effects on senior citizens' everyday life.

This article has shown that senior participants in women-only races give meaning and value the sporting events in light of (1) an aging, deteriorating body, (2) a health and exercise trend in Western society, (3) a desire for a single-gendered social context, (4) their own imagined physical (in)capability, (5) male-connoted capacities of physical strength, speed, and stamina, and (6) other senior female athletes who function as role models. An effect of the complex and varied meanings attributed to single-gendered sporting events among the senior participants is the opportunity to question the status of sports norms. There are several examples discussed in

this article, which might eventually lead to a gradual change in how older bodies are culturally valued and understood (cf. Schwaiger, 2006). The women-only races provide the chance to experience the sensation of a physical body in movement in a large enough event where the senior participants will not finish last. Further, the women-only races contain many other senior participants who can be noticed and can become visible as good examples, making one's own physical training culturally understandable and entirely reasonable.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer, my project leader, Karin S. Lindelöf, PhD, and the research seminars at the Center for Gender Research, and the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Sweden, for valuable comments. I also want to thank Florence Fröhlig, PhD., Södertörn University for translating the abstract into French.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, during the years 2014–2016 [grant number P13-0783:1].

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. The project is financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and Centrum för Idrottsforskning. It is conducted in collaboration with Nordiska Museet and Riksidrottsmuseum, Sweden. The project leader is Karin S. Lindelöf.
2. All the interviewed persons were given pseudonyms in order to ascertain the anonymity of the informants.
3. Gerontology is the academic discipline that deals with the research concerning old age.
4. The following races are included in the Women's Classic: Skiing Kristinaloppet 30 km or Tjejvasan/Kortvasan 30 km; cycling Tjejevättern 100 km; swimming Vansbro Tjejsim/Vansbro Kortsim 1 km; running Lidingö Tjejlopp 10km.
5. <http://www.tjejmilen.se>, <http://www.vasaloppet.se/lopp/skidlopp/tjejvasan/>, <http://vatternrundan.se/tjejevattern/>, <http://www.varruset.se/start/>.

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