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# The Power of the We: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Attitudes Towards Exercise in a Cato Manor Workout Group

Serena Bernthal-Jones  
*SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad*

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The Power of the We: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Attitudes Towards Exercise in a  
Cato Manor Workout Group

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Serena Bernthal-Jones  
Advisor: Dr. Eliza Govender  
School for International Training  
Fall 2015: Community Health and Social Policy

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## **Abstract**

This study explored attitudes towards exercise within a workout group in Cato Manor, Durban. Taking an autoethnographic approach, I have interwoven narratives of group members with my own experiences, both as a participant in the workout group and as a long-distance runner. Using focus groups, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and direct observations, as well as running as a method of introspection, I aimed to examine both individual and collective perceptions of and motivations for exercise. All but one of the workout group members I spoke with were women, reflecting the makeup of the group while I was there. My findings indicate that the workout group has had a positive impact on participants' attitudes toward exercising. While weight concerns were identified by the majority of participants as the initial motivator to join the group, the welcoming, fun group environment kept them coming back. Moreover, participants identified the group itself as a powerful source of motivation and social support. Such findings carry important implications for understanding motives for behavior change specific to a consistent exercise routine within the Cato Manor community, and were utilized within the scope of this project in the participatory development of an informational poster.

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## Forward

*My heart raced. Standing on the starting line in my bright yellow Carleton College jersey, I played the course over and over again in my head. Strong arms, quick steps, eyes ahead...bam! The gun sounds, shaking me out of my thoughts. 1 minute until start. A quiet descends over the crowd, over the runners. And then.... we are off! Before my mind has time to think, my legs are moving under me, and I am enveloped by the flood of moving bodies.*

There is nothing quite like the start of a race. No matter how many races I run, I don't think I will ever get use to the nervous anticipation followed by the intense rush of adrenaline that propels me forward along with hundreds of other runners. I often find it a strange experience, then, to watch a race from the sidelines. I am no longer able to feel that intensity that is so palpable when I myself am a participant. I am just an observer, watching the runners pass by. That energy, that movement; I am sure it is still there. But I am no longer a part of it. I feel...detached.

In the following pages, I invite you, the reader, into my thoughts, into the depth of my experiences. I acknowledge that not all of you will come to this with the same connection to running that I will express. In fact, some of you may hate running. But for the next few pages, I ask you to run *with* me, to let yourself feel as I have felt. And let us see where that takes us.

## Prologue

I stand outside on the balcony, watching the runners pass by on the Durban beachfront below in the early morning sunlight. The perfect day for a run. There must be some race going on because the pathway is flooded with people. From the fifth floor balcony where I stand, they look like ants, all moving in the same direction.

Within a few minutes, I have become one of those ants, swallowed up by the larger group moving down the beachfront. I chat briefly with an older man. They run every Saturday morning, he tells me. I thank him before quickening my pace, falling into my own rhythm.

I check my watch. 30 minutes. My usual halfway point. *Why not push it a little today?* My mind has settled on the new goal, and my legs follow suit. Before I know it, the wide paved path narrows and becomes gravel. I feel at home as I wind through trees and over grassy terrain.

Thousands of miles and seven times zones away, today is the day of the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Cross-Country Championships, the final meet of the season. I have been thinking a lot today about my team and running, and why I run. About rising with the sun for grueling morning workouts in the crisp autumn air. About trailing behind a teammate; about falling into stride with another. About being unexpectedly welcomed into a community that has since been so integral to my college experience.

I approach a hill. *Strong arms, quick steps, eyes ahead.* I pretend I am racing, focusing on the top of the hill. With each step I feel stronger, more confident. I feel weightless as I glide up the hill, propelling myself forward with each step...

Then suddenly pain. Shooting pain. My hands splay in front of me, catching my face from smashing into the hard brown dirt. *Breathe. Don't cry. Just breathe.* I struggle to my feet,

assessing the damage. My knee is caked with dirt and blood, and I wince as I try to stand. I let my body be overcome by the pain for a second. *Move. Just move*, I tell myself.



## Chapter 1: Where Are All the Runners in Cato Manor? Arriving at my initial research question

*“Running is what I do. Running is what I love. Running is – to a large extent – who I am”*

(Jurek, 2012, p. 2)

I run. But it’s more than that. I *am* a runner. Running is part of my identity, a way of life. It has become a method of processing, reflecting, and escaping. It is through running that I was not only drawn to, but literally stumbled upon, my research topic.

Initially, I had planned to look at the absence of young female runners in Cato Manor, a predominately black suburb on the outskirts of Durban<sup>1,2</sup>. Over the course of my first two-month stay in Cato Manor, I became acutely aware of the absence of other female runners and the lack of a runner-friendly space. I spent many a workout avoiding speeding minibuses, barking dogs, screaming children, and crude catcalls. I ran in the early mornings or after school in the late afternoon, and only twice saw another woman out jogging. This led me to my initial research question: Why are there so few young female runners in Cato Manor? Why do girls stop running?

Ironically, it took a day of not running to find what was right in front of me all along. I had been resting in bed all day due to a low fever. I was feeling restless (as I often do when I haven’t run), so I asked my 10-year old host brother<sup>3</sup> to go on a walk with me. As we descended the hill to the soccer field, I was surprised to see 40 plus women stepping in unison, led by a buff young black man

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<sup>1</sup> Cato Manor was settled by its current residents through mass invasions in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. It is now home to approximately 93,000 residents, the majority of whom are Zulu-speaking and of a lower-to-mid socioeconomic class (eThekweni Municipality, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Cato Manor is often called a “township,” a term which dates back to the racially motivated spatial planning of Apartheid. I have therefore intentionally chosen to refer to it as a “suburb,” due to the connotations that the former term holds.

<sup>3</sup> During my time in Cato Manor, I lived with a Zulu-speaking family from the community. Such students exchange accommodations are commonly referred to as a “homestay,” where the goal is to facilitate mutual learning and understanding across cultures.

barking commands. Women *do* work out in Cato! I had just been looking in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Over the next few weeks, I began attending the workout group, out of curiosity at first and then because I genuinely enjoyed it. I began recognizing faces and names, and started to learn some Zulu commands. And I began asking questions: Why did you join the group? What keeps you coming back? How has being a part of this group changed your view of exercise?

And so my project began to take shape. Using the community organized workout group as a case study, I planned to examine the motives for and perceptions of exercise in the daily lives of the participants. By participating in the workout group myself, I aimed to not only ask, but also *experience* my own answers to such questions.

The links between regular exercise and good health are well-established (World Health Organization, 2010; King, Hopkins, Caudwell, Stubbs, & Blundell, 2009; Goedecke, Jennings, & Vambert, 2006). Rather, I was interested in people's perceptions of, attitudes towards, and motivations for exercise within the context of a community-based workout group. By offering a safe, peer-supported space for exercise that is both fun and physically challenging, the group promotes an active, healthy lifestyle within the Cato Manor community. Going into the project, I hoped that my findings could in some way be utilized by the workout group in the development of strategies for retaining current members and attracting new participants. Within the time that my project allowed, this took shape through the development of an informational poster encouraging new members to join, which I developed in partnership with group members and leaders.

This paper is organized into chapters, following the journey that I have taken over the past weeks with my Independent Study Project (ISP). This story takes me from cornfields of Southern

Minnesota to the Masxha sports grounds<sup>4</sup> of Cato Manor, from racing with my collegiate cross-country team to attempting to following along to Zulu exercise commands. Given my autoethnographic approach, I often switch between tenses as I jump in place and time: from my current interactions with the group, to reflections on past experiences, to looking ahead at possibilities for the future. Over the course of this journey, I return again and again to the idea of movement; as experienced as an individual, as a member of a group, and ultimately as a “we”.

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<sup>4</sup> The “grounds” refers to the soccer field and basketball court where the workout group is held in Masxha, Cato Manor.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

*“No matter how long you stand there examining yourself naked before a mirror, you’ll never see reflected what’s inside”* (Murakami 2009, p. 163)

### Autoethnography

Dr. Clive Bruzas first introduced me to the research method of autoethnography. “It’s not something you apply; it’s something you live,” he told our class (2015). Initially, I remember feeling intimidated by this method. *That’s not for me*, I told myself. *I’m not a creative person*. Try as I might to convince myself otherwise, I kept coming back to autoethnography. It excited me. In contrast, the more I learned about ethnography, the more I took issue with this research method. How was I supposed to make knowledge claims about others when I can barely make them about myself? As I struggled with how to authentically represent another group of people, especially in such a short time frame that I had to complete this ISP, autoethnography offered a research process of integrity. By exploring my research question through people’s lived experiences, the focus shifts to making meaning. Such an approach recognizes knowledge as “a process, a temporary state” (Eisner, 1997, p. 7).

