Becoming a strongwoman: an auto/ethnographic study of the pursuit of strength and power, and the negotiation of gender aesthetics in the UK strongwoman community

Becoming a Strongwoman: An auto/ethnographic study of the pursuit of strength and power, and the negotiation of gender aesthetics in the UK Strongwoman community.

Hannah J. H. Newman

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School of Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the subculture of strongwoman - a strength sport that along with its male counterpart, strongman, are together also known as strength athletics – examining the practices, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of those who train and compete in it. Taking a combined autoethnographic and ethnographic approach, my immersion in the sport and its community formed the basis of this study. Autoethnographic reflections, reflexive journaling, and ethnographic fieldnotes were accompanied by semi-structured interviews with 23 other strongwomen. The extant literature on women's strength- and muscularity-based sport is largely focused on female bodybuilding, a sport in which competitors are judged solely on aesthetics. Strongwoman is judged solely on physical capacity and so it is posited that it may have greater empowering potential than bodybuilding. This in-depth research into the subculture of strongwoman explores the values of its small, close-knit community, as well as the dynamic between gender, sport, and embodiment for those who compete in it. The notion of strongwoman being more empowering than bodybuilding is deemed to be too simplistic, with the empowering effect of strongwoman fluctuating through the levels of participation from novice through to elite level. This research demonstrates how strongwomen negotiate gendered aesthetics through their experience of strongwoman – largely through training and eating practices, as well as in their considerations of performance-enhancing drugs. Considerations for the future of the sport are considered in a time of a wider shift towards acceptance of female strength, power, and muscularity.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Sitting in a café starting to write this chapter, by complete coincidence there are two women at the table next to me having a conversation about lifting weights. I overhear the line: 'He said I'm really strong, he said the weights I'm lifting are what a bodybuilder would lift in competition'. This captures my attention. Why? Because I know that bodybuilders do not lift weights in competition. They do in training, but they certainly do not in competition. Bodybuilding is a sport that is purely aesthetically judged. In competition, rather than lifting weights, competitors take to the stage in minimal clothing and perform a sequence of poses to best display their very lean, hyper muscular physique.

This conflation of bodybuilding with other strength- and muscularity-based sports that do involve lifting weights in competition, such as Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, and strongman/strongwoman, is in my experience, somewhat of a common occurrence. When I first started telling friends and family that I had entered a strongwoman competition, the initial reaction of many was to respond with the question 'So, are you getting on stage in a bikini?' No, that's bodybuilding, strongwoman is not that, I'd explain patiently despite my frustration at what was fast becoming a regular conversation. Then post-competition, when showing people videos of the events and the weights that I had been required to lift, some would ask, 'so you're a bodybuilder now?' No, I'm a strongwoman.

Strongwoman, as to be explained further in this chapter, has no aesthetic focus. Unlike bodybuilding, it is judged entirely on physical capacity. Despite their similarities in being strength- and muscularity-based then, they are fundamentally very different. In my experiences, those people I have encountered who have been less familiar with the

differences between such activities have been prone to associate the lifting of weights with the hyper muscular aesthetic they know of bodybuilding, such as in the above examples of conflation. This conflation between strength- and muscularity-based sports raises a number of issues that I will be addressing in this thesis, including the potential implications of these activities on gender aesthetics, the conception of fears that strength training of any form or intensity will lead to a hyper muscular appearance – i.e. fears of 'getting too bulky' or 'looking like a man', and the role that these fears play in women's engagement in strength- and muscularity-based activity.

The lack of distinction between these activities and experiences in both research and societal contexts is one reason behind the need for further research into strength- and muscularity-based activities other than bodybuilding. Bodybuilding is currently the most prolifically researched of these activities by a comfortable margin, and anecdotally appears to be the most well known in non-strength sport contexts, often used as a frame of reference for any discussion of strength- and muscularity-based activity. However, as detailed further in this chapter, extant research on strongwoman is very limited. Whilst bodybuilding research has enabled exploration and understanding of gender via an extreme example of visible transgression of what is widely considered 'the norm' of gender aesthetics, the study of other strength- and muscularity-based sports has the potential to expand and deepen our understanding of gender; particularly when a hyper muscular appearance, and/or appearance more broadly, is not the primary focus of the activity.

Hence this research, as explained in more detail later in this chapter, aims to explore participants' motivations for, and experiences of training and competing in strongwoman, including their negotiation of gender and gender aesthetics throughout their engagement with the sport. This forms an integral part of a wider exploration of the subculture of this small, niche sport. The sport is one that has no governing body or any form of formal governing

structure and is therefore self-regulated by those who form its community. An introduction to strongwoman, and its male counterpart, strongman, is given in the next section of this chapter.

What is strongwoman?

Strongwoman is a strength and power-based sport and is the female counterpart of strongman. Although these gendered names are the most commonly used, the sport as a whole can sometimes be referred to as strength athletics, although this name is not commonly used. The sport tests competitors' physical capacity in a number of different ways. Events vary between competitions but typically combine static tests of strength, such as the deadlift and overhead press, with more dynamic tests of strength, which combine strength, power, speed, and endurance; for example, the farmers walk, and the vehicle pull. A typical competition would include five to six of these events, and the combination of events differs for every competition. The origins of strength athletics lie deep in history, with displays of strength evident in ancient Greece, but strength athletics did not emerge as a contemporary sport until the late twentieth century. Although traditional strongwomen were also seen performing circus events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern-day male strength athletics, or strongman, emerged prior to strongwoman, with *World's Strongest Man*, which is now widely regarded as the most prestigious strongman competition, first being developed in 1977.

The rising profile and success of strongman has in part encouraged the more recent development of strongwoman, with a distinctive growth in opportunities to train and compete at all levels, and *World's Strongest Woman* first taking place in 1997. Participation rates vary hugely, but the women's competition is most popular in Sweden, Norway, Britain, and the

United States (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). However, due to the lack of a governing body and the withdrawal of sponsorship money, this event has not been held consistently in every year since 1997, and, in contrast to the men's major competitions, it is no longer televised. The fact that strongwoman events and strongman events are not held on the same day means it is easier for strongwoman events to be marginalised regarding finance and media coverage. Equally, it is not surprising that sports such as strongwoman are not well represented in a media culture that much more frequently judges women based on their appearance rather than achievements (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). 2016 though saw the return of *World's Strongest Woman* after a two-year hiatus, a positive sign of the sport's growth, development, and current levels of interest.

The most typical places for people to begin strongwoman-specific training are dedicated strongman/strongwoman gyms. As I explore in chapter four of this thesis, which details the journeys that strongwomen take into the sport, many have preceded their involvement in strongwoman-specific training with more general forms of strength or resistance training in mainstream, commercial gyms, and/or with other forms of fitness training, such as cardio-based training and/or group fitness classes. Dedicated strongman/strongwoman specific gyms are often located in industrial estates or remote locations in the countryside, and their small number in comparison to mainstream gyms mean they can be difficult to access. These strongman-specific gyms are spread sparsely across the UK. Those who are geographically located close to a dedicated gym are more likely to complete all of their training there, whilst those who do not live so close to a dedicated gym are likely to train in another gym predominantly, making trips to the strongman/strongwoman gym once a week, or once/twice a month, in order to access specific equipment that is not typically available in mainstream gyms. These dedicated strongman/strongwoman specific gyms tend to pride themselves as being welcoming to anyone who steps through the door and

wants to give the sport a try, as is explored in chapter six of this thesis which focuses on the values of the strongwoman community. This is reflected through the array of fitness/sporting backgrounds that people come from, sizes and shapes of people involved, and the mix of ages that are seen in both training and competition environments – the youngest I've seen compete is 16, and the oldest was in her sixties. Strongwoman does though, appear to be a predominantly white sport, with less range in ethnicities seeming to be involved in the sport.

As mentioned previously, strongwoman, and strongman, are not governed by an official governing body. The organisation of most strongwoman competitions, largely novice and intermediate level events, is conducted by gym owners and/or coaches, who hold these competitions either inside their gyms, in their gym car parks, or sometimes in local venues or spaces such as fields and parks. These types of competition are generally run with an open entry policy, with anyone being able to secure their place upon payment of the stated entry fee. This means that entrants self-select which level they decide to compete in, or what level competition they choose to enter. The higher levels of competition are typically organised by a promotor. These competitions are the one's which are on the qualification pathway, which means that if you place within the top spots of one of these competitions, you qualify for the next level – e.g. the national competition, *England's Strongest Woman*, and the regional qualifiers for this. Similarly to the novice and intermediate type competitions, anyone can pay to enter the regional qualifiers, but then only those who place high enough in the regional competitions qualify to compete at England's. *World's Strongest Woman* is run by a promotor organisation called *Strongman Corporation*, and the primary method of athlete selection for this event is by invitation. However, in recent years there has also been the provision for athletes to apply online, uploading videos of two to three different lifts as requested by the organiser.

The organisation of competitions, and the structure of these competitions, or lack of it compared to other, more developed sports, means that there is not one cohesive qualification pathway from the regional competitions in the UK, such as *Midlands' Strongest Woman,* all the way through to international competitions such as *World's Strongest Woman.* Different people/promotors in the sport take responsibility for different parts of the pathway, different competitions etc. and this appears to be done on a relatively informal basis in which there is largely mutual agreement and respect for that promotor owning the rights to hold the official *England's Strongest Woman* competition for example. However, this isn't always without problem, for example, in 2017 there were two competitions called *Britain's Strongest Woman*, with some dispute between organisers as to whose was the 'official' one. This dispute has since been resolved and *Britain's Strongest Woman* is now organised by the same promotor that organises *England's Strongest Woman* and its regional qualifiers. This is an attempt to start to form a more cohesive pathway for those wishing to progress in the sport to a higher performance level.

The performance pathway and higher-level competitions referred to thus far in this section of the chapter are not drugs-tested; and with no official governing body, there are no prescribed rules on the use of performance-enhancing drugs in these competitions. Separate to these competitions exists a 'natural' federation in the UK who run a drugs-tested alternative to the regional and national titles described previously – e.g. *England's Strongest Natural Woman.* The use of performance-enhancing drugs in strongwoman and their implications for both the individual athletes, and the sport more broadly, are explored in chapter seven of this thesis. These strongwoman competitions, both 'natural' and untested, as well as all of the novice and intermediate competitions, sit intertwined with the men's strongman competitions. There are times when the two sit closely together, for example when the men's and women's categories of the same competition are held on the same day, but

there are also times when these categories are run entirely separately, in terms of when they are held, but also in terms of who is organising them. For example, some of the qualification pathway competitions, such as *Britain's Strongest Woman/Man*, are held entirely separately, organised and hosted by different people, and held at different times of the year. The fact that *World's Strongest Man* and *World's Strongest Woman* are no longer held on the same date or even in the same place has consequences for the media coverage given to the women's event, and subsequently prize money, as the men's event is shown on Channel 5 in the UK, but the women's event is not televised. Strongwoman currently has little financial reward for its competitors, even at the highest levels, with athletes self-funding their way to international competitions for very small financial reward (if they win). As becomes clear throughout this thesis, there are times and situations when strongwoman and strongman come together as one cohesive community, and there are times and situations where there appears some distinction or separation between the two.

Why study strongwoman?

This research undertaking is a focused study of a specific sporting subculture, that of the strength sport, strongwoman. However, it also forms part of a wider cultural shift towards acceptance of female strength, power, and muscularity. As explored in chapter two, the literature review of this thesis, strength and muscle have long been perceived as the antithesis of femininity (muscle = masculinity) (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). In addition, different sport, fitness, and exercise activities have been deemed to be more appropriate for one binary gender over the other. In fitness and exercise settings for example, lifting weights and other forms of resistance training have long been seen as a form of exercise for, and marketed to, men, whilst group exercise classes and steady state cardiovascular activities have been

deemed more appropriate for women. However, in recent years this trend has begun to change and there has been an increasing media interest in strength sports and strength-based fitness activities for women. It is thought that this has been in part encouraged by the CrossFit phenomena, which I explore further in chapter four of this thesis, by Olympic weightlifting role models such as Team GB athlete Zoe Smith who featured in the 2012 London Olympic Games, and by the wider international health and fitness drive. This increase in media attention has been accompanied by a rise in social media trends such as '#liftlikeagirl', suggesting that more women are taking up strength sports now than ever before. As will be explored and discussed in this thesis though, this is a developing but incomplete trend, in the sense that despite there being an increase in women's participation in such activities, gendered expectations and implications are still influencing how these strength- and muscle-based activities are negotiated, experienced, and sometimes recuperated into heteronormative gender roles.

Strongwoman, like other strength sports for women, has seen a steady increase in interest and participation in recent years. It is still a small, niche sport, but it is growing, in terms of the number of participants involved, the opportunities for competitions and how and where they are run, and what monetary or other prizes may be available for the winners. This timepoint is a crucial one for strongwoman as an emerging and changing sport that is currently rife with tensions and contradictions as those involved in its community squabble over what direction and path the sport they love should take. With the growth in participation, and the visibility of the sport within more mainstream health and fitness circles, discussion as to the best routes forward for the future of the sport are currently prevalent within the community. Some examples of these discussion points that are raised at points across this thesis are the structure of competitions and performance pathways, routes to professionalism for those competing at the highest levels, and the form that strongman/strongwoman as a

collective should be trying to aim to be – e.g. a formal, governed sport or an entertainment show? At a timepoint where the future and direction of the sport is a topic at the forefront of discussion, this also highlights potential tensions in preserving aspects of the sport and its community that already exist. This particular tension is explored in chapter six of this thesis, which comes at a time and opportunity to capture the dynamism of a sport and subculture that is in a state of progression and change.

As already mentioned, there has been a dearth of research focusing on strongwoman. Much of the extant literature has focused on female bodybuilding, and much other research has conflated bodybuilding with strongwoman, Olympic weightlifting and other strength-based activities. Shilling and Bunsell (2014) called for further research into this unexplored area. Their study documented one female bodybuilder's transition from female bodybuilding to strongwoman and suggested that its focus on practical achievement as opposed to aesthetics helped to provide an escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics within bodybuilding. Hence, they posited that strongwoman may have the potential to be more empowering or liberating than bodybuilding. However, it is hard to assess the empowering potential of strongwoman until an in-depth study into its subculture takes place, and this research project therefore seeks to investigate this unexplored area.

The importance of this study lies in its potential to examine the dynamic between sport, gender, and embodiment, and the implications these may have for one another. The study of the dynamic between sport and gender has been gaining momentum, for example Robinson's (2008) study of rock climbing and masculinity and Breeze's (2015) study on roller derby and gender. This study on strongwoman is on one hand a detailed study about a sport and its specific subculture. On the other hand, it is a study about sport and how it helps us to understand gender better, exploring stories about gender and embodiment, and examining how cultural ideals create expectations for and influence the form of our bodies.

Why auto/ethnographic?

Autoethnography is a research method which draws on the researcher's own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture and subcultures of which they are a member (Allen-Collinson, 2012). Autoethnographic approaches acknowledge the impact of the researcher on the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) and autoethnographers recognise the many ways in which personal experience influences the research process. The complexities of an autoethnographic approach and the reasoning for its methodological suitability to this research are fully explored in chapter three, the methodology chapter, of this thesis. However, it is important to acknowledge in this introduction, at least in part, my rationale for incorporating my own experiences in strongwoman, alongside those of other strongwoman competitors, in this study.

Prior to the commencement of this research project I had been competing in strongwoman for two years and was by that point well immersed within the strongwoman community in terms of both inhabiting its spaces and building relationships with its people. The emotions and journey to becoming a strongwoman long preceded the point of beginning my participation in it, something I explore further in chapter four of this thesis, and by the point of beginning the formal fieldwork period for this project I had been immersed in the sport for three years. These three years of involvement, plus the longer journey preceding that, were my own journey of immersion and experience of the strongwoman community and being a strongwoman. I was not a bystander, and I did not immerse myself in the world of strongwoman for the purpose of this research. Hence, I felt that my own experiences could play an important role in helping to build both my own and other peoples' understandings of this subculture through the process of this research. Equally, given my level of immersion, resonance, and experience of this subculture and living as part of it, it did not seem possible to, nor did I want to, attempt to remove my own experiences and understandings from this

study. Instead, in this thesis I embrace my familiarity of the subculture of strongwoman, using my own experiences alongside those of others to enrich and deepen the exploration and discussion of the lived reality of being a strongwoman.

I have used this autoethnographic approach in combination with key aspects and features of a traditional ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a set of research methods that aims to understand the culture of a particular pre-existing group from the perspective of the group members, with the group culture therefore lending insight into the behaviours, values, emotions, and mental states of group members (Krane & Baird, 2005). Ethnography employs the use of multiple methods, with participant observation providing the basis, but supplemented by other methods such as qualitative interviews, and the collection and analysis of text, photographic, or online data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In this research project, I adopted some of these methods, including participant observation, interviews with 23 strongwoman competitors, and the use of online data, as is explained in detail in chapter three of this thesis, the methodology chapter. This research therefore comprises of the co-construction of knowledge from both my own personal experiences and the experiences of others regarding being a strongwoman competitor and being a part of the strongwoman subculture. Hence, I have called my approach to this research undertaking 'auto/ethnographic', with the slash deliberately used to signify the combination of these methods.

Aims of the study and original contribution

The overall aim of this research is to explore and investigate the subculture of the sport of strongwoman; examining the practices, motivations, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of the strongwomen who train and compete in the sport. It is expected that this

detailed examination of strongwoman will allow for further exploration of the notion of female strength and power, the attitudes and values that encompass it, and its implications for identity, gender, and sexuality. The original contribution of this study is in its exploration of a sporting subculture, and sporting activity, that has until this point been underexplored. As stated previously in this chapter, much of the extant research in female strength- and muscle-based activity focuses on the aesthetically judged sport, bodybuilding. Shilling and Bunsell (2014) called for further research into this sport which instead focuses on practical achievement and physical capacity. But other than their study, to my knowledge there has been no other research focused on strongwoman to date. It is hoped that this in-depth study will help to explore strongwoman's empowering potential, but also contribute to wider cultural and societal negotiations regarding the strong, muscular female body and its interaction with gendered ideals and expectations.

Hence the questions that this research aims to explore are: who competes in strongwoman and why? Does strongwoman allow women to build a body for themselves? Does strongwoman allow women to construct an identity that they can be content with in contemporary society? Is the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman liberating or constricting? Are normative representations and social perceptions of strongwoman empowering? Are the actual processes of the sport resistant and/or transgressive in relation to social norms of femininity? To what extent do strongwomen embrace and/or negotiate elements of the strongwoman experience that do transgress social norms of femininity? These particular questions are important in exploring the dynamic between sport and gender, and it is hoped that through these, this research can provide detailed insight into the specific subculture of the sport, strongwoman, and its community, whilst also exploring gender and how sport can help us to understand it better.

Overview of the thesis

Following this introduction, **Chapter Two** provides an overview of the literature that grounds this thesis. It begins by situating the research in the wider context of women's sport participation and its traditional position as a transgression of traditional gender norms. This is followed by discussion of the implications and assumptions regarding the sexuality of female athletes that are often suggested due to this transgression. Discussion then turns more specifically to sports that have been traditionally deemed as particularly 'masculine' or 'non-feminine' and the gendered nature and perceived gender-appropriateness of specific sport and leisure activities. Following this is a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to the focus of this thesis, women's participation in strength- and muscularity-based sports. This section of the review begins by exploring the extant literature examining women's participation in strength- and muscle-based sports and training activities more broadly. It then looks at specific sports and activities in turn, including bodybuilding and Olympic weightlifting, before turning to the sport that is the subject of this thesis, strongwoman.

Chapter Three is an explanation of the methodology and research design adopted in this study to provide an in-depth exploration of the subculture of strongwoman and the experiences of those who partake in it. The chapter begins by outlining the key features and relevant aspects of both ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to research. It then explains how and why these methodologies come together in this study. The practicalities of the research and fieldwork process are then detailed, including that of the specific methods undertaken in order to achieve the co-construction of data and knowledge between the participants and the researcher. The ethical approach taken to this study is outlined, and

ethical dilemmas and considerations arising before, during, and after the time of this research are then explored and discussed.

Chapter Four is the first of four substantive empirically based chapters that make up the analytical core of this thesis. This chapter explores and explains the journeys that strongwomen take into the sport, including: who competes in strongwoman, when did they get into it, how did they get involved, what did their first venture in the sport consist of, why did they get involved, as well as why did they continue to maintain their involvement and participation. The chapter offers important insights into the sport through the stories of those who enter it. It combines an autoethnographical account of my own journey into strongwoman with exploration of the journeys and experiences of others that I interviewed and spent time with during the research. The two come together to examine the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman.

Chapter Five explores strongwoman's liberating and/or empowering potential as an activity that focuses on practical achievement as opposed to aesthetics. This chapter again combines autoethnographical accounts of my own experiences with the experiences of the other strongwomen who were involved during the process of this research. Three ideal types are used as a methodological device to convey the experiences of the strongwomen in this study, these are: 'Nelly' the novice strongwoman, 'Isobel' the intermediate strongwoman, and 'Ella' the elite strongwoman. These ideal types are used in this chapter to acknowledge the differing experiences of strongwomen in regard to how liberating and/or empowering their involvement may be as they progress through different stages of participation and performance. This chapter explores the day-to-day practices of a strongwoman and examines

how restrictive these are regarding the amount of time, level of commitment and sacrifice that is required at each stage of involvement in the sport.

Chapter Six explores the strong set of values that the strongwoman community, as well as the wider strongman community which strongwoman forms a part of, is built upon, and how these are experienced and acted upon. The three ideal types of 'Nelly' the novice, 'Isobel' the intermediate, and 'Ella' the elite strongwoman are once again used to depict the nuances and changing nature of experience at the different levels of performance. Drawing on both my own and others' experiences, the chapter conveys what it is to be involved in the strongwoman/strongman communities, and the shape and dynamic that it takes. The potential gatekeeping of the communities is also explored, using examples that I witnessed and experienced during my research in both real life and social media settings to consider who appears to be accepted or not accepted within these spaces.

Chapter Seven is the fourth and final substantive empirical chapter of the thesis and discusses a topic that is not generally openly discussed within the community, the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) in strongwoman. The three ideal types Nelly, Isobel, and Ella are again used to articulate the range of experiences with and attitudes towards PED use at different levels of performance. The chapter explores the culture of silence surrounding PED use in the strongwoman community, reflecting on the stigma attached to them and their implications for gender and the gendered aesthetic. It also explores the use of PEDs in relation to the concept of fairness, and the moral dilemma attached to this, as well as the element of risk that is involved in making the decision to use PEDs. Given the existence of

this stigma, consideration is also given to the ramifications of PED usage on the growth and development of the sport.

Chapter Eight concludes this thesis by revisiting the aims of the research, taking each research question in turn and providing summaries of how these have been addressed throughout the thesis. The originality and contributions of the research are then considered, before a concluding section looks to the future of strongwoman and what direction it might take in its current period of growth.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the extant literature in regard to women in sport; specifically, women's participation in sports which are deemed traditionally 'masculine', and the associated issues and implications concerning gender and sexuality. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of women in sport, followed by an exploration into the suggestion that women's participation in sport is a transgression of gender norms. Following on from this exploration, potential implications and assumptions regarding the sexuality of female athletes are discussed, including the sanctioning and stigmatisation of female athletes and their negotiation of this. The review then turns to the specific implications for female athletes participating in 'masculine' or 'non-feminine' sports, before examining the main focus of this thesis, female 'strength sports'. This part of the chapter presents the rise of women's participation in these sports and the findings of previous research on specific sports such as bodybuilding and Olympic weightlifting. The empowering nature of these sports is debated, as well as the integral role of the athlete's body in their identity. Finally, the chapter focuses on strongwoman, a sport which thus far, no in-depth research has been conducted on. The nature of the sport, and the differences and similarities it has with bodybuilding and Olympic weightlifting are presented; and the basis for further research into this area is explained.

History of women and sport

Sport has traditionally been dominated by men. Labelled a 'male preserve' by Nancy Theberge (1985, p. 193), this dominance has been exemplified firstly by higher rates of participation among men than women, particularly within organised sport, and secondly by

the lack of female leaders in sport administration and organisation; positions which have historically been held almost exclusively by men. In Britain, this male supremacy is thought to have originated from the masculinised modern sport phenomenon that grew out of boys' public schools in Victorian society. In mid-nineteenth century Britain, the foundation of sporting masculinity was fostered, 'games for the boys' were created, and the 'cult of manliness', comprising of qualities such as strength, endurance, and physical courage, was spread throughout sport across the British Empire (Allen, 2014). Women were not considered part of this Victorian sporting revolution, but were instead restricted by narrow, inhibiting feminine ideals that demanded them to be docile, subservient, and committed to domesticity (Mangan & Walvin, 1987).

These inequalities in opportunity for men and women in sport were underpinned by biological reductionism. Based on the traditional assumption that differences between women and men were innately biological and psychological, rather than cultural, male sporting superiority was seen as the 'natural' order. Biological explanations were therefore used to construct social ideas about gender, as well as to justify the maximised cultural differences between men and women (Hargreaves, 1994). While men were typified as naturally rational, aggressive, and competitive, women were seen as inherently emotional, co-operative, and passive and thus much less suited to strenuous physical activity and sport (Delamont & Duffin, 1978). Additionally, the long-standing perception that 'women are the weaker sex' drove the belief that women were not just psychologically unsuited to strenuous physical activity, but were also physically incapable (Vertinsky, 1990). This perceived medical danger, often accompanied by emphasis on the potential implications for the reproductive role of women, has repeatedly been used as justification for the limitations placed on women's sporting participation.

These historic beliefs and assumptions established a male superiority that would need to be challenged and contested if women were ever to be allowed equal opportunity in sport. Furthermore, Theberge (1985) proposed that this male dominance has had implications beyond the realm of sport, suggesting that gender inequality in sport 'contributes to its maintenance in social settings that transcend sport' (p. 195), and therefore has made a significant contribution to gender segregation and inequality in other realms of social life. Since the mid-nineteenth century Victorian era, women in sport have challenged and contested that male sporting superiority, in what could be described as a gradual progression to the point where we are at in the early twenty-first century, a time that has been described as a 'period of change' (Polley, 2014).

The Olympic Games are an appropriate exemplar of the journey that women's sport has taken between the mid-nineteenth century Victorian era and the twenty-first century. In 1912, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Pierre de Coubertin, expressed his views on Olympic gender roles in an article he wrote for his journal, *Revue Olympique.* In this, he described his ideal of 'male athleticism…with the applause of women as a reward' (Coubertin, 1912, p. 713). This ideal he later repeated when he stated that women's roles at the Olympic Games 'should be above all to crown the victors' (Coubertin, 1935, p. 583). Therefore, as described by Hargreaves (1994, p. 209), the modern Olympics were a 'context for institutionalised sexism, severely hindering women's participation'. Despite Coubertin's continued opposition to women's sport, changing attitudes towards women both inside and outside of sport meant that new opportunities were evident from as early as the 1908 London Olympic Games, and continued to expand and grow until eventually at London 2012, women were allowed to compete in every sport of the programme for the first time.

Despite this allowance of women to compete in every Olympic sport, signs of disparity were still apparent; the ratio of male to female competitors was not 50:50, there were fewer disciplines for women in certain sports, and heteronormative gender roles were still evident in cases such as that of men being barred from rhythmic gymnastics and synchronised swimming (Polley, 2014). These inequalities, seen as recently as the London 2012 Olympic Games, are reflective of sport as a whole, as argued by the Sport and Citizenship think tank (2012)[1]. Their position suggests that the percentage of women doing sport in Europe is still lower than that of men, despite women representing more than half of the population. Women are also continually underrepresented in areas such as coaching (Walker & Bopp, 2011) and within sport media (Godoy-Pressland, 2014). These findings support the three key issues highlighted by the think tank for consideration: improvement of the status of women in sport, accessibility of sport to all women, and the development of media coverage of women's sport (Sport & Citizenship, 2012) – a subject that is examined later in this chapter.

Transgressing gender norms

In this section, the notion of male sporting superiority as the 'natural' order is further explored through its suggestion that women's sport is a transgression of gender norms. The concepts of hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity, and emphasised femininity are introduced and discussed in regard to their role and impact in women's sport participation. Hegemonic masculinity was proposed by Connell (1987) in their gender order theory as the pattern of practices that allowed men to maintain dominance over women. It was distinguished from other masculinities and assumed to be normative; embodying the most

[1] The Sport and Citizenship think tank was launched in 2007. It is a forum for new thinking which aims to put forward the core values of sport in society, in the realm of politics, economics, and media issues.

honoured way of being a man and requiring all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and was described as connecting 'masculinity to toughness and competitiveness' (Connell, 1990, p. 83). Criticisms of the concept have included ambiguity and inconsistency in its application (e.g. Martin, 1998) and lack of distinction between the long-term structure of the subordination of women (patriarchy) and the direct exercise of personal power by men over women (e.g. Holter, 1997, 2003). In response to these and other criticisms posed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) re-examined the contested concept. They suggested that the fundamental feature of the concept remained the plurality of masculinities and hierarchy of masculinities, but that reformulation was needed, including paying closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated alongside a concept of hegemonic femininity, defined as 'an ideal of conduct and a set of related practices by which women comply with men's power' (Leahy, 1994, p. 49). This was soon renamed 'emphasised femininity' to 'acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). Emphasised femininity asserts that femininity is displayed as compliance with gender inequality and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. Schippers (2007), expanding on Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) call for more theory and research on femininities, suggested that femininity had been under-theorised, with no empirically useful conceptualisations of hegemonic femininity and multiple, hierarchical femininities as central to male dominant gender relations being developed. Therefore, femininity had become the 'other', defined or displaced by work on masculinity.

Schippers (2007) argues that the characteristics attached to hegemonic masculinity (e.g. strength, aesthetic displays of muscularity, aggression), can only guarantee men's legitimate dominance over women when they are 'symbolically paired with a complementary

and inferior quality attached to femininity' (p. 91), for example, physical vulnerability, small, lean, non-muscular bodies, emotionality and embeddedness in social relationships. Hence masculinity and femininity establish meaning for the relationship between men and women and provide 'legitimating rationale for social relations ensuring the ascendancy and dominance of men' (p. 91). Schippers suggests that society's collective and recurring use of masculinity and femininity as the rationale for what to do and how to do it causes the relationship between genders to become a taken-for-granted feature of interpersonal relationships, culture, and social structure, leading to the institutionalisation of gender difference and gender relationality. Focusing on the relationship between masculinity and femininity, she suggests that hegemonic masculinity 'is the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' and that hegemonic femininity 'consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Schippers, 2007, p. 94).

Hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic/emphasised femininity therefore underpin the notion that women being involved in sport is a transgression of gender norms. In this research, I draw on Schippers' (2007) definitions of hegemonic femininity and masculinity, specifically the attention she draws to qualities and characteristics that are defined as 'manly' or 'womanly'. I therefore position practices and aspects of strongwoman that deviate from these 'womanly' qualities or those that are considered 'manly' characteristics as 'resistant' or 'transgressive' to hegemonic femininity and societal gender norms. Athleticism is symbolised by characteristics that are associated with hegemonic masculinity, and thus, it deviates from the norms of hegemonic femininity. For example, the masculine characteristics of

assertiveness, competitiveness, and physical strength are essential for sporting success (Krane, 2001). Moreover, gender has even been considered as an organising principle of sport (Hargreaves, 1993), meaning that our very understanding of sport is based upon 'what is suitable and acceptable for males and what is suitable and acceptable for females' (Krane, 2001, p. 116). Therefore, although femininity is a socially constructed standard for women's appearance and multiple femininities exist (Bordo, 1993), hegemonic femininity is privileged, and sportswomen are expected to perform this hegemonic femininity, distancing themselves from behaviour perceived as masculine (Choi, 2000; Krane, 2001). Furthermore, Schippers (2007) proposed that women who contradict or deviate from practices defined as feminine are sanctioned, stigmatised, and labelled as deviant or contaminated because they are refusing to embody the relationship between masculinity and femininity demanded by the current hegemonic gender order. This provides a cause of internal conflict for many female athletes; they are expected to perform hegemonic femininity, yet the characteristics they need to be successful in their sport are associated with masculinity, contradicting the hegemonic femininity that they are trying to perform (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004).

The heteronormative discourses of medicine, the media, and sport are thought to have contributed strongly to the way that physical activities were framed as either 'female-appropriate' or 'non female-appropriate' (Lenskyj, 1986). This is said to be due to the focus on ensuring that such activities enhanced women's heterosexual appeal and reproductive ability (Cox & Thompson, 2001). Therefore, lesbian athletes, muscular and physically assertive female athletes, and feminist sport participants, all disturb this ideal of appropriateness by contradicting the concept of hegemonic femininity that it has been built upon (Krane, 2001). Those athletes that have challenged this ideal have often found that their athletic identity was not socially accepted, and that they were deemed 'different' in a variety of ways, including being larger, more assertive, more muscular, and eating more than

'normal' women. To be considered socially acceptable then, some athletes, such as those in Krane et al.'s (2004) study, who were all college level athletes in the U.S. from a variety of sports including running, soccer, tennis, and swimming, felt that they had to create an alternate feminine identity away from sport, presenting a feminine demeanour and image in social settings as a way of negotiating their place within society as a female athlete.

Sport participation empowers women both physically and psychologically. Challenging the bounds of hegemonic masculinity and femininity allows women to be free to make their own decisions regarding how to look and how to act, and thus develop their own definitions of an ideal female body, acceptable body shape, and appropriate sporting activities (Krane, 2001). Sport provides an arena in which women can test their physical skills and develop a sense of mastery (Theberge, 1997). By creating alternative images for women in sport, some sportswomen become empowered to transgress the margins of hegemonic femininity (Krane, 2001). However, as proposed by Schippers (2007), female athletes are often subject to stigmatisation as a result of their transgression of gender norms. Gender signifies a prevailing normative system that both evaluates and controls the behaviour of men and women (Schur, 1984). Violation of gender norms by women constitutes a serious threat to this system and the 'natural' gender order, traditionally built upon the assumption that the differences between women and men were innately biological, rather than cultural. Female athletes, therefore, who are perceived to push or break the boundaries of socially constructed definitions of hegemonic femininity (Theberge, 1985; Willis, 1982), are subjected to stigmatisation and labelled as deviant (Blinde & Taub, 1992). While non-traditional gender behaviours provide occasion for enhancing opportunities and self-actualisation, stigmatisation limits these opportunities, creating a fear of being labelled deviant that keeps women 'in their place' and hence represents a method of social control which protects the traditional gender system (Schur, 1984). Sport can though become a

refuge from this stigmatisation, providing a safe space where women can interact with others similar to themselves and feel able to transgress hegemonic gender role expectations without fear of being constrained or construed negatively by societal norms (Palzkill, 1990).

Tomboyism is one concept that appears to provide an exception to this system of gender order, social control, and institutionalisation of gender difference. Defining features of tomboyism include participation in stereotypically masculine activities, rough and tumble play, and playing with masculine-labelled toys (Halberstam, 1998; Paechter & Clark, 2007). Although the term 'tomboy' can be used for both women and girls, it is most commonly used for girls. Despite the features of tomboyism challenging hegemonic femininity and masculinity, those who are labelled as a 'tomboy' do not seem to incur the same level of sanctioning and stigmatisation as that proposed by Schippers (2007) and that which is often experienced by adult women who transgress and challenge gender boundaries in the same way. Tomboy behaviour has been suggested as a frequent and unproblematic aspect of female childhood (Sharpe, 1976), with pre-adolescent girls who transgress gender boundaries not being stigmatised by others in the same way that adult women are for similar transgressions (McGuffrey & Rich, 1999).

Whilst claiming features of a tomboy identity is largely unproblematic for these pre-adolescent girls, only causing difficulty in specific circumstances, Paechter and Clark's (2007) exploratory study of tomboy identity with 10-11 year old school children in London, UK, suggests that this identity is harder for girls to maintain as they get older, and their commitment to physical activity, particularly in sports that are deemed 'masculine-appropriate' e.g. football (soccer), may become increasingly problematic. This is exemplified by one participant in their study who became increasingly conscious about seeming different from other girls as she transitioned from primary to secondary school, becoming aware that being mistaken for a boy was going to be more difficult as she got older. Adolescent

communities which increasingly embrace characteristics of the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, such as romantic attachments between boys and girls, are likely to increasingly marginalise those who adopt features of the tomboy identity. This lessening approval of tomboyism as girls get older supports Comer's (1976) statement that tomboyism is permitted 'but only on the condition that she grows out of it' (in Hargreaves, 1994, p. 148). As girls get older the marginalisation increases, as does the association between tomboyism and lesbianism. As Paechter and Clark's (2007) findings suggest, even by the age of ten and eleven they may therefore find that they become increasingly uncomfortable with their tomboy identity, which may potentially lead to them giving up physical activity and/or other features of tomboyism which they had claimed. This could then suggest that sporting participation becomes harder in adulthood for women than it is for them as girls, because the associated transgressions of femininity may become more stigmatised and less accepted.

Gender performativity and performance

Thus far in this chapter gender has been explained through the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, which, by Schippers' (2007) definitions, are characterised by either 'manly' or 'womanly' traits and behaviours. This to some extent assumes that there are certain bodies, behaviours, and personality traits that can be neatly matched to either one of two distinctive genders, man or woman. In this section, gender is explored beyond this dichotomy, acknowledging its deeper complexity, and presenting theories that attempt to explain how and why women negotiate the gender binary whilst participating in sports that often require bodies, behaviours, and traits that are associated with hegemonic masculinity.

In the nineteenth century, both sex and gender were thought of as located within the body (i.e. both were thought of as biological). In 1949, Simone De Beauvoir challenged this

in her book, *The Second Sex*, in which she proposed her belief that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. This was to suggest that there is a distinction between biological sex and the socio-historical construction of gender. In other words, that gender is not biological, but instead a social construction (De Beauvoir, 2015). West and Zimmerman (1987), in their 'doing gender' approach, which is rooted in Erving Goffman's work on social interactionism, also refute the classic distinction between man and woman. They highlight the need to distinguish between the biological 'sex', and the socially constructed 'gender', but also going beyond this to create a triadic distinction between sex, sex category, and gender. They present sex as a biological determination of what distinguishes male from female, sex category as something that is imposed on us and founded upon socially required displays that assert one's masculinity or femininity, and gender as something which is established and displayed through interaction, created by an organised social performance and hence something which is 'done'. In this approach, 'doing gender' is acting in a manner which promotes assignment to one of the sex categories. West and Zimmerman argue therefore, that whether we are complying with our imposed sex category, or rebelling against it, we are always 'doing gender'. Critiques of the 'doing gender' approach have suggested that it does not fully grasp its own potential (e.g. Deutsch, 2007). In 'Undoing gender', Deutsch proposed a shift from West and Zimmerman's focus on the reproduction of gender difference, and instead focus on how undoing gender can dismantle the gender system to achieve equality.

As exemplified by Judith Butler (1990), critiques of the sex/gender binary led to a more radical overhaul of thinking around gender and sex. Butler (1990) argues that the existence of 'men' and 'women' as two distinct classes of people is a socially constructed binary, and that it is the symbolic meanings and characteristics that have been attached to these categories (e.g. men are physically strong/women are physically vulnerable) that have established the gender difference. Additionally, Butler claims that it is heterosexual desire

that fixes the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship. Defined as an erotic attachment to difference, this desire, for Butler, is what fuses masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites. The term 'gender performativity' was introduced by Butler (1990) as an argument against this perception of gender as binary, which she believes to be outdated and limited by its adherence to dominant societal constraints. She proposes that gender is not a performance, or an act of some kind, but that it is performat*ive,* as it produces a series of effects. Butler perceives that gender is therefore constructed through a series of acts that are ongoing and out of an individual's control. She suggested that an individual is not producing a performance, but that the performance is what produces the individual. This performance of identities disrupts the categories of gender and sexuality, creating and re-creating new ways of being that go beyond the set binary because they cannot necessarily be neatly categorised as male or female.

