Researching the relationship between physical activity and motherhood in older Somali women

Georgia Birch
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
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Date: 24/10/2012
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the older Somali women who were gracious and generous enough to allow a white woman from ‘the other side’ to become part of their lives and to accept me as someone they can trust. Also to Fadumo, her husband Hirsi, and her extended family for their continued support. She is one of a kind!
“I think we can work with this”:

Acknowledgements

There have been many people who have come along on this journey with me and I would like to acknowledge their continued support and guidance. I have to start with Maria and her unbridled enthusiasm towards the project even when at times I had none. She has had to put up with my appalling writing skills and spelling her name wrong on the first three drafts of the ethics application; but she remained a steadfast mentor and friend. Maria introduced me to the wonderful writings of Gloria Anzaldua and this thesis is in memory of Anzaldua and her commitment to border crossers around the world. Thank you for putting up with me Maria, but I feel I have forged a new path for you coping with challenging PhD students like me!

To Fadumo, my amazing new friend, who continues to inspire and delight me with her unbelievable talents and her commitment to the Somali community. This project could not have been done without you, your translations and connections and I will be forever thankful for these. I know we will remain steadfast friends and I will always be there for you. Thank you to Louise, a remarkable artist who just kept my motivation going in the art classes even when only two women turned up. Her amazing ability to connect with the women was the reason the art was so successful and her time and commitment were vital to that success. To the women who have participated in the study I thank you for your passion and commitment in seeing that the project was completed and your stories heard. May Allah bless you always – Inshall Allah.

To my wonderful friend and confidant, MaryAnn, who has had to put up with me from the very beginning editing and correcting my work and only ever saying politely to the many chapters she read, ‘I think we can work with this’. Her living only doors from me meant I was on her doorstep in either despair or joy from the ups and downs of draft writing and I thank you so much for your unwavering support on the whole project. She attended everything from my confirmation to the Somali exhibition and has been an integral part of getting me through.

Finally, to the most important people in my life, my husband Greg, and my children Elizabeth and Harry. They have seen the tears, the joys and the frustrations of the entire project. Every time a draft was mailed to me the children would count the number of pages that did not have changes on them and in the beginning they could count them on one hand. When this occurred and I felt like crying into the paper they would point out the wonderful ‘food stains’ like chocolate cake and Indian curry that Maria must have been having when reading it and they would say ‘wow she must really love your work to eat and read it at the same time’. With every draft the number of ‘unmarked’ pages increased and the delight on their faces inspired me to
keep going. To Greg, my soul mate, who has only ever provided encouragement to keep going and get it done despite the financial costs to our family and amidst the turmoil of losing our house and belongings, thank you. We had each other and without that love and support I could not have completed the project. From the holiday we spent at the caravan park on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast in 2008 when I said ‘I think I will do a PhD’ you have been there for me and I promise I will never come up with a suggestion like that again.
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# Glossary

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<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>Culturally and Linguistically Diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEH</td>
<td>Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGCHS</td>
<td>Doutta Galla Community Health Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>Department of Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FECCA</td>
<td>Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USWO</td>
<td>United Somali Women’s Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USWN</td>
<td>United Somali Women’s Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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Abstract

This thesis explores participation in physical activity by a group of older Somali women living in Melbourne, Australia. First, it describes the methodological challenges faced by a white researcher conducting cross-cultural research; second, it explores how participants' experiences of motherhood and physical activity in Somalia and Australia influence their participation in physical activity. This research contributes data to address the scarcity of knowledge and research on physical activity amongst older African and Muslim women.

The theme of crossing borders – physical, cultural and psychological – arises from the research data. To explore this theme, I draw on two powerful frameworks: first, Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) borderlands theoretical framework, which considers how people navigate and live between cultures and in what Homi K. Bhabha calls “the third space” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 209). Anzaldúa (1987) uses the term ‘mestizas’ to refer to women who are in this third space and crossing borders, aware of their interweaving identities within and between two cultures. Secondly, I draw on Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote methodological framework, which explores how researchers work with marginalised communities.

This border zone ethnographic methodology reflects the challenges faced by the participants and the researcher as they negotiate two different worlds – the Somali world and the Australian world. My research and interaction with the Somali women became a journey that required meeting on the borderlands and interweaving our cultures and perspectives. As a coyote researcher, my emotions are revealed as I was first, challenged by the dominant culture’s judgement of where a white woman should be positioned in relation to “the Other”; and second, I experienced a lack of trust in my capabilities and an unsettling of my own identity (Pease, 2010, p. 13). This destabilising and reconstitution of the researcher’s identity adds another dimension to the coyote framework (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005).

Through conversations, observations, journaling, photography and art, this research reveals that most participants were active in Somalia, where physical activity was entwined in daily gender, maternal and cultural roles. In Australia, the women lead a sedentary lifestyle where physical activity is constrained by their perceptions of what exercise means; lack of money, time and a private space to exercise; tiredness and illness; racial abuse and Islamophobia; limited transport and other facilities; and community and dominant cultural perceptions of older Somali women participating in exercise.
Older Somali women are not meeting the National Physical Activity Recommendations for Older Australians (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), and Western concepts of activity are not transferable or relevant to their lives. This research makes recommendations for policy and programming based on an understanding of the women’s culture, religion, economic concerns and gendered familial roles.
Note to the reader

When I use the term ‘white’ within this thesis it reflects my consciousness as a white person within the Western culture that exists in Melbourne, Australia. Whiteness, or belonging to the dominant culture and the privileges and perspectives this brings, may not be recognised by all those who have it; however, it is certainly visible to those who do not. I acknowledge that in Australia whiteness in itself is not homogenous and that there is diversity and difference within whiteness.
My interest in the Somali community was aroused in 2005 when my youngest child started primary school. My son was one of only two white children in his class. At the end of his first day he ran out to me, tired but happy.

Harry: Mum, I made a friend today, that boy over there (pointing to a group of preps)

Georgia/Mum: Which one? That boy with the dark skin?

Harry: NO! The one with the red jumper.

We were talking about the same boy.

This conversation with my five year old made me question my beliefs and values; I realised I had a deep-seated colonial mindset. I had sent my children to this school because of its multiculturalism, yet I had within me a deeply woven psychic pattern of the West that created an illusion that I was contributing to this multiculturalism. In fact, it was my children who showed me that they were the ones living on a border, mixing seamlessly with all cultures, respecting, merging and navigating within this wonderful third space. It was me who was looking out from the centre at how marginalised cultures were positioned in relation to me and how they fitted into Western culture.

Throughout this thesis I refer to myself, others and the mainstream society as white. When I use this term, I am referring to an Anglo-Saxon background, a background that makes me a member of the majority, a privileged group. My previous research on white older women and physical activity had been instigated by seeing my grandmother’s active lifestyle and my own positive experiences around physical activity. She, like me, was white, Anglo-Saxon, middle class, privileged and, perhaps, as Pease (2010) points out, not “aware of [our] privilege” (p. 9). But I questioned if her active lifestyle was easier to achieve because she was white, lived in a dominant culture, spoke perfect English, owned her own home and had access to a car. I began
to wonder how anyone from a culturally and linguistically non-Anglo background managed to be physically active and maintain their health living in a country that primarily catered for the mainstream, Anglo population. It was a sense of social justice that inspired me to make their lives just as important as the lives of my own grandparents. The fitness industry that I was part of is socially structured around being white, acting white and following white health norms around diet and activity messages. By this, I mean that the stereotypical person is thin, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure (Pease, 2010).

During my children’s schooling I volunteered for a Care Connection program run by Doutta Galla Community Health Service (DGCHS) in North Melbourne. I was assigned to help a young Somali woman called Fadumo who was having difficulty 'writing up' the program for evaluation. The program was designed to find Somali families in the surrounding estates who had disabled children and connect them with the appropriate health services in the community. This was a very difficult and sensitive task because disability is often hidden away in the Somali community as families are ashamed or embarrassed that this has happened to them (Mohamud et al., 2009). I began to see the daily struggles Somali families faced within mainstream social structures that are contained by “the normativity of privilege” and the difficulties in getting and maintaining connections (Pease, 2010, p. 13). Fadumo and I became great friends and she was subsequently employed by DGCHS as the community worker for the older and younger Somali women’s mental health groups that were run on a weekly basis from the Flemington Housing Estate.

This is where the actual project began, through a friendship that was formed four years ago and that has allowed me access to the older Somali women’s community. I see my role as describing older Somali women’s lives; however, I acknowledge that this document will still represent my own perspectives of them. It will, however, be informed by their voices, their artwork and their stories.
Chapter 1

“She will survive the crossroads”: introducing the research

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time
(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 99)

Anzaldua’s poem conveys one woman’s struggle in a world where two or more cultures occupy the same land. She has to continually cross psychological and sometimes physical borders; she is the mestiza who has “a dual or multiple personality plagued by psychic restlessness” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 100). This thesis explores the lives of Somali women aged over 65 years living in a housing estate in inner Melbourne, Australia, with a specific focus on their physical activity and motherhood. It aims to illustrate how these women live in the white dominant culture of Australia, yet constantly cross the borders between their traditional Somali culture and the dominant culture, juggling each value system. The image of Hawo on the cover of this thesis provides a simple reflection and a strong symbolic image of the meshing of cultures. The reality behind this image, Hawo’s life and the lives of the other women participants, is more complex and reveals the challenges they face every day.

We never learn these things that you do. I thought you were crazy, I can’t believe why you just do, running on those road machines why?
What are they doing that for, not even running from anything? (Hawo, participant)

1.1 “a compassionate involvement with the world and with others”: outlining the research

This thesis analyses and describes the Somali women’s experiences of motherhood and physical activity and the factors that influence their participation in physical activity. Through all aspects of this research the themes of crossing borders – cultural, psychological and physical – are strong. To reveal and represent the strong border themes, I draw on two powerful theoretical frameworks to understand, describe and analyse the influences on physical activity levels amongst these older Somali women. The first is Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) borderlands framework, discussed further in section 1.6, which considers how people move between cultures, cross
borders and create new “lands” – how they “survive the crossroads” (p. 103). The second is Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) framework of the coyote, which is further discussed in section 1.7. The coyote is a metaphor used for those, such as researchers and community workers, who guide and journey with people across the borders. These frameworks, discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, interweave as my study presents the women’s experiences of physical activity and motherhood and, in doing so, outlines the cross-cultural relationships that evolved throughout the project.

The reader should be aware that I started this journey with a mindset that I would easily measure, analyse and evaluate the influences on physical activity of older Somali women. However, over the course of the four-year journey, the thesis developed into something completely unexpected. I discovered that the context and the understanding of the participants required me to look at things differently, in particular to look at myself. My research and interaction with the Somali women became a journey that required me to meet the women on the borderlands and interweave myself into a new culture. To help me on this journey I followed Livholts’ (2012) process of extending ideas about reflexive writing to promote an “awakening the senses” for the reader and move beyond the limitations of traditional mainstream writing. Being reflexive, whereby researchers critically reflect on their lived experiences in a particular community, can be an asset; a set of resources that can be used to develop relationships rather than hinder them. As Olesen (2005) argues, “she can evoke these resources to guide, gathering, creating and interpreting her own behaviour” (p. 251). In my research I have maintained my reflexivity by keeping a journal. Writing down these reflections helped me clarify my positionings as I travelled between worlds.

Maria has asked me to write down my experiences and how I feel about beginning this research. I have never been a journal writer so for me it is a new process. However as I write about what I see and hear I begin to understand that it clarifies more about who I am and where I sit in relation to the women I am researching. It also reflects my thoughts and frustrations which can be self centred and arrogant but it’s who I am and that’s what I bring to the research and it needs to be acknowledged. (Field notes, 2009)

This thesis consequently developed two main pathways, firstly, an exploration of how cross-cultural research methodology on the borders can be undertaken and, secondly, an analysis of the women’s perspectives and experiences around physical activity levels and motherhood (see Anzaldua, 1987 and Valadez and Elsbree, 2005). I do not want the reader to be bored by the self-reflexivity within the methodology or the fact that there is a long wait for the findings to be presented; but I ask the reader to absorb
the significance of the methodological journey as much as the findings. A lot of my emotions are revealed in the methodology as the journey became as much about the women’s reflections and questions of me and who I was as it was about physical activity and motherhood. This journey has raised new and insightful challenges and questions about cross-cultural research in small ethnic minority groups that could be used for further research.

Older Somali women live on the border of, and between, two cultures, in what Homi Bhabha calls “the third space...a position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 209). Anzaldua (1987) also describes this space as the “mestiza consciousness” which involves perspectives that evolve from these borderland or liminal experiences (p. 99). She injects plurality and fluidity into boundaries and margins, creating the possibility for achieving multiple ways of being within these locations. In this thesis I use borderland theory as a tool to deconstruct the Western dominant discourse, to make visible those who are different or unusual, and to understand the inter-subjectivity they present to the world (Anzaldua, 1990). It is where Anzaldua’s borderland theory is grounded; discovering the unusual, the multiple, the merging identities of border dwellers. These borderland spaces are spaces of activity and energy, of oppression and resistance and they call into question the potential for change and revision. This is further explored in section 1.6.

In this thesis, the women’s conversations that allow glimpses into their lives are collected within the discipline of sociology, specifically Game and Metcalfe’s (1996) “passionate sociology” (p. 5). The desire to know is one of the most powerful passions and it is the desire to learn that motivated me through this research – to learn about the Somali women and further understand my positioning as a researcher but also as a person living in a multicultural city. Game and Metcalfe (1996) describe this passion for learning as “an immersion in life, a compassionate involvement with the world and with others” (p. 5). In this thesis I have used what Pease (2012) describes as “vicarious introspection” in my writing as a white academic which provides accounts of my personal journey and brings the personal into academic writing. Critics like Pease (2012) argue that “by writing in a non-academic voice, there are more possibilities of bridging the cultural and linguistic gap that separates academics in the ivory tower of others” (p. 76). Through this study I immersed myself in what I call the 'Somalilands' of Melbourne. This term was inspired by Anzaldua’s (1987) US-Mexican border metaphor where she describes the border as “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (p. 25). Similarly, older Somali women live in the Flemington Housing Estate amongst people of many cultural backgrounds, surrounded by the white culture, yet merging with it to create a new one. I was motivated “to be
on the edge” to explore their worlds and understand how they developed strategies and spaces to survive (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 5).

This thesis, therefore, uses the post-structuralist concept of the decentred subject and engages with the arguments surrounding the deconstruction of the colonial concepts of sameness, identity and domination. The history of colonialism is the history of the West, which is central to Australian culture and its social and political structures (Rutherford, 1990). This culture claims there is a fixed, pure and homogenous body of values. While all cultures are heterogenous, the history of colonialism in the West claims a notion of sameness. It operates within a binary framework of “subject-object, I-You, self-other, masculine-feminine and those who fall outside this centre, those who are different or unusual, are placed on the margins” (Metcalfe & Game, 2008, p. 188). Marginal groups, however, do not often endorse a fixed centre; rather they indicate a positionality that is best defined in terms of the limitations of their access to power (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Ashcroft et al. (2007) describe this power as a function of its centrality, “such a resistance can become a process of replacing the centre because it is the centre that creates the condition of marginality” (p. 121). In this thesis I will highlight the centre of older Somali women’s lives and show the major influences on their identity and their actions. An example of this centrality is the act of veiling: “it masks the woman in her revolutionary activity...transgressing the familial and colonial boundary” (Fanon, 2008, p. xxiii). It creates a space or a new difference “in defiance of genderless, hegemonic centred standardisation” (Minh-ha, 1990, p. 372).

For myself and Fadumo, my informant, friend and the woman coordinating the group of participants, this centre/margin dichotomy was always evident. Figure 1.1 is a staged photograph of Fadumo and me. We had to take this photograph about 20 times because each time we looked at it I felt it represented Fanon’s (2008) perspective on colonial domination: “there one lies body to body, with one’s blackness or one’s whiteness in full narcissistic cry, each sealed in to his own particularity” (p xxi). Whose hand should be on top? Should they be side by side? The jewellery, the dark skin, what does it all represent? This photographic session reminded me of where we both came from and what we represented. Throughout the study I was conscious of how my colonial whiteness was seeping into the research, and this photo was a visual reminder of my power as a researcher, uncovering the perspectives of the participants but still coming from a position of “whiteness” (Pease, 2010). I realise that I am playing the role of presenting these older Somali women’s experiences and recognise my responsibilities as a researcher which requires analysing results in order to present findings that policy makers can work with. I endeavour to be reflexive about my own positioning but acknowledge that this does not in any way
rid me of my power or privilege. I do not shy away from my own interpretation of myself during this journey nor do I claim that my interpretations are more valid than anyone else’s; it is simply another way of exploring how qualitative research is done.

Figure 1.1 Fadumo and Georgia

1.2 “We must be able to locate them within our own grid”: challenging traditional research

Research into physical activity and exercise has been heavily positioned within the scientific traditions of biology (Macdonald et al., 2002). Positivist research dominated and shaped early research into physical activity, relying on objective descriptions, unit based measurement and experimental analysis to find a single multiple truth and then plan interventions to address that truth (Macdonald, 2002). This research challenges the positivist way of thinking in relation to physical activity and motherhood; it shifts the research rooted in science into a passionate sociological perspective. It questions the deep-seated biases and limitations of Western scientific patriarchal views of the world. It rejects the notion of a reality that is fixed and instead adopts the fluidity, impurity and mobility that occur on the boundaries and margins where older Somali women live (Mahraj, 2011). This research relies heavily on participants sharing their views and experiences from which multiple truths are presented, developed and understood.

Since the classical times, Western philosophical and scientific tradition has been characterised by thinking in binary oppositions (Derrida, 2004). Binary opposition is the most extreme form of possible difference – man/woman, either/or,
black/white. Such oppositions, each of which represents a binary system, are common in the Western cultural construction of reality. The problem with such binary systems is that they “suppress ambiguous or interstitial spaces between the opposed categories so that any overlapping region...becomes impossible” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 18). Any activity that does occur outside this binary framework is subject to repression. The binary system creates a hierarchical structure in which one term of the opposition is dominant and so the opposition itself confirms its own dominance (Ferguson et al., 1992; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010). Ashcroft et al. (2007) argue that this binary system creates fundamental binary impulses to “exploit” and “civilise” (p. 20). It seems that a norm given by the dominant culture is to say “these cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid”, thus reinforcing Western binary logic where the white middle class is the centre and others sit on the margins (Rutherford, 1990, p. 208). It is the intention of this study to deconstruct these binary oppositions which have permeated research into culturally diverse women and physical activity via the Western power structures of science. Deconstructing these binary oppositions is positioned within literature on feminist pedagogy which simultaneously celebrates and disassembles marginal spaces (Lugones, 1992; Mahraj, 2011). I intend to uncover, describe and articulate older Somali women’s issues and experiences of physical activity and motherhood from the perspectives of the study participants, presenting their lives from their standpoint, from their centre. This research is about broadening and developing ongoing debates about diverse ways of promoting health behaviours rather than wanting to find ways of making marginalised groups 'assimilate' their health behaviours in ways that reinforce the dominant health behaviours of the centre.

Throughout this thesis I will refer to Mahraj’s (2011) understanding of marginalisation as “to be marginalised is to be positioned on the edge of value, consideration and justice” (p. 2). Margins must be contextually considered and should consider all people, as everyone is involved in the dynamics of the margin and everyone has something to contribute to improving inclusion. Understanding the complexities of marginalisation involves “placing those who currently are marginalised in the centre” of analysis (Mahraj, 2011, p. 4). To do this, a new reflexive methodology is required that pursues and evaluates the margin’s changing contexts. The older Somali women in this project are uniquely positioned to deconstruct marginalising categories as they mesh and mould within and between two cultures. They are able to socially construct their identity in these spaces and develop “perspectives that evolve from borderland experiences and embrace plurality and fluidity over dualism” (Mahraj, 2011, p. 6). This allows these women to occupy multiple locations at any one time and develop their own positionings on physical activity and exercise. It is from this standpoint that I foreground the lives and stories of older Somali women living in Flemington, Melbourne, in relation to physical activity.
1.3 “Will they even talk to me?”: research aims

This qualitative research focuses on the experiences of Somali women over the age of 65 who have migrated to Melbourne, Australia, and are living in the high-rise flats of the Flemington Housing Estate along with many other ethnic minorities. Participants were recruited through an existing weekly mental health program that provides informal social support for approximately 15 women. “Will they even talk to me?” was my first question to Fadumo who was employed as the group co-ordinator. So the research began with developing a series of creative arts workshops and 'conversations' to gain an understanding of the physical activity levels of these women. I now draw your attention to the aims of the research.

1. To explore how aging, ethnicity and gender affect the physical activity levels of older Somali women in Melbourne, Australia.

For example, how do older Somali women living in the Flemington Housing Estate manage to establish a regular exercise regime that fits in to the National Physical Activity Guidelines (see Appendix 1) when they:

- have very low speaking and literacy skills in English and Somali
- experience a heavy care workload
- experience a mental illness
- may be victims of past torture
- may be victims of past or present domestic violence.

2. To verify the social implications of previous physical activity experiences and motherhood on the adoption of physical activity in later life by Somali women.

I investigate the following questions:

- What are the physical activity experiences that the women have had in their lifetime?
- How has motherhood influenced the physical activities they have been exposed to?
- How has physical activity been integrated into Somali and Australian life?

Considering the role of motherhood acknowledges that people's roles and relationships can affect their health and choices – a woman's biography is always intertwined into the biographies of others (Moen & Chermack, 2005). This is especially evident for mothers, whose lives can revolve around relationships that
can be positively and negatively related to health. As the Somali women explained to me, in Somalia a woman is a mother, she is ‘Hawotako’. The story of Hawotako, discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.5.1, helps explore how the role of motherhood impacts on the women’s everyday lives, their identities and on their levels of physical activity.

Early life experiences and the environment in which people grow up also have an effect on their participation in physical activity in their old age and this is further explored in Chapter 2, section 2.1.5 (Cousins, 1997; Thompson et al., 2009; Witcher et al., 2007.) The research will develop a context for these women, describing their 'centre', the Somalia where they grew up and their experiences of physical activity. In Africa, physical activity started at the basic level. It was a part of everyday life, in play, chores, school and community. Dancing was a physical activity that expressed and reinforced communal values (Nadee, 2010; no author, 2010); it was educational and helped convey the social values and customs of their community (no author, 2010). In comparison, as Renzaho et al. (2011) found in their study of parenting styles in sub-Saharan Africans living in Melbourne, the new lifestyle in a city in Australia was substantially sedentary in comparison to 'back home' due to the use of modern conveniences and modes of transport. What was a long walk to the market two or three times a day became a once a week shop at the supermarket by car. In particular, Renzaho et al. (2011) found the biggest difference in lifestyle was families operating outside in the open spaces in Africa rather than inside a home in Australia. Families felt less safe here due to the insecurity of high-rise accommodation. This research will explore if, how and why the familiarity of the 'centre' was pushed aside when the Somali women arrived in Australia and how older Somali women attempt to create a new space where they develop and merge strategies around physical activity and motherhood.

1.4 “What is this physical activity?”: research objectives

Physical inactivity costs the Australian health system $400 million each year and is the second most important factor in disease prevention (Bauman et al., 2002). While the health and longevity benefits of physical activity for older adults are well established, migrant groups are consistently found to have relatively low physical activity levels and refugees often experience particular difficulties in accessing appropriate physical activity programs (Armstrong et al., 2000; Kriska & Rexroad, 1998; Lee & Brown, 1998; Preventative Health Task Force, 2009).

Apart from my previous research and my grandmother’s exercise history as discussed in the Prologue, my passion for this research also grew from my own positive
experiences of physical activity throughout my life, especially during childhood. However, as I began to talk to the participants I soon realised that their experiences and attitudes towards exercise were completely different to mine. The older Somali women would begin by asking questions such as “What is this physical activity?” and “Why exercise when there is no reason?” These questions highlight our differences in understanding physical activity as well as the need for further contextually-based research. This study aims to better understand the attitudes of the research group towards physical activity by drawing out their perceptions. It also explores the challenges and factors that may prevent older Somali women from participating in physical activity. Although these research objectives were followed through in order to achieve outcomes and recommendations, a major cross-cultural methodological journey occurred. With this backdrop the objectives of the research are:

- To describe what the term ‘physical activity’ represents for older women from Somalia and consider if the National Physical Activity Guidelines are broad enough to incorporate these (Department of Health and Aging, 2010).
- To examine why activity diminishes with advancing age in refugee and immigrant women and what strategies can be implemented to minimise this decline.
- To examine whether the type of physical activity chosen in later years is influenced by factors including exercise history, cultural and social issues (for example, religious beliefs, gender roles, perceptions of leisure, body image), socioeconomic level and previous education.
- To examine the role of motherhood/caregiving in determining exercise participation in older Somali women.
- To discover if social support is important in older refugee and immigrant women’s development of exercise-based strategies for regular participation.
- To investigate how social and cultural contexts affect physical activity participation, exposure, norms and beliefs.

1.5 “What is it you are making?”: research questions

A set of key questions was used as a guide towards a more detailed conversation according to the specific issues raised by the women. These questions were asked during the art based activities which is further explored in Chapter 3, section 3.1.13. This thesis reflects what each woman was prepared to share; some were more forthcoming than others and therefore the questions were adapted accordingly.
The first question I asked, “What is it you are making?”, was used to initiate conversation, to encourage the women to talk of their home, their lives.

1. Can you tell me about the artwork you are making and why have you chosen to make this particular piece? Does it represent something in your life?

The women’s art reflected something in their life from Somalia, their centre, before they arrived in Australia. The embroidery and the ceramics were often of things or places that they remembered from Somalia that were then woven into their life in Australia. The intention was not to produce 'an Anglo art creation' that represented the dominant culture and an assimilation with that culture, as this assumes that being assimilated is legitimate, acceptable and unified (Lugones, 1992). The art activities were anchored on the women’s borders where they could respond and create pieces of work that represented their new space. An example is shown in Figure 1.2 where Hawo has traced her hand and then used embroidery to represent henna on the hands, which is applied at times of celebration. Hawo fondly remembers these times when she was part of the centre...and so the conversations begin.

![Figure 1.2 Hawo's hand](image)

The remaining questions flow from this first question. They encourage a conversation that allows the researcher to understand where these women come from, what their lives were like in Somalia and what their border positionings are today. The conversation that results draws a picture of life and highlights influences and barriers to physical activity, as well as attitudes and perceptions around exercise, health,
motherhood and aging. It reflects the centre in which they place their identity, one that Metcalfe and Game (2008) describe as “a back and forth movement between the self and other, who are in a constant state of never quite meeting and forever moving on” (p. 198). These questions were adapted to suit individual women and the extent to which they wanted to disclose information. This is further explored in Chapter 3, where I discuss the methodology.

These questions have been numbered for the purpose of writing the thesis but they were not necessarily asked in any order; rather they were asked according to the women's cues within the conversations.

2. Can you describe your daily routine in your country of origin?
3. What do you define as physical activity?
4. What types of physical activity do you like participating in? What are the differences between activity done here in Australia in comparison to Somalia?
5. Can you explain how you and your family participated in any physical activities or recreational activities in Somalia? Is this different to what you do in Australia?
6. How has being a mother or caregiver influenced the amount of physical activity you do?
7. Does where you live in Melbourne determine how physically active you are?
8. What would you like to see happen in this area of Flemington to make women from your community become physically active?
9. What barriers prevent you and your family from being physically active?
10. Can you share some examples about what kind of work you performed? Was the work you did based on you being a woman?
11. Can you provide examples of poor health that result from your work/caregiving duties?
12. Can you recall some positive ways that your work/caregiving duties add to your total wellbeing?
13. Can you explain the differences in food and food choices here in Australia compared to Somalia?

1.6 “she holds tight to the earth”: mestizaje as a theoretical framework

Through the women's conversations, this thesis will explore their lives on 'the borders' in their adopted home and aim to reveal their feelings of living on the fringe. It will consider how the women feel as they merge with the dominant culture; whether they remain “in the shadows of others”, the whites.
Anzaldua (1987) calls the women who are crossing borders “mestizas” (p. 99). Mestizas are aware of their conflicting and interweaving identities within two cultures. The mestiza in Anzaldua’s (1987) poem has “thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth” (p. 103). I will explore how older Somali women in this study hold tightly to their earth, their cultural heritage and their personal history, and how they face the crossroads on the border of the ‘Somalilands’.

This thesis presents the ‘tea and talk’ of women on the border – descriptions from the research participants' life journeys and from my journey as a researcher in the Somali community (see also Harris, 2012). It provides the reader with a shared “internalist” sociologist perspective that enables them to “feel” the research and be part of the process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 45). This thesis will also explore the positionalities of a researcher who also needs to cross borders between the dominant culture and the culture and values of the research participants. How does the researcher also become a mestiza, straddling two cultures? How, and to what extent, does the researcher's thinking shift from the analytical reasoning and rationality that dominates Western academic mode to the divergent thinking of Somali culture, which ignores patterns and goals and looks at how things happen in a more holistic way? As a mestiza researcher, I am in neither homeland; I represent those from Somali culture and create a new story to explain their crossing, yet I am rejected by my own homeland for doing so. This is explored further in Chapter 3, section 3.1.6.

Anzaldua (1987) describes the border “where the Third world grates against the first and bleeds” (p. 25). It is not easy to adopt these codes of behaviour, continuously crossing borders while trying to maintain a core centre, trying to still be who they are. All this crossing and interweaving two cultures that older Somali women perform creates a new way of thinking, a “new consciousness” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 99). This thesis will discuss and explore Anzaldua’s (1987) theories of the mestiza; looking at older Somali women’s multiple lives as they sit outside mainstream fixed notions of physical activity and exercise. The Somali women have an insider/outsider positioning that allows them to live on the edge of marginality – the third space – while providing
a perspective to view and assess the social environments of the dominant cultures. Many of the photographs included in this thesis provide evidence of this third culture in the women’s dress, showing that they are blending the Western culture and Somali traditions. This is clearly evident in Hawo’s image on the cover.