Narrative is not a new method of inquiry. Oral storytelling was used for centuries as a way of making meaning and generating knowledge. Hendry (2010) argues that narrative research is one of the oldest forms of inquiry, from which all forms of “traditional” research have derived. Yet such alternative forms of data representation have only begun to gain academic credibility in the past few decades. The merits of alternative forms of data representations, such as autoethnography, continue to be hotly debated. Such debate can be understood as a collision of paradigms, as a disagreement about “how meaning is made and what shall count as knowledge” (Eisner, 1997, p. 7).

Ethical concerns played a primary role in the shift towards alternative forms of data representation. Questions of authority, representation, and integrity prompted a growing awareness of the problematic nature of the researched-researcher relationship (Ellis & Adams, 2014). The autoethnographic approach not only recognizes, but also invites the presence of value-laden paradigms that the researcher intrinsically brings to their research. By “acknowledging and accommodating subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on the research” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. n.p.) autoethnography “enmeshes the personal within the political and the political within the personal in ways that can, do, and must matter” (Jones, 2005, p. 774).

Autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography. According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner, autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systemically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (2011, p. n.p.). This style of inquiry is a “balancing act,” requiring a constant interweaving of the self and the other (Jones 2005, p. 764). Indeed, “autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement – between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement” (Jones, 2005, p. 764). It is at the intersection of the self and the other that meaning emerges, where “charged moments of clarity, connection, and change” occur (Jones, 2005, p. 764). Indeed, change is the ultimate goal. To quote Bruzas, “learning is about change” (2015).

Autoethnography is, after all, about creating *meaning*, not only for the researcher, but also for the reader (Bruzas, 2015). As the writer, I acknowledge that the meaning is personal, contextual, and ever changing: what members of the workout group find meaningful might differ from what I find meaningful, which might also differ from what the reader finds meaningful. As Ellis and Bochner note: “Not all people respond to an autoethnography in the same way” (2006, p. 441).

The value of autoethnography lies not only in the product but also in the process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The process of writing itself is both a way of learning and knowing (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Moreover, an autoethnography must “confront the impossibility of full or complete knowledge (of self, of others, and of the relationship between the two)” (Jones, 2005, p. 768). Requiring self-consciousness and vulnerability, a successful narrative will be a “tale of two selves,” a story of change (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). The ultimate product may take a variety of creative presentation forms; however, all autoethnographies aim to “change us and the world we live in for the better” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. n.p.).

Unlike traditional methods, autoethnography privileges narrative truth. According to Bochner, “The purpose of self-narrative is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly how it was lived” (2000, p. 270). As such, validity and generalizability take on new meanings. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) discuss such concerns in “Autoethnography: An Overview”. Concerning validity, the researcher must continually ask herself: “How is my story useful?” Autoethnographers do not aim to make their work generalizable in the scientific sense of a randomized control trial; however, they are equally concerned with generalizability in terms of how it speaks to, and ultimately moves, their readers (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

From the start, I have been unable to separate myself from the topic of exercise, not only from my own experience as a runner but also as a new member of the workout group. Before deciding that I was going to pursue the topic for my ISP, my initial reaction upon seeing the group that night with my host brother was to ask if I could join. The autoethnography allows for, even demands, this presence of self (Jones, 2005).

## **Data Collection**

I began my preliminary data collection in September and October of 2015, during my initial stay in Cato Manor. As a new member of the workout group, I used both direct observations and informal conversations that took place between and after exercises as a way to formulate my initial research questions. Upon returning to Cato for the first two weeks of November for the official portion of my data collection, I continued to attend the workout group every night in addition to conducting interviews and a focus group. As an active participant, I aimed to both engage with and experience the workings of the group directly.

Over the course of my study, I conducted nine one-on-one interviews and one focus group in order to explore both individual and collective experiences with exercise and the group. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 56, and all but one was female, reflecting the makeup of the group during the time I collected my data. I recruited participants through a combination of both convenience and purposeful sampling. After obtaining permission from the group's leader, I made an announcement at the end of each workout session for the first week, explaining my project and asking if anyone would be interested in talking with me. I received an overwhelming response: virtually all members wrote down their names and phone numbers. After following up with phone calls, however, only 13 individuals followed through on their initial interest in participating.

During the first week, I conducted a focus group made up of eight group members, all women. I began the session with a brief survey, asking the participants basic questions such as their age, when they joined the workout group, how they heard about it, and how many times a week they attend (see Appendix A). I then led the group through a series of questions about their collective experience with exercise and with the workout group (see Appendix A). Through this dialogue, I aimed to allow for the collective voice of the group to be heard.

I had initially planned to conduct two focus groups in order to best accommodate the large number of group members. However, the workout group was significantly smaller over the period when I returned to collect my data, averaging around 10 members (previously, attendance had been as high as 30). Therefore, I shifted my focus towards individual interviews. This shift prevented me from using the focus group survey in the way I had initially planned: to create a representative profile of the group as a whole. Rather, I solely used it to understand a general profile of the women in the focus group itself.

One-on-one interviews provided the chance to explore my questions in-depth with a few individual participants, allowing me to present personal experiences with exercise in the form of narratives. I began by interviewing the group's leader, in order to understand the formation of the group, the logistics of running it, and to obtain her permission for speaking with the members of the group over the next few weeks. I was somewhat purposeful in my sampling, seeking out individuals of a variety of ages and experiences with the group. The focus group provided a good indicator of which individuals I want to follow up with; thus, some participants were involved in both the focus group and one-on-one interviews. The majority of interviews were conducted directly before and after the workout session on the Masxha sports grounds, as per the participants' request.

The interviews themselves were conversational in nature. Each interview began with experience and behavior questions, before becoming more conversational as I moved into opinion and feeling questions. I had a list of general questions to use as a guide (see Appendix A), but allowed the questions to flow and evolve naturally. Note that some questions were asked both in the focus group and the one-on-one interviews; in the latter, I was interested in going more in-depth with personal experiences that may not have had the chance to evolve fully in the larger group setting.



Additionally, I used health communication strategies, as outlined by the P-Process<sup>5</sup>, to develop and implement an informational poster encouraging new members to join the workout group. I took a participatory approach, including various stakeholders in all stages of development. The topic of encouraging new members to join was brought up in the focus group and individual interviews; therefore, I approached the group with the idea of a creating a poster. I then worked collaboratively with the group members and leaders to design and develop a final draft (see Appendix B). Due to time limitations, I was not able to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the poster.

### **Data Analysis**

As a primary method of making meaning, I turned to what I have always used as a tool for reflection and introspection: running. As Bruzas (2011) used labyrinth walking as a meditative approach, I used running as a way to explore the common themes and meanings emerging from my research. I found this “reflection in motion” (Bruzas, 2011, n.p.) to be incredibly vital in facilitating triangulation and crystallization. I have shared some of these thoughts in a series of reflections on reflections, as recorded in my journal immediately after running. In the words of T.S. Elliot, “At the still point, there is the dance” (1943, n.p.). For me, I find that still point of reflection in the movement of running.

To explore my own sources of motivation, especially when I was unable to run, I turned to the writings of two long-distance runners: *Eat and Run*, by ultramarathon champion Scott Jurek, and *What I Talk About When I Talk about Running*, by runner and novelist Haruki Murakami. I have

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<sup>5</sup> The P-Process is a foundational process in health communication used for planning, executing and evaluating projects (Dyll-Mycklebust, 2015). It is comprised of 5 stages: Analysis, Strategic Design, Development and Testing, Implementation and Monitoring, and Evaluation and Replanning.

included quotes from these two works throughout the following chapters, serving as a point of reflection and synthesis of my own thoughts on running and motivation.

### **Limitations**

While I spoke with 13 members, I was not able to interview all members of the workout group. External factors were not in my favor, such as the weather and the time frame in which I collected my data. The second week I was in Cato, the workout group was canceled three of the five days due to rain. November also proved to be an inopportune time to conduct interviews due to the scheduling of school exams, which may have prevented younger members from attending. Additionally, I was unable to speak with Lindane, the group's original leader, as he had moved to Johannesburg temporarily. I made multiple attempts to get in contact with him but did not receive a response.

Language also hindered my ability to be a keen observer. While the majority of the participants spoke English, the workout sessions were conducted predominantly in Zulu. Therefore, I had to rely heavily on body language and non-verbal cues, as well as informal interpretations from other participants.