Despite a growing awareness and understanding of gender beyond the dichotomies of male and female (the sex binary) and man and woman (the gender binary), these binaries are still prominent in sport and the fear of stigmatisation for those who transgress the binaries of societal norms is still apparent. This means that many women athletes actively negotiate the 'scripts' of femininity in an attempt to clearly display conventional hegemonic femininity (Cox & Thompson, 2001). Ussher's (1997) typology of gender performance suggests that becoming 'woman' is something women do rather than something women are. She identified four 'performances' of femininity available to women: 'being girl' refers to the conventional position of 'woman' taken up when women want to 'be' rather than 'do' femininity; 'doing girl' describes the performance of the 'feminine masquerade' but acknowledging that this is 'playing a part'; 'resisting girl' refers to women who defy the traditional signs of 'femininity'; 'subverting femininity' is associated with women who knowingly play with gender as a performance. Ussher describes a continuous process of negotiation and resistance

in which women move between different positions in different times and circumstances (Ussher, as cited in Pope, 2014). This typology provides a useful tool for analyses of female athletes' negotiations of their transgressions of hegemonic femininity through their participation in sport.

Sexuality and sport

Based on the previously described concepts of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, it has been established that women's participation in sport can often be a transgression of gender norms because of the need for characteristics that are associated with hegemonic masculinity such as strength, power, aggression, and competitiveness. The level of this transgression occurs to a greater or lesser extent dependant on the sport in question and its perceived level of male or female 'appropriateness', however the underpinning physicality of the sport is in itself a contradiction to the physical vulnerability attached to hegemonic femininity. The purpose of this section of the review is to explain the connection between this transgression of gender norms and sexuality, the assumptions that are sometimes made because of this, the sanctioning and stigmatisation of female athletes that may occur as a result, and the mechanisms that some athletes may use to negotiate this.

Female athlete = masculine = lesbian

For male athletes, sport participation is normalising: athleticism = masculinity = heterosexuality. Sporting prowess and athleticism is associated with characteristics that epitomise hegemonic masculinity, such as physical strength, assertiveness, and competitiveness. Thus, male athletes are assumed as heterosexual unless proven otherwise (Messner, 1996) as they epitomise rather than contradict the accepted gender narrative for men (Anderson, 2005). Helen Lenskyj (1995) however proposes that the sexuality of women

involved in sport and physical activity has long been viewed with suspicion, although it could be argued that this is less so in women who are involved in 'feminine-appropriate' sports that fall in line with characteristics of hegemonic femininity such as ballet or gymnastics. Athleticism generally though has not been aligned with femininity and the behaviour of female athletes can be seen as crossing the line into masculinity. Thus, their heterosexuality is questioned, and questions are raised about their sexual behaviour – are they lesbian? Or do they want to be men? (Cox & Thompson, 2001; Lenskyj, 1995). This is encapsulated by the statement 'all the men are straight, all the women are gay' which Lenskyj (2012) quite strongly claims has been implicitly assumed in mainstream sport media for at least the last sixty years through media stereotypes of the 'mannish' lesbian athlete. Lenskyj does not appear to provide any specific examples or evidence for this claim. However, Susan Cahn's (1994) description of the rise of tennis player Martina Navratilova does highlight the apparent tension that occurred amongst the general public and media in regards to her perceived masculine style which refused to give the reassurance that she was a 'normal' woman – which is a reassurance that Cahn claims the growing popularity of women's tennis hinged upon at the time.

Lenskyj (1991) posited that these assumptions surrounding the sexuality of female athletes are based on the idea that women who challenge traditional gender-role behaviour cannot be 'real' women. Gender inversion, gender deviance, and gender transitivity were central terms to the construction of homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990). Signs of gender inversion include characteristics associated with sport and physical activity, such as well-developed muscles and enjoyment of 'masculine-appropriate' pastimes (Caudwell, 1999). Thus female athletes can be linked to the notion of a 'virilised woman,' which has been collapsed into the image of the 'mannish' lesbian. Mannishness in women has been implied as indistinguishable from lesbianism, and the lesbian has at times been marked as the

'pseudo-man' (Sedgwick, 1990; Caudwell, 1999). Lenskyj (1991) asserts that sports association with hegemonic masculinity creates a belief system that can associate female athletes – and the consequential violation of gender norms - with a label that has been used to represent a violation of sexuality norms, lesbianism. It is important to note here though, that this assertion by Lenskyj is likely to hold more credibility in some sports than others - those in which the transgression of gender norms is greater, for example strength-, muscularity-, and combat-focused sports.

Heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia

Discussion in this section focuses on the sanctioning and stigmatisation of female athletes that can occur because of their sexuality or assumed sexuality. The concepts of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia are defined and discussed, before their occurrence and application within women's sport is explored. Homophobia is a term that generally refers to 'irrational fear, abhorrence, and dislike of homosexuality and of those who engage in it' (Yep, 2002, p. 165). Vikki Krane (1998), in her study on the experiences of lesbian college athletes in the U.S., suggested that phrasing homophobia in psychological terms such as these does not necessarily encapsulate the purposeful and deliberate negative behaviours directed towards homosexuals, and thus proposed homo-negativism as a more appropriate term for this.

British sociologist of sexuality Ken Plummer (1998) also identified a number of criticisms of the notion of homophobia, including the suggestion that it focuses on individuals and hence diverts attention away from larger underlying social and cultural conditions that maintain fear and hostility towards human sexual difference. Yep (2002) proposed that heteronormativity and heterosexism are at the core of these cultural conditions. He described heterosexism as 'the belief and expectation that everyone is or should be

heterosexual' (Yep, 2002, p. 167) and heteronormativity as the assumption that 'heterosexual experience is *synonymous with* human experience (Yep, 2002, p. 167). Jackson (2006) expanded on this, describing heteronormativity as 'the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life' (p. 108).

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, homosexuality as a concept was not noticeable beyond the medical profession. However, as the term began to gain wider recognition, the stereotype of the 'mannish' lesbian became more prominent (Lenskyj, 2012). This stereotype of female athletes as masculine and therefore lesbian (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Griffin, 1992; Krane, 1998; Messner, 1996) has been used to differentiate feminine athletes from masculine/lesbian athletes (Krane & Barber, 2003). Pat Griffin (2014) suggested that female athletes are 'held hostage for fear of being called a lesbian' (p. 272), whether they are or not, and have been subject to negative impact and stigmatisation, despite increasingly more accepting societal attitudes and practices in western countries. As alluded to previously in this chapter, and as suggested by the differentiation between feminine athletes and masculine athletes, this stigmatisation occurs to a greater or lesser extent dependant on the level of transgression from hegemonic femininity. Anderson (2005) posits that homophobia has a much broader-reaching negative impact in women's sport than in men's, being used as a social control mechanism to devalue and trivialise women's athletic accomplishments. Lenskyj (2012) argues that sport, as a bastion of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity (see also Krane, 2001; Lenskyj, 1994, Messner, 1988), additionally remains one of the last bastions of heterosexism and homophobia because it reinforces acceptance of and commitment to traditional gender roles (Krane & Barber, 2003).

The position of heterosexuality as the dominant is reinforced by terms such as being 'in the closet' and 'coming out'. These terms imply that heterosexuality is the norm, and therefore being in the 'closet' or being 'out' must be understood in relation to this (Caudwell,

2002). Gender boundaries are an integral part of the discourse of heterosexuality. Consequently, when women cross these gender boundaries by engaging in sports which require and feature characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and transgression from hegemonic femininity, this can sometimes lead to a tendency to challenge heterosexuality, and indicate lesbianism (Cox & Thompson, 2001). The resultant assumption means that female athletes can sometimes be labelled as deviant in a society that views female athleticism in opposition to traditional gender norms (Schur, 1984). Blinde and Taub (1992) posited the notion of 'falsely accused deviants', suggesting that the tendency to label female athletes as lesbians, particularly those in 'masculine-appropriate' sports, can sometimes lead to the false labelling of heterosexual female athletes as lesbian. Stigma management techniques have therefore been used by both lesbian and non-lesbian athletes, suggesting that falsely accused deviants react in a similar vein to 'pure deviants'. These techniques have incorporated: concealment, including self-segregation, passing, and use of disidentifiers; deflection; and normalisation (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1972).

These stigma management techniques often used by female athletes are largely passive, centring on silence and denial, rather than posing an active challenge to the stigma. The likelihood of resistance to these labels is thus reduced, internalisation of the 'deviant' label is common, and heterosexuality is protected, maintained and reproduced (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Caudwell, 2002). In her study exploring women's experiences in football (soccer) in England and Wales, Caudwell (2002) argues that lesbian presence and visibility are negotiated and transient, and that heterosexuality continues to assume a position of dominance and permanence. This has also been reflected in sport-based feature films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) and *Girlfight* (Kusama, 2000). In her analysis of women's sexuality as presented in these two films, Caudwell (2009) suggests that in both films, heteronormativity is disturbed with moments of ambiguity and instability, with the

possibility for other sexual identities to be represented on screen. As Caudwell (2009) presented though, ultimately normative sexuality remains intact and we continue to see the ways in which heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy – a term used to describe men and heterosexuality's primacy over other genders and sexual orientations (Valdes, 2013) - in sport are maintained.

The figure of the lesbian in sport has also been subject to homophobic positioning such as 'predator' and 'converter' (Caudwell, 2002). In their study of a women's football (soccer) team in New Zealand, Cox and Thompson (2001) posit the lesbian gaze to be perceived as masculine with predatory intent due to the construction of lesbians as 'pseudo-men'. This implying that the gaze is both sexually desiring and indiscriminate, and thus that 'a lesbian will be aroused by the sight of any naked female body' (Cox & Thompson, 2001, p. 17). This positioning of female athletes who are strong and athletic and/or lesbian as 'pseudo-men' not only helps to maintain the dominant 'natural' gender order, but also positions lesbianism as abject and unintelligible, reinforcing and protecting heterosexuality as both compulsory and 'natural' (Caudwell, 2002). These discourses of sexuality and/or desire position masculinity in women as an anathema because of the link between masculinity and oppression and domination. Therefore the 'butch', an identity read as an overt masculine lesbian sexual identity, has been the target of prejudice, harassment, and abuse, as it challenges the stable notion of gender whereby women and femininity are synonymous (Caudwell, 1999). The fact that 'butch' does not appear in research without being associated with lesbian sexuality also implies the incorrect assumption that masculinity in women represents authentic lesbian sexuality (Caudwell, 2003).

The 'apologetic'

This section describes and explains the notion of the 'apologetic', a mechanism that female athletes are said to use in order to negotiate the discourses of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia in sport described previously. These discourses, as well as the public focus on the sexuality of women who partake in non-traditional, transgressions of gender, has caused many female athletes to feel pressure to present themselves in ways that are unmistakably heterosexual and to self-police their image so as to conform to dominant constructions of hegemonic femininity (Cox & Thompson, 2001; Lenskyj, 1995). Cox and Thompson's (2001) study on a football (soccer) team in New Zealand found that it also encouraged heterosexual athletes to disassociate themselves from lesbian athletes in order to avoid further discrimination, which ultimately has resulted in a lack of solidarity in confronting homo-negativism and sometimes, homonegative behaviours towards lesbian athletes from heterosexual women in sport.

The 'apologetic' in women's sport is a concept that describes the need for women athletes to present in a 'feminine' way or to emphasise their femininity, 'feminine' becoming a code word for 'heterosexuality' and 'attractive to men' (Lenskyj, 1995). For example, having long hair, wearing make-up, and dressing in deliberately feminine ways (Kolnes, 1995). Lenskyj (1995) claimed that women's sport, at that time, was still perceived as a threat to the existing gender order despite advances that had been made. She posited that it was deemed important for competitive athletes to send out 'feminine' messages of reassurance in order to gain public approval, and that lesbian athletes were astute enough to realise that their compliance with this façade of emphasised femininity was integral to this. She suggested that the gains of human rights and equality legislation and more liberal societal attitudes about sexuality between the 1970's and 1990's meant that the pressure for female athletes to emphasise their femininity had reduced but that there was still evidence of concern surrounding the 'image problem' of women's sport. This is reflected in more recent studies,

such as Krane et al.'s (2004) study on collegiate athletes from a variety of sports, which found athletes to be engaging in typical behaviours to enhance their femininity, such as 'doing their hair'.

Contrastingly, Broad's (2001) ethnographic study of women's rugby in the U.S. documented the experiences of those who do not subscribe to a 'female apologetic' but instead to an 'unapologetic'. This unapologetic approach consists of characteristics of queer resistance; transgressing gender, destabilising the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and 'in your face' confrontations of stigma – a much more active approach than the passive stigma management techniques previously described. Women rugby players' transgressions of gender and assertions of fluid and multiple sexualities serve as a challenge to heteronormativity and patriarchy, and contrasts assumptions that all female athletes use apology to negotiate an athletic identity and the notion of the 'lesbian bogeywoman' (Cox & Thompson, 2001). The apologetic and unapologetic female athletes have also been described as boundary-defenders and boundary-strippers (Gamson, 1998, p. 589). The apologetic, or boundary-defenders, make claims of true 'womanhood' to gain access to sport participation and strive to explain why and how women belong in sport, whereas the unapologetic, or boundary-strippers, are athletes who are unregretful about complicating the category of womanhood and the attendant heterosexuality (Broad, 2001).

Silencing of lesbianism

Another mechanism that can be argued as used to negotiate the discourses of heteronormativity and heterosexism in sport is the silencing of lesbianism. The survival and stigma management strategies adopted by some lesbians in sport, as well as the lack of sports governance and structures in taking up this issue, has led to a longstanding silence around lesbian issues, which Lenskyj (1995) describes as a 'silence so loud it screams' (p. 51). As

alluded to previously, although women's sport is now much more accepted than in the past, and that developments have continued since Lenskyj's (1995) study, it could still be argued that women's sport holds a tenuous position in society, or at least is still considered to be behind men's sport in terms of its acceptance. Effort is still directed at portraying a socially acceptable image of girls and women in sport, and a commonly employed strategy to enhance this image is to present traditionally feminine images of female athletes, such as by consciously emphasising feminine characteristics, as found in Krane (2001)'s study. Lesbians in sport have been required to remain silent about their identity because of an implicit set of rules governed by the stereotypes that perpetuate heterosexist and homonegative prejudice (Griffin, 1998; Krane, 2001). The general perception is that lesbians are 'bad' for the image of women's sport (Krane, 2001; Wright & Clarke, 1999), and that their presence is the reason for the lack of sponsorship, fan support, and respect for women's sport (Blinde & Taub, 1992). This can also be linked to the 'fear' of lesbians created through their positioning as 'predators' (Caudwell, 2002) and the associated risk of heterosexual athletes being 'turned,' 'putting off' some heterosexual women from competing in sport, and encouraging parents to adopt the perception that they need to 'protect their daughters from the lesbian players' (Lenskyj, 1995, p. 51).

Previous researchers have suggested that lesbians are actually overrepresented in the ranks of female athletes (Cahn, 1994; Lenskyj, 1995; Palzkill, 1990). Explanations for this are varied, and do not shed complete light on this alleged trend, but include: the suggestion that women who are non-conforming in terms of sexuality also choose to be non-conforming in their recreational activities; women-only sport provides a safe space for lesbians to meet other women who are strong, independent, and probably lesbian; and the suggestion that heterosexual women may be more vulnerable to pressure to behave and present in ways that conform with hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality, through being socialised to value

male attention and approval, and therefore, avoid 'unfeminine' sports (Lenskyj, 1995). However, lesbians feel pressure to negotiate their athletic identity and sexuality and are often fearful of the potentially negative consequences of being identified as a lesbian. Krane and Barber (2005) found this to be the case for lesbian coaches as well as lesbian athletes in their study interviewing 13 lesbian college coaches in the U.S. These coaches identified the conflict they face between doing what they believe is best for their athletes' well-being (e.g. being open about their sexuality and fighting homonegativism) and doing what is best for their professional well-being (e.g. hiding their sexuality and remaining silent), recognising that being openly lesbian may pose a threat to their career.

Media representation

The historical domination of men in sport, and the gender inequalities that still exist, are also manifest in the presentation of sport in the media. Feminist sport sociologists have labelled sports media as one of the last bastions of male domination (O'Reilly & Cahn, 2007). Despite claims that there has been a shift towards greater gender equality in the sports media coverage of women, Godoy-Pressland (2014), in her analysis of the coverage of sportswomen in British Sunday newspapers, argues that this coverage occurs across specific time frames during major sporting events, but that in normal day-to-day reporting women are still underrepresented. It is not just the lack of representation of women in sports media that has been flagged by sociologists, but also the ways in which they are represented. There is often gender differentiation in the depiction of male and female athletes; male athletes are more likely to be portrayed as active participants in sport, whereas female athletes are more likely to be portrayed in passive and traditionally feminine poses (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004).

Additionally, emphasising the wider patriarchal context, women's sport is often marketed in a way that is appealing to men (Krane et al., 2010). Lenskyj (1995) has suggested that women's sport is largely an aesthetic spectacle shaped by market demand and male audience response. There is a tendency for sports media to focus on aesthetic appeal and heterosexual attractiveness (Bernstein, 2002; Lenskyj, 2012), revealing photos that are heterosexist, objectifying, and sexualising (Kane, 1988; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), and the wife-and-mother status of sportswomen (Lenskyj, 2012). This culminates in an overall representation of women's sport in the media that appears to be 'filtered through a male gaze that struggles to reconcile discourses of sport and discourses of femininity' (Bruce, 2012, p. 9).

'Masculine' or 'non-feminine' sports

From the discussion in this chapter thus far, it is evident that the extant literature examining women's sport participation presents numerous challenges for female athletes in regards to their gender and sexual identities, largely stemming from the general perception that being involved in sport or physical activity is often a transgression of hegemonic femininity. As this is the suggestion for women's participation in most sports, excluding those which are strongly associated with features of hegemonic femininity (e.g. ballet), it could be argued then that these challenges are likely to be particularly heightened when considering the presence and participation of women in stereotypically 'masculine' sports, or those deemed 'masculine-appropriate'. These include boxing (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Mennesson, 2000); rugby (Carle & Nauright, 1999; Howe, 2001; Wright & Clarke, 1999); ice hockey (Theberge, 2000) and bodybuilding (Holmlund, 1997; Johnston, 1996, Wesely, 2001). Even recently developed 'extreme' and 'lifestyle' sports have quickly become

coded as masculine – e.g. in Wheaton (2000)'s ethnographic study of a windsurfing community in England.

Hargreaves (1994) argued that when women participate in these male-dominated sports, they face the greatest criticism and ridicule. This notion is supported by Wiley, Havitz, & Shaw's (2000) study on hockey players and figure skaters that suggests that the gendered nature of leisure and/or sports activities (i.e. whether they are gender conforming or non-conforming) needs to be taken into account when explaining participation levels. This intimates that involvement is not only influenced by individual preferences, but also by societal ideologies regarding the gender-appropriateness of activities. If gender and sexuality are considered organising principles of sport (Hargreaves, 1993; Kolnes, 1995), and perceptions of heterosexuality are the foundation for how female athletes are interpreted (Krane, 2001), it is therefore reasonable to suggest that participation in sports that are specifically gender non-conforming may lead to further stigmatisation of those athletes involved.

One sport that is becoming increasingly popular amongst women, despite previously being thought to 'belong' to men, is rugby union (Carle & Nauright, 1999). Although it is important to recognise that opportunities for women in rugby and other sports that have formerly been considered a 'man's game' have increased, findings from Carle and Nauright's (1999) study interviewing members of a rugby club in Queensland, Australia, suggest that the historical, masculine-oriented stereotypes still exist. Despite women rugby players stretching the boundaries of feminine-appropriate behaviour in a sport that has the perceived potential to 'challenge fundamentally what it means to be male and female' (Wright & Clarke, 1999, p. 228), it is suggested that they still conform to male expectations of how they should 'perform' their roles on and off the rugby field (Carle & Nauright, 1999). Furthermore, a number of barriers have been identified that confront female rugby players in their quest to

gain the same recognition that has previously been reserved for elite professional men (Howe, 2001). Namely, the lack of social acceptance of women's physicality (Young, 1997; McDermott, 2000) and the social importance of avoiding this physicality if being perceived as 'normal' is the athletes' goal (Howe, 2001). Implied as an internal barrier to success as an elite, professional, rugby player, this positions female rugby players as having a choice between perceived normality and sporting success, and as not being able to have both.

Similarly, studies of women's wrestling in Norway, a combat sport described as 'one of the most masculine arenas in the sport world' (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009, p. 244), suggest that although the wrestlers are transgressing traditional social norms by taking part, some (particularly juniors) are holding back on certain areas of training and adjusting weight workouts in an attempt to avoid the 'social burden' of big muscles. The senior wrestlers however, appear to acknowledge the importance of muscle for their sporting success, and are more likely to gain respect from males as 'serious' wrestlers. Boxing, another combat sport labelled as 'for men, and is about men, and is men' (Oates, 2006, p. 72), has also raised the question of the 'seriousness' of female participants and the contradiction with gender conformity. Fielding's (1972 & 1996, in Boddy 2014) fictional depiction of 'Amazonian heroines' presents the two stereotypes that female boxers have had to contend. The boxer presented as feminine, Molly, is said to be fighting as a kind of sexual display, whereas Goody, presented as unfeminine, is deemed as less appealing, but also a better fighter. Therefore, it is implied, both in wrestling and boxing, that sexual attractiveness and sporting ability cannot be synonymous, and that any woman who transgresses the norms of hegemonic femininity will not be 'attractive to men'.

Interestingly though, women's boxing appears to have been tolerated much earlier than one would expect for a sport deemed so 'masculine'. Dugaw (1989, in Boddy 2014) suggested that there was a 'casual acceptance of women combatants' (p. 126), partly due to

the aesthetic attraction of women's boxing and its association with sexual voyeurism (Dunn, 1998, in Boddy, 2014), but also due to its promotion as a potential response and form of self-defence against a predominant social problem, rape (Bishop, 1895, in Boddy, 2014). Despite this early acceptance, it has proven hard for women's boxing to break the association with catfights and 'titillating novelty acts' (Dunn, 2009, p. 127). Boxing was not introduced as an Olympic sport until 2012, as its early acceptance was built upon motives other than competing for the challenges of the sport itself. This provides an example of sport as being a major male preserve (Dunning, 1994; Theberge, 1985), with the recognition of boxing as a sport that women can compete in for themselves trailing a long while behind the concept of boxing as a spectacle for the male 'gaze' and as a method of self-protection from an act of male dominance.

Strength sports

As identified previously, there appears to be additional challenges for women when they participate in sports that are deemed traditionally 'male-appropriate', as opposed to 'female-appropriate' sports. Discussion here turns to women's participation in the group of 'male-appropriate' activities that form the focus of this thesis, strength sports. In recent years there has been a burgeoning of interest in 'strength sports' for women, both in academia and wider society. This is thought to have been encouraged by the CrossFit phenomena, Olympic weightlifting role models such as Team GB athlete Zoe Smith, and the wider international health and fitness drive. British Weight Lifting announced a rise in female participation from April 2014 to March 2015, with over 28,000 women recorded as participating in weightlifting for a minimum of 30 minutes per week (Northbrooke, 2015). UK media attention and newspaper articles have emphasised this increasing interest across both strength training and strength sports as a whole. As well as estimating that females make up a third of the 110,000

people who participate in Olympic lifting in Britain every week, media declarations have included the notion that 'strong is the new beautiful' (Oliver, 2015) and that women's weight training has created a 'new standard of sporting beauty' (Northbrooke, 2015). This increase in media attention has been accompanied by a rise in social media trends such as '#liftlikeagirl' and '#girlsthatlift'. Given the lack of mainstream media attention for women's sport and a tendency to focus on aesthetic appeal and heterosexual attractiveness (Bernstein, 2002; Lenskyj, 2012), social media can offer women's sport the opportunity to control their own content, engage the passion of fans, and create communities of interest (Bruce, 2012). Hence social media can increase the visibility of women's sport that has been invisible in the mainstream press (Bruce, 2011).

Despite this burgeoning of interest in women's 'strength sports', studies have suggested that women may still be less likely to lift weights or choose weight-based activities as a preferred form of physical activity. Statistics of exercise participation have indicated low levels of female participation in weight training. In 2004, 17.5% of women in the United States weight trained two or more times per week (Kruger, Carlson, & Kohl, 2006), and in 2005, 14.3% of Canadian women participated in weight training at least once in three months, compared to 23% of men of the same age (Statistics Canada, 2005). Explorations into the reasons why participation levels have remained relatively low suggest that there is a continued presence of a cultural dissociation between women and strength-related goals (Salvatore & Maracek, 2010), and a social expectation that the force and powerful physicality associated with strength is expected to be male (Brace-Govan, 2004). This is a reflection of the consideration of strength as 'that quintessentially masculine attribute' (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014, p. 481) – the epitome of hegemonic masculinity – resulting in an association between strength and men so 'strong' that female strength denotes the ultimate transgression of hegemonic femininity. Research exploring female strength-based sports and training

activities suggest that many women avoid weight training altogether due to a fear of displaying muscle tone that is perceived as high musculature and masculine (Felkar, 2012; Grogan, Evans, Wright & Hunter, 2004; Heywood, 1998; Moore, 1997). This fear is most probably driven by the perception of 'excessive' musculature on women as masculine and socially unacceptable, and fear of being labelled a lesbian (Krane, 2001).

Susan Bordo (1993) explained that society perceives a tight, toned body as ideal, yet large muscles are not feminine because they symbolise strength and masculinity. This can be read as an absurd contradiction, as it could be argued that weight training is integral to the development of a 'tight and toned' body. This 'big is bad' mentality surrounding female strength and muscularity has been evidenced regularly in previous research. In bodybuilding, the argument of the constitution of a 'winning' appearance has involved debates surrounding femininity rules and the appropriate size of female competitors and the question of 'how big is too big?' (Bunsell, 2013). Another example is the previously described female wrestlers from a study in Norway, some of whom held back from weight training activities through fear of gaining excessive muscle (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). This concept has been termed the 'glass ceiling' of musculature for women (Dworkin, 2001), whereby women can gain strength and muscle, but must then struggle to reconcile seemingly incompatible expectations about musculature and femininity (Dworkin, 2001; Felkar, 2012; Heywood, 1998; Moore, 1997). The point at which this struggle begins, and the athletes begin to feel as though they have to negotiate between their athletic identity and feminine identity (Krane et al., 2004), is the point at which this 'glass ceiling' is hit. The fear is that if the athletes were to continue to become any stronger, or maybe more crucially, any more muscular, they would no longer be able to negotiate these identities, no longer able to 'hide' their athletic identity.

Bodybuilding

The first specific strength sport to be discussed here is female bodybuilding, which has been the focus of a large proportion of the small, but growing literature on women in strength and muscularity-based sports. This is a sport in which competitors are judged purely by their aesthetics and engage in the pursuit of a hyper muscular visual ideal which has long been perceived as the 'antithesis of femininity' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 6). As an activity considered inherently male, the choices, actions, experiences, and patterns of consumption that female bodybuilders engage in, as well as their appearance, transgress gender norms. Therefore, some feminist scholars have presented participation in female bodybuilding as a method of empowerment and liberation (e.g. Bolin, 1992; Mansfield & McGinn, 1993; Ian, 1995; Aoki, 1996; St Martin & Gavey, 1996; Moore, 1997; Heywood, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Frueh, 2001; Boyle, 2005; Felkar, 2012). Bartky (1988) praised female bodybuilders for resisting hegemonic norms and creating 'new styles of the flesh'. This view was supported by Frueh (2001), who encouraged celebration of hyper muscular women for their achievement in creating an aesthetic project for their own pleasure, as opposed to that of men. This perspective views bodybuilding as an opportunity for women to access male dominated space and liberating experiences of achievement that had previously been denied to them (Bartky, 1988).

Others though, have depicted bodybuilding as an oppressive act of control, an argument that is built upon the fact that bodybuilders are judged purely by their appearance. Bordo (1993) maintained that female bodybuilding is not a liberating act, but instead one of extreme control and hatred of the body, due to its aims of achieving a 'perfect body', and the level of discipline and control required to fulfil those aims. There has been debate throughout the history of female bodybuilding as to what the 'perfect body' is, and what constitutes a 'winning' appearance. Bunsell (2013) described this, in her ethnographic study of female

bodybuilding in the South of England, as being an issue of: 'how muscular can a woman become and still retain her femininity?' (p. 28). The fluctuation of opinions led to the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) implementing a set of 'femininity rules'[2] in 1992, amid fears that women were becoming 'too masculine' through excess muscularity (Huxtable, 2004). Additionally, in 2005 female bodybuilders were instructed that they must reduce their muscularity by an average of 20% if they were to be validated in competitions (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014). Focusing purely on the aesthetics, this standpoint presents female bodybuilding as an oppressive quest that is dominated by male standards. It is said to promote the hegemonic norms of 'muscle equals masculinity', discouraging the transgression of gender norms and restricting the extent to which these women can develop their embodied environment (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014).

In Bunsell's (2013) ethnography of female bodybuilding in the South of England, she indicated that the situation may be more complex than this dichotomy suggests, implying that female bodybuilders are not simply either empowered or oppressed, but that for most, elements of both would be present. Her findings highlighted the complexities and contradictions in the lives of female bodybuilders and indicated that it is reasonable to conclude that *no* practice can absolutely emancipate and empower women. This view is supported by Pitts (2003) who posits that the female body is 'a site of negotiation between power and powerlessness, neither of which are likely to win fully' (p. 81). Therefore, empowerment can be seen as 'a shifting, transitory and evolving process full of complexity and contradictions – just as one 'problem' seems to be resolved, others are revealed' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 161).

[2] These rules included the line that 'competitors should not look too big' and guidelines stated that women should look 'feminine' and not emaciated.

Olympic weightlifting and weight training

Another strength sport which has seen a rise in female participation is Olympic weightlifting. The dominance of bodybuilding in this line of research has meant that many discussions about women lifting heavy weights have either focused solely on bodybuilding, or have conceptually conflated bodybuilding with weightlifting (Hargreaves, 1994). However, unlike bodybuilding, weightlifting does not centre on the tenets of beauty and appearance through physical displays in competition. Alternatively, it provides an opportunity for women to experience an instrumentally orientated, quantifiable physicality through the task of lifting as much weight as possible (Brace-Govan, 2002). In her research in this area, Brace-Govan (2002; 2004) suggested that focusing on this instrumentality, rather than the gendered aesthetics of bodybuilding, is more constructive for women and can help them transcend the voyeuristic objectifications of male aesthetics. By concentrating on a 'quantifiable, objective measure of success' (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 416), women can use their bodies for assertive and creative action.

In her study examining bodybuilders, weightlifters, and ballet dancers in Australia, Brace-Govan (2002) found that many weightlifters still had a general desire to maintain a feminine presentation, but, compared to bodybuilders and ballet dancers, invested little in their appearance and had no specific aspirations for how their bodies should look. There appeared to be benefits to this approach: success in their sport and good training sessions led them to feel good, and the instrumental active processes of lifting heavy weights, rather than thoughts surrounding their appearance, were attributed to positive feelings. Furthermore, being strong was central to the weightlifters' sense of self (Brace-Govan, 1998; Brace-Govan, 2002) and in Brace-Govan's later study focusing on 16 elite women powerlifters, the women experienced feelings of mastery and capability through developing powerful strength

(Brace-Govan, 2004). The strong body is therefore presented as a 'source of self-identity' (Shilling, 2003, p. 202).

Thus, Brace-Govan (2004) argues that weightlifting alters the social dynamic of women's experiences of physical strength. Weightlifters' ability to build formidable strength without the same visible, physical displays of bodybuilding creates a significant lack of visibility. However, the social expectation is that powerful physicality is used to dominate others, and is expected to be male; therefore, women's access to domination is contained. Brace-Govan found social controls to occur both inside and outside of the gym space, and close family members, friends, and male gym users made efforts to contain the behaviour of these weightlifters, particularly when such women were recognised as physically powerful. She posited that this stems from the relatedness of several key issues: the association of maleness and strength (presumed to be natural); the presumption that women cannot be as strong as men; the presumption that women should not have visibly large muscles; the association of physical strength with domination and; the expectation that aggression is an essential element of physical power (Brace-Govan, 2004, p. 526).These expectations and assumptions underpin the social forces exerted to contain women's interest and access to weightlifting and muscular strength. Brace-Govan concludes then, that while strength retains its links to maleness and domination, 'men retain their socially constructed superior position and strength will retain its association with physical force' (Brace-Govan, 2004, p. 527).

Embodiment

As alluded to throughout this piece of work so far, the body of the female athlete is an integral part of their identity, and plays a crucial role in the formations of other people's perceptions of them. People cannot be in the world without bodies, thus the symbolic meanings that they convey are important; the physical body is a message in social

communication (Brace-Govan, 2002). Much of the feminist reflection on female embodiment has been built upon the sociohistorical fact that the differences in women's bodies to men's have served as excuses for structural inequalities (Young, 2005, p. 4); as does the assumption that differences between women and men are biological as opposed to cultural, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Iris Marion Young's 1990 paper 'Throwing Like a Girl' explores the restriction of women's movement and motility that exemplifies this difference between the bodily experiences of men and women. Young proposed three commonalities of female embodiment in relation to action/movement: ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings (Young, 2005, p. 35). 'Ambiguous transcendence' refers to a woman's propensity to refrain from throwing her whole body into a movement (Young, 2005, p. 35), 'inhibited intentionality' describes the self-imposed 'I cannot' which prevents the female body from using its real capacity (p. 36), and a 'discontinuous unity' is proposed as existing between both the body and its surroundings (p. 38). In summary, Young describes feminine bodily existence as having its roots in 'the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing – a fragile thing… a thing that exists as *looked at* and *acted upon*' (p. 39).

This notion of a woman's body as something to be 'looked at' is linked to Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze', which refers to the depiction of the world from a masculine perspective, presenting women and their bodies as objects of male pleasure. Women's sport has at times been suggested as an attraction due to its 'opportunity to expose bare flesh' (Boddy, 2014, p. 254) as opposed to its demonstration of skill and/or power; a dichotomy that is illustrated in Fielding's (1972 & 1996) previously described stereotypical fictional depiction of female fighters. Women with large muscles evoke strong reactions from both men and women, including disgust, discomfort, anger, and threat, and are perceived as unattractive to heterosexual men (Bunsell, 2013). Also, some female athletes have considered

their muscular bodies as the primary hindrance to being perceived as heterosexually feminine (Krane et al., 2004). Thus, the bodies of women who are involved in muscularity and strength-based sports such as bodybuilding and weightlifting do not 'fit' with the masculine perspective of the 'male gaze'. Inevitably then participants are subject to these negative perceptions and reactions, as well as societal expectations to conform to hegemonic standards of beauty and contain their strength and muscularity in line with the 'glass ceiling' of women's strength (Dworkin, 2001).

Some sociologists have suggested that humans can only understand themselves 'by comparing themselves with others, or seeing themselves through the eyes of others' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 434). Others have extended this concept, postulating that the eyes of others are not only important in the understanding of ourselves, but also for our lives to have meaning and purpose, as positive approval is needed for this to occur (Mead, 1962). The concept of the 'looking glass self' (Cooley, 1922) has been used to illustrate how identities of individuals are formed via the 'gaze of the other', and Crossley (2006) suggested the significant influence of the perception of this gaze, stating that 'it is difficult to find yourself beautiful if others do not' (p. 97). Furthermore, Goffman (1979, 1987) suggested that the first impression is crucial in the preservation of both social and personal identities. Social expectations, norms, values, and roles are constantly being maintained, with the strongest evidence of this being in the case of culturally acceptable notions of gender. Individuals are thought to make an automatic 'gender attribution' every time they see a human being that consigns others to the sex of male or female based upon Western assumptions of masculine and feminine (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Hence it is reasonable to suggest that female athletes, particularly those in muscularity and strength-based sports, may place high value on the opinions and perceptions of others and experience self-consciousness in relation to their bodily presentation.

The bodies of female athletes then, especially if they are perceived as 'masculine', play an integral role in the marginalisation and stigmatisation described previously in this chapter, including heterosexism and homophobia. Successful athletes need to be powerful and strong, yet obvious signs of this power are construed negatively, and participants of previous studies have described an arbitrary line that separated too much muscle from attractive muscle in women (Krane et al., 2004). In a culture where the 'appearance and (re)presentations of women's bodies are key determinants of feminine identity and cultural acceptability' (Brace-Govan, 2002, p. 404) female athletes are therefore condemned because of their deviant aesthetic, and are forced to negotiate their desire to be strong for sporting success whilst attempting to maintain a body that is socially accepted, without 'oversized' musculature (Wright & Clarke, 1999; Young, 1997). For example, in Krane et al.'s (2010) study of college athletes in the U.S., female athletes displayed empowerment, strength, and pride in their athletic bodies when in an athletic context where their athletic identities were made salient. However, when social contexts were made salient, those same female athletes expressed the need to be feminine and experienced dissonance between their bodies and social expectation. Thus Krane et al.'s research implied that when athletes are encouraged to focus on being an athlete as opposed to being female, their attitudes to their bodies can become much less negative. Nevertheless, it is difficult for these athletes to maintain this positive view of their bodies as 'strong and powerful and free from male domination' (Theberge, 1985, p. 191) when they are still viewed with disdain outside of their sporting and athletic contexts.

An important point of distinction to acknowledge is that while some female athletes may not desire a strong, powerful, or muscular appearance but come to accept that it is a necessary part of their sporting success, for some, the complete opposite is the case. Female bodybuilders, and others who *desire* and *choose* to present in a hyper muscular way, and

choose to cross the arbitrary line that divides those perceived as feminine and those perceived as masculine (Krane et al., 2004), are arguably condemned even more. In these cases, this aesthetic is no longer viewed as a side effect of being an athlete that is not particularly desired, but as an active choice to pursue even further transgression of the entrenched societal gender norms. Bunsell (2013) suggested that this choice poses a considerable challenge in relation to the task of sustaining a viable sense of self-identity. The media have at times acted to portray these women as 'scary monsters' who are 'at war' with both society and their own bodies, choosing to present a body that is not just culturally unacceptable, but in some cases, even intolerable (Theroux, 2000; The Independent, 2008; Maume, 2005). Positive judgements are based on heterosexual desirability, rather than objective, instrumental, or measurable abilities associated with successful athletes (Brace-Govan, 2002). Therefore these women, who adopt an amount of strength, size, and muscle that is not construed as attractive to men (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2007) are perceived as rejecting both their sex, and heterosexual relationships, in line with the 'female athlete = masculine = lesbian' assumption discussed earlier in this chapter (Cox & Thompson, 2001; Lenskyj, 1995). They therefore 'risk censure for so deliberately transgressing the normative ideal for the female body' (St Martin & Gavey, 1996, p. 55).

The empowerment debate

The perceived 'masculine' nature of strength sports, and the discernment that women's participation in these sports can be considered a transgression of gender norms, has provoked debate as to the empowering nature of such participation. As recognised by Bunsell (2013) in her ethnography of female bodybuilding, empowerment is a difficult concept to operationalise and explicit definitions of empowerment are rare. She posited that Mosedale's (2005) definition of women's empowerment was a useful one in this context: 'the process by

which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing' (p. 252). Bunsell (2013) also drew on sport feminist definitions of bodily empowerment, specifically the following interpretation:

> 'Bodily empowerment lies in women's abilities to forge an identity that is not bound by traditional definitions of what it 'means to be female', and to work for a new femininity that is not defined by normative beauty of body ideals, but rather by the qualities attained through athleticism (such as skill, strength, power, self-expression)' (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p. 127).

Bunsell suggests that this can be broken down into two aspects: individual empowerment, such as 'gaining a sense of self-definition through taking control of the body' (p. 8) and social empowerment, including 'challenging the objectification of women's bodies and re-defining gender roles by resisting the cultural processes which tend to define or control the female body' (p. 8). Bunsell's approach to empowerment, which my approach is built upon, is underpinned by the notion that there are multiplicities of empowerment, that it is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that is a process rather than an event.