To set the context for the reader and apply the mestizaje theoretical framework to where the Somali women in this research live, I will briefly describe the physical world, “the earth” that these Somali women live in and “hold tight to”, and further explore this positioning in Chapter 3, the research methodology (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.103). The City of Moonee Valley has a diverse population that includes affluent residents and the second largest public housing population in Victoria (Moonee Valley City Council (MVCC), 2010). While the Flemington Housing Estate (Figure 1.3) on its own would rank as the fifth most disadvantaged area in Melbourne, because of its locality in a wealthier suburb the ranking moves to the 18th most disadvantaged (MVCC, 2010). The diversity in this municipality can result in the needs of disadvantaged residents being overlooked because the focus is on the postcode rather than on pockets that are substantially disadvantaged. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 compare streets within the municipality of Moonee Valley, one showing the streets of the Flemington Housing Estate and the other picture taken less than 2km away is one of most affluent streets in Melbourne.

*Figures 1.3 Flemington Housing Estate  Figure 1.4 Moonee Ponds*
As mestizas, the women must deal with the physical and environmental borders that exist between the Flemington Housing Estate and the affluence of the surrounding suburbs. Anzaldua (1987) also talks of borders that are not so obvious but are “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (p. 25). These places are constantly changing, the “prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants...the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel...in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (p. 25). The older Somali women live in a new world, on new borderlands, alienated from the dominant culture and from their mother culture. They cross the borderlands adjusting their senses accordingly, unsure of what awaits them on the other side. This thesis explores how these border dwellers face difficulties in carrying out their multiple realities in relation to physical activity and motherhood.

1.7 “guide people across borders”: coyotes as a methodological framework

Valadez and Elsbree (2005) use the coyote as a metaphor for those who navigate and guide people across borders. Coyotes can, in Native American culture, be seen as cunning or foolish or both, tricking or stealing from people (Discenna, 2010). This interpretation is not within the scope of this thesis but a metaphor that could be used in further research. Coyotes are skilled at knowing the code and conduct of both sides of the border, much like the human coyotes who help Mexican immigrants cross the US border illegally. They understand the people they aim to help, are protective of them and are committed to seeing them reach a destination. Coyotes are ultimately border dwellers themselves, moving and weaving between two cultures, living in the margin and the centre and on the borders in between. They often face difficulties in carrying out their multiple realities. The coyote framework is similar to the Ottawa Charter which is considered the “bedrock of health promotion” in the Western world (Keleher & Murphy, 2004, p. 139). It encourages advocating, mediating and enabling, rather than dictating, ruling and blaming. Like the coyote, the Ottawa Charter advocates health determinant conditions and represents equality in health for all. It aims to reduce the differences in health status, and provides information and guides people to achieve their full health potential. Like the coyote, the Charter mediates between interest groups in society for the pursuit of health.

I will use the coyote framework to guide the reader through Chapter 3, the research methodology, as it develops new ways and new knowledge about accessing marginalised groups. The reader will have the opportunity to understand how my informant Fadumo and I moved within the third space and developed strategies of survival, negotiation and guidance. These evolving strategies raise significant questions around accessing hidden groups and individuals and developing new
methodologies for research. In an interview conducted with Anzaldua she suggested the need for looking at the other: “don’t just look at what’s on the outward surface, but really look inside, where you hear the other, really hear what they’re saying beyond spoken words” (Lara, 2005, p. 44). As a researcher and coyote in this study, the long-term fieldwork of over two years moved me to see things from a much broader perspective, listening with what Lugones (2005) describes as a “raw openness” and acknowledging an “unmapped common ground” between myself and the participants (p. 250).

1.8 “taking tea”: an overview of the research methods

I chose to use a qualitative research approach to explore the physical activity experiences of older Somali women. I wanted to, as accurately as possible, represent the women’s views and I believe that qualitative methods such as observation, talking and spending time in the field are effective in revealing others’ perspectives. A variety of ethnographic methods were used in the research, including participant observation, field notes, small informal group discussions and cultural performance ethnography, to provide an understanding of the participants’ cultural practices and experiences and a context for their experiences of physical activity and motherhood. I used an environment that was familiar and comfortable for the participants as a primary venue for interaction. This was a place where they live, meet and talk over the ritual of “taking tea”; an environment where they feel safe and free to talk. Further detail about each method is provided in Chapter 3.

Participants for this project were recruited through an existing mental health program for women who are experiencing, or are at risk of developing, mental health issues. Some of the participants were also recruited through an active recruitment drive by Fadumo, and through contacts with the women themselves. The mental health program is run by Doutta Galla Community Health Service (DGCHS) at Holland Court, Flemington, Melbourne and Fadumo is employed as the co-ordinator of the group. It is an informal social group for older Somali women who live on the estate and provides a forum for transferring health information and supporting one another in day to day living.

Here I would like to highlight that there were issues that were not raised in this study that I had recognised and that the reader might consider absent. These included the women’s sexuality and issues associated with female genital mutilation (FGM). These issues were beyond the scope of this thesis and their absence will be further explored in Chapter 6, section 6.5.
1.8.1 “all these yarns, they make me who I am”: presenting the women's views from their standpoint

I chose to use standpoint theory, which is further explored in Chapter 3, section 3.4.1, to give the women an opportunity to talk about their lives and experiences. Standpoint research is a post-modern method of theoretical positioning taken up by feminist scholars to address the “absence of women from or marginalised women in research accounts” and to construct a knowledge base from the insights of women’s experiences (Olesen, 2005, p. 243). Individuals and groups within a culture experience the culture differently. Consequently, standpoint theory holds that the social groups that people belong to will shape the way they view the world and the way they communicate, and the researcher’s role is to see the world from those views. Data collection through talking and conversations enables research participants to express views from their standpoint. Conventional research draws conclusions based on the results of its statistical data, which is mechanical in its process. It is the creativity of standpoint theory that develops from the researcher’s ability to recognise patterns and similarities in ‘talk’ produced by participants that provides us with rich human understandings. It gives us insight into other people’s lives and enables the participants to talk about their lives and work with the researcher in the telling of their lives rather than be “pushed to the other side” (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 70; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The thesis describes and articulates issues and values around physical activity from the perspectives of the participants. Ultimately all their ‘tea and talk’ is sacred. It was my intention to treat all the conversations of the Somali women as reflections of their past and present and their hopes for the future; “all these yarns, they make me who I am, they tell me how I got here, where I came from and what’s next” (Edwards, 2010, p. 13). While providing this avenue for women to reveal themselves, I am aware of the possible hierarchical relationships that may be implied. I understand that my giving voice to a group also reflects my social position and power as a researcher to filter information and adapt the voice to represent the “wisdom of the West” (Narayan, 1997, p. 131). My role has been to encourage conversations and to understand and represent the difficulties older Somali women face as border dwellers and the multiple roles they adopt to survive. Fawcett and Hearn (2004) argue that “by listening to the voices of women and others oppressed and made ‘other’, and taking full account of their experiences in their struggles against oppression, the ‘truth’ or at least a form of truth, can be revealed and action taken” (p. 207).
1.8.2 “develop trust”: an essential component

I have interwoven various qualitative methods into this research, one being ethnography. The main focus of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the point of view of the people within that culture; it “is the work of describing a culture” (Spradley, 1979, p. 3). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) emphasise the importance of prolonged immersion in the field, with the ethnographer embarking on a cultural learning curve. The researcher must take time to learn about people by listening, understanding and immersing oneself in their daily lives. Limited culturally relevant research is available on older women within ethnic minority groups (Lindstrom & Sundquist, 2001; Small et al., 1999; Torres, 1999; Wray, 2003). Guerin and Guerin (2007) and Guerin et al. (2003, 2004) researched the Somali community in New Zealand and Norway and argue that finding out about the community and how it operates is critical to any successful research project. By participating in community activities and communal gatherings throughout the project, I had an opportunity to develop trust, relationships and friendships that provide the basis for good qualitative research and basic human relations.

1.8.3 “white people taking notes often means trouble”: interviews and observation

Fadumo was the primary source of translating and interpreting conversations I had with the older Somali women. Information was collected through semi-formal interviews in small groups during the art workshops and through participant observation and field notes (see section 1.8.4). These notes were often taken after fieldwork was completed as many women were uncomfortable with me taking notes in what was a normal day for them. Ardo’s words reveal the uneasiness of research: “white people taking notes often means trouble”. It was therefore necessary to create pathways that allowed those voices to be heard in a place that represented the women’s centre, where they felt comfortable. Towards the end of the data collection, in-depth interviews were held with key informants to aid in the analysis of the project. Interviews can yield greater breadth of information and provide validity and rigour. Field notes allow qualitative researchers to study people in their everyday settings, attempting to make sense and interpret the things people do and say. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) support the relevance and need of these methods to ensure basic ethical care and commitment to research.

1.8.4 “opening up conversations”: art workshops

All art has a health benefit; an ability to develop wellbeing and mental and spiritual health (Eakin, 2003). Eakin (2003) found best practice in the use of arts in those health initiatives that encouraged and supported people to improve their health
and that used artists who unlocked, interpreted and played back local people’s feelings about themselves and their health, along with creating lasting pieces of work. In this study, the art became a facilitation tool for opening up conversations about the experiences of the participants and representing their centre, their being and what their life was like prior to migration.

Thus, the art workshops were used as a communicative tool for participants (see also Springgay et al., 2005). Arts provided the participants with an activity to work on together, an opportunity to create something that was central to them all, and an environment and time for me to establish rapport and relationships with the women. Figure 1.5 represents a mix of Western and Somali objects sitting together, showing how we came together, creating new ways of inquiry, a new “mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 102). It was a time where women could express their border positionings and the strategies they used in living within and on the borders of the mainstream centre.

![Figure 1.5 Working together during the embroidery art sessions, listening, sharing and understanding each other’s stories](image)

During the art workshops some of the participants allowed me to take photographs of their hands and feet. Most of the participants could not be photographed as the Islamic religion does not allow photographs or images unless for essential paperwork, such as a passport. Some of the participants did approve of the photography, such as Nero in Figure 1.6, while others were strictly religious and forbade all photography. As a result, throughout the thesis some names will not have an accompanying photograph. Some of the names accompanying the pictures or the
text are pseudonyms, while others are the women’s actual names. I requested that all the names be changed for confidentiality but some of the women insisted that I use their real name because the Islamic religion values honesty in the images they portray.

![Figure 1.6 Nero and her hands](image)

The photographs provide an interactive visual perspective of living in the borderlands, allowing the reader to see the women as mestizas.

### 1.9 The structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 has provided an outline of the research. It has highlighted how the study originated, providing a broad rationale for undertaking this research, and introducing methodological and theoretical frameworks. This chapter has also stated the aims and objectives of the study while introducing some of the issues affecting newly arrived immigrant communities. It has aimed to provide the reader with an overall understanding of the context of the research, the context of the lives of the participants and the positionality of the researcher.

In Chapter 2 I will further discuss and critique the literature that informs this research from within the centre, the white dominant culture, and from the margins and borderlands where older Somali women merge their lives with the dominant culture. Chapter 2, section 2.1 will provide an overview of how physical activity is
traditionally researched and discuss any limitations associated with traditional approaches and frameworks. It also provides an insight into research that is centred on those in the margins, with a focus on the impacts of culture, immigration and religion.

Chapter 3 will present further detail regarding the methodology, research design and processes used in this project. It will examine the methodologies used through the framework of the coyote.

Chapter 4 will present the individual participants and their stories, connecting the research to real people. Only some of the participants are presented as many did not want to be identifiable for fear of being recognised within their community.

Chapter 5 will present the findings of the study. This chapter will highlight the key barriers to physical activity and how issues such as stress, fatigue, the impact of religion and the complex nature of Somali culture combine to provide limited time for physical activity.

Chapter 6 will provide a summary and recommendations, reiterating the major findings from the research and making recommendations for policy makers and program developers working in fields relating to health and physical activity.
Chapter 2

“Straddling cultures”: a critical review of the literature

“cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems”
(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 100)

Figure 2.1. Allawia and the runners: the meshing of cultures

The photo of Allawia (Figure 2.1) highlights the major themes of this research, the straddling and merging of cultures and its significance in relation to participation in physical activity. The image of Allawia’s dress and the Western style walking shoes tells of meshing cultures and straddling the border to create a new culture. The image also recognises that while the border dwellers sometimes travel to the centre, their shoes can always be removed at the end of the day and their ‘Somaliness’ can return while they rest on the margins. This chapter, the literature review, focuses on physical activity and how it is perceived and practised by older Somali women. It also draws on research and literature about physical activity in other cultures where it is relevant or insightful in regard to Somali women.
The literature review critically discusses research that:

- considers physical activity as perceived and practised in the Western centre, which reflects the individualistic realities of how exercise operates within the dominant culture
- highlights different perceptions and definitions of physical activity, revealing how physical activity for people living ‘in the margins’ or ‘on the borders’ of one or more cultures is often misunderstood by those ‘in the centre’ and raises multiple and opposing questions
- explores the physical activity experiences of immigrants in their homeland and in settling in a new country
- considers the role of culture, family, motherhood and religion in shaping perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in relation to physical activity.

In presenting the literature, this chapter uses the borderlands and mestizaje theories as a framework. As discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.1, Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework examines people who live between, within and on the border of one or more cultures: “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems” and how they establish strategies of survival (p. 100). In relation to my topic of physical activity, the first step in survival is ‘the mestiza way’ where a new way of negotiating and navigating physical activity creates a ‘third space’ which has been deconstructed and then constructed to create a new way of doing and seeing activity. This chapter and my subsequent research will highlight the limitations of the existing research literature positioned mainly within and around Western scientific thinking. Much of the research reviewed on physical activity is positioned within a binary framework where the dominant culture has fragmented activity into separate entities of intensity, frequency and duration of exercise. If a person does not perform an activity under these conditions, then they are not being ‘physically active’. It is therefore important to understand how intensity, frequency and duration of exercise are discussed and defined within limiting, hegemonic binary discourses that have permeated much of the research. It is my intention to challenge this and suggest a new position from which we view physical activity and exercise.

This literature review is presented in three sections:

1. **Section 2.1 “the only way to describe reality”:** physical activity from the centre explores current literature relevant to participation in physical activity as it relates to the dominant culture. This literature is placed within a “dominant Eurocentric paradigm of modernity” and reveals the knowledge and practices developed around physical activity (Hernandez-Wolfe, 2011, p. 294). It considers how knowledge and subjectivity around physical activity are intertwined in the colonial
structure of research and how dismantling non-Western identities and creating sameness or assimilation is a part of this mindset.

2. Section 2.2 “being tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture”: physical activity from the margins reviews literature that uncovers older Somali women’s identities in the context of their history and experiences of migration to Australia. They are able to dismantle the physical activity classifications within the dominant culture and negotiate a new understanding of how physical activity is incorporated in their lives.

3. Section 2.3 “border dwellers”: navigating new positionings and negotiating new possibilities highlights the need for a new border space, a new mestiza consciousness research that recognises and acknowledges a new reality and looks “beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest” (Keating, 2005, p. 248). It examines the literature around how those who live on the borderlands negotiate and navigate their physical activity and motherhood experiences within a dominant discourse. It highlights the need to address the limitations of past research and to extend future research to better understand and represent many peoples, many cultures.

2.1 “the only way to describe reality”: physical activity from the centre

During an interview, Anzaldua described traditional science as having “such a grip on us it’s become the only way to describe reality...every other way has been trivialised” (Smuckler, 2000, p. 18). It is in this paradigm that physical activity is often described and explained, representing the dominant culture, the centre. In the Western world, health is viewed as something to be ‘achieved’, as having universal properties that are equally adopted by all (Macdonald et al., 2002). Views of health are based on a centrality of a certain type of thinking, a Western, scientific patriarchal view of individualistic gain. This positivist scientific world employs the traditions of biology and statistical correlations to create ‘hard core’ data on the science of human behaviour (Macdonald et al., 2002). Consequently, the hegemonic practices of a Western culture of health and the way in which the centre defines it render others invisible.

2.1.1 “under the conditions of colonialism”: definitions of physical activity and leisure

It is colonialism that “at present is more concerned with the transforming of local cultures and the minds of exploited people” (Pease, 2010, p. 52). Colonialism and the coloniser adopt the view that European civilisations like Australia have superior
qualities associated with race and, more specifically, with white culture compared with non-Western cultures (Pease, 2010). Pease (2010) argues that studies which endeavour to address the marginalised are often done so under the conditions of colonialism and racism. This implies that scientific Western paradigms reflect a monocultural format that disregards the histories, experiences and values of other cultures. It is within this Eurocentric paradigm that physical activity is defined and developed. The World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines state that physical activity is “all movements in everyday life, including work, recreation, exercise and sporting activities” (WHO, 1997, p. 2). This definition illustrates a significant shift away from the culture of biomedicine to broader socio-political and economic issues; however, it is still surrounded by Western notions of absence of illness, health as an adaptation or maximising one’s health potential (Anderson & Reimer Kirkham, 1999). The centre views physical activity as measured, frequent and of a specific duration in order for it to fit within the scientific paradigm of ‘good exercise’. This literature from the colonial centre reveals differences, inadequacies and confusion surrounding understanding of physical activity and leisure and suggests an urgent need to establish a universal, standardised approach in measuring and monitoring physical activity participation, especially among those groups in the margins who are more likely to be inactive, such as women, older adults, ethnic cohorts and people experiencing social disadvantage (Bauman et al., 2002). This study focuses on a particular group that is likely to be inactive and has been positioned in the margins by Western colonial perceptions and practices of physical activity. It is my intention to critique this universal standardised approach and to better understand older Somali women in Australia and their perceptions of physical activity and its role in their lives. This shifts the gaze from the coloniser to the colonised marginal group and considers how they negotiate and navigate the borders.

Many studies have paid relatively little attention to what actually constitutes physical activity and exercise for various non-dominant groups. Dishman et al. (1995) and Bauman et al. (2002) agree that studies have specific limitations because of the inadequacy of measurement of physical activity and confusion about definitions of ‘exercise’ and ‘physical activity’. The term ‘physical activity’ seems to encompass a broader range of activities than the term ‘exercise’ (Tortolero et al., 1999). Concepts about exercise and physical activity appear to be culturally specific and not easily identifiable. Consequently, many surveys show that minority women, such as ethnic cultures and migrant groups, are less active than women from the dominant culture; however, assessment instruments may need to be tailored to account for activities most commonly performed by women, such as everyday errands and housework (Eyler et al., 2002; Kriska & Rexroad, 1998). Brown et al., (1999) argue there is a genuine need to include yard work and housework in physical activity measurements; in their
study, most of the 81 Anglo-Saxon participants aged over 60 believed this was adequate exercise to sustain health. Many of Brown et al.’s (1999) participants asked why questions around basic household duties needed to be asked: “what are these things you talk about?” (p. 57). Exercise appeared to be a natural part of their daily activities. Eyler et al. (1998) had similar results with their older ethnic participants not identifying themselves as ‘exercisers’, indicating that they got enough physical activity from caregiving, housework and everyday activities.

Many older people perceive physical activity and exercise as something that is not related to their age group and is often vigorous and difficult to perform. Koo and Rowling’s (2006) study of older Chinese Australians found that the term ‘physical activity’ was associated with the body moving in daily living, such as housework and caregiving chores. However, the participants did not perceive this activity as beneficial to health; they believed ‘exercise’ that is more effective in producing health results requires a great deal of effort. Brown et al.’s (1999) study participants believed that older people could not manage vigorous exercise and there was a great deal of confusion around what constitutes activity and the amount and type that is adequate. Similarly, Booth, Bauman and Owen (2002) revealed that the 402 randomly selected Australian adults aged 65 years and older in their study understood ‘exercise’ only to be vigorous, high intensity activity and therefore beyond their capabilities. Lees et al.’s (2005) study with 66 participants, mostly women from across all cultures aged 65 years and over, found that they had feelings of discomfort, such as sweating, breathlessness and feeling faint, which they associated with ‘exercise’. Schutzer and Graves' (2004) literature review found many older adults correlate exercise with negativity, excessive sweating, muscle soreness and unladylike behaviour. It seems the perceptions, meanings and levels of intensity of physical activity are connected with Western mainstream media, culture and research and therefore a stereotype around physical activity is constructed. This is significant because it shows how marginal groups may adopt the definitions of the centre and then consider themselves inadequate or unable to meet these standards. Consequently, they feel further pushed out towards the margins as they fail to meet these expectations.

Given the above discussions regarding researchers’ measurements of physical activity and research participants’ understandings of physical activity, it appears that physical activity can be categorised in a variety of ways and some categories are considered more significant and central in defining physical activity. The literature suggests an alternative research approach that may be pertinent to marginal groups, which is to segment physical activity on the basis of the identifiable portions associated with daily life, which is a non-colonising way of connecting physical activity and everyday duties (Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985). This approach requires
monitoring how much physical activity is performed during housework and yard duties. Leisure time physical activity can be sub-divided into categories such as sports, conditioning exercises, household tasks (for example, yard work, cleaning and home repairs) and other activities (Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985). This study will explore older Somali women's understandings and perceptions of physical activity within the context of their lives and consider ways of applying non-colonising approaches to researching physical activity.

2.1.2 “a serious public health issue”: physical inactivity and the burden of disease

Epidemiological research undertaken in Western cultures and supported by Western governments consistently reports that physical inactivity is one of the key health issues of the 21st century (Moynihan & Cassels, 2005). In Australia, physical inactivity is second only to smoking in the nation’s burden of disease. The outcomes of physical inactivity account for an estimated $400 million in direct health care costs each year, with indirect costs including time off work and social costs doubling this amount (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2008; Bauman et al., 2002). Bauman et al. (2002) argue that physical activity should be classified as “a serious public health issue” because most of Australia’s 8,000 deaths per year due to physical inactivity are avoidable (p. 29). Sallis (2009) states that exercise is a form of medicine that is a “much needed vaccine to prevent chronic illness and premature death” (p. 3). Church and Blair (2009) reveal that the top seven chronic illnesses, which include coronary heart disease, cancer, diabetes, lung disease and mental disorders, cost over $1.3 billion annually and this is expected to rise dramatically along with the increase in age of the population. They suggest that a sedentary elderly person with multiple chronic diseases is likely to get great benefit from even a small increase in physical activity. One of the main findings of Brown, Burton and Heesch’s (2007) Australian longitudinal study over a 10-year period with older women found that if sedentary older women did as little as 75 minutes per week of physical activity, there would be lifestyle benefits physically, mentally and socially. All these studies view physical activity under a biomedical framework which is epidemiologically valuable but ignores culture and gender roles.

Most studies measure physical activity within a binary ‘either/or’ framework of either being ‘an exerciser’ using measurements of frequency, intensity and duration or a ‘non-exerciser’ if you fall outside these measurements. In contrast, Anzaldua, in an interview, describes health as being a more holistic mind/body/spirit connection and about “living with disease, with dysfunction, with wounds, and working towards wholeness” (Lara, 2005, p. 51). Much of the literature on physical inactivity and the burden of disease from the position of the centre seems to support the assumption
that success in health depends only on individual effort and that those who do not succeed at being physically active only have themselves to blame. It reflects notions of individualism, choice and agency; the language of neo-liberalism which describes how the perceptions and values of wealthy countries increase their power over the perceptions and values of the rest of the world. As Keating (2005b) argues “this highly personalised self-enclosed individualism” prevents us from recognising the interconnectedness with others (p. 249).

The Victorian Government recognises the enormous health and cost implications of physical inactivity in the population and the limitations of a neo-liberal approach. It has begun to adopt a social determinants of health approach that recognises that older migrants face negotiations in their new lifestyle that may prevent them from pursuing healthy behaviours (State Government of Victoria, 2010). The complexity of older immigrants’ circumstances often causes them to underuse, and to be overlooked by, health and aged care services. As a result, a vision statement has been released to accommodate all aging Victorians: “An age friendly society inclusive of all ages, abilities and backgrounds where older Victorians play active and valued roles, age with dignity, maintain independence and have their rights respected and upheld” (State Government of Victoria 2010, p. 16). This attempts to move beyond placing migrants in fragmented categories and begins to understand the flexibility required by governments in providing services that can respond to migrants navigating and negotiating the Western dominant health model.

The Victorian State Government’s guide to coordinate whole-of-government planning and investment for an aging population acknowledges that building the capacity of older people to manage their lives will “minimise the economic, social, health and welfare costs associated with an aging population” (State Government of Victoria, 2010, p. 11). One of the three key priority outcomes in this guide is the development of good health and wellbeing. It is intended that “health promotion strategies that encourage healthy lifestyles will help address the increasing prevalence of chronic disease, one of our greatest health challenges” (State Government of Victoria, 2010, p. 5). In an attempt to address these issues, the Victorian Government is using a life course approach, which recognises that people experience important life transitions and influences at different times throughout their life. Bulatao and Anderson (2004) agree, arguing that late life differences develop from events at earlier ages; however they also call for further research to improve our understanding of racial and ethnic differences. This study aims to look beyond the binary, individualistic frameworks of physical activity of purely measuring how much, how often and for how long, to explore the border positionings of the older Somali community and how the women negotiate this site of ‘in-between-ness’.
2.1.3 “under the scrutiny of medicine”: the central role of health professionals

The role of health professionals, especially the family physician, has been identified as central in exercise participation for older adults. Cousins’ (1995) review revealed that the endorsement of a physician was a paramount concern to older adults considering starting an exercise program. She also argues that, on the other hand, the ‘see your physician’ prescription might prevent older people from getting started; if becoming more physically active depends on seeing their local doctor then many older people may not go through with this as they feel stress and anxiety about what they should and should not do. Wray (2007) found in her study of midlife women that all took up exercise because their medical doctor had advised them that this would improve their health. Wray (2007) examines the possibility of having one’s lifestyle “come under the scrutiny of medicine” (p. 135). To ignore this advice would assume that a woman had not tried hard enough to make herself better, yet to follow it can make women cautious and apprehensive about how much and what type of exercise to do. Wray (2007) finds this paradoxical; health promotion interventions are actually having a negative effect on health and wellbeing by provoking feelings of anxiety, guilt and fear. Schutzer and Graves (2004), however, suggested that the elderly who receive exercise advice from their physician are more likely to exercise than those who do not. King (2001) agrees that the physician’s advice on physical activity is very important; however, physicians may not have the confidence or time to dispense such advice. This study will examine how physical activity and health may be recognised but not necessarily understood within a biomedical framework by older Somali women. It will also explore the potential for culturally appropriate exercise to promote physical activity habits.

2.1.4 “accompanied by further gains”: a central view and value of aging

In recent years, several studies have shown that older people who have a more positive view on aging (PVA) maintain better physical and functional health than those with a more negative view (Levy et al., 2002; Wurm et al., 2010). Wurm et al.’s (2010) study examined the contribution of a PVA to higher levels of physical activity participation in later life. In their study, PVA “refers to the view that aging is accompanied by further gains” (p. 27). People who have a PVA have a positive feeling about their personal future and believe that there are still plenty of ‘life years’ ahead to set goals and achieve plans, such as caring for grandchildren or spouses or learning new skills. Having these goals can, in turn, make it worthwhile pursuing and engaging in physical activity. Wurm et al.’s study (2010), however, did not address older people from culturally diverse backgrounds; rather, the participants were from higher socioeconomic groups, they had partners and they rated their health as ‘better’.
Those participants who were followed up as part of the study, had significantly higher
levels of optimism, a greater PVA and higher sporting activity levels. This outcome is
not unexpected; these people in the centre, from the dominant groups with money,
support and access, would be expected to demonstrate high levels of participation in
physical activity (Brown et al., 1999; Cousins, 1993, 1995; Hillsdon et al., 2008; Litwin &
Shiovitz-ezra, 2006; Vertinsky, 1991). Also, Wurm et al.’s study did not test the
possibility that for some cultural groups a PVA may not contribute to an increase in
physical activity. PVA is culturally bound and in Western societies this often means
hyper-individualism and the pursuit of individual success within the neo-liberal
framework of the centre. This study with older Somali women examines how PVA can
be culturally bound and may not be reflective of Western culture’s ideology on aging.

2.1.5 “keeping ourselves busy”: early life experiences

The literature suggests that it is important to develop a better understanding of
older adults’ physical activity experiences by examining their roles over a life course.
Witcher et al. (2007) examined rural older adults’ perceptions of leisure time physical
activity (LTPA) from an historical perspective, finding that participants engaged in LTPA
only after all necessary work tasks had been completed. As children, these
participants only engaged in activity or sports once all their school work had been
completed. Time in LTPA was not considered to be time well spent. Being raised in an
environment that was not supportive of physical activity devalued such activities and
now, as older adults, participating in physical activity was not part of their aging
experience (Witcher et al., 2007). Participants expressed the desire to keep busy,
integrating productive activities into their daily lives rather than specific physical
activity. Thompson et al. (2009) agree, suggesting that family-focused activities that
are also productive, such as walking children to school, walking to the shops or walking
the dog, are low cost, simple activities that families can incorporate into their daily
lives without falling into the category of structured activities. Keeping busy with family
and friends in familiar activities may also be a way of remaining connected to the
community and including incidental physical activity. These activities, however, reflect
the white dominant culture and the privileges it entails. It may be easier for white
Australians to do these activities for various reasons, for example language and literacy
skills (at the shops) or perceived safety (walking the streets), and these incidental
exercises may not be part of the Somali culture. It is a reflection of following and
reinforcing what the dominant culture finds acceptable as physical activity and
exercise. This study will explore the extent to which older Somali women equate
“keeping ourselves busy” with adequate amounts of activity.
Past physical activity experiences and associated lack of enjoyment can also influence older people’s participation in physical activity, as discussed further in Chapter 5, section 5.6.1. Cohen-Mansfield, Marx and Guralnik’s (2003) study of 324 community-dwelling, married, white adults aged 74–85 found that lack of experience and enjoyment with exercise in their early life remained a barrier to physical activity as people aged. Hirvensalo and Lintunen (2011) agree, finding in their extensive literature review of life course perspectives for physical activity that early physical activity seems to be the most important determinant of activity, along with gender, in old age. Cousins (1997) argues that mastery experiences in physical skill affect physical activity involvement six decades on, as shown in the study of women aged 70–98 living independently. Older women judged their efficiency for exercise based on their perceived health, chronological age and previous skills. Redeker and Musanti (2002) looked at lifespan physical activity experiences as a predictor of activities a person will partake later in life and found that women who believe themselves to be capable of participating in activities and have this schema to draw upon in their life will carry this belief into old age. Perceived self-efficiency or confidence in one’s ability to exercise is an important motivator for older women to participate in physical activity; again, the evidence seems to be limited to white, educated women and ignores the socioeconomic and socio-cultural privileges that come with this.