Additionally, I am aware of possible response bias due to my position. I introduced myself to the group as a public health student, explaining how I was interested in the connection between health and exercise. There was the possibility, then, that participants may have exaggerated or geared their responses to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. By participating in the group and observing it in action, I hoped to diminish the extent of this bias. Nevertheless, I was aware of this potential bias throughout the interview process.

## Ethics

*“Relationships are the centrepiece for ethics”* (Zaner in Adams 2008, p. 178)

As previously noted, my concern with the ethics of research played a large role in my decision to approach my research question through autoethnography. As Brown notes:

“Ethnographic inquiry unwittingly reinforced negative stereotypes of the exotic Other, who was reduced to an object of study while serving the careerist goals of the active, knowing ethnographic self. Field research often replicated the oppressive effects if not the material conditions of colonization, in which the Other found him or herself not only at the wrong end of a colonial gun but at the short end of an imperial pen” (2004, p. 208).

I felt strongly about being an active participant rather than an outside observer, choosing to subject myself to the same level of scrutiny that I was asking of the participants in my study.

Autoethnography provided me the means to do this in an authentic manner while upholding the integrity of the participants. I also intentionally chose to end each interview with the chance for participants to ask me any questions they might have about my experience with exercise, the group or my project.

Before I began official data collection, my project proposal was reviewed and approved by the Local Review Board (see Appendix C). I began each interview by explaining the purpose of my study and informing the participants of their rights to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. I also made it clear that they need not answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Such conversations often felt awkwardly formal, especially prefacing the informal conversation that followed. Nevertheless, I embraced the awkwardness, always obtaining written consent before launching into the start of the interview (see Appendix D). Before the focus group discussion, I requested that participants respect each other’s rights to anonymity and confidentiality by keeping what was said within the group. I also made myself available after the session, should someone have wanted to bring up an issue that they did not feel comfortable sharing with the whole group. While I

informed participants of their right to anonymity, all but one participant chose to use their real name in the report. Interviews were recorded, using my password-protected iPhone, only if the participant gave me permission. Recordings and interview notes were stored on my password-protected computer.

Based on my preliminary observations, I had assumed all group members were over the age of 18. I quickly learned that it is difficult to gauge ages, as three of the participants I spoke with were minors. For these participants, proper consent was obtained from a parent or guardian in addition to assent from the participants' themselves. This added an interesting lens that I did not anticipate, as I got to meet the family and see the participant in a setting outside the workout group. Over the course of the study, I was also aware of those whose voices may not have been heard. While I did not exclude anyone from participating, I only had two weeks to conduct interviews; therefore, group members who did not attend during that timeframe, who may have had differing opinions, were not able to be included in my study.

Relational ethics were at the cornerstone of my study. Over the past few months, I became friends and acquaintances with the majority of the participants. Therefore, I have felt a moral responsibility, in addition to an ethical obligation, to tell their stories to the best of my ability, and I have chosen to exclude any information that may be harmful to the internal workings of the group. Additionally, I felt strongly that I give back to the group in some way. This desire was manifested in the collaborative development of the poster (see Appendix B), which I delivered to the group the final night I was in Cato.

### Chapter 3: The Fall

*“We never make the journey we think we are making”* (Okri 2002, p. 58)

Occasionally, I have worried about my over-dependence on running. It is usually no more than a fleeting thought here and there: *What if something were to happen to prevent me from running? How would I cope?* Little did I know I was about to find out.

On the Saturday before the official start of my ISP, I tripped on a tree root and took a bad fall, hurting my left knee. I awoke the next morning to an intense throbbing pain in my knee. I recall having every intention of continuing to despite the pain. “Absolutely not!” my mother commanded over the phone, the voice of reason.

I spent the first day of the ISP in a lot of physical pain. I was sitting around waiting, waiting for doctors to call back, waiting to get on with my life. As I waited, I wrote in my journal:

*I am worried how this will affect my ability to be a part of the workout group and to establish meaningful relationships with the members of the group. I wanted to be a member of the community, not an outsider coming in to observe...that is exactly why I chose an autoethnography as I took issue with the traditional notion of the researched-researcher relationship. Plus, I had been so looking forward to participating, and showing my enthusiasm for my project by fully immersing myself in the experience....*  
(Pers. Journal, 2 Nov. 2015)

Ultimately, I do not think my injury greatly impacted my ability to be a part of the workout group as I had feared that first day. I still attended every evening and even was able to participate partially in the arm and abdominal exercises. Additionally, many of the members recognized me from earlier in September and October, when I first started attending. By the second week of November, I was back to participating fully. My injury did, however, impact my own process of self-reflection. Approaching my research through autoethnography, I had planned to engage with my own experiences, not only as a member of the workout group but also as a runner. At the time, I did not anticipate that running would be taken away from me, albeit briefly. Having to live without

running for two weeks forced me to experience life without running. Through the pain and frustration that followed, I began to think about my relationship with running in a new light.

## Chapter 4: Twenty-Six Strong

September 22, 2015

*I checked my watch. 6:32 pm but still no one. Did I get the time wrong? By 6:35 pm two other women had walked onto the court. "Let's begin," they announced, and the three of us started to walk across the court. Back, forth, back, forth. Slowly at first, gaining speed and momentum with every turn. As we walked, women would arrive and join, forming an ever-growing chain. "Get in line," the woman who initiated the walking commanded, spreading her arms on either side as a marker to catch up. Faster, stronger, gaining speed and numbers with every turn. By 6:50 pm we were 26 strong, a single line of speed walkers. A force to be reckoned with. The power of the "we".*

After the walking ends, the group transitions into stretching, led by various members of the group. As we stretch, Lindane, the group's leader, sets out colored cones across the basketball court in an organized manner. The group then disperses to a spot marked by the cones, forming five or six rows. The front row faces back at the group and will help Lindane demonstrate each exercise to the group. The next hour consists of various leg, arm and abdominal exercises led by Lindane. Each exercise is typically done in repetitions of four. Lindane calls out commands in Zulu, and members typically count aloud in a mixture of Zulu and English. I personally liked counting aloud, as I found myself falling into rhythm, my body moving without my mind having to tell it what to do. As the seconds fell away, I was reminded of the racing philosophy of ultramarathoner Scott Jurek. According to Jurek, the "empty mind" is the "dominant mind" (2012, p. 87).

When I returned to Cato in November, the group had changed somewhat. Lindane had left temporarily for a job in Johannesburg, passing the leadership off to a young woman named

Thoko. She has a kind, shy smile, but a loud, commanding voice. Given her outward confidence, I was surprised to learn she was only 17. In a later interview (4 Nov 2015), she tells me how the group had formed:

It was July of 2012, and she had started jogging every day at the Masxha grounds. “My intention was to lose weight,” she tells me. “I felt, I felt that I HAD to do this...I was uncomfortable [with my weight]”. It was here that she saw Lindane and two other men working out together. She asked if she could join them, and soon an informal group was formed. Schools were out then, so they had no trouble getting more people to join. Friends told friends, and soon they had a full-fledged workout group.

By 2013, they had enough people to make a set start time. Ever since, the group has been meeting Monday through Friday between 6:30-8:00 pm. At the beginning, the group was almost a third male. It is now almost exclusively female; over the course of my two-week stay in November, only one male attended. When Lindane was offered a job in Johannesburg two months ago, he passed the leadership off to Thoko. She recounted: “Because he saw how good I was at the gym, he trusted me to take care of the group”. At first, she mainly led the group in exercises that Lindane had taught her. She now has begun incorporating new routines from workout videos such as Tae-Bo. This is her first experience training people. “I’m trying”, she tells me.



## Chapter 5: Mindset

*“The past was gone. There was only the trail, only movement. There was only now. And now was enough. It was more than enough. It was everything. I ran. I ran and I ran.”* (Jurek 2012, p. 225-226).

Over the years, my mindset towards running has shifted and evolved. What began simply as a way to stay in shape for basketball has become an integral part of my daily existence.

Murakami writes: “No matter how mundane some action might appear, keep it long enough and it becomes a contemplative, even meditative act” (2009, p. vi). That is how I feel about running.

So why exactly do I run? This is something I often try to think about the night before I race, to remember what exactly I love about running. Seldom have I taken the time to record such thoughts. In the weeks leading up to the start of my project, however, I began to journal on the topic:

*I run because I'm happy. I run because I'm sad. I run because I'm frustrated, angry, stressed, overwhelmed. Because I'm elated, light, full of energy. I run because I feel fat, weak. I run to feel strong. I run to be alone. I run to be with others. To see new places, to revisit my favorite ones. I run to think, or not to think. To be disciplined. To let go* (Pers. Journal, 19 Sept. 2015).