As within the female bodybuilding literature, the debate as to whether any muscularity- or strength-based sports are liberating and empowering or restrictive and oppressive for women is ongoing. As is evidenced in the literature surrounding embodiment and female athletes, there appears to be a constant conflict between the empowerment associated with building a body for themselves, or one which is capable of huge feats of physical sporting success, with the restriction and oppression imposed by societal expectations of how a woman's body 'should' and 'ought' to look, placing a cap, or a 'glass ceiling' (Dworkin, 2001), on the potential liberation and empowerment of these athletes. In

addition to the previously described empowering benefits, such as providing opportunity to create a body for their own pleasure (Frueh, 2001) and to experience achievement that had previously been denied to them, muscularity- and strength-based sports can also be viewed as symbolically and physically empowering for women due to their potential to reduce the physical power imbalances on which patriarchy and the oppression of women have been founded (Custelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998).

However, others have also cited concern that these activities can become recuperated into heterosexual normative gender roles. For example, the femininity rules instigated by bodybuilding federations, which state that competitors should look 'feminine' and not 'too big', encourage the absorption of this subversive femininity back into the mainstream (e.g. muscular women to be viewed) (Brace-Govan, 2004). It has also been asserted that even the largest female bodybuilders had succumbed to the 'recuperation' effect, and that the dominant perception of women as objects to be viewed had overpowered the resistant idea of the muscular female body (Ndalanis, 1995). Heterosexual desirability was also identified as a strategy for recuperation in women's bodybuilding (Schulze, 1990). This was implemented by allaying fear of 'excessive muscles' as biologically impossible and linking the activity to self-improvement, self-confidence, and self-control (Brace-Govan, 2004). This discouragement of transgression, and overtly sexual focus, appears to attempt to shun the 'lesbian' and 'aspirant men' labels that have been so regularly used in reference to female bodybuilders and other female athletes due to their transgressions of the gender norms (Schulze, 1990).

Furthermore, although the recent increase in media attention can be seen as a positive step for strength-based sports, much of this attention appears to use sexualisation and a focus on aesthetic attractiveness as tools to promote the benefits of participation. Examples include references to 'beauty' in the previously mentioned newspaper headlines (Oliver, 2015;

Northbrooke, 2015) and social media campaigns featuring phrases such as ‘strong is the new sexy’ and ‘damn, she squats’. Some journalists have even suggested that ‘strong’ may now just be a rebrand of ‘skinny’, representing a shift in the type of body women are expected to conform to (i.e. strong instead of skinny), but ultimately there is still the creation of a new desired aesthetic and a pressure to imitate a new body trend (Kessel, 2016). This is arguably supported by the earlier discussed female bodybuilding literature, which details the pressure competitor’s face in regard to the body type they are expected to adhere to. Scholarly research examining this proposed concept in other, non-aesthetic strength sports, such as strongwoman, has previously been limited. Hence in this research, I, similarly to Bunsell (2013), also draw on the earlier described sport feminist interpretation of empowerment as underpinned by the notion of challenging traditional definitions of what it means to be female, as well as Mosedale’s (2005) definition of empowerment as a process in which women redefine what is possible for them to be and do in situations that have hitherto been restricted.

Strongwoman

As demonstrated in this review, there is an existing body of literature examining female ‘strength sports’, with a predominant focus on female bodybuilding. However, no in-depth research has been conducted on the vital sport of strongwoman. Strongwoman, in contrast to bodybuilding, and similarly to weightlifting, has no aesthetic focus. Competitors are judged solely on their physical capacity, through tests of strength, power, speed, and endurance. Although it is acknowledged that the training required to build strength and power will result in the growth of muscle mass, strongwomen are generally more concerned with the strength of a muscle than its appearance, and hence do not engage in the same extreme nutritional behaviours as bodybuilders whose primary focus is the aesthetics of this muscle

mass. These extreme behaviours can be detrimental to physical capability, as alluded to in Fussell's (1991) account of his bodybuilding experiences, which described his lack of energy and inability to run when at competition state. This depleted physical state would be a hindrance to strongwomen, whose physical strength is integral to the practical achievement required for strongwoman success.

Shilling and Bunsell (2014) call for further research into this area. Their account of one UK female bodybuilder's transition to strongwoman suggested that the focus on practical achievement in strongwoman helped to provide an escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics within bodybuilding. Sarah, the competitor in this case study, was a victim of the 'compulsory femininity' implemented by bodybuilding authorities, not receiving an invite to the British Championships because she was deemed 'too big' for the UK Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation (UKBFF), who called for a 'smaller' female body type. This again presents a sporting situation in which women are 'permitted' to transgress gender boundaries, but only to a certain extent, before the stereotypical divisions between men and women are re-imposed and the rules of femininity are reinforced. In contrast, in strongwoman, in Sarah's own words, 'no one gives a monkey's what you look like' (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014, p. 489). The aspect of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) is removed and the 'subject-at-work' is what matters (Brace-Govan, 2002). Strongwoman allowed Sarah to validate her pursuit of self-transformation and engage in experiences that were 'outside the zone of male dominated notions of femininity' (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014, p. 490). To my knowledge, there are no other existing studies of strongwoman in any context.

Summary

In conclusion, the literature discussed in this chapter presents the barriers and obstacles that women have faced, and sometimes still face, in regard to their participation in

sport. Although there has evidently been a huge development in regard to removing these barriers, and a sense that this trend is continuing, the participation of women in sport still appears at times to be placed under certain limits, best described by Dworkin's (2001) concept of the 'glass ceiling'. An example of this is the previously described rule that female bodybuilders should not be 'too big'. In a sport that's primary purpose is to build muscle, this is a clear indication of the bounds of what's deemed appropriate and not appropriate for female athletes. The development here is that it is acceptable for women to compete in what has been a male-dominated, muscle-building sport, while the 'glass ceiling' is the fact that there is a limit placed on women that is not placed on men in regards to how much muscle it is acceptable for them to build. As presented, female bodybuilding has been the focus of the majority of research into women's participation in muscularity and strength-based sports thus far. The sport is aesthetically judged, and therefore muscularity is given primary importance, rather than strength. It is integral that research continues to explore the experiences of women in sports where strength is the primary goal, such as strongwoman. Strength is described by Shilling and Bunsell (2014) as 'that quintessentially masculine attribute' (p. 481) and hence it could be suggested that it is these sports that arguably represent one of the greatest transgressions of gender norms.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

The overall aim of this research was to explore and investigate the subculture of the sport of strongwoman in the UK, examining the practices, motivations, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of the strongwomen who train and compete in the sport. To fulfil this aim, the methods of this study have incorporated and combined elements of both a traditional ethnographic approach in which others are the subject of inquiry, and an autoethnographic approach in which the personal experiences of the researcher are also the subject of inquiry. This combined approach has enabled the co-construction of data, drawing on interactively produced, collaborative, and shared knowledge, as well as the individual experiences and stories that each participant brought to the research.

This chapter will begin by setting out my epistemological and ontological approach to research. It will then outline the key features and relevant aspects of both ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to research, with particular focus on their suitability to the study of gender embodiment and sport. The chapter then offers a more detailed explanation as to how these methods come together in this study, as well as discussion as to the application and use of an autoethnographic approach, including the distinguishing of autoethnography from ethnography and the differences these approaches may have. Focus then moves to the practicalities of the fieldwork process in this research project, and the specific methods undertaken including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and the use of online data, in order to achieve the co-construction of data and knowledge between the participants and the researcher. The chapter then explores the ethics of this study. This section comprises of an outline of the ethical approach, and exploration and discussion of the ethical dilemmas and considerations raised both before and during this research, as well as

the implications after completion of the formal fieldwork period. Finally, the chapter explains the processes employed in order to analyse and reflect on the knowledge produced in this study.

Epistemological and ontological perspective

Our epistemological and ontological perspective form the basis of a set of philosophical assumptions that make up our research paradigm, which informs and influences our methodological decisions. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), a paradigm is a 'set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) … and a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts' (p. 107). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) posited that the basic beliefs of a paradigm pose the following questions: 'beliefs about ontology (What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?), epistemology (What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?), and methodology (How do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?) (p. 22).

My approach to this auto/ethnographic research undertaking is underpinned by an interpretivist epistemological perspective. An interpretivist perspective accepts that the researcher can never be separated from the research - the researcher is inseparably a part of what is studied (Smith, 1989). Sparkes and Smith (2014) describe this as an interdependency between the knower and the known, which are 'fused together in such a way that the 'findings' are the creation of a process of interaction between the two' (p. 13). This perspective underpinned my methodological approach to this research project, which has acknowledged and embraced the inability to remove myself, my own experiences, and my role in the construction of knowledge, from the research. As explored further later in this chapter, it is this basic belief that influenced my decision to combine both autoethnographic

and ethnographic methods, enabling the co-construction of data, drawing on interactively produced, collaborative, and shared knowledge.

An interpretivist epistemological perspective is partly based on a relativist ontology, which views knowledge as a social construction. A relativist ontological perspective accepts the existence of multiple, subjective realities. Gubrium and Holstein (2008) describe this as a perspective in which 'participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements' (p. 3), meaning that in research underpinned by this ontological perspective, we are not seeking one universal truth, but to understand the subjective reality that exists for those participants. In other words, the aim is to co-construct knowledge through understanding of the individual experience and interpretation. Hence my approach in this research is one which seeks to understand the experiences of those strongwomen involved in this study, and to co-construct knowledge, collaboratively producing knowledge through reflection and understanding of my own experiences as well as others.

Ethnographic approach

Ethnography is a research method that aims to understand the culture of a particular pre-existing group from the perspective of the group members, with the group culture therefore lending insight into the behaviours, values, emotions, and mental states of group members (Krane & Baird, 2005). Wolcott (1995) described ethnography as both a process and a product. The process involves intense familiarity and extensive fieldwork within a setting (Lofland, 1996), and the product is a comprehensive, descriptive, detailed understanding of the social group in question (Tedlock, 2000). Ethnographic research involves researcher immersion into a culture or social group for an extended period of time. This includes commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of the particular

group or culture (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), and is a process of knowing and becoming through immersed observation (Atkinson, 2012).

Ethnography employs the use of multiple methods. Participant observation is the most distinctive, providing the basis of the research, and this is accompanied by a range of other methods including interviews, and the collection and analysis of text, photographic, or online data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Qualitative research in sport has previously been criticised for its over reliance on singular perspectives, with 'one shot' approaches to data collection such as one-off interviews often adopted (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). It has been suggested that the rigidity of such interviews and other similar approaches may restrict the examination of the topic of interest (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003). Ethnography and autoethnography have in some instances though been used well to study sport, for example Wacquant's (2006) experimental ethnography of a boxing gym in Chicago, Breeze's (2015) study of the UK roller derby community and sub-culture, and Throsby's (2016) autoethnographic account of UK marathon swimming. In these examples, ethnographic methods allowed for deeper exploration of the sporting culture in hand, relying not just on the face value of the words of those speaking in 'one shot' interviews, but enabling the researcher to see first-hand the types of experiences and interactions that those words aimed to describe. Through the multiple method approach that ethnographic research employs, researchers are able to record individual meanings attached to everyday activities as they happen in situ (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), understand the social norms and culture that encompasses mental states and behaviours, and gain a comprehensive awareness of the lived experiences of the athletes. Ethnography is a combination of research activities, mediated through the researcher, culminating in a textual account of the culture of a social group (Krane & Baird, 2005).

Autoethnographic approach

Autoethnography is a method which draws on the researcher's own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture and subcultures of which they are a member (Allen-Collinson, 2012). It is an approach to research that seeks to describe and systematically analyse the personal experiences of the researcher in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). A researcher uses tenets of both autobiography and ethnography in order to conduct and write an autoethnography, examining the social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, then looking inward and exposing the self (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Atkinson (2012) suggested that the process allows exploration of the particular social processes, experiences, and realities involved in the unfolding of social life. In addition, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2005) posited the idea that culture circulates through us all, and hence through writing about individual experience the researcher is simultaneously writing about social experience, meaning autoethnography is always connected to a world beyond the self.

Autoethnographic approaches (and ethnographic approaches) fully acknowledge the impact and influence of the researcher on the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Autoethnographers recognise the many ways in which personal experience influences the research process, for example the decisions made on who, what, when, where, and how to research and the impact of personal circumstance on these decisions (Ellis, Bochner, & Adams, 2011). Hence these experiences are actively engaged in as part of the process of conducting research. When conducting and writing autoethnography researchers retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies, realisations, and meanings that they have attached to their experiences that have been made possible by being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis et al. (2011) argue that autoethnographers must use their methodological tools and research literature to analyse

their experience, and that they must also consider the ways in which others may experience similar realisations, using personal experience to illustrate and explain cultural experience. They argue that in doing this, an autoethnographer is making characteristics of a culture familiar for both insiders and outsiders. Methods suggested to accomplish this include comparing and contrasting personal experience with existing research into the topic and/or culture (Ronai, 1995; 1996) and interviewing other members of the culture that is being explored (Foster, 2006; Marvasti, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). This they argue, is what distinguishes autoethnography from autobiography – autoethnographers use their personal experiences, but also become participant observers in the culture, like ethnographers, studying a culture's relational practices and shared experiences for the purpose of helping cultural members (insiders) and cultural strangers (outsiders) better understand the culture (Maso, 2001).

Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2005) detailed the potential of autoethnography when studying topics such as sport which are embodied, emotional, and sensory. They acknowledge that the meaningfulness of sport, as a 'thoroughly embodied and practically accomplished activity' (p. 186), is only fully understood if the actor's subjective point of view is examined in depth. They highlight the problem of 'subjectivity and inaccessibility of mind' (p. 186) and how techniques such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation have been imperfect in accessing the sporting mind, suggesting that the result is often a failure to provide 'an in-depth analysis of meaning as constructed by the participants themselves' (Bain, 1995, p. 243). Hence, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2005) present autoethnography as a methodology that has the potential to complement some of these imperfections and failures by offering insight into an individual's meaningful sporting subjectivity using 'unorthodox narrative forms and strong emphasis on embodiment, emotions, and feelings' (p. 187). This is of particular pertinence to this research undertaking

as one which explores not just the embodied nature of the sport itself but also its connection to gender and gendered embodiment. The relationship between the body and mind, which have together been described as 'reversible aspects of a single fabric' (Crossley, 1995, p. 47), is thus central to this research and it is integral that such insight into individuals' thoughts and feelings around such embodied activity is conveyed.

Types of autoethnography

The ways that different forms and types of autoethnography are categorised has been a point of debate amongst ethnographic and autoethnographic researchers. These debates have centred largely upon the distinction between 'evocative' and 'analytical' autoethnographies. Evocative autoethnography can be described as a show stories rather than tell stories approach to autoethnography (Smith, 2017). In this approach, theory is shown through emotionally driven stories with the goal of creating an emotional resonance with the reader, letting the story do the theoretical work on its own. Analytic ethnography (Anderson, 2006), on the other hand, tells the reader what the story aims to theoretically do. There is a theoretical dissection of the story that does not occur in evocative autoethnographies (Smith, 2017). Anderson (2006) proposed analytic autoethnography as an alternative to the evocative autoethnography that had previously been established and used by Ellis (2004). He did so because he expressed concern that the success of evocative autoethnography 'may have the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be' (p. 374). However, in their response to Anderson's (2006) paper, Ellis and Bochner (2006) contested that, although they have used the term evocative autoethnography, all forms of autoethnography should be evocative. In this response, Bochner said: 'evocation is a goal, not a type of autoethnography. I wouldn't think of applying the term 'autoethnography' to texts that are not evocative' (p. 435). Ellis and Bochner (2006) are resistant to the idea of turning

autoethnography ‘into another genre of mainstream, realist ethnography’ (p. 433), they say autoethnography was designed to be unruly and dangerous and would not want it to be tamed by attempts to ‘bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis’ (p. 433). To summarise this debate then, the analytic proposal of Anderson (2006) aims to establish links between the ethnographic tradition and emerging forms of personal narrative whilst Ellis and Bochner (2006) refuse any attempt at autoethnography being recuperated into traditional, mainstream, realist ethnography.

This debate also relates to others around how autoethnography is evaluated or assessed. Criticisms of autoethnography have described it as unscientific, entirely personal and full of bias (Denzin, 2000). Autoethnographers have in turn sought to ‘rethink’ the ways in which we determine the validity of research and have discussed ways in which autoethnographic research should be judged. Some though have also expressed concern around placing too much emphasis on criteria amid concerns of methodological policing (e.g. Bochner, 2000). Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) suggested four goals for evaluating and assessing autoethnographic work. I have summarised these here:

1. Make contribution to knowledge – The first goal of autoethnographic work is defined as a conscious effort to extend existing knowledge.
2. Value the personal and experiential – This second goal includes the featuring of the perspective of the self, exploring experience as a means of insight, and using emotions and bodily experience as a method of understanding.
3. Demonstrate the power, craft, and responsibilities of stories and storytelling – This goal is defined as the showcasing of stories, used in sensemaking and researcher reflexivity to create descriptions and critiques of culture.

4. Take a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation – This fourth goal is defined as the work a researcher does to make research relationships as collaborative, committed, and reciprocal as possible, and to take safeguard identities and protect the privacy of participants.

I agree that these four goals are salient in the assessment of autoethnographic work and discuss qualities that I deem important to autoethnography, hence I have used them to evaluate the validity of this research. In this section I have outlined the debate around evocative and analytic autoethnographies, as well as the assessment and evaluation of autoethnography. In the next section I will outline my approach to evocative and analytical autoethnography in this research and will use Adam's, Jones, and Ellis' (2015) four tests to discuss its validity.

Approach to this research

The combined ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to this research was taken due to my own pre-existing status within the strongwoman culture being studied. Prior to the commencement of the research, I was already an established member of the strongwoman community, having trained and competed as a strongwoman competitor for three years prior to the beginning of the formal fieldwork period. This meant that I had a pre-existing relationship with the culture, community, and those within it that differs from many examples of traditional ethnographic research where the researcher enters a community or culture that they are not familiar with or a part of, stays immersed in that culture for a set period of time, and then leaves the culture once the 'data collection' or fieldwork is complete (O'Reilly, 2012). I did not need to consciously immerse myself in the culture for the purpose of this research, I was already immersed. I also continued to train and compete in the sport even after the formal end of the fieldwork period. Therefore, it seemed logical and useful to

embrace and use my own personal experiences in the sport and as part of that community to contribute to and help to further understanding of the culture and the experiences of those within it. However, it also remained important to capture and utilise not just my experiences and stories in relation to this culture, but to also explore the stories and experiences of others as well. While I recognised that there was value to be added through the contribution of my own personal experiences, with insight deeper than that I could ever get from talking to other competitors, I also felt that my story alone could never fully explore all the nuances of the strongwoman culture or give justice to the diversity of experience that I had witnessed. This was particularly so in regard to the range of different women involved and the range of different reasons and journeys that led them to find their place in this community.

It is also important to note here the occurrence of a particular personal epiphany that occurred during the course of the research that distinguished my experience from that of other competitors or changed my position in the research to some degree. This epiphany came after an ongoing personal exploration regarding my gender identity which led me to question my perceived status as a 'woman' and therefore also as a strong 'woman'. This realisation that I did not identify as a woman stimulated deeper reflection upon my position in the research as a 'fellow strongwoman competitor' alongside the other competitors present in my fieldwork, and hence the relevance of some aspects of my own personal experience. Further reflection on this in relation to the place of my experience within this research is present at different points throughout the thesis where it is felt pertinent to the topics being discussed. Briefly, this realisation further highlighted to me the importance of gaining insight into the bodily experiences of other strongwoman competitors, as well as the importance of my own reflection and recognition of how my experiences regarding my body, as a transgender person, may differ from those of the self-identifying strongwomen in my study.

This research therefore comprised of the co-construction of knowledge from both my own personal experiences and the experiences of others in regard to being a strongwoman competitor and being a part of the strongwoman culture. Further detail as to the specific methods used to achieve this will be outlined in the next part of this chapter, however the working premise of this was essentially that the bringing together of both mine and others' experiences would allow for interactive exchanges and joint reflection that would produce insight and develop understandings beyond that which would have been possible had either mine or others experiences not been utilised. This was a two-way dyadic process – some topics or points of interest were driven by my own personal experience and reflection and then introduced into discussion or interviews (e.g. the potential conflict between aesthetic- and strength-based goals), other topics arose from my observations or interviews with others (e.g. performance-enhancing drugs and the reliance on information from strongman competitors and/or coaches as opposed to other strongwomen), in turn leading me to reflect on my experience of those topics. This was also sometimes an ongoing process in which my personal experiences brought topics to discussion, which were then explored among the experiences of others, and this then provoked further reflection on my own experiences.

It has been argued by some that autoethnography does not need to be seen as a distinct methodology from ethnography, based on the principle that if ethnography is done well, the full immersion of an ethnographer within the culture being studied would produce personal experiences and levels of personal reflection comparable to those detailed in what others term autoethnography. For example, Moors (2017) questions whether autoethnography differs from engagement in participant observation, as a method that involves learning about the lives of others, listening to them, engaging in some of their activities, and reflecting on our own experiences as researchers. Although I do acknowledge that, as in Moors' (2017) argument, many ethnographers will reflect on the place of their own experiences and

influence as a researcher on the study, and that many will embrace and incorporate this within their ethnographic work, I would argue that the experience of an autoethnographer is still distinct from this approach to ethnography. My view, and hence my approach to this research, is that the experiences and position of a researcher who has a pre-existing relationship with the topic of study or who is a pre-existing member of the culture being studied will have differences to those of a researcher who has entered the culture of study purely for the purpose of conducting that piece of research. To exemplify this, if I had never competed in strongwoman before, but did so for the purpose of this research, I may be able to reflect on my experiences in regards to some aspects such as changes to my body or how it felt to compete, but the meaning I attach to different experiences may be different considering they would not be driven or influenced in the same way by any previous motivation for getting involved in the sport, or previous involvement and experiences in various sports and sporting cultures, that was not for the purpose of research. In summary, the experiences of those who would be a part of the culture with or without the presence of a research project will hold differences to the experiences of those who would not be involved in the culture without the motive of conducting research upon it. This is not to discount the experiences of the latter, but to recognise the distinction between the two.

In regard to the debates between evocative and analytic autoethnographies, I would agree with Ellis and Bochner's (2006) statement that evocation is a quality of autoethnography as opposed to a type, and thus in this research evocation has been a central aim of the use of autoethnographic vignettes throughout the thesis. These vignettes tell stories about my own lived experiences of strongwoman, aiming to create an emotional resonance with the reader. At times these vignettes are used as a tool to 'set the scene' at the beginning of a chapter, giving rich insight into a particular element of strongwoman experience, before also exploring the experiences of other strongwomen in this research. However, I do also

draw on the autoethnographic elements of this thesis, and the stories I have told, to further the discussion and analysis in each chapter. Therefore, in relation to this piece of research, I do not feel it is appropriate to draw a hard line between evocative and analytic autoethnography, primarily because of my agreement that evocation is a quality to strive for in all autoethnographic research, and thus that the degree to which the stories shown in autoethnography are subject to a theoretical dissection (Smith, 2017) does not dictate whether or not an autoethnography can be deemed evocative.

Using Adams, Jones, and Ellis' (2015) four goals for assessing autoethnography, this research approach can be judged to be valid because it makes a conscious effort to use personal narratives and autoethnographic reflections as a tool to extend existing knowledge, as well as to give a deeper level of insight into the experience of being a strongwoman. The personal stories featured in this research were used to help explore the subculture of strongwoman through the reflexive, two-way dyadic approach to this research discussed previously. As discussed later in the ethical considerations section of this chapter, great care was taken in this research to be relationally responsible in its approach, for example through the use of ideal types to combat the risk of the narratives of individual participants being recognisable to others in a relative small, close-knit community.

The research process

It is widely accepted that a key component of ethnographic research is how you negotiate and maintain field roles and relationships, for example building rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, O'Reilly, 2012). My pre-existing involvement in the strongwoman culture and insider status meant that I already knew the majority of the strongwomen that became participants in my research, and therefore I did not need to 'gain entry' to the field and build rapport and trust in the same way that an outsider might in order

to conduct research. As well as continuing to train at my local strongman gym with the other strongwomen that trained there, I also had existing contacts and relationships with other strongwoman competitors and other gym owners across the UK that I had met through previous competitions, training days, or gym visits. Therefore, the first step for me in beginning the research process was to get back in touch with those competitors and owners in different gyms to the one I was already training in, to re-establish connections, to explain the aims and scope of the project, and to set-up opportunities for me to go and spend some time training with those competitors at other strongman gyms. This allowed me to continue building rapport and sustain and build upon prior relationships with key figures within the strongwoman community, but also formed a key timepoint in the negotiation of my change of role from participant to researcher-participant. This negotiation was easier when re-establishing connections with those whom I had pre-existing relationships but with whom I spent less time because of their geographical location, because my reaching out and explaining of the research marked a clear new form to my role. Whereas with those who trained locally to me, with whom I spent more time and had stronger relationships, there was not such a clear moment of distinction.

As an existing member of the strongwoman culture, establishing common ground, communicating empathy, and understanding and use of the participants' language were relatively easy for me to do given my prior knowledge and experience of the sport, therefore this encouraged trusting relationships and aided the 'fitting in' process in the gyms and settings that I had not spent as much time in previously (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Acting appropriately within the setting and learning the social norms, which Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest are crucial in these initial stages of fieldwork, were not something that I had to overly consider, as this was not a new setting for me. Perhaps due to the fact that I had previously had some level of interaction with the majority of people I was spending time with

prior to the research commencing, my presence as a researcher did not appear to have a significant impact on the behaviour of those around me – my 'master status', a term used by Ellis (2007), was still as 'another competitor' or 'friend' as opposed to a 'researcher'.

I spent the first three months of this research process in this phase – visiting strongman gyms further afar that I did not usually train at on a regular basis, re-establishing prior connections with other strongwoman competitors across the UK, and continuing with my own ongoing training and competition preparation journey. I introduced the research at the point of reaching back out to these gyms and/or specific competitors, suggesting that I visit for a training session and that we could use that visit for me to explain more about what I was doing and what their involvement might look like. Within a small sporting community, whose limited number of participants and competitors tend to train out of a relatively small number of strongman-specialising gyms across the country, the addition of my researcher status to my existing participant status fairly soon became a well-known fact - at least amongst those who competed or were looking to compete on the qualification pathway from regional to national competition.

Ethnographic conversations formed a part of these early stages of the formal research process, with casual chats and informal questions. O'Reilly (2012) describes this as a passive, informal approach to interviewing, and describes these interactions as the beginning of a long conversation across the course of the fieldwork. She also suggests that this serves purpose in reminding people that you are there as a researcher, which felt particularly important given my existing status as a strongwoman participant. I began to introduce formal interviews with other strongwoman competitors that I had spent time with after three to four months of the research process, having given myself time to identify points of interest, reflect on potential topics for discussion and develop a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews occurred across the course of the next eight months – further details regarding the interview

process are given in the next part of this chapter. During these eight months I continued to train at my own regular strongman gym, I continued to visit other strongman gyms and spend time with other strongwoman competitors, and I continued my own competition journey. During the course of the research I competed in three strongwoman competitions, two of which at a higher level than I had previously competed, which gave me access to further competitors who I met for the first time at these competitions. In particular, my own personal journey out of novice competitions and into the qualification pathway for the national competition meant that I was able to establish rapport with more of the higher-level strongwoman competitors.

Field notes and reflexive journaling

Observation forms the basis, or backbone, of ethnographic research (Ely, 1991). The observer stance in ethnography can range along a continuum from pure observer to pure participant. Atkinson (2012) described the dual role of the ethnographer, as both a participant in the culture, but at the same time as an ethnographic observer. As an autoethnographer and pre-existing strongwoman competitor, I would state that my position in the research was mostly as a participant, but with some researcher's distance at the same time. O'Reilly (2012) explains her stance on participant observer positions is one that believes it is impossible for any observation in ethnography to be 'entirely non-participatory', but on the other hand 'neither can a complete participant be considered an ethnographer' (p. 110). Agreeing with this standpoint, I would place myself as a participant observer. I was engaged in all training activities when I visited gyms and went to training days, I was engaged as a competitor in the competitions I took part in, and even when I went to watch additional competitions that I was not competing in, I was an engaged participant in that environment through my relationships with other competitors and other attendees, and my involvement as an active

spectator/support for those I knew competing. However, the additional researcher status that accompanied my time in the sport from the start of this project meant that I was not solely a participant, and I made mindful strides to distance myself, conscious of the risk of 'going native' and losing sense of any objectivity (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 110).

I made field notes to log all my ethnographic observations during this time. These were often made in my own training log or on my phone, as it would be usual for me to track my training through one of these methods, and therefore I was able to make brief notes during training or competitions discreetly without risk of making those around me self-conscious or allowing my researcher status to have too much of an impact on their behaviour. This discreet process contributed to my ongoing master status as 'friend and competitor' as opposed to 'researcher'. I would often then expand on these brief notes or add anything I hadn't had the chance to note down whilst sitting in the car before I drove home from the gym or competition or event that I had been at. Within a couple of days of the event, I would transfer these observation notes onto Word documents which formed my research log, adding researcher insights and interpretations alongside the field notes I had made (see Appendix C for an example of this).

Throughout the research process I also kept a reflexive journal. This provided opportunity to communicate my feelings about the research process in general (Ely, 1991), as well as my own ongoing reflections on my personal experiences of the strongwoman culture and being a strongwoman competitor. The reflexive journal also enabled me to document, analyse, and assess the process of being an autoethnographer and the challenges that this sometimes caused (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). These reflexive notes were integral to the ongoing research process at the time, but also had many benefits when later brought back into the analysis and writing-up stages, enabling me to fully acknowledge shifts in my own perspective and understandings of different aspects of the strongwoman experience

throughout the process. One key example of this was my own thoughts and beliefs on the use of performance-enhancing drugs, which throughout the research process shifted significantly, as is reflected upon in chapter seven of this thesis.

Interviews

Ely (1991) stated that 'interviews are at the heart of doing ethnography because they seek the words of the people we are studying, the richer the better, so that we can understand their situations with increasingly clarity' (p. 58). Across the course of the research I conducted 21 formal scheduled interviews with 23 different strongwoman competitors from across the UK. 19 of these interviews were one-to-one interviews with individual competitors, the remaining two were joint interviews with two competitors for each. The interviews were all semi-structured with the same interview guide used for each. This guide contained questions such as 'how did you get into strongwoman?' 'What is it that you enjoy about training/competing in strongwoman?' 'What challenges would you say that there in regard to your training/competing in strongwoman?' 'What changes have you noticed in your body since starting strongwoman?' and 'Could you tell me about your experiences of strongwoman competitions?' The full interview guide is included in the appendices of this thesis (Appendix B). A record of these interviews can be found in Appendix A.

I took an autoethnographic reflexive dyadic approach to the interviews (Ellis & Berger, 2003). This type of interview resembles a traditional interview protocol, but with the added dimension of the interviewer sharing personal experience with the topic. The interview is conducted more as a conversation than a hierarchical exchange, and the author reflects on the personal experiences that brought them to the topic and what they learned from their sharing. This was a suitable approach to the interviews that I conducted, as I had some level of existing relationship with all but one of the competitors I interviewed, meaning that they

knew my involvement and history in the sport and would often during interviews make references to previous incidents or previous discussions we had engaged in regarding the topics at hand. It was more appropriate for me to engage in this discussion and acknowledge and utilise this insider status than to put on the 'act' of an outsider researcher looking in at strongwoman culture. Indeed, it was this reflexive, dyadic approach that enabled the co-construction of data between myself and the other strongwoman competitors being interviewed.

The two joint interviews occurred on occasions when I had travelled to other gyms in other parts of the UK to join in with training sessions with other strongwomen who trained together. This is not an unusual activity in the strongwoman community, and these training sessions are often followed by some form of 'refeed', social time and strongwoman chat at a nearby restaurant, café or pub. Hence these situations provided a natural space and time for these conversations to be had and so it made sense for me to incorporate and integrate the more formal interview guide into them. The joint interviews took the form of interactive interviews, a form of collaborative interview in which each of the individuals are given space to share their story (Ellis & Berger, 2002). The focus in this type of interview is on what the group learn together and the understandings that emerge among the participants during their interaction. In both of these joint interviews, each participant was given space to share their individual story before group discussion then in turn related back to these stories and individual experiences. These discussions were a great example of the collaborative, interactively produced knowledge that was co-constructed by both researcher and participants in this research project.

Online data

The organisation of events and communication of important information in both the strongwoman and wider strongman communities occurs predominantly online. Aside from a small number of the biggest international competitions, almost all other events and competitions are organised via Facebook using the Facebook 'event' feature. Additionally, Facebook serves as a key platform for strongwoman competitors to stay in touch after competitions, to share and exchange training and competition tips and experiences, and to connect with others in the sport. Instagram has also become a significant platform for strongwomen to document their training and nutrition practices and 'follow' other strongwomen, including those who are competing at the highest level. Given therefore the integral part of strongwoman culture and community these online social media platforms are, and the richness of social interactions that has been enabled by the internet (Hine, 2000), they were also used to inform this research. This rich online interaction has been instrumental in the development of ethnographic methodologies for documenting those interactions and exploring their connotations (Hine, 2000).

Being a pre-existing member of the community meant that I was myself already immersed in these practices online, and my own social media accounts and feeds featured a large amount of content related to strongwoman. Although online data was not the main focus of the research, my established engagement in the online community of strongwoman meant that it was natural and logical for this to form part of my study and observation of the community, its practices, and the lived experience of those within it. Online data did become important for some elements of the project, particularly in regard to the gatekeeping of the strongwoman community as discussed in chapter six of this thesis, and in general contributed to my understanding of the community as a whole.

Browsing online content related to strongwoman formed a natural part of my daily activity both prior to and during the formal fieldwork period, as this is the primary way, other than by word-of-mouth, to stay up to date with training events, competitions, and any other goings on within the sport. My browsing would usually consist of scrolling through my Facebook and Instagram feeds, which were saturated with posts related to the sport. During the formal fieldwork period I made the decision to screenshot and save any posts that I felt were useful and pertinent to my understanding of the community, of the experiences of others within the sport, or in helping me to identify the topics that I felt should be included within my interview guide. These screenshots and saved posts later contributed to the analysis and write-up stages of the research, adding additional context and examples to many of the topics discussed in the substantive data chapters of this thesis. As discussed, this online data was not the main focus of this research, but did become important for some elements of the project and in general contributed to my understanding of the community.

Ethical considerations

The ethical challenges and considerations involved in this study were mostly derived from two key points: firstly, the relatively small, close-knit nature of the strongwoman (and wider strongman) community, and secondly, my pre-existing status as an active insider participant in the strongwoman community prior to the commencement of the research. These presented a number of ethical challenges pertaining to issues of maintaining participant anonymity, the overlapping of my relationships with participants as a researcher, fellow competitor, and sometimes friend, and 'leaving the field' as a researcher in a sport and community that I continued to be involved in as a participant. These challenges and considerations will be explored and discussed in this section of the chapter.

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained through the Loughborough University Ethical Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee via submission of the Ethical Clearance Checklist, and ethical approval was granted in March 2017. The ethics checklist acted as a guide for the commencement and process of the research. A participant information sheet and informed consent form were approved by the ethics committee and these are included in the appendices of this thesis (Appendix D & E respectively). Both documents were either sent ahead to potential participants via email when reaching out and re-establishing contact with strongwomen in different parts of the country or were shown to potential participants when I met them again for the first time since the beginning of the formal fieldwork period. They were given the opportunity to ask questions and any queries were clarified before they signed the informed consent form. The participant information sheet and informed consent form were also shown to participants again prior to their formal interview, giving another opportunity to ask questions and clarify any points as required. At this stage the purpose of recording the interview was further explained, along with explanation that upon transcription, references to specific names and/or places would be anonymised. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and later uploaded to secure Loughborough University systems in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Once this upload had occurred and back-up copies were saved, the audio files were deleted from the Dictaphone.

Anonymity and ideal types

Strongwoman in the UK is made up of a relatively small number of people and thus it is a sporting community in which many people tend to know each other well, or at least know of each other and their stories or backgrounds. Because of this, when it came to making decisions on how best to present and write up the study there were challenges in maintaining

anonymity of those who contributed to the research. I had initially planned to use pseudonyms, but when I began the writing up process it became clear that individual stories, work, and home situations would make each individual still too easily identifiable within such a small close-knit community. Therefore, I decided to create three characters that would represent three different phases of involvement in strongwoman and its community. 'Nelly the novice' represents the novice strongwoman experience, 'Isobel the intermediate' represents the intermediate strongwoman experience, and 'Ella the elite' represents the elite strongwoman experience. These three characters, based on Weber's "ideal types" (Runciman, 1978), are used as a conceptual tool to understand and analyse the social reality of the lived experiences of those individuals in this study. This approach has been successfully used in other sporting ethnographic studies, for example, Klein's (1993) study on bodybuilding gyms, in which he constructed 'Olympic Gym', a single fictitious gym used to represent four single gyms in which Klein conducted ethnographic research. Another example is Howe and Morris' (2009) study on middle- and long-distance running in which 'Richard', a fictional character, represents an amalgamation of ethnographic research.

The experiences described for each of the three characters are each based on amalgamations of stories and experiences from the study that represent that phase of participation and involvement in the strongwoman culture. For each particular topic discussed in the thesis, a narrative for each of these three characters is used as a starting point for discussion and analysis of the experience of that aspect of strongwoman culture in that phase of involvement. It is acknowledged that a potential criticism of this use of ideal types as a conceptual tool could be that it does not allow space to portray the nuance of experiences at each stage of being a strongwoman. However, as posited by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), the "ideal type" approach is an 'analytic construct. It does not, and is not intended to, correspond in every detail to all observed cases. It is intended to capture key features of a

social phenomenon' (p. 195-196). Hence, I have used these narratives as a starting point to discussion and analysis, each narrative detailing a composite of the most common experiences amongst strongwomen who contributed to this study. This then provides a basis and platform for further discussion and analysis of the differences and nuances in others experiences without telling each person's story individually and risking the loss of anonymity for those involved.

Whilst progression from novice to intermediate to elite is possible and for some of those contributors to the study this has occurred, it is important to recognise that not all strongwomen will progress through these stages. Some may never progress beyond the novice stage, either because they choose not to or because they do not have the ability. The majority will reach the intermediate phase but not progress to the elite stage. As discussed later in the thesis, taking the step from intermediate level to elite level requires a much larger commitment and sacrifice in terms of everyday practices and experiences. Therefore, not all contributors to the study will have informed the intermediate and elite narratives, these are informed only by those contributors who have experienced that stage of involvement.

Ethical approach

Relational ethics were applied to this research. These have been defined as doing what is necessary to be 'true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on others' (Slattery & Rapp, 2003, p. 55). It has also been posited that the central question to relational ethics is 'what should I do now?' as opposed to the statement 'this is what you should do now'. Lincoln (1995) suggested that relational ethics recognise and value mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and communities in which they live and work (p. 287). Ellis (2007) said that a part of relational ethics is that we seek to deal with the reality and changing

relationships with our research participants over time. We have to address questions and dilemmas surrounding what our ethical responsibilities are when our participants become our friends, and what our responsibilities are towards intimate others who are implicated in the stories we write about ourselves. This has been explained as a process that requires researchers to acknowledge interpersonal bonds to others and initiate and maintain conversations surrounding our relationships and responsibilities as a researcher (Bergum, 1998; Slattery & Rapp, 2003).

Friendship and ethnographic research

The typical positivist paradigm to research requires a separation between the researcher(s) and the participant(s) based on the idea that any kind of personal involvement would bias the research, disturb the natural setting, and/or contaminate the results. However, Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014), along with many other researchers taking an interpretivist position, argue that emotional involvement and emotional reflexivity can provide a rich resource in ethnographic research, and do not necessarily constitute a 'problem' that needs to be avoided. Tillmann-Healy (2003) proposed the concept of friendship as method, described as being built upon the principles of interpretivism, taking reality to be both pluralistic and constructed in language and interaction.

Tillmann-Healy (2003) described friendship and fieldwork as 'similar endeavours' (p. 732), both involving being in the world with others. This similarity is proposed as existing through key characteristics of both, such as the need to gain entrée, to negotiate rules, and to experience developmental ties that pass through stages from role-limited interaction, to integration to stabilisation. Tillmann-Healy suggests that although employing traditional forms of data gathering such as participant observation and interviewing, when researching with the practices of friendship the methods we use to build and sustain friendship are the

most integral ones, (e.g. conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability). Friendship as method is described not as strategy aimed at gaining further access, but as 'a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project' (p. 735).