The available literature also appears to conclude that exercise in the early years is often central to participation in later life. Lee and Brown (1998) highlight the importance of developing exercise programs with awareness of the physical skills participants have gained in their early years. Skills in bike riding for example would only be accepted by groups of women who have had relevant early life experiences; for women who have not developed these skills, the experience would be overwhelming and inappropriate. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities may not come from a sporty culture and this may influence their participation in sport in Australia (Centre of Culture and Ethnicity and Health, 2006). Dishman et al. (1995) revealed that people who maintain exercise programs in later life are generally self-motivated, have had childhood involvement with sport, and modelling and support by their mother. Supporting this is the study by Hillsdon et al. (2008) of more than 4,000 British women aged 60–79 randomly selected from general practitioners across 23 towns. Hillsdon et al. (2008) concluded that older women whose parents were less encouraging to be active and who were not active themselves were less likely to participate in physical activity in later life. Encouragement to explore and develop vigorous motor skills early in life has a powerful and lasting effect into old age. Cousins’ (1995) study of 327 community-dwelling women aged 70 and over revealed that childhood encouragement in physical activities, opportunities to be active and enjoyment of physical education all contributed to activity in later life.
Hirvensalo, Lintunen and Rantanen (2000) also argue that participation in competitive sports earlier in life was a powerful predictor of maintaining a high physical activity level in old age. From these experiences, participants believed that they were still capable of succeeding at physical activity and fitness regimes.

As acknowledged in earlier sections of the literature review, many of the participants in these studies were white and middle class and therefore would have been exposed to physical activity within the definitional framework that operates in Western cultures. It is also possible that the systems and structures of Western schools and weekend sporting programs were not available to some refugees, migrants and members of lower socioeconomic groups when they were growing up. They have been part of physical activity as a measured parameter of exercise and sport under the intensity, frequency and duration model rather than acknowledging the subjective, cultural and economic perceptions and values of people around physical activity. While these studies produced encouraging results, the participants lacked diversity in ethnicity and nationality and the studies failed to address issues around migration experience, socioeconomics and gender role expectations. It is my intention to broaden this spectrum of research to include an ethnic minority, namely, Somali women. Maintaining a focus on the merging or ‘straddling’ of cultures, this research also intends to consider how participation in physical activities that previously existed in one country may be applicable to an Australian way of life. Such exploration is needed if culturally appropriate services are to be developed.

2.1.6 “beyond its scientific parameters”: exploring the influence of social support

There has been an attempt by researchers to understand physical activity beyond its scientific parameters and explore the significance and relevance of social connections in enhancing activity levels. Both Cousins (1993) and Vertinsky (1991) indicate that supportive social networks have a positive impact on the maintenance of an active lifestyle in older women. Although these studies are more than 15 years old, they are still significant in gaining an insight into how social networks influence physical activity. A physical activity session can provide social support and companionship, which may exceed the physiological benefits in terms of adding life to years (Cousins, 1993; Vertinsky, 1991). Again, however, participants from culturally diverse backgrounds were sparse in the research (Brown et al., 1999; Chiang et al., 2008; Kirkby et al., 1999; Litwin & Shiovitz-ezra, 2006; Wray, 2007). The literature does suggest, however, that people from collective cultures, such as the Somali culture, also benefit from gathering socially. Coming together to talk, sing and tell stories can be a source of social support and guidance and an opportunity to practise traditions (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). It also provides people with an
opportunity to be involved in what Anzaldua describes as “shapeshifting” or transforming themselves into another form of being (Caputi, 2005, p. 186). Coming together to talk and sing may provide older Somali women with an opportunity and the strength to connect and shape their identity, and survive on the borderlands.

Older adults who are physically active are also more likely to be socially connected (Litwin, 2003). McAuley et al.’s (2000) randomised control trial of the effect of physical activity modes on social relations and wellbeing of white adults aged 65 years and older concluded that social relations were integral to the exercise environment regardless of the type of activity. There was an increase in happiness and social wellbeing and a decrease in feelings of loneliness and isolation. Conn’s (1998) qualitative interviews of older white women revealed that being physically active was associated with a good social life, feelings of happiness, and enjoyment in life and in helping others. Again, while the studies are moving towards a better understanding of being physically active, the study participants have mostly been white and middle class. The meaning of social support can differ among participants; some define it as caring for others, while others regard it as more of a kinship. All the above studies agreed, however, that exercising with others and being able to share experiences and interests was an important reason for continuing to exercise (Martin & McCann, 2005).

Physical activity interventions that are delivered in the context of social clubs or groups may be a good way of getting older women started on a regular exercise program. Tang et al. (2011) found in their study of older women from ethnic backgrounds that social engagement through senior centres provides avenues of participation in physical, mental and social activities and older women benefited from sustained engagement in senior centre activities. Social aspects are highly valued by disadvantaged participants and contribute to the sustainability of an exercise program (Davies et al., 2008). This may be true for migrant groups that have been established in Australia over many decades, however newly arrived populations, like Somalis, may not have the financial resources to establish culturally specific senior centres.

This thesis further explores how social support for older Somali women is intertwined with their physical activity levels. The literature also recognises that not all older people want to exercise in group settings. Wilson and Spink’s (2009) study of 102 retired single women with an average age of 74 years, recruited from churches, senior housing complexes and fitness groups, found that women who preferred being active with others reported being influenced by modelling and compliance from friends more than those individuals who prefer to be active alone. In contrast, King (2001) found that many older middle class adults prefer physical activities undertaken outside a formal class or group setting as it frees them from the demands of having to
attend a structured class. Overall, there was reluctance in this older age group to attend community settings or gyms. Again there is a lack of studies using older women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, with most focusing on white, educated women. This study will explore if and how older Somali women use their supportive systems to enhance their health, their wellbeing and their physical activity levels.

2.1.7 “the potential for devaluation of exercise needs”: the limitations of research from the centre

In the previous sections, discussions of the available literature and research into healthy physical activity that has been undertaken from the position of the coloniser or centre has illustrated that formidable challenges remain in achieving social equity in opportunities for healthy physical activity for a socially diverse society. Vertinsky (1998) suggests that involvement in healthy exercise is closely intertwined with the social, economic and health status of women. Participating in physical activity is “dependent on financial status, class structured by gender, ethnicity and race” (p. 85). She criticises scholars studying exercise and aging for the lack of listening and responsiveness to elderly women whose late life patterns reflect their life course pathways. “The deeper issues of stereotyping and powerlessness should be of central concern to those designing exercise promotion strategies, especially health professionals whose stereotypes about female aging add another dimension to sexism that increases the potential for devaluation of exercise needs” (Vertinsky, 1998, p. 93).

Many of the studies examined in this literature review do not specify participants’ cultural background or nationality. There appears to be an assumption by researchers who work with only white Anglo-Saxon women that white experiences are generalisable to all. The focus on white women in these studies may be due to difficulties with recruitment, finding interpreters, gaining access or establishing links with gatekeepers. This needs to be explored further. None of the researchers acknowledged that privileges accrue to those living in powerful, developed, affluent countries and that their positioning provides them with automatic advantages (Pease, 2010). As highlighted earlier, Pease (2010) suggested that marginalised groups are often studied under colonial or dominant guidelines that ignore the histories and experiences of other cultures. Hodge et al. (2007) is also critical of scholars in physical education and exercise, arguing that researchers are obliged to consider all perspectives and reflect racial and ethnic identities when identifying, describing and representing participants and their lived experiences. In their review of data-based studies in physical education, Hodge et al. found that many researchers were unfamiliar with and ignored sensitive topics, especially in culturally diverse groups, persons of colour, all of whom are often neglected, misrepresented or marginalised.
They found in most cases that more attention needed to be given to socioeconomic status, geographical location and individuals’ social positioning. It appears that scholarly research that uses Anglo-Saxon samples that fall into the normative group leads to a very narrow database that result in biased conclusions.

This section considered research and literature from the position of the colonial centre. The next section of this review will focus on the available literature relating to the experiences of ethnic minorities living in a country where their culture is not the dominant culture – it moves the exploration of literature on physical activity across the borders from the centre into the margins.

2.2 “tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture”: physical activity from the margins

The review of the literature helps us to understand the perspectives of people living in the margins, to understand what is important in their lives, what influences their behaviours and the strategies they use to survive on the border, to be creative, to have agency and show resistance. Physical activity is developed within cultural and gender roles and blended with successful aging concepts. Traditional, centred activities, such as religion, are meshed with the dominant culture to create a new way of adopting, understanding and participating in physical activity. It is this unique border dwelling lifestyle that this study attempts to identify and understand.

This section argues that a person’s ethnic background can influence their past and current participation in physical activity. In particular, it explores how older Somali women and other ethnic minorities, positioning themselves and positioned by others in the margins, understand and experience physical activity. In doing this, it represents their 'centre' by exploring their perceptions, their roles, the influences of physical activity on their lives and their choices. Ethnicity can significantly affect a person's standard of living, their achievements in life, and their life as a whole (Spiers & Walker, 2009). Older Somali women can be described as “tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 103); their identity is tied to cultural images and activities, their religion and to certain foods and modes of dress and behaviour (McMichael, 2002). This study explores how they connect with each other and with their homeland, while at the same time adapting to and negotiating a new culture, which Anzaldua (1987) portrays as “kneading” or “blending” the old and new (p. 103).
2.2.1 “exercise that was considered appropriate or ‘proper’”: physical activity as perceived by older Somali women

Most older ethnic women recognise the usefulness of exercise and often express a strong desire to participate; however, they have difficulty initiating this (Sodergren et al., 2008). In their study of older immigrant women in Sweden, Sodergren et al. (2008) found that the cultures of countries including Chile, Iraq and Turkey regarded older women who exercise as morally loose, raising the need to find exercise that was considered appropriate or ‘proper’. These attitudes are, however, in stark contrast to Western attitudes towards physical activity which organise people’s experiences from within hegemonic practices and lay the blame for marginalised groups’ lack of participation on their culture (Anderson & Reimer Kirkham, 1999). This is reflective of the cultural deficit model where low income students’ lack of education success is rooted in their cultures and communities (Kirk & Goon, 1975). Similarly, physical activity researchers, in their attempts to measure physical activity, blame the individual for their own institutional oppression and for their own victimisation by referring to negative assumptions around their culture. It represents part of the ‘self as multiple’, being self-oppressed in the Western world and yet also feeling self-oppressed within and by traditional Somali ways through attitudes and opinions from other people within their own culture (Anzaldua, 1987). Anderson and Reimer Kirkham (1999) explored this in their study as a major barrier to starting an exercise program. In this study, I explore how older Somali women would be identified within their community if they were to participate in formal exercise, as many communities link exercising with mental illness (Anderson & Reimer Kirkham, 1999). Again, from their centre, I explore Somali women’s vision of participation in physical activity. Kriska and Rexroad (1998) support the need for an explanation of exercise and appropriate gender roles with their findings of older Hispanic women, revealing that cultural issues such as ‘exercise appropriateness’ influence their participation. If the community in which older ethnic women live does not offer appropriate culturally-based exercise classes that are sensitive to older women’s needs then it is unlikely women will participate (Burns et al., 2000; Sriskantharajah & Kai, 2007). This study attempts to understand what kinds of exercise are considered appropriate and what resources are needed to achieve a greater participation rate among older Somali women.

2.2.2 “bringing existing cultural values into a new society”: cultural shaping and physical activity

Schwartz (2006) defines culture as “the rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values prevalent among people in a society” (p. 138).
Within each culture, values represent shared concepts about what is good and desirable and help shape ideals and standards. Being immersed in one culture defines and shapes individual and group beliefs and daily behavioural principles. These values and ideals create cohesion amongst members of a culture; behaviours that are incompatible are subject to criticism and pressure is applied to change (Schwartz, 2006). As an individual member of one's culture, Lugones (1990) describes this as positioning oneself as a “self-conscious critical practitioner of her culture and a self-conscious and critical member of the racial state” (p. 47). It is these cultural values and beliefs that shape our understanding of being physically active, the value placed upon it, our body image, our gender roles and the time available for activity. By exploring Somali culture, this study aims to develop an understanding of how older Somali women think about activity and, therefore, provide insights into how to promote physical activity.

The experience of migrants also indicates how bringing existing cultural values into a new society can create barriers to physical activity. The available literature shows that people from ethnic minorities, people born in non-English speaking countries and older people exhibit lower levels of physical activity (Cortis et al., 2007). As discussed in section 2.1.5, this may be due to their very different early life experiences, where physical activity was often interwoven within daily cultural life, such as farming, dance and traditional customs. One piece of research that explores this, which was not identifiable by author name, described how in pre-colonial East Africa the boys and girls learnt about farming and weather patterns and social cohesion through song lyrics. Dance accompanied almost all the activities, was educational and helped convey the social values and customs of their community (no author, 2010). Exercise was promoted for general fitness and developing specific skills; for girls this was playing games that prepared them for womanhood (no author, 2010). A game like ‘the lazy one’, similar to ‘chasey’, had the aim of not getting caught or tagged by other children (no author, 2010). At the end of this game the final chaser was branded ‘the lazy one’ because he/she had not made enough effort to catch another child. The ‘lazy one’ term was an overt indication that society did not approve of laziness and encouraged young people to be active. Migrants bring these early life experiences of physical and social activity and their life values to Australia where they merge them with their new life.

Research shows that physical activity rates decline with age, especially for those people born in non-English speaking countries. People aged 65–75 years born in North Africa and the Middle East have the lowest participation rates; fewer than one in five women from this region participated in any form of physical activity compared with three in five Australian-born women (ABS, 2006). Those women who are not
proficient in English had a participation rate of 35% in comparison to 49.8% for those who were proficient (ABS, 2006; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009). Those people who made the migration journey during old age have particular issues associated with leaving their homeland, facing resettlement, problems in a foreign society and the prospect of dying in a foreign land. Consequently, it is difficult for this older age group to be flexible and motivated to adjust to a new language and environment (Dawson et al., 2005; Dyck & Dossa, 2007; Lewis, 2009). This study explores the factors that act as barriers to adopting new activities and new ways of being physically active for older Somali women.

2.2.3 “aging successfully”: concepts across cultures

Notions of wellbeing and successful aging are not universal and goals fluctuate and take on different meanings across cultures and ethnicities (Wray, 2003; 2007). There are significant cultural differences in the meanings older women attach to self-fulfilment and successful aging. Wray’s (2003) study of older women across a variety of ethnicities revealed that Western concepts of freedom and opportunity were not the dominant issues; rather lifestyle, household composition and gender relations played major roles in defining their experiences in later life. For these participants, aging successfully was more likely to be linked to spiritual fulfilment and a sense of belonging within a group of the same ethnicity. Being in good health was linked to relationships with others, religious beliefs, and being able to get out and about. Wray (2003) makes the point that for these participants, women’s bodies “represented their access to ‘being’ in the world” (p. 525). They were able to keep their centrality within themselves and also mould their behaviour to negotiate Western parameters. Moriarty and Butt (2004) also discovered through their survey of 203 white British, Asian, black Caribbean, black African and Chinese older adults that the majority of participants emphasised the positive benefits that their relationships with family and friends brought to their lives. People from these ethnic minority groups saw aging as a positive step in their lives and one they looked forward to rather than dreaded.

As this section 2.2 demonstrates, culture and tradition can form an important condition and context for the possibility of exercising in older adults from ethnic minority groups. Kolt, Paterson and Cheung (2006) examined physical activity in older Tongan adults and found that family and the cultural environment were significant barriers to physical activity. The role of physical activity was centred on traditional ways of living, recreation and household chores, most of which were considered basic necessities for daily living. As discussed in section 2.1.5, physical activity needs to be discussed within the framework of everyday living and traditional Somali culture. In this study there was a strong theme around lack of education about the benefits of
exercise and the researchers concluded that health messages should be grounded in a more specific cultural context. Clark (1995) also found that lack of education explained race differences in physical activity. He argued that less educated persons may be less confident in their ability to carry out exercise behaviour and be less inclined to be aware of the benefits of a particular health behaviour. Sulaiman et al. (2007) acknowledged the importance of tradition and knowledge in Turkish and Arabic Australians in their study of diabetes education. Here, traditions and context for the possibility of exercising provided a ‘frame’ within which exercise could be taken up. Current opportunities for exercise lay outside this cultural frame even when all participants had a good knowledge of exercise and could identify the relationship between diabetes, exercise and stress relief. Consequently, based on the analysis of the available research literature, it appears that little is known about the ways to mould and intertwine physical activity and diverse cultural frameworks.

The literature identifies that central to many older women's lives is the opportunity to rest and be looked after by family members in their old age (Lewis, 2009; Perrino et al., 2011). Perrino et al. (2011) examined the role of support of older adults by other family members and found that too much instrumental support, that is assistance with chores and shopping, reduces the likelihood of walking among depressed older adults. Well-intentioned efforts by family members to help older women by completing daily tasks for them may inadvertently eliminate their need or motivation to walk and be physically active. This study explores this aspect of instrumental support in Somali culture and considers the extent to which it is a cultural rite of passage and that all elders are given time and respect by other family members. This literature review explores these values further in Chapter 2, section 2.2.5

It appears from the literature that cultural roles, particularly for women, formed constraints as they were not expected to set time aside for themselves and were supposed to be focused on housework and family commitments. Batnitzky (2008) extends this argument, finding that older Moroccan women’s lifestyles are congruent with the cultural norm which rewards increasing age with a more sedentary lifestyle. It could be argued that participants find it difficult to act on their exercise knowledge or lack of it because of broader social and cultural factors and yet they are shaped by such factors; these contexts may have to be addressed in interventions aimed at ethnic sub-groups. Both Wray (2003) and Moriarty and Butt (2004) accept that aging successfully for immigrant women depends on factors centred around maintaining mobility, language skills, caregiving duties, experiences associated with racism and/or harassment, and their relationships with family and friends. Racism was heavily intertwined into everyday life and Bell (2003) further argued in her study on interviews with “People of Color and Whites” that there were “widely divergent views
of reality” (p. 22). Given the examined literature, this study aims to understand how the older Somali woman “perceives, understands, grasps her world as multiple sensuously, passionately as well as rationally” without having to operate under a dual personality and how this is connected to her physical activity (Lugones, 1994, p. 465). It explores how she moulds and interweaves her roles to create a new way of thinking, feeling and doing physical activity within the margins and on the borders.

2.2.4 “motherhood and family are central”: physical activity and gender roles

As discussed in Chapter 1, motherhood and family are central to the identity of older Somali women and have a major influence on their participation in physical activity. Women of all ages form their health and physical activity choices in relation to the needs of other family members, including spouses, children and aging and infirm relatives (Moen & Chermack, 2005). These ‘choices’, however, are often framed within and contingent upon the values and belief system of colonialism and this study explores how they affect physical activity participation (Pease, 2010).

The literature states that family responsibilities for women, such as caring for family members, take priority over participation in physical activity and leisure time activity. For example, Lee and Brown’s (1998) Australian study of 200 older women from countries such as Poland, Greece and Macedonia found that housework was considered a top priority and Macedonian women in particular found home and family pressures were a barrier to exercise participation. Women often feel they have more domestic duties than men which leaves them with little time to exercise (Eyler et al., 1998). Hunt et al. (2008) found in their study of Indigenous Australians that physical activity is positively supported within the context of family and community, but negatively associated with the promotion of individual physical health. Women were unlikely to participate in activities that only involved themselves. In Hunt’s (2008) study, family engagement in physical activity was a strong motivator for physical activity as were group-based activities. Juarbe et al. (2002) also develop this argument in their qualitative study of aging Latina women, finding that multiple role responsibilities gave the women little or no time for social interaction outside the home. In Sriskantharajah and Kai’s (2007) study of older South Asian women, exercising beyond daily work was seen as a ‘selfish’ activity and there was limited spare time when set against family and other obligations. Also, for newly arrived communities, physical activity is often seen as a low priority, with concerns for housing, education, employment and learning English requiring a great deal of time and effort (CEH, 2006). Taking time to focus on oneself, removing oneself from family obligations, is often not acceptable in ethnic minority sub-groups (Kriska & Rexroad, 1998). These studies reveal that for many women, their priorities are directed at
improving their roles in the context of family, which is considered more important than individualistic gain (Siraj, 2012). This reflects their collectivist culture and what is central to their lives and suggests the need to move physical activity opportunities away from Western constructions of individual activity pursuits and towards CALD constructions of family and community activities.

Few studies have considered that physical activity may not be central to the lives of women who are highly committed to work within and outside the home. Sternfeld et al. (1999) found in their study of physical activity patterns in diverse women that recreational physical activity may not be perceived as a value for those who are already “on their feet all day long” (p. 321). Those women with the highest level of household caregiving activities were more likely to be older and perceive themselves as having little time for exercise. Kriska (2000) continues this argument that women from lower socioeconomic groups use occupational activity as a significant contribution to their total energy expenditure. In addition, housework and family care appear to take a substantial portion of total energy expenditure in an average day, especially for ethnic minority women. Traditional roles are particularly hard for older women to challenge and overcome. Perez et al. (2009) found that older Hispanic women’s physical activity opportunities were limited due to caregiving demands and that physical activity was an unacceptable behaviour for women of their age. For many older women in that study, physical activity was described as being “out of role” with normative behaviours for Hispanic women, particularly because it took them away from domestic duties (p. 683). Woodward, Green and Hebron (1989) also acknowledge that participation in leisure away from the household was influenced heavily by dominant ideologies about a woman’s ‘place’, which formed contexts around negotiations with partners, appropriate physical activities, venues, cost and timing, transportation and personal safety.

Conversely, the traditional role of caregiver and the centre of the family can motivate and provide opportunities for physical activity for ethnic women. One of the emerging themes in the Perez et al. (2009) study was that family members were viewed as facilitating physical activity through encouragement and acknowledgment of their efforts of shared health amongst the family. In a sense, family interaction provided a structure for activity, with many women joining their grandchildren and children for activities. They concluded that the roles of caregiver were seen as motivating factors in taking care of their health and that keeping healthy was something positive they could do for their families. This, again, is an example of Anzaldúa’s (1987) blending and navigating border dwelling behaviour, where women incorporate physical activity into their many roles.
As with caregiving, mothering and domestic work, women’s leisure time physical activity is also heavily influenced by their perceived gender and social roles. Redeker and Musanti (2002) used selected research studies to explore the construct of physical activity and acknowledge that women, especially those of advanced age and members of ethnic minority groups, are at particular risk for physical inactivity. They concluded that women adopt behaviours that are consistent with their perceptions of themselves and their social and cultural roles. Women were more likely to describe housework as physical activity and less likely to engage in leisure time physical activity than men, and women’s leisure was described as being much less viable than men’s, often taking place in sedentary activities. All of the concepts of exercise were incompatible with the participants’ view of themselves as an ‘exerciser’ and therefore they were unlikely to engage in it. Hankonen et al. (2010) and Wilcox et al. (2000) agree, speculating that social roles set practical demands, such as caregiving and housework, which constrain women’s exercise participation. In their study of men’s and women’s psychosocial processes and the different roles in predicting exercise behaviour, they found that women receive far less support from spouses and family because spending time on non-family related activities may have a greater effect on the daily routine of the family. As stated in section 2.1.1, the literature tries to apply ethnocentric values and Western concepts of physical activity as generalisable to all cultures. It does this by defining what constitutes ‘leisure’ and how significant and possible ‘leisure’ time is for women in the margins.

Women’s Health Victoria (2009) identified women’s social roles in CALD communities around food and food preparation while the men are often doing physically active roles in the outdoors. These cultural roles and responsibilities contribute to ethnic women’s lack of opportunity to be physically active. Redeker and Musanti (2002) recommend using a lifestyle physical activity model, one that focuses on self-selection of activities in short or longer bouts and considers the contributions of multiple roles and responsibilities which may be relevant to ethnic aging women. It appears that it is not an individual choice to be inactive; but that choice is influenced by their social and gender roles within their cultures, along with colonial framing ideas about physical activity and leisure activity. This means not only challenging the notion that Western knowledge around physical activity is the only legitimate knowledge but also challenging the knowledge in non-Western cultures as well. This study attempts to understand how older Somali women experience such boundaries, or borders, in relation to their multiple roles as women, and consequently adopt border dwelling behaviours as they explore and identify their physical activity levels. This will be further discussed in 2.3.2.
2.2.5 “intertwined into the biographies of others”: physical activity and family relationships

As outlined in 2.2.4, one of the major aims of this research was to examine the impact of motherhood on participation in physical activity later in life. Considering the role of motherhood acknowledges that people's roles and relationships can affect their health and choices – a woman's biography is always intertwined into the biographies of others (Moen & Chermack, 2005). This is especially evident for mothers, whose lives can revolve around relationships that can be positively and negatively related to health.

Being a mother in different cultures can influence the types of physical activity women are exposed to. Cousins (1995) examined family size as a predictor of physical activity participation and found that women who had raised more children were more likely to be physically active in their older years. Some reasons put forward for this were, firstly, that having a large family required a lot of physical work which may help establish activity as a habit. Secondly, through their children, mothers learn about the benefits of play and physical exercise and consider the risks of being involved to be minimal. Thirdly, having more children may mean those women are genetically more robust and have a sense of self-efficiency to manage a large family. Scanlon-Mogel and Roberto (2004) explored this issue in their in-depth interviews with nine men and six women over 65 years of age. They concluded that family relationships, especially motherhood, positively influenced participation in physical exercise. Women’s responsibilities and busy lives in the parenting years gave them the confidence to draw on these experiences in later life. These studies consider that raising children could increase exposure to diverse opportunities and encourage leisure time pursuits. They do not, however, discuss how being a mother in a different country, in a different culture, with very different experiences with their children, impacts on physical activity later in life. This study will examine how their gender roles in Australia affect the amount of physical activity older Somali women do post-migration.

In light of the reviewed literature regarding motherhood and physical activity, this thesis will explore how older Somali women perceive the importance of the role of mother in the context of their lives. It also considers the issue of older Somali women taking time out to do things for themselves, like being physically active, and what this would mean in relation to their family relationships and their duty as a woman. Both Caperchione et al. (2011) and Cromwell and Berg (2006) agree that older ethnic women who take time out for themselves away from their family to do physical activity would send a message to others that they were neglecting the role of mother.
Expected mother roles within a culture often determine the amount of physical activity a mother should do and whether this is appropriate within the family context of relationships within which her biography is intertwined.

Commitment to family is central to many older ethnic women's lives in the margins; however the dominant culture can view this as exploitation. The dominant culture may see women struggling for autonomy when in fact for the ethnic woman it is their centre, their inner self that is reinforced in this role and relationships within their family. The dominant culture reinforces its superiority by claiming that ‘West is best’ and that women can now be released from their ‘devalued differences’ (Pease, 2010). Melillo et al. (2001) extend this argument in their study of older Latino adults who felt that a lifetime of mothering and caring for others deserved an old age that included rest and letting other people serve them. Many older ethnic women who are mothers were raised to take care of family members; little time and value was placed on physical activity and many cultures do not view it as a necessity in life. As Hirvensalo and Lintunen (2011) found, the attitudes of older people toward physical activity may sometimes be undermined by the prevailing perception that older people are passive members of society who need a rest. Their discussion paper on life course perspectives for physical activity argued that long working hours and other responsibilities may have prevented women from participating in physical activity and now these women prefer to rest and be looked after by other family members. This study attempts to understand how the role of motherhood influences the physical activity participation of older Somali women within their family frameworks and relationships.

2.2.6 “an integral part of everyday”: physical activity experiences of women in the margins

As was presented in section 2.2.4, for many women throughout the world, physical activity is an integral part of every day; however it is not structured, it is incidental. Burns et al. (2000) studied newly arrived women from the Horn of Africa and found that when they lived in Somalia both physical activity and social interaction were integrated incidentally into everyday life. Examples included daily walking for essential items such as purchasing food from markets, getting water from wells, and receiving medical treatment. All of these activities were done with family members, friends and relatives. After settling in Australia, many reported a dramatic decrease in physical activity because of increased use of public transport, change to weekly shopping, an increase in labour-saving devices and a less communal way of life. Many found the pace of life very stressful and had fewer opportunities to socialise outside the home. Boyle and Ali (2009) found that Somalis within and outside Somalia have
tended to become more socially conservative in response to civil war, droughts and famine. The trauma associated with the civil war and life in refugee camps places a strain on relationships. Physical activity was a necessity of daily survival but migration has created more urgent needs of adjusting to a new environment. In addition, specific difficulties with meeting women’s basic daily needs because of conditions in the margins, such as low socioeconomic status, residing in areas with poor transport services, having limited mobility because of children and other domestic duties and, if they are employed, limited flexibility with working hours, all contribute to a lack of exposure to physical activity experiences.

This study explores the type of physical activity older Somali women do in later years in Australia and whether this is influenced by exercise history. As has been discussed, the literature acknowledges that early physical activity is a strong predictor of participation in later life; however it fails to acknowledge whether these skills and experiences are transferable after migration. It also lacks cultural and gender sensitivity as older women adjust to new roles and adapt to a new reality, the way they see themselves in a dominant culture. This study recognises that these women live in more than one culture and that the beliefs and realities of each culture sometimes align and sometimes clash, and they need to construct a new borderland of multiple beliefs and realities.

2.2.7 “the quality of the social ties matters more than the activity itself”: social support and physical activity

As well as the physical world in which we live, the social environment also influences access to and participation in physical activity. Langellier (2010) acknowledges that genealogy functions as a dominant force to Somalis’ ethnic identity and communal culture. The clan system is a very complex and highly structured system that is difficult to understand and it is not within the scope of this thesis to expand on this. However, it affects who you are, who you socialise with, who you marry, how many children you have and how much freedom you have as a female within a family structure. Cousins (1995) argues that the socialising characteristics of physical activity and sport may be among the key reasons for older women’s participation. Litwin and Shiovitz-ezra (2006) expand on this, arguing that the quality of the social ties matters more than the activity itself, “well-being in later life is less a result of what older people do, but rather of who with and how they feel about them” (p. 237). Their study of the formal and informal activities of older Jewish retirees found that the social relationship quality was an influential variable in the association between activity and wellbeing.
The different types and levels of support derived through social ties are sources of social capital. ‘Social capital’ refers to the web of interactions with friends and relations within a community and relationships with outside structural and economic forces (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). The concept of social capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), considers the resources that strong communities offer to individual members, including extending favours to others, looking out for one another and providing extra help for those who need it (Portes, 1998, p. 4). More recent studies have emphasised the importance of social capital in promoting individual and community wellbeing for people in the margins (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Cattell’s (2001) qualitative study of two housing estates in East London concluded that social capital buffers the harsh effects of poverty, but the concept is not extensive enough to explain all the effects poverty has on health and wellbeing. In the researcher’s comparison of two housing estates, the estate that had individuals with better self-rated health had greater social capital both individually and as a community. Understanding the community context was a vital component in understanding where and how this social capital worked. Neighbourhood factors, such as the area’s history, the resources available and the opportunities to be involved in activities, all played a role in developing trust and rapport within a community. Exchanging information, establishing behaviours of giving and receiving, creating safe and crime-free ethical standards and encouraging a less transient population contributed to a neighbourhood conducive to better health and wellbeing (Cattell, 2001). In Cattell’s (2001) study the worst health was found on the other estate where there was very little social capital for individuals to tap into. It also held a reputation in the area of being dangerous and unwelcoming, which in turn influences the creation of social networks and social capital. It contributes to isolating the individuals from each other within the estate, restricts the flow of information and stops that development of trust and local cooperative culture. Cattell (2001) argues that “social capital – essentially an individual and neighborhood resource produced when people co-operate – is a helpful construct for identifying conditions which contribute to the quality of life” (p. 1514). It goes a long way in understanding the relationship between poverty, place of residence and health and wellbeing. However, Cattell (2001) emphasises that her evidence of successful social capital in housing estates can “ameliorate the harsher health effects of poverty and deprivation; they are, nevertheless, no substitute for a more equitable distribution of resources” (p. 1513). This study with older Somali women investigates the benefits of social capital in a large housing estate in Melbourne and how border dwellers like older Somali women use certain strategies to survive and sometimes thrive in the margins.

The literature indicates that newcomers’ perceptions of social support depended on past experiences in their homeland. Stewart et al.’s (2010) study of Somalis in Canada found that participants relied on social networks of family members,
friends and neighbours for support. They believed that people should help each other and they should be thankful to God when they received support. McMichael and Manderson (2004) agree, stating “women’s memory of Somalia involved nostalgic recollections of their homeland configured as a place where dominant norms and values provided an environment of trust and social support that suffused everyday life and social relations” (p. 91). Since arriving in Melbourne, these community characteristics were being eroded, much to the disappointment of the women. Many Somalis experience marginalisation. They are dependent on welfare, have limited employment opportunities and live throughout Melbourne’s suburbs, which restricts their ability to socialise. Somali women feel trapped in their homes with few transport options and no reason to leave; they are lonely and isolated with little opportunity to socialise (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Stewart et al., 2010). In contrast, Somalia was described in physical terms as structured to create neighbourliness and reciprocity. Few Somali participants in McMichael and Manderson's (2004) study felt they were part of an Australian community, with many of their neighbours not sharing their language, culture or religion and lacking an understanding of their plight and journey. This study investigates if the social support received in the Somali culture on the Flemington Housing Estate is reflective of the studies in this literature review and whether they feel caught between cultures. The literature largely agrees that traditional support of extended family is missing and Somalis must deal with the loss of extended support networks in their day-to-day lives. Again the women feel caught between two worlds, not in one place or another, one country or another and this state of “nepantla”, meaning the place in the middle, is frequently permeated by alienation and depression (Ortega, 2005, p. 78).

As discussed, the literature highlights social support as an integral component of older women’s participation in physical activity. Social events, religious gatherings and celebrations play an important role in women’s lives, providing interaction and opportunities to share stories and pass on health information (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). It is a strategy of being together and transferring information on how to exist in this transitional space, this life on the borderlands where one is caught between two cultures and needs to create a third culture, a new mestiza consciousness, from the two. This study explores social support within the Somali community and considers its role in preventing or enabling participation in activity. I explore this social space in the margins to gain knowledge that will support the development of gender- and culture-appropriate physical activity opportunities.
2.2.8 “obligatory acts of worship”: the role of Islam for Somali refugees and physical activity

Recent research shows that a person’s religious beliefs influence their health and that faith and its protective effects are likely to be important to deal with the adjustments and challenges associated with aging (Klocker, Trenerry & Webster, 2011).

The five pillars of Islam are the basic concepts and obligatory acts of worship that touch every aspect of a Muslim’s life:

1. The Shahada – the belief that there is no other God but Allah and that Muhammad is the last prophet.

2. The Salat – a prayer ritual performed five times a day (at dawn, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening) that involves standing, bowing, prostration and sitting. The act of prostration is the substance of Salat (Reza, Urakami & Mano, 2002). It is done from the standing position to kneeling, putting the head down and touching the ground with the forehead, with the palms remaining parallel to the ears, and touching the ground with the flexed elbows for a few seconds. Reza, Urakami and Mano (2002) examined and measured the active range of motions for each of the joints that were involved during the Salat and found that it has psychological, musculoskeletal and cerebral effects, improving the muscular functions of elderly, disabled and dementic Muslims. It “punctuates the daily rhythms and permeates the consciousness of the believer” (Delaney, 1990, p. 517). It was found to provide significant health benefits with a mild to moderate amount of physical activity on a daily basis (Reza, Urakami & Mano, 2002).

3. The Zakat – to give charitable donations to the needy.

4. The Siam – to fast from food, drink and sex during daylight hours during Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar. It ends with a three-day celebration, breaking the fast. It is a time of self-reflection and discipline rather than abstinence and hardship. The Siam is a time to purify the soul and refocus attention on God and practise self-sacrifice. During Ramadan every part of the body must be restrained. There is no back-biting or gossip; the eyes must restrain themselves from looking at unlawful things. The hand must not touch or take anything that does not belong to it. The ears must refrain from listening to idle talk or obscene words. It is in every sense that the body observes the fast. Ramadan means not only refraining from food and drink but from evil actions, thoughts and words (Ali, 1998).
5. The Hajj - is the pilgrimage to Mecca, a holy city of Islam where Allah revealed the Koran to the Prophet Muhammad. To make the Hajj is to touch the foundation of faith and to drink from the well-spring that sustains and gives life meaning. Delaney (1990) describes it as a “unified experience, one that integrates the pilgrim’s present life with both the past and the future” (p. 515). It should be taken at least once in a Muslim’s lifetime.

Each of these religious rituals is part of achieving a better afterlife and provides support and overall wellbeing to a Muslim’s life. The Islamic religion promotes the idea of a community that supports and encourages togetherness. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) describe the Muslim society as “high-context” (p. 293); it emphasises the collective over the individual, has a slower pace of societal change and a higher sense of social stability. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) also state that “Islam is not concerned with the welfare of the individual alone; it seeks to achieve a wider societal well-being” (p. 293). In contrast, the Western world is a relatively low context society and fast-paced. Islam creates a state for these older Somali women where they can develop their potential self. As travellers between worlds they refuse to be split by the dichotomy of patriarchal tradition and scientific modernity and are therefore in constant movement where they can face profound isolation. Islam keeps them centred and reminds them of their inner self and their place in the eternal world, which provides immense comfort and satisfaction (Lugones, 2005).

Many elder refugees turn to religion in their search for life’s meanings (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2001; Graham, Bradshaw & Trew, 2009; Orb, 2002). Religion plays a significant role in their lives, providing comfort and an overall sense of order while reducing their sense of alienation. Graham, Bradshaw and Trew (2009) interviewed 50 Canadian social workers who had worked extensively in the Muslim community and found that the decisions that individuals make about health behaviours may be bound by religious guidelines and that the belief system is so strong it can interfere with Western interventions. In contrast, Mir and Sheikh (2010) also looked at the impact of religious identity and beliefs on Pakistani Muslims’ long-term health and found that religious teachings and practices such as prayer or reading the Koran gave meaning to patients’ experience of illness and helped decrease anxiety and depression. Their respondents associated acceptance of God’s will with tranquillity and the ability to carry on with everyday life. Ritual prayer and attendance at religious gatherings increased their emotional resilience and helped individuals be more patient with their associated pain or anxiety. Hodge’s (2005) study on orientating practitioners on the beliefs and values of Muslims in the United States reveals that Muslims believe that everything that happens to them is God’s will.
While this is thought of as engendered fatalism, that all events are predetermined by fate and are unalterable, it in fact prepares Muslims to face hardships and foster perseverance during difficult times. Whatever happens here in the now, God will reward them in the next life and will help guide and support people during difficult experiences such as illness. Similarly, Anzaldua (1987) legitimised her soul by turning to her indigenous roots and the mythology surrounding her Mexican heritage. She did so in an attempt to give meaning to the world and to herself. She used this framework to create energy that was used to refocus herself and bring together all parts of her, physically, spiritually and mentally (Levine, 2005).

In summary, the literature finds that religion can be a high priority in a Muslim’s life; religion can set boundaries for decision-making and be an important determinant of behaviour. Faith helps older Somali women cope with travelling between worlds and allows them to centre themselves in a dominant culture. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) state that religion can also have health benefits as praying can be both a physical activity and a preventative and inexpensive psychological guard against anxiety and depression and can increase the person’s sense of wellbeing. This study explores the impact religion has on older Somali women’s health and their perceptions of physical activity.

The literature also presents Islam as a “conceptualised mobile anchor” that provides stability in a new and ever changing environment (McMichael, 2002, p. 172). In McMichael’s (2002) study of Somali refugees in Melbourne, participants told stories of the good life, familiar food and strong social networks that supported and connected them with each other. Many related tales of generosity and support; gathering in groups for sharing and understanding. Women told how people shared details about their lives with each other and helped make decisions (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Women mourned the loss of family support and trusted social networks which in the Somali community in Melbourne had turned into gossiping and lack of trust (Boyle & Ali, 2009). They consequently feel out of place in Melbourne and, McMichael (2002) argues, a distinct “narrative contrast between Somalia as home and Melbourne as a site of exile and disorientation” (p. 178). It is within this disorientation of living in the margins that Islam becomes a way to recreate fond memories and provide support within the self. Most women talked of a life in Somalia that existed under a framework of Islam. This research will add to the existing literature around the centrality of faith in women’s lives and identities and the extent to which it can carry a sense of home and familiarity that provides comfort and guidance in day-to-day life.

Within the Somali community, reading the Koran is a regular part of mental, physical and spiritual health (Bell, 2003; Guerin & Guerin, 2007). It seemed to be the first comfort people go to when feeling depressed or not feeling themselves. In terms
of mental and physical health and useful interventions, learning about the readings in the Koran is very important. Some women use the Koran in its strictest sense while others use it for guidance on how to live and behave. An example McMichael (2002) uses is that of fate in determining women’s lives. Some participants felt that their lives were determined by the will of Allah, while others felt that they set the path of their future through choices and morals. More concisely, “women make sense and make use of Islam by continually moving amongst an inventory of ideas, practices, and modes of expression” (p. 182). It provides an important support when women from Somalia living in Melbourne are faced with anxiety, sadness, loneliness and depression. It gives meaning to their lives and helps them cope with distressing events. Somalis arriving in Melbourne must create new social networks and negotiate new resources while living with the trauma of the past. McMichael (2002) found Islam in every aspect of her participants’ lives: “Prayer, talking to Allah, modes and moral guidelines for social relations, words uttered, and ways in which Islam provides explanation, meaning, solace, emotional support and acceptance of life situations” (p. 185).

Through choice of clothing and food, an image of shared Islamic practices can all too easily homogenise all Muslim women and influence other people to view these women as “passive adherents to an oppressive religion, and of staring eyes seeing their veils as the regulation of all women” (McMichael, 2002, p. 180). In fact, the women held diverse views about Islam and its application to their everyday lives. One of the main examples was that of veiling, the most tangible and visible symbol that Western culture observes. Somali women differ in its application, from a full length chador to a veil covering their hair, forehead, shoulders and neck or a cloth tied around their hair. This study will explore the impact of the rules and guidelines of the Koran in the lives of Somali women living in Melbourne, particularly in relation to physical activity.

When researching Somali women and their attitude to sport, it is essential to examine the interwoven ties with the Islamic faith. Walseth and Fasting (2003) found that sport has a place in Islam and that some Muslims find a non-secular relationship between sport and religion, meaning that to participate in sport is to get closer to God. There are, however, variations in attitudes towards Islamic women participating in sport and physical activity and all are interconnected with how Islamic faith is interpreted. If the activities are conducted in a sex-segregated environment, the veiling can be taken off, otherwise all sports require a woman to be covered. Sfeir (1985) agrees that Islamic religion in no way tries to depreciate, much less deny, sport for women. On the contrary, it attributes great significance and function to physical strength and sport activities. This study explores the importance of religion in older Somali women’s lives and to what extent and how the daily Islamic rituals provide support and comfort along with exercise and movement. Although the Islamic religion promotes activity and health through the teachings of the Koran, the Islamic practices also guide the type of physical activity performed by older women. I will explore how Islamic teachings and interpretations impact on choices around activity.
Western culture portrays its superiority “in the belief in the need to intervene in other ‘less advanced’ societies, a belief in the legitimacy of imposing western values on non-western cultures” (Pease, 2010, p. 42). If non-Western cultures like Somalia do not take this path of ‘joining us’, they deviate from the norm and are therefore placed in the margins to be part of ‘the others’. It is the intention of this study to untangle this normative place of privilege and understand how older Somali women are placed in the margins. It was Rutherford (1990) who suggested that the sign of a cultured society is the ability to “appreciate cultures in a kind of musee imaginaire; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them” (p. 208). It is then usually the Western culture that transcends and renders each transparent; the Western culture is the collector. Therefore, I will use the definition of ‘acculturation’ by Evenson et al. (2004) with the acknowledgement that creating cultural diversity can often mean the containment of cultural difference: “Acculturation is the process by which subgroups adopt the patterns of another dominant yet undefined cultural group” (p. 2510).

Research provides examples of how the degree of acculturation can impact on physical activity and health. Belza et al. (2004) examined older adults in immigrant communities and found they were less acculturated and therefore likely to remain sedentary. Lindstrom and Sundquist (2001) agree, finding that with increasing geographic distance to the country of origin there was increased risk of having a sedentary lifestyle, particularly among older women. In contrast, Dawson et al. (2005) found that immigrant women who spent more time exposed to Swedish cultural norms adopted physical activity patterns that closely resemble Swedish-born women. Lim et al. (2007) support this in their study of older Korean Americans, finding that those who were more acculturated to American life rated their health more positively and participated in more health promoting behaviours.

Research by Renzaho et al. (2008) conducted in Australia found that understanding the process of acculturation is essential in developing an explanation for migrants’ development of obesity. They argue that acculturation has four dimensions or cultural points of reference. The first is ‘integration’, where groups arrive in a new country while maintaining their sense of cultural identity and resisting the pressures of the new culture. Secondly, ‘assimilation’ is where the group accepts the loss of some of their cultural identity but acquires a new identity by taking on some of the values and beliefs of the existing culture and developing some of their own. Thirdly, the ‘traditional’ group is where the acculturating group holds a strong identity and does not want to adopt cultural characteristics of the dominant group and, finally, the fourth group, marginalisation, which does not maintain its cultural characteristics but loses all cultural contact with the dominant group by excluding
themselves. Renzaho et al. (2008) describe the need for understanding acculturation when targeting specific food and exercise habits as the study population of sub-Saharan Africans has a preference and social acceptance of larger body sizes. This study will explore these four points in relation to older Somali women and physical activity by travelling to their “worlds” (Lugones, 1987, p. 16). If I restrict my movement to worlds in which I am comfortable, Bailey (1998) argues that “privilege is difficult to see and whitely scripts are never challenged” (p. 40). This is further explored in the introduction of Chapter 3 but it is important to recognise that “travellers” or researchers should not attempt to conquer or destroy different worlds as this “agnostic attitude, the playful attitude given man’s construction of playfulness, is not a healthy, loving attitude to have in travelling across ‘worlds’” (Lugones, 1987, p. 16).

Another study that explores the effect of acculturation is Evenson et al.’s (2004) literature review of first generation Latina immigrants, which revealed that those who become ‘more acculturated’ were more likely to report being physically active. Their study found that immigrants who arrived in the United States when younger than 25 were more likely to have higher levels of English and be more physically active. However, they identified a fatalistic attitude that often dominated attitudes to physical activity participation in older acculturated women with low levels of English. For example, two-thirds of the women in their study believed that prayer could help them stay healthy and over one-half agreed that whatever was supposed to happen to them will happen, regardless of their efforts, and that their health was mostly in God’s hands. Fatalism is a central concept that is closely intertwined with religion and is a strategy that is comforting. The overall perception was that life events were out of one’s control and there was little they could do to prevent illness. Evenson et al.’s (2004) results indicate that changes in values and beliefs associated with the acculturation process and exposure to exercise messages over time are possible contributors to creating positive changes in lifestyle behaviours.

Understanding the influence of acculturation on physical activity is critical in developing culturally appropriate programs. Rowland (1999) highlights, in his research on ethnic aged populations, that all ethnic groups are not equally vulnerable. Some groups have been in Australia longer and are more acculturated and speak English proficiently, making many aspects of their health care less complicated. Others, like newly arrived groups and longer established settlers who have never become proficient in English, face particular difficulties in adapting to the Australian health care system, relying on others for support. This study explores the influence of acculturation on Somali women and how groups make new identity markers. As Keating (2005b) argues “what your eyes, ears and other physical senses perceive is not the whole picture but one determined by your core beliefs and prevailing societal
assumptions” (p. 248); yet we use these and perceive them as an accurate reflection of the entire truth about reality and ourselves. This study explores how physical activity is interwoven into and between cultures, using parts of each to develop new ways of participation. In relation to acculturation, this study explores how older Somali women negotiate their way on the borderlands, not adopting the values and beliefs of the existing culture but rather making new identity markers by navigating between both cultures.

2.3 “border dwellers”: navigating new positionings and negotiating new possibilities

Having explored physical activity from the dominant Western centre and the Somali margins, this section examines the literature that surrounds a new way of thinking about physical activity and motherhood for those who dwell in the margin and the centre and on the borders in between. This study attempts to make a new space that recognises older Somali women as border dwellers who develop their own positionings and possibilities around being a mother and being physically active in a white dominant culture. Allawia (Figure 2.1) in her walking shoes and dress is this new mestiza, a representative of the border theory I will be using and one who is “in all cultures at same time” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99).

2.3.1 “hybrid way of creation”: the challenges of resettlement

You cannot extricate
my Indianness
my Jewishness
my Lesbianess
You cannot reach in and exorcise that pain, or joy
(Waters, 1990, p 159)

Waters (1990) wrote about the pain of forced assimilation “dosed with amnesia for years and years and years” and the confusion that surrounded her as she tried to sort out what was, and what was not, part of her history (p. 160). Waters (1990) lived life on the borders negotiating and navigating her way around Western dominant understandings. Similarly, older Somali women who arrive in Australia create a “(de) colonised self” or “mestizaje”; “defying control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts” (Lugones, 1994, p. 460). In relation to physical activity, this is about considering what physical activity
represents in the white culture and meshing it with the physical activity from their youth in Somalia. It’s a new way of understanding physical activity on the borders. Like Anzaldúa (1987) and her Spanish heritage, older Somali women can “assimilate without ceasing to be cultured” and it is this “hybrid way of creation” that represents the subjective inner life of these women (Lugones 1994, p. 470). It is a blurring of the boundaries where refugees, like older Somali women, such as Allawia in Figure 2.1, bleed their reality into the dominant culture which requires energy for refocusing and weaving new patterns of change.

In the world of migrants, establishing mobility and identity is a complex and often fluid process (Bauman, 1996; Skrbis, 2007). Bauman (1996) describes the establishment of a modern identity in relation to traditional pilgrims as “the true place is always some distance, some time away...it is not where he ought to be and not where he dreams of being” (p. 20). The literature acknowledges that homeland remains a symbolic point of reference for many migrants. People are bound by family responsibilities and also hold “distinctly nostalgic and romantic” notions about their homeland for reasons beyond their control (Skrbis, 2007, p. 315; see also Skrbis, 1999). Skrbis (2007) argues that “discrepancies between the reality of home and the migrants’ imaginings of an idyllic home reveal a great deal about the intensity and centrality of these attachments for some migrants” (p. 315). It is not my intention to discredit the women’s lived experiences but rather observe and acknowledge the competing realities of the women’s identities in their reminiscing about Somalia. These places are concrete and tangible to them and their belief “rejuvenates them both ethnically and spiritually” and provides a fluidity of identity that helps them survive the borderlands (Skrbis, 2007, p. 327).

Like all refugees, Somalis face the challenges of resettlement in an alien environment. Additionally, they face stress and trauma from their past along with local tensions over assistance between existing members of the community and the newly arrived. They negotiate a path that is well worn and one that they have to discover and manoeuvre around in order to survive. Langellier (2010) explored Somali identity in Western culture through the storytelling of a young woman refugee in Maine, USA. She acknowledges the difficulty in resettlement and that learning English and finding employment are high priorities for newly arrived Somalis but this is compounded by low literacy levels in their own language. Choudhry (2001) acknowledges that older women who face resettlement come with the prospect of being the matriarch and enjoying the maternal comforts of an affluent society; instead they face a future of uncertainty and marginalisation. Difficulties faced living on the border include lack of informal support from family to adapt to a new environment, language barriers, limited access to public transport which further isolates the women, and a fast-paced life that does not allow time for the elderly. Health care professionals
need to take into account the nature of stress and the impact of these border experiences on the health of older immigrant women, whose children and grandchildren have become liberated from the constraints of the traditional social system. Older women often feel remorse and regret for having to leave their own country and for losing traditional ways (Choudhry, 2001). It appears that Somali women who have migrated to Australia and have experienced border life have altered traditional roles, including entering the workforce, supporting families, purchasing food, accessing transport, health care and schooling – all in an environment where their language, religion and culture differ from the mainstream centre (Ramsden & Taket, 2011). This is an example of what Anzaldua (1987) describes as the ‘self as multiple’; on the one hand self-oppressed within and by traditional Somali ways and, on the other, self-oppressed in the Western world.

This study examines the challenges older Somali women face in resettlement in a new environment, the difficulties in coping in a Western-centred culture and the border life in between, particularly as it affects physical activity. It highlights the new border culture or third space where the women have developed strategies of defence and distraction “to keep at bay the fear of having no names” (Lugones, 1992, p. 34). It highlights the lack of access to resources and institutional power and dealing with the internal conflict of leaving their own country and losing traditional ways. It brings physical activity into a new dimension, where they navigate and negotiate the measured values of physical activity of the dominant culture and blend them with their Somali centre in the margins of the dominant culture to create new behaviours and understandings.

2.3.2 “understanding life on the borders”: physical activity and its new directions

The experiences of those living between and beyond the centre and the margin, the border dwellers, is a relatively unexplored empirical field and theoretical framework in the area of physical activity and motherhood. There are a number of researchers, however, doing extensive work using the borderland theoretical framework specifically in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual issues (Anzaldua 1987, 1990; Ferguson et al., 1992; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005, 2010). Ramsden and Taket (2011) have been clear leaders looking at Somali families in Australia using the borderland framework. In this study, I use the borderland framework to examine and present the ‘border lives’ of a group of older Somali women. Understanding the context that people live in, that is understanding life on the borders, is critical when assessing their levels of participation in physical activity because for these older women, their definitions of physical activity do not necessarily fit neatly within the Western binary scientific framework of intensity, frequency and duration; but neither can they fit what they were in Somalia as traditional culture (Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985).
New forms and definitions are required and have to be created on the borders of the two cultural systems. In this study I use definitions around physical activity that incorporate more of daily life activities to allow for flexibility and to connect physical activity with gender roles in the women’s lives, culture and religion. A similar approach was recommended by Stodolska and Livengood (2006), whose study on the influence of religion on the leisure behaviour of immigrant Muslims highlighted that researchers need to pay more attention to the effects of Islam on three major factors: leisure time physical activity; strong family ties; and modesty in dress, speech and everyday behaviour. Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland theory argues that even the way Islam is lived in Australia is not exactly the way it was lived in Somalia; it evolves, shifts and is part of a new hybrid space. This research unravels this space and explores how older Somali women develop physical activity within it.

This research used an arts-based program to create Bhabha’s ‘third space’; a space that allows the construction of a new hybrid culture where other positions emerge (Rutherford, 1990). I will continue to use Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland and mestiza theories to illustrate and analyse the complexities of their border lives within these dichotomous frameworks of centre and margin as Somali women struggle to establish their identities. In an attempt to address the research gap surrounding physical activity and its impact on older Somali women, this study will explore if and how new multiple identities are developed and interwoven into a new way of thinking and behaving.

The white dominant culture reinforces its centre based on the principle of sameness, identity and coherence and the post structuralist strategy used in this thesis is to bring to the light these principles “in the negated term that disrupts the sameness of oppositional logic” (Metcalfe & Game, 2008, p. 150). To do this, principles based on movement, process and multiplicity are used on the site of the border. Is this where older Somali women are placed within a space or “central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks 1992, p. 134)? Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) conceptualisation of borders, crossing borders and fluidities in women's lives sits under the umbrella of post-colonial feminism, where identities are influenced by the white dominant – or colonising – culture. Lara (2005) goes further to suggest that the major paradigm for reality, the scientific paradigms, were constructed by those in power and that we are in “need of a new paradigm that comes partially from the outside and partially from inside the dominant culture” (p. 51). Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland theory creates a space of “radical possibility, a space of resistance”, where the coloniser is rejected and the dominant group is located on the margins (hooks, 1992, p. 341). It is from within this space, on this border, that insights into new identities and possibilities can be revealed.
2.3.3 “creating socially inclusive environments”: supporting new directions in research with border dwellers

In summary, this research is premised on the need for researchers to extend their studies to newly arrived communities, such as Somalis, in an attempt to create socially inclusive environments that promote health and wellbeing. To date, research in Australia exploring older refugees has concentrated on communities that arrived from Europe following the Second World War (Atwell et al., 2007). Many of those communities have their own community centres with specific meetings for the elderly. However, most of the smaller and more recently arrived refugee communities, such as Somalis, have no such meeting places and lack the resources to rent or acquire them. This leads to a lack of opportunities to socialise with friends and peers outside the home and can cause many older refugees to struggle with their problems alone (Atwell et al., 2007). Research also tends to focus on medical and physiological aspects of exercise, which provides a restricted, more central position of the dominant culture's views of health and wellbeing in older ethnic women (Wray, 2007). Yancey, Ory and Davis (2006) acknowledge there is little high quality data on effective physical activity interventions that relate to meaningful numbers of aged or ethnic minorities. They are generally considered hard to reach populations that require substantial time and money to infiltrate. There is also a tendency to universalise the conclusions gained from research, pooling all minority groups into one and making generalised recommendations around physical activity. The Somali community has often been dragged under the umbrella of ‘African research’ but the Somali community has its own values and ideologies that cannot simply be transferred from other ethnic migrant communities (Hopkins, 2010). These women are consequently sandwiched between two cultures, which has led to an inner struggle of blending between the white dominant culture and the Somali culture. I will explore how they live on the borderlands, making new identity markers, new ways of composing themselves, and coming together to share tools and strategies to survive.

As discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.8, using qualitative methods to understand the physical wellbeing of older Somali women is a new area of research. In my study, the women tell their stories through art and conversation so that health workers and those outside their culture can begin to understand their perceptions and ideals around physical activity (Irwin et al., 2006; Springgay et al., 2005). The aim of the research is to heighten awareness of the barriers and enablers of participation in physical activity for women from CALD communities. It will also enhance our understanding of the Somali culture and the migration experience, and broader implications of the integration of the Muslim culture into Australian life. The examples of Allawia in Figure 2.1 at the beginning of this chapter and Hawo on the front cover
are the start of my description of a unique way of analysing physical activity and motherhood using Anzaldua's (1987) mestizaje theory. She describes the mestiza as “a geography of selves – of different bordering countries – who stands at the threshold of two or more worlds and negotiates the cracks between the worlds” (in Lunsford, 2000, p. 268). Before introducing the women using photography and personal stories, I will engage in a detailed discussion of the research methodology.
Chapter 3

“She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person”: discussing the research methodology used in border crossings

Figure 3.1 Fadumo the coyote

Fadumo’s hennaed hands, her watch and mobile phone, shown in Figure 3.1, are symbols of Somali culture meshed with symbols of white culture. The photo represents her role in this research as a link between the researcher and the researched. It also reflects Fadumo’s coyote position, her ability to “become a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 104). As introduced in Chapter 1, section 1.1, the discussion of the methodology used for this research is framed within the coyote metaphor. It is the first of two major parts of the thesis, this being how my journey within the Somali community transpired and the lessons and challenges of cross-cultural research. Like Fadumo, I, as the researcher, became a coyote throughout this project, accompanying others through different worlds, transforming ourselves to cross borders and understand the contexts of each other’s lives. In this chapter I explore how I became aware of and experienced a further element of the coyote framework which is not discussed in Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) framework. This relates to the impact of the journey through different worlds on the coyote’s own emotions and life.
In Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) framework, the coyote has four characteristics:

• First, coyotes operate “in secreto”, they are trustworthy and operate in secrecy “to protect those they are smuggling” and develop trust and understanding about their plight (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). As I developed an understanding of the participants’ world and how they attempt to fit into the dominant culture, they could trust me to work alongside them and support them.

• Secondly, coyotes are “skilled at knowing” the codes, “los codigos”. They are able to “school their border crossers” and provide information about the new culture they are entering (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). Within the borderland they are “capable of blending in so that they are not identifiable as coyotes in multiple settings” (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). I was able to explain the codes of the dominant culture and ways of navigating its social structures.

• Thirdly, coyotes are “la facultad”; they can read situations quickly and understand the context. They “see the surface phenomena, the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structures below the surface” (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 177). I was able to immerse myself in the daily life of older Somali women and understand their lives and rituals.

• Finally, coyotes express “sincere compromiso commitment”. They are committed to seeing that the people they guide and collaborate with have a voice and can reach a destination that will benefit them (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 177). I was committed to making a difference to older Somali women’s lives by foregrounding their stories around physical activity.

Ultimately, coyotes are committed to aiding others to cross the border safely. Using these characteristics I developed my own ‘coyote ethnography’, combining a variety of ethnographic techniques to establish a new process of data collection. I follow Lugones’ (1987) concept of “playful world travel” in this process, using a number of interconnected interpretive methods (p. 5). This study offers the opportunity to be “playful” with methods, as Lugones (1987) suggests we can inhabit more than one of these “worlds” at the same time therefore the research methods need to be able to reflect and work within these different worlds (p. 10). Bailey (1998) extends this argument by stating that “white women world travel is a way of becoming aware of the privilege-evasive scripts we have learned” (p. 40). As introduced in Chapter 1, the selected research methods combine participant observation, ‘tea and talk’, field notes, participatory action research and feminist, standpoint and grounded theories to understand the Somali culture and ensure the validity of the research,
which may be useful for future or other researchers in cross-cultural research. These research methods gave me contextual flexibility and allowed me to adapt to the challenges that arose throughout the project.