Going into this project, I was particularly interested in what drew people to the workout group. What initially motivated them to join? What has kept them coming back? I quickly found out that the answers to these questions were not the same. Much as my attitude towards running has shifted over the years, the perceptions of and motivations for exercise expressed by participants appear to have evolved since joining the group. In this chapter, I explore the shifting attitudes of participants to exercise.

## **Initial Motivation**

Luyanda, age 22, has been attending the group for only two weeks. Having never worked out before, she seemed genuinely enthusiastic about her experience thus far with exercise and the group. The majority of our conversation seemed to focus on weight and visible results: “I don’t look the way I want...I want to change the way I look”. She confided that the first time she attended she was nervous, but she knew her body was tough and could handle it. “The way I feel now...it feels good...my body has changed...”. She proudly spoke of how she has already dropped to a size 34 but wants to be a 32 or even a 30. “Seeing that change [in my body], and I want more change”. She noted how exercising had inspired other healthy behaviors, such as eating less, drinking more water and stressing less. Before she joined, she told me, she often found herself bored at home in the evening. The workout group, however, has provided her with structure and purpose in her day. “I really enjoy this part of every evening,” she tells me (5 Nov 2015).

Like Luyanda, the overwhelming majority of the women spoke of losing weight as the motivating force that prompted them to join the gym. While several participants noted that a doctor had recommended they join due to other health concerns (Ntombizonke, Participant 1, Zama, Nov 2015), weight dominated both individual and group motives for exercise initially, regardless of age or body type. When “getting fat” was brought up in the focus group, laughter erupted throughout the group as women showed their agreement. Many women also spoke of losing more weight or attaining a “figure” as an individual goal for the next few months.

Given such goals, it was no surprise then that visible results appeared to drive the women to join. “I heard some ladies talking that when they started here,” Nonhlanhla, age 29, tells me. “One was wearing size 44 or something but now she is wearing size 38...and I said, no, I have to

keep on coming, because that is what I want” (6 Nov 2015). Happiness had a similar experience with her aunt Futhi, who, she tells me, inspired her to join the group: “I’m seeing the difference in her and she’s all fit” (6 Nov 2015). Even Luyanda, who has only been attending for two weeks, was extremely positive about her progress so far. Such perceived self-efficacy, taken from both testimonials of friends and family or from individual experience, appears to motivate participants to exercise. I wonder: If people stop seeing results will they stop coming to the workout group?

Hearing women talk about their bodies in such a negative light continually proved one of the hardest parts of the interview for me. As a young American woman, I am no stranger to a culture of body shaming. “*I’m big, I’m fat*” ... “*I have a big stomach!*” ... “*My tummy...my thighs...oh god!*”. These comments, which came up during multiple individual interviews and in the focus group, might well have been coming from any of my peers back home.

Obesity is certainly a growing public health concern in South Africa. While I was unable to find data specific to Cato Manor, the South Africa Demographic and Health Survey provided nationally representative data. According to a 2002 survey of 13,089 South African ages 15-95, 56% of South African women were classified as overweight or obese<sup>6</sup> (Puoane, et al., 2002). The highest prevalence (58.5%) was found among black South Africans (Puoane, et al., 2002). In the context of motives for exercise, however, it is vital to take into consideration the socio-cultural contexts and perceptions of weight management. Based on a preliminary review of literature, I found that being obese has historically been viewed as a sign of affluence and good health in South Africa (Kruger, Puoane, Senekal, & van der Merwe, 2005) (Puoane, Fourie, Rosling, &

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<sup>6</sup> A Body Mass Index (BMI) between 25 and 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> classifies an individual as “overweight,” while an individual with a BMI greater than 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> is considered “obese”.

Tshaka, 2005) (Mvo, Dick, & Steyn, 1999). In a 2003 qualitative study<sup>7</sup> on the barriers to healthy living within a township in Cape Town, many participants perceived being moderately overweight as attractive and a sign of dignity, respect, and confidence. On the other hand, weight loss was associated with illness, especially within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. One of the participants in this study noted: “I’m scared of exercising because I will lose weight and people may think that I have HIV/AIDS” (Chopra & Puoane, 2003, p. 25)

To quote the title of the 2005 work of Puoane, Fourie, Rosling, and Tshaka, I went into my study with the notion that ‘big is beautiful’. Comments from the various homestay gogos<sup>8</sup> about “fattening us Americans up” only reinforced this generalization of the plumper South African silhouette. I was quite surprised, therefore, when almost all the women participants I spoke with identified weight loss as their initial motivator for exercising. Such findings within the context of the Cato workout group reflect a very different view of weight loss than the literature I had read. In contrast to the 2003 study conducted in Cape Town, weight loss within the Cato workout group was perceived not only in a positive way, but as the very *reason* for exercising. I wonder: does this reflect a larger trend of changing body ideals?

### **A Shift in Attitude**

Thandeka is 20 years old. Like Luyanda, she initially starting exercising to lose weight: “I did that BMI thing and the results showed I was overweight. So then I started jogging.... jogging every afternoon when I had time”. She has been attending the group now for one year and four

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<sup>7</sup> This study was conducted in Khayelitsha, an informal township of Cape Town. The study took a “participatory approach to assessment, analysis, and action,” drawing from the personal experiences of 44 black Xhosa-speaking Community Health Workers (CHW). Two of the 44 CHWs were normal weight (BMI 18.5 - 24.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup>), two were overweight (BMI 25 - 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>), 25 were obese (30 – 40 kg/m<sup>2</sup>), and 15 were extremely obese (BMI >40 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) (Chopra & Puoane, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Zulu term of endearment for “granny”

months. Over this time, her motivation for exercising has shifted: “Back then it was about losing weight, but now it’s more for staying fit” (9 Nov 2015). She also spoke of how her experience with the group has changed her attitude towards exercise in general: “For me, exercise, I use to believe it was torture. But since I have been here for one year and four months I’m having extreme fun” (6 Nov 2015).

She acknowledged, however, the general conflation of weight and exercise within the community. “So most people have the mentality that if you come to gym it’s all about losing weight. So I don’t lose weight...So they are like ‘Why are you still wasting your time going there’” (6 Nov 2015). Even her friends and family do not understand why she goes to the workout group. “I have a brother; he’ll be like ‘Why are you still going there? It’s just a waste of time because there are no results showing.’ Because there are no results. Not getting any thinner. And I’ll be like, ‘No man, I’m not going there for going any thinner or whatever, I just want to go there and enjoy myself and have fun’” (9 Nov 2015).

Does this reflect a larger trend within the community? In the focus group, I asked what they perceived to be major barriers to exercise for the Cato Manor community as a whole. Gugu, age 18, speculated: “The major reason is they don’t see the point of working out. Most people, they start working out because they see they are gaining weight. So that’s when they see a reason to work out. If they are slim they think, ‘No, there is no reason. I’m happy the way I am.’ That is just wrong. Not realizing if you don’t work out there are diseases you can get infected with”. She then elaborated on her own shift in mentality: “At first, I thought exercise was the hardest thing to do. Seeing all those people working out all the time, sweating and feeling pain, I used to think, ‘No, it’s not good. If I want to lose weight, I can just go on a diet whatsoever.’ But when I joined

this group I realized it could be fun, it could be motivating; so it's all about your mindset... worldview...how you view things" (6 Nov 2015).

While weight seemed to be the initial motivator, participants identified other factors that have kept them coming back over the weeks. Multiple participants spoke of the welcoming atmosphere of the group and the company it provided (Luyanda, Gugu, Participant 1, Nov 2015), something I myself have certainly experienced over the past month. "The company.... the team. Just keeps me coming..." Gugu explained (6 Nov 2015). She later noted: "Since the company keeps me coming so I guess I'll keep on coming even if I've lost weight" (13 Nov 2015). Others noted how it has become a part of their daily routine: "...then I came here...and I enjoyed it...and I came back the following day and then it just became a routine" (Thandeka, 6 Nov 2015).

Participants also talked about how exercise has become an outlet, a source of energy. Thoko explained: "When I go to the gym, my mood changes, even if I'm sad. I come back home happy, feeling excited, hyper...It makes me happy" (4 Nov 2015). Gugu echoed a similar sentiment: "...when I'm here the problems all go away and I focus on gym, nothing else" (6 Nov 2015). She later elaborated: "The thing is, the thing that keeps me going back whenever I feel tired, I just need to relax, out of work stress and when I go there [to the workout group], just everything just disappears. So you get to exercise and relax at the same time. That keeps me coming back. And when I come back [home], I'm tired and I just want to sleep, and that is when I get to rest peacefully" (13 Nov 2015).

I often had to contain my excitement to such answers. *Exactly! I run for that exact reason: to escape, to unwind.* Like Gugu and Thoko, I get my energy from running. After a long stressful

day, many people like to take a nap. I run. In moving my body, my mind is able to be free, to think. (Or sometimes not think.) I always return from a run in a better mood than when I set off.

The second week I was in Cato Manor, it rained almost every day. Gugu and I sat inside, listening to the constant patter of the rain on the windows. As we began our conversation, the sky lit up with lightening.

She tells me how frustrated she has been this week, with not being able to exercise. “When I get use to exercising every day, one day without exercise, it’s going to be a very very very problem, a big problem” (13 Nov 2015). My mind travels back to the previous week, of being forced to sit out for the majority of the exercises due to the pain in my left knee...

*I crave movement. To do something. Anything! Without that structure, I feel lost. Without that outlet, I feel overwhelmed. Without that source of energy, I feel lethargic.*

## Chapter 6: The Wall

*“Exerting yourself to the fullest within your individual limits; that’s the essence of running, a metaphor for life...”* (Murakami 2009, p. 83)

When I was ten years old, my aunt ran the Seattle Half Marathon. On the car ride to school the following Monday, she told us about her experience in detail, including how she “hit the wall” at the 11-mile mark. I was fascinated. I had not heard about this “wall” before. I imagined it to be giant blow-up wall on the corner of Roanoke, at the very top of the hill near where my mom and I used to go cheer on the runners. In my mind, the runners would approach the wall at a crawl, gazing upward in sheer exhaustion before hurling their bodies into it. If they could manage to get up, they could manage to finish the race.

It was not until years later that I experienced this wall myself (and realized that it was not, after all, a physical wall). There is something indescribably satisfying about pushing yourself to the point where you think you can’t go on, only to discover that you can push more. Scott Jurek writes of a near addiction to this pain in relation to self-discovery: “But now that I knew the rewards of pain, I wanted more pain. I wanted to use it as a tool to pry myself open” (2012, p. 76).

In a conversation with Gugu, I was taken back to this desire to push myself. “I don’t like working out and feeling no pain,” she told me. “When I’m working out, I want to feel pain. I want to scream. I want to shout. I want to do all those crazy stuff, so you’ll see that something is happening. When I exercise and I don’t get tired, and I don’t get any aches in my body, it feels like I didn’t do anything”. She added: “What I’m comfortable with doesn’t help me. What I cannot do can actually help me” (13 Nov 2015).



She also commented on how many people in the group are beginning to complain and give up. “The key word that Lindane used to use is ‘try’. Just try. If you came to your limits, then stay there. Don’t try and compare yourself to another person, because you cannot be them”. Hearing this, I was brought back to Murakami’s comments on competition. Like Murakami, I have never done particularly well with team sports like basketball or soccer. Rather, my personality is much better suited for sports like running, where the “the only opponent you have to beat is yourself, the way you used to be” (2009, 10). He goes on to note: “My time, the rank I attain, my outward appearance – all of these are secondary. For a runner like me, what’s really important is reaching the goal I set myself, under my own power. I give it everything I have, endure what needs enduring, and am able, in my own way, to be satisfied” (2009, p. 173).

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*“My body is talking. My body is talking. Eh, it’s got a body language. My body language, it says, ‘go on and cry my son. Don’t give up’. That is what my body says to me”* (B, 16 Nov 2015).

The first day I attended the workout group, I couldn’t help but notice B, (and not just because he was the only male participant). He walked onto the court, head high and shoulders back in perfect posture. Dressed in a matching tracksuit, he removed the outer shell before joining the line of walkers. Immediately, something shifted in the group. “Stay in line,” he commanded, holding his arms out on either side of him. Some stragglers jogged to keep the rapid pace. “Walk together. Together. We are a family”. We became unified by his presence.

I know just enough Zulu to understand the cries of pain and frustration that sound throughout the workout, especially during the last few exercises. “*Eishhhh!*” “*Hhayibo*”<sup>9</sup>. I

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<sup>9</sup> Zulu exclamatory phrases

often find myself joining in, much to the amusement of those around me. B, however, does all the exercises to completion without complaint. I ask him later about this: “Where do you get this determination and motivation?” “I can say self-motivation,” he responds. “Because I hear my body talking. Saying, ‘go on and cry my son until you get what you want’. What you want, it’s: energy, exercise, keep yourself healthy all the time, look after yourself...” (16 Nov 2015).

I was struck by how in-tune with his body B was. Over the past weeks, I have begun to realize just how *unaware* of my body I have been. As a runner, my knees are one of my most important parts of my body. Yet when was the last time I was actually *conscious* of my knees?

I was first introduced to Thomas Moore’s illness narrative in a lecture early on in the semester. Moore writes:

“To all appearances, we’d like to be bodiless, and most of our inventions point toward that goal as they encourage us to sit in front of a screen and work, play, shop, and meet with old friends electronically. But after a lifetime of avoiding the body, we meet it face to face in illness, where, not coincidentally, we can also discover our souls. Illness teaches us lessons our high-tech education has overlooked: that we are mortal, that we have a body, that to be human is to have sensation, and that we could discover what is really important by paying attention to the body’s reactions” (Moore, n.d., p. 3).

At the time, Moore’s comments did not particularly resonate with me. It wasn’t until I fell on my knee, and subsequently became consumed by the throbbing pressure day in and day out, that I came back to this writing. I am mortal, yes. I have a knee, yes. But what could I possibly discover of value by paying attention to this pain?

The first time I saw the doctor, I was told I should be running again by Wednesday, no problem. *Four days, I can do that*, I remember thinking. I took my antibiotics and probiotics. I iced. I rested. I did everything I was told to do. Wednesday rolled around and my knee was still in excruciating pain. That evening, I reflected in my journal as I was watching the group exercise from the sidelines:

*Frustration sums up my current state of being. As sit on the sidelines of the court, knee throbbing in a constant reminder of what I cannot do (as if I need a reminder!), my mind plays over and over that Saturday morning, of all the different ways it could have gone. What if I didn't decide to take that path? What if I had taken a bigger step? What if I hadn't decided to push it and had just turned around at 30 minutes like I had originally planned? My mind is consumed with regrets, spiraling down a futile cycle of blame and self-loathing. I know it is useless...yet I can't help it.... (Pers. Journal, 2 Nov 2015)*

In a later entry, I write:

*My mind keeps drifting back to the world CONTROL. So far this week has been one prolonged lesson in letting go of control. Nothing has gone as I planned: my knee not healing, Lindane leaving, people not showing up for interviews, bad weather. With running, I am able to be in control: of my weight, of my schedule, of my attitude. It gives me a way to control what I cannot control in other parts of my life. It gives me structure, routine. It gives me a way to process, to reflect, to just be. This past week has taught me, no, make that **forced** me, to live a complete 180: without control. I have been banished to the passenger's seat of my life and am watching the scenery pass by but do not know where the car is heading. I have been forced to let go of that structure and relinquish control: over myself, my body, of my external circumstances. Maybe that's not such a bad thing... (Pers. Journal, 6 Nov 2015)*

In a similar breath to Moore, Murakami writes: "In most cases learning something essential in life requires physical pain" (2009, 140). I first read this as I was sitting on my bed in Cato, icing my knee with a frozen bag of peas. *The irony!* Looking back, now that I am fully recovered and back running, I think he is spot on. The physical pain in my left knee certainly made me aware of my body in a way I had not been before. But that is not what I took away from the experience. What I took away is twofold: First, I was afforded the opportunity to experience life without running. I aim to run now with a renewed sense of gratitude and awe at my body for carrying me over miles and letting me continually push my limits. Second, and more important, the physical pain made me physically aware of other aspects of my being and the way I approach the world. I was able to experience a world without regimented control, and as frustrating as it was at times, I ultimately think it was good for me to learn the limits of what I can control. And in a way, that was freeing.

## Chapter 7: Rhythm

*“The sounds of my footsteps, my breathing and heartbeats, all blended together in a unique polyrhythm”* (Murakami 2009, p. 13)

“One, two! Hhayibo!” we chant, legs pumping high in the air. Higher now, faster, keep going. Sweat drips down my face and my legs burn. “Eishhh!” “Hhaiybo!” we exclaim between counts, not so silently begging the coach to call time. Left foot, right foot. Our bodies moving in unison.

What is it, exactly, that draws people to work out together in a group rather than alone? Over half of the participants I spoke with had done some form of exercise before joining the group. In these interviews, I was particularly interested in what prompted the shift from working out alone to joining the group, and what they liked about both. Over the course of the interviews and focus group, several themes emerged as to the power of the group. I have broken these down into the broad categories of motivation, inspiration, and energy.

### Motivation

Today is Friday, marking Nonhlahla’s third workout session. It is only her first week with the group, but she has been working out by herself on an off for the past five years. We sit on our towels on the edge of the court, exchanging pleasantries. As the women trickle in and begin warm-ups, she begins to tell me about her experience with the group.

She is 29 years old. In 2010, she joined Virgin Active, where she worked out until she became pregnant. After having a baby, she got back into exercise and joined the Body Lab, but eventually stopped going as it required a contract. This brought her to the Masxha grounds, where she would jog alone for exercise. It was here that she first saw the group exercising together. Initially, she wasn’t sure how to join, until a man at her church told her anyone could,

no contract was needed. “I prefer it with a group,” she reflected. “You get more motivated when you see other people...of the same size and age group”. She seemed to like the structure and discipline that the group provides: “When you are with a group, it’s not like when you want to sit down you will sit down, when you want water, you drink water...there is a certain routine we have to follow...we have to do what the others do...”(6 Nov 2015).

Similar sentiments were brought up in almost all the interviews as well as the focus group: “The motivation...whenever you get tired, you see someone else doing it and then you just don’t back down” (Gugu, 13 Nov 2015). “If you see someone doing it, so you want to also do it, ya. But then if you’re alone, you can stop anytime, but if I’m with a group, I could continue doing it” (Zama, 10 Nov 2015).

Thandeka has been attending the group on and off for the past year and four months. “Do you consider yourself to be self-motivated or motivated by the group?” I asked her. “I’d say, a bit of both,” she responded. “Because I used to train alone. And then from there I don’t know what happened, I just lost that and then came back here, and then gained that motivation again. So now I am able to do it constantly” (9 Nov 2015). Others, like Luyanda, were adamant in their need for the group to motivate them for exercise. As she noted, “I can’t do it alone” (5 Nov 2015).

### **Inspiration**

The group also serves as a source of shared knowledge and a support system. One woman spoke of how the group provided her with new ideas for workout routines (Participant 1, 5 Nov 2015). As a participant, I too found it helpful to get ideas for new exercises. During the second week, when Thoko was absent due to exams, Gugu stepped up and led the exercises, often asking for feedback and ideas from the group. One day, I was even asked to lead the group in

stretching. Additionally, I observed the group sharing recipe ideas and reinforcing healthy eating behaviors. As B noted, “If you have a group, but you’ve got different techniques, different minds, communicating with other people by doing the exercise, that’s why I like being in the group” (16 Nov 2015)

In addition to personal benefits, participants identified what the workout group could do for the community as a whole. In the focus group, Gugu suggested that the group get sponsors so that it could grow and expand. That way, she explained, “we can take people off streets and then they would come here and they would start exercising and forget about drugs and all that” (6 Nov 2015). B also expressed a similar hope: “...the other people who are not doing what we are doing, maybe, they can turn back to us in order to join us just because we are doing something that is good among the people. Exercising the body system” (16 Nov 2015). In the meantime, he spoke of the importance of role modeling:

“...people are looking at you, doing something which is good among the community. So people, I wish they must learn from me, in order to do something good among the people, because as we are fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, we need our children to copy from us, from what we are doing. Following our steps, of what we are doing. Rather than doing the bad thing on the road, which is not good. It’s better to do something which is good, so other people copy from you, if you are doing something good” (16 Nov 2015).

### **Energy**

I came back to this topic of the power of the group with Gugu in a one-on-one interview. Gugu is only 18, yet she exudes a strong confidence. Over the past week that Thoko has been in exams, Gugu has stepped up to lead the group in a variety of workouts. She is a big fan of exercises that involve kicking, punching and shouting.

We had met earlier that day to jog together. The weather had turned at the last minute, keeping most people indoors. By 6:45 pm, there were only three of us. Thunder clouds loomed overhead, rain threatening at any second. We began to jog.

“What motivates you to get out there and exercise, especially on a rainy day like today?”

I asked her later in the warm comfort of her house. “The excitement...the passion...the energy...the first time I came, I was like, this could be cool, because they have that energy of working together. It was very powerful”. She went on to describe in detail a specific moment with Thoko where she felt that energy:

“There was this other time where we were doing...we use to run and then shuffle, run shuffle, and then...Lindane was still coach then, and Simpewe was there too. And me and Thoko were like close to each other. So she would run, and I would run right next to her. And we use to shuffle. And both the coaches thought we ate something, like ‘you guys are going crazy today, something is wrong with ya’ll?’ And with that [exercise], the key was to go - actually go - before the person in front of you, like you have to tap them to run. So we saw they are wasting out time, and we will go before them, and we will run, like maybe we did more than what they did. And it felt so good. I was sweating, I was tired, heavy breathing, everything. And I was very happy with that. That is the best memory, that is the very best memory” (13 Nov 2015).

She talks quickly, with great enthusiasm and passion. “I had to push, to get to the limit” she recalls.

As she talks, my mind travels back to that first night with the group, stepping and counting in unison. It takes me further back to the start of a race, being carried along by the movement of the other runners. Energy in movement. Energy fueling motivation.

*Standing in the light rain, moving in step with the group members on either side of me, calling out chants in a language I would not have recognized only a month before, I feel a part of something greater than myself...a part of the group...a part of a “we”.*

## Chapter 8: Coming Together

*“Annnnnndddd time!” Sighs of relief roll over the group as we let down our arms, overcome by sheer exhaustion. As I bend to collect my towel and water bottle, the women form a huddle around Gugu and Futhi, a team meeting of sorts. I make my way to the periphery, unsure at first what is going on. An English word here and there, complemented by the helpful interpretations of Happiness, gave me just enough to follow roughly what was unfolding. One of the group member’s spouse had passed away, Gugu informed us, and it would be nice if the group could organize some donations for the funeral, “whatever you can personally afford”, no pressure. As I watched the looks of concern wash over their faces, I was taken back to the very first night with the group. “Together, together, together,” B had chanted while we walked. “We are a family”.*

The majority of the participants I spoke with had not known anyone in the group before they joined. Some spoke of a neighbor, a church member, an aunt, but most started attending the group alone. Based on my initial observations, I would never have guessed this. The walking at the beginning of the session was always filled chatter, as the members caught up with one another and greeted each other as they arrived. In between (and during) exercises, there was often laughter and joking, the majority of which occurred in Zulu. Luyanda noted how the group made her feel comfortable, welcome, at home (5 Nov 2015). Thandeka echoed a similar sentiment: “I like being associated with people. You get all sorts of people...the environment, the vibe...it’s just on another level” (9 Nov 2015).

In the focus group, the social aspect that the group provided was brought up repeatedly. While many women identified weight as the motivator for initially joining, what kept them coming back every day was each other. “It’s the connections that we have with each other, and the



excitement that we give...the support and everything...” Gugu explained (6 Nov 2015).

Clapping erupted in response to her comment, as various women chimed in to support this point:

“Team building.... team building...thank you!” (various focus group participants, 6, Nov 2015).

What does it take to unite a group? Initially, I was interested in the change in leadership, from Lindane to Thoko, and how that had affected the internal workings of the group.

Ultimately, though, I realized that the details of such a shift were not particularly relevant to the story I was interested in telling. This did not occur to me until the second week of November when Thoko was absent due to her exam schedule. Without an official leader, I began to become aware of the strong leadership *within* the group. Futhi would lead stretches. Gugu would lead exercises, welcoming suggestions and feedback from the group. I thought back to Gugu’s earlier response, about what was working well in the group: “Working together. We are able to help one another, with or without coach. We can do it all by ourselves” (6 Nov 2015).

Aside from leadership, though, there seems to be something about sharing a common experience or goal, of sweating together and pushing each other, which has the power to unite a group of strangers. Scott Jurek comments on the bonds he feels with other ultra-marathoners: “It’s a solitary activity... and yet ultrarunners – even the fiercest competitors – grow to love each other because we all love the same exercise in self-sacrifice and pursuit of transcendence” (2012, p. 119). Reading this, my mind drifts back to Southern Minnesota on a particularly hot, humid day in August of 2013, to my first collegiate race...

*Standing on the starting line in my brand new jersey that was a size too big for me, I felt massively unprepared and out of place. Who was I to be here? In front of me was a sea of Carleton maize and blue, the jerseys of teammates I did not yet know by name. Before I had time to think, the gun sounded and we took off, legs moving by primitive instinct.*

*Over the course of the race, something magical seemed to happen. We began the race as individuals. Individuals united only by our uniform tops. In racing together for the first time, we became something more. We became a team. We became a “we”.*

Fast-forward now two years and spin the globe. I am now in Marloth Park, South Africa, sitting in the cool shade of a grove of trees and watching the occasional giraffe drift majestically by in the valley below. Here, I am first introduced to the story of the green banana, of experiencing another’s “center of the world” (Batchelder, 1993, p. xiv). Over the past three months, I have returned again and again to this story. Nowhere did I *feel* its essence more strongly than in that moment on the Masxha grounds, walking in step with twenty-something other group members. I arrived, at the center of someone else’s world, not through conversation, but through movement. Movement that connects individuals with one another. It was that same feeling that I had felt two years’ earlier on the trails of the cross-country course in Minnesota. Uniting the “I” into the “we”.

## Chapter 9: Spreading the Word

*“One of my neighbors, she used to walk around to my place of where I am staying, used to invite me, say ‘hey, B, you must come and join us. We need some people who can join us. There is a wonderful thing we are doing there, like exercising.’ I would say to her, ‘no, I’m coming, I’ll be there, I’ll follow you’ (B, 16 Nov 2015).*

It took me nearly four weeks in Cato before I realized that the workout group existed. A few of the participants had stumbled upon the group, as I had, but the majority had heard about it by word of mouth, as B described above. Gugu emphasized this welcoming, encouraging atmosphere that the group creates towards newcomers: “You telling the next person ‘You should come join us; it will be fun, I’m sure you won’t regret coming’. If they see us working out, telling them to watch us. ‘If you like it, come join us, it’s not a problem’” (6 Nov 2015).

As participants repeatedly spoke about their desire to draw new members, I thought it might be helpful to design a poster to put up around the community to encourage new people to join. I brought up this idea during the focus group, showing a rough sketch that I had designed as part of an assignment for the course I was taking at the time on health communication strategies. Over the month of November, I worked with various members of the group to re-design the poster, using participatory communication techniques. This original draft was modified and revised to better serve the needs and visions of the group (see Appendix B).

I was first introduced to the idea of participatory communication by Dr. Eliza Govender. “Participation involves *ownership* by the people who benefit from the project,” she explained. By engaging in community dialogue through the focus group and individual interviews, I aimed to engage as many stakeholders as possible. According to Govender, participation is both a means and an end in itself (2015). I came back to this comment at the end of my project, realizing just how true it had proved to be.

While the specific details of the poster remained roughly the same (date, time, and place), the overall design and theme of the poster changed dramatically once I engaged the members of the group. What proved the most difficult was coming up with a group name. As the group did not have an official name when I first joined, I had initially referred to it as the “Cato Workout Group” in the rough draft that I presented the group. It quickly became apparent, however, that the group wanted a name. “The name of the group has to mean *motivating*,” Gugu explained (13 Nov 2015). Over the course of the following weeks, I worked with various group members, as well as Thoko (who was communicating with Lindane), to develop with an official name for the group that they believed would attract new members.

As the current leader, Thoko played a large role in the design of the poster, providing me with a detailed sketch of the way she envisioned the poster (Appendix B, Figure 3). Over the next few days, we went through multiple revisions. The first name that was suggested was: “No Big Girls and No Big Guys”. It quickly became apparent, however, that this name might be misinterpreted by the reader. I suggested that she pretest the name with as many people as possible to make sure the intended message was understood. Ultimately, we revised the name to: “Get Fit or Die Tryin”, followed by the Zulu slogan, “Hee’e na na,” meaning “no no”. According to Thoko, the phrase is a nice way of encourage people to say no to unhealthy things. We then got feedback on this revised version of the poster from various members of the group through a WhatsApp group text, in order to reach as many people as possible (talking in person that week proved futile, due to the weather). I printed 50 color copies of this poster, which I delivered to the group on my last day in Cato Manor.

The process of participatory development, testing, and revising the poster took much longer than I initially anticipated. Ideally, I would have liked to pretest the poster with various

focus groups of people outside the group (the intended audience), but was unable to do so within the limited time I had. I hope that this poster will prove to be helpful to the group and the community as a whole, in spreading the word about the workout group and encouraging more people to participate.

## Chapter 10: Moving Forward

*“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time”*

(Eliot, 1963, n.p.)

I have intentionally chosen not to call this section a “conclusion” as my years of traditional schooling would tell me. Rather, I have chosen to end by offering a reflection on the *process* itself, and how I have made meaning of this process at this point in time in my own life. At the same time, I look forward, both for myself and for the future of the group.

I arrived in Cato an outsider. In an unfamiliar place filled with unfamiliar faces and an unfamiliar language, I turned to a point of familiarity: running. Through my experiences of running in Cato, I arrived at my initial research question: What are the motives for and perceptions of exercise within the community?

I set out to explore this question within the context of a community led workout group, both as an observer and a participant. As I review my transcriptions and interview notes, what I see is a story of change: a change in motives, a change in attitudes, and a change in behavior. While the majority of individuals started exercising to lose weight, what kept them coming back to the group were not just the visible results. Rather, it was the company and the fun social environment that the group provided. Moreover, participants spoke of how exercising with others provided needed motivation as well as social support.

I return again and again to the concept of movement, each time experiencing it in a different way. In the participants’ shifting motives for and perceptions of exercise after joining the group. In moving with the group, of becoming part of something greater than myself. In not moving, and in the process finding out why I so dearly crave that movement and the control that

it brings to my life. And finally, in letting go of that need for control, both in the research process and in the writing of this paper. And so I move forward, with an increased self-awareness and gratitude for all that the movement of running continues to bring me.

Looking back, I realize that I am ending with more questions than I have answered. As Leggo notes, “I do not ask the question in order to answer the question; I ask the question, again and again, only to know the question” (2001, p. 177). I am left to wonder: What do people perceive to be the ideal body type? Has this ideal shifted? If so, what factors have contributed to this shift? How has this shifting ideal influenced motivations for exercise?

Moreover, I wonder about the voices I was not able to include: What are the perceptions of exercise by community members *not* involved in the workout group? By those who chose to work out alone? By those who do not work out at all? And conversely: what *prevents* those people from working out? As Burns notes, “There is more to be learned. There are more voices to be heard (2004, p. 217).

As I look forward, I begin to think about possibilities for future research. In a final conversation with my advisor, I was asked: how might my project pose questions for the advancement of future health promotion at a community level? Due to my methodological approach, my aim was not to generalize my findings outside the context of the study. Future studies, however, could examine this workout group as a health promotion strategy, created by and for the community. The majority of participants had heard about the group by word of mouth and were motivated to keep attending by the company the group provided. What role, then, do social networks play in effecting positive behavior change? How can these networks be better utilized to promote an active, healthy lifestyle within a community?

Over my time in Cato, I heard about the existence of a similar workout group in a neighboring community. What are the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individuals regarding exercise within this group? Within the community as a whole? A future study could explore and possibly compare behavior change within the context of the two workout groups. Such a study could take a social ecological perspective<sup>10</sup>, looking at the interconnected influences on knowledge, attitudes, and practices at various levels, from the immediate social networks, to the community and to society as a whole.

Furthermore, the process of poster development has validated the importance to me of participatory engagement, as both a means and an end in itself. Future studies could monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this poster, and work with community members to re-design or utilize other communication strategies.

Finally, it could be of particular interest to approach a similar research question using an arts-based research method such as body mapping. This method, which was first developed by the 2002 Long Life Project, has since been utilized to explore a range of social, emotional, and psychological issues, allowing participants to document their lived experiences through visual representation (Govender 2015). Body-mapping might very well bring up ideas that did not emerge in focus groups, interviews or observations, while simultaneously enabling participants to explore their perceptions of their bodies in relation to exercise.

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<sup>10</sup> The “social ecological perspective” is a theory of social change communication. This perspective acknowledges that behavior change does not occur in a vacuum; rather, interconnected influences at various levels influence an individual’s decision-making process (Dyll-Mycklebust, 2015).



## Epilogue

*“The thoughts that occur to me while I’m running are like clouds in the sky. Clouds of all different sizes. They come and they go, while the sky remains the same sky as always. The clouds are mere guests in the sky that pass away and vanish, leaving behind the sky. The sky both exists and doesn’t exit. It has substance and at the same time doesn’t. And we merely accept that vast expanse and drink it in”* (Murakami 2009, p. 17).

I pause by the door. I am tempted to bring my headphones, to let the music drown out my thoughts, to be carried by the rhythm of the music, transported to a different time and place. At the last moment, I toss them aside. Today, I *want* to be with my thoughts. Today, I *need* to be with my thoughts.

As I run, my mind drifts over the past few weeks.... Back to the searing pain in my knee followed by regrets and frustration. Back to losing control: in my routine, in my project, in my being. Back to losing my rhythm...to finding my rhythm.

I become aware of a group of three joggers approaching me from a distance. I watch as the woman in the middle begins to slow down, falling behind. The two on either side turn back, uttering words of encouragement.

I have been there. I have been the one who falls behind in a hard 2K workout. I have also been the one ahead, encouraging a teammate to keep going and catch up to me. The words of my cross-country coach echo in my mind. *Take the energy to make two quick steps to run next to, instead of behind, a teammate. Once in stride, you can play off the energy of the person next to you. Alone, that momentum slips away.*

.... Back further now to the nervous butterflies in my stomach the first night I attended the group, very much an outsider. Unfamiliar faces and names becoming familiar. Being swept up, unexpectedly, into a group. Experiencing the answers to the very questions I was asking. Becoming a part another’s center of the world, of something greater than myself.

I am closer now to the group of joggers. I can see the determination on the middle one's face as she consciously decides to catch up rather than giving up. She quickens her pace, and soon she is back in stride with her two companions. Her teammates on either side, keeping her moving forward.

From the end of the pier, I am only half conscious of the bustle of Durban behind me. I breathe in the salty air and close my eyes, the sound of the waves crashing beneath me. A sense of calmness overwhelms my being, slowing down. I begin jogging, slowly at first, my muscles warming up again after a long break. As I gain speed, I become aware of the waves again. This time, I am not a passive observer. This time, I am moving with the waves below me. My stride quickens, falling into their rhythm. Faster, faster, legs moving without my mind telling them what to do. I am being carried, propelled forward, to where exactly I do not know, enveloped by their frothing white energy.

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Bernthal-Jones)

## Appendix A: Interview Guides

*Note that these questions were used primarily as a guide and that I let the conversations evolve naturally, as appropriate.*

### One-on-One Interview Guide

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been attending?
3. On average, how many days a week do you attend?
4. What did you do for exercise before you joined the workout group?
5. How did you hear about the group?
6. Why did you decide to join?
7. What keeps you coming back?
8. Do you enjoy working out?
9. How do you feel after working out?
10. What do you like about working out in a group?
  - a. Do you ever work out alone?
  - b. What do you like about working out alone?
  - c. Do you prefer to work out alone or in a group?
11. Do you attend the group with a friend?
12. Do you encourage other friends to join?
13. What do your friends and family who are not in the group think about your going?
14. After a long day, what motivates you to go exercise rather than relax at home?
15. On days you do not attend, why not?
16. Are there any direct health benefits for you for working out?
17. What changes in your daily routine did you have to make in order to attend?
18. Do you consider yourself to be a self-motivated person? If not, who do you get your motivation from?
19. What are your individual future goals in terms of exercise?
20. Are there any questions you could like to ask me about my experiences with the workout group, or with exercise in general?

### Focus Group Survey

*Surveys were distributed at the start of the focus group*

1. How many months have you been attending the workout group?
2. On average, how many days do you attend per week?

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---
3. How did you hear about the group?
  - a. Recommended by friend
  - b. Poster
  - c. Saw it in passing and stopped by to see what was going on
  - d. Other: Please explain\_\_\_\_\_

### Focus Group Interview Guide

1. Why did you decide to join the workout group?



2. What keeps you coming back?
3. What do you like about working out in a group?
4. Has participating in this workout group changed how you view of exercise?
5. What are the direct health benefits from working out?
6. What do your friends and family who are not in the group think about your going?
7. On days you do not attend, why don't you?
8. Do people come back regularly or do they just come sporadically?
9. In your opinion, what are major barriers to exercise for the Cato Manor community as a whole?
10. What are your goals for the future of the group?
11. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions for attracting new members and keeping people come back?

## Appendix B: Poster Development

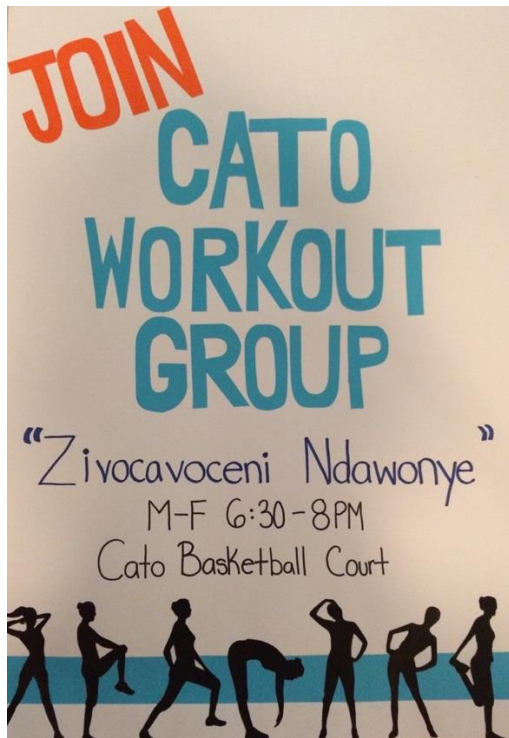


Figure 1. Preliminary draft, as developed by Serena Bernthal-Jones on October 15, 2015



Figure 2. Second draft, revised on November 15, 2015 after speaking with group members

JOIN  
" NO  
BIG GIRLS  
NO  
BIG GUYS"  
Hee'e nana  
WORK OUT GROUP  
MASHIN  
GROUNDS  
MON-FRIDAY  
18:30 - 20:00  
NO JOINING FEE YOU JUST  
BRING YOUR OWN RZ... PER DAY  
BRING YOUR : TOWEL  
: BOTTLE OF WATER  
NO AGE LIMIT  
FOR MORE INFO  
CALL 081-061-7144

Figure 3. Third draft, drawn by Thoko on November 16, 2015

**JOIN**

**“Get Fit or  
Die Tryin”**

Hee'e na na

**WORKOUT GROUP**



**M-F 18:30-20:00**

**Masxha Sport Grounds**

**Bring: 2R + towel + water**

**No Joining Fee, No Age Limit**

**For more info call: 081-061-7144**

Figure 4. Final draft, revised on November 19, 2015

# Appendix C: Local Review Board Approval Form



## Human Subjects Review LRB/IRB ACTION FORM

<p>Name of Student: <u>Serena Bernthal-Jones</u></p> <p>ISP Title: <u>The Power of the We: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Women's Attitudes Towards Exercise in Cats Manor</u></p> <p>Date Submitted: <u>30 October 2015</u></p> <p>Program: <u>SFH Community Health</u></p> <p>Type of review: LRB</p> <p>Exempt <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Expedited <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Full <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Institution: <u>World Learning Inc.</u>                  IRB organization number: <u>IORG0004408</u>                  IRB registration number: <u>IRB00005219</u>                  Expires: <u>9 December 2017</u></p> <p>LRB members (print names):  <u>John McGladdery</u>  <u>Clive Bruzas</u>  <u>Francis O Brien</u></p> <p><b>LRB REVIEW BOARD ACTION:</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved as submitted  <input type="checkbox"/> Approved pending changes  <input type="checkbox"/> Requires full IRB review in Vermont  <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproved</p> <p>LRB Chair Signature: <u>John McGladdery</u>                  Date: <u>30 October 2015</u></p>
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**Form below for IRB Vermont use only:**

**Research requiring full IRB review. ACTION TAKEN:**

approved as submitted  approved pending submission or revisions  disapproved

\_\_\_\_\_  
IRB Chairperson's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D: Sample Consent Form For Adult Respondents in English

# SIT Study Abroad

a program of World Learning



### CONSENT FORM

#### 1. Brief description of the purpose of this study

This study aims to explore attitudes towards exercise in Cato Manor and to look for links between health and exercise. To do so, I will be exploring both group and individual motivations for and perceptions of exercise. In addition, I will be participating in the group workouts, linking my own experiences with that of the group.

#### 2. Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

- a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless you choose otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to you.

I understand that I will not be monetarily compensated for participating in the study. However, additional transportation costs may be reimbursed.

I confirm that the learner has given me the address of the nearest School for International Training Study Abroad Office should I wish to go there for information. (404 Cowey Park, Cowey Rd, Durban).

I know that if I have any questions or complaints about this study that I can contact anonymously, if I wish, the Director/s of the SIT South Africa Community Health Program (Zed McGladdery 0846834982).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name printed

Serena Bernthal-Jones  
Interviewer's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Your signature and date

Serena Bernthal-Jones 22/10/15  
Interviewer's signature and date

I can read English. (If not, but can read Zulu or Afrikaans, please supply). If participant cannot read, the onus is on the researcher to ensure that the quality of consent is nonetheless without reproach.