I did not plan to adopt the concept of friendship as method prior to the beginning of my study, however during and after the official fieldwork period it became clear that there was an overlap between my position as researcher and as a friend in the case of many of those strongwomen who contributed to my study. Like other researchers, such as Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014), I recognised that the friendship dimension I had with many of those contributing to the research both enhanced my research relationships but also generated challenges. Hence friendship as method became a relevant approach to my research and the decisions I made regarding ethical considerations such as maintaining anonymity, what stories and experiences I could or should use or not use, and the level to which those relationships continued or didn't continue after the end of the formal fieldwork period.

One of the most notable challenges of the overlap in my relationship with participants as a friend, as a fellow competitor, and as a researcher was making decisions as to what I could use within the study and what I could not. The multiple and varying types of relationship I had with the participants in this study meant that it was often difficult to determine what was being said to me as a friend and/or as a fellow competitor, and what was being said to me as a researcher. Although I was open about the research and everyone was aware of my researcher status, because I was still training in gyms where my participants were based, and with some who had become interview participants in my study, the lines were blurred for me as to when the research stopped, and the friendship/training partner relationship started. For example, any conversation I had with another strongwoman during a training session we were having together if it was one where I had not explicitly stated

beforehand that I was going there to train for the purpose of the research. In those situations, the person I was training with knew I was still conducting the research, but despite me explaining the nature of the research as an immersion in the culture and based to a large extent on everyday observations and interactions, I was not always sure that they fully appreciated that for me that operated on a 'full time' basis. I mitigated this potential problem by seeking later clarification with participants as to whether they were happy for me to use certain conversations or interactions that occurred during training within my research. Some of these happened soon after the interaction, others were later on in the thesis writing process. My continual involvement in the sport and maintaining contact with those involved enabled me to do such checks.

Another challenge that I found was deciphering to what level I could or should engage in conversations and debates amongst groups of strongwomen that I previously would have shared my opinion on amongst a group that I would consider friends. The most challenging example of this was discussions around steroids and performance-enhancing drugs more widely. As discussed later in this thesis, performance-enhancing drugs in strongwoman are largely shrouded within a culture of silence and hence speculation can occur between strongwomen about other strongwomen as to 'who is and who isn't' partaking in these practices. In situations where the strongwoman being discussed was someone I had interviewed and spoken to about performance-enhancing drugs, it was difficult to know how best to engage in the conversation because I did not want to encourage speculation but was also worried about accidentally revealing information told to me in confidence. My instinct was usually to stay silent or as unengaged in the conversation as possible, but by remaining silent what might other people interpret from that? On most occasions I was able to deflect and/or remove myself from the conversation, often by making a swift return to my 'next set'

and jumping back into training activity if the conversation was occurring in a training environment.

When I conducted interviews with participants, particularly those who I knew well, either as a friend or a fellow competitor, further challenges were negotiated. In the majority of interviews, there would tend to be a period of conversation prior to starting the formal interview, i.e. before the tape recorder was started. As strongwoman was the main connection I had with those I was interviewing, conversation often naturally flowed into areas that I planned to ask them about during the interview. Worried that the conversation I wanted to capture in the interview was being played out before the interview had started, learning how to negotiate this conversation and move on to the start of the interview was a challenge that I felt I needed to overcome. Once this had been negotiated though, I still often grappled with the question of whether it would be right to use in my research anything that had been said prior to the formal interview and/or tape-recording beginning. Equally, in many of the interviews the interviewee would continue talking immediately after I turned the tape recording off.

In some cases, it was clear that the participant intended their next words to be 'off the record', in others it just seemed as though they were keen to continue the conversation we were having. Given that these conversations occurred around the period of time that formed each interviewee's opportunity to contribute anything that they wanted to the study, I made the decision that it would not be right to use any of this material unless I asked for specific permission from the interviewee in question. Goodwin, Pope, Mort, and Smith (2003) discuss similar ethical dilemmas as the first author grappled with her insider status in an ethnographic study of expertise in academia. In this study, Goodwin explains how she combated this by taking steps to clarify what she called 'ambiguous' data at every opportunity (p. 571). In this

research, by seeking retrospective permission from an interviewee I was clarifying the use of 'ambiguous' data too.

Leaving the field

As my participation and involvement in strongwoman pre-existed the formal fieldwork period, which began in April 2017 and continued after the end of the formal fieldwork period, which concluded in April 2018, the boundaries of this involvement were not clear cut. I began preliminary observations and ethnographic conversations in April 2017 at the beginning of the fieldwork period. Formal interviews began in July 2017 and continued through the majority of the main ethnographic fieldwork period until February 2018, after which point I began to close the fieldwork over the months of March and April 2018. There was a challenge in knowing when to draw the line on what informed my study and what did not. I continued to observe points of interest after the 'formal' fieldwork period had ended. In relation to the friendship as method approach, throughout the course of the research I had maintained relationships that I had prior to the research, I also developed relationships that had pre-existed the research, and in occasional cases I had developed relationships that had not existed prior to the research beginning. Although it could be argued that the latter of these were developed for the purpose of the research, it could also be suggested that they would have been an organic production of my further involvement in the sport with or without the research focus. This is reasonable to suggest because the research period coincided with the year that my involvement progressed from novice competitions to starting to compete in the regional and national competition qualification pathway.

In leaving the field, which in reality I never really 'left' as such, I decided that there was no ethical need for me to discontinue any of the relationships I had formed and/or developed during the research period, as I did not perceive any of them to have been formed

purely for the purpose of the research, and I knew that my contact and interaction with them would continue naturally through my continued involvement in the sport. Some of these relationships have continued as they were, others have dwindled although there is still some interaction. This has largely been due to either logistical reasons, such as me travelling to train at different gyms less often, or my decision not to compete in strongwoman anymore, but to compete in strongman instead. Thus my distancing from the sport in terms of my own competition and involvement has meant that I am not so closely entwined in the experiences of some of those who contributed to my study as I am no longer competing against them. In the instances of friendships that did, and still do, continue, there were sometimes things that were further said or observed that were relevant to the research. In these instances, I took a case-by-case approach and if I deemed something to be important and that including it would add value to the research then I asked the person in question whether they would be happy for me to use it or not.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic research compiles a large amount of data, which takes different forms – e.g. in this study I had interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and online data. My approach to data analysis in this research therefore took an approach that worked to build a big picture of findings by building relationships between different parts of the data that I had. I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on the interview transcripts, coding themes and sub-themes that were evident in the data, before then taking the discrete concepts and categories identified from this and applying them to the other data that I had compiled, the field notes and the online data. This process is called selective coding and refers to the further definition, development, and refinement of these concepts that are brought together to form a larger story (Price, 2010). This process though was not a one-way linear process. Instead I

adopted an approach that repeated this process at every stage, continuing to refine and develop my core analytical concepts as I moved between the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and online data.

I took a manual approach to this data analysis, deciding that the benefits to using software for qualitative analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) did not outweigh the difficulties for new users (Gilbert, 2002). Mind-mapping became an integral part of my data analysis. In mind-mapping, primary branches represent the major ideas or themes around the central topic, and secondary branches include more concrete examples (Burgess-Allen & Owen-Smith, 2010). Mind-mapping has been suggested as beneficial when handling large volumes of data (Northcott, 1996). I created these mind maps at several points throughout the analysis process, helping me to think through the links between different aspects of the ethnographic data and to build relationships between them. This visual representation assisted the cyclical process of coding the large volume of data I was working with.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter has outlined the methodology, research design, and research methods that were adopted in this research to explore the subculture of strongwoman and examine the practices, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of those who train and compete within it. I began by outlining the key features and relevant aspects of ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches to research, with particular focus on their suitability to the study of embodiment and sport. I then went on to explain how and why the two come together, including the differences between them and the decisions made to make use of an autoethnographic approach. I then focused on the practicalities of the fieldwork process in this research undertaking, and the specific methods undertaken including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, reflexive journaling, and the use of online data, in order

to achieve the co-construction of data and knowledge between the participants and the researcher. I then explored the ethical challenges and considerations involved in conducting this research. This comprised of an outline of the ethical approach, and exploration and discussion of the ethical dilemmas raised before, during and after the time of this research, and the formal fieldwork period. Finally, the chapter explained the data analysis process that led to the development of the themes that form the basis for the four substantive data chapters that follow. The first of these explores the journey that strongwomen take into the sport, and the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman. The second explores strongwoman's liberating and/or empowering potential as an activity that focuses on practical achievement as opposed to aesthetics. The third explores the strong set of values that the strongwoman community is built upon and how these are experienced and acted upon. The fourth explores the place of performance-enhancing drugs in strongwoman and the culture of silence surrounding their use.

Chapter Four

‘EVERY STRONGWOMAN HAS A STORY BEHIND THEM’: WHO COMPETES IN STRONGWOMAN AND WHAT JOURNEY PRECEDES THEIR INVOLVEMENT?

As described in the introduction to this thesis, strongwoman, and its counterpart strongman, form a relatively small sport in the UK, with a very limited amount of media coverage and exposure. The relative anonymity of this sport, as one that lacks mainstream visibility but also as one that is small in terms of numbers (albeit growing), was demonstrated in this study through the number of strongwoman competitors who stated that the first response they often received when telling others that they compete in strongwoman is ‘what’s that?’ The standard return to this from people within the strongwoman and strongman communities was suggested to be, ‘have you ever seen *World’s Strongest Man* on TV at Christmas time?’ This competition has been a regular television feature since its inception in 1977, firstly via CBS in the U.S., later via the BBC in the UK, and in recent years it has been a staple feature of Christmas-time television on Channel 5 in the UK. It has been widely considered the leading brand name in the sport, claiming a worldwide viewership of 220 million (Day, 2005). Both in my own experiences of this, and through experiences that the strongwomen involved in this study reported, when prompted with this many people then seemed to have a better awareness and understanding of what strongman and/or strongwoman is. However, many appeared to be unaware of its existence in any form beyond the *World’s Strongest Man* competition, but specifically unaware of its form as a sport for female competitors.

Strongwoman competitors have also suggested that their sport is often conflated with bodybuilding, regularly facing questions, similarly to I have, such as ‘so do you get on stage

in a bikini?' This conflation of bodybuilding with weightlifting and other strength-based sports has also occurred in the extant strength- and muscularity-based sport research, as documented in the literature review chapter of this thesis (Hargreaves, 1994). This demonstrates the dominance of bodybuilding in much of society's perception of strength- and muscle-based sports, but also exposes a misunderstanding of what is involved in bodybuilding, as was the example in the introductory chapter where I overheard someone referring to the lifting of weights in a bodybuilding competition – something that does not occur.

This conflation and misunderstanding of female strength- and muscle-based sports highlights the lack of visibility they have in comparison to some other female sports that are culturally visible, such as women's football, cricket, hockey, netball, or tennis for example. The majority of these culturally visible female sports are what would be considered mainstream sports, and some of these will have been taught at school, whereas strongman is not. All of the strongwomen involved in this research entered the sport in adult life, whereas in other sports, e.g. netball or football, most would have had some exposure to, and participation during childhood or adolescence. In this respect, strongwoman has more in common with niche or subcultural sports in terms of its lack of visibility, recognition, and understanding. Given this lack of exposure, understanding and awareness of what strongwoman is, and its existence as a niche, subcultural sport, a significant question within this research is that of how strongwoman competitors 'discover' the sport and how and why they begin taking part.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and explain the experiences of strongwoman competitors in terms of their journey into the sport, including: who competes in strongwoman, when did they get into it, how did they get involved, what did their first venture into the sport consist of, why did they get involved, as well as why did they continue

to maintain their involvement and participation? The chapter begins with an autoethnographical account of my own journey into strongwoman, exploring the journeys and experiences of others that have been accessed via interviews and ethnographic observations, bringing the two together to examine the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman. At the end of this chapter, I introduce 'Nelly' the novice strongwoman, the first of the three ideal types I use in this thesis, as explained in chapter three, the methodology chapter. This chapter details the journeys that strongwomen take, the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman, and into 'being' a strongwoman. It is at this stage that the strongwomen begin to take up the role of 'Nelly the novice'. Going forward into the following chapters, the character of 'Nelly' will be used, alongside 'Isobel' the intermediate strongwoman, and 'Ella' the elite strongwoman, in exploring and explaining the experiences of the strongwomen in this study in relation to each chapter's focus.

Beginning with an exploration of my own journey into strongwoman, the following autoethnographical vignette documents my experience of competing in a strongwoman competition for the first time:

I felt the nerves wash over me as I pulled up outside the gym, a unit tucked away on an outer town industrial estate. As I got out of the car, two friends in tow for moral support, my legs felt heavy and unprepared for what lie ahead. I had never been into a gym like this until now. Huge very heavy looking tractor tyres lay on the floor at one end – 'Wait' I thought, 'one of the events today is tyre flips…Which one of those am I meant to be able to lift?' I remember thinking in horror. I'd randomly signed up for this competition after discovering a new-found love of weight training in the gym, but I'd never touched a single piece of strongman equipment in my life. It was the second of three physical challenges I'd rather spontaneously and non-strategically decided to take on that year, looking for a new challenge as my long-term interest in my current sport, cricket, was beginning to wane: run a

half marathon, compete in a strength-based competition, and climb Kilimanjaro in an organised charity hike.

Once I'd been registered I hung around nervously in one corner of the gym. As other competitors began to arrive I remember trying to gage what level I thought that they were at, quietly hoping that there were others amongst them that were as inexperienced as me. 'Why did I ever think this would be a good idea?' I questioned myself as more competitors continued to arrive and I began to feel more and more out of my depth. I followed the lead of others as I tried to figure out when I should warm up, how long I should warm up for, what I should warm up with. Eventually the competition began. Six events, and aside from the deadlift, which was up first, I'd never tried any of them before as they were all very strongman-specific movements requiring strongman equipment that wasn't available at standard commercial gyms like mine – log press, farmers walk, sled drag, yoke, and then finally tyre flips – but wait, no… they'd decided to change the tyre flips to a van pull – A VAN PULL?!?! Yes, a van pull – a 3.5 tonne transit van… for twenty metres...

The van pull was the last event of the day. By this point I had exceeded my own expectations in every other event. I remained convinced that this one was beyond my capabilities though. 'There's no way this is going to move' I said to my friends as we stood in the car park waiting for my name to be called. But it did move… very slowly, but it did move, and for the full twenty metres too. 'I pulled a transit van!' were my first words to everyone who subsequently asked me how the competition had gone. I had placed last in a field of twelve – a fact that bothered me far less than my strong competitive streak had anticipated. I had achieved things that I did not think I could achieve – how that compared to others at that moment in time felt irrelevant to me. I had done something cool, something that most people can't say that they have… I had pulled a transit van! If the rest of the day hadn't completely

convinced me that this was something I would want to try again, then that part definitely had – the sense of achievement afterwards was incomparable to anything else I'd ever done.

(An account of my first strongwoman competition: 21st June 2014)

My journey into strongwoman

In this section I detail my own journey into strongwoman that preceded my participation in that first novice strongwoman competition described in the previous autoethnographic account. This journey was one characterised by a love of competitive sport conflicted with a turbulent relationship with 'general fitness' activities. I had grown up with competitive sport, both watching and playing. I played both football and cricket at a competitive level from a young age, and by the time my attention began to shift to strongwoman I had played competitive cricket for over a decade, including brief involvement at representative levels. I loved playing, I loved competing, and I would always give any sport a go if I had the opportunity. But sitting alongside this journey in competitive sport was a simultaneous one in health, fitness, and body image that I did not love anywhere near as much. I had an unhealthy relationship with my body throughout my teenage years and into my adult life. The hate I had for how my body looked acted as my motivation for following a range of overly-restrictive diets, yo-yo dieting between spells of intense restriction and subsequent rebound spells where it often felt like I had lost all control. But this body dissatisfaction was also my motivation for engaging in fitness activities that I didn't enjoy.

I'd later, as an adult, come to the realisation that some of this hate for my body had always been a symptom of the gender dysphoria that I was experiencing, and therefore to some extent was beyond the control of diet and exercise. At the time though, completely unaware that that was the case, I attributed all my unhappiness with my body to my weight,

and hence I continued to engage in diet and exercise behaviours that I thought would help to change this, 'if only I just tried harder, ate less, exercised more…' I grappled with the 'big is bad' mentality, believing that as someone who was perceived as female, I needed to be smaller. This 'big is bad' mentality was described in the literature review of this thesis as being partly derivative of the notion that large muscles are not feminine (Bordo, 1993), and has been acted upon in bodybuilding contexts, with the introduction of femininity rules to limit competitors to an 'appropriate size' for a woman (Bunsell, 2013).

For the majority of this time, other than playing sport, I viewed exercise as a chore. Despite already being reasonably active through my sporting ventures, the additional exercise felt like something that I hated doing but that I had to do if I wanted to make my body look 'better'. I first joined my local gym as soon as I was old enough to do so at the age of sixteen, and that marked the start of a long-term behaviour pattern which would consist of fluctuations between periods of regular, highly structured gym attendance and periods of little to no gym attendance at all. This irregularity was borne out of extreme self-consciousness in the gym and a strong dislike for the types of activities I was engaging in. These were almost always forms of exercise and training that are widely deemed the standard gender-appropriate activities for young women - either long, steady state cardio sessions such as on the treadmill or exercise bike, which I deemed as long, dull, and boring; or group exercise classes such as spin, step, and body attack, in which attendance was always dominated by women and in which I felt inadequate, only serving to increase my self-consciousness and uncomfortableness in being in a gym environment. Hence, despite the intense need I felt to make changes to my body, I found it near impossible to maintain a regular, consistent exercise regime.

The first significant step on my journey to discovering strongwoman was when I first made what felt like a very bold move into the 'weights section' of the gym I was attending. It

was a heavily male-dominated space that felt intimidating to someone who had no experience of lifting weights, and it was only because I had started going to the gym with one of my female cricket teammates that we were able to build up the courage to take that step together. It didn't take long for me to realise that lifting weights was something I enjoyed. It made me feel strong, it made me feel better about my body even before there was any noticeable physical change, and most crucially, it felt like something I could be good at – as opposed to the running and other previous fitness ventures in which I had always felt so incompetent. Again, retrospectively, I can appreciate that there was more than a small part of my enjoyment in lifting weights that stemmed from its gender-affirming nature, indeed it is the experience of feeling strong and feeling muscular, the antithesis to what I was trying to achieve in my previous diet and exercise behaviours, that did and still do make me feel most comfortable in my body. Hence my motivation to continue lifting weights and eventually begin and maintain my participation to continue in strongwoman was largely a result of this impact. To my surprise at this stage though, beginning to lift weights meant that going to the gym started to become something I enjoyed, and even looked forward to.

Lifting weights soon became central to the training programme that my teammate and I had created for ourselves. We became fully immersed in trying to learn more, teaching ourselves different types of lifts using online videos and by following strength training and fitness experts on social media. This switch into general strength training and the space that this kind of online content began to take up on my social media news feeds eventually led me to stumble across the novice strongwoman competition that I first competed in. *World's Strongest Man* had been something I had watched regularly on television when I was younger, but as suggested previously I, like many others, had been unaware of the existence of this sport beyond its one televised competition. I had little knowledge about where I could go to train the competition events specifically. Strongman and strongwoman competitions

generally involve utilising a range of highly unusual, equipment that for the most part do not exist in commercial gyms, for example logs, tyres, atlas stones, and kegs. Despite this, I decided to enter, on the basis that I could still train to become as strong as I could in my usual gym with more standard forms of equipment, turn up for the competition, give these more unusual events a go and just see what happened. The competition experience described in the previous vignette was the result, a day which marked the start of my strongwoman experience.

This section has explored my own journey into the sport. In the next section of this chapter I will begin to introduce findings from other strongwomen involved in this research, drawing on interview quotes to explore and explain the journeys into the sport that many of these strongwomen have taken. As has been alluded to in various parts throughout this thesis thus far, strongwoman's existence as a niche subcultural sport, with a lack of visibility, means that the path that individuals take before beginning their strongwoman journey is rarely as straightforward as it being something they have seen and wanted to try. Here then, I explore the different routes that strongwomen in this study took as they 'stumbled' into strongwoman.

'Stumbling' into strongwoman

'I started off just going to the gym trying to lose a bit of weight…'

The quote above encapsulates what was the beginning of the journey into strongwoman for many of the women in this study, a route that has many similarities to my own. For the clear majority, they did not begin this journey with the already established intention of competing in strongwoman, it was something they almost 'stumbled' into through the beginning of some form of health and/or fitness journey. For many of the women

I met and spoke to, as well as for me, the beginning of that health and/or fitness journey was driven by the aim of losing weight, taking a predominantly aesthetic-focused approach to their goals that often heavily featured participation in cardio-based exercise. These goals and exercise behaviours were typically characteristic of what is often deemed to align with societal norms of femininity, and the 'big is bad' mentality. For example, one novice strongwoman competitor spoke of her beginnings in the health and fitness world:

> 'I just used to come and do classes. I was a bit of a cardio bunny as they'd say, I used to go to just like a leisure centre, so I used to go there and be so proud of like how much I could row or how fast I could run a mile and I was yeah, very trying to sort of get skinny, even though I wasn't really big in the first place anyway.'

This competitor was not the only strongwoman who began their journey as a self-professed cardio bunny. Many of the strongwomen I spent time with described similar cardio-focused first ventures into gyms and physical activity. This is a reflection of the long-established gendered body ideals that are so often perpetuated both in the fitness industry and wider society, prescribing strength as the masculine body ideal and thinness as the feminine body ideal (Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002; Salvatore & Marecek, 2010). Salvatore and Marecek (2010) argue that these gendered body ideals have a significant impact on the type of exercise that people choose to participate in – men must build muscle, while women must burn fat. This trend is changing in recent times, as discussed in the introduction chapter of this thesis, and resistance training is becoming more accessible and muscularity more desirable for women, however the cultural dissociation between women and lifting weights is still

pervasive in many mainstream health and fitness settings. In line with this, another competitor described her early exercise choices whilst pursuing her weight loss goals:

> ‘When I first met my PT (personal trainer), at that point I was a complete cardio bunny, there’s a gym round the corner from here, so when we moved in here I was doing back to back classes, I’d do two spin classes, then on the next day I’d go and do the boxercise, then the next day body pump, like every night I would do something.’

While for some of the competitors, their initial weight loss goals were self-driven through their own desire to change their body’s appearance, for others there was also the presence of secondary influence from doctors and medical professionals who emphasised the need for weight loss change for health purposes. One elite strongwoman competitor spoke of how crucial her initial exercise programme was for her health:

> ‘When I started I was referred to the gym by my doctor because I was 21 stone 10, I couldn’t walk upstairs without getting out of breath… In the beginning it was life-saving. There was no choice.’

Similarly, another competitor disclosed the advice she received from her doctor that stressed the importance of her losing weight for her health:

> ‘I just went to the gym, just as a regular gym-goer doing body attack, body pump, body everything like that because I was really obese and the doctor said that you know I needed to lose weight basically.’

Whether the motivation to lose weight was for aesthetic reasons, health, or both, it appeared that many of the strongwoman competitors who began their journey with a weight loss goal did so through their participation in cardio-based exercise activity, predominantly in commercial type gyms. One exception to this was a competitor who explained the reasons why she chose to go straight to a small bodybuilding gym instead of a commercial gym:

> ‘I knew the guys that trained there, they weren’t interested in looking at anyone else, they were solely involved in what they were doing. As big as I was, I didn’t wanna walk into a place where there was 50 to 100 people on treadmills, very… already fit, already lean, and feel very self-conscious. I knew at this tiny gym no one cared, no one spoke to me and I was just able to get on, do my own thing and not worry about people looking at me as I was trying to run. I didn’t wanna be in a place where there’s just people everywhere and they just, and they do just stare at you, I hate to say it.’

Assumedly because this strongwoman already knew people from the bodybuilding gym, she was able to hold a different perception than arguably most others would when first searching for a gym that they would feel comfortable at. Bodybuilding gyms are often perceived as hardcore, ‘spit and sawdust’ type gyms and hence as potentially less welcoming of beginners or people who are not already ‘in shape’ or have limited knowledge of how to

train. Commercial gyms therefore tend to be the most common first gym for most people, as they appear to be more welcoming for the 'average' gym user.

'Stop doing all that cardio and go and lift some heavy shit'

Many of the strongwomen described a point in their health and/or fitness journeys in which lifting weights/strength training became something that they started to become engaged in, either as an addition to, or instead of, some of their current cardio-based training routines. The above quote used to title this sub-section was what one strongwoman reported that her personal trainer had said to her when she reached out to him for help after hitting a plateau in her weight loss:

> 'I was like what do you mean? At that point I'd never lifted anything, and he was like seriously just trust me, drop two to three exercise classes, do that and then lift three times a week. It was just trusting him really.'

The slight reluctance at the suggestion of lifting weights described by this strongwoman was not unique to her. There are two points of resistance that I have heard identified by many strongwomen during my time in the sport. The first is that reducing cardiovascular exercise to engage in weight/strength training would have negative consequences for their weight loss goals. The second is concerns that this shift in activity would cause them to look 'too bulky', forming part of an association between muscularity and masculinity, an association that has been seen in previous literature, with the perception that 'excessive' musculature on women is masculine and socially unacceptable (Krane, 2001)

and avoidance of weight training due to a fear of displaying muscularity (Grogan et al., 2004). This implies that engaging in weight training will have gendered consequences.

Hence, the period in which the strongwomen in this study began to be persuaded to give strength training a try was described as one in which many relied on their trust of the people that were suggesting it – these people more often than not being male personal trainers or coaches. In trying strength training for the first time, they were trusting the suggestion that this was something that they either might want to do or would find useful to do in pursuit of their goals, and not something that was going to make their gendered and aesthetic-based concerns a reality. This was the first step for many into an activity associated with strength – the 'quintessentially masculine attribute' (Shilling & Bunsell, 2014, p. 481), as opposed to aerobic fitness or fat burning activities, deemed as more feminine/female-appropriate. Hence this step could be seen as the first 'transgressive' step, or a significant point in the negotiation of gender and gendered aesthetics in their health and/or fitness journeys.

CrossFit – an introduction to resistance-based activity

CrossFit is a branded fitness trend. It consists of a variety of physical disciplines including gymnastics, Olympic Weightlifting, and functional training. These disciplines are combined to form a variety of high-intensity exercise routines (Edmonds, 2019). CrossFit was officially established in 2000, branding itself as the 'sport of fitness', and has seen rapid growth rates well beyond those of other well-known fitness franchises, such as Planet Fitness and Anytime Fitness, hitting 10,000 affiliates worldwide in 2014 (Beers, 2014, p. 3). As a branded fitness trend with good advertisement strategies, CrossFit has had a level of cultural visibility since its conception, and hence it arguably is a more likely first step into strength-

and resistance-based activity than other strength-sports which have lacked the same visibility, such as strongwoman.

CrossFit has some overlap and cross-over with strongman/strongwoman movements, mainly through its incorporation of compound lifts such as squats, deadlifts, and overhead presses, but also through its occasional use of specific strongman equipment, most notably atlas stones. Several of the strongwomen that I interviewed in this study described how they had 'stumbled' into strongwoman via their membership at CrossFit gyms, for example:

> 'I first got an interest in strongwoman when I was at CrossFit… they had stones and a log so when I first started training I was doing CrossFit and then I saw [name of a strongwoman] there training a bit and then they started to introduce a strongman class on a Sunday at CrossFit. So I just sort of dabbled in that and we did some heavy sled pulls and some stones and things like that and I really enjoyed it, I really enjoyed doing a different type of lifting.'

This strongwoman describes how the presence of strongman-type training at their CrossFit gym, in conjunction with the introduction to it from someone already involved, provided their first experience of the sport. This was similar for another of the strongwomen, who describes how someone she met at CrossFit went on to own a strongman gym that she later became a member of:

> 'I got into it by accident, and it's all [name of gym owner's] fault. To be fair I first met him when I did CrossFit, at the CrossFit box, he only went for a few

> times… but then we randomly kept in touch… he sent an invite saying, 'I'm starting something of my own, do you fancy coming down?'… went a couple of times… and then it just went from there really, but it was kind of by accident'.

Notably, both of these strongwomen described similar journeys to the previous strongwomen in this chapter who had begun a health and fitness journey based on weight loss or weight management in some form. For these two participants, CrossFit was an additional stepping stone towards strongwoman that many of the others did not take. The appeal of CrossFit for both of these women was seemingly in its difference from their experience of 'standard' commercial gyms. The first said:

> 'My friend messaged me and said I've started this new thing called CrossFit it's amazing you should come down one time. So I went, and I was like I quite like this, this is a bit different, it's a bit fun. Again, not a standard gym, I thought yeah I quite like this.'

CrossFit can be deemed 'not a standard gym' for many reasons, but one in particular that should be considered important here is that its spaces are usually mixed gender, meaning that the traditional divide between men's and women's activities that is still upheld in many commercial gym settings is not so evident, with everyone engaging in the same resistance-based activities. This might help to diminish any feeling of transgressing a perceived norm of what constitutes 'feminine-appropriate' sports, despite participating in activities associated with masculinity and contradictory to the hegemonic femininity that many feel they are expected to perform (Krane et al., 2004). Furthermore, it can be argued that the normalisation

of women's strength-based activity and visibility of other women engaging in these activities at CrossFit reduces the amount of trust required to give them a try that was previously described in this chapter when a male personal trainer suggested their benefit. The use of the word 'fun' to describe her CrossFit experience mirrors a step in this participant's own journey similar to the step in mine and others', in which there is a discovery of a different type of training that feels like less of a chore and more as something that brings a level of enjoyment. The second of these two strongwomen also alluded to this when she described the appeal of CrossFit when seeing it in action for the first time:

> 'I started training in the gym just doing my own thing and it was a bit slow and I kind of didn't really have a direction. I went for a sports massage and the therapist had a treatment room above CrossFit. I went into this treatment room, looked out of the window and I was like what is this crazy type of exercise and I loved how it was, people were working out in groups and everyone was motivating each other… So that's how I got into it, I signed up and I did for six months five classes a week'.

Despite its rapid growth, CrossFit has been described as 'polarising', with its supporters claiming it to have a strong, supportive community, and its detractors arguing that the allegedly insular nature of this community and some of its more extreme practices are 'cult-like' (Dawson, 2017). Other scholars have criticised CrossFit for its injury rates, which one study found to be approximately 20% (Weisenthal et al., 2014), attributed to its focus on high-intensity, successive ballistic motions. Whilst some strongwomen who have discovered its existence through CrossFit continue to train and/or compete in both, others move away

from CrossFit completely on discovery of strongwoman. For some this will be because they prefer strongwoman due to its increased focus on lifting heavy weights and lesser focus on other aspects of CrossFit such as the gymnastics. Others in my own research have flagged the intensity of CrossFit as a risk and source of injury for them, with strongwoman being perceived as a safer option with less injury risk due to less focus on scores and times in training:

> 'The only thing that made me eventually go off CrossFit was just the injuries, cos it's all scores on the board for time and it's reps for time, weight for time, reps and weight for time and you end up basically doing crap form… that was the problem and I think that's the biggest thing with CrossFit. If you are an athlete, and I mean a proper dead sporty athlete athletic person then it won't necessarily be an issue… but when you're Joe Bloggs just turning up for time for reps and you are actively competing every single class, cos your scores are on that board and you're comparing yourself to every other person, it's really demoralising when you don't do very well. So therefore, you put yourself under pressure to do more, to do more reps and basically your form can, if you've got someone [a coach] who's not quite paying attention, go out of the window and you just break yourself'.

There were some comments and comparisons made by those strongwomen whom I interviewed who have also been involved in CrossFit as to the differences and similarities in the atmosphere and community of the two, and strongwoman is often spoken of as lacking a competitive 'me' vs 'you' type focus in the same way that this quote suggests about CrossFit.

These will be discussed in a later chapter of this thesis which focuses on the community aspect of strongwoman.

‘Becoming’ a strongwoman

Thus far, this chapter has described the different pathways into the sport that myself and the other strongwomen in this study navigated on their journey towards discovering strongwoman. It seems pertinent to note that for most, at this stage, strongwoman served as a new form of training and activity in their pursuit of their health- and fitness-based goals, as opposed to an opportunity for a competitive sporting venture. In her autoethnographic study of marathon swimming, Throsby (2016) details the process of ‘becoming’ a marathon swimmer, which she describes as a ‘social and embodied transformation’ (p. 28). The next part of this chapter explores the process of ‘becoming’ a strongwoman – a stage in the journey of those involved in which a shift occurs from being ‘someone who participates in strongwoman training’, to being ‘a strongwoman’. It could be argued that this process of ‘becoming’ and state of ‘being’ a marathon swimmer or strongwoman, as opposed to ‘someone who does…’ is associated with sports and activities that require serious dedication in order to participate in them. In both endurance swimming and strongwoman, you cannot just ‘turn up and play’, because if you haven’t trained for an event, you will most likely be unable to complete it – both require a distinct level of fitness and physical capacity. Hence it is not just a case of doing the sport, but participation in them requires reshaping and repositioning of the body, and then of the identity as well.

As the previously described pathways suggest, strongwoman/strongwoman training appeared to be something that most of the strongwomen in this study ‘stumbled’ upon via another form of physical activity in their weight loss and/or health and fitness journey.

Perhaps symptomatic of its lack of public visibility, enmeshed with perceived societal notions of gender-appropriateness, and potentially age-appropriateness, of strength training more widely, strongwoman does not appear to be a sport that women and girls would aspire to do if they had not 'stumbled' upon it. Unlike other, more mainstream sports, 'no one just sees it and says, that's what I want to do' one strongwoman said to me (Fieldnotes, May 2017). Engaging in sports that are both mainstream and perceived as gender-appropriate is a path that features much less resistance, whereas to cross those lines and go against the flow is where the resistance is experienced. As Throsby (2016) noted, the process of 'becoming' is one that begins to explain how individuals 'come to be immersed in, and by extension, find pleasure in, an activity that is not inherently or self-evidently pleasurable on the first encounter' (p. 29).

The next part of this process of 'becoming' focuses on the occurrences that take someone from the point at which they introduce strongwoman as a method of training to complement their existing health and fitness programme, to the point at which they decide to take their involvement to a competitive level and enter a strongwoman competition. This stage of the process in 'becoming' a strongwoman has potential implications therefore on both the identity of the individuals involved, and the status of strongwoman in the context of their lives as a leisure activity and/or a competitive sport. Stevenson (2002) argued that the formation of an athletic career occurs when an introduction to a sport is followed by 'various interdependent processes of ever-deepening commitment to the sport' (p. 132). Stevenson described these processes of deepening commitment, as a 'conversion' to the 'worldview of the sporting subculture', with those involved becoming 'entangled' via a 'subtle but every-increasing series of commitments and obligations' (p. 132).

The series of decisions and subtle processes that might typically take someone from participating in strongwoman-style training for the first time to competing in their first

strongwoman competition is a stage that, in this study at least, has been less articulated by those involved. My own experience did not follow this logical progression, as I chose to enter a competition on a whim despite never having tried strongwoman-style training in any capacity, only engaging in general strength training prior to the event. For the others in this study, there was limited discussion of this phase of their strongwoman journey. It felt almost as though for many it was just an assumed and logical progression to go from strongwoman training to strongwoman competition, with many repetitions of the phrase 'it just went from there' featuring in descriptions of this step. However, given that for most, their previously described motivations and journeys that led them to the point of discovering strongwoman did not give any indication that they were seeking a competitive sporting opportunity, this progression does in some ways not seem so easily assumed and logical. This finding resonates with Stevenson's posited conversion to the worldview of the sporting subculture, with those engaging in strongwoman training soon adapting to the commonly held perceptions and ethos within the sport around competition. Namely, that the main purpose of training is to compete, or at the least that competition is a natural product of training, regardless of the original motives for engagement. Once that step into competition has been taken, many also describe competitions as where you see the best of the strongwoman community in terms of solidarity, support, and camaraderie. This is discussed in-depth in chapter six of this thesis.

Any resistance that I have observed to this perception of competition being a natural progression from training has centred more significantly around confidence levels and one's perceptions of their own capabilities to compete, as opposed to a message of resistance due to competing not being their motive for being involved. These self-doubting forms of resistance that I have observed have focused largely around the perception of 'not being strong enough' to compete, but also around the notion of 'being too old' to compete. It is worth noting here

that the ages of those involved in strongwoman is wider than an outsider might expect, reflective of the journeys that typically precede one's involvement in the sport which may differ to other sports where involvement more typically occurs from school age for example. The recent emergence of many masters' strongwoman categories (which are for those aged forty or over) indicates the breadth of age of those involved, but is also reflective of the importance of categories in striking a balance where people can find a space to compete that offers them enough challenge to be competitive but not so much that those who are new to it or are lacking in self-confidence are deterred.

'Being' a strongwoman

At the point at which an individual decides to take part in their first novice strongwoman competition, there seems to be the most significant shift towards embracing their identity as 'a strongwoman'. One form of evidence of this is the noticeable changes in the way people describe themselves on their social media accounts. For example, those early in their strongwoman journey may add 'aspiring strongwoman' to their Instagram 'bio', and I have often seen the titles 'novice strongwoman' or 'strongwoman competitor' used in this context after taking the step to competition. For those who it is relevant for, this may be accompanied by the name of a competition they have competed in, and their placing within that (e.g. Leicestershire's 4th Strongest Woman), for others their 'bio' may place these titles next to other perceivably important aspects of their life or identity (e.g. family, mum of two etc.) In some cases, and more often at a later stage of a journey of a competitor who has competed many times, their Instagram handle will also include the word 'strongwoman' in addition to their name (e.g. @hannahnewmanstrongwoman). These small changes serve as indicators of being a strongwoman becoming a more significant part of one's identity, which

is certainly a significant shift for many from their previous position as a 'regular gym-goer' aiming to 'lose a bit of weight' and/or 'get a bit fitter'.

A number of the strongwomen in this study suggested that being a strongwoman was an identity that seeped into many different aspects of their lives. This became visibly evident in both social and work situations in which disclosure of their strongwoman activity became a novel point of discussion and in some cases, a commonly used form of identifier. This is something that I have also experienced since the beginning of my involvement in strongwoman, key examples being the nicknames I have accrued, such as 'muscles' and 'hulk', and my known status as 'the strong one' meaning I am often recruited to help with tasks that involve carrying, moving, or lifting heavy items. Another strongwoman, who has competed internationally, described her experiences of becoming known at her children's school and around her village as a strongwoman:

> 'I get spoken about a lot at school. I've been asked to come in and give speeches and things… I live in a small village, so a lot of them see me pull my car around the village. And things like they jump in my car, they think they're adding weight bless em. They find that quite funny'.

At this stage of the process in 'becoming' and 'being' a strongwoman, being strong establishes itself as a key tenet to their identity, both in their own perception of themselves and in others' perceptions of them. Stevenson (2002) suggested that the further an athlete moves along a path within a sport, the more commitments and obligations they will have, and the more entangled they become in relationships with others in the sport – 'to the extent that 'reputations and identities' are built and are seen as desirable, then the athlete becomes

increasingly committed and tied to his/her athletic career' (p. 132). The implications of this further commitment and entanglement within the sport are discussed in the upcoming thesis chapters, particularly in regard to the level of discipline and sacrifice that is required as they become deeper entrenched in a path of athletic improvement and high-performance goals. This is most evident in chapter five, where the empowering, liberating, or restrictive nature of a strongwoman's daily lifestyle is discussed, and in chapter seven, where sacrifices made in the decision to use performance-enhancing drugs are explored.

Introducing 'Nelly': The novice strongwoman and beyond

The journeys detailed in this chapter describe the experiences of strongwomen in the time preceding their involvement in strongwoman and their eventual decision to compete in a novice strongwoman competition. In the next chapters of this thesis, I adopt three 'ideal types' as a methodological tool to describe the experiences of strongwomen at different phases of their journey in relation to each topic of focus. As explained in the methodology chapter of this thesis, these are composites built from interviews with different participants, from ethnographic observations and from my own experiences. These three 'ideal types' are 'Nelly' the novice strongwoman, 'Isobel' the intermediate strongwoman, and 'Ella' the elite strongwoman. These characters are then used as a platform to begin to explore the nuances, exceptions, and full range of difference in experiences.

In this chapter, the processes and journeys described take the strongwomen in this study from their pre-strongwoman status, through their process of 'becoming' a strongwoman, and into their status of 'being' a strongwoman. At this stage of 'being' a strongwoman, having taken part in their first competition, the strongwomen begin to take up the role of 'Nelly the novice'. The forthcoming chapters explores the experience of 'Nelly',

as well as the nuances to this novice experience across the range of topics focused on, and also explore the experiences of 'Isobel the intermediate' and 'Ella the elite'. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all strongwomen will progress from novice to intermediate or to elite level; many remain at novice level, some progress to intermediate level, others fluctuate between novice and intermediate level, and only a few will progress through to an elite level. This is highly dependent on the level to which they adopt the discipline and sacrifice required to achieve that level of performance in the continued entanglement and commitment to the sport.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter of the thesis has explored the paths and journeys that myself and the women involved in this study took in the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman and getting to the point of 'being' a strongwoman. These paths were largely characterised by distinct shifts in the health and/or fitness journeys they had been on until the point of 'stumbling' upon strongwoman. As was mentioned previously, the first step that each of the strongwomen study took into a form of strength-training, whether that be in a commercial gym, via CrossFit, in a bodybuilding gym, or in a strongman-specific gym, was a significant step in its implications for the negotiation of gender in their journeys.

Prior to these moments, for many their health and fitness journeys had largely been driven by the need/want to be smaller – i.e. to lose weight/be leaner and/or work towards aerobic fitness as opposed to strength and muscularity. This notion of women being smaller, and taking up less space, fits into Schippers' (2007) view that hegemonic femininity guarantees the domination of men and legitimates a hierarchical relationship to hegemonic masculinity. The move towards partaking in an activity that for many would be deemed

‘masculine’ meant a transgression of their previous conformity to hegemonic femininity, albeit a relatively small one at this early stage of their time in the sport. The reluctance that some described in trying a strength-based activity, and the reliance on trust of those who recommended that they did, suggested a level of awareness of the transgressive nature of the shift that they were making, however it is reasonable to suggest that many may not have anticipated the performance journey, and accompanying gendered negotiations, that would lead from it. This was because many strongwomen in this study described the novice stage of involvement as one in which their main focus was still health and/or aesthetics. This is further discussed in the next chapter of this thesis, which explores the empowering and/or liberating potential of strongwoman.

Chapter Five

‘I MIGHT NOT LOOK LIKE A VICTORIA’S SECRET MODEL, BUT I COULD SQUAT ONE’ – WHAT IS STRONGWOMAN’S EMPOWERING POTENTIAL?

The focus on practical achievement in strongwoman has been posited as potentially liberating and/or empowering for women in comparison to other strength- or muscular-based sports that focus on aesthetics, for example, female bodybuilding (Shilling and Bunsell, 2014; Bunsell, 2013). The following autoethnographical vignette, which details my experience of cutting weight to make a specific weight category for a strongwoman competition, aims to set the scene for this chapter’s discussion of this notion.

I lay on the cold floor of my bathroom staring blankly at the ceiling. My head spinning, and my vision blurred in intermittent bouts of dizziness. The nauseous feeling that had been intensifying all day had reached its peak, a combination of the lack of food, lack of water, and the intense heat of the bath I had just got out of had left me feeling sick and weak. There was a knock on the door, ‘you still doing alright in there Han?’ it was my housemate - I’d asked her to keep check on me. Fearful that I might pass out in the scorching hot bath, I’d left the bathroom door unlocked and given strict instructions to make sure that I was still responding every ten minutes. ‘Yep just about’ I called out wearily, ‘knock again in ten’. I picked up my phone and took a second to focus my vision on the numbers it displayed – thirty seconds more and I’d be back in for another ten-minute stint. Those five minutes off had raced by far too quickly. I’d been lying on the floor to try and regain some composure, but it still felt far from regained.

As I lowered myself back into the bath the hot water pierced my skin once again, but I knew this pain was necessary. The fear of not making the weight category I was due to

compete in the next day sent yet another anxious wave through my mind and body. Everything I was doing was driven by that fear. I had already spent an hour in the sauna that evening, followed by twenty minutes in the leisure centre car park seeking the composure I needed to drive home. But when I arrived home I was still too scared to step on the scales. What if I was still over? I should sweat out some more. And so I had decided to continue to try to sweat out more water weight in the bath. Three lots of ten-minutes was the plan, with five-minute breaks in between. This was round three. I tried to put the fear to the back of my mind and go through my plans for the next day – event one, overhead log press, knee sleeves, elbow sleeves, wrist supports, remember the leg drive, dip and drive, event two, deadlift – it all swirled around my mind as I tried to distract myself from the discomfort I was experiencing.

I watched the beads of sweat build up on the skin of my arm and willed them to build up faster. It felt like torture but was almost addictive. My skin had become slightly more adjusted to the temperature of the water around me, as long as I didn't move, but the thermal base layer shorts and t-shirt that I was wearing felt as though they were constricting tighter around me. I pulled the neck of my t-shirt away from my throat as I felt my heart beat faster and my breathing get heavier – I started to panic. I stumbled out of the bath as quickly as I could with my phone timer still showing two minutes to go and decided to call it a day, easing my feelings of guilt with the compromise that I'd have another hot bath in the morning before I stood on the dreaded scales.

Lying in bed that night the fear continued to dominate my thoughts. Fear of embarrassment. Fear of how stupid I'd look if I didn't make weight. Fear of being deemed as 'the fat one' who'd been eating too many cakes. The only distraction from my fear was the unbearable thirst. I hate being thirsty. Hunger I can handle, thirst I cannot. I never go

anywhere without a water bottle stuck to my hand. Tormented by the intolerable dryness of my mouth, I fought every urge I had to run downstairs and down a pint of water.

Chew on sugar free gum they said. It will help they said. I got up and chewed furiously on yet another piece of the strawberry-flavoured sugar free gum that I'd been chewing all evening, but it gave me little relief. I gave up and got back into bed again, conscious that my 6am alarm was edging closer and closer. I lay motionless, desperately hoping that I would drift off to sleep sometime soon.

In the literature review chapter of this thesis, I suggested that strongwoman may have empowering potential for those who partake in it due to its heavy focus on practical achievement as opposed to visual appearance. Shilling and Bunsell's (2014) call for further research in this area was prompted by the 'escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics prevalent within bodybuilding' (p. 493) that strongwoman provided for the competitor featured in their case study. Though at the point of the experience described in this autoethnographical vignette, just under three years since I'd taken part in my first strongwoman competition, I did not feel very empowered at all. The competition in question was my first foray out of the world of novice events and onto the qualification pathway. It was also the first competition in which I had to make weight for a specific category. Up until this point my preparation for competition had always looked significantly different to this. In the week before competition my daily calorie allowance would normally increase, my carbohydrate intake would increase, and I'd be making sure I stayed fully hydrated – In short, I'd be doing everything I could to maintain my strength for competition day.

The contrast between my preparation for this competition with that for all my previous competitions was huge. Previous 'comp prep' phases had left me feeling strong, athletic, and healthy. The permission to eat more in order to fuel my body meant that the

chronic guilt that so often accompanied my eating had somewhat subsided. I had permission to eat, I had permission to be strong, and I had permission to build muscle; all three were required for successful performance in this sport, and in relation to empowerment, all three challenged traditional definitions of what it means to be female (Hesse-Biber, 1996). After persistently striving to be smaller for as long as I could remember, I was by this point striving to be bigger, at least in terms of muscle, bigger and stronger. But in this 'comp prep' phase I felt weak, lethargic, and unhealthy. Everything I was doing was necessary to make weight for competition, but it was also the antithesis of what I needed to do to be strong, arguably the most vital element in a sport which has the word strong in its name, and in which competitions are most commonly titled '[region]'s *Strongest* Woman'.

It is conflicting experiences such as these that spark the debate as to how empowering strongwoman is for the women who partake in it, and that lie behind some of the key questions that I hoped to address in this study: is the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman liberating or constricting? And are the actual processes of the sport resistant, transgressive, or empowering in relation to social norms of femininity? This chapter aims to deconstruct the debate further, using both mine and others' experiences, alongside critical reflection, to assess the empowering potential of strongwoman. To do this, the chapter focuses first on the novice strongwoman experience, before moving through to the intermediate experience, and finally the elite experience, to explore and explain the differences and similarities these experiences have in terms of empowerment and/or restriction. The first part of the current chapter further explores this notion in its analysis and assessment of the empowering or liberating potential of the novice strongwoman experience.

The novice strongwoman

Novice strongwoman competitions are generally open to anyone who has competed in less than three to five previous competitions, depending on the rules that each specific novice competition has set, and/or has not placed on the podium (in the top three positions) at any of those competitions. However, the specific rules on this are dictated by each competition organiser and therefore can differ for each individual competition, which is a point of contention for some. For the purposes of this chapter though, the novice strongwoman phase applies to those who are relatively new to the sport and have only competed in 'novice' competitions. In the previous chapter, which explored the journeys and pathways that women take into training and competing in strongwoman, for many there appeared to be a sense of liberation gained from shifting their focus away from how much they weighed, or how their bodies looked, on to how much they could lift, or what their bodies could do. This chapter explores the subsequent experiences of these newcomers to the sport in their stages of involvement.

The following vignette is constructed from my ethnographic experience within strongman/strongwoman gyms and my corresponding fieldnotes. The topic of its focus, 'Strongwoman Saturday', sometimes also 'Strongwoman Sunday', is a regular and common feature within the strongwoman community, for strongwomen of all abilities and experience levels, but it is particularly prominent in the experiences of novice strongwomen and all those who are new to the sport. The usually friendly, welcoming group setting gives opportunity to try different events and techniques for the first time, and access to the specific equipment for those who train at commercial or other more standard gyms throughout the week.

Strongwoman Saturday – It's the weekend. That time of the week when a group of novice strongwomen, sometimes accompanied by more experienced competitors, come together and

train. The majority have trained on their own midweek, either because they don't live close enough to the strongman gym to travel there every day, or because work schedules have dictated that they all come in at various differing times of the day. The Saturday session has a buzz to it. Two women sit chatting on the sofa in the corner of the gym with a coffee, catching up on the week, complaining about their aches and pains from squat day, comparing their bruises and war wounds from a hard week of training. Another two have already begun their warm-up routines, looking much keener to get going than those still enjoying their coffee. One can be heard moaning about the people at her weekday gym and their lack of friendliness – 'it's so good to be back here with you lot' she says. As another enters the door of the gym, they all stop to say hello, even the ones who are warming up come over for a hug. The chatting continues for a while before one jumps off the sofa and says, 'right, well I suppose we better do something while we're here'. They all congregate in the middle of the gym, moving reluctantly away from the 'coffee corner' that has become such a community hub for all those who train here.

A brief discussion ensues – 'who's got a competition coming up? What events have you got to do? Is there anything that anyone else wants to work on? You've got log in yours, so we'll do a bit of that, you guys have got farmers in yours, haven't you? We'll do some farmers. How about yoke? Has anyone got yoke coming up? Yeah? Ok let's do some yoke as well then'. The gym is empty bar two men doing their own thing in the corner. The owner and coach of the gym sits in 'coffee corner' doing some admin, on hand whenever the group may need some tips or advice.

The log, a wide, cylindrical, metal implement designed to be pressed above the head, is set up on two tyres to raise it from the ground, and each of the group take their turn to warm up on the empty log. Those who have had their turn chatter at the side 'what weight have you got to do for this in your comp then?... 45 for reps? Wow, I'm lucky if I can get 40

over my head once'. The weight added to the log rises in increments… 30 kilograms, 35, 40, 45… 'I don't know if I can do this weight, I've never done it before' one of them says. 'Yes, you can', another chips in, 'you just made 40 look easy, come on'. As the doubtful strongwoman steps up to the bar the others stop their chatter and start to shout words of encouragement – 'come on, you've got this'. She cleans the log from the floor to her chest in one smooth movement. 'EASY!' someone shouts, 'take a second, set yourself for the press'. The owner of the gym has wandered over now too, even the guys in the corner have stopped to look over, everyone set to cheer what would be a PB (personal best) lift. She attempts the press, it doesn't go up. 'Come on you know you've got this, big leg drive, remember to use your legs' coach says. She sets herself for a second attempt. She drives her legs with more force and confidence this time and the log is thrust above her head, just a few more centimetres needed to lock out for a successful lift. The pure strain and effort in her face is evident as she pushes hard for those final few centimetres, the shouts and encouragement growing from everyone around her. When her arms eventually lock out everyone cheers, everyone claps, and as she moves away to take a sip of drink she gets a high five from everyone that she passes.

'PB!' she shouts excitedly, 'does this mean I can have a slice of cake today now coach?' she laughs. 'Of course!' another strongwoman says, 'PB's are always cake-worthy!' Those in the group who could lift heavier continued to add more weight to the bar, celebrating each individual success until everyone had got to where they wanted to be. Only then did they move on to the next event.

This vignette illustrates a key aspect of the strongwoman experience that is central to the experiences of all strongwomen at some point in their journey, but I have chosen to highlight it here in discussion of the novice strongwoman experience because it often forms a

pivotal part of the initial liberation that is felt by those who have begun to make the transition from less community-focused commercial gyms, prior strong focuses on aesthetics as opposed to practical capacity, and previous participation in other fitness activities that they did not enjoy. The focus on physical capacity, sense of achievement, and encouragement from others demonstrated in the vignette in a group training setting such as 'Strongwoman Saturday' align with my own experience of first entering the world of strongwoman, but also reflect an experience and a training structure that were commonplace in the experiences of those strongwomen I spent time with during this research. The key characteristics highlighted in this vignette will be explored in more detail in the remainder of this section discussing the strongwoman experience in relation to empowerment and/or liberation.

As discussed further in the methodology chapter of this thesis, and as introduced in chapter four, I have developed characters and narratives of three strongwomen (one novice, one intermediate, and one elite) drawn from the experiences of a combination of all the strongwomen I both interviewed and encountered in my study, as a methodological device to help elaborate on the lived experiences of those involved. The character 'Nelly', a typical representation of those who would attend sessions such as 'Strongwoman Saturday', is used here to elaborate on the novice strongwoman experience in relation to the debate of empowerment, liberation, and/or restriction.

Nelly – Novice Strongwoman

> Nelly loves Strongwoman Saturday's. After a long week at work it's an opportunity to spend time doing something she enjoys with new 'strong friends' that she's made. She has trained during the week too, but on her own at the local 24-hour commercial gym, her 5am alarm set three mornings a week so that she can squeeze in a gym session before work. These sessions are now almost always

weights-based, replacing the cardio-based classes or the hour on the treadmill that she used to do. Nelly still does an evening spin class once a week, feeling the need to continue to incorporate some form of 'traditional' cardiovascular exercise into her training. Aside from this though, her routine is made up of three general strength-building sessions during the week - a deadlift day, an overhead press day, and a squat day, plus one additional event-specific training session at the weekend – Strongwoman Saturday.

Nelly's primary goal is to continue to lose weight, although she is beginning to make the distinction between losing weight and losing fat. The weighing scales do not tell the whole story, she has been told, because muscle is heavier than fat and starting strength-training will have increased her muscle mass. Nelly is enjoying the new decreased importance that she is placing on the number that the scales show, but she can't ignore it completely, still so ingrained is the notion that a higher number indicates 'more fat' and a lower number indicates 'less fat' that she has to reassure herself when she steps on the scales and sees a number that she perceives as 'bad'.

Although losing fat is Nelly's main focus, she enjoys feeling strong and wants to get stronger. She enjoys the new focus on what her body can do, and it provides a welcome distraction from her continual striving to lose weight and/or look better. Generally though, Nelly's nutritional approach remains in line with her goal to lose weight/fat, and she eats at a caloric deficit to continue to achieve this. On a particularly heavy training day, such as a deadlift day, Nelly may decide to eat a little more than she usually would, conscious of the messages she has begun to hear about the need to be well-fuelled to build strength. She is careful not to overdo it though as she does not want to negate her weight/fat loss

efforts. Nelly has competed in a couple of novice strongwoman competitions and was pleasantly surprised at how much she enjoyed them after her initial anxiety at the idea. She continued to train to get stronger in the build-up to these competitions but did not make any changes that would work at the expense of her primary goals of weight/fat loss and health.

The experiences encapsulated by Nelly's narrative, and complemented by the 'Strongwoman Saturday' vignette, highlight three core features of the novice strongwoman experience that demonstrate its empowering and/or liberating potential: health, enjoyment, and practical achievement. They show the continuance of a gradual shift towards healthier (both physically and mentally) and more enjoyable practices than the more restrictive diets, repetitive cardiovascular exercise, and aesthetic-driven goals that many of the strongwomen in this study were abiding to prior to their discovery of strongwoman, or initial weight training more generally. This could be seen as a potential shift away from a bind to normative beauty or body ideals and towards individual empowerment, or alternatively it may be more of a shift to new normative ideals (e.g. strong not skinny). However, the presence of these potentially liberating and/or empowering features does not mean that the novice strongwoman experience is completely devoid of the body-conscious, aesthetic-based focuses and associated restrictive practices that these women had previously experienced. Equally, it is neither free from the societal expectations of the female body surrounding how it should or shouldn't look and what it should or shouldn't do, as discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis and explored further in this analysis. This is not to suggest that a focus on aesthetics is always 'bad' or unempowering, however it does imply that for some there is an underlying residual bind to normative beauty or body ideals that may form a barrier to the bodily satisfaction that associated with individual empowerment (Bunsell, 2013).

Health

As the previous chapter demonstrated, for the majority of those involved their journey into strongwoman began from a health-related motive, most commonly based around the goals of losing weight and/or getting fitter. Amongst the strongwomen I spent time with during my study and in my prior experience of being involved in this sport, becoming a novice strongwoman appeared, for many, to be a continuation of this search for health. Once discovered, strongwoman training became the next step in their health-seeking journey. There was not always the initial desire to go on to compete in strongwoman; often this initial interest in training was just that – a new way to train. One participant at a Friday night strongwoman class – a group training session similar in content to a 'Strongwoman Saturday' but under the direct supervision of a qualified coach - organised by a small strength training studio gym said, 'no – I'm too old, I'm 47 - and I've got another 15 excuses up my sleeve too', when I asked her if she wanted to compete (Fieldnotes, April 2017). Interestingly though, like many others who had once exclaimed their absolute non-intention to compete, I later saw her, via social media, taking part in her first novice competition.

The previously described shift in focus from visual appearance to physical capacity was described by one strongwoman as 'the change from focusing on the number on the scales to being able to focus on the number on the bar', a refocus that suggests a distinct shift in priority from goals that are based upon aesthetics to goals that are based upon physical capacity. Social media hashtags which reflect this refocus, #strongnotskinny for example, have also been highly prevalent amongst strongwoman Instagram posts and have reiterated this notion. In the interviews I conducted with them, one strongwoman described this as a 'positive change' and another said, 'it makes you feel empowered by being strong and doing things that you never thought you could do'. Despite this proclaimed shift in focus though, for many, their original fitness or health-based goals continued. For those whose initial

health-seeking journey began with the goal of losing weight, this tended to continue into their novice strongwoman stage. Although this was often accompanied by recognition of the distinction between losing 'weight' and losing 'fat', acknowledging that any increase in muscle mass gained from their new venture into strongwoman training would have implications for the 'number on the scales' and that a smaller or larger number would not necessarily be representative of the changes they were making to their body. In an interview with one novice strongwoman, she said 'I still wanna lose another stone, well it's not really much about weight… I wanna get my body fat down'.

When considering goals that many of the novice strongwomen continued to hold relating to body composition change, it is somewhat difficult to ascertain if and when these were still health-based motives, more to do with aesthetic-based motives, or a combination of the two. For those who had begun their fitness journey by being told by their doctor that they needed to lose weight, there was arguably still at this stage a need to continue losing weight for health-based reasons. For others, whom one would say were much closer to, if not already at what is deemed 'a healthy weight', one could argue that their motivations for continuing to look to change their body composition were for aesthetic reasons. What is interesting though, is that from many novice strongwomen there was an apparent sense of a preference to frame their motives as health-based as opposed to aesthetic-based, with almost a certain negativity surrounding the idea of aesthetic-based goals. This was a part of trying to reinforce to others the shift in focus that so many of them had described from focusing on the number on the scales, to focusing on the number on the bar, from aesthetics to physical capacity. It was also part of the process of trying to reinforce that shift in focus to themselves or trying to maintain their focus on physical capacity when the temptation remained present to think about aesthetics.

This depiction of the novice strongwoman experience as a part health-motivated, but also part aesthetic-motivated, practice is one that reflects my own experience at that stage of my strongwoman journey. Despite wanting to do well in the occasional novice competitions I had begun to compete in, my overriding motives for regular strength training were to continue to get leaner, fitter, and therefore in my mind, healthier – I had just found a new, more enjoyable way to do it. Getting stronger was at this stage just a welcome side effect of this process for me, and the occasional competitions a way of focusing my attention and efforts. I equated leaner with healthier, but I also strived to be leaner in hope of finding some contentment in the way my body looked. In terms of my own experience then, it wasn't a case of my goals as a strongwoman being either health-related or aesthetic-related, I saw them as being one and the same – being leaner would mean that I was healthier, but it would also mean that I would look 'better'. Discovering strongwoman, and strength training more broadly, meant that I enjoyed going to the gym for the first time, it encouraged me to go regularly, and it encouraged me to continue learning about and improving my nutrition. As someone who enjoyed playing sports but had always viewed going to the gym as a chore, had always been above the 'normal weight' parameters, and recurrently yo-yo dieted, at this stage I felt the healthiest I had ever been.

Enjoyment and achievement

For many of the strongwomen in this research, their previous participation in physical activity had been in the form of exercise as opposed to competitive sporting activity, often featuring non-competitive running and/or other cardiovascular-based exercise such as group exercise classes or use of the treadmill and other 'cardio' machines at the gym. It was apparent that for most of them these exercise choices were driven by their belief that they were required to meet their weight loss or health-driven goals, as opposed to something they

chose to do because they wanted to. Whereas their discovery of strength training/strongwoman training often provided a new-found enjoyment in going to the gym. For example, one strongwoman described how she has found the challenge of strongman more enjoyable than the 'boring' previous gym activity she was doing:

> 'I just wanted something else that kept me fit because I get bored at a local gym. Unless I can find a class that I really like. Unlikely… and then just going and doing like a treadmill or whatever. Boring. In a standard gym I don't enjoy it so I don't push myself because I don't enjoy it. I've got no real interest in being there. I'm there cos I feel I should be… It was the push and the challenge that attracted me to strongman. You never quite know what you're gonna do when you turn up but you know it's gonna be hard and you know it's gonna be a challenge. That's what keeps you going back. The constant, this is a push, this is a challenge, I'm gonna find this hard and actually, I can push myself. So I think that's what I enjoy most about a non-standard gym thing…'

Other strongwomen had some prior, more competitive experience through completing organised running races or obstacle races. One, who found her way into strength training because she recognised she needed to be stronger to get over some of the obstacles in the obstacle races she was doing, said:

> 'I had a goal that I wanted to compete in something strength-based. I've done quite a few running races and cardio-based stuff. I have enjoyed the obstacle races but there's only so many you can do, you can't really go anywhere else with it, so I was looking to try powerlifting and strongman stuff and was trying to

work out where I fit best… my goal was to use the strength that I thought I had to compete in something that I didn't really know what it looked like at the start.'

Both of these examples from interviews with strongwoman competitors refer to the enjoyment found in the challenge of strongwoman training. They allude to the need for a sense of direction, and a sense of something to aim for, or signs of self-improvement, for their training to be enjoyable and less 'boring', suggesting that it is the sense of achievement that contributes to their enthusiasm for strongwoman as their new way of being active. This is highlighted further in my interview with the first competitor of these two examples when I asked her what she enjoyed most about strongwoman:

'It's the challenge element I think. Because it's not easy. An atlas stone is round and it's a pig to pick up and it's difficult… it's that real inner satisfaction of I can do something which is really hard, and a lot of other people can't. It just gives you that inner yeah, I'm doing this. This is awesome.'

This quote exemplifies the focus on 'what the body can do' (i.e. the number on the bar) that strongwoman training encouraged many of the strongwomen in this study to shift their attention to, which was more lacking for some in the exercise activities they were previously engaged in when their focus was more on the size of the body (i.e. the number on the scales), whether this was for aesthetic-based, health-based goals, or both. These feelings of achievement, often accompanied by surprise at their own strength in their early involvement in lifting weights, are characteristics of the novice strongwoman experience that epitomise the empowering potential that was suggested by Shilling and Bunsell (2014) in their call for further research in this area. The continued pursuit of their goals in an instrumental fashion,

as opposed to activities that invite others to look at and to judge the appearance of women's bodies, can, as suggested by Brace-Govan (2002), resist the disempowerment that such aesthetic-based activities can facilitate through the effect of the 'gaze' (Mulvey, 1975). It is the 'subject-at-work' that matters in strongwoman.

Being a novice strongwoman – to what extent is it an empowering or liberating experience?

Bodywork is the effort of an individual to actively and consciously create a specific kind of physicality (Brace-Govan, 1997). The experiences of novice strongwomen in my study indicate for many the beginning of a distinct shift in their bodywork. Their initial weight loss goals, driven by a need to be smaller, and their exercise selection of cardio-based activities that focused on the aim of getting smaller, fell in line with the societal feminine ideal that 'big is bad', a notion still reproduced even within sport in instances such as female bodybuilding where categories for larger female bodybuilders have been removed (Bunsell, 2013). This bodywork that pursued a smaller physicality fit in with the discourse of femininity, and the discourse of heterosexual men's desire (Brace-Govan, 2002). The shift that began in their experiences of a novice strongwoman though, was to place more focus on their strength than their size, with their more instrumental bodywork beginning to focus on a strong physicality as opposed to a small one, shifting the balance away from the subject-in-discourse and towards the subject-at-work (Brace-Govan, 2002).

Brace-Govan (2002) posed the question, 'does being physically strong make a difference to the disempowering nature of the gaze for women?' (p. 409). The weightlifters in her study, driven by instrumental objectives, reduced the impact of the gaze and were more empowered than both the bodybuilders and ballet dancers that were also part of the study. The shift of the strongwomen in my study to a more instrumental focus suggests a similar increase in empowerment in comparison to other activities that focus on appearance.

However, it cannot be suggested that the presence of this shift completely removed any focus on the look, shape and size of the body that was previously there. This is demonstrated as part of the experience of the novice strongwomen in this study through their often continually restrictive diets, reluctance to increase food intake in order to help build strength, and their positioning of strongwoman as a new tool in achieving their weight/fat loss goals. At this stage of the strongwoman experience, those goals to be 'smaller' often still exist alongside the new-found excitement and initial pursuit of strength.

The intermediate strongwoman

'Inters', short for intermediate, is a category that is sometimes used in strongwoman competitions for those who have moved beyond novice competitions, either because they no longer classify as a novice (as dictated by competition organisers), or because they feel that novice weights have become too light for them and that their ability surpasses it. Similarly to the novice strongwoman phase, there is a lack of consistency when it comes to categorisation – inters competitions rarely have any entry criteria, and the term is not consistently used. Instead, some competitions are offered as 'open' to any strongwoman who feels that the weights and events are appropriate for them. For the purpose of this chapter/thesis, the term 'intermediate' is used to describe the experience of those who have begun to move beyond novice strongwoman competitions, but that are not yet competing at an elite level at the very top end of the sport – essentially, it is used to capture all those in the middle of the two. This next part of the chapter hence explores the experiences of strongwomen in relation to their sense of liberation, empowerment, and/or restriction once they move beyond the novice strongwoman phase. The following autoethnographical vignette describes a situation that was typical of much of my own experience as an intermediate strongwoman:

'Do you wanna go the pub to watch the football tonight?' – a simple question, you might think. But amid my progression as a competing strongwoman questions such as this one would send me into a spiral of agonising deliberation that ultimately always left me unhappy with my decision, whatever that ended up being. One pint won't hurt, will it? But alcohol is bad for strength, bad for muscle growth, and bad for body composition, and think about the calories… and can I even trust myself to stick to one pint? Maybe I'll go but just have a diet coke, or water would be better… but what's the fun in that? I might as well stay at home… but I don't want to miss out… how much do I want this?

I can't give in to social stuff again. A glance in the mirror and a reminder of my discontent with my body, or a scroll through Instagram dominated by posts showing other competitors training hard and eating well, would often be enough to convince me to stay at home. If I went to the pub and drank water it would be torture, watching everyone else sip their cold beer, but if I went and had a beer, the overwhelming guilt would plague me the whole time I was there and long after I left. But sitting at home on my own watching the football on TV, a litre water bottle in hand, and a dinner of dry Quorn (one of my main protein sources as a vegetarian lifter), plain rice, and broccoli sitting in front of me would leave me far from content with my decision.

The frustration, loneliness, and the pain of feeling left out when I chose not to go out with my friends would often leave me in tears. But this is what it takes right? You don't get better if you don't put the work in. If you can't handle sacrifice then you'll never get as strong as you want to be. If you don't put in the work then you don't deserve to be strong, you don't deserve to succeed in this sport. What do you want more? Staying at home felt like the 'right' thing for me to do if I wanted to get better at my sport – going to the pub would have been the 'wrong' thing to do, it would have been bad, would have meant that I was bad, that I had failed.

The above situation is just one example of the changes that came with moving beyond novice competitions in my own experience as a strongwoman. I had been training long enough that the initial 'quick strength gains' that come through being new to strength training had begun to plateau and I needed to step things up further if I wanted to get stronger and move higher within the sport. I had been 'bitten by the strongwoman bug' – a phrase I've heard used many times by strongwoman competitors who had stumbled across the sport in one way or another and had since developed some form of enjoyment of it that fuelled their desire to continue. Although I had always played sport, this was the first time that I had ever thought I had enough potential in a particular sport to have a chance of doing reasonably well at it, and that sparked a motivation in me to find out just how well I could do if I pushed myself hard enough and got the maximum that I could out of my body. But the level of dedication that type of ambition requires presents many challenges in relation to how liberating or restrictive strongwoman is, particularly in relation to the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman.

The conflict I experienced during this time was not limited to alcohol as in the situation described, but food as well. It was also not limited to social eating and drinking, or what I ate or drank specifically, but also as to how much I ate on a day-to-day basis. On reflection, I can see that although a large part of the discipline I tried to instil in myself when it came to food and drink was about getting better at my sport – fuelling my body well in the most optimal way, there was also a significant part of it that was about changing the way my body looked. As much as I told myself, and others, that my focus was now on what I could do, not on what I looked like, that underlying focus on aesthetics never went away in the same way that I seemed to outwardly suggest that it had, once the liberation of lifting weights and getting strong had begun. Yes, I loved the feeling of being strong and I wanted to be stronger, to the point of almost feeling 'addicted' to being strong at times, but the

requirement to eat more in order to do that still filled me with conflict in regard to my underlying desire to lose more weight, or more accurately, fat. After years spent striving to be smaller, and therefore eating less, I was almost scared to eat more. The fad diets I had previously followed promoted low calorie, low carbohydrate approaches to weight loss that instilled a belief in me that if I ate more than 1500 calories or 75 grams of carbohydrates per day I would have been 'eating too much' – any more than that would have been 'bad', I'd put weight back on and 'get fat'. But could I get stronger and build muscle with that kind of eating behaviour? Everything I heard from the strongman/strongwoman world suggested not, and so I battled on a daily basis between eating more calories and more 'carbs' to 'fuel my training' in the way that I was consistently advised to, and eating less and 'cutting carbs' in the hope of getting leaner and closer to the aesthetic I was still so desperate to achieve. To what extent did strongwoman shift my focus away from aesthetics? Seemingly not to the extent I would have liked to believe it had, or as much as I portrayed that it had to those around me.

Reflecting on my desire to be stronger I have also had to ask myself the question: how much of this has been purely about being stronger, and how much of it has been about using the need to be stronger to justify my desire to build muscle? My training programmes have never been designed for muscle building, they have always been designed for increasing strength, but the accompanying muscular development has always been something I've embraced, if not yearned for. I had a distinct but distant admiration for muscular bodies for a considerable amount of time prior to my discovery of general weight training and later, strongwoman training and competition. But this had always remained a distant admiration, due to the messages I had been led to believe that a muscular body was not something that I, as a woman, should or could strive for.

Once competing in strongwoman, being able to frame the development of my own more muscular body as a side effect of getting stronger, something that was a 'necessary evil' for success in my sport, meant that I felt better able to justify my increased muscularity to others who disapproved of female muscle development. A pertinent example being that of the look of disgust on my nan's face one day when she said, 'blimey Hannah, the size of your arms these days' – 'I know nan, I've got a big competition coming up though so I'm training hard' was my outward response, playing down my desire for 'big arms' and positioning them as a necessary side effect of my training that I had come to accept. Inwardly I celebrated the fact that someone else had noticed and commented on the size of my arms – it was a compliment to me, it was a large part of what I was striving so hard to achieve. In this sense strongwoman has in my experience been a practice that is transgressive of social norms of femininity, a transgression acknowledged by other participants in this research too – strength, as mentioned previously in this thesis, has been labelled the 'antithesis of femininity' (Shilling and Bunsell, 2014), and the resultant muscle growth, whether it is the primary aim of the activity or not, has been deemed as undesirable for women, as demonstrated in Bunsell's (2013) study on female bodybuilders. Hence, it can be argued that the increase in women's participation and the acceptance of women in strength- and muscularity-based sports still has a limit – i.e. you can participate in these activities, but only if you don't become *too* strong, or *too* muscular. This is reflective of Dworkin's (2001) concept of the 'glass ceiling' on women's strength and forms a key part of the 'negotiation' of gendered aesthetics that was evident for many of the strongwomen involved in this research.

I do not feel that justification for increased muscularity has been the only driving factor in my desire to be stronger – I did and still do just enjoy being strong to be strong. The notion of enjoying being strong appeared to be of heightened importance in the experiences of many of the other strongwomen that I encountered during my study. Whilst they often

embraced the signs of increased muscularity that emerged through strongwoman training, my sense was that the majority of them had a different approach to it than I did, or that the balance in importance of being strong and building muscle leaned much further on the side of being strong, as opposed to for me it being relatively equal. There was often an apparent sense of pride on the discovery of a new sign of muscle growth or muscle definition – 'do they actually look like muscles?' one strongwoman said to another, flexing her arm whilst cooling down on an exercise bike. 'They ARE real muscles,' the other strongwoman replied. 'I know but I've never had them before!' the first strongwoman exclaimed, smiling with a sense of disbelief as she continued to flex and looked down at her bicep (Fieldnotes, May 2017). It was this element of disbelief, or almost surprise, that so often struck me when witnessing other strongwomen talk about their muscularity. These small but significant changes to their bodies were often viewed as additional, surprising rewards for the hard work they had been putting in to getting stronger, as opposed to a primary aim that was consistently strived for.

The second of the three characters and narratives that I have used as a methodological tool to encapsulate the lived experience of the strongwomen in this study is 'Isobel' the intermediate strongwoman. Isobel's character forms a combination of the experiences of many of the strongwomen in this study to elaborate on the experiences of those who progress their strongwoman journey beyond the novice phase. In the next section of this chapter I will be depicting and discussing Isobel's experiences in relation to the lifestyle of being a strongwoman, and issues around empowerment and liberation.

Isobel – Intermediate Strongwoman

Isobel the intermediate strongwoman has competed in several novice competitions and recently stepped up to take part in her first regional qualifier for

the national competition. With the weights heavier, the event harder, and the other competitors stronger, she had to train harder for this competition than she had ever trained before. In the build-up, Isobel knew that the weights she needed to lift in this qualifier were a challenge to her, and if she wanted to be able to lift them on the day, tiredness and long days at work would no longer be a valid excuse to not get her sessions done.

So particularly in the twelve-week period prior to the qualifier, Isobel gave her all. She prioritised her training sessions, and her nutrition too. Social events were put on hold, drinking alcohol was put on hold, she tracked everything she ate using a mobile app, and most of her spare time was spent in the gym. Everything she did in those twelve weeks was geared towards making her stronger – this meant eating more than she was used to given her previous weight-related focus, but the concern she had for this was minimised by her reasoning that she could cut back on her food intake again post-competition.

Although Isobel did not achieve a top five placing that was required to qualify for the national competition, she proved that she could hold her own amongst the field of competitors she was up against. Her fear of 'zeroing' an event (not being able to complete one repetition) was unfounded as she successfully completed all five events, even the 150kg deadlift that she was so sure she wouldn't be able to lift. Isobel had surprised herself. All her hard work had paid off and the buzz that she felt walking away from the qualifier was a feeling that she didn't want to end. Isobel wanted to do this again.

Isobel enjoyed a week off after the qualifier. She didn't train, she caught up with all the friends she had put on hold during her competition preparation, and she ate and drank whatever she desired. She thought back at her achievements

from the previous weekend and was filled with excitement when she pictured how strong she might be by the time the qualifiers came back around next year. The following week, Isobel went back to training with renewed enthusiasm and began to track her nutrition again, but as the week progressed she found her motivation waning as she remembered the freedom that her week off had given her. The time with her friends had reminded her of all the fun times she had missed during her strict 'comp prep', and all the wonderful things to eat and drink that she had deprived herself of. She couldn't help but think that one week of enjoying those things was not enough.

At the stage she is at now, Isobel often feels frustrated at the part of her that struggles with the discipline that she views as necessary to succeed in this sport. Every time she is tempted to skip a training session or go out for a drink she feels guilty about her decision – she wants to be stronger and she wants to progress in the sport, so why can't she stick to everything that she said she would do? The reality of the dedication that is required to reach the top elite levels of strongwoman has hit Isobel and she feels constantly conflicted by her desire to succeed and the sacrifices she needs to make in order to do it. Isobel asks herself these questions regularly: How badly do I want this? How far do I want to take it? Is this my priority?

A large part of Isobel's experiences as an intermediate strongwoman, as was clear in my own experiences, was the presence of conflict. Progressing from being a novice strongwoman to being an intermediate appeared to bring significant changes to the experiences of those involved. The strength they had gained by training as a novice strongwoman had reached a plateau, and to gain further improvements in strength required a

greater level of dedication to the goal of getting stronger – which inevitably conflicted with the weight/fat loss goals that had until this point remained the priority for most. The greater level of dedication also required further sacrifice on a social level, with greater time and consistency needed to be given to training, and the higher importance placed on nutrition meant that decisions surrounding food and alcohol intake required more time and energy.

For the most part, the enjoyment of training appeared to continue for the majority of strongwomen who had made this step. They still enjoyed the feelings of achievement that they got from getting strong, and training was still something that most of the time they looked forward to. One exception to this being their increased feeling that they needed to 'push through' and train even when circumstances were more difficult, when they were tired, had a long day at work, or were ill for example. However, when talking about nutrition in interviews, and discussing the role of nutrition in their training and competing in strongwoman, a common response was that the role of nutrition in their preparation was 'not as big as it should be'. The importance of nutrition was recognised, but deciding what, and how much to eat, and how much discipline around food was required, appeared to be a much larger source of conflict than deciding when and how often to train. This was certainly the case for my own experience too. Training (which I mostly enjoyed) for one to two hours five days a week was a relatively manageable level of commitment, but the all-day every day requirement to track and/or monitor food intake was far more difficult and had much more of an impact on other areas of my life.

Being an intermediate strongwoman – to what extent is it an empowering or liberating experience?

In the aims and justifications of this study I suggested that strongwoman may have empowering potential due to its focus on physical capacity as opposed to aesthetics. The level

of conflict experienced by intermediate strongwomen though shows that this notion is too simplistic. As was previously discussed, it is evident that the novice strongwoman experience has significant empowering potential, particularly from the feeling of being strong and the sense of achievement. These empowering features were also evident in the experience of intermediate strongwomen as strength continued to increase, the achievements were greater, and training was still enjoyed. However, the increased level of commitment required means that it also has the potential to place more restriction on those involved as well, particularly in terms of social and family life.

Therefore the intermediate strongwoman experience could be seen as the phase in which strongwoman moves away from being a casual leisure pursuit - which Stebbins (1997) explains as a relatively short-lived, immediately intrinsically rewarding pleasurable activity requiring little to no specialist training, and is engaged in for the significant level of pure enjoyment or pleasure found in it – and towards a serious leisure pursuit, defined as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling' (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). The heavier weights and harder events that feature in the intermediate strongwoman experience are rarely able to be achieved without a systematic training approach, and therefore it becomes a leisure pursuit that can no longer be enjoyed by anyone without significant preparation and training.

The other interesting aspect of conflict at this level of competition is to what extent strongwoman provides an 'escape from dominant gendered aesthetics' (Shilling and Bunsell, 2014, p. 493). Although the sport itself has no focus on aesthetics at all, and has no rules on aesthetics unlike bodybuilding, it seems as though almost all of those involved are not able to fully 'escape' from their tendency to focus on aesthetics, even when they have decided that they want to try and push themselves as far as they can go in the sport. The conflict between eating more to help build strength and eating less to avoid putting on weight/fat is still

apparent for many, often manifesting itself in cyclical behaviour patterns of eating more in the build-up to a competition to be as strong as possible for competition day, and then less in the post-competition phase to counteract the additional weight that may have been gained in preparation for it. For example, this strongwoman describes the fluctuation in the way she eats whilst trying to balance weight loss with being strong for competition:

> 'Before the strongwoman competition and before the powerlifting competition I did things like increase my calories to get my strength back up because most of the time I'm in a calorie deficit because I want to maintain losing weight. But like for strength a couple of weeks before I will just eat more so that my strength builds back up. So it's a bit of a rollercoaster with food'

Therefore, it could be suggested that despite the initial shift away from aesthetics when first introduced to strongwoman, there is still an underlying focus on aesthetic, and concern about having a transgressive appearance, that is not removed by the focus on being strong. For example, one strongwoman spoke about her self-consciousness about the changes she had experienced to her body, including increased musculature:

> 'I had to wear something weddingy, so then that was a trauma in itself and it was summer so there's another trauma because you can't wear loads of clothes to cover yourself up either so I ended up in this flowery dress with a jacket on and I was absolutely roasting and I had to take it off and he [her boyfriend] was like what's the problem with taking your jacket off and I was like they're just gonna stare at me, and they did. They were all just like staring at me and that just makes me uncomfortable'

The self-consciousness and worry over other's opinions in this quote suggests that the notion that 'big is bad', gendered aesthetics, and societal discourses surrounding ideal femininity still hold some concern for some of these strongwomen, despite their increasing desire to be strong as they become more immersed in the sport.

The elite strongwoman

For the purpose of this thesis, the term 'elite' is used to describe the experience of those competing at the top end of the sport, paying particular attention to those who compete at an international level, but also including some who compete at a national level. None of these are full-time professional strongwomen, with the only monetary reward being occasional competition prize money, and the majority balance their training with either full-time or part-time work. As I have not ever competed at this level, this part of the chapter differs to the previous novice and intermediate sections, as it focuses primarily on the experiences of others as opposed to a more balanced combination of both my experience and others.

The third character and narrative that I have used as a methodological tool to elaborate on the strongwoman experience is 'Ella' the elite strongwoman. Ella's character is formed by a number of different individual's elite experiences and is typical of a strongwoman who has overcome the potential obstacles that caused conflict for many of the intermediate strongwoman. She is committed to being the best strongwoman that she can be, whatever sacrifice that may require.

Ella – Elite Strongwoman

Ella the elite strongwoman competes at a high level. On an average weekly basis, she completes a full training schedule consisting of five to six training sessions a week that last two to three hours each. She also balances a full-time job alongside this, and she has a family. For Ella, strongwoman is high on the priority list. - family comes first, but strongwoman is right up there, on par with her job. This means that every week training is meticulously planned to fit in around work and family commitments – being too busy to train is not an option for Ella.

Unlike Isobel the intermediate, Ella experiences little to no conflict when considering the impact that competing in strongwoman has on her social life. For Ella, she has already made the decision to commit to being the best that she possibly can be and competing at the highest level she can as a strongwoman, she prioritises that ahead of her social life and accepts that investing so much in the sport will have consequences for other parts of her life. Ella competes in strongwoman to win – it's all about winning, and she is prepared to do whatever it takes to do that. Obstacles that others may refer to as challenges to their training, Ella refers to as excuses. In Ella's opinion, either you want it enough to overcome them or you don't.

Ella still gets some enjoyment out of training and competing in strongwoman, but not to the same extent as Nelly the novice, or even Isobel the intermediate. Strongwoman isn't Ella's job, but it's not a hobby either. She goes to competitions to win, and therefore experiences a great deal of pressure to perform. In contrast to Nelly the novice, health is no longer a priority or motivating factor for Ella's involvement in strongwoman. The motive to be healthier has been replaced by the need to perform and succeed, and her daily

> lifestyle and practices as a strongwoman reflect that. Everything Ella does on a daily basis is geared towards self-improvement in terms of getting stronger and getting better. Ella's training pushes her body to the limit, pain is seen as necessary both in training and competition in order to succeed, and risk of injury is accepted as part of the sport.

It is evident, through learning about the experiences of the elite strongwomen I spent time with in this study, that their involvement at this level is significantly different to that which they experienced when they first entered the sport as a novice strongwoman in terms of how liberating and/or empowering the sport is. This builds on Shilling and Bunsell's (2014) study, in which they suggested that the attitudes towards health, pain, and injury that appear to exist among strongwomen, particularly the emphasis of pushing the body to breaking point, question whether the sport can be seen as liberating. Amongst the elite strongwomen I interviewed, many, like many of the novice and intermediate strongwomen, found their way into the sport initially through a weight loss and/or health-motivated journey. Through the 'win at all costs' mentality that they have adopted by the time they reach this stage though, and their dedication to getting stronger and better, their initial focus on health appears to be much less of a priority. Moreover, some of the practices that being an elite strongwoman involves can be seen as unhealthy.

The level of dedication required to succeed as an elite strongwoman almost becomes a 'full time' lifestyle. In practicality it is not a full-time pursuit because even the elite strongwomen are not full-time professionals and have to work in other roles, however it does become a full-time lifestyle in the sense that nutrition regimes are adhered to rigidly on a daily basis and a large amount of time away from work is dedicated to training. The daily practices of an elite strongwoman are therefore much more restrictive than at novice and

intermediate levels and require a greater level of sacrifice. One of the key differences between those who were at intermediate level and those who had progressed on into the elite levels were their attitudes towards this sacrifice and dedication. For those at the elite level, there is no, or very little, conflict in terms of other areas of their lives like social life. For them, they have prioritised doing well in this sport, and wanting to win, and therefore there is no question in their minds that their actions and behaviours should fall in line with this. For example, one elite strongwoman said:

> 'I think the only challenges, if you're gonna face a challenge, is making excuses as to why you can't do it. I don't really have that. I mean people could think of other excuses but no I don't really have any. I'm accountable to myself and if I don't put the work in then I don't expect the result for it and if I haven't done all that I can and I don't get the result then it's my own tough luck… as long as my kids are all looked after then I don't really have an awful lot of anything else, the rest of it just fits in.'

Similarly, another elite strongwoman said:

> 'I don't drink alcohol at all and if I'm asked to go out I'll say no because I've got training tomorrow… So there are some friendships that have just fizzled out, but that is again, choices, and my priority is this sport. It's one of my highest priorities. My family, my job obviously, and this. This is making history to me. You're carving the way for other women coming into the sport. And if you can't set an example, and the smallest thing and you walk away from it then you're in the wrong sport.'

This approach resonates with Weber's (1991) concept of the 'heroic ethic', where individual action is tied to an ideal irrespective of its costs and there being no uncontested grounds in which it could be justified. Engaging in such a regime of self-transformation was described by Shilling and Bunsell (2014) as a 'value rational' choice in their case study of a strongwoman athlete, in that the athlete was willing to make the sacrifice that she needed to obtain the satisfaction that she did from linking her self-identity to the quest for cultivating strength.

What began as a health-motivated journey for many of the elite strongwomen, just like many of the novice and intermediate strongwomen, is now a performance-driven lifestyle. Their bodywork pursuits follow a 'perfection discourse', in a pursuit for continual self-improvement in which their bodies are viewed by themselves as unfinished products with the intention of continual amelioration (Evans, Rich, and Holroyd, 2004). In pursuit of this perfection, and the drive to continue to get better at their sport, health is not always the priority. It is a sport that is characterised, particularly in competition, by 'limit experiences' which require the body to be pushed as far as it can be, and it is a community and environment that rewards grit, determination, and perseverance through pain and struggle. This was something I became acutely aware of after I competed, not at an elite level, but at a level in which I was challenged beyond my capabilities and struggled to successfully complete any of the events in which I was set. But afterwards I received feedback from numerous other competitors, spectators, and organisers that referred to me as a 'true strongwoman' purely because of the fight and determination I had shown, and despite only lifting one implement successfully all day. The high value placed on pushing the body to its limit, as being required to be a 'true strongwoman', creates a culture in which pain is normalised, and although there is still distinction made between good pain and bad pain, arguably this normalisation of pain, pushing the body to such an extreme, and risk of injury,

is another way in which the elite end of the sport contradicts the health-based motives that initiated many competitors involvement in the sport in the first place.

Concluding remarks

This chapter discussed the question of what extent the experience of being a strongwoman is an empowering and/or liberating experience. As suggested previously, the notion that strongwoman is more empowering than other, more aesthetically driven, activities because of its focus on physical capacity is too simplistic to explain the lived experiences of the strongwomen in this study regarding this. As explored throughout the chapter, the empowering and liberating impact of strongwoman on the lives of those who partake in it varies and fluctuates throughout the course of their time in the sport. Most of the strongwomen involved in this study appeared to experience empowering and/or liberating effects upon their initial discovery of strongwoman, and during the initial stages of their involvement through taking part in an activity that deviated from traditional notions of what women could be and do in a sporting context, and through the focus on bodily competencies. However, for those who progressed beyond novice stages and began to take strongwoman more seriously as a competitive venture, as opposed to an exercise activity, the daily lifestyle became more restrictive and the level of sacrifice and commitment needed to continue to get better and stronger increased. The conflict experienced by those at this stage saw them tussle between wanting to progress as a strongwoman, but also wanting to maintain aspects of their life away from strongwoman that were beginning to be impacted – one key example being their social life, but there was also signs of conflict around the impact of progress in the sport on their gendered appearance.

It is important to note here that not all the strongwomen in this study, nor all strongwomen more broadly, will experience all three of the levels of involvement and participation described in this thesis. Some may never progress from novice level, some may reach intermediate level but choose not to make the commitments required to reach elite level, and some may go back and forth, fluctuating between the levels depending on how much of a priority it is in their life at different points in time. Only those who choose to commit to the lifestyle and behaviours required reach performance at an elite level, as did the elite level strongwomen I interviewed and observed during this study. The notion of the sport being empowering and/or liberating was again complicated at this level of performance too. The daily lifestyle required to reach peak levels of performance meant that the elite level strongwomen in this study had to make sacrifices in their social and personal lives. On the other hand, it was clear that the feeling and sense of being strong, as well as the accomplishments they achieved, led them to feel empowered. Hence, there is no straightforward answer to the question: is strongwoman empowering and liberating for the women involved?

What was ultimately striking on exploration of this topic, was how pervasive both 'numbers' and aesthetics continued to be through all levels of strongwoman experience, despite it being a sport that has no aesthetic focus. Like in McMahon and Penney's (2013) study of female swimmers' embodied experiences, 'numbers still matter' (p. 171). For some, these numbers were crucial to an ongoing monitoring of their weight and/or body composition that lie in conflict to their strength and performance goals, which McMahon and Penney described as 'living by fat numbers' (p. 173). For others, these numbers pertained to the number of kilograms they could lift – in other words, their focus on performance and need and want to continue to build strength and lift more weight meant that numbers still carried meaning. In both cases, these numbers remained a reference point for how they

viewed their bodies aesthetic and/or capability. The journey of self-improvement shifted for some from one of a health and/or aesthetic focus, to a performance focus, however acts of self-surveillance and punishment were retained. The notion of 'living by numbers', be it 'fat numbers' or 'strength numbers', means that sense of self the body is contingent on those numerical evaluations, so it can never be always 'good' or always 'bad', for example it could be very positive for those who set numerical targets and achieve them, but it could be negative for others who do not achieve them. Whilst the notion of aesthetic and number-based evaluation of the body is not then always inherently negative, the self-surveillance and punishment can contradict the bodily self-respect and bodily satisfaction that is associated with individual empowerment (Bunsell, 2013), in a women's sporting context.

Chapter Six

‘IT IS FOR EVERYONE, ANYONE AND IT IS TRULY AMAXING’ – BELONGING, SUPPORT, AND RESPECT: THE CORE VALUES OF THE STRONGWOMAN COMMUNITY.

The strongwoman community, and the attitudes, values, and behaviours of those within it, form a topic that was spoken about by every one of the competitors that I interviewed as part of this study. That the community, but most specifically the sense of community, is a key factor in the sport’s attraction for those who participate in it, has also become apparent through my own experiences in this sport. Other studies of niche or emerging sports have also been community and sub-culture focused, for example skateboarding (Borden, 2001), roller derby (Breeze, 2015), and marathon swimming (Throsby, 2016). This group of disparate sports, with the addition of strongwoman as discussed in this chapter, have all shown that in terms of the community, where there is unity there is also the potential for conflict or contested values. This chapter therefore aims to depict and explore the strongwoman community, its values, and the conflicts and contestations that can occur, partly as a result of the enthusiasm and passion shown for upholding these values.

This opening autoethnographical vignette describes one example of the values of the strongwoman community in action, and an element of the competition day experience, something that will be further explored through others’ experiences later in this chapter.

Three… Two… One… GO! The whistle blew but I wasn’t going anywhere. Lined up against one of the strongest women in the world, out of the corner of my eye I could see her already

five metres or so down the track and moving quickly. The 200-kilogram metal frame that I was meant to be running with laid heavy across the back of my shoulders – pushing hard against the floor I was using every ounce of strength I had just to try and get it off the ground. It didn't move. I tried again. Again, it didn't move. My competitor reached the end, turned, and came running back to the finish line with her 200-kilogram yoke frame while I was still stood on the start line trying desperately to get mine off the floor. Thirty seconds left. Determined to at least pick it up, I tried one more time to push against the frame. Instead of walking away when she had finished, my competitor stood just to my side and screamed motivation and encouragement at me – willing me to pick it up. As did the referee, the timekeeper, and everyone else who was watching from the side-lines. My body screamed in agony as I put everything into this final effort and as the whistle blew to mark the end of time my vision was blurred, and I felt as if I was about to faint – but the yoke had moved off the floor! I was in so much discomfort that I hadn't even realised. As I dropped the weight back down and stepped out from under the yoke my competitor yelled 'You did it!' and gave me a big hug. As I walked away back to where my family and friends were watching the emotion of competition day hit me and I burst into tears. The same competitor who had just stuck around despite finishing long before me to cheer me on for the last 30 seconds of that event went out of her way again to come over to me and say 'you don't need to be upset. You should be so proud of what you've just done. You haven't given up; you've stepped up into a different weight class and you're giving it everything.'

This vignette describes an occurrence that I feel encapsulates my own experiences of being a part of the strongwoman community. On this competition day, I had taken the step to compete in my first regional qualifier. I had intended on competing in the middleweight category, but on the day had weighed in heavy, an experience I described earlier in this thesis

by use of an autoethnographical vignette about my attempt to make weight in chapter five, and had to choose between competing in the open weight category or not competing at all. Not wanting to walk away, I chose to compete, even though the weights that had to be lifted exceeded my capabilities. The overwhelming level of support I received from everyone who was at the competition, as well as online afterwards, was an indicator of the attitudes and behaviours that are valued within this community, (the central point of discussion for this chapter), and of the presence of a network of mutual support rather than individualistic competition. For example, one comment from another competitor on Facebook after the event described me as a 'true strongwoman', which, considering I failed to successfully complete any of the five events on the day, suggested how much value is placed on grit, determination, and hard work – not just on how physically strong you are or how much you can lift. This is a valuable indication that strongwoman has a defined community of participants with shared values. The boundaries of this community are though, not defined by any formal process or status, however once you are immersed within the community it becomes clear as to the way that attitudes, behaviours, and values are used to regulate full access to the community. This is discussed further later in this chapter.

This chapter further explores the apparently strong set of values that the strongwoman community, as well as the wider strongman community which strongwoman forms a part of, is built upon, and how these are experienced and acted upon in the novice, intermediate, and elite settings within the sport. Drawing on both my own and others' experiences, the chapter aims to paint a picture of what it is to be involved in the strongwoman/strongman community, including what the shape and dynamic of the community looks and feels like. It also aims to explore the potential gatekeeping of the community and who appears to be accepted or not accepted into them by using examples that I witnessed and experienced during my study through both real life and social media settings.

The novice strongwoman

The term novice is used to describe those strongwomen who are relatively new to the sport and have only competed in 'novice' competitions. The following vignette, constructed from ethnographic fieldnotes from the time I spent in the field, describes an example of 'Strongwoman Saturday', or sometimes 'Strongwoman Sunday', a regular occurrence in strongwoman that was previously described in chapter five of this thesis. It is the informal name often given to weekend training sessions in which a group of strongwomen, either from the same gym, or different gyms, come together to practice specific competition-style events.

This particular Strongwoman Saturday involved a road trip with some of the other strongwomen at my gym to another strongman gym to train with the strongwomen who were based there. Eight of us split between two cars and took the two-hour journey to the gym. When we got there, we spent another two hours playing around with different bits of kit and training different events. The group split into two's and three's to work on different events depending on what competitions they had coming up and what they most wanted to work on. Some were running up and down the car park doing farmers walks – a moving event where a heavy weight is carried in each hand, similarly to carrying shopping bags, but much heavier! Its combination of lifting heavy things and moving with them quickly tests both muscular strength and aerobic capacity. It activates nearly every muscle in the body, but particularly grip strength in the hands and forearms, and the muscles of the upper back to stop the shoulders and chest from sagging forward. Others were inside using a weights rack to simulate a car deadlift – an event where the back end of a car is placed on a frame which the competitor lifts at the other end from the floor to waist height. Every time someone was attempting a heavy lift, usually a weight they hadn't reached before or that was close to their

personal best (PB), everyone else stopped what they were doing to encourage, shout and support.

At the end of the session, one of the women from the gym we were training at brought out a tray of homemade cakes, which we all tucked into before we left the gym. One said, 'I shouldn't have a second'… another said, 'come on, have a second with me, we've worked hard today we deserve it'. From the gym we all moved to the pub for lunch, where steak sandwiches were the subject of much excitement – 'all the gains!' someone shouted, a reference towards the necessity of good post-training nutrition and importance of protein in the building of strength and muscle. Lunch was accompanied by lots of sharing of training and nutrition ideas, as well as lots of laughter about all things strongwoman-related. Some of the women commented on how nice it was to chat about these things with other people who appreciated them and understood them, and shared their frustrations when talking to people outside of the sport about their training or nutrition – 'they just don't get it!' The sense of community, support, and camaraderie was strong – a group of people who had not previously known each other brought together by strongwoman.

(Fieldnotes, April 2017).

The day described in this vignette is a typical example of what is considered a regular and common practice amongst strongwomen. It is also an example of the togetherness that is often visible within the strongwoman training and competition community. As explored in the previous chapter, the majority of strongwomen in my study found their way into the sport through an individual health and/or fitness journey. Practices such as this suggest that through their early involvement in strongwoman, these women begin to find a sense of group belonging by bringing together individual journeys in pursuit of similar, common goals with

like-minded people. Once again, in this chapter the composite character and narrative of 'Nelly' the novice strongwoman is used to represent the experiences of novice strongwomen in this study.

Nelly – Novice strongwoman

Nelly has been pleasantly surprised by how welcome she has felt within the strongman and strongwoman communities. To her, non-commercial, non-mainstream gyms, such as hardcore bodybuilding, weightlifting, powerlifting, and strongman gyms had always seemed to be even more intimidating versions of the weights room in the commercial gym she had always trained at; dominated by men and only for people who were already strong and/or muscular. Aside from not being sure how weight training aligned with her body composition goals, Nelly had spent a long time feeling too intimidated to enter these spaces. She felt as though she was not strong enough, and didn't know enough, to do so, and so had stuck to the more comfortable cardio-based areas of her commercial, mainstream gym.

When Nelly had first ventured to a strongman gym for a training session, she hadn't known what to expect, but had been worried that she would be out of place or not strong enough to be there. But Nelly soon realised that she felt more comfortable training at the strongman gym than she had at the mainstream gym she had been training at for some time. Everyone seemed to know each other and there was a sense of togetherness, not just within the strongwomen, but as a larger collective with the men training there too, that she had not experienced in a gym before – many people would be training in pairs or small groups, (largely in

groups of women or men, but sometimes mixed), and even those training on their own would share a joke with those around them or pass tips or stop to encourage another attempting a heavy lift. Now she trains regularly with a few other women from the gym. The support and encouragement she's had here, as well as the tips and coaching that have enabled her to learn how to lift, mean that when she can't get to the strongman gym she now has the confidence to use the weights room at her previous commercial gym.

Nelly's experience of the novice strongwoman competitions she has competed in is very positive. She particularly enjoys the sense of camaraderie between competitors and notes how different this feels to any other competitive sport she's been involved in before. She is still trying to get her head around the fact that the people that you are directly competing against are so happy to stand and cheer you on – everyone just wants everyone to do the best that they can do, regardless of how substantial or modest their achievements are in terms of the weight being lifted. Nelly thinks this is great, but just so different to anything she's seen in competitive sport before. After each competition, Nelly keeps in touch with the other strongwomen that she has competed against, and sometimes she will travel to the strongman gyms that they train at to have a training session. These training sessions are normally followed by a meal at a pub or restaurant, sometimes attended by just the women who have been training, other times also attended by the coach or owner of the gym and male gym members too. Nelly jokingly describes these as being 'for the gains', a joke which is commonly used amongst the community, but sometimes seems to have more serious underlying connotations in its use to justify food consumption to one's self. Nelly is thrilled to have found a form of exercise that she genuinely enjoys, unlike many of her

previous weight loss efforts, and feels as though she has found a community in which she belongs.

Nelly's narrative portrays a process of shifting from the feeling of being an ill-fitting outsider within previous fitness contexts, such as commercial gyms, to the feeling of being a welcomed insider within the strongwoman community – unexpectedly given her previous perceptions of non-mainstream, 'hardcore' gyms. Her narrative also suggests key points about the nature of competition, and the continuance of that feeling of belonging and notion of support even in competitive settings within the sport at novice level. Overall, Nelly's narrative depicts the novice strongwoman experience as one in which an individual pursuit is characterised by group support and a level of inter-competitor camaraderie that would more typically be associated with team sports or activities.

Belonging

As demonstrated in both Nelly's narrative and the 'Strongwoman Saturday' vignette, the novice strongwoman experience is characterised by a sense of belonging and togetherness in both training and competition settings alike. This sense of belonging appears to be made up of three components: good relationships with other strongwomen, unconditional support from all those involved regardless of ability or competitive status, and respect for one another's journey and efforts. The first, good relationships with other strongwomen, is exemplified by this quote from one of the novice strongwomen in my study:

> ‘I really like the community and the friends that I have made and how positive that side of the thing is. You know like with the girls, they’re so lovely, and they’re people that I never would have met in my lifetime before if I hadn’t got into lifting and strongman so… Like when I did my first strongwoman competition I made really good friends with (another competitor). So these are just people that I would never ever have met before if I hadn’t have got into it. So that’s really nice, that’s what I really like.’

For this strongwoman, the social benefits of being involved in strongwoman, through making new, supportive friends, were a key part of her feelings of belonging and togetherness within the community. Similarly, another novice strongwoman spoke of this social element, but also began to expand on their experiences of the support shown on competition days between strongwomen who were competing against each other:

> ‘I really enjoyed like the social group of it and I really enjoyed the fact that with strongwoman, or strongman, even though you’re competing against each other everyone supports each other, and it’s not really like that in any other sport, so I like that aspect of it a lot.’

She later expanded on this when describing her first experience of competing in strongwoman, suggesting that she found the level of support unusual given that it came from direct competitors during a competitive sporting event:

> ‘I was like why am I even doing this? But the other competitors in my class were like COME ON, like really like screaming you on, and not just the crowd but the actual competitors, and that’s what I find really unusual but actually no one’s an arse, no one’s a dick. No one actually wants to, obviously they want to beat you because that’s the point of competition, but no one goes about it in a horrible way. No one tries to put you down and everyone encourages you. I don’t know of any other sport genuinely where that happens. People want you to do well which is weird.’

The third component of the sense of belonging that describes the novice strongwoman experience, respect for one another’s journey and efforts, is demonstrated by this quote from a novice strongwoman:

> ‘I think everyone’s a bit more “this is really bloody hard, we are, we’re pretty cool for doing it, so everyone who can do it, you’re awesome”. I think that tends to be the attitude that I find. I haven’t come across one person who’s been an idiot.’

This quote alludes to the value that is placed on hard work, grit, and determination in the strongwoman community. Respect is not only shown to those who are the strongest, but to anyone who exhibits these behaviours, regardless of their ability or status within the sport. Contrary to many of the outsider impressions of the sport, like that described in Nelly’s narrative prior to her involvement, strongwoman provides a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere to anyone who turns up willing to give it a go, regardless of gender, age,

ethnicity, or body shape for example. This inclusivity has been noted in other niche sport communities, such as skateboarding, which is described in Borden's (2001) work with this statement: 'at its heart [skateboarding] shows a tendency towards openness and inclusivity and has been used for social empowerment worldwide' (p. 28). Overall then, the experience of the novice strongwomen in this study suggests that the community provides a welcoming alternative to their previous experiences on their health and/or fitness journey. What had appeared to them from the outside as an intimidating environment instead offered them a supportive, respectful atmosphere in which to continue their journey and embrace a new type of physical activity.

The intermediate strongwoman

The term 'intermediate' is used in this thesis to describe anyone who has moved beyond novice strongwoman competitions, but that are not yet competing at the elite, top end of the sport. This phase includes everyone who falls between these two ends of the sport. This part of the chapter explores the experiences of those who have moved beyond the novice stage of participation in strongwoman regarding their integration and perceptions of the strongwoman community and its values and practices. The character and narrative of Isobel the intermediate strongwoman is used as a methodological device to depict the experiences of the intermediate strongwomen in this study.

Isobel – Intermediate strongwoman

Isobel has been competing for approximately two years now. She has progressed beyond novice competitions and has begun to participate at a higher level, competing in her first regional qualifier for the national competition.

Across her time in the sport, Isobel has met a large number of other strongwomen as well as other people involved in the sport – strongmen, gym owners, trainers and coaches, promoters etc. – and as such, her feeling of belonging within the strongwoman and strongman communities has continued to grow. The strongman gym that Isobel trains at has begun to feel like a second home. Taking her competition preparation more seriously than she did before, she spends a lot of time there and now feels like her training group have become her friends. She enjoys the feeling of being able to walk into the gym and to know the majority of, if not all, of the other people in there.

Isobel's experience of taking the step from novice competitions to an intermediate one such as a regional qualifier is that there is still a strong camaraderie between competitors during the event. Others were willing to lend chalk or lifting straps and other pieces of equipment to those who do not have them, and competitors still cheered each other on as they had in previous novice competitions. Isobel did however notice some differences to this, the most prominent being the increased diversity of approaches that competitors took to their handling of the day. In novice competitions, the majority of competitors seemed to spend the time between events getting to know other competitors, asking questions about where they train and discussing the next event and how they were going to approach it. Isobel was aware though that at this level, not everyone engaged in this in the same way – some appeared to take a back step and sit quietly in the corner with their earphones on, others were already going through their routines and warm-ups ahead of the next event, while some chatted away in the same way that Isobel was used to. During the competition these seemingly more focused competitors tended to keep themselves to themselves,

> completing each event and then starting their preparation for the next one. Once the last event was over though, those who had appeared to distance themselves congratulated and chatted with the other competitors in the same way as all the others. Isobel still felt that the environment was a supportive one, but that there was a sense that some competitors amongst them were beginning to make their performance a bit more of a priority.

The novice experience of the strongwoman community was that competitors felt a sense of belonging and togetherness built upon three components: good relationships with other strongwomen, unconditional support from all those involved regardless of ability or competitive status, and respect for one another's journey and efforts. Isobel's narrative suggests that despite the increase in the level of competition as an intermediate strongwoman, this sense of belonging and togetherness continues to exist. Furthermore, it proposes that this sense of belonging strengthens, as time spent in the sport increases and relationships with others within it continue to build. The process of 'becoming' a strongwoman and of it forming an established part of identity continues to solidify in this intermediate experience, similarly to the 'becoming' that Throsby (2016) talks of in her study on marathon swimming. However, the increased seriousness of competition inevitably means that there are some changes to how competition days are negotiated by those taking part. This negotiation is exemplified by this account from an intermediate strongwoman competitor whose strongwoman journey saw her start from lifting weights to help her lose weight, to competing in strongwoman at European level:

‘It almost feels like it’s a group training session, but that somebody writes down your lifts. I’ve never noticed any kind of atmosphere between people. There’re definitely some girls that remove themselves and get their head in the zone, [name of competitor] is always one, but like after the comp is always really chatty, really friendly, so that’s just her getting into her headspace… I think there’s some people who really get into the spirit of comp day and get involved in everything and what everyone’s doing, and then there’s some people who are just a lot more focused and are somewhere in between. So for me, focusing on other people is a good distraction and it’s a good way of calming myself down. Whereas I find that if I sat in the corner thinking about the next event that doesn’t help me so much. Not too long before, I try to have a little walk around and get my head set a couple of minutes before, but if I was to do that all day I don’t think that would work for me. I can’t say that I’ve tried it in fairness, but I find that watching what other people are doing, kind of keeping my eye on what’s working and what’s not working for people, and then in that it’s really difficult to not encourage people you know when you’re watching someone.’

This competitor went on to describe a particular example from an intermediate competition where she found herself internally conflicted as to whether she should be cheering someone on who she was directly competing against for a qualifying spot for the next level of competition. The quote demonstrates a part of the competition day experience that was so widely referred to by so many of the strongwomen I spoke to in this study:

> ‘I think the thing that points that out to me the most was at one comp, in the final event I was in fifth place and [name of competitor] was in sixth place going into the last event… it was the keg over the yoke, and I was cheering her on because we’ve always got on really well, and I really wanted her to do well but I kind of had that dawning moment, like that realisation that you’re cheering her on but if she gets one more rep she knocks you out of your qualifying spot, but then you just carry on anyway cos you think well I can’t control it. Either I cheer her on or I don’t cheer her on, she’s either gonna get it over there or not, my mind is not powerful enough to stop it from happening and kind of in that moment it was: this is what it’s all about. Cos everybody was around her just, you know, when you can’t do it and you’re really trying to do it, and everybody kind of sees it start to happen and stops whatever they’re doing to come over, that sums it up for me, I’ve never been anywhere else that I’ve seen that happen.’

This account portrays a level of internal conflict in the intermediate experience that was not evident for the novice strongwomen. A conflict as to how one should approach a competition day, and what the priorities should be. At novice competitions, although everyone wanted to do well, there appeared to be less focus on how to improve performance, and more focus on enjoying the day and just doing the best that they could. For this intermediate strongwoman though, there is distinct consideration given to what strategy to competition day would be best for performance, albeit one which she appears to find difficult to stick to when engaged in the atmosphere of competition day. This atmosphere is something that almost all of the strongwomen I interviewed spoke about, and was described as a ‘buzz’ by one other intermediate strongwoman competitor when asked to talk about her competition day experiences:

> ‘Positive. Fun. Enjoyable and a real buzz. The worst thing about the competitions is the two days after when you suddenly come down after that, because it is such a buzz when you do well and that camaraderie and like I said before the friends I’ve met from that environment like I would never have met you and you know that camaraderie that’s there and everyone else cheering everyone else on… It’s like a brick wall two days later, just like bam where did that go. Even if you come last there’s still that buzz element of it and I achieved this and oh my god you done so well and that is great. That is great.’

These accounts from intermediate strongwomen, as well as all those experiences and accounts that made up the basis of Isobel’s narrative, provide an indication that strongwoman competition days at the intermediate level, like at the novice level, are about more than just sporting performance. The support, respect, and relationships that make up the components of the sense of belonging in the strongwoman community form a strong part of the competition experience as well as the training experience, and this continues beyond novice competitions but into regional and national intermediate competitions too. However, there are indications here that strongwoman is for some at least, becomingly increasingly an activity that is competed in, as opposed to participated in, as the shift from it being a tool for health and fitness, and from a friendly, social, care-free environment, to a more focused, competitive sporting venture continues. It is at this intermediate phase that engagement in strongwoman starts to become more of a systematic pursuit, with aims and goals other than just enjoyment. In line with Stebbins’ (1987) concept of serious leisure, strongwoman is characterised by a unique ethos and social world and becomes a part of its participant’s personal and social

identities as they cement their belonging within its community. With this progression comes extra work and commitment, and costs to their time, and sometimes more pressure on their work-life balance. This increased commitment was also discussed in chapter five of this thesis.

The elite strongwoman

The term elite is used to refer to those strongwomen competing at the very top end of the sport, paying particular attention to those who compete at an international level, but including some of those who compete at a national level too. This part of the chapter explores the elite experience of the strongwoman community, considering how much of the community ethos that is so evident at the lower levels of participation is carried forward into an elite high-performance setting. The character and narrative of Ella the elite strongwoman is used as a methodological device to represent the experiences of the elite strongwomen in this study.

Ella – Elite strongwoman

> For Ella, competitions are not fun anymore. The build-up is highly-pressured and her performance needs to be without error if she is going to win the title she is aiming for. Ella has set routines for her approach to competition day, and to each individual event within that. She knows that she needs to be focused, and not get distracted by everything that is going on around her. She keeps herself to herself during competitions, and makes sure that she is thoroughly prepared, both mentally and physically, for each event. The respect between competitors is still very much present, but Ella is aware that they are no longer standing at the side

cheering each other on. If another competitor is standing by her side, she knows that it's not to cheer her on, but to count how many repetitions she has completed, so that they know how many they need to achieve to beat her.

This level of preparation and focus though doesn't mean that Ella no longer has any interaction with other competitors. Whilst she needs to fully focus during competitions, she will still spend time with the other competitors the day before, and after the event. Particularly when travelling to competitions abroad, there is a group of strongwomen that Ella will meet and have dinner with the night before a competition. Ella considers many in this group to be friends and enjoys the friendships that strongwoman has allowed her to build across the world. She also enjoys using her knowledge and experience to give back to the community – regularly interacting with other, less experienced strongwomen both in person through workshop, seminar, and training activities, and online by commenting on others' strongwoman-related posts or answering questions and messages. In this sense, Ella feels like she is part of a wider strongwoman and strongman community both in the UK and beyond. She now holds a position of status and authority; others look to her for guidance and follow her progress and performance in training and at competitions. This comes with its own pressures, and there is a high level of competitiveness between her and her opponents, however the mutual respect and values that she is used to appear to still be present in the elite sections of this wider community that she is now engaged in. Ella sees the differences from her earlier experiences in the sport as inevitable when competing in any sport at such a high level.

The narrative of Ella the elite strongwoman depicts a strongwoman community that maintains its values, yet adapts accordingly, when high performance becomes a priority for competitors at the elite level. The internal conflict that was demonstrated by the intermediate strongwoman experience regarding approach to competition day is no longer present, with the elite narrative indicating high performance as the established primary aim and focus. This is not though at the expense of the strong community values that characterise the novice and intermediate strongwoman experiences. However, the practical manifestations of these values differ, particularly during competition itself, when focus is firmly on doing what is required to win, as demonstrated in this quote from an elite strongwoman, comparing an intermediate level competition to the Arnold, an international elite level competition that many would consider at the least on par with, if not, potentially more prestigious, than World's Strongest Woman:

> 'We'll use that competition as an example, yeah everyone was cheering everybody else on, you won't see that at other places. Come to the Arnold, you won't see that, unless they're your actual friends, you know – everyone's standing there counting, no one's there like that was a great lift, everyone wants to know how many reps that was because then you're going to be going next. Or how many other people have done, you're keeping an eye on what's going on, you're not like… that's the difference between knowing how to compete and not. So you know, if you want to beat the other person then you're going to have to know, or at least an estimate of what you're going to have to do or how much you know the next person is better at pressing. You need to know how much you need to beat this one so that you're coming second or third, rather than just bang away two reps and think that that's going to be enough, you know it won't be.'

This account talks of the notion of knowing how to compete, one that grows in importance as strongwomen progress through the sport. This growth portrays a shift in motivation from the early novice experiences of strongwoman as a participatory tool for health and weight management purposes, to strongwoman as a competitive sporting endeavour. Those that make it to the elite level commit to this sporting endeavour, for others whom this shift is something that they do not wish to pursue, their participation continues at intermediate and/or novice levels. It is important to acknowledge explicitly that most strongwomen will not reach this elite level, some might push on and then drop back, some may never get close or even want to. However, the small, close-knit nature and structure of the community means that the elite strongwomen are not removed from the rest, with many often training together, and sometimes competing in the same events. For example, the regional qualifiers and national competition. One elite strongwoman talks of the friendships she's made in the sport, but also the enjoyment she experiences from being able to give something back to the community through the support of other strongwomen:

> 'The community is amazing, I have made so many friends in so many different countries that I talk to every day. You know, as a single parent I'm never alone. I love going to compete, I love… for example, the qualifiers. I love being that person who can encourage someone and go yeah you can do it. It's not, this isn't impossible. And I love someone… being able to see them achieve it.'

Through my time and my own experiences in the sport, it is clear that the strongwoman community at all levels places high importance on a strong set of values that include support and respect for one another, as well as reward for hard work, determination,

and grit. However, the further immersed into the sport I have become, the further aware I am of the cracks and disputes within the community that also lie beneath the surface. One elite strongwoman competitor alluded to this:

> 'The community, I don't know, it depends I think with what context you get people in. Whole-heartedly I think it is kind of quite supportive but there's like little things within it, but that's the same as with everything, it's the same as at school, I think you just have to try not to be involved in it. I try not to be because it just interferes with everything else, because you get to a competition and there's like too much eurrrgh, you know friction, tension or whatever. You can't have it like that it just impedes on performance and ultimately that's what you've spent your time doing, why would you want to destroy it one day with the crappy atmosphere around you.'

It can be suggested from this that there is an occurrence of further immersion in the sport allowing the 'reality' of its community make-up to come to the fore, with some of the gloss and shine being taken from one's initial impressions of it as an all-welcoming, all-supportive environment in which everyone gets along, and everything is good. However, that is not to propose that those qualities of the community are just a façade, it is evident that they run deeper entrenched from novice level right through to the elite. But to suggest that there were never any incursions to these community values would be a falsification. The next section of this chapter will explore one particular example of these incursions, and the reaction to it of the rest of the community.

The community as one?

Whilst most of this chapter thus far has explored the strongwoman community through each phase of participation individually to highlight the nuances and distinctions between them, it is also important to consider the strongwoman community as a whole. As mentioned previously, the small size of the sport means that it is a community in which 'everyone knows everyone' and those at the top end in terms of performance level are far less removed from those just beginning their journey in the sport than one might expect. It is not uncommon for elite strongwomen to hold seminars in which they impart knowledge, advice and practical coaching to others. There is also a prominent online strongwoman community presence, particularly on Facebook, where there are both strongwoman specific Facebook groups, as well as mixed gender groups, and so interaction between strongwomen, and strongmen, of all levels occurs regularly in this context. As one strongwoman I interviewed said, 'everyone's got everyone on Facebook'. During the period of time that I conducted my strongwoman research, this online context became a platform for an incursion of values that provoked a strong reaction from the wider strongwoman and strongman community.

The unrefined, and somewhat incoherent, structure of strongwoman in its current state means that there is not a clear competition-based qualification pathway to *World's Strongest Woman*. That is, instead of competing in a qualifier event, athletes are either invited to compete in World's based on previous competition accomplishments, or they can enter an online qualifier by submitting videos in which they hit the prescribed numbers of weight on several specified events.

During the course of my research, one strongwoman competitor who was not invited to World's released a video in which she and her boyfriend/coach stated that she would not be entering the qualifier. They also spoke of other, invited strongwoman competitors and her

potential to beat them if she was to compete – essentially heavily scrutinising the decisions to invite other athletes, and implying that those decisions were wrong.

It appears that the majority of the wider strongwoman and strongman community took objection to this video and its content. This objection was based around what was perceived as a lack of respect for the other competitors mentioned and their achievements. Objectors also noted that the strongwoman in question had not competed in many competitions to date, and not in any in which the strongwomen mentioned in the video had competed. In their view, she could not expect an invite to World's, and could not make such claims as to who she would be capable of beating, without competing and proving herself against them.

The video provoked a significant community response on social media, in which many community members expressed their views in the form of comments on the original video post and in other forums where the video had been shared. These comments were mostly responded to by the strongwoman and her partner, and heavy debate and back-and-forth of opinions ensued. Thirteen days after the original video post, with comments and posts about this video and the issues surrounding it still continuing to emerge, another strongwoman competitor took to social media 'fed up with the drama' to post 'something positive' that she hoped 'would convey what we are all about' – 'we' referring to the strongwoman community. The content of this post was something she called 'The Strongwoman Manifesto' which summarised what she saw as the core values of the community:

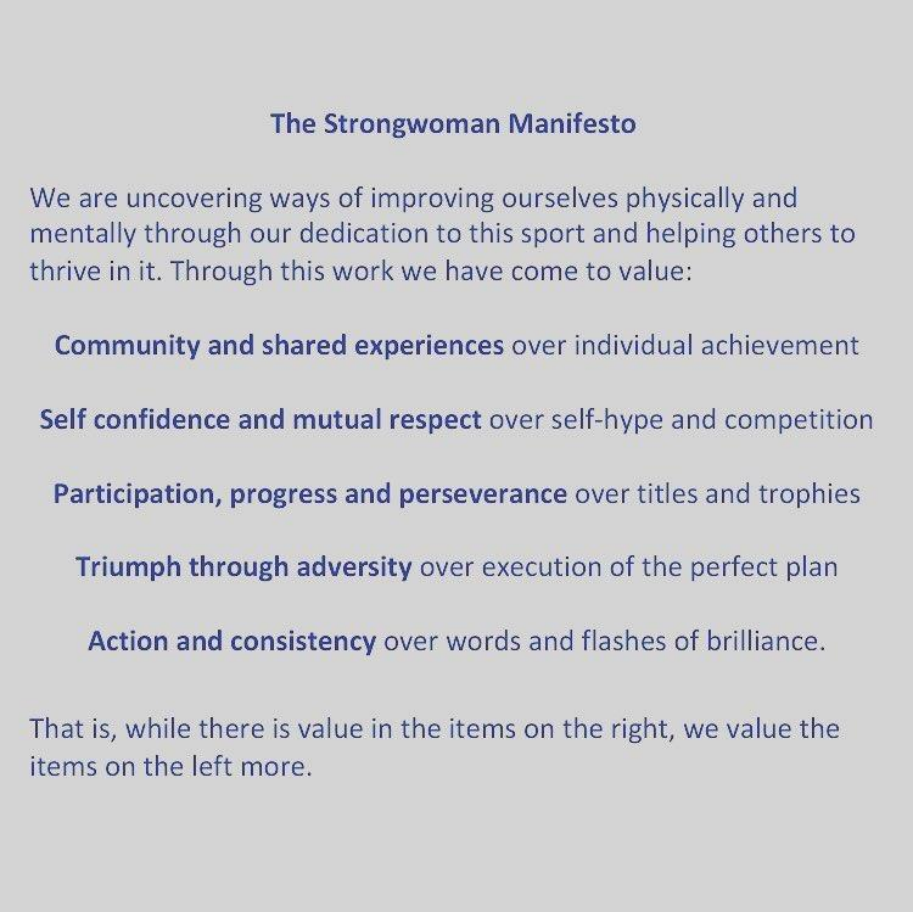

Figure 1: The Strongwoman Manifesto. Published on Facebook: 22nd August 2017.

The values listed in this manifesto reflected the intimation of much of the comments of objection that had been posted in response to the video. In particular, the line 'self confidence and mutual respect over self-hype and competition', was reflected with many postings about the importance of having self-belief and confidence in one's abilities when competing at the top levels. These posts also emphasised a key difference between having this self confidence and showing a lack of respect to other athletes. 'Action and consistency over words and flashes of brilliance' was also a sentiment echoed in many of the responses, with a strong 'less talk, more action' message in terms of coming out and competing against those that had been mentioned in the video, as opposed to talking about the 'could haves and would haves'. Overall, between the manifesto and all the other general responses to this video, the strong

message from the community was ‘we don’t do that here’ in reference to the content of the video. It was a message that was unequivocally delivered by virtually unanimous response, summarised by this quote from one of the strongwomen I asked about this incident during interview:

> ‘I think the response from the community was - we don’t do that here – you can’t be like that in this sport, and if you do, you will be very isolated. You will be very isolated within what is a very small community. Now it is, and technically it is an individual sport, but it’s a team sport as well because you are never alone. Every competition you go to, no matter who the competitors are, if you finish your reps before someone else you stand there shouting at them helping them. If someone falls to the floor you help pick them up. You know you encourage other people. That is strongwoman. And strongman… it’s the same with the guys. I think it did send out a very clear message… the enormity of the response, and the fact that everybody was saying the same thing. It’s just not how you behave in this sport. What the sport and the community responds well to is giving it everything, digging deep, and never giving up, regardless of your ability level. It’s about challenging yourself.’

The video and all the response and reaction that stemmed from it depict an example of a community in action, self-policing and self-regulating those who are accepted or not accepted, and what behaviour is accepted or not accepted. The community in this example have seemingly imposed a set of ‘unwritten rules’ that are agreed upon and acted on by a very large majority of those involved in the sport. Any exception to those values and the

overall ethos of the sport is challenged and it is made explicitly known that it is behaviour that is not welcome in the context of this sport. This is positioned by those who are 'policing' as a way of protecting the positive attributes that the strongwoman community can provide. However, by those who are 'policed' this is sometimes suggested as being taken too far or perceived as 'ganging up' or 'bullying', as was alleged in this case by the strongwoman who posted the video.

I had the opportunity to interview the strongwoman that posted the video. When I asked her about the response to the video, she felt that she hadn't done much wrong and suggested that similar statements from a strongman as opposed to a strongwoman would have been received much better with no offence taken, gender being made relevant here as a reason why the video received the reaction that it did. She felt the amount of 'hate' she had received was unwarranted. She said that she understood that not everyone would have known who she was and that the video may have taken some by surprise, yet remained strong in her assertion that she was strong enough to beat the other competitors she had named, referring to her training videos as evidence. In response to their comments on the amount of competitions she had partaken in, she said this was just a reflection of the limited amount of time she had been in the sport and remained confident that in the future she would prove her critics wrong.

This conflict raises the issue of power and hierarchies within the sport, perhaps exposing some limitations of how inclusionary the sport is – i.e. a sense of inclusion being limited to those who follow the self-imposed values of most of the community. A question here also though is how unavoidable or how useful a conflict such as this one is for the growth and development of the sport. It could be argued that through conflicts such as these the group may emerge stronger, with a more refined purpose, or a clearer defined set of values. There is a possibility that this moment may well come to be looked back on as a formative moment in the sport as it progressed from formation and into maturity.

Concluding thoughts

The strongwoman, and wider strongman, communities are undoubtedly a central feature of the strongwoman culture and the experiences of those who partake in it. The two communities are certainly not distinct from each other, with the two intertwining and overlapping – particularly in training situations, where strongwomen and men generally train in the same strongman-specific gyms, sometimes together but sometimes separately. Almost every strongwoman that I interviewed, with the exception of one or two, referred to the community as a positive part of their experiences in the sport. For many, the community was their first reaction to the question 'what do you enjoy about strongwoman?' and it was apparent that it formed a large part of their reasons for continuing to engage in strongwoman – particularly for those at the novice and intermediate stages.

These positive accounts of the strongwoman community are ones that reflect my own experience. Overall, my experiences in the sport have been overwhelmingly positive regarding how welcome, supported, and respected I have been made to feel by training buddies, other competitors, coaches, gym owners, promoters, and general supporters alike. The atmosphere and support on competition days in particular is something very different to any I have ever experienced in any of the other sports I have been involved in. Like one of the strongwomen quoted in this chapter said, you rarely feel like you are competing in an individual sport. There is certainly an element of something special and unique about its qualities and ability to engage people who never thought that lifting heavy weights would be something they would be capable of or want to engage in.

Strength and empowerment may also be drawn from involvement in the strongwoman community through its position outside of the 'norms' of society. With the traditional cultural dissociation surrounding the practice of women lifting weights (Brace-Govan, 2002) and

ongoing stigma towards female muscularity (Bunsell, 2013), strongwoman can be seen as an activity that challenges prescribed societal standards of femininity. There is certainly a sense of collective unity between strongwomen around the idea of challenging these standards together and fighting against the aesthetic societal standards that for many consumed their previous health and fitness endeavours. Parallels can be drawn here with the skateboarding subculture, another originally niche sporting activity (although now very mainstream) that has been 'largely cast as being oppositional to normative society' (Borden, 2001, p. 24), with participants that 'unsettle conventional society in an ambiguous yet challenging manner (p. 24). Although a strong theme in extreme and lifestyle sports is that the originally subversive and countercultural elements eventually get co-opted into mainstream corporate rationale.

That being said, it feels important not to portray the strongwoman community as entirely positive without any criticality – it would be unrealistic to think that any community could exist without its tensions. The 'cracks' in my experience only began to show the further I became immersed in the sport and the more people I came to know and interact with. None of these have caused me personally to have any negative experience in the sport but have instead increased my awareness of the splits and disagreements that are often present between key stakeholders. Many of these appear to be wrapped up in differing opinions as to how best the sport should progress, what competition pathways should look like, how each competition should run, what type of events should feature in certain competitions, and methods of controlling who participates in any given competition. With this in mind, it could be posited that many of these heated debates come from a place of passion and commitment from people who have a love for the sport, invest a lot of time into it, and want to see it continue to grow and thrive. The more one invests personally the less willing they are to see the sport and its community change in ways that take it away from their control or what they've been familiar with. The majority of tensions I have been aware of have been seemingly based in good

intentions and disagreements as to what is best for the sport and its participants. There is very little financial reward in strongwoman, so it is hard to imagine that many actions are motivated by monetary gain, for competitors, gym owners or promoters.

Regarding the example of the community's response to the video described in this chapter, despite many of the differences in opinion as to the logistics and progression of the sport, it does appear that one thing that the vast majority unite in is their actions to protect the ethos of the community. The collective enthusiasm, and in some sense aggressive response to this incident, indicated just how important this protection is deemed. The common goal of maintaining this ethos highlights its clear importance and centrality to strongwoman and strongman's culture, and places it very highly in considerations for any route of development that the sport takes in future years.

Chapter Seven

‘I JUST THOUGHT THEY ATE A LOT OF CHICKEN’: RISK, MORAL DILEMMA, AND THE CULTURE OF SILENCE SURROUNDING PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUG USE.

Strength- and muscularity-based sports have had a long and enduring association with performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), most notably anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS). However, my experience of PEDs in strongwoman is that there is a distinct silence surrounding the subject, and this was also confirmed in my interviews with other strongwomen. This chapter therefore aims to discuss a topic that is generally not openly spoken about; including the potential reasons for this silence, complex attitudes of strongwomen towards PED use, and the ramifications of the existence of PED usage on the growth and development of the sport.

This chapter will aim to expand the prior literature and understanding of this topic by exploring the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) in strongwoman, a sport that has not yet been studied in relation to this. The chapter aims to increase understanding of the attitudes and practices of strongwomen regarding a topic that is characterised in the community largely by a culture of silence. This chapter, similarly to previous ones, draws on both mine and others’ experiences and views, alongside critical reflection, to explore the place of PEDs within strongwoman, the existing attitudes towards their use, the potential reasons for the culture of silence and associated stigma, and the role of PEDs in the potential for growth and development of the sport. The main part of this chapter explores the changing attitudes and practices regarding PED use through the experiences of the novice, intermediate, and finally elite strongwoman competitors in my study, particularly regarding

the three analytical points that make up this chapter's core: risk, moral dilemma, and a culture of silence. This is situated alongside reflection of my own shifting stance on PED use as I progressed within the sport.

The following vignette describes a conversation I had with my Grandad prior to competing in my first strongwoman competition and sets the scene for subsequent autoethnographical reflection throughout the chapter on my changing awareness and attitudes towards this topic across my time in the sport.

'How was the gym?' my nan asked as I walked into the hallway, dropped my gym bag on the floor and headed into the kitchen for dinner. 'Good!' I exclaimed, 'I'm feeling really strong for this competition'. I sat down at the dinner table opposite my grandad, the smell of nan's roast potatoes filling the air as I waited patiently for my post-training feed. 'What competition were you talking about Hannah?' Grandad asked as we waited. 'I'm doing a strongwoman competition Gramps, like weightlifting type stuff'. 'Be careful' he said. Expecting the same warnings my nan had given me about the risk of hurting myself or of 'getting too big', I had my response already lined up in my head, but instead he said, 'you'll end up on steroids'. I looked at him puzzled as he continued, 'I had a few mates that used to go down the gym a lot, they didn't start out wanting to do them, but the more they trained the more they got obsessed with it you know? Just wanted to be stronger and stronger. In the end they were all on em'. Having never heard performance-enhancing drugs mentioned in the context of my chosen sport before I said, 'Nah grandad don't worry, you know I wouldn't do anything like that. Anyway, I think you're thinking of bodybuilding or something… no one does steroids in my sport…'

I did not say this just to put my Grandad's mind at ease. At that point I truly, if somewhat naively, believed that steroids were not a feature in the sport I had recently chosen to pursue. Perhaps this derived from my lack of understanding as to the effect that steroids had – from my rather innocent perspective, I thought that the only people taking steroids were the ones who had a hyper muscular visual appearance, very lean and highly defined– the appearance of a bodybuilder. Not having seen or been aware of many people that looked like that in strongman/woman, I was content in my belief that steroid use did not exist. In addition, I had a pre-existing negative attitude towards such drugs, stemming largely from my familiarity with more mainstream, tested sports such as athletics, in which those taking any form of performance-enhancer were deemed as 'cheats'. The negativity I perceived around this meant that I was reluctant to even consider the possibility that this may be something that was occurring in strongwoman.

'Steroids' is a term used colloquially as an abbreviation of anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS), the name given to synthetically produced variations of the male hormone testosterone. 'Anabolic' refers to muscle-building, and 'androgenic' refers to increased male sexual characteristics. Steroids are viewed as performance-enhancing drugs, taken by athletes to increase strength, stamina, and muscle size. They work in the muscle cells by increasing protein synthesis, creatine phosphate synthesis, and glycogen and fluid storage (Frueh, Fierstein, and Stein, 2000). Researchers have highlighted a lack of studies on women taking steroids in comparison to those on men. In her ethnographic study of female bodybuilders, Bunsell (2013) stated that there had been a 'dearth of information' regarding the experiences of female bodybuilders and steroid use prior to her work (p. 88). Additionally, Grogan et al. (2004) suggested that 'most previous work on anabolic steroid use has focused on men, as most bodybuilders are men, and most steroid users are male' (p. 846). This indicates that the

apparent silence surrounding PED use, in a research context at least, has not been unique to strongwoman, but to some extent has occurred in other strength- and muscle-based sports.

The potential reasons for this silence suggested by previous research include the associated stigma of women taking steroids – muscle-building, androgenic substances are often heavily equated with men and masculinity. In her research on female bodybuilders, Bunsell (2013) posited that women tended to be less open about their steroid use due to the 'associated gender stigma' (p. 75). Propositions from her study were that the use of steroids amongst men was a form of enhancing the levels of testosterone that they already naturally had, whereas for women it was seen as putting something into their body which is not natural and that could have implications for their biological sex and/or gendered appearance. Prior to this, Klein (1993) also stated that the disdain surrounding women's use of PEDs was based on the notion that they were taking the 'male hormone' (p. 181).

The next section of this chapter explores the attitudes and practices regarding PED use in novice strongwomen, moving through to those in intermediate strongwomen, and finally elite strongwoman competitors in my study. Reflection of my own shifting stance regarding PED use as I progressed within the sport will run alongside these. Characteristic of the iterative-inductive approach of ethnographic research in which there is movement back and forth between foreshadowed problems and theory grounded in data, PEDs became a much more prominent part of my research than I had thought they would be prior to beginning the research. This is reflected in the sections of this chapter that address my own shifts in perspective as the research progressed.

The novice strongwoman

As in previous chapters, the term novice is used in this study to describe those who are relatively new to the sport and have only competed in 'novice' competitions. The character 'Nelly' is used here to elaborate on the novice strongwoman experience in relation to PEDs.

Nelly – Novice strongwoman

Nelly the novice has not directly encountered PEDs during her time in strongwoman so far. Beside the occasional speculative remark from someone at her gym about someone else who competes, she has not heard them spoken of, and certainly has not heard any strongwoman openly discuss their use of them. It does not occur to Nelly that PEDs could be prevalent in this sport, she views them as something quite distant that she cannot link to anyone she knows or knows of in the sport.

Nelly does not see PEDs as something that she would ever consider using. She views them as a threat to health – particularly as something that could have significant impact on the fertility of the women who use them – and a threat to female appearance, regarding what she considers the unwanted side effects such as facial hair growth and deepening of the voice. Nelly is also vehemently against the use of PEDs in the interest of fairness. She does not believe that it is fair for athletes using PEDs to compete alongside those who are not, as this is not a level playing field. She thinks that if anyone is using PEDs, they should be open and honest about it so that other strongwomen are not left feeling inadequate or

incapable due to skewed perceptions of what level of strength is physically possible as a natural competitor.

The experiences of PEDs described in Nelly's narrative can be seen to reflect and fall in line with her reasons for competing in the sport and the priorities she has within this. As described in chapter five of this thesis, this study has shown the core features of the novice strongwoman experience to be health and enjoyment, as opposed to high performance. Steroids are generally associated with achieving high performance benefits at the potential expense of health, and thus it makes sense that a novice strongwoman would not consider using them. However, Nelly's lack of awareness and knowledge of PED use within the sport across all levels reflects the culture of silence that appears to be embedded within strongwoman. This silence means that the use of PEDs is not 'common knowledge' amongst those making their way into the sport. Given the tensions that appear to exist for many female athletes between developing the characteristics they need to be successful in their sport, and performing hegemonic femininity (Krane et al., 2004) – see literature review chapter – and the initial reluctance of many women to engage in strength and/or muscle building activity as a result of these tensions, it is reasonable to suggest that in some cases wider awareness and acknowledgement of use of substances that are equated with men and masculinity may negatively impact the number of women who look to engage in the sport.

Fairness

All of the women that I asked about PED use in strongwoman spoke about the concept of fairness, however these conversations depicted a wide range of opinions regarding how fair or unfair the practice of using PEDs is in a sport which has no formal rules against

their use. The exception to this is a very small number of competitions which are titled 'natural', and these will be discussed further later in this chapter. Central to the opinions of many of those competing at a novice level was the notion of a 'level playing field', with PED use being positioned as a transgression of this. For example, one novice strongwoman said, 'I don't like it or don't agree with it. But I don't agree with anyone… not cheating but having a helping hand.' Similarly, another said, 'If you're competing against a natural athlete and you're roided up, [taking steroids] that puts you at a massively unfair advantage.' Perspectives such as these appear to position PED use as the single, defining factor in determining whether there is a level playing field or not – without PED use, the playing field is level, with PED use, it is not. Another novice strongwoman though acknowledged the complexity of the notion of a level playing field, how this is determined, or if it can exist at all:

> 'I think no one's ever on a level playing field because you're taller than me, I'm short, so when we do a medley I'm always gonna have a disadvantage, but when we do a squat I'm gonna have an advantage because I'm shorter and closer to the floor, so no one is ever on the same playing field. But when you add things that enhance muscles, strength, endurance, and I know that they're not necessarily illegal but when you add things that are enhanced like that you take away that level playing field.'

For this novice strongwoman, PED use is therefore not positioned as the single factor in determining the existence of a level playing field, however it is placed as different to the other naturally occurring athlete variations that are discussed, such as height. This quote

suggests that PEDs have different implications on the level playing field because they produce athlete variations that are not natural, they 'enhance' physical attributes that are crucial to performance in this sport, most relevantly strength. This perspective though poses an interesting discussion as to the place of other less-vilified substances regularly used by strength-sport athletes such as peptides and creatine, as well as assistive equipment such as lifting belts, which are used by almost all competitors to help stabilise their back, and lifting straps, which are again used commonly to assist grip strength. It could be argued that these are also non-naturally occurring aids to performance. The definition of 'natural' and the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable is hence quite blurred.

Health

As described in Nelly's narrative, for the novice strongwomen in this study the potential performance benefits of PED use were not deemed to outweigh the potential costs to health that they could cause. This appeared, at this stage in their strongwoman journey's, to be a decision that they were sure about, with very little or no suggestion that this may change at any point in the future. For example, one strongwoman said:

> 'For me personally I would never do it cos I think at the end of the day, I know what that shit does to you. It's pretty nasty shit and really, do you really want that kind of stuff in your body? For me personally, eurgh no thank you… I would never take them, I have no desire to. I'm just too conscious of all the other shit that does to your body. That's the biggest thing.'

Although it was not always stated directly by the novice strongwomen I had these conversations with, my discernment was that as relative newcomers to the sport they had little first-hand experience of PEDs. Rather, their perceptions of the dangers of their use derived from high-profile accounts in mainstream media and other sources. This strongwoman described one such account in her description of the health-based dangers of PED use:

> 'I dunno I just think it's dangerous to your body more than anything. It's dangerous. What was that guy? The big bodybuilder that died last year, the American dude? They were all like nah it ain't drugs… of course it is. You can't look like that and not take stuff… and put a massive strain on the heart.'

Her issue with the health problems associated with PED use stretched beyond that of the impact for the individual and concerned even more the implications that such health issues may have on the UK National Health Service (NHS) and other users of that service. Taking a similar stance to that which is often described in relation to the costs of obesity, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, which criticises the extra strain put on healthcare responses through 'self-inflicted' health problems, she said:

> 'And then there's the health which obviously that's their opinion but then that goes into the fact of our NHS already being overloaded and people like me who already have to wait for their appointments… it has a knock-on effect on that as well I think for me very politically on that one.'

Overall then it is evident that the novice strongwoman view is largely characterised by limited knowledge on the specific details of PED use, and an anti-PED perspective based on the notions of both fairness and health. As previously suggested from Nelly's narrative, this aligns with the motives for novice participation in strongwoman as described earlier in this thesis. For many novice strongwomen, their early participation in the sport is a step in their health-related journey, and thus it is understandable that health would take priority over performance-enhancement at this stage.

The intermediate strongwoman

As in previous chapters, the term intermediate is used to describe the experiences of those who have begun to move beyond novice strongwoman competitions, but that are not yet competing at an elite level at the very top end of the sport. This part of the chapter therefore explores the experiences of those who have progressed beyond novice competitions regarding PED usage and their changing awareness and attitudes. The character 'Isobel' is used, like in previous chapters of this thesis, as a methodological tool to help elaborate on the experiences of intermediate strongwomen regarding PED use, and their attitudes and experiences in relation to this.

Isobel – Intermediate strongwoman

Isobel has been competing for a while now. She has progressed beyond novice competitions and has begun to participate at a higher level, competing in her first regional qualifier for the national competition. In doing so, Isobel has started to meet some of the more experienced and accomplished strongwomen from her

region and beyond. Whilst she has full admiration for them and their strength levels, the more heavily she becomes involved in the sport, the more she begins to think about PEDs. Isobel finds herself beginning to quietly question others: 'Is she? Isn't she? She's super strong and her shoulders are huge, but she doesn't look like a man, and her voice isn't THAT low is it?' - Isobel speculates to herself. She has begun to hear the occasional indirect reference to PED use, and is doubting her previous thoughts that these practices do not occur in strongwoman.

Although Isobel has still never heard anyone openly admit to taking any form of PED, she is beginning to resign herself to the fact that their use is probably more common in this sport than she had first thought. She begins to re-think her own stance on the issue and finds herself conflicted. Her previous views that PED use was not fair were strong, and it is hard for her to completely shed the negative perceptions she has of the practices as being 'wrong'. However, in her most recent enthusiasm to be the best and strongest she can possibly be, Isobel is starting to see and to an extent beginning to understand how the temptation and motivation to use PEDs might start to set in. Thinking back to her frustrations with her inconsistency of training and nutrition though, Isobel knows that she has a lot more potential to fulfil naturally before she will even begin to seriously consider this step. Occasionally she feels a strong desire for this 'magic' substance that she perceives will make her stronger than she's ever been and give her the strength she is increasingly craving.

However, for Isobel these feelings are soon superseded by the reasoning and remembrance that she is still only just starting out in this sport in comparison to others and would like to see just how strong she could get naturally first. Besides, she knows very little about the impact of steroids – on health,

appearance, or performance – and she doesn't even know who she would approach for help or how she would obtain them. At this stage though, Isobel has noticed a distinct shift in her attitudes and approach to PEDs – the drive to be stronger has triggered a temptation for something that she once thought would be a line she would never cross.

From denial to increasing realisation

This shift in Isobel's attitudes to PED use has many similarities to my own experiences of hearing and learning more about this 'silent' topic and hence developing a different, changing perspective on it to the one that I had upon starting the sport. The following autoethnographical vignette details the first incidences I had in which I became more aware of PEDs as something that occurred in my sport and the shifts in perspective that these began to prompt for me:

Sitting in my hotel room post-competition waiting to go out for dinner I scrolled through Facebook, responding to comments on the videos that I had posted of my performance and congratulating other competitors via their own posts. It was my fourth or fifth novice competition and would end up being my last before moving on to intermediate competitions and regional qualifiers. I placed fourth. My scrolling stopped when I came across a post from the coach of a fellow competitor that piqued my interest. The competitor in question had placed fifth. My interest turned to unease as I read an account that congratulated her performance, with emphasis given to the consideration that she was a 'natural athlete in an untested field'. It was less the words that were used and more the ones that were implied that provoked a reaction in me. Were they suggesting someone who placed above her was on

drugs? Were they suggesting that all of us that placed above her were on drugs? Steroids? In our sport? And in a novice competition? No. Surely not. I thought about the three athletes who had placed above me – Did I think any of them were using? I don't know – it hadn't even crossed my mind until I had read this post. I wasn't using them, for sure.

Given my pre-existing negative perceptions around PED use before venturing into this sport, and general naivety as to their existence, my initial reaction was one of denial that anyone in that competition would have been using, and outrage that someone would dare suggest that they (including myself) were, particularly in a public forum. I screenshot the post and sent it straight to my coach – 'who do they think they are, implying things like that?' I wrote. I didn't necessarily think that they were accusing me of steroid use – I didn't think that my level of strength or performance that day was impressive enough for anyone to suspect that I might be using – but I found myself outraged on behalf of those that had placed in the top three that such things were being said or thought about. My coach was dismissive of the comment. This was the first time that I had really heard of PEDs being openly mentioned in my sport and once my initial internal reaction to the post had calmed I found myself questioning what I thought I knew and what I had assumed regarding PED use in strongwoman.

Fast forward three weeks or so and I was being introduced to someone who used to compete in strongwoman at a fairly high level. Since reading that Facebook post I had been giving PED usage in strongwoman a lot of thought and went back and forth in my head as to whether I was right to think that it was a 'clean' sport or not. I had found myself scrolling through social media looking at photos of those considered amongst the best at my sport, looking for clues as to whether I thought they were using steroids or not, all the while desperately wanting to believe that their superior levels of strength and muscular appearance were achievable naturally. Speaking to this ex-competitor felt like my first opportunity to ask

anyone else about PEDs. I wouldn't have wanted to ask another current competitor about them for worry that they would think I was accusing them of something.

As I sat down opposite this person and nervously sipped my coffee, I debated how and when to best broach the subject – of course I'd ask them about training and nutrition-related topics first – but how would I ask the question? I needn't have worried. Before I had the opportunity to bring PEDs into conversation they had done it for me. 'Have you ever thought about steroids?' they asked. 'Funny you should say that!' I exclaimed and proceeded to seize the opportunity to ask all about their prevalence in the sport I had become so enamoured by over the last eighteen months. 'They're pretty much all on them at the higher levels' and 'If it's ever something you consider then please just drop me a line, it's important that you get the right information and do it properly' are the two lines of that conversation that stuck with me. That one conversation completely shot to pieces all my naïve assumptions about PED use in strongwoman, or the lack of it, that I had perceived and once so fervently believed.

Following the interactions detailed within this vignette I endured a spell of distinct disillusion when it came to strongwoman. As I tried to process the thought that it was highly likely that many of the strongwomen I looked up to on social media were using some form of PED, I remember feeling sad. I don't remember feeling much resentment to those who I now thought must be using, rather a disappointment that I too would have to make a decision on whether I wanted to pursue that or not. It began to feel increasingly likely that the strength- and muscularity-based goals that I so desperately aspired to by this point were not physiologically possible in my natural state as a female-bodied competitor, and it was the process of accepting this, rather than any thought towards the fairness or unfairness of others using, that troubled me the most. My enthusiasm and motivation for training suffered as a

result. My overwhelming thought at the time was ‘what’s the point?’ – If it was impossible for me to achieve the goals I wanted to achieve without PED use, and with the question of whether I would ever use them still shrouded in negativity by association with the words ‘cheat’ and ‘dangerous’, at this stage it felt as though my efforts in training and in my restrictive and disciplined nutrition plan were all for a pointless cause.

Over time though I began to regain some enthusiasm. Like Isobel, the drive to be stronger was beginning to feel powerful enough that one day I might consider a switch to ‘the dark side’ and begin to think more seriously about whether PEDs were something that I wanted to pursue or not. I had ‘been bitten by the strongwoman bug’, a phrase I have heard used repeatedly to describe those who, through their participation in the sport, had discovered a drive within themselves to become as strong as they possibly could be. However, also like Isobel, I knew that this was not something I would even begin to consider at that point in time as I knew that I had far from fulfilled my natural potential and wanted to be sure that I had reached my physical capacity before considering something so ‘dangerous’ and controversial. Like me, and as described in Isobel’s narrative, numerous intermediate competitors in my study described their own speculations regarding others’ PED use since their increased awareness of their prevalence in the sport, such as this participant:

> ‘I have to admit when I went to the regional qualifiers I was thinking to myself I wonder if I’m up against people who are and looked around and thought probably. You know, never accused anyone of anything but just thinking yeah if you’re right at the top end of this you probably are aren’t you’.

It is important also to note here that the intermediate strongwoman phase, in comparison to both the novice and elite phases, was in my study characterised by the largest range of attitudes and opinions amongst those within it. There were several intermediate competitors that I spoke to whose experiences somewhat differed from those that Isobel's character and story portrays. Most interestingly, there were a handful of competitors who appeared to maintain their very strong 'anti-PED' stance that had preceded their involvement at an intermediate level, but whilst also citing many of those competing at the top levels as their idols who they aspired to be like, and their goals of reaching those top levels themselves. I cannot make any conclusions or assumptions from my research as to how many of those competing at the highest levels are users of PEDs. However, there is a noteworthy discrepancy in attitudes towards PED use among this sub-group of intermediate strongwomen. Taking into account everything I have heard and learned about PED use in strongwoman, my thought here is that some of these women were aspiring to become elite athletes, aspiring to achieve more and become one of the best at what they do, without always being aware of the presence of PED use amongst those they were aspiring to be like. Moreover, they were taking inspiration from experiences of others that had involved the use of something they were so adamantly against.

This is a prime example of how the culture of silence hides the potential danger that this can have in portraying unachievable results as achievable in a natural way. For those who believe that these standards are achievable without PED use, there is the risk that in striving to achieve these standards, and inevitably not reaching them, harmful negative self-perception could occur through reinforcement of a belief that they 'are not good enough'. There could be risks to bodily health through training naturally if the athletes perceive that they need to adopt more dangerous practices, or 'just need to train harder' to achieve the

results they see in others, not being aware that these results were not achieved through 'just' training and nutrition discipline.

Fairness

For those intermediate strongwomen who maintained a strong 'anti-PED' stance as they progressed in the sport, the concept of fairness was still central to their perspective, with PED use depicted as an act that also undermines the achievements of those who succeed whilst engaging in it, because they haven't achieved them 'on their own'. For some, this perspective is strong and unwavering, as in the following example from one of my participants:

> 'I kind of can't put into words just how much I dislike it, I just don't like it. I don't think it's fair… If someone takes performance enhancing drugs and can be the best in the world, and I found out they take those, I have no respect for that person whatsoever. Cos you haven't done it solely as you. So I really don't like it. I'm gonna get really angry. Yeah, I don't agree with them.'

The anger and frustration of this intermediate strongwoman was clear throughout our conversation on this. In contradiction to this though, I was aware through previous interactions with her that she looked up to and was heavily inspired by several elite strongwomen that I knew to be PED users, which she was seemingly unaware of. The conversations I had with this competitor, but also similar conversations I had with other competitors, concerned me because of the clear incongruity between their opinions on PED

use, and their beliefs about the athletes they aspired to the most. I wondered if they too would at some stage in the future endure the same period of disillusion that I had when I had discovered the prevalence of PED use in strongwoman.

Health

There was a distinct shift for some of the intermediate strongwoman away from the evident priority of health over performance so vehemently described by many of the novice strongwomen in this study. As in Isobel's narrative, and similarly to the shift in my own perspective, some had begun to view the potential negative health impacts as something that needed to be evaluated and 'weighed up' alongside the potential benefits to performance. Essentially, the balance in priority of health over performance had shifted to a point at which for some at least, the two appeared to now be given almost equal importance and consideration. This quote from an intermediate strongwoman demonstrates an example of this measured consideration:

> 'It's personal preference and you weighing up the balance of the side effects and what it does to your body, so I just think it's personal preference. I know girls who use it and it is what it is, I don't necessarily see it as a bad thing, or a disadvantage, everyone's got a choice and it's a choice that you make… So yeah it's not something I've done yet, but not something that I'm saying I'm never ever gonna do, it's just personal preference… but I'd like more information on it and the risks and all that kind of stuff so yeah talking about it isn't something that kind of bothers me.'

The intermediate strongwoman experiences of PEDs then are characterised by a similar degree of conflict to that which was also evident when considering how much discipline and restriction they were prepared to add to their life for the purpose of strongwoman in the previous chapter of this thesis. It is a critical timepoint for those in strongwoman in which they appear to make numerous decisions regarding their future direction in the sport and its place in their lives. Decisions regarding PED use are one dimension of this, although these are also arguably the decisions with the most significant potential consequences. The diversity of this decision-making period is reflected through the range of opinions and perspectives on PED use adopted by intermediate strongwomen: those who remain staunchly against their use, those who were once against their use but now find them increasingly intriguing, those who are ambivalent to others' PED use but would not consider it themselves, those who are actively looking to pursue it themselves, and those who are torn between the perceived consequences on both their health and their performance. There is a sense of finality in this decision-making process, as though the decision to take PEDs is one that once taken cannot ever be fully reversed – that your status as a 'clean' or 'natural' athlete will then be forever tainted, even if after a trial period you decide not to continue with their use.

The elite strongwoman

Again, as in previous chapters, the term elite is used in this thesis to describe the experiences of those competing at the very top end of the sport, paying particular attention to those who compete at an international level, but also including some who compete at a national level. The narrative of 'Ella' is used once again in this chapter as a methodological

tool to elaborate on the experiences of elite strongwomen and their attitudes and practices regarding PEDs.

Ella – Elite strongwoman

Ella the elite strongwoman is a user of PEDs. She believes that to compete at the highest level, you must make that choice. She says that most people at the elite level have made that choice, so if you don't, you will lose. If you want to win, and be the best, it is something that you must do. Ella doesn't view the use of PEDs as cheating. To her, the sport is untested and there are no rules against it, and therefore no rules are broken by their use.

However, Ella also feels that some people make the decision to start using PEDs too early in their strongwoman career, or at an inappropriate level. She feels that there is no need to take them when competing at lower levels, and that each competitor should get to the point where they are as strong as they possibly can be without the help of PEDs before they follow that path. Ella acknowledges that it is a big decision to make and must only be done at the point where it is necessary in order to achieve more, or win, as steroid/testosterone-based PEDs can have significant impacts to female physiology beyond helping with strength and muscle growth.

Ella notes that because of the reluctance of people, particularly women, to talk about steroids, there is a significant lack of information available for those who may be looking to start using them. She observes that many strongwomen will often go to a man for advice – usually someone at their own gym that they know uses PEDs and who they presume will therefore have all the knowledge required.

Whereas in Ella's view this is often an unwise decision – she says that these men will often not have enough knowledge or not recognise the potential different impacts that what they are taking will have on women, and she feels that women often therefore get bad advice on what, and how much to take, sometimes causing them to experience physiological changes that they did not desire. Ella feels that strongwomen do not communicate openly enough about it between themselves, and that more strongwomen should feel comfortable to talk to another woman for advice.

Ella believes that it is the unwanted side effects of steroid 'abuse' rather than 'use' that have contributed to the stigma around PED usage in women's strength sports. Her perception is that steroid use is associated with 'looking like a man', which she perceives as something that many strongwomen are actively seeking to avoid, and that it is construed as negative or 'wrong' by wider society. She notes that in the past some women have, through incorrect or over-use of steroids, inadvertently experienced the same level of physiological changes that a transgender person assigned female at birth would experience when they are prescribed testosterone for hormone replacement therapy. For Ella, the stigma is much more heavily associated with the impact steroids may have on appearance and the gendered implications of this than it is with the notion of 'cheating' – because in an untested, unregulated sport that has no formal rules concerning PED use, steroid use is often not perceived as cheating.

Fairness

As depicted in Ella's narrative, the perspective of the elite strongwomen in this study differs greatly from that of the novice strongwomen. It is evident that for these competitors, performance has ultimately overtaken health as a priority when considering PED use. It is worth noting that the elite strongwomen that I spoke to about PEDs in this study began their involvement in strongwoman as part of a health-related journey, but by the time they had reached elite levels, they had also reached a point where performance was their priority. In regard to fairness, they took a somewhat pragmatic approach summarised simply as: PED use is not banned in this sport therefore it is not cheating, PED use will help me become stronger, I need to be stronger to win, therefore PEDs are a logical choice to pursue. This approach is demonstrated in the following quote:

> 'If you're going to compete at that level it's going to be something that you need to do. If you go into it natural, which I have complete respect for as I do all competitors, but if you go into it natural at that level you are going to lose because these women are helped… I was once asked if I thought it was cheating and my answer was no, I don't think it is cheating. It's an untested sport.'

It was the fact that PEDs are not banned in strongwoman that was the basis for this perspective on the fairness of their use, as described in this quote:

> 'I feel that obviously if people are competing in a tested federation or something then they shouldn't do it. Because for your own moral standard. But if you're

competing in an untested something or other then you have the choice and the information and the education to make an educated decision, it's completely up to you.'

Interestingly though, for many of the other novice and intermediate strongwomen who were 'anti-PEDs', the fact that they are not banned in strongwoman did not impact their views on the fairness of their use. For them, the rules, or lack of rules, governing PED use in strongwoman were not enough to dissuade them that PED use provided an unfair advantage to those who engaged in it. This can be associated with and derived from the narrative that surrounds PED use in mainstream sport and mainstream media, which often have heavy emphasis on the pronouncement of those found to be using PEDs as 'drugs cheats'.

Kirkwood (2014) explores the question of 'what is cheating?' through the case of an athlete who had intended to dope but failed to due to inert, counterfeit drugs. In this case, Kirkwood concluded that the athlete did cheat due to the athlete's intention to cheat and belief that he had cheated. In his discussion, Kirkwood summarised the 'dominant model' of cheating as one which 'sees cheating as a form of non-cooperation through rule violation in activities that are voluntary, cooperative and rule-governed' (p. 58), however, he also acknowledges another 'shared notion' that 'cheating is wrong not because rules are broken, but because it creates unfairness in the activity' (p. 58). This divide of conceptual perspectives in respect to the need for rules to be broken for cheating to have occurred is reflective of the divide in opinions amongst the strongwomen in this study.

Gendered Aesthetics

The potential impacts of PED use on health did not feature prominently in the discussions I had with elite strongwomen in this study. They spoke on the need to be aware of the risks, and to have correct and reliable information regards the type and dosage of what they would need to take, but providing this information was made available to them, health did not seem to be an explicit concern. Discussion with these strongwomen instead seemed to focus on the risks for their appearance, particularly in relation to gender. As they did not perceive PED use in strongwoman as cheating - even if some others did - it is reasonable to suggest that perceptions of fair or unfair advantage were not the only reason why there was a culture of silence surrounding the topic. Upon asking them what they thought about this, stigma surrounding the impact of PED use on gendered appearance emerged as an important factor. This elite strongwoman suggested that there had previously been women in strength- and muscle-based sports that had experienced physiological changes that they did not desire, and that their 'manly' appearance had created a stigma around the use of PEDs for women:

> 'I think CrossFit has done a lot to help because people can see, you know the women are still muscular, but they're still fit, and they still look like girls. There's much more known about things to help you with being strong that don't turn you into a guy and that's what I think the biggest thing was then, people didn't maybe know what was gonna happen, and then you could see it and it wasn't nice… I think it comes from the stigma attached to it. First of all you've got women lifting weights and people are already freaking out about that, so then if you're gonna be like oh we've got women lifting weights and taking steroids then this is what

she's gonna look like and you see images of the past of people and it's just not like that.'

The strongwoman in the quote above suggests that those female athletes using PEDs now were trying to distance themselves from those figures in the past who had 'turned into a guy' or 'looked like a man' because of the amount, or type, of steroids that they had used. This is reiterated by this quote from another elite strongwoman:

'I think because essentially if you take these in the wrong way, or something goes wrong with it, you are essentially going to look like a man, and that's not what most of us are going for. I think that stigma around it is what makes it such a taboo subject because there's the potential for you to look a way you don't want to look and sound a way you don't want to sound.'

Their description of PEDs and their potential impacts to gendered appearance portrays their use as a fine balancing act between achieving the performance benefits that they desire, whilst limiting the amount of unwanted aesthetic and other gendered changes that they did not want, for example physical attributes associated with maleness and masculinity such as deepening of the voice and growth of facial hair. The implied ramifications of failing to retain this balance are that they would 'look like a man' or 'turn into a guy' – ramifications that are strongly perceived as negative, both in relation to their personal desires for their own aesthetic, and the opinions of others through the social stigma that exists for those women who 'look like men', which Bunsell (2013) also notes in her ethnographic study of female bodybuilding. The decision to use PEDs for the purpose of performance enhancement can

also though be seen as a positive in that it may articulate a strategic choice to use the lack of regulation as a 'permission' to use PEDs despite their potential risks to hegemonic femininity. The small margins that create the fine line that PED users appear to tread in strongwoman highlights the danger of the culture of silence that still exists. If it is integral that those making a decision to use PEDs obtain the correct information, and acquire the correct substances from trustworthy sources, then the difficulty that this silence may create for those trying to obtain this information could have highly damaging effects. Those who are unable to obtain this information may be liable to experiencing unwanted, irreversible changes to their body and their external appearance through incorrect PED use.

In the next section of this chapter I will be bringing together the experiences, attitudes, and practices of all those strongwomen involved in this research, at novice, intermediate, and elite levels, by exploring in more detail the three characteristics of PED use in strongwoman that run through these different levels of performance and stages of participation – risk, moral dilemma, and the culture of silence.

Risk, moral dilemma, and the culture of silence

The experiences of the strongwomen in this study regarding PED use show that there is great diversity in the range of perspectives and opinions that exist amongst those who compete in this sport. As depicted in this chapter, these range of perspectives tend to focus upon three main concepts: risk – both for health and for gendered appearance, moral dilemma – regarding how fair or unfair PED use is in an untested sport, and a culture of silence – perpetuating ongoing issues such as skewed perceptions of achievable natural aesthetics, and a lack of information available to all. The level of attention and priority given to each of these three central concepts shifts and changes across the journey of each strongwoman. It can be

posited though that the latter two, moral dilemma and a culture of silence, contribute to the first - the degree of risk that is involved in deciding to use PEDs.

The health implications of long-term PED use include high blood pressure, depression, heart complications, kidney and liver malfunction, and lack of fertility, to name just a few. Risks to gendered appearance resulting from the use of testosterone-based substances include receding hairline, growth of facial hair, deepening of the voice, growth of clitoris size, and increased sex drive. Klein (1993) described these side-effects as 'violating masculine conventions of female attractiveness' (p. 181). Bunsell (2013) suggested that these risks are central to social stigma surrounding PED use because of the impingement 'on so many people's sense of what is natural and central to biological sex'. That is, their identity status as women is called into question. This also has the potential to call these women's sexuality into question, with the 'virilised woman' often collapsed into the image of the 'mannish lesbian' (Sedgwick, 1990; Caudwell, 1999). These concerns regarding appearance and identity are evident in the perceived risks described by the strongwomen in this study, both in terms of the direct risks of PED use, and the wider risk pertaining to muscle-building and femininity.

Mainstream perceptions of PED users as 'cheats' and the reluctance of women who use PEDs to speak openly about the topic collectively encourage an environment in which there is a lack of knowledge and a 'veil of secrecy', as Bunsell (2013) described it (p. 88). This means that women often negotiate the associated risks of PED use with little authoritative knowledge. Monaghan (2002) described a similar situation in bodybuilding, where a lack of medical knowledge means that bodybuilders create their own subculture of ethnopharmacology and become their own 'human guinea pigs'. Klein (1993), posited that this type of subculture invoked 'gym-bred myths' about the reversibility of effects and altered dosages in relation to the undesirable and potentially harmful side effects of PED use for

women (p. 183). When considering the risks of PED use, one strongwoman once said to me ‘steroid use is not dangerous, but steroid abuse is’ (Reflexive Journal, October 2016). When placed in the context of this discussion, it is clear that a lack of knowledge, existence of myths, no expert medical support, and unknown or untrustworthy sources of such substances may increase the risks to both health and gendered appearance that create such a stigma around their use. The danger of crossing the fine line that strongwomen tread in their use of PEDs is increased because of this.

At the beginning of my involvement in strongwoman, as demonstrated at the start of this chapter, my own perceptions of the risks and morality of PED use meant that I also perceived it to be a behaviour that was both ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’. I cannot make firm conclusions on the level of knowledge that the novice and intermediate strongwomen in this study have, but I can however speak of the shifts in my own perceptions towards the level of risk that I feel PED use has. Regarding the health risks, my prior experience of PEDs had been media coverage of incidences where a steroid user, or steroid abuser, in most cases male, had died suddenly and unexpectedly, hence my perception of these substances as being incredibly dangerous to use. In more recent times though, this perception has changed. I now take testosterone for the purposes of gender transition under the supervision of a medical clinic, and although some of the long-term risks of this are still unknown, this is not portrayed by the medical profession as a high-risk practice. My understanding is that I am essentially taking the same type of substance as PED users, as steroids are also synthesised forms of testosterone, yet because my use of this substance is done under medical supervision, the health risks are not as extreme. Therefore, whilst I have no medical authority on the subject, I would posit that the culture of silence and ‘veil of secrecy’ amplifies the medical risks that exists. If users were able to access more reliable information via credible medical resources, then at least some of this risk could be negated.

PED use and the future of strongwoman/strongman

The topic of PED use is one of the most vital in determining the future direction of strongwoman/strongman, largely due to its antithetical position to the policies, rules, values, and attitudes that exist in mainstream sport and mainstream media, in which such drug use is not accepted. Therefore, if the path of growth and development of the sport is directed towards it becoming more mainstream, there would be significant incompatibilities of this with the current landscape of PED use. For example, one potential direction for the growth of the sport could be towards it becoming an Olympic sport. This has been suggested by some for both strongman and strongwoman. However, whilst PEDs are prevalent to the degree that they are now, there would be significant challenges to the achievement of this. Consideration would need to be given to the number of current competitors that may be lost from the sport under Olympic rules and drug testing procedures, and it is difficult to envisage the extent of the actions that would need to be taken to re-establish the sport potentially without many of the higher-profile names that have to date helped grow its popularity beyond the directly involved strongman/strongwoman community.

One potential avenue for an alternative, PED-free direction for strongwoman and strongman is the emergence of 'natural' competition categories. A natural federation does currently exist in the UK, hosting tested alternatives to the titles of England's, Scotland's, Wales', and Britain's Strongest Woman. However, these competitions currently experience challenges in achieving participation numbers in a sport that does not have an abundance of numbers even before they become sub-divided through categories such as this. Most recent discussions on social media platforms regarding the lack of entries to these tested competitions suggests that their proximity to the untested regional and national competitions in terms of time means that many of those who would be eligible to compete cannot commit to both. Preference is given by most to the untested competitions, due to the perception of

these as currently being the 'bigger' and more prestigious competition to take part in. There does also appear to be a negative circle operating in this, in which some do not want to enter a competition that has low numbers, and so the entry numbers remain low, which in turn further discourages others who may have decided to take part if there were increased numbers of competitors. The lack of take up of 'natural' category competitions could also feasibly indicate a widespread prevalence of PED use in the sport, hence few strongwomen capable, in terms of their strength and ability, of competing at a national competition want to enter and be tested.

An additional implication of attempts such as these to progress the sport in a PED-free direction is that this would require a degree of openness and honesty in relation to the current prevalence of PEDs that is not currently exhibited. This in turn could have consequences for many who currently benefit from commercial investment such as athlete and competition sponsorship deals. Wider attitudes to PED use in mainstream sport could mean that companies would not want to be seen to be funding a drug-fuelled sport and therefore there could be substantial financial implications for many of those currently involved. This could also have implications for current television deals, as well as interest from the wider general public, many of whose views on PEDs may be likely to align with the 'cheat' narrative in mainstream media.

An alternative to seeking a PED-free future for the sport direction could involve the embrace of PED use and the potential benefits that this may have for the sport as a spectator-friendly, entertainment entity. PED use has conceivably increased the weights that competitors are seen to lift. These increasingly impressive feats of strength are viewed as a positive in developing the sport as an entertaining spectator show in the eyes of promotors and television broadcasters. Some would argue that PEDs and the resulting achievements that are made possible by their use are central to the development of the sport in terms of

increased interest from the general public, and the exposure it is given through television and media deals. This path of growth and development is very different to that which the Olympic path would entail, raising important questions as to which direction the sport should take.

The concept of 'seriousness' is one that has been debated in other small sports and sporting subcultures that have experienced challenges regarding growth and development. One example is roller derby, the subject of Breeze's (2015) research in which its status as a 'real, legitimate, serious sport' (p. 93) or as 'just a big sexy joke' is discussed. As suggested by Colin Bryce, the producer of *World's Strongest Man*, in the documentary film 'Eddie: Strongman' (Bell, 2015), the perceived 'sexiness' of incredible feats of strength is central to the current strongman product as an entertaining spectator show broadcast on television, a major source of income for an expanding sport such as this one. Pitted against the 'seriousness' of the path of becoming an Olympic, or more formally regulated sport, this appears to be a key question to be answered in determining the future of the sport. Should strongwoman/strongman be developed as a seriously recognised mainstream sport, or alternatively as a television/entertainment-based show?

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the subculture of the sport of strongwoman; examining the practices, motivations, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of the strongwomen who train and compete in the sport. The aim was to explore strongwoman's empowering potential given its focus on physical capacity and practical achievement, as opposed to aesthetics. The research questions that the study aimed to explore were: Who competes in strongwoman and why? Does strongwoman allow women to construct an identity that they can be content with in contemporary society? Is the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman liberating or constricting? Are normative representations and social perceptions of strongwoman empowering? Are the actual processes of the sport resistant and/or transgressive in relation to social norms of femininity? These questions were deemed important in exploring the dynamic between sport and gender, and it was hoped that through these, this research undertaking could provide detailed insight into the specific subculture of strongwoman, and its community, whilst also exploring gender and how sport can help us to understand it better.

Within the context of extant research in women's strength- and muscularity-based sports, strongwoman was posited as having the potential to be empowering and/or liberating due to its focus on physical capacity, as opposed to aesthetics in female bodybuilding. This was drawn from Shilling and Bunsell's (2014) call for further research in this area following their case study of one female bodybuilder's transition from bodybuilding to strongwoman. In this case study, it was suggested that strongwoman's focus on practical achievement as opposed to aesthetics helped to provide an escape from the dominance of gendered aesthetics within bodybuilding. This research was undertaken at a point in time in which there had been a recent increase in media interest, and an increase in participation, in strength sports and

strength-based activities for women which has been seen as a wider cultural shift towards acceptance of female strength, power, and muscularity.

This research is a focused study of a specific sporting subculture. However, strongwoman also forms part of that wider cultural shift and hence this research also explores the dynamic between sport and gender, exploring stories about gender and embodiment, and examining how cultural ideals create expectations for and influence the form of our bodies. Prior to this study, strongwoman was an underexplored area. Much of the extant literature of women's strength- and muscle-based sport was focused on female bodybuilding, and Shilling and Bunsell's (2014) case study just mentioned was the only extant research, to my knowledge, exploring strongwoman in any capacity. No in-depth study into its subculture had previously taken place, and so this research project sought to investigate this unexplored area.

Returning to the research questions

Who competes in strongwoman and why?

Chapter four, the first of four substantive empirical chapters that made up the analytical core of this thesis, primarily sought to answer this research question. The chapter explored and explained the journeys that strongwomen take into the sport, including: who competes in strongwoman, when did they get into it, how did they get involved, what did their first venture in the sport consist of, why did they get involved, and why did they maintain their involvement and participation. This chapter offered important insights into the sport through the stories of those who entered it, including my own story as well as those of others, examining the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman.

This chapter highlighted the tendency for strongwomen to 'stumble' into the sport, in that for most of the women in this study, they had not begun their journey with the intention of training or competing in strongwoman, but instead they had 'stumbled' into it through the beginning of some form of health and/or fitness journey. For many, this health and/or fitness journey had been primarily driven by the aim of losing weight, with a predominantly aesthetic-focused approach to their goals and to their journey. These health and/or fitness journeys had for many of the strongwomen been previously characterised by cardio-based exercise activities, such as running and/or group exercise classes. Many described a point in their health and/or fitness journeys in which they began to engage in lifting weights/strength training either in addition to, or instead of, their cardio-based training, after becoming aware, most commonly through a personal trainer or fitness professional, that it could help them reach their health, fitness, and/or aesthetic-based goals.

Either by engaging directly with strongwoman as their first strength-based activity, or by engaging with strongwoman via some experimentation in other strength-based activities, or forms of resistance training more broadly, this initial engagement was a significant step for the women in this study in the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman. Early involvement typically took the form of 'someone who participates in strongwoman training', serving a purpose in the pursuit of their health and fitness goals, as opposed to an opportunity for a competitive sporting venture. From this point, the process of 'becoming' a strongwoman consisted of a gradual process of immersion, similar to the process described by Stevenson (2002) in the formation of an athletic career as 'various interdependent processes of ever-deepening commitment to the sport' (p. 132). This process eventually culminated in competitive participation in strongwoman, something that appeared to be an assumed and logical progression for many once they were immersed in the sport and its training practices.

The first step taken by these women into a form of strength-training, whether that was via a commercial gym, CrossFit, a bodybuilding gym, or in a strongman-specific gym, marked a significant step in its implications for the negotiation of gender in their health, fitness, and sporting journeys. Prior to these moments, for many their health and fitness journeys had largely been driven by the need/want to be smaller – i.e. to lose weight/be leaner and/or work towards aerobic fitness as opposed to strength and muscularity, fitting into Schippers' (2007) view of hegemonic femininity. The reluctance that some described in trying a strength-based activity, and the reliance on trust of those who recommended that they did, suggested a level of awareness of the transgressive nature of the shift that they were making. The move towards partaking in an activity that would be deemed 'masculine' meant a transgression of their previous conformity to hegemonic femininity.

Chapter five explored the empowering and/or liberating potential of strongwoman, and the stories and experiences shared by strongwomen involved in this research as to the empowerment they began to feel through a shift in focus 'from the number on the scales to the number on the bar', gave some insight as to the reasons that strongwomen chose to continue their involvement in the sport after their initial 'stumble' into it. Chapter six also provided some insight into this, through its focus on the strongwoman community, which was mentioned by every one of the strongwomen I interviewed as part of this research. For many this mostly supportive and welcoming community was a key reason as to why they enjoyed competing and being involved in the sport, many saying they had 'never seen anything quite like it before' in any other sporting contexts.

Does strongwoman allow women to construct an identity that they can be content with in contemporary society?

As was discussed in the introduction chapter of this thesis, recent years have seen a burgeoning interest in strength sports and strength activities for women. However, I posited that this is a developing but incomplete trend, in the sense that despite there being an increase in women's participation in such activities, gendered expectations and implications are still influencing how these strength- and muscle-based activities are negotiated, experienced, and sometimes recuperated into heteronormative gender roles. Drawing on Mosedale's (2005) definition of women's empowerment and Hesse-Biber's (1996) interpretation of bodily empowerment, this recuperation and continued gendered expectations contradict the re-defining of gender roles and body ideals that are associated with individual and societal empowerment. One key example of this in recent fitness trends is the '#strongissexy' social media hashtag, mainly used on Instagram, which puts emphasis on being strong for the purpose of being 'sexy', i.e. refocusing on gendered aesthetics, and what the body looks like, as opposed to what the body can do.

Strongwoman performance, as discussed throughout this thesis, is judged purely on physical capacity, with no focus on aesthetics. 'Becoming' a strongwoman, and then 'being' a strongwoman is something that appeared to become a significant part of the identity of those strongwomen involved in this research, as discussed in chapter four of this thesis. Their strongwoman identity seeped into many different aspects of their lives and became visibly evident in work and social situations. When talking about other people's reaction to this part of their identity, many of the strongwomen reported positive responses, with it often becoming a novel point of discussion. 'Being strong' often became a key tenet of their identity, as it did for me in my experiences too.

Despite these positive responses though, it is evident in parts throughout the thesis though that the strongwomen in this research still felt the need to negotiate certain aspects of being a strongwoman in relation to their appearance and particularly their gendered aesthetic. For example, negotiations of eating enough for good performance versus not wanting to eat too much, because of the perception that 'big is bad' for women (as discussed in chapter five), practices of dieting down post-competition, self-consciousness about the changes that they experienced to their bodies, particularly visible musculature, even if they liked it themselves, and the negotiations around the use of performance-enhancing drug (PED) use discussed in chapter seven, and the risks to their gendered appearance that these pose.

Therefore, it can be seen then that despite there being an increasing openness and acceptance of women's strength, power, and muscularity, in this strongwoman context there still appears to be a 'glass ceiling' (Dworkin, 2001) to what is deemed acceptable in regard to these physical characteristics. The negotiations that are made, and the perceived need that the strongwomen feel in making these, suggests that 'being strong' and/or muscular as a woman is still viewed as a transgression because importance is still placed on traditional norms of femininity. Although it appears that we are at a timepoint in which attitudes are ever-changing, there are still some constraints to this and hence there is some tension preventing many strongwomen from being completely content with the identity they have constructed in current society, and hence the potential for social empowerment is reduced.

One aspect of identity that I had thought prior to the research might have been more salient was sexuality or perceptions of sexuality. As was discussed in chapter two, the literature review of this thesis, previous research has suggested that there is an association often made between female athleticism and lesbianism – athleticism has not generally been aligned with femininity and the behaviour of female athletes can be seen as crossing the line into masculinity, and thus their heterosexuality is questioned (Cox & Thompson, 2001;

Lenskyj, 1995). The association is made: 'Female athlete = masculine = lesbian'. Given that strength has been so strongly associated with masculinity, I had expected that discussion around sexuality might have come through more in this research. However, discussion of sexuality, and the prominence of sexuality in this research, was very small. Hence it did not feature significantly in the empirical chapters of this thesis – it was simply not made salient.

Is the daily lifestyle of a strongwoman liberating or constricting?

Chapter five of this thesis, which explored the empowering and/or liberating potential of strongwoman, sought largely to answer this research question. The notion that strongwoman is more empowering than other, more aesthetically driven activities because of its focus on physical capacity was found to be too simplistic to explain the lived experiences of the strongwomen in this study. As explored, the empowering and liberating impact of strongwoman on the lives of those who partake in it varies and fluctuates throughout the course of their time in the sport. The daily lifestyle was seen to become more restrictive and the level of sacrifice and commitment needed to continue to get better and stronger increased as the strongwomen progressed through to higher levels of the sport. The intermediate strongwoman phase was characterised by high levels of conflict between wanting to commit to the lifestyle required to continue to get better and stronger and not wanting the constriction to other aspects of their life that accompanied this – for example their social life. Those who reached the elite performance level were only able to because of their willingness to embrace the constrictions that the strongwoman lifestyle placed upon them, and they acknowledged a large level of sacrifice to other areas of their life in order to achieve this.

Are normative representations and social perceptions of strongwoman empowering?

As discussed at the very beginning of this thesis in its introduction, strongwoman is often conflated with other strength- and/or muscle-based sports, most notably bodybuilding, despite one being purely focused on physical capacity and the other purely focused on aesthetics. Strongwoman remains largely unknown to many, with many of those involved only discovering it by 'stumbling' upon it, and others not involved often requiring an explanation, and also a reference to *World's Strongest Man*, shown on UK television every year, before they are aware of what strongwoman is, and looks like. Hence, I would argue that social perceptions and normative representations of strongwoman are not accurate, as most would associate strongwoman with the hyper muscular appearance, and aesthetic-focused activity, of bodybuilders. When this inaccurate perception of strongwoman is held, I would also argue that this is largely not empowering due to the negativity that is often displayed towards the visible transgressions of hegemonic femininity that are displayed by bodybuilders, a hyper muscular appearance which has long been perceived as the 'antithesis of femininity' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 6). The debate as to whether bodybuilding is an empowering endeavour for women is complex, as posited by Bunsell (2013) in her ethnography of female bodybuilding in the South of England, who implied that female bodybuilders are not simply either empowered or oppressed, but that for most, elements of both would be present.

Are the actual processes of the sport resistant and/or transgressive in relation to social norms of femininity?

Throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis, insights into the processes of the sport have shown much of them to be transgressive in relation to social norms of femininity.

As discussed earlier in this conclusion chapter, there are many points throughout the thesis where strongwomen can be seen to be negotiating these transgressions in relation to their gendered appearance. Whilst the sport itself does not focus on aesthetics, and a muscular aesthetic is not the primary pursuit of the strongwomen involved, increased muscularity is an unavoidable side effect of 'becoming strong' or 'being strong'. It is this aesthetic impact of strongwoman participation that appears to be more noticeably transgressive, and which requires the most negotiation rather than the act of 'becoming strong' and the notion of 'being strong' itself. My understanding is that generally, most of the strongwomen involved in this study did not feel much negativity towards their strength, as long as their gendered aesthetic remained aligned with societal expectations of femininity. This fear of gaining excessive musculature has been seen in other sporting contexts, for example the female wrestler's in Sisjord and Kristiansen's (2009) study in Norway. Again this aligns with Dworkin's (2001) concept of the 'glass ceiling' for musculature for women, whereby women can gain strength and muscle, but then struggle to reconcile seemingly incompatible expectations about musculature and femininity.

Originality and contribution of the thesis

As discussed in chapter one, the introduction of this thesis, and chapter two, the literature review, Shilling and Bunsell's (2014) study of one female bodybuilder's transition from bodybuilding to strongwoman is to my knowledge the only existing study of strongwoman in any context prior to this research. Therefore, they called for further research into the area, positing that strongwoman may be more empowering than bodybuilding due to its escape from gendered aesthetics, but stating that it was hard to assess its empowering potential without an in-depth study of its subculture. This research provides an in-depth study

of the specific subculture of strongwoman, hence building on the limited extant research that exists on this sport and adding an original and valuable contribution to the strength-sport literature more broadly.

This research has contributed to the field of the sociology of sport by its focused study of a specific sporting subculture and examines the sport at a crucial timepoint in relation to a wider cultural shift towards acceptance of female strength, power, and muscularity. The importance of this study lies in its exploration of the dynamic between sport, gender, and embodiment, and the implications these may have for one another. As previously discussed, this study is on one hand a detailed study about a sport and its specific subculture, while on the other hand it is a study about sport and how it helps us to understand gender better. It explores stories about gender and embodiment and examines how cultural ideals create expectations for an influence the form of our bodies. Overall, the research investigates a largely unexplored area and provides valuable insight and understanding of the subculture of strongwoman and experiences of those involved.

Concluding remarks

In the concluding remarks of chapter seven of this thesis I discussed some of the potential ramifications of PED use in the sport for the future of the sport and the direction it chooses to take. At this time of a wider cultural shift towards greater acceptance of power, strength, and muscularity in women, strongwoman has seen a large growth in participation and development in recent years. This is a crucial timepoint for the sport, in which those most closely involved in its running – gym owners, promotors, and competition organisers – are making attempts to develop its structure, for example the qualification pathway from *England's/Scotland's/Wales' Strongest Woman* through to *Britain's Strongest Woman*

through to international competitions such as *Europe's* and *World's Strongest Woman*. As was discussed in chapter six, and briefly at the end of chapter seven of this thesis though, being at such a crucial timepoint for the growth and development of the sport means that across the sport there are varying opinions and ideas as to which direction the sport should take.

Performance-enhancing drug (PED) use, as discussed at the end of chapter seven, certainly does have implications for the range of possibilities that might exist for strongwoman, and strongman. Its antithetical position to the policies, rules, values, and attitudes that exist in mainstream sport and mainstream media, i.e. that drug use is not accepted, will inevitably mean that there are incompatibilities between the sport and a development route into something more mainstream and/or more highly organised and governed. One example of this is the suggestion that has been raised that strongwoman/strongman could become an Olympic sport, which seems unfeasible given the current prevalence of PED use in the sport and the number of competitors that would be lost if the sport was governed by Olympic rules and drug testing procedures.

Another challenge in the growth and development of the sport from this point is the likely tensions between maintaining all the aspects of the sport in its current small, unorganised, ungoverned form that could easily be lost as the sport becomes more organised and formalised. As has been made evident in this thesis, strongwomen place a high level of importance on the community aspect of the sport, and the feelings of belonging they have within this. Growth and development of the sport could threaten the small close-knit community ethos that is currently such a valued part of the subculture. Similar contestations are explored in Maddie Breeze's (2015) study of the UK roller derby community, which is also a small, close-knit, open, and inclusive sport.

Regarding negotiations of gendered aesthetics, and the underlying premise that strength- and muscle-based activity is still deemed a transgression of femininity, despite a wider cultural shift towards its acceptance, I believe these perceptions to be wrapped up in a much broader cultural moment regarding gender. At a timepoint where the notions of binary gender and binary sex are being contested and challenged, societal understandings of gender are currently in a time of flux. New understandings of gender are emerging but are also being contested and invalidated in what has become a very dichotomous debate in the context of the UK. The rise in visibility of transgender and gender diverse people is arguably something that has the potential to increase acceptance not just of transgender and gender diverse people, but also for those who are not transgender, but don't conform to traditional gender expectations, like the strongwomen in this study. However, this currently appears to be in some ways working in reverse, with increased visibility to transgender people and discussions around their inclusion leading to some tense and hostile frictions that are having negative consequences for many non-transgender people who do not conform to traditional gender expectations.

The most salient part of this study on strongwoman that relates to this is the stigma around PED use and the notions of 'looking like a man' as a result. This stigma around the visible masculinising effects of PED's on women who take them suggests a wider cultural negativity towards female masculinity, and transgressions of femininity that disrupt the stereotypical expectations of the binary gender system that is currently being contested and debated. The overlap of these effects with those experienced by a transgender person assigned female at birth who is taking testosterone for gender transition purposes also adds complication to this, with fears of what the use of such substances means for the identity of those who use them.

In conclusion then, this small, niche sporting community is in a time of change, but is also ingrained in the context of a sporting world that is also in a time of change. Much broader, long assumed tenets of mainstream sport are being challenged – for example, some have posited the idea that we should have an equivalent of the Olympics in which 'anything goes' – i.e. PEDs would be allowed. Another example is discussions around the inclusion of gender diversity in sport, and notions that the way sport is currently categorised by biological sex may be something that is changed or broken down in the future. How strongwoman, and of course strongman too, negotiate this changing sporting world in combination with their own period of change will be an interesting journey to follow, and inevitably this will continue to be an area in which there will be future opportunities for further research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Record of interviews

	Date	Participation Level & Age
1	13/07/2017 (morning)	Novice strongwoman, aged 29.
2	13/07/2017 (afternoon)	Novice strongwoman, aged 36.
3	15/07/2017	Novice strongwoman, aged 29.
4	21/07/2017	Regional intermediate strongwoman, aged 35.
5	15/09/2017	National/Europe's elite strongwoman, aged 39.
6	19/09/2017	Novice and master's strongwoman, aged 46.
7	20/09/2017	World's/Elite strongwoman competitor, aged 36.
8	14/10/2017	World's/Elite strongwoman competitor, aged 37.
9	16/10/2017	Regional/Master's intermediate strongwoman, aged 43.
10	29/10/2017	Joint interview with two strongwoman competitors – (one regional/masters, one worlds masters) – aged 52 and 46.
11	18/11/2017	Novice strongwoman, aged 36.
12	28/12/2017	Joint interview with two strongwoman competitors (one national/europes, one national) – aged 34 and 40.
13	02/01/2018	Regional/intermediate strongwoman, aged 40.
14	18/01/2018	Regional/intermediate strongwoman, aged 25.
15	19/01/2018	National/intermediate strongwoman, aged 33.
16	20/01/2018	National/Intermediate strongwoman, aged 31.
17	22/01/2018	Novice strongwoman, aged 34.
18	23/01/2018	Regional/Intermediate strongwoman, aged 28.
19	25/01/2018	Novice strongwoman, aged 30.
20	31/01/2018	Novice strongwoman, aged 35.
21	11/02/2018	World's/Master's elite strongwoman, aged 42.

Appendix B – Interview Guide

How did you get into strongwoman?

Follow up on:

- How long have they been doing it?
- Their previous sporting/fitness experiences?
- What encouraged them to begin/how did they discover it?

Could you tell me a bit about your training routine?

Follow up on:

- How often/for how long they train?
- When/where they train? (what type of gym etc.)
- What they do? (what type of training etc.)
- Do they have a coach? Do they train with others or alone?
- Attitude/approach to training

How does that fit in/how do you balance that training routine with the rest of your life?

Follow up on:

- Work (what do they do, full time or part time etc.)
- Family, relationships, kids etc.
- Social life (do sacrifices have to be made?)

What is it that you enjoy about training/competing in strongwoman?

Follow up on:

- How does it make them feel?
- What do they feel that they get from it?
- Health benefits (Physical? Mental?)

What challenges would you say that there are in regards to your training/competing in strongwoman?

Follow up on:

- Work/family/social life – what impact does it have on that?
- Barriers to strength training (attitudes of others, access to gyms, attitudes of others in the gym – Different in strongman gyms than commercial gyms?)
- Level of discipline required? Adhering to training and nutrition schedules etc.?

What role does nutrition play in your training/competition preparation?

Follow up on:

- How much time/effort they spend on their nutrition (do they have nutrition plans, do they have to prep their meals, how much do they restrict what they eat etc.)
- If applicable, experiences of cutting weight.
- How has their nutrition/approach to food changed since beginning strongwoman?
- What challenges do they feel they face in regards to food/nutrition?

What changes have you noticed in your body since starting strongwoman?

Follow up on:

- Have they noticed an increase in muscle mass? How do they feel about that? How have others reacted to that?
- How do they think/feel about their body? Has this changed since beginning strongwoman?
- What do they think about their body's capabilities? How much attention do they pay to the way their body looks vs. what it can do etc.
- What kind of physical toll does the sport take on their body and how do they feel about that?

Could you tell me about your experiences of strongwoman competitions?

Follow up on:

- How they think/feel on a competition day… In the build up, and during the comp?
- Interactions between competitors
- The environment/atmosphere
- How do they feel after a competition? How/what do they think about their performance/placings etc.?
- What is their usual routine in the week before a competition? Night before? On the morning?
- Do they do anything in particular after a competition is over? Celebrate?

What are your plans/aims/ambitions in the sport going forward?

Follow up on:

- What level they aim to compete at?
- What competitions (if any) are they looking to enter? Or do they just want to train?
- What challenges might they face leading up to that? Will they need to change their approach to training/nutrition at all to get there?

Appendix C – Fieldnotes example

Bodypower – 12th May 2017

Dancing girls on entry to the Bodypower Arena. Music across the whole exhibition was a lot lighter than at strongman/woman events – where's the heavy metal? All pop and dance. The rest of the exhibition was almost like a nightclub but for fitness people – loud club music playing everywhere, and samples of protein drinks and pre-workouts being given out at bar-like stands in shot glasses. Going for a trendy/cool look.

Strongman/strongwoman arena was tucked away right in the corner of the exhibition. It's no frills approach didn't seem to fit with the glam of the rest of the fitness industry. There was no dancers or loud club music in this corner!

As with every strongwoman competition, as soon as the women received their t-shirts many of them cut the sleeves off/cut them to a shape they most preferred. Is this to show off muscles? Is it to look what they perceive as their best?

Do we call it strongman or strongwoman when talking about the women's category? Appear to be used interchangeably. Do we refer to competitors as girls or women? Again used interchangeably. A sense that perhaps the normal atmosphere of a strongwoman competition was lost in such a big arena?

There was also a women's masters category but this had to be campaigned and bullied for by one masters competitor.

Talking to another competitor who was spectating at Bodypower. She said: 'most of the women who do strongwoman have mental health issues. Generally they're either trying to prove a point or are a little bit off centre. Because as women we are just not made in a way that we want to be strong, we're not made to want to lift heavy things. But that's good because I don't want everyone to do it, I want the right people to do it'.

Appendix D – Participant Information Sheet

Exploring female strength and power: An ethnography of strongwoman
Adult Participant Information Sheet

Main investigator:

Hannah Newman, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, h.newman@lboro.ac.uk 01509223365

Other investigators:

Dr Line Nyhagen, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, l.nyhagen@lboro.ac.uk 01509223362

Dr David Howe, School of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, p.d.howe@lboro.ac.uk 01509226389

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the subculture of the sport of strongwoman; examining the practices, attitudes, values, and lived experiences of the strongwomen who train and compete in the sport.

In recent years there has been a burgeoning of interest in 'strength sports' for women. Media attention and social media trends such as '#liftlikeagirl' suggest that more women are taking up strength-based sports than ever before. However, there is suggestion that societal ideologies regarding the gender-appropriateness of activities pose challenges to women's participation in traditionally 'masculine' sports.

Existing research has focused largely on bodybuilding, an aesthetically judged sport in which female participants have been restricted by 'femininity rules.' No in-depth research though has been conducted on strongwoman, which may have the potential to be more liberating than bodybuilding due to its focus on physical capacity rather than aesthetics. However, until an in-depth study into the subculture of strongwoman is conducted it is difficult to assess its empowering potential. It is expected that this detailed examination will allow for further examination of the notion of female strength and power, the attitudes and values that encompass it, and its implications for identity, gender, and sexuality.

Who is doing this research and why?

The main investigator for this study is Hannah Newman, who will be conducting the research as part of her PhD at Loughborough University. Hannah will be conducting all of the data collection for this study. Hannah's supervisors are Dr Line Nyhagen and Dr David Howe. This study is part of a student research project supported by Loughborough University.

Are there any exclusion criteria?

No.

What will I be asked to do?

The main investigator for this study will be conducting observations and informal discussions at the gym that you train and/or compete at. If you choose to participate in this study, your training, competitions, and observed experiences will contribute towards the results of this study. The main investigator may have informal discussions with you during this time, but may also ask you if you are willing to participate in additional formal interviews, which would be arranged at a time and place convenient for you.

Once I take part, can I change my mind?

Yes. After you have read this information and asked any questions you may have we will ask you to complete an Informed Consent Form, however if at any time, before, during or after the sessions you wish to withdraw from the study please just contact the main investigator. You can withdraw at any time, for any reason and you will not be asked to explain your reasons for withdrawing.

However, once the PhD thesis has been submitted (expected to be by April 2019), it will not be possible to withdraw your individual data from the research.

Will I be required to attend any sessions and where will these be?

The majority of your participation in this study will take place during your usual training and/or competition attendance through observations and informal discussions. You may also be asked if you are willing to meet for a formal interview. If so, this will be arranged at a time and venue to suit you.

How long will it take?

The main investigator will be conducting this study for a period of twelve months. The level of your involvement within this time will be largely dependent on you, how often you train and/or compete, and how long/how much you are willing to be involved for. If you agree to be formally interviewed, the interview could take between 30 to 120 minutes.

What personal information will be required from me?

On agreeing to take part in this study, your full name and e-mail address will be the only personal information required. Throughout the course of the study you may be asked further questions regarding information such as your age, ethnicity, sexuality etc. in order to help contextualise individual experiences within the sport. However, what and how much information you choose to divulge will be completely at your discretion, and you will not be forced to share any information that you do not want to.

Are there any risks in participating?

While this study is considered low risk, it is important that participants are aware that recounting or describing their experiences and/or feelings and emotions regarding their sport and/or identity may cause some emotional distress. Participants will not be expected to talk about anything that they do not want to talk about, and as described previously, can withdraw from the study at any point up until the submission of the PhD thesis. If participants have any concerns during or after the study, they should contact the main investigator and/or the other investigators.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Your personal information (e.g. name, e-mail address), as well as any video or audio recordings, will be stored securely and destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

When quoting and/or referring to the participants, pseudonyms will be used instead of real names in order to anonymise the results of the study. Every effort will be made to anonymise the data, however, it must be acknowledged that quotes describing particular situations, people, or specific competitions may unintentionally disclose the identity of a participant to others involved in or who have knowledge of the sport. E.g. If a participant described their experiences of winning a particular competition in a particular year, they may then be identifiable to those who know who won that competition at that time.

I have some more questions; who should I contact?

Please contact the main investigator, Hannah Newman. Contact details can be found at the top of this information sheet.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of this study will be submitted as part of a PhD thesis at Loughborough University. They may also be published in academic journals and/or as a book.

What if I am not happy with how the research was conducted?

If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact Ms Jackie Green, the Secretary for the University's Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee:

Ms J Green, Research Office, Hazlerigg Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU. Tel: 01509 222423. Email: J.A.Green@lboro.ac.uk

The University also has a policy relating to Research Misconduct and Whistle Blowing which is available online at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/committees/ethics-approvals-human-participants/additionalinformation/codesofpractice/ .

Appendix E – Informed Consent Form

Exploring female strength and power: An ethnography of strongwoman

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
(to be completed after Participant Information Sheet has been read)

Taking Part	**Please initial box**
The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Loughborough University Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee.	☐
I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form.	☐
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.	☐
I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study, have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason, and will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.	☐
I agree to take part in this study. Taking part in the project will include being photographed, interviewed and recorded (audio or video).	☐
Use of Information	
I understand that all the personal information I provide will be treated in strict confidence and will be kept anonymous and confidential to the researchers unless (under the statutory obligations of the agencies which the researchers are working with), it is judged that confidentiality will have to be breached for the safety of the participant or others or for audit by regulatory authorities.	☐
I understand that anonymised quotes may be used in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.	☐
I agree for the data I provide to be securely archived at the end of the project.	☐
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Hannah Newman.	☐

_____ _____ _____

Name of participant	[printed]	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____	_____
Researcher	[printed]	Signature	Date