This chapter may be perceived as too long, however, as suggested in Chapter 1, section 1.1, the methodology is a critical element of what became an unexpected journey of borderland cross-cultural research. I believe that the length and detail are necessary to document and describe the complex processes involved in ‘border-crossing’ research and to understand my role as researcher and recognise the interpretive and critical lens I apply to the methodology and the research findings.

This chapter is also a reflective journey. Behind each researcher is a personal biography that represents a class, gender and racial perspective that becomes interwoven into a setting with a set of ideas, questions and understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Each section includes personal reflections of what I experienced and how I felt. The field notes provide the reader with an insight into the researcher who is from a white, middle class background. I have “playfully” intertwined these reflective positionings throughout this chapter to highlight my awareness of my role and the impact of my gaze (Lugones, 1987, p. 4).

I used my knowledge about the Somali context to negotiate and lay the groundwork to develop a project that sees the participants as individuals first and uses conversation as a way to understand their experiences and perspectives around physical activity. I hope that it promotes useful and important discussions around older women, ethnicity and physical activity and, simultaneously, explores possibilities in undertaking cross-cultural research.

3.1 “in secreto”: research issues of protection and trust

Coyotes operate “in secreto” to protect those they are guiding (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). Building trust, creating a safe environment and protecting the research participants encourages them to open up, to talk. In this project, trust was built gradually through spending time with the participants and the Somali community, gaining access, providing culturally sensitive information, developing an understanding of participants’ border-dwelling positionality, and supporting them to develop strategies to cross borders. This section focuses on the coyote role of myself, the researcher; Fadumo, the community worker; and Louise, the artist in residence. Each of us undertook extensive work in the field and with each other to develop the trust and understanding of the participants. We worked together to help the women feel comfortable and to provide a safe environment where they could disclose information about themselves in relation to physical activity and motherhood.
I came to this project having established a relationship with Fadumo and having a previous connection with the local Somali community, as mentioned in the Prologue. I had volunteered with the Doutta Galla Community Health Service (DGCHS) Care Connection program which linked Somali families with disabled children to health service providers. My role involved helping the community member, Fadumo, write up the results on a computer-based program. During this project Fadumo and I developed a friendship. When Fadumo began supervising a weekly mental health program for Somali women, I saw the possibilities of undertaking research with this group of women.

3.1.1 “Why weren’t they out there being physically active?”: choosing the topic

As outlined in the Prologue, I live in an area where there are many Somali families and my children attend school and extracurricular activities with the children of these families. Over time I heard the Somali women talk of hardship and happiness and I developed friendships with them.

Here and there I can catch where the conversation is going. The conversation moves in and out of English, discussing and analysing how things can be translated for me to understand. (Field notes, 2009)

Local Somali women had crossed the border into the social structures of my world but I had never ventured across the boundary into their world. I began my journey into this research from a position of seeing Somali women as the ‘exotic other’, intrigued with their dress, their mannerisms, their celebrations, their family relationships. As mentioned in the Prologue, my white, middle class, elderly grandmother is very social, active and independent and yet she finds maintaining her lifestyle difficult because navigating health and social systems is often complicated and time-consuming. I highlight her experience here as it made me question how older women from Somalia entered into and coped with old age and its physical decline. Why weren’t they out there being physically active, maintaining their independence and living life to the full? As I was mentoring Fadumo and thinking about how older Somali women operate within the dominant Australian culture, my interest developed in the project and I began to consider how I could do such research in a small marginalised community that I knew very little about beyond ‘school playground’ perceptions and meetings with Somali parents.

Questions about what we study and why pose some difficulty. We want to have set questions and answers but we know that these will change over time as we develop more insight into the setting and the people. We can talk about the initial research questions but, as Kleinman and Copp (1993) argue, we often feel foolish as we really do not know what we are doing until we actually get there. When I
presented my early work to two colleagues, I was shocked that they believed that choosing such a population would not be worth the research effort.

I presented my topic to colleagues today and I was met with grave responses. They asked me to change the cultural group; ‘why don’t you try Vietnamese, they are much easier to find or even young people but old people from Somalia, the group can’t be that big and probably not worth the trouble’. I was shocked that research could be based on how ‘easy’ the research group is rather than actually being interested. (Field notes, 2009)

It seemed to me that the combination of Muslims, refugees and older women seemed to fit in the ‘too hard basket’. This research needs to be treated as interesting and useful work that needs to be done, even more so because it is constructed as too hard to do. Furthermore, the stigma extended to me: “Who could establish rapport with such people?” I was determined not to be disheartened by my colleagues and now see that this was the beginning of developing my coyote nature; being protective and determined that the Somali community was worthy of research and support.

3.1.2 Producing “a slice of reality”: choosing qualitative research

Qualitative researchers are concerned with the individual’s point of view and feel they can get closer to this perspective through observation, conversation and spending time in the field. These approaches produce interpretive methods that quantitative researchers regard as unreliable and not objective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Flick (2009) argues that quantitative investigations “are too far removed from everyday questions and problems...influences from interests, social and cultural backgrounds are difficult to avoid in research and its findings” (p. 14). The qualitative researcher is described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) “as bricoleur, as a maker of quilts, or, as in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages” (p. 14). I felt this as I became the sole researcher for the entire project, able to be many things, cross borders at any time and be adaptable, changeable.

Having taken on this PhD I feel like I have to be a woman of many things, changing personas when I meet Deakin officials, DGCHS representatives, Somali community members. Each requires me to adapt to the listening and responding and be aware of each person's understandings. (Field notes, 2009)

The qualitative researcher uses all the tools of their craft and deploys whatever strategies, methods or materials are at hand to produce a slice of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).
In a way I feel like a private investigator, hanging out in order to get vital information, listening to everyone and staying in the background. I have even gone to such lengths as to visit stakeholders at various times just to get information from secretaries, cleaners and mothers’ groups just to know how to ‘get in’ to this new community and understand all the processes involved. I am amazed at what people will tell you in an ‘off the cuff’ conversation. (Field notes, 2009)

If the researcher needs to invent, develop or acquire a new set of tools or techniques, they will do so. I was developing my own set of tools for building trust, stepping into the older Somali women’s world and being a casual observer rather than trying to set up an artificial environment and ask formal questions. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that quantitative research often “fails to capture the true nature of human social behaviour” and the researcher creates artificial environments that do not truly reflect social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.117; Maynard et al., 2008). Rather than creating a group specifically for research purposes, I undertook research within a well-established mental health and social support group, with its own set of relationships between women that make them feel comfortable and relaxed.

3.1.3 “She must have felt powerless, maybe embarrassed”: questions of ethnography

One of the central questions of ethnography is: what are or should be the social and moral responsibilities of the white researcher researching non-white people? My coyote ethnographic research was constantly influenced by this question. My first experience of this was when I helped a local teacher fill out surveys on the experiences of parents of children in their first year of school (‘prep’). I assisted a woman from Somalia who could not understand the concepts or terminology I was using.

I felt inadequate that the material I was collecting was not truly representative and I felt empathy for the woman I was interviewing because she would have known that this information was not accurate, and there were not a lot of choices for her to change this. She just wanted to please me as the researcher and be as generous in her answers as she was as a person. She must have felt powerless, maybe embarrassed, and I felt ashamed that I made her feel like that. (Field notes, 2009)

Interaction between researchers and participants can be a creative development in the process of gathering data. Instead of asking if the researcher’s feelings affect the study, we should consider how emotions play a part in gathering the data for this group and in this setting. Raising these issues allows the researcher to better understand their emotional reactions and often reflects the social structures in which
they live and their political ideologies (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). This initial experience with ethnography led me to look for new ways of understanding and collecting information.

When researchers have a smooth, comfortable relationship with participants we assume that the fieldwork is competent and trouble-free. Kleinman and Copp (1993) argue that this is the time when we, as researchers, should “be the most alert about the analytical import of our feelings” (p. 46). There are reasons why this smooth process has happened and figuring this out can aid our analysis. By providing instant support and failing to ask questions of the participant we may find that we provide our own interpretation of a story rather than recording theirs. Kleinman and Copp (1993) argue that to avoid this problem researchers need to ask “do we share the same understanding of what has transpired or do our feelings of closeness mask different interpretations of the same event?” (p. 48). The experience of collecting information from prep mothers made me realise that our understandings were often the ones ‘I wanted to hear’ rather than what the parents were expressing. Ultimately I was protecting their stories and experiences by not imposing an obligation on them to express what I wanted to hear and by developing trust so they could express themselves to me; I would listen and respect their perspectives.

The relationship between the interpreter working with the researcher and the person being interviewed can also be “fraught with difficulties” (Edwards, 1990, p. 197). Edwards (1990) recognised that power relationships can exist between the interpreter and those being interviewed, especially when they are from the same ethnic group, and that there can be trust and mistrust. The interviewee may be dependent on maintaining a good relationship with the interpreter and this can affect whether the interviewee participates in the research and how much they reveal. Birks, Chapman and Francis (2007) agree and add that the interviewee often presents a strong desire to please the interviewer and interpreter, telling them what they think they want to know. Both Fadumo and I were very aware that many participants may say what they thought Fadumo would like to hear despite our constant reassurances of confidentiality. At the end of one of our weekly groups of collecting data, Fadumo made the observation about some of the translations.

It seems that one of the women is telling Fadumo that she was warned not to interpret certain answers to me because they don't want Somalia to be represented in a certain light. Also there is a perception that men can say certain things and that’s ok but if they as women were recorded as having a certain opinion it would ‘not be right’. She reassured the woman that all that was said would be confidential but Fadumo feels that some of the women may feel that she would tell others in her community about what they have said. She also suggested that women
may just agree with the rest of the group just to remain in consensus with others. We will have to continue working on this together during the data collection but also discussing these concepts on social occasions to provide reassurance and trust. (Field notes, 2010)

Smith, Chen and Liu (2008) found similar issues when collecting and analysing data in Mandarin where there is a prevailing culture of courtesy and participants were reluctant to be openly critical about services or people, particularly those in authority. As a result, the answers given were ones that were socially accepted. This seemed especially so when discussing and sharing opinions about health and illness. They found “a good approach was to take time to build up trust with the participant – depersonalize the questions so that the participants felt they were not necessarily talking about themselves when they responded” (Smith, Chen & Liu, 2008, p. 4). In this thesis, time was spent developing trust and creating an environment where the participants felt comfortable to express themselves.

3.1.4 “all I can do is listen”: intense immersion and the coyote’s distress and vulnerability

Qualitative research often involves engaging with people on an interpersonal level where sensitive issues can arise. This can be incredibly intense for both parties. Disclosure of emotive personal stories of trauma, abuse and other sensitive topics can pose a threat to those being researched and the researcher (Liamputtong, 2007). Warr (2004) explains that researchers can feel powerless when confronted with personal suffering and the inability to alleviate the participant’s personal distress or misfortune. The confrontation of overwhelming inequity between dominate and ethnic minority groups can cause the researcher to doubt the real value of their work and its impact on the circumstances of the group they are representing.

Every week I leave the group, I drive out of the estate and I re-enter my world, I am a coyote, able to transform myself from one world to the next. It holds comfort, safety, privileges and opportunities which I long to get back to. I know however that I leave these women in another world, a world of uncertainty, displacement, below standard housing and I am ashamed, ashamed that I represent Australia; that all I can do is listen to their stories rather than providing them with the opportunities they really deserve. (Field notes, 2010)

Despite the feelings expressed above, I agree with Warr (2004) that “being present in the telling of these uncomfortable stories can heighten the capacity of the researcher to portray people’s understandings” (p. 580). It can enhance the researcher’s sense of responsibility to complete the research and provide people of
disadvantage with some benefits. Much of this personal reflexive data is often not collected on a tape recorder or transcribed onto pages. Warr (2004) argues that these “significant details are lost if we take away and preserve only the words people actually said” (p. 579). It is important for the researcher to understand and record their written reflections immediately after any interview as they serve as excellent field notes and research data and provide an opportunity to highlight significant contexts (Liamputtong, 2007). When dissecting the transcript information, it is therefore important not to brush away significant layers of meaning each time the data is processed (Warr, 2004). During data collection and throughout this project I experienced guilt and a sense of helplessness that no matter what I say or do it will never help these people who have experienced such trauma. Many of the conversations were emotionally draining for me as the stories of hardship and discrimination created anguish over participants’ and my informant’s lives. Often I would dream that Fadumo was talking to me in Somali and I was able to understand her and she would tell me the same sad story over and over again. McMichael (2002) also noted that she found these stories distressing and sometimes had nightmares of being in those situations. She found talking to close family and friends and writing field notes helped her to debrief. I listened to similar stories with participants and wondered how tranquil, unassuming women could hold the inner strength to overcome such hardships. I was constantly reminded of how fortunate I am to live in a free and democratic country and I wonder if I hold such inner strength and how I would go about finding it. Colleagues had suggested to me that this is a ‘waste of energy’, however researchers are human and this emotion provides a greater connection to the women. Over time I began to see myself as a coyote, one who the women can rely on and trust, who understands their plight and advocates for their future.

The protection and vulnerability of the coyote researcher does not come up in Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote framework but it is here that it can be extended. The coyote researcher becomes vulnerable themselves, undertaking sensitive cultural research that exposes emotions. Often the research journey is lonely and the coyote researcher may need support and guidance from mentors and family to ensure their health and wellbeing. Being a coyote caused a lack of trust in my own strength and capabilities to do the right thing for those I was “smuggling” (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005 p. 176). Hearing stories of hardship and turmoil caused distress as well as feelings of distrust and abandonment from my own culture. It is living on a borderland, constantly negotiating and navigating my way around, trying to gain and keep the trust of many while protecting those I am ‘smuggling’.

I became very defensive if people spoke badly about refugees, particularly about Somali people. One example was when I was waiting for my son with other
mothers at cricket practice, listening to one mother expressing her hatred for Somali people because her car had been broken into at the Flemington Housing Estate and her bag taken. She was sure it had been Somali boys and that ‘the police let them get away with anything’. The comments went for some time with the rest of the group agreeing with the ‘state of Somali people on the estate’. Finally the women asked me what I thought and I told them that I worked with Somali women from the Flemington Housing Estate and had done so for nearly two years. I explained that these people had come to this country under distressing circumstances and all they wanted was a better life for themselves and their families. I conveyed one of the sad stories I had heard and was quite emotional in telling this story; the women quickly backed away and apologised for their racist comments. I had become Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) “bandidos”, operating within my own hostile community. In many ways it distanced and alienated me from my original home and culture and created an inner turmoil and frustration.

3.1.5 “living in the white world”: the researcher's awareness of her own location

I felt a constant dilemma about myself as a coyote, living in the white world and trying to understand the Somali culture. The project advisory group discussed how they felt about me at the beginning of the project and agreed that it was better that I was an ‘outsider’. I was now one who sits on the borderland between the white dominant culture and the Somali culture.

Halima mentioned that in fact it was better for me not to be part of the Somali community as she felt it easier to discuss and talk about issues. If the researcher had been from the Somali community she would not have discussed issues and “because you don’t know about Somali ways we have to explain everything”. (Minutes of advisory meeting, 10 November 2010)

Egharevba (2001) experienced anxieties when recruiting participants for her research because her background was different to those she was recruiting. She expressed doubts about whether an outsider could give voice and present the perceptions and experiences of a group that is not heard. Similar to my own experience, Egharevba was used to dealing with white people both in positions of power and as her peers and she had limited experience with the women she was researching. Even though my own community is a multicultural mix, my direct relationships with Somali women are very limited. At the front of my mind were feelings of distance between myself and the participants and the possibility of misinterpreting information. I was struggling with the idea of how a person in the dominant culture and in a position of power was going to present these women. My field notes reflect these anxieties.
Is it really appropriate for someone who knows virtually nothing about the culture of these women to be researching them? Should I be doing research on an ethnic minority that I will always be biased against just because of who I am and where I sit in Australian culture? I understand that research methods address these issues but does it change the fundamental fact that information and interpretation is being done by me? (Field notes, 2009)

Markowitz (2002) clearly states her unease about how her family background, religious beliefs and political views enter her ethnographic work; the “unease with the implications of my white skin and the privileges that it conveys constantly gnawed at me as a bodily reminder of the vexing politics of my ethnographic work” (p. 209). I believe that I was aware of my whiteness throughout the project. Towards the end I felt I had become part of the Somali women’s culture, yet not part of it. I was the coyote, sitting on the borderlands of two cultures, wanting to be part of both. Stepping into this space between cultures, Anzaldua (1987) describes as “a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (p. 100). I found it was possible to research across diversity and simultaneously be aware of my positionality. The following notes reflected my personal experience of managing my family life while dealing with a storm damaged house.

I really feel one of them living on my own set of borderlands. In a fluid contextual environment I live this complex border dwelling life, and is testing me as a reflexive researcher, trying to negotiate which identity I should take on in which environment. I feel obliged to always look after them yet at some points I am struggling to take care of myself. I am still living in a tent-like situation with our house and its belongings in a moulding mess. I’m trying to find somewhere to live, dealing with insurance companies, refinancing our loans to build a new house and keeping the day to day running of the family going. (Field notes, 2010)

This experience is further described in section 3.3.6.

3.1.6 “nowhere but on the borders of everywhere”: challenging researcher privilege and centrality

Throughout the project I collected field notes that were personal reflections about situations I faced, relationships that were formed and daily frustrations and challenges. My reflections are from a privileged white position and, as Pease (2010) argues, people like me feel that privilege is normality. I am, however, aware of internal hierarchies within this white framework and that there are layers of poverty, obesity and prejudice in Melbourne, Australia. Pease (2010) argues that “we should be careful not to suggest that any one system of domination is more important than
another, we need to look at people’s circumstances” (p. 20). This “particular construction of the human” defends a “Western, patriarchal and colonialist world view” (Pease, 2010, p. 13). Many of my field notes reflect these positions. What I have written is not deliberately demeaning, patronising, condescending or colonial; it represents who I am and where I have come from. Figure 3.2 is an example of trying to leave those views at the front door with my shoes. The photograph shows my white, athletic Western shoes in stark contrast to the dark, practical shoes of Somali women. I took off those shoes to step across what Anzaldúa (1987) describes as a physical and psychological border to be a part of their world. An awareness of who I was and where I entered as a white, middle class woman began at the women’s front doors. It was also here that the Somali women left the dominant culture behind when they took off their shoes to enter the comfort zone of being Somali, feeling safe, being themselves.

![Figure 3.2 The shoes and crossing over into Somali life](image)

Even the position of my shoes, which I only realised well into writing this study, is on the border. I had perfectly positioned my shoes on the edge. The photo represented my border dwelling positionality, my ability to cross over, to transform myself and be able to understand those in the Somali culture by inhabiting the edge or margin of that culture.

To effectively challenge privilege from within, Pease (2010) argues that we must “accept our oppressor status” and challenge our own oppression “before you can become an ally to the liberation of others” (p. 173). I tried to do this by acknowledging this privilege and understanding the benefits that come with it. In some ways I
became a ‘traitor’ to my dominant group, rejecting the ideals and values that it holds and at a cost to my family relationships where those in ‘my group’ felt I had left them and irresponsibly ‘moved away’ to be ‘with others’. Developing this traitorous character must include being a “world traveller” (Bailey, 1998, p. 38). In the process of travelling, “our identities fall apart” and we get a glimpse of how we are seen “through the eyes of whom we have been taught to perceive arrogantly” (Bailey, 1998, p. 40). In many ways I was in neither place, what Somali women call ‘kooyto’; nowhere but on the borders of everywhere. Those in my dominant group felt threatened as if I ‘had become one of those’ and I felt torn between two cultures. An example was the response of family and friends when I had my hands hennaed (Figure 4.15 in Chapter 4); they felt that I was moving ‘away from them’.

I have had my hands hennaed again and I always wait for the comments as I go throughout the day. My friends have asked, ‘so when is the hijab coming’ or ‘why don’t you get a real tattoo that says LOVE or HATE across each knuckle’. It is always the same as family are often awaiting me to arrive at a dinner with a hijab on or when I rejected the notion of traditional religious celebrations such as Christmas or Easter, it’s always been ‘she is becoming one of those, a Muslim’. Ahhh this border life. (Field notes, 2011)

I was experiencing a view of the dominant culture from the women’s standpoint. However, I seemed to be losing the trust and protection of the dominant culture the more I became immersed and understood in the Somali culture. Bailey (1998) suggests that people who occupy the edge of the centre, as I did within the dominant culture, have a way of seeing that is “off-center” and “destabilise their insider status by challenging and resisting the usual assumptions held by most white people” (p. 32). While I gained the women’s trust and I set out to protect and understand them, I lost the trust and protection of my own culture. Anzaldua (1987) put this best when she described her identity in the US as a Mexican woman: “I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (p. 85). The impact of research on the researcher’s personal relationships is not often discussed in research and should be further explored.

3.1.7 “my first taste provides me with a sugary hit”: developing trust

Researchers of ethnic minorities need to consider using time to get to know the community – the needs, issues and values – prior to recruitment (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001). To understand the Somali community, I spent many hours observing families and communities in their daily lives. I attended celebrations and communal gatherings, religious festivals, public art projects, community festivals and occasions,
and undertook volunteer mentoring to gain an understanding of, and familiarity with, the lives of older Somali women. I was aiming to establish trust by entering their world and respecting their rituals. In doing so, I was reversing the role of the ‘other’, making me the stranger, the one who is vulnerable and unaccustomed to daily Somali life. Field notes record my observations of activities and interactions with the community, such as the first time I participated in ‘taking tea’, a common ritual when visiting a Somali household.

The flat I enter is immaculate, we discard our shoes and enter the small overheated living area. We sit on comfortable oversized sofas upholstered in beautiful earthy tones that reflect the African landscape. We are invited for tea and it begins with grinding herbs and spices in a large mortar and pestle which causes the air to be filled with an intense aroma. It is then added to a large pot of intensely sugary water for about 10 minutes to brew. It is poured into large mugs of half filled warm milk to make a rich aromatic tea. It is only when we have begun to sip that we all sit to ‘begin’ our conversations. My first taste provides me with a sugary hit that is beyond anything I have drunk and I look around to see if anyone else is overwhelmed with the sweetness but they have not flinched. These ‘tea rituals’ allow me to work all day at a frantic pace only to feel the sugar ‘down’ late afternoon. It is this tea however, that provided the energy that kept women working all day in Somalia. (Field notes, 2010)
Over 12 to 18 months, I got to know the Somali women by participating in their everyday lives.

I attend another celebration at the Flemington Community Centre and I am beginning to enjoy myself and fit in. People are happy to have me ‘hang around’ and even come up to me specifically to tell me something about the Somali way of life. I begin to remember names, faces and small phrases in Somali. Miriam, one of the ladies in our group, is the head cook and she is extremely pleased I was eating and enjoying her food. We dance and eat the night away and I leave with trays of cakes and sweets and the feelings of trust and understanding are beginning to feel their way into the project. It’s so nice to be working on the ground and working with the people in my study. (Field notes, 2010)

For Guerin and Guerin (2007), learning informally by participating in the community painted a more accurate picture about health topics and produced data that could be used for intervention and policy making. This process, however, required extensive preparation by gaining trust from community members, collaborating with gatekeepers and gaining permission for projects. All of this was costly in both time and money. Researchers cannot simply waltz in unannounced and start gathering data; participation would be low and data superficial. Miller (2004) argues that with regard to refugees it is the exceptional published article that includes any discussion of the research relationship. In his experience, entering a refugee community is a complicated process that takes time, negotiation and a respect for the gradual development of relations based on trust and mutual respect. “Even under the best circumstances, this can be a challenging experience with its share of missteps and moments of uncertainty” (Miller, 2004, p. 218). This is reflected in my first experience discussing the project with stakeholders from the Somali community.

I am finding it very frustrating because the project rests in other people’s hands and I cannot be in control of promoting this because of the language barrier and the lack of cultural knowledge. On nearly all the points I bring up like what questions I would like to ask or what the women would like to make in the art classes, Fadumo says to me, ‘Georgia, you have to tell them smoothly, it cannot be done all in one go, it has to be done smoothly, Somalis like to take time and discuss things’. So we never really talk about the actual project, we sort of talk around it. (Field notes, 2010)

As the research progressed over many months, I discovered that my participants had become very close to me. I cared deeply about them, what happened to them and their families and they, in turn, became more interested in me.
We sit in the group today and I cannot believe how far we have come. At the beginning people hardly spoke at all and were very hesitant about giving information. Now they sit down and say, ‘so what questions do you have for us today!’ They get disappointed when I am not there asking them about their life and stories. I too feel much more comfortable with them, even driving them home to their estate, even though we don’t speak the same language we manage to have a conversation and discussion and get directions! (Field notes, 2010)

Some of the people from DGCHS had also developed an understanding of the project and were concerned about the health and wellbeing of the Somali women. A DGCHS nurse expressed the many factors that can influence the thoughts and practices of Somali women.

These women have had a hard life, they just want to come here and relax. When they get here however they find that waiting for appropriate public housing takes 5-10 years; learning the language is very difficult; negotiating how the health system works is complicated; a lack of employment for older workers; health issues that they have never faced before such as obesity and diabetes; the complex issues of homeland; expectations of how to act; cultural assumptions about living, eating, respect and dignity; the constant worry about family members back home. (Kim, a nurse from DGCHS working with refugees)

3.1.8 “constant negotiation”: gaining access

Gaining access into the Muslim community requires an entry point. Hamzeh and Oliver (2010) discuss the traditional forms of entry into research, such as the participants signing consent forms at the beginning of the study. In their study of Muslim girls, Hamzeh and Oliver (2010) highlighted the need to change this into a process that stretches throughout the study’s duration. The researchers were not granted entry only at the beginning of a study; they had to constantly negotiate along the way by maintaining relationships with their participants. Access was, therefore, challenging through the course of the project. The researcher in Hamzeh and Oliver’s (2010) study was a Muslim woman who did not wear a hijab and needed to constantly negotiate tensions arising from differences in order to maintain relationships. Alternatively, in Langellier’s (2006) study, being a cultural and community outsider proved an advantage, allowing the researcher to gain more respect and disclosure than a local inside researcher was given. In my study, I was constantly negotiating with stakeholders and gatekeepers about what was acceptable and what was not. Obtaining consent was only part of the project.
There is a constant negotiation with both stakeholders, changes in what they want, previous decisions upturned, it is very frustrating. People change their mind very quickly and just when I think I am ‘in’, they shut you out again, put you on the fringe. There is always this issue of “Inshall Allah” meaning that whatever happens will happen, it is in god’s hands, you must wait. The most recognizable concept of entering a study is when the consent forms are signed, but for my project this ‘entry’ stretches over the entire project as participants constantly negotiate what you can and can’t do. (Field notes, 2009)

The importance of reflexive relationships resounds across many studies involving Muslim communities (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Langellier, 2006, 2010). It appears we need to stay reflexive about relationships and social conditions that affect conversations and attempt to produce a non-hierarchical environment that is conducive to sharing stories.

Miller (2004) understands that many communities have difficult histories and are guarded in their interactions with ‘outsiders’. So there is an essential process of developing relations of trust and thereby gaining access. The failure to get this type of access can result in data that does not accurately reflect the participants' feelings, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Miller (2004) describes this as “front stage responses” (p. 222). To gather meaningful data, we have to invest the time and energy to “facilitate interpersonal access and the sharing of ‘backstage’ information” (Miller, 2004, p. 222). Participants may shape their responses based on the degree of trust they feel toward the researchers. After nearly two years in the field, with many of the participants becoming like grandmothers to me, they became insistent that I keep asking them questions, creating discussions.

As the project draws to a close and we prepare for the art exhibition, the group today was manic and loud. So loud in fact that the men down the hall way came down and said this sounds like a wedding. There is so much singing, laughing and action and he commented that each week this group gets louder and louder. All the women insist that I ask them questions, they seem to be bursting with their stories that it is hard to keep up. I can’t believe that we started with two women who were extremely reluctant to talk and now they are unstoppable and have complete faith and trust that I will re tell their stories properly. (Field notes, 2010)

My field notes reflect a significant moment in the research process as I recognised that we had achieved the aim of effective qualitative coyote research. As a researcher there were many things going on simultaneously, listening to different
voices, looking from different perspectives, self-reflecting on the process. When the participants wanted more and were prepared to share beyond what was anticipated I felt that I had achieved a marker towards a successful research project.

3.1.9 “individual attention and encouragement”: recruiting older women in the Somali community

Recruiting older Somali women was a slow process that required patience and lots of clear, concise explanations about how the study would be conducted. Lee et al. (1997) consider two methods of recruiting ethnic minority women to a health promotion program: active and passive. Passive recruitment involves making the target population aware of the study and having volunteers approach the researcher. Active recruitment targets specific groups or individuals often in defined areas and while it allows the researcher a generalisable sample that accurately reflects the population, it often has low recruitment rates and can be timely and costly in following up participants. Older Somali women required individual attention and encouragement to be a part of the project and this needed to be reinforced regularly.

Active recruitment was done weekly or fortnightly to encourage the older Somali women to attend sessions. An example was visiting Asha, one of my first experiences trying to meet individually with women in their context.

Asha tells me she has waited five years already to get her own flat and she keeps going to the housing office and they tell her she must wait, what is she to do? She tells me ‘I am tired in the head always too much going on, my blood pressure is very high, it is very hard’. So many people live in this small cramped environment and she worries constantly about relatives at home and the country that she once belonged to. (Field notes 2010)

This experience helped me to understand Fadumo’s difficulty in getting women to participate. I could see that these women were struggling with issues such as housing and that being part of my project would not be a priority. Even though Asha attended the group weekly there were recruitment issues with others that required specific strategies to be implemented. Fadumo would phone many of the participants throughout the project to reassure them that the project was culturally appropriate and to promote attendance. In addition, Fadumo and I made weekend visits to participants’ homes to ‘get to know one another’ over tea were essential in establishing rapport and building trust.

Fadumo and I continued our recruiting drive today by visiting another lady in the estate. It requires a couple of hours for each lady and this day
is no different. We enter the building and rise to the 8th floor, moving along endless corridors to find a flat that has the same layout as all but upon entering find a warm almost African inspired décor that is earthy and rich in colour. We enter and remove our shoes, a small woman clothed in a purple and white hijab greets us. We enter the lounge room and she turns the television down which is chanting Islamic teachings. It is somewhat soothing background music and looks like it comes directly from somewhere in the Middle East. We discuss families and children and where I am from and what the project is set out to achieve. While this is happening the woman grounds heavy spices in a mortar and pestle and sets the spices to simmer over the stove. It is poured into delicate cups and we sip this extremely sweet brew with hints of cloves, cardomom and cinnamon. It is very warming on a cold winter’s day and the woman is reassured by my answers and Fadumo’s presence. The conversations move from English and Somali and she is impressed with my knowledge of Islam, the Koran and my few phrases of Somali. We leave two hours later buzzing from the sugar hit and knowing that we have established enough trust for her to show up. (Field notes 2010)

Moriarty and Butt (2004) used a similar technique, known as ‘snowballing’, to supplement recruitment numbers for their study of inequalities in quality of life among older people from different ethnic groups. This involved recruiting members using their contacts within the minority group, which aided in developing good relationships and trust between the researchers and the target population. Similarly, Fadumo was my lifeline to establishing and maintaining the trust required for the project to continue.

3.1.10 “highly complex project”: ethical dilemmas of protection and trust

A certain amount of coyote work was needed to develop a level of trust so that the women would agree to participate in the research project. Informed consent is a central concern for all ethical research and in studies such as mine where participants do not speak English, extra mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that this procedure is carried out correctly. In order for the participant to understand what is being asked of her, the information needed to be placed in a simple yet informed way that summarised the key elements of the project. This meant having an interpreter translate the information into Somali and in some cases having only verbal consent. The group I worked with met on a weekly basis and was labelled by the stakeholder as a ‘mental health group for older Somali women’. This label posed challenges for approval of my ethics application. It appeared that being ‘at risk’ of a mental health condition complicated the understanding of consent. The first ethics application was rejected by the Ethics Committee and placed into a ‘high risk category’ requiring more
information for such a ‘highly complex project’. This was extremely frustrating because when I was with the women it seemed straightforward. They were able to understand the consent process in their own language, yet the Ethics Committee in the dominant white world of a university appeared to struggle with them accepting consent, saying because the women were at risk of having a mental health condition they could not understand consent. I realise that Ethics Committees are obliged to maintain a duty of care to participants in research projects and I, as the researcher, have to follow procedure, however, there must be some level of awareness that CALD participants can understand the consent process. Consent should be a context for creativity, not constraint, yet these processes and the forms required became so complex that I was very hesitant about showing all this paperwork to the participants.

Somali women are very hesitant when it comes to showing them paperwork that they have to sign as they worry that anything might get into the hands of immigration officials or Ministry of Housing and yet ethics is asking me to do more and more complex forms. In some ways it puts the women off being part of the study, all they want to know is me, who I am and the relationship I have with the community. (Field notes, 2010)

Helgesson et al. (2005) also argue that research participants who have a limited understanding of the study give consent because they trust the researchers and the research communities to which they are attached. Because I was a trusted member of the research community, participants felt happy to disregard most of the information offered and settle for basic facts about how their participation would affect them in practice. This made me even more protective of the women; they trusted me, my coyote role was enhanced.

As this process continued to become more complex I was asked to explain the project in person to a panel of sixteen Ethics Committee members. The first thing I noticed was the lack of diversity on the panel.

There is only one Asian man taking notes on a computer, the rest of the panel are white academics. The only people who ask me questions are white older middle class men who are struggling to understand why I just couldn’t ask direct questions around physical activity, why did I have to listen to the stories of their lives as well? I tried to explain that the lives of these women are interwoven from many stories and one part of their life is connected to many others. The men really just want a question and answer technique and this is exactly what Somali women don’t want as they have to continually answer questions from authorities all the time. (Field notes, 2010)
Phoenix (2010) observed that “overly restrictive situations can easily arise, protecting institutions and sponsors at the expense of letting participants’ stories be heard” (p. 105). This meant that I had to work “in secreto”, protecting and operating within Ethics Committee guidelines and trying to develop their trust that I would follow their strict regulations (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). At the same time I am “smuggling” and protecting the participants from the rigours of the ‘dominant’ committee and establishing their trust that I will protect their rights and responsibilities (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). As I move between the worlds of the dominant culture and Somali culture I develop new ways of explaining concepts to both groups so that each is protected and respected.

3.1.11 “the legality of the process”: consent

As discussed in 3.1.10, as a coyote it was my duty to ensure that the participants understood consent in the most culturally appropriate way. After consulting with DGCHS and the United Somali Women’s Organisation (USWO) representatives we determined the most appropriate method of providing informed consent for each potential participant. Bhutta (2004) argues that there is a growing appreciation of the importance of community leaders and families in the context of decision-making at the informed consent stage. It adds an element of security in traditional societies where “communal consciousness and living is the norm” (p. 744). She also highlights the inadequacy of consent forms for marginalised communities as they are designed in developed countries, translated and then back-translated to ensure that they retain their original meaning. This only serves to satisfy the legality of the process rather than the information and comprehension needs of the potential participants in the research. Lloyd et al. (2008) argue that there needs to be extensive discussion between researchers and stakeholders in regards to screening appropriate participants and transferring information. Most of the participants in this project had been identified by both stakeholders as being susceptible to either anxiety or depression. Some participants attended just for the companionship and support. Some women were not suited to this project due to irregular participation or the extent of their mental illness. This did not mean they were excluded from the art workshops, just that they were not recorded by the researcher.

At the first information session attended by the mental health group, I was present, with representatives from DGCHS and USWO, to explain the project. We discussed how the project would affect them, using plain language statements as a baseline. Fadumo then followed up with one-on-one conversations with those women who needed extra information because of their specific mental health condition. This was done in a relaxed, culturally sensitive environment with food and tea provided, to avoid individualising specific participants. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and Fadumo and I provided additional information as required. At the next
information session, Fadumo and I conducted one-on-one conversations with participants to ensure they had clearly understood what the research project was about and how it would affect them.

An independent interpreter was hired to translate the complex wording that was required by the university as Fadumo was not confident in ensuring that her translation would be accurate. Not surprisingly, when the interpreter arrived she was instantly recognised as a community member and a relaxed and informal interpretation then proceeded.

Today the interpreter arrived to explain the consent form and many of the participants were concerned that such formalities were going to take place. Understandably they seem to get very nervous when anything has to with authorities explaining procedures and then asking them questions. However, when the interpreter arrived, there were greetings and warm welcomes which I found out was because she was a respected member of the community and many of the participants knew her and her family. This instantly changed the context as there was friendly banter and easy discussion around explaining consent. (Field notes, 2010)

Once all stakeholders, participants and I had established that informed consent had been understood and agreed upon, I asked the participants to sign a plain language consent form. This consent form was provided for those who were fluent in written English and was translated for those who were not. For those who were illiterate in both English and Somali, verbal consent was taken in the presence of representatives from DGCHS and USWO and Fadumo and I. A signature on the consent form was then taken.

3.1.12 “protect the women and not expose them unnecessarily”: confidentiality

As part of developing the coyote role, it was essential that the women understood the concept of confidentiality and how this would ensure that their voices were heard under strict conditions. I wanted to protect the women and not expose them unnecessarily. I conducted all informal discussions in the strictest confidence and in a manner determined by the participants. Prior to participation in the project, I informed and reassured participants, through Fadumo, that their discussions would be confidential, that all data collected would be confidential (tapes, field notes or reflective journals) and all data that was coded would be kept separate from the coding instructions to secure anonymity of the participants. Additionally, participants were informed that standard professional practices would be in place, including:

- the participants were free to respond or not respond to any questions that were put to them
the participants were free to stop talking to the researcher and terminate the conversation at any time
all participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group
the taping of conversations was only done with the participant’s approval
participants had the opportunity to veto any material they provided to me
any reflective materials presented to me were treated as confidential and would only be known to the participant, myself and the research supervisors
all tapes and transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a secure place and any materials were kept for six years from the completion of the study.

Consent applied to all art activities, conversations, interviews, photographs of their hands and recordings. If a research participant chose to withdraw they were still able to participate in the art workshops and continue in the mental health program. There are obviously limitations to these practices which may include the participants not feeling confident enough to terminate the discussion; wanting to please the researcher; or feeling uncomfortable discussing some topics in front of others. As mentioned in Chapter 1, section 1.8 issues around sexuality and female genital mutilation were topics beyond my research role as a white woman. Even as a border dweller, merging myself with the group, I could never truly be Somali and there is a crossroads where women may come to feel that there are topics that should not be discussed with outsiders.

3.1.13 “partners and coyotes who crossed borders with me”: trusting partnerships

Effective qualitative research is founded on the relationships between the researcher and their key informants. This project required trusting relationships between myself, Fadumo my informant, and Louise the artist. They were partners and coyotes who crossed borders with me to help make the project work.

“I know I am going to like her”: my friend and informant Fadumo

Building on prior positive working relationships is an essential part of conducting community-based research (Israel et al., 1998). As mentioned in the Prologue, I had established a relationship with my informant, Fadumo, and DGCHS during the Care Connection project. As this relationship became the foundation of the success of the cross-cultural aspect of the project, I think it is important for the reader to be aware of Fadumo’s background and of our relationship. When Fadumo became the supervisor of the weekly older Somali women’s health group our ‘official’ relationship began.
I think I have just made a great friend and possible informant for my project. She is a young woman, maybe early thirties, full Muslim dress, funny, articulate and a great mediator between western culture and her own. Her job is very demanding and requires extensive fieldwork just talking to people and establishing relationships with the community. I know I am going to like her. (Field notes, 2009)

Fadumo collected and translated all the information from the interviews conducted as part of this study. It is important to acknowledge that a close personal friendship developed over the four years and the bond we formed affected how the data was collected. Our combined knowledge enhanced our understanding of the issues and the timing and placement of questions. Both of us come with our ‘cultural baggage’ but we were able to cross each other’s cultural borders to guide and inform the methodology. This term, ‘cultural baggage’, was one chosen after a discussion during one of the data collections.

Georgia: I think ‘cultural baggage’ is a term we could use that describes what we carry with us wherever we go and it influences what we listen to, what we record, and how the study flows.

Fadumo: This is a good word but I will have a very bad back as my baggage will be much bigger than yours Georgia [laughing]. (Field notes, 2010)

Fadumo’s comment made me realise that perhaps she felt a great deal of what Anzaldua describes as ‘chaos’ in this process of living in between overlapping and layered cultural spaces (Betancor, 2000, p. 238). She felt a great sense of protection for the participants as she was a highly respected member of the Somali community and part of her role, both as a member and a DGCHS employee, was to make sure that the participants were able to trust her and that she could provide them with guidance. She straddled the border of Somali and Australian culture, sensitive to both yet wrapped closely in the “husks of her culture” (Anzaldua, 1987, p.103). Figures 3.1 and 3.4 represent this crossroads of cultures, Fadumo’s hands hennaed weekly with intricate Somali symbols and her nails the bright colours matching her hijab or dress. She had two phones, one for work and one for her personal life, to each she spoke either Somali or English or the language of the “forked tongue” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 77). It was constantly slipped into her hijab and she had the skill to run two different conversations and languages at once. After many months in the field she would speak to me in Somali forgetting I was ‘not one of them’ and I would look at her and say “English, Fadumo, remember I need English”.

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A trusting working partnership between Fadumo and I spilled into a friendship that has continued to flourish beyond the project. Over many months we saw each other both on the project and socially with her family at her home. Being invited to her house was one of the biggest steps of trust in our friendship.

Today I was invited to Fadumo’s house. This seems to be a big step in any friendship when you step inside someone’s personal space, their home and family. She lives on a high rise estate very close to the city and I still find the entry into such spaces difficult to negotiate. They all look the same with endless hallways of flats but I found hers and I enter. You instantly get the smell of cardoman and incense, the warm comforting of the heat and colour of Somali culture. There are beautiful curtains in rich earthy colours and big bold furniture with heavy legs and upholstered in fawn and earthy browns. It is quite beautiful and large bowls filled with Somali herbs and spices that permeate the room. It is winter yet everyone is barefoot and the heating is at its highest and seeing her ‘outside of work’ she becomes ‘more Somali’ in this environment and I know that this is why she is good at what she does because in her heart and in her life she is one of them. (Field notes, 2010)

Much later in the project, towards the end of the second year, Fadumo reluctantly visited my house. Prior to this we had always met either at her house due to her child care commitments or in a neutral place such as a coffee shop. When she entered my home she took her shoes off but was shocked to notice that I did not. I
explained to her that it was not necessary, which she found strange because part of being ‘at home’ is being ‘free’ to walk around in bare feet. I asked her later what she thought about my house and to my shock she replied “It is the first white house I have ever been in”.

I asked Fadumo today to describe what she thought of my house. She was hesitant because she did not want to offend me and I assured her that whatever she said would not. I explained that I had discussed in the thesis what I thought of her house, which she has read so it was only justified that she could say something about mine. She said it was quite sterile and separate in that everyone had their own rooms, they were not altogether. She also explained that there was no specific cultural room set up to take guests into for ‘tea’. “Where” she said “do you come together as a family?” I pointed to the dining room table where we ate dinner every night and she said ‘but there is not warmth, no culture that surrounds it’. She said “it is very clean but everyone is separate doing their own things, not coming together as we do”. In her world communal family life is so central and yet she did not feel this in my home. (Field notes, 2011)

This exchange highlighted the cultural differences between Western individualism and Somali collectivism. In many ways I envied her communal life of family and being together, while she commented that she would love her children to have more space, a yard, their own bedroom. Together we straddled each other’s borders peering into another cultural world that changed how we both thought, how we both perceived each other.

Fadumo is a key member of the Somali community; she has credibility and visibility and was well integrated into both the Muslim-Somali world and Western culture. She has allowed me to ask questions and openly discuss concepts around Islam and Somali culture, which has helped me become a culturally sensitive researcher. Fadumo has also taken me into the public and private spaces of Somali women and their families and has allowed a smooth entry into all social contexts.

Fadumo had organised yet another group of women to talk to; her contacts are unbelievable. This time it is at her mother’s house and we sit on the floor on huge cushions with the heavy smell of incense in the air. More and more women arrive, brightly coloured and all want to talk and chat about the project. Vats of food arrive and I know Fadumo has arranged all this for me and I am completely overwhelmed by this enormous amount of kindness. Considering how long it took to get
through the paperwork of the stakeholder I can’t quite believe how warm and open this culture is to me, embracing me in every way possible. (Field notes, 2010)

Fadumo also has this wonderful mannerism that nearly all Somali people have and is used in every sentence to reassure me that she is listening and interested in what I have to say. This mannerism is quite distinctive, it’s like a sucking motion done with the lips and it goes with the nod of the head; it’s quite reassuring in a way. It is similar to me saying ‘mmmm’ when white people are talking – it keeps us connected in conversation. I once commented that when she does this she has the most luscious lips that Westernised women like me would love to have. Fadumo told me that there is a story that white people do not have these lips because when they talk, they tense their mouth so their lips become thin and terse, much like how they speak. From then on I am conscious of how I use my mouth when I speak and laugh heartedly inside when I return to family and friends and think of Fadumo’s story and why they have the mouth that they do. Figure 3.5 shows Fadumo holding the ceramic plate that was made during one of the art projects. Along with the mannerisms that represent her warmth and understanding, Fadumo’s friendship has been an integral part of the success of the project.

Establishing friendships requires a continued, everyday involvement, compassion, giving and vulnerability. It is an “investment into participants’ lives and that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 734). As described earlier, Fadumo and I developed a trusting relationship as two coyotes working together and this became a lasting friendship. When we use friendship as methodology a new set of obligations is made and not all offer a smooth, comfortable road. When we engage others, especially those who are living in the margins, and become entwined in their daily struggles and oppression, we cannot simply walk away, turn off the recorder and exit the field. Tillmann-Healy (2003) describes the benefits and challenges around friendship as a method from both the researcher’s perspective and the participant’s perspective. For the researcher, friendship can bring us to “a level of understanding and depth of experience we may be unable to reach using only traditional methods” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 737). By studying Somali history I can learn about the participants’ history and politics; by being a part of their lives I experience their culture and their everyday movements; by giving them my compassion I experience their emotions, disappointments and oppression. Also, by developing a friendship with Fadumo I gain a deeper understanding of the lives, values and beliefs of Somali women.
Every week I find something more interesting about Fadumo’s life, and I feel that sometimes I am continually taking from her but she is gaining little from me. Today she described the country and her circumstances from where she came, describing the horrific killing of her father and her family’s escape to our country. Layers and layers of sad stories that she tells me with tears in her eyes and in mine. I feel a sense of guilt that I can only provide empathy and compassion towards her and I have no ‘story’ or ‘history’ to tell her about my life that would be of equal value to her. She does not have to tell me these stories but she insists, arguing that for me to understand ‘we are a nation of storytellers, we do not write information down, this is how we communicate’. It doesn’t matter how many books I read about Somali history, a friend’s story speaks a thousand words. (Field notes, 2010)

Pease (2010) argues that when white people recognise their privileges it can provoke a sense of anxiety. There can be an overwhelming sense of sadness and guilt when they realise the social injustices that exist in our society; “guilt and shame can play an important role in addressing white people’s complicity in white privilege” (p. 123). I felt this with my friendship with Fadumo as my many white privileges became more evident in my everyday activities with her. When we walked into a local store to buy groceries together shopkeepers treated us differently and we both knew why, without saying anything to one another. I felt ashamed and even angry that a
shopkeeper I knew quite well would do this; it highlighted the daily frustration of the social injustice that Fadumo felt. This occurred throughout the project but more so on one particular occasion, described here.

Today was Fadumo’s last day of work before she goes on maternity leave and it couldn’t be timelier as we enter Ramadan the following week and things really shut down over the next month. I had arranged for Louise, the artist to come and celebrate with us and with the women over tea and sweets. Fadumo arrived to say she had just come from a morning tea that DGCHS had provided for her as it was her last day. She handed me an envelope and said “this is what they gave me, could you explain this to me”? I opened it to find a voucher for a beautician whose services include spray tanning, eyelash extensions, waxing and make up trials. I laughed and said “I think this is a joke, now show me the real presents’. Fadumo laughed as she explained that this is what they gave her and she saw the shock and shame come over my face. I thought I had seen everything, experienced most things in these women’s lives but this was too much. Louise and I stood together and openly said “we are embarrassed white people at this moment”. I have been angry, ashamed and full of guilt that people can be so culturally insensitive and from an organisation that is supposed to represent diversity. Everywhere I go I ask friends, family what sort of present would you give a Muslim woman going on maternity leave? Even when I told my teenage children who go to multicultural high schools they were shocked at the insensitivity of it all. For me it highlights the entrenched lack of cultural understanding and continued injustice of how people are treated if they are not white. I think, what have I really achieved? (Field notes, 2011)

This brought out the coyote in me, being very protective of Fadumo and aware of how she is treated by the white dominant culture. It helped me understand the day-to-day struggle in Somali life and their border dwelling positionality. On the other hand, border friendships also have their challenges, as discussed in 3.1.6. Because we reveal and invest so much of ourselves, researchers can become exposed and vulnerable (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). I often over-identified with the women, like an ‘over-rapport’, and I began to feel overwhelmed by their situations. Kleinman and Copp (1993) question whether there is a right amount of rapport and argue that what matters more than our degree of identification is what we do with our feelings. I dealt with my distress by talking to a supportive husband and supervisors and I made genuine attempts to help out by taking women to appointments, writing letters or financially supporting them to supply basic needs. This was my way of ‘smuggling’, protecting those ‘in darkness’ and dealing with my emotions.
I feel so powerless that Fadumo is experiencing such hardships at the moment. She is living in high rise accommodation with two small children awaiting the arrival of her husband who is stuck with immigration in the US. She has no carpets which are absolutely crucial for the Somali way of life and the place is cold and draughty. I have called all the carpet retailers in the area and have had carpets donated for her to place in her flat; this is what I would do for any friend but I also know that it makes me feel better as a person that I can help her out and provide some comfort to her family. Have I stepped over the mark as a researcher? (Field notes, 2009)

Tillmann-Healy (2003) argues that whatever action is taken, the researcher should always consider the power relations that exist and “constantly strive to balance the need to advance the social justice agenda of their projects and the need to protect one another from harm” (p. 745). Fadumo became ‘pressed’ between Somali life and Western culture through her employment and pleasing me as the researcher. I felt an obligation to protect her as I had, not intentionally, pushed her onto the edge of the border; I felt it was my ethical duty to ensure that no harm came to her because of my research.

The participants who take researchers in as friends also increase their level of risk. It requires a great deal of trust to become friendly with someone outside your own culture and one who is for the Somali women, ‘the other’. Fadumo felt the pressure of getting the participants to attend the group and conform to Western timelines.

In one of our many car trips together Fadumo discusses her frustration at trying to get participants to commit to the project and come every week at the set times. She tells me “this culture requires a lot of time and patience about understanding what the project is about, who will be there, what’s in it for them, it’s like we have to physically be there in explaining the whole thing along with staying with them for tea and talking about their lives as well, it’s very difficult for Western people to understand”. She also feels the pressure to have participants come every week on time as this requires her to ring and often visit people every weekend to remind them and me hassling her about how many will be coming. Fadumo is so gracious that she never complains about this extra work that she needs to do for recruitment but I know that my hassling every week contributes to the pressure she feels. (Field notes, 2010)
Kleinman and Copp (1993) highlight that good relationships with informants is not only about our feelings of competence in getting along with others or our exceptional skills of establishing rapport, but rather thinking about what we are offering that makes us attractive and useful to them. Engaging Fadumo in the research provided her with new ways of thinking, feeling and relating to the research. It allowed her a greater understanding and depth of knowledge of the community and the difficulties surrounding recruitment. It also promoted her commitment to social change within her community.

Today was one of our slow days at the group with only a few participants coming. Fadumo discusses the frustrations of getting the ladies to the group but also that she is persistent to see change within her community. She said today “it is extremely hard to break this kind of thinking because praying and religion is all they care about, but we must keep going, we need these projects to make change, we need this Georgia, we really need this”. (Field notes, 2010)

Although her commitment never waivers, there is a downside for Fadumo taking part in this project as it involves clashes with other community members. Israel et al. (1998) accept this as a major challenge in community-based research. There were conflicts around who represented the community, who in the community would be excluded, and competition turf issues between the DGCHS stakeholder and the Somali community groups. Fadumo was in a unique position as she was employed by DGCHS as the community leader for the group, yet she was an individual who was part of the Somali community. Although she had knowledge and understanding of community life, she had an obligation to represent the DGCHS and the values and ethos of the organisation. As a skilled coyote, she was developing trust and protecting the participants as well as trying to maintain trust within the Somali community. She constantly 'smuggled' people within and around the DGCHS, negotiating and protecting those who participated in the study. As a result, Fadumo was placed in a position of losing trust from those who respected her most, her community.

There is a lot of tension around clans and whose blood is whose, the line of your family is very important. Fadumo was very upset today about Isha complaining about her to other community members and I knew this was coming as tensions had been rising over the last few weeks. Fadumo is trying to recruit participants but this is proving difficult as Isha is establishing her own community organisation and wants women to go to that and not ours. When these insults establish themselves within the community it not only affects the individual but their entire family, so now Fadumo’s relatives are part of the clash which extends to
all hours of the day and to all celebrations. The project has infiltrated her life beyond anything I imagine and, in this case, not in a good way. (Field notes, 2010)

It was, therefore, part of my ethical coyote duty to protect Fadumo from harm as much as possible while remaining culturally sensitive to community clashes. DGCHS provided counselling and mediation to Fadumo and Isha to develop norms and ways of operating. However, the Western concept of mediation was always going to be a difficult process as conflict within the Somali community runs deep within clans and this clash was to continue beyond one or two mediation sessions. In some ways it seemed that the conflict had to ‘run its course’ as this is how disagreements are settled within the Somali community, with constant discussions, stories and group conversations. In many ways it reflects the collective culture that Somali life operates in, with an emphasis on family closeness and the roles each play within community life.

In concluding this section on Fadumo as a coyote, I would like to add a postscript. Fadumo went on maternity leave during the writing up of this project and another young Somali woman took over her position. I was still visiting the group weekly for ‘tea and talk’ and found the connection with the new community worker very difficult to establish. She was reluctant to translate, was not accurate or would not translate my questions because she did not think the women would have an opinion. I realised how wonderfully professional Fadumo was and dedicated to everything I asked, every word that could not be translated, every question, every context explained. She never once questioned my questions or the answers of the participants, always treating me and them with total respect. I realised that she was a truly professional coyote, dedicating herself to living a border-dwelling life, guiding me and the women between two cultures and understanding it all with respect and dedication.

“we were instantly suited to each other”: Louise the artist

The art project was used as a communication tool for participants that allowed time to develop narrative processes. Initially I planned to use a local community arts centre as a stakeholder to help plan and coordinate the arts program, but after interviewing the many artists they suggested, I failed to find a culturally appropriate person. It should be noted that these are my subjective feelings and impressions about the artists I interviewed. I felt that many were aggressive and lacked the warmth and understanding needed for such a culturally sensitive group. Many I interviewed seemed demanding and critical of the unstructured processes that I was suggesting and wanted to produce artistic pieces rather than use art as a communication tool. They wanted to receive a significant hourly rate and asked how the program would ultimately be advertised to show their credentials and their ‘commitment’ to local communities. I was interviewing people using my protective
‘radar’, making sure that the person I chose would be suited to the project and respect the needs of the participants. Many wanted themselves featured in local papers and magazines, which I felt was inappropriate for this project. I had become the gatekeeper, coyote or protector of my participants. I wanted to create an environment that promoted trust and appreciated and valued the women’s perspectives; I wanted a person who would understand their plight. I am not trying to persuade the reader that ‘I knew best’ on which artist to choose; rather I was protecting those who were going to be part of the project by following what they wanted.

Very early on in the project, a refugee nurse at DGCHS mentioned a friend who was an artist at The University of Melbourne. I arranged to meet her and we were instantly suited to each other and she to the project. Louise had an aura of compassion and softness, she knew that the participants needed time and understanding along with creativity. She supported the concept of using art to facilitate conversation rather than to meet ‘artistic goals’.

When I first met Louise at the coffee shop, I knew instantly that this would work. She was a kind compassionate woman who knew exactly how the group should be run. Her relaxed and natural nature was perfect for the participants and for me. I heard endless stories about her work with the disabled and disadvantaged and I knew she was going to be wonderful. (Field notes, April, 2010)

Figure 3.6 reflects Louise’s warmth and brightness and her commitment to making the project successful. Her compassionate working style was an instant attraction for the women.

Figure 3.6 Louise holding some of the participants’ ceramic works.
At each of the art workshops, Louise was careful not to push the participants in any direction; rather she talked and worked her way around the group suggesting ways of moving clay or things to sew. The participants found this relaxed inclusiveness reassuring and they slowly developed an interest in making artwork while involved in conversation. Figure 3.7 shows Hawo at work during a ceramics class. Hawo was reluctant to get involved in the ceramics but Louise’s supportive and inclusive teaching style gave her the confidence to create some lovely pieces of artwork.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 3.7 Hawo’s ceramic workshop experience**

Matarasso’s (1997) arts project gave participants the capacity to contribute to the health and social support of vulnerable people. It built confidence in minority and marginalised groups and strengthened people’s commitment to engaging and tackling problems. When I asked Louise how she got participants involved she reflected on her own coyote behaviour, noting that she was able to guide the women “by giving them the clay and the rolling pin and showing them a picture, not to necessarily do but as a guide” (Louise, informal interview, 2010). Louise was able to understand the women’s pain and vulnerability, which emphasised the need for “los secretos”, to create an environment that was safe and comforting (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176).

### 3.2 “los codigos”: knowing the codes

The second characteristic of Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote is knowledge of the codes of both cultures and the ability to position themselves to educate people about life across the border. As discussed in 3.1.7, I spent many hours with the participants to learn about their culture and codes, and I received an insight through my relationship with Fadumo. To understand the codes of older Somali women and
adopt the role of the coyote also required listening with what Keating (2005b) calls “raw openness” (p. 249). It begins with the belief that we are “interrelated and are willing to see commonalities or points of connection between human beings” (Keating, 2005b p. 249). Anzaldua describes this as exploring “an unmapped common ground” and the ability to recognise each person’s complex personhood (Keating, 2005, p. 250). This listening, however, can be difficult, painful and sometimes the coyote researcher makes mistakes, misunderstands people despite their best efforts, but overall the researcher risks it all to be vulnerable to people. The coyote immerses fully within a culture, within families and with individuals with a non-judgemental attitude that expands their awareness of a new world. In this section I will outline how I discovered and understood the codes of Somali life and how I was able to guide Somali women to live life on the borderlands.

3.2.1 “everyone having their turn and no one speaking out of place”: cultural connections

My first impressions of Somali culture were made during the first consultation with the USWO early in 2009 when we sat at a round table discussing how we would run the project.

The conversations are loud and intense. It’s like everyone is shouting with snippets of English amongst the Somali language. I am trying to follow the conversations but it is very difficult as the DGCHS workers and I wait for the interpretation back into English. The ladies work as a team, finishing each other’s sentences and repeating the same words, agreeing wholeheartedly with each other. A lot of the conversation goes around in circles, discussing, analysing and going over the same thing, with everyone having their turn and no one speaking out of place. (Field notes 2009)

In a collective culture like the Somali culture, the most highly sought after values are “social order, respect for tradition, security, obedience, and wisdom” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 140). People in collective cultures are socialised to maintain cooperation between members and feel concern for others’ welfare. Co-operation with key community members was crucial in this project.

Working with Isha today was a real breakthrough. She is a key community member and although we did not discuss a lot about my project we did discuss the future of the Somali community and how research can benefit them. I realised in this ‘tea and talk’ moment that if she did not like me or was not happy with my answers there is no way this project would go ahead. Including her in the decision making is
crucial and allows her voice to be heard instead of mine. (Field notes, 2010)

Cultural connections help explain the relationships between the researcher, those being researched and the cultural systems in place. A cultural paradigm involves “an examination of how the history people live is produced by structures that have been handed down from the past” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 185). It joins cultural texts that are the prescribed cultural roles, the lived experience and the subsequent relationship with everyday life. As discussed in 3.1.7, spending time in the Somali community prior to recruitment was an essential part of learning about the cultural life of older women. One of my first gatherings with some older women provided a wonderful insight into the ‘oral world’ of Somali life.

Today I met Syrad who is a key member of the older women and what a character, full of life and folk tales. It was a frantic mix of Somali, English and translations that amazingly went for three hours and it felt like 45 minutes. Everything was discussed from travels to family to what my topic was and many of them had said “we have no purpose, no job, no care, no husband and we are bored”. In Somalia they tell me that they would get up in the morning, shower, do jobs, clean, cook and have activities with friends. Instead here, they sit, watch TV and do nothing. All their conversations are with their hands, banging intermittently on the table to make a point, dramatic facial and hand expressions to demonstrate their feelings and their lives. It is like a performance, never stopping and only does so when some walk outside for a cigarette, coughing and spluttering all the way. We drank sweet tea from polystyrene cups in a cold draughty room but it was fantastic, a learning experience that stories and the telling of them are an essential part of Somali life. (Field notes, May 2010).

3.2.2 “code switching”: the slip of the tongue

A good working relationship is essential between the researcher and the translator/interpreter in cross-cultural qualitative research (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Birbili, 2000; Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2007; Bradby, 2002; Edwards, 1990; Smith, Chen & Liu, 2008; Tsai et al., 2004). I relied on Fadumo to understand and translate the vocabulary, tone and accents of the Somali language. Often in her interviews words came up that did not exist in the Somali language, such as the word ‘freezer’ which was borrowed from English and seemed to offer a more direct expression than the Somali alternative. Bradby (2002) calls this “code switching” and it provides vocabulary precision or the ability to discuss a topic more accurately, as occurred during the conversations with many participants (p. 847).
Today Fadumo was having a conversation with the ladies about food and I was able to pick up what the conversation was about and the direction it was taking because many of the words slip back into English. I asked her about this and she mentioned that many of the words in ‘Aussie’ cannot be translated properly in Somali so they just use the English word. This prompted us to have a large discussion around translating words and trying to get the meanings across accurately. (Field notes, 2010)

Language provides a good example of coyote behaviour and mestizaje border-dwelling, where people who live in a country where their language is not the dominant one create their own language, a combination of two languages. This is further discussed in 5.10.1. Ultimately, this becomes a language that represents their border identity – not identifying with Australian cultural values and speech and yet struggling to hang on to a truly Somali identity. Although these ‘slips’ of language in English are helpful for me as a coyote researcher to follow the conversations and learn the codes, it is a language created to cope and merge on the borderlands; that space of in-between-ness, the space between two cultures.

3.2.3 “a state of soul”: talking in conversations

During data collection the women would talk about their lives here and in Somalia. Their everyday chatter was intertwined with mystic and historical stories that helped them develop strategies to survive on the borderlands. As mentioned in the literature review, Chapter 2, section 2.3.1, the conversations around their life experiences in the homeland can “fuel diasporic imaginations”, which allow the women to merge their past and their future and live out their lives on the border with a sense of belonging and place (Skribis, 2007, p. 327). On one side of the border within their homes and families Somali women are constantly exposed to the essence of Somalia, it is “a state of soul - not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (Anzaldua, 1987 p. 84). It is here that they feel safe and away from the dual identity they are forced to adopt when they cross over to the other side. It is here that they can be truly Somali without Anglo influences and tell their stories within conversations as they should be told. Storytelling, Minh-ha (1989) describes as the “simplest vehicle of truth”, a method of communication for transferring the natural form of life (p. 123). The power of the story is that it provides us with insight into other people’s lives; it revives or keeps alive those forgotten, deceased or a reflection of oneself. These stories are sometimes funny, sometimes sad; but there is always a lesson in each one.
Stories through everyday conversations often pass through generations and are changed with each storyteller; “the granddaughter picks up the story where her grandmother left it and carries it to its end accordingly, the way it must be told” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 144). Every woman partakes in this transmission of information by holding a sense of guardianship of stories passed on to her for her creation, “in this horizontal and vertical vertigo, she carries the story on, motivated at once by the desire to finish it and the necessity to remind herself and others that ‘It’s never finished’” (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 149). When the women were telling me ‘Somali tales’ there would always be more than one narrator.

Today a story was told about a Somali farmer and his wife and it was all told by the whole group. One woman would start and then another would take over or correct the story line until it was finished. Then the last two women who had not said anything at all finished it by providing like a ‘postscript’ to the story about how this relates even today to the way we should behave. (Field notes, 2010)

These processes are ongoing and bond the women, helping them to understand and negotiate their border worlds together. These stories helped explain their behaviours, attitudes and values as border dwellers in the Australian culture.

I came to understand that conversations were intertwined with stories about Somali culture. The stories were often long and moved from one storyline to another but it was all a part of understanding the codes. Personal stories are readily collected and provide a window to people’s experiences of health and illness. One example was the famous Somali story of Allowarra, a queen who once held power over all the males. When this story was originally told it took many hours as versions from all the women were agreed upon and the laughter was finally controlled. Fadumo explains this in the following transcription.

This woman used to have men for slaves. She cuts his [points to the scrotum] so that he cannot have babies anymore and they won’t run away and they don’t want women and they will work for her [hysterical laughter]. These men are nobody, they are nothing, she treats them just as a person who looks after animals. Nobody likes her she is a bad woman. Every woman who is stupid now is called Allowarra. All men are upset at Allowarra and even today they think any woman who stop men from succeeding is called Allowarra. That word become very famous in Somali culture. But women know that when Allowarra smashed them down there they smash their brains as well because they have their brains down there too! Men think that because we can’t crush those things anymore they have control over us but we can do other things like play with their brains. (Field notes, 2010)
This legend is considered a 'code' that every female must learn as it explores issues ranging from powerlessness within social structures to gender role expectations. The challenge for the ethnographer lies in collecting these stories through conversations as data and interpreting them appropriately. Heath and Street (2008) state that when the ethnographer rereads data, patterns jump off the page from which to construct a thematic analysis, rather than begin with a set of themes. It was important for me to personally do all the transcribing of the ‘talking’ in order to describe the context behind every one, because without having this incorporated into the transcription, themes would have been lost.

The experiences of researchers conducting studies with the Somali community have provided a structure for collecting conversations that is unique and reflective. Langellier (2006) struggled to find a word for ‘narrative’ in the Somali language but after much discussion with participants came up with the term ‘preserving culture’. Conversations were not being told like they used to and yet storytelling in everyday talk denoted their rich oral tradition of folktales and poetry, as it was only in 1972 that Somalis acquired a written language. To preserve this oral culture, Langellier’s (2006) participants expressed a desire to create a library of stories for themselves and future generations. In Langellier’s (2010) study, the structure of a young woman’s story reflected Somalis’ patterning of speech; “they begin with a conclusion, follow with an introduction and end with a main point” (p. 88). Similarly, I found that the participants and even the Fadumo discussed stories that started at the end and finished at the beginning or were woven into others, which reflected their cultural heritage. So, knowing the ‘codes’ of how a story is constructed is important in understanding how women ‘operate’ on the border of two cultures. An example of this could be found in the women’s conversations about their journey to Australia. Nadifo described her life in Australia, then how the war interrupted her life in Somalia, and ended with how she copes with this loss.

I try my best to keep the family together here in Australia which is 9 children and be there for them the best. I marry my husband I was 16 years old and he was an engineer and we lost everything we hope for and lived best life. I was stay home mum travel a lot even to the holy land (Mecca) with him. Boom I lost everything, even my personal things. Even though we were lucky ones and have each other and never been in a camp. I get out of the country at the beginning of the Civil War 3 days exactly with airplane, but still it was hard for me and things could never be the same again. Now I don't care about life I am just going through every day as it comes. The life here is good but it is hard as we had a wonderful happy life before, a house, food, friends and family.
This conversation then flowed to the house that she had been given and still lives in after many years in Australia. As her children have left home she now offers her home to other Somali women to provide respite for them from the crowded conditions on other housing estates. The conversation continues and moves easily from one topic to another as each life connects with another. Conversation and ‘talking’ require us to listen to the lives of the women, to understand how they look upon the world, and to understand the linguistic codes by which they convey their worlds.

3.2.4 “an excruciating exercise”: tea and talk

The Somali culture of storytelling and conversation provides an opportunity to share values, express feelings and disseminate information amongst individuals. My first experience at one of these storytelling sessions was a lesson both physically and mentally as I describe in my field notes below. This context is important because it was the first time I questioned my perceptions of health and fitness once I had been tested physically to sit on hard floors.

As part of being together as women, sharing food, taking tea and talking, sharing information and stories we always sat in a circle on large cushions on the floor. Even the oldest women sit on the floor for hours and their flexibility in getting up astounds me. They move onto all fours, and then straighten their legs, keeping their hands flat on the floor to balance. This requires extremely good flexibility in the hamstrings and even the most overweight woman is capable of performing this with ease and often many times in one night. My body on the other hand found this an excruciating exercise. My back ached, my knees locked up and I felt the desperate need to sit in a chair. I would often excuse myself to go to the bathroom just to unlock my stiff aching joints. The irony in all this was that I was supposed to ‘be the fit one’ and yet I really struggled to sit like this for more than one hour at a time. Many of the women noticed my stretching and moving and said ‘how are the knees’ and I would laugh uncomfortably saying ‘alright, just a bit stiff’. They would laugh as they were aware of my discomfort and in some ways taught me a different type of physical activity that I may need to learn from them. (Field notes, 2010)

Manderson and Allotey (2003) looked at immigrant women’s stories of conflict and outcomes in relation to health services and found that stories circulate and change through conversation; categorising them as ‘gossip’ or “informal talk conducted within small groups of familiar participants in order to elicit and share information of knowledge” (p. 4)(see also Ramsden & Taket, 2011). For Somali women, ‘gossip’ was a ‘code of knowledge’. As a researcher, I had to be part of this if I wanted to learn more
about Somali culture. Gossip is an important tool for communities to share and gather health information and health literacy. My first experience of how this worked in the Somali community was when I met a highly respected community member.

Everyone knows everyone else’s business, who is sick, who is getting married, who is pregnant and who is struggling to cope and how they can help. Each woman is warmed by this information as if a cultural blanket is warming them up. This type of information in my white world is kept private and concealed yet here all information is open, even the most private. Fadumo translates softly in my ear how one woman is suspected of being beaten by her husband and the women gradually question her about what is happening and how they can help. (Field notes, 2010)

Gossip also allows the transfer of values, ideals and religious beliefs and reflects how they are adapted to their new environment. For those with low levels of literacy in new communities, and where access to and understanding of information is limited, gossip is an important tool to discover and share stories. As highlighted in Manderson and Allotey’s (2003) study, Horn of Africa women retain a strong oral tradition with conversation and stories featuring at many social gatherings. The social life for many of these women consisted largely of gatherings at births, funerals, religious ceremonies and celebrations of good news and life events. In these environments gossip is central to the celebration; sharing and gathering information through conversation.

Today I was having ‘tea and talk’ at Hawo’s house with Fadumo and the ladies were gossiping about certain families in the community. Fadumo was translating for me and kept saying “this is not like gossip as you know it, we learn about each other talking about families, it’s how we work out how to fix our own families’ problems (laughing), it’s like a code that we follow”. I felt like a true insider having the entitlement of listening to this gossip but I thought if this was happening in a white conversation with my friends it would be ‘a scandal’. (Field notes, 2010)

Unlike Somali culture, in Australia stories and gossip are associated with mistrust and boredom, so withholding personal details prevents statements from being misconstrued and prevents rumours.

For the Somali women, the mobile phone has become central to linking them to each other and to their homeland. They use the phone every day to keep up to date on local and overseas news and to ensure that everyone is coping. My field notes reflect this important source of communication.
The mobile phone has no boundaries in Somali culture. It is vital to transferring information, stories and life’s problems. It tells us who is sick, who has had a new grandchild, who is out shopping and where to buy food. The hijab acts as a mobile phone holder; it is slipped under the tight head scarf so the mouth piece is left hanging out and leaves the hands free to perform other tasks. Many conversations are a frantic mix of English and Somali, some of which is for me and some for the mobile phone, each conversation having its own life and completely seamless in its delivery. (Field notes, 2010)

The phones are always being checked for credit, swapped or borrowed. Being present in these daily conversations allowed me to understand the codes of existing on the borderlands and how older Somali women develop and share strategies to cope.

3.2.5 “Inshall Allah”: cultural and religious codes of knowledge

Just as culture is reflected in the everyday conversations of the participants, so is religion. Mir and Sheikh (2010), in their study exploring the impact of religion on long-term health conditions, found that religious expressions were often used naturally within conversations about health, indicating the close links their participants felt between their physical and spiritual lives.

Nearly every sentence that is spoken in Somali ends with the religious phrase ‘Inshall Allah’, which means “whatever happens will happen, it is in god’s hands”. This reassures the speaker that their religious life is always closely linked to their physical day to day living. At first I found this frustrating as there was no definite answer to anything but as the project progresses I begin to use the phrase myself, reassuring myself and my participants that things will work out as they should. (Field notes, 2010)

For the women, ‘Inshall Allah’ meant an acceptance of things that would happen to them. Over time this gave me a more relaxed attitude towards the research as I came to realise that many things happen in an older Somali woman’s day that are beyond anyone’s control. To cope with instability it is necessary to take things as they come. Similarly, in the research changes took place even up to the last minute; some participants couldn’t attend, excursions were cancelled, and women were unavailable for appointments. My researcher role had to become flexible and I even began to use the phrase ‘Inshall Allah’ in my private moments to accept unpredictable situations. There was ultimately a role reversal; the researcher was now learning a new research process and codes from the participants. This reflects my extension of Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote theory, where the coyote is guided by others through different
worlds. Graham, Bradshaw and Trew (2009) also found that faith influences the mannerisms of many Muslim individuals, including hand shaking and eye contact, which can potentially lead to misunderstandings. The dress code can also have an impact, for example, I found it difficult at first to adjust to the women I was talking to who were wearing the full burqa, covering everything except their eyes.

The dress code varies so much between women even if they are from the same area, some wear full burqas while others wear partial head scarves covering part of the face while others show full face. It is very difficult, I find, to do ethnographic work when you cannot see a person’s face and their expressions, it can be quite confronting to speak to someone whose face is covered. When we are talking I feel out of place, sort of exposed in a way, my expressions are plain for them to see, there is nowhere for me to hide whereas they have a covering that gives them a safety net to use when talking. I am sure they do not feel this way but ironically it is me who feels vulnerable. (Field notes, 2009)

Some women did comment later, when I knew them well, that they felt ‘sorry for me’ being surrounded by so many Somali women and not understanding anything that was going on. As a coyote I had to learn the cultural codes and understand how to greet and interact with the women. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2010) found in their qualitative interviews with 14 asylum seekers in the UK that it took many months to establish what form of cultural context was appropriate – what they should and should not do, when and with whom. This applied, for example, to the handshake as a form of greeting. The Somali tradition is that a greeting is related to the type of friendship, clan or relative.

Now I know that you shake the hand for people you know and kiss the hand for those who you respect, such as the elderly. Sometimes if you know the person only as an acquaintance, you shake their hand and then kiss your own. Alternatively, people will cover their hand with their hijab and then shake your hand. Some Westerners find this offensive, apparently because they think you have dirty hands, but this is not the case. It is because people may have washed before prayer and do not want to touch another otherwise they have to start ablution again. (Field notes, 2010)

Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) recommended that researchers and practitioners recognise that Muslims’ communication style tends to be implicit and indirect, rather than explicit and direct, and can lead to misunderstandings. It is therefore important for researchers to understand the significance of customs and
religious phrases from the client’s language and use this cultural knowledge to enhance interactions. Community is a fundamental Islamic value, emphasising care for others, cooperation between individuals, empathy, equality and justice between people (Schwartz, 2006). Hodge (2005) has assessed the Muslim family as the basic social unit; this being a broad term that includes relatives or even the whole Islamic community. At my first family gathering at a Somali woman’s house I was welcomed with warmth and generosity, and instantly felt the family connections. Figure 3.8 was taken at a gathering where food, especially sweets, goes hand in hand with talking. For me, this photo recalls memories of laughter, singing and conversation.

![Figure 3.8 The warmth and comfort of Somali sweets at a participant’s house](image)

Women's business and religious stories and history were discussed on almost all occasions with women only. It was here I learnt about the gender and social ‘codes’ of how women identify themselves. There were never any men in the house as women met in definite segregated groups. I had asked where and what all the men were doing and the reply was “they are doing the same but at another woman’s house”. These ‘codes’ that were followed in segregating the men from the women made for a very relaxed and carefree atmosphere and an opportunity for the women to centre themselves and talk openly about their issues.
3.3 “la facultad”: reading different contexts

The third point of Valadez and Elsbree's (2005) coyote framework is that coyote researchers learn to read different situations and contexts. A main aim of the methodologies used was to understand the context for these Somali women, to understand their cultural and family lives and to be aware of the influences on their behaviour within social and political structures. It was my aim to see “the surface phenomena, the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structures below” (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). In this section I explore how I developed an understanding of how older Somali women negotiate and navigate their contextual environment.

3.3.1 “another way of life”: ethnography

Researchers may combine ethnographic methods with gerontology to further our understanding of the relationships between ethnicity and aging. Following an ethnographic methodology seemed appropriate when researching older Somali women as I attempted to explain their physical activity patterns in the context of understanding their everyday lives in a marginalised community. Rather than me studying these women, ethnographic methods allowed me to learn from them, to be taught by them. As noted by Spradley (1979), “ethnography is the work of describing a culture”, the main focus being to understand another way of life from the participant’s point of view (p. 3). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) expand on this view, emphasising the importance of prolonged immersion in the field with the ethnographer embarking on a cultural learning curve. Just as children acquire culture by watching and observing older adults, so too does the ethnographer (Spradley, 1979). Each cultural reference must be tested until the ethnographer is certain that people share a particular system of cultural meanings. In order to do this I was required to be in the field over an extended period of time so that behaviours could be observed over and over again in many situations. Spradley (1979) suggests that “Ethnography is a culture studying a culture” and I had been in the field for over 18 months when I noticed that I was living inside a particular reality without even knowing it (p.10). I began to fit into gatherings without feeling as if my whiteness was an issue and one particular visit provided the turning point of ‘fitting in’.

Today Fadumo and I visited Miriam’s house because her daughter had had a baby and she was looking after her and the baby for the first 40 days. It just so happened that when we arrived the maternal child health nurse was there along with about five other older Somali women. I was welcomed warmly and easily slipped into the cultural rituals of visiting one’s house and being interwoven amongst everyone. But I
soon noticed the maternal child health nurse, who happened to be white and middle class like myself, looked very out of place. She was trying to get this young woman to read endless booklets of material on the baby’s sleeping arrangements that needed to be followed. I knew that this was never going to happen because Miriam’s daughter is not very fluent in English let alone reading it and the nurse was looking at me wondering how I was fitting into this picture so easily. It was then that I realised that I had become so immersed in how things were done that I could clearly see how inappropriate this particular service was for this setting. To me it seemed so simple yet I felt so far away from where this nurse was I wondered how I never noticed that this process of immersion had happened. (Field notes, 2010)

This experience made me realise just how separate the dominant culture is from the Somali community and yet 18 months ago I was just as separate as this maternal child health nurse. Again it made me question one of the central issues of ethnography: what are or should be the social and moral responsibilities of the white researcher researching non-white people? Original research by Owusu (1978) looked at this issue in conjunction with data quality and found many problems. Owusu (1978) was an African living in Africa observing how some of the first white people were interpreting African lives and returning with their information to their Western lives. I thought about how this maternal child health nurse would report back the life of this young woman with her first baby. Descriptive ethnographic work by Western researchers presents information that is formed around well-established, orthodox Western views of society and Owusu’s (1978) data reflected that. Would this nurse have done this? She did follow a traditional format of questions and ‘ticked off’ answers on a clipboard; but the information she was giving was in no way a reflection of the young woman’s understanding. Just being in the room and knowing more about Somali culture, I could see how this situation should have been handled.

I thought to myself how would I have related this material now that I have been with these women for some time? Involving the many older women in the room would have been crucial as they have all had about 5-10 children each themselves and know a lot about how to care for a baby. An example occurred when I was trying to explain some of the written material and Miriam said “I do know all this I have had six children myself”. This child was going to be raised by many, not by just the mother but grandmothers, aunties, cousins and friends and not to include them was a mistake, an insult in a way that traditional ways were not part of the written white material. (Field notes, 2010)
The accuracy, trustworthiness and validity of cross-cultural research rely on the researcher’s knowledge of the ethnic group’s cultural beliefs and value orientations. Spending time in the lives of the community and understanding their context was essential for me to pick up on behaviours and cultural beliefs; when collecting data I was able to identify visual cues and characteristics that I could then ask the community worker to explain. This ensured that both the participants' voices and the context in which they spoke were part of the data analysis. This was especially important when it came to religious matters.

I have just been to an Islam conference and it really cemented my knowledge around the Koran and the Salat and its meanings. Certain behaviours and sayings I am now noticing much more often in my observations and I ask Fadumo much more about why women are acting a certain way. This is often translated back to the women as they want to know what I am asking and they seem genuinely impressed that I have noticed such small details and their meanings to Islam. (Field notes, 2010)

I was learning about living on the borderlands and ensuring that I was getting the most accurate information from the women. I was then able to make connections and assist others in understanding their daily lives and behaviours around health and physical activity.

3.3.2 “Who cares about how much exercise you do?”: putting the research into “la facultad”

During my initial conversations with women from Somalia, I listened to their stories of hardship, discrimination and isolation and I began to question why I had the right to ask them about their physical activity patterns. I began to see their realities, to see the deep structures in which they live, and to question the place and significance of physical activity in the deeper context of their lives.

Layers and layers of sad stories that she tells me fill my eyes with tears. There is so much trauma and misery that these women live through that my study regarding physical activity seems pointless and weak. Who cares about how much exercise you do when you have seen atrocities, lost children in camps, don't speak the language, live in totally inadequate housing, and feel isolated and alone? In some ways I feel like I am trivialising the lives of these women when so many more important and necessary issues need addressing. (Field notes, 2009)
An email I received from one of my co-supervisors helped me clarify these thoughts. Wendy Hunter told me that improving the women’s physical health would enable them to cope better on an everyday basis with their complex lives. I subsequently took the approach that research into older Somali women’s physical activity needs would gather information that could assist policy makers, program directors, councils and future researchers to develop culturally appropriate options. The women could then access these options and make choices about how physically active they want to be and this in turn would assist them in coping with other aspects of their lives.

My project was affected by participants’ commitments to more pressing issues such as caregiving for their large families and attending medical, Centrelink (Australian Government welfare benefits scheme) and immigration appointments. Some participants attended one week and then not again for three weeks, so recording stories took longer than expected. There were often extended interruptions with weeks where no-one attended because of religious festivals or when tragic news from Somalia spread throughout the community.

Today’s group was very small as when we had arrived many of the women were upset by the news that a relative of one of the participants had been killed in Somalia. The news spreads very quickly in the Somali community and each woman feels this pain of suffering the loss of a loved one in their home country. It reminds the others of how much they need to worry about their own relatives and the suffering that they are enduring. It’s like a black cloud that descends over everyone, the conversations turn to war, the animation disappears and participants become visibly upset about what is going on in their homeland. We keep working on the pieces of art but the women understandably lack concentration and focus. (Field notes, 2010)

Dyck et al. (1995) encountered difficulties when women broke appointments, responded minimally to questions or denied an interview in their own homes. They often experienced other people being present during interviews which the researcher found limited the participant’s answers; however, they considered this a reflection of how women talked in their everyday practices of communication rather than a barrier to data collection. Egharevba (2001) also struggled to realise that her study of Asian women was not as important in the lives of the participants as it was in hers, especially when appointments were continually missed. The evidence suggests that researchers need to allow for a less structured and more flexible mode of qualitative inquiry and allow for the changing circumstances of minority groups. I did find that the more women who were there on a weekly basis the better the data I collected as the communal gatherings reflected their everyday lives.
They were all very large tall women with an amazing presence about them and in the most amazing colours. The group seems very comfortable with each other and as more and more women arrive the talking and the laughter increases. Their conversations come alive and the communal sharing of food and Somali life came alive. (Field notes, 2009)

However, as I became immersed in the Somali culture, many of the data collection sessions were opportunities for the women to enlist me to fill out forms, transfer money, explain gas and electricity accounts. When I was keen to collect information around physical activity and motherhood the women would direct the conversation to their more pressing needs, like phone contracts. At first this made me feel frustrated as I had limited data collection opportunities but I soon realised that their life on the borderland was complex and often chaotic, and priority had to be given to daily living over and above my project. It was all part of contextualising my project and placing it in the wider perspective of these women's lives.

3.3.3 “severely stretched in its resources”: working with key stakeholders

This project involved working with a number of institutional stakeholders: DGCHS, the USWO and Deakin University. Throughout the project I came to understand the impact of their contexts on my research. These institutions often held the key to the project progressing. ‘La facultad’ is developed as one understands the social and political situations within a community and this was most evident as I made relationships with the stakeholders involved in the project (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). Initially, DGCHS contacted me and expressed interest in using members of the older Somali women’s mental health group as participants for the study. This was an existing group that met once a week to discuss and inform on health issues. DGCHS worked with the USWO to provide a culturally appropriate program. It was the aim of DGCHS to have a three-way partnership in the project and for them to connect me to Fadumo and to offer contextual and cultural knowledge about the older Somali community living within the Flemington Housing Estate. Informal and formal discussions were held with both stakeholders, however, challenges surrounding these meetings continued throughout the project. On many occasions meetings were cancelled at the last minute or there was minimal representation, which proved frustrating for me as the sole researcher. It appeared that the health service was severely stretched in its resources, had limited time to commit to small projects like this one, and the appointed team leaders were often culturally illiterate.

For the coyote, ‘la facultad’ is about working within and on the border of political, economic and gatekeeping structures and contexts (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). This project has required me to conduct research in the context of women's
lives and in the context of institutions and be able to work within and between these contexts. It meant I had to develop my negotiating and navigating skills to ensure each context was clearly understood and to move easily between them.

3.3.4 “a week full of drama”: challenges with key stakeholder

The relationship I developed with the key stakeholder provided many challenges during the project and my field notes reflect this. It is important for the reader to understand that these reflections may not be representative of how each organisation is run, they are purely my thoughts and emotions; if another researcher were to follow the same path they may see and experience the situations differently. I have no intention of denigrating any particular person and I have highlighted in section 3.1.6 the effects that my ‘privileged gaze’ may have on research observations and data collection. I have also used pseudonyms for all DGCHS employees to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Researchers frequently discuss challenges, tensions and barriers when working with institutional partners. In an attempt to achieve open communication, mutual respect and shared decision making, some lessons were learned. As Israel et al. (1998) noted, one of the most frequently mentioned partner-related issues is the presence of power differentials between researchers and other health professionals. These inequalities affected scheduled timelines, who attended meetings, who participated, whose opinions were considered valid and who had influence over what and when decisions were made.

Prior to each meeting I am told to wait outside until I am called in. I stood there thinking this must be going to be a really structured board meeting and when I enter it is three ladies chatting over coffee. I present my work trying to be as organised as possible, having copies for everyone but I know from their faces that it will be all dumped in their recycle bin. I feel like an outcast in every meeting, using me as an addition to general business. Every time I spoke, ‘Julie’ (pseudonym) rephrased my words in supposedly ‘better English’ looking directly at others as if I was not in the room. (Field notes, 2009)

Both DGCHS and the USWO found it difficult to grasp the project process and the requirement for extensive academic paperwork. Reading documents and ethics applications required a significant time commitment, which they could not make. There were weeks between emails and returned phone calls, with agreements and discussions forgotten or changed.
After numerous phone calls and emails to DGCHS there is absolutely no response and I am starting to think that this project is never going ahead. I am trying to get an approval letter to hand in with my ethics application and no one wants to take responsibility, I am passed from person to person, explaining who I am and what I need. Finally, a message comes through from ‘Julie’ to say go and pick up the letter from DGCHS in North Melbourne; it’s all ready to collect now that it is signed. Ecstatic, I drive immediately there and find the letter at the desk but not signed! How hard can this be? Friday, I drive again and pick up the letter, finally after a full week of drama! (Field notes, 2010)

This lack of time to commit to the project is parallel with the contextual lives of the participants. Both the stakeholder and the participants are inundated with the everyday issues that occupy their lives. The community workers at DGCHS appear to have problems with time commitments, inadequate support and funding of projects. Many are appointed to positions they are totally unfamiliar with and require vast amounts of time to understand the complex cultural needs of their clients. The projects are often underfunded and there is a lack of understanding of what aspects need to be funded. Community workers are snowed under with paperwork that justifies their position and programs and they participate in endless seminars and meetings to ensure everyone is following procedures. They constantly appear harassed and over-worked and are concerned about the broader political environment within the office. They rarely responded to calls, emails or letters as overwhelming amounts of paperwork filled their desks. Overall there is a reluctance to tackle ‘another new program’ and this ultimately affects the clients they are working for. Their situations are similar to their clients’, as I saw many of the older Somali women struggle with making appointments, filling out endless forms and accessing the same social worker, doctor or health care worker.

Understanding ‘la facultad’ of stakeholders often led to me feeling frustrated and angry (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). Markowitz (2002), a white American woman who visited Israel to study black Hebrews over many years, reported that she found the constant negotiation with her partnerships frustrating. Sometimes they embraced her and encouraged her visits, aiding her to coordinate interviews and inviting her to community events. At other times, however, she waited months before phone calls were returned or an invitation was offered. Lone ethnographers have always struggled with the occupational hazard that Markowitz (2002) labels it “schizophrenia”, sliding back and forth between feeling like a stranger and a friend (p. 216). Coyotes learn to understand this transformation, being able to slide between environments or borders; being able to be flexible in adaptation and understand situations and contexts quickly. There is no other support for the lone ethnographer to lean on, no other comrades sharing those experiences, just them in the field.
I have just attended an EID celebration that DGCHS was running and everyone was very enthusiastic and excited about the project. Women were coming up to me and thanking me for becoming interested in their elderly and telling me how much such a project is needed in this area. I feel warmth, understanding and it has renewed my enthusiasm, even ‘Julie’ was excited saying that whatever you need DGCHS will help in every way possible. One minute I am loved, the next I am cast aside. (Field notes, 2009)

Markowitz (2002) argues that these relationships and their challenges are “at the heart of fieldwork, the experimental stuff that gives anthropology its added dimension of knowledge that the hard sciences lack” (p. 215). These differences are often determined by positionings and can emerge as conflicts; but rather than being destructive, they can create “moments of illumination, or epistemological turning points in the research” (Markowitz, 2002, p. 215). When my project was at its most frustrating, when ‘Julie’ made it difficult for ethics approvals to be signed, I began to understand what it would be like if I depended on this government service, as many of my participants do.

This was the end; I am frustrated, annoyed and angry that ‘Julie’ and the organisation were placing enormous barriers around getting a simple form signed. I now have a new understanding and sympathy for clients who rely on this organisation for health services and support because the lack of communication skills and continual delay around decisions, making appointments and time management, must be an everyday frustration that is so time-consuming. Again, it reflects my privileged life, the organised academic world in which I live and my financial position of having health and health services at my fingertips. (Field notes 2010)

This experience supported my understanding of Somali women’s contexts within the systems and structures of the dominant society. At other times these conflicts and frustrations made me feel powerless and provoked an anger in me that hurled me further towards the commitment of working with the Somali community and giving them a voice.

A final meeting today with ‘Julie’ at a local coffee shop before she leaves the organisation really tested my professional etiquette as a researcher. I explained to her that I was frustrated with the lack of communication between the organisation and myself and that I had emailed many times with no response and even turned up to meetings where people forgot to come. She in no uncertain terms warned me ‘not to burn my bridges
or else we could cut you off all together’. She felt I was rushing the project and that ‘piles of paper’ I keep providing do no good to my cause. I am angry and dismayed because I have made every effort to keep the communication lines open and this had never once been relayed to me. It has only made me more determined to get through this gatekeeper because I know once I get through, things will run much smoother. (Field notes, 2010)

Challenging moments occurred often, particularly in meetings with stakeholders.

Every time I speak, ‘Alice’ rephrases my words to ‘Zeinab’ as if I am speaking another language which I myself did not think was said any differently to my version. She is cold and abrupt and constantly undermines what I am saying. This does not go over well with ‘Zeinab’ as she can feel the tension in the air about what DGCHS thinks of the project. One minute the project is fantastic and innovative, next it is criticised and downgraded. (Field notes, 2009)

Another major challenge with my stakeholder was the constant turnover of staff. The older Somali women’s group sat under the DGCHS Social Inclusion Program and was overseen by a Social Inclusion Team Leader. Over the two years, I dealt with five team leaders, each requiring a full explanation of myself and the project. Some staff lasted weeks while others lasted months. The institutional pressures placed on the team leaders often made it difficult for them to devote the time and energy needed for the project. Some were enthusiastic about getting involved but often they were not relieved of other responsibilities; others were defensive and abrupt about having to tackle yet another project. This broader issue of overworked, underfunded staffing of health services often created a hostile environment. Understanding the context within which a health service is situated revealed that there are layers and hierarchies of contexts that require levels and layers of ‘la facultad’ (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). On many occasions I felt the team leaders were culturally inappropriate and did not understand the contextual environment; they were unaware of religious festivals, such as Ramadan, and of basic Islamic principles. Once again, however, every challenge produced a new dimension to my ethnographic experience.

I can now pick them straight away! Another uninformed Team Leader has been appointed to oversee the group. Again, I explain who I am and what the project is about. Fadumo and I explain the support we need and the complex needs of the women involved. It’s always the same, they listen intently, ask basic questions about Islam, veiling and Ramadan and I get tired of having to say the same thing over and over again. They return to their office and we are unlikely to ever hear or see them again. Why is someone employed who knows so little about
Muslim culture? Fadumo feels my frustration and says “this is what it feels like to be Somali, always explaining what you look like, why you do things and what you need. It is mentally tiring and this is what we live with every day”. (Field notes, 2010)

I have gained Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) intuitive sense as a coyote, an ability to detect those people who do not understand the culture let alone the lives these women lead on the borderlands. Israel et al. (1998) recognise that it is a challenge for researchers to be involved in partnerships with larger institutional organisations, to keep all staff informed and engaged, and to maintain the support of senior administrators. Building and maintaining these relationships, conducting a proper community assessment and getting past gatekeepers requires sustained commitment financially and personally for the researcher.

I have just started to pay for the art materials myself as DGCHS has now told me that I am to receive no funding for the project. Basically if I want to use one of their groups then it is up to me to find any funding. I have emailed the new team leader on many occasions about information to complete the funding applications but there is no reply so I have had to put the funding application in incomplete. This is really disappointing especially when I allowed six weeks for her to get back to me with some basic letterhead information. (Field notes, 2009)

The challenges continued within DGCHS but it was a case of understanding how each service required different explanations and negotiations so they could all merge and develop a new way of working together, a new way of perceiving reality. I became expert at reading contexts quickly and accurately and knowing when to push and when to back off.

3.3.5 “I feel quite out of place”: understanding and negotiating contexts of place and space

Geography often restricts women’s movements within and around spaces. Bryant and Livholts (2007) explored the interconnections between space, place and time and the sexualisation of women in public spaces. Different forms of space, such as the verticality of the city, affect the way we live and the kind of terrain we negotiate to use these spaces. The Flemington Housing Estate influences the way women move. Moving within and around the flats requires a sense of self, being secure and recognising the people around you. The body, through gender and other social powers, like socioeconomic status, ethnicity and disability, is constructed in various spaces and at times certain bodies are restricted or denied access to these spaces based on these lenses (Bryant & Livholts, 2007). Many women at the estate have waited years to ensure access via lifts or to live in certain buildings where other older
Somali women have gathered. Lewis (2009) conducted an 11-year study of elderly Cambodian immigrants in the US and found that having families living within walking distance allows them to buffer the effects of life in a foreign land. Women, in comparison to men, are usually the ones who negotiate and adopt measures to cater for these restrictions in an attempt to move through or enjoy public spaces. Bryant and Livholts’ (2007) aim is to show that by connecting memories and emotions, gendered space is shown to be an active process that comes into being. They highlight memories of a researcher driving into unfamiliar territory, into an unfamiliar space which challenges her sense of self and her orientation in space. I too experienced this on my first visit to the Flemington Housing Estate.

I feel quite out of place here in this environment. People seem to stare at my whiteness, perhaps my middle class looks are obvious. It’s like entering another world, not here in Australia but somewhere where we don't want to really know who lives here. Conditions seemed cramped with hundreds of flats in each building and rubbish strewn around doorways. Everywhere you turn there are tall brown buildings with a sameness in each window that makes it faceless. It’s like nobody lives here yet thousands do. When you walk away back out into the familiar street, it seems comforting to know a more familiar environment. (Field notes, 2009)

In contrast, the women living in what I defined as unfamiliar territory have a strong sense of familiarity and would be disorientated and unfamiliar in the academic world. I saw one woman as strong, despite her physical appearance, and completely comfortable in a housing estate, whereas I, the white researcher, looked and felt uncomfortable. If we use Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework it is like crossing a physical border into another world, a world that separates ‘us from them’, “the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (p. 25). Older Somali women feel comfort here with others from Somalia who speak the language and follow the traditional customs. It is the whites like me who see the border as a psychological barricade that separates people, as reflected in my visit to Amni’s flat.

There is a quick visit to Amni’s flat to pick up sweets for EID. Every flat I enter has the same layout. We enter and remove our shoes, the smell of cardoman and spices fill the air. The flat is packed with stuff and we find out that she lives here with her daughter, her son-in-law and four children, one of whom is autistic. Amni sleeps on a mattress in the lounge room and suffers from anxiety, high blood pressure and obesity yet she is comfortable in being here as it is who she is. Space has really shown itself here. The comfort and ease of space is somehow managed by all. Yet I sense chaos and pressure when everyone is home in this
tiny flat. It is uncomfortable for me in this unfamiliar space and reflects my social status of comfort and material wealth. This is her landscape and she is a reflection of this. I am always shocked at the living conditions in some of these flats yet Fadumo walks in differently to me, with indifference as if this how it is and there is nothing else. It says a lot about her and a reminder that she is used to these spaces and landscapes, and I as a coyote am learning to see that these spaces are part of them and their culture. (Field notes, 2010)

I relay my feelings to Fadumo who laughs and translates this to Amni as if they are ‘playing with me’ in their territory. Amni looks at me with absolute self-confidence and says “you are smart with words, but I am strong with cooking and caring for many”. At this moment I realise that Bryant and Livholts (2007) are accurate when they argue that “each woman holds bodily perceptions of self that are controlled, at times self-controlled and at others shaped by landscape” (p. 36). This space was comfortable for Amni and her family and yet my white middle class observations saw it as cramped and confined. It was yet another lesson and more “world travelling” that perhaps told me more about myself as about Somali life (Lugones, 1987, p. 15).

The women in my study are constantly having their space dominated by stories from back home and the struggles associated with family members and loved ones. Bryant and Livholts (2007) explore these complexities of how space becomes gendered and how these are captured in wider contexts, and the strong, sensory, emotional pull this has on everyday life. They state that “the smell of a farm, the fear of vast open space, feeling trapped and the journey across space and time that can influence self-identity” (Bryant & Livholts 2007, p. 40). Every day my participants feel this entrapment and mental fatigue that depletes them and contributes to their isolation and withdrawal. On many occasions data collection was disrupted due to phone calls and the conversations turned towards more pressing issues. As a researcher, I had to be flexible in understanding this context and be aware that data collection had to be negotiated around this.

3.3.6 “this is a tiring and complicated process”: experiencing my own displacement

Refugees tell their stories of turbulent journeys repeatedly to bureaucrats, neighbours, communities, researchers and to themselves. This is a tiring and complicated process that I did not fully understand until the beginning of the second year of my project when I lost my entire house and its contents through a natural disaster. On Saturday 6 March 2010, a super cell thunderstorm, described by Cratchley (2010) as “one of the most damaging hail storms in Australian history”, crossed Melbourne severely damaging scores of houses and cars. This storm
destroyed my home. Figure 3.9 shows my daughter walking through our house after the roof collapsed. The house was eventually pulled down and at the time of writing this thesis it is being rebuilt.

![Figure 3.9 My natural disaster](image)

In Western cultures disasters are associated with the loss of material possessions which we see as important to the quality of our lives (Pease, 2010). When we view media reporting of disasters in Third World countries however, we do not and cannot understand the magnitude, and so we move onto the next news item. Similarly, people every day drive past the Flemington Housing Estate, knowing that what lies beyond the boundaries are stories of hardship and suffering of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, yet they move onto the next thing in their daily lives. I was one of those people, yet now I have crossed these borders and their world has become part of me. I now stop to see the older women walking or carrying their shopping. When I lost my home, I began to understand what it means to live in chaos and uncertainty. I appreciate that for the Somali women I can only see and listen and cross their borders to feel as much as I can. Even entering their homes and hearing their stories I am gaining some understanding of their lives, which is more than I used to have when I, like so many others, just drove by the estate.
So my journey was building a new house, trying to re-establish my sense of home in my own country, speaking English and having family and friends to support me. The participants' journey began in Somalia, their home; then came war and everything they owned was taken from them and in many cases loved ones were killed or died. Refugee camps brought disease and the focus was on daily survival, food, water and personal safety. As refugees, they left their home ground “to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 35). In Australia these older women are not trying to make a building to call home; they are trying to develop a psyche where they are not feeling torn between two cultures, not “plagued by psychic restlessness” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 100), as reflected in my field notes.

This experience has given me a new perspective on displacement and trying to find rental accommodation and ‘a home’. We are being treated with ignorance and disgust by real estate agents, turning up to inspections and being grilled about finances and being looked upon as second class citizens. This is for a white middle class family, imagine what it would be like if we were dark and wearing a hijab? The chaos that you deal with everyday does not allow you to think or factor in your physical activity because you are constantly under pressure to try and sort out your life. Dealing with insurance agencies and negotiating services is difficult enough for us when we are very good at these types of dealings and I imagine what it would be like if you did not speak very good English and/or did not know how the system works. People take advantage of you, processes take forever and I now understand the frustration, worry and exhaustion from such processes. In any such case not being at home, that sense of belonging to something that you have is very daunting and can make you feel very isolated. You no longer have the neighbours you love, the family you know and the friendship connections in a move. This is how I feel when moving suburbs let alone countries. I now have a new respect and understanding for displacement. Hopefully this makes me a better researcher and a more compassionate and empathetic person and will contribute to better data collection. (Field notes, 2009)
I was reluctant to tell the women of my plight because I knew that I stood in a privileged position in terms of finances and family support. They, however, were sad for me but quiet in their responses, as my field notes reflect.

I told the group today about the disaster of the house falling down and at that point my family was sleeping in a tent-like situation and dealing with the enormity of the project. The women were shocked but quiet and reserved and spoke of the meaning behind ‘inshall Allah’; that everything happens for a reason and Allah will guide you along the path. In many ways I thought this a great reasoning as when the enormity of a task is before you, you really have to take each day as it comes and cope as best you can. I always knew it was only material things and that they could all be replaced and that my family was safe. When I find the process getting too much I will think and self talk the phrase ‘inshall Allah’ in an attempt to remember this wise philosophy on life. (Field notes, 2010)

As Guerin et al. (2004) point out, “In researching Somali refugees we are researching a group of people under considerable pressure” (p. 157). Researchers need to take time to care about how and what we are asking, interpreting what we have found and its relevance to the community. We must consider that these people are not sitting in their homes contemplating theoretically-based concepts, but are under pressure, focusing on solving immediate problems that affect their day-to-day lives. I was still experiencing this displacement and realised just how much time and effort it takes to do the simple things.

We have finally moved house and found that everything did not work. I realized that this is a smaller version of trying to set up house in a new and foreign environment, yet I am in my own country speaking my own language. I had difficulties in just putting on gas and electricity let alone phone and internet and endless forms to fill out arrive in the mail. I know nobody in the area, feel completely out of place and I contemplate how hard this must be for newly arrived families when I have experienced the stress and time it takes to complete these tasks. (Field notes, 2010)

This experience adds to my coyote behaviour by giving me an understanding of the participants' daily realities, “la facultad”, and the constant pressure they live under (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176).
3.3.7 “you won’t be coming back to us”: understanding the researcher’s privileges

According to Cannon et al. (1988), women from ethnic and low socioeconomic backgrounds are less willing and able to participate in research due to their heavy responsibilities and their scepticism about the value of social research. Liamputtong (2007) goes further, including refugees in this category and stating that many feeling vulnerable in taking part in any research due to their past experiences of dealing with authorities. Some of the women were very conscious of me as a researcher and having a higher education, and they questioned whether researchers do research for their own sake rather than for the community.

Asli: Once you do get your doctorate, once you get higher education you won’t be coming back to us

Georgia: Why do you think that?

Asli: What I am referring to is back home, if the person gets higher education and higher than us they won’t come back to us they just disappear because they doing something higher, doing something else not this. When you get educated up off to another level of her life not this kind of low life (Asli)

Asli’s comments highlighted what education meant in Somali culture and the underlying reality that often refugee groups were researched and then deserted, seeing no benefit for themselves or their community. Others had a perception about ‘the richness of my life’ and Australian culture. At first I thought this conversation was going to be about money and yet it was about a sense of place, a sense of home.

You are rich Australian, I am poor. Yes, you are in your country and you are lucky you know the language. You are richer than me because you know the language and this is your country and this is your home, where you grow up. (Miriam)

Sometimes I feel like I am rich because I have a passport, I have freedom and that makes me very rich. (Miriam)

This exchange again highlighted my Western concepts of richness as wealth and my white normative world of automatic privileges of freedom and peace. It made me more attentive to the women’s stories and prompted me to ask for extended explanations around concepts to ensure that I stood looking from their point of view. I realise that I have grown up in ignorance of my privileges and I have a Eurocentric vision of the world (Pease, 2010). I learnt to develop sensitivity to seeing the meaning behind each woman’s reality.
According to Valadez and Elsbree (2005) “la facultad is developed as one maneuvers through social and political situations” and this section has highlighted those developments (p. 177). It has been an experience of understanding another world by immersing myself in Somali history, especially daily history and the unsettling travel that occurs on the borderlands (Lugones, 1987, p. 12).

3.4 “compromiso”: making a commitment

The fourth part of Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) framework states that “coyotes are committed to making a difference” (p. 177). By foregrounding Somali women’s voices, I am aiming to make a difference in their lives, to contribute to a better understanding of the influences on their health and wellbeing, and to inform the development of effective policy and programs. I came to this research as an outsider but have now become a coyote, dedicated to nurturing older Somali women by participating in border-meetings, understandings and mergings of two cultures. I want to assist them to exist on the borderlands safely and to reach a destination of power and insight. I have developed multi-positionings that require relationships in both the dominant culture and the Somali culture and I am committed to ensuring that the women have a voice that is heard. This section focuses on how the research enabled the participants to express themselves from their standpoint and tell their stories in their own words.

3.4.1 “the research relationship”: who has the power?

One of the commitments of feminist research is reducing the unequal power in the research relationship. One strategy Acker et al. (1983) suggest is encouraging the interviewee to take the lead in deciding what to talk about. McMichael’s (2003) interviews with Somali refugee women also discovered that “women’s narratives were not ordered and constant; they contained both a measure of predictability, and the uncertain, indeterminate, and creative” (p. 193). In many of my conversations I had similar experiences, especially when I was doing back translations trying to clarify a point or a story they had told me as the conversations went off on alternate creative tangents.

Today I attempted to do some back translations and clarify some answers to ensure they are correct. However, when I ask particular women about their answers they begin other stories that do not relate to anything I have asked them. In fact I realise that by asking them questions all I am doing is providing them with a space to tell me something that is important to them, rather than what I want to hear. I keep trying to bring them back to the point I want to clarify yet they
continue to tell me what they think I should hear. Deakin will not be happy that these back translations are not being done ‘correctly’ but what can I do? The stories become more intertwined with home, place, self and aging and are continually layered upon by other members of the group. (Field notes, 2010)

In addition, silence in conversations was a way of working out the order in which to tell a story, what to omit, revise and rework. McMichael (2003) understood “silence in women’s narratives as a form of communication that enabled women to construct the narratives in meaningful and acceptable ways” (p. 195). Another attempt to deal with objectivity was for the researcher to tell the women something about themselves and respond to questions as honestly as possible.

Many women interview me on a weekly basis about my family life, how many children I had, was my husband ‘good to me’ and I try and answer as honestly as possible. I feel that they should know as much about me as I know about them and as our relationship progresses they ask more personal questions about what I think about abortion, women’s issues and religion. (Field notes, 2010)

The women always responded to my answers with understanding combined with a persuasive tone of Islamic religious teachings. Again it was an example of how we were learning about each other, and I was learning more about myself through their eyes and their stories. This is similar to what has been reported by other researchers, such as McMichael (2003), who formed friendships with many women in her study and offered hospitality or provided support. I found that to feel and experience the women’s stories in their own environment made me a better researcher; better connected to what they were saying. In addition, I learnt about my own secrets by giving them away and having them told back to me. Minh-ha(1991) describes this as “an arranged marriage between ‘experience-distance’ and ‘experience-near’ between the scientist’s objectivity and the native’s subjectivity, between outsider’s input and insider’s output” (p. 68). This framework always means very little giving and more than a little taking. The ideal insider becomes one who balances precariously between faithfully representing the other for the research while developing the ‘self-other relationship’ by gathering serviceable data and protecting the project territory (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 68). My field notes reflect this dilemma throughout the entire project.

I am always mindful of me being the ‘other’ in this project. I am not a native, I cannot understand what it is like to be an immigrant or Somali in any way but hopefully by immersing myself in the everyday lives of these women I can be faithful in representing them. (Field notes, 2010)
Even though Acker et al. (1983) had gone to extra lengths to reduce these kinds of power inequalities, they compounded during their analysis when they had to take on the role of defining what was important to keep and what to leave out. Summarising another’s life and placing it in a context is an act of objectification, posing further problems and contradictions. The question kept arising: how do we explain people’s lives without redefining their reality? In this study I have attempted to develop a standpoint epistemology that allows participants’ voices to be expressed and their experiences to be foregrounded. This research strategy supports my commitment to “understanding the processes that result in inequalities is a necessary step toward changing women’s position” (Acker et al., p. 424). I did not want to maintain the all-knowing Western paradigm as an everlasting domination which somehow provides the right “to tell the previously colonized how to unshackle themselves” (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 332). The premise is that all countries of the world should adopt Western values as the ideal model of progress. Minh-ha (1991) argues that the “purpose is to spread the Master’s values, comforting him in his godlike charity-giver role, protecting his lifestyle, and naturalizing it as the only, the best way” (p. 333). My field notes reflect this when speaking to Fadumo who is constantly asked ‘why can’t you take that off?’

Every week Fadumo and I have this ‘pre-chat’ before the women arrive and it is an informal conversation about the day to day living of our lives but it is at this time that I often learn the most. Today she tells me only three times this week has she been asked “why can’t you take that thing off (meaning her hijab), does your husband make you wear it?” They tell her “You are in Australia, you are free, you don't have to wear that scarf”. She explains that if she is free, she chooses to wear it, it is part of who she is. They reply “so why did you come to this country if you don’t want to be unrestricted and free?” I am always embarrassed that as an Australian who lives here we still have people who judge others by what they wear and think that as a Western country we are saving these people from themselves. (Field notes, 2010)

Fadumo respects and is non-committal about what whites wear, yet people from the dominant culture cannot understand why she, the so called ‘oppressed’, is not applying their Western ideals. Pease (2010) argues “this is because those who are marginalised have to understand the viewpoint of the dominant groups, while those in the dominant position have no need to understand the perspective of the oppressed” (p. 29). Again, I was committed to showing the dual identity of Somali women, having to fit into the dominant culture while remaining close to their own; wearing the hijab is a constant visual reminder that they will never ‘be one of us’.
3.4.2 “a third party in the communication process”: the role of the interpreter

To ensure that the voices of the women were accurately recorded during data collection, Fadumo and I were faced with one of the most important issues, the translation and interpretation of material. As a coyote, I was committed to accurately translating what the women were saying and what I was asking. This social situation of constantly translating and interpreting the questions and answers was a major challenge in the project. It was an important part of the methodology and one that required many hours of extra time for Fadumo and I to ensure accuracy of the material. It made us coyotes who could read social situations quickly and use them to gain insightful information and therefore honour our commitment to tell the women’s stories from their standpoint.

Qualitative research, which involves language differences in the gathering and interpretation of data, requires an inquiry into the implications of using a third party in the communication process. One of Fadumo’s professional strengths as an interpreter was that she translated every word despite, on some occasions, the conversation being very confusing as some of the women would drift from topic to topic. The interpreters should be treated as key informants, as understanding their social framework, values and beliefs can reflect how they interpret and translate meanings and understandings. Twyman et al. (1999) agree, highlighting the need to acquire an autobiography of both the researcher and translator/interpreter and recognise the power relations that exist between the two. The researcher should interview the interpreter, finding out about their life history, their relationship with the ethnic group and what issues they think are relevant on all research topics.

Fadumo has been completely open about her role as a Somali community member and as a representative of DGCHS. I know her migration to Australia, how she met her husband, her extended family and the clan sensitivity that exists. She is remarkably honest in all her answers and I feel completely at ease with her style of interpretation and her translation abilities. I can ask her anything and she would not be offended but rather sees it as informing me of her culture and her lifestyle. Fadumo can see Western ideologies objectively and is genuinely excited about the project and what it will do for her community. (Field notes, 2009)

Giving the interpreter an active role in the research process also makes them ‘accountable’ for their social participation (Temple & Edwards, 2002). In their study, Temple and Edwards (2002) discovered their interpreters had constructed their own social identity and those of the participants before the interviews began, placing themselves as socially ‘above’ the participants. This affected the way they translated
and interpreted the data. It was only when the researcher and translator openly discussed the ‘literal’ translation of the meaning associated with different words that they realised social identities had been created. English-speaking researchers therefore need to talk to their interpreters and translators to find out their perceptions of the topic. Fadumo and I did this regularly, discussing words and ideas in English and within a Somali context. This enabled both of us to be clear about what each other meant when it came to asking questions during the data collection.

In Edwards’ (1998) study, interviewees with some grasp of English bypassed the interpreter and spoke directly to her. In many cases the interviewees exercised quite some power over the interview. Similarly, those participants who were confident in English spoke directly to me or combined Somali with English phrases to make certain points. In Edwards’ (1998) case, a Somali woman seized the opportunity to point out that the interpreter’s previous lack of help taking her to the doctor identified her needs for home help. Edwards (1998) was concerned that the interpreter was being influenced and pressured to interpret in an uncomfortable situation and this has been discussed in 3.1.6. She concluded that the researcher needs to be mindful that interpreters may be socially harmed because of the position they are in. Harm could include reduced self-esteem or ‘looking bad’ in front of others or threatening future employment. I was very mindful as a researcher of this as on many occasions Fadumo ran personal errands for the participants, such as driving them or shopping for them. I tried to take more responsibility for these requests by offering my services over Fadumo’s, which gave me the opportunity to develop trust and rapport and allow the community worker to maintain her other roles at DGCHS.

3.4.3 “Ensuring women's voices are heard”: issues around translation

Ensuring women's voices are heard without exploiting or distorting those voices is a commitment many feminist researchers make. The challenge for the researcher may be in accepting answers that may not lie within our feminist framework and then representing them in the participant’s own words. This can be a powerful reminder of who we represent. It is a reminder of Wright’s (2000) ‘unified seam’ analogy based on Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework, where we need to come together to create a new understanding, a new way of thinking “and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (p. 102). As Smith, Chen & Liu (2008) explain, “researchers are increasingly being encouraged to explain how translation is being carried out, by whom and how local meaning and cultural connotations are captured and reported in their data” (p. 8). This process, as highlighted by Edwards (1990), can be tested through ‘back translation’, which she
describes as a powerful assessment tool and checking device. As highlighted briefly in 3.2.2 this involves one interpreter translating a relevant piece of spoken or written English into another language. That version is then translated back into English by another interpreter and the two versions are discussed and compared. Small et al. (1999) looked at the issues surrounding translation in their study of new migrant mothers and their experiences of maternity care. Some of the words associated with mental illness were more formal, sophisticated language that could not be translated from English to Vietnamese, Turkish or Filipino in a culturally sensitive way. Better alternatives, even for common words such as ‘unhappy’, were difficult to translate with their intended meaning despite a lengthy discussion with the researchers and translators. Alternatively, back translations to English often resulted in English that was clumsy and grammatically poor. Small et al. (1999) concluded that the process of translation and back translation was not simple and needed further exploration, advice and comments. In this study my first attempt at back translation occurred when I had prepared Fadumo to go over some of the questions again and ensure that the answers were still the same.

Today we tried to do back translations with the women. Fadumo and I ended up in fits of laughter because the whole process was a disaster. When we told them that we were going to check their answers to ensure that I had recorded everything correctly they immediately started talking about something else. It just turned out to be another opportunity to tell more stories rather than ‘go over the old ones’. Poor Fadumo kept on trying and trying to pull them back to the answers they had given us and they kept saying ‘we have already told you that, we want to tell you something more important’. (Field notes, 2010)

Birbili (2000) also described translation in fieldwork in which the language of the participants is different to the write up as having “unsolvable problems” (p. 4). Instead of using back translation, Birbili (2000) suggests consulting with others, discussing the use and meaning of words that are problematic with people who are bilingual (p. 4). In this project an independent bilingual worker checked all the transcripts for their accuracy. We also discussed meanings of many words in English and their uses in both languages.

Having Fatoon check and discuss the accuracy of the transcriptions was an essential part of enriching the data. We discussed many of the stories told and some of the concepts needed further clarification in English. One interesting point was one of the songs the ladies were singing she said would not sound right if it was translated to English directly so she suggested I learn the ‘stories behind the conversations’ to fully understand the cultural explanation. (Field notes, 2010)
Another way of eliminating translation-related problems is to pre-test or pilot the research instrument in the local culture, asking not only for answers to the questions but their interpretation as well (Birbili, 2000). Birks, Chapman and Francis (2007) agree that when interviewing people from other cultures it is strongly recommended that some practice be undertaken in conducting interviews before entering research settings and using people from the cultural group that are to be interviewed. This will help clarify possible terminology and translation issues. It is the translator’s job to translate one set of meanings into another in the most accurate way possible. Temple (1997) argues that translators decide how and what to interpret and then transfer this information to the researcher. They make decisions about how much detail to include, the tone of the conversation and where to ‘add weight’ to particular words. When Fatoon was checking the back translations, I discussed with her whether we had achieved a high level of accuracy and she commented that “Fadumo’s accuracy was exact nearly word for word; I can't believe that she remembered all of the conversation and then translated that so accurately”. This ‘checking’ ensured the voices of the women were an accurate representation of the conversations.

Temple and Edwards (2002) argue that it is impossible to achieve a literal translation of meaning from one language to another as some concepts may not necessarily be able to be interpreted into equivalent meanings in the English language as the same words in one culture mean different things in another. Fadumo and I worked together within these limitations in the research. If there was a word or a phrase that was particularly difficult to translate, we would discuss how this could be phrased or Fadumo would follow this up the next week after having done some research of her own. An example of this was the word ‘privilege’. Fadumo had attended my Confirmation of Candidature session, heard this word, and described to me that this could not be literally translated into Somali. The next week at the group we discussed with the participants how best to describe the word and place it within a context. Using these extensive methods gave Fadumo and I our coyote status, our ability to understand and accurately portray the women’s attitudes and be part of a border culture.

3.4.4 “themes clearly emerged”: grounded theory as a commitment to research participants

Grounded theory requires us to discover how participants look upon the dominant culture and let the analysis and conclusions emanate from the data, rather than trying to fit data in an already constructed set of themes and categories of analysis (Charmaz, 2005). This theory operates in a reverse fashion from traditional research – instead of starting with a hypothesis, grounded theorists begin with data collection. From this data collection, the text is coded and themes and categories
emerge. These categories are the basis for the creation of theory. As Charmaz (2005) summarises, “our work results in an analytic interpretation of participants’ worlds and of the processes constituting how these worlds are constructed” (p. 508). Similarly, in this study, once the conversations had been transcribed, back translated and verified, themes clearly emerged around participation in physical activity. This approach allowed for different aspects of the women’s lives to be revealed, giving a holