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“IT’S JUST ME”:

A Grounded Theory of the Experience of Being a Long Term Exerciser

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University, Palmerston North, New
Zealand.**

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ABSTRACT.

Exercise has been linked to a range of health benefits. Despite significant research into this relationship many of its dynamics remain a mystery. Almost all of this research has been quantitative in orientation with little emphasis given to the experiences of the exercisers' themselves. This study focuses on the lived experiences of eight long-term exercisers using a hermeneutic grounded theory methodology to collect, collate, explore and interpret their accounts of it. In arriving at themes that meaningfully describe these experiences this project was a collaborative effort between the co-researchers and myself to negotiate a shared understanding of what exercising means for us. These themes include exercising outcomes and background influences that combine to produce exercising experiences that are both self-defining and self-enhancing. Seen this way our exercising can be viewed as a three-stage process of self-discovery involving initiation, exploration and integration. This understanding of long-term exercise provides the opportunity to gain further insight into the dynamics of our adherence and longevity. In producing a public record of this shared understanding this study also validates and gives voice to our experiences.

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PREFACE

From the earliest times movement has played an important part in human life. As well as ensuring survival it has, over the centuries, served a variety of purposes including transportation, communication, socialization, status, wealth and recreation. In more recent times human movement has become the subject of scientific study and spawned, in the process, sub-disciplines including biomechanics, exercise physiology, motor behaviour and exercise and sport psychology.

With public interest focused on the lifestyle and health implications of exercise, a predominantly biomedical perspective has emerged to explain this phenomenon. However sociological and phenomenological perspectives seeking a more subjective understanding of exercise are challenging these explanations. One example of this is the 'reconceptualising' of exercise from a hermeneutical perspective that views "... the [human] body as, the site of meaningful experience" (Lyons, 1999, p. 246). This approach allows themes like well-being, health, injury, fitness, training, enjoyment and persistence to be explored from the perspective of individual meaning and relevance.

In adopting a hermeneutical understanding of exercise this project produces a 'verstehen' (Henwood, 1996) or negotiated understanding of the meaning of exercise for eight co-researchers. Four men and four women were interviewed about their exercising experiences over their lifetime. These interviews were transcribed and analysed by myself as the researcher using a hermeneutically influenced grounded theory methodology to produce an understanding of these co-researcher accounts. This understanding involved negotiation with each co-researcher as to the authenticity of the arrived at themes and meanings conceptualised by the researcher.

The interpretive nature of the study involved an active flip-flopping (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) back and forwards between co-researchers' words, my own thoughts and ideas and the grounded theory techniques used. The outline that follows covers these three key aspects of this interactive process that led to a grounded theory of long-term exercise as a process of self-discovery.

As a way of introduction chapter one discusses the history of exercise and contrasts quantitative and qualitative approaches to it. Chapter two looks at the history of, assumptions behind, and rationale for, using a philosophical hermeneutic perspective for this research. Chapter three provides a history and rationale for the grounded theory methodology used, as well as describing its procedures. Chapter four details the semi-structured interview method used and summarises how the data was collected, collated, analysed and verified. It also includes an overview of the preceding chapters. Chapter five introduces the co-researchers by using their own words to provide brief overviews of their exercising lives. These profiles lead into chapter six and seven that outline the outcomes and background influences that combine to produce an exercising journey of initiation, exploration and integration (chapter eight). These three phases can be summarised as a process of self-discovery and as chapter nine suggests leads to a number of implications for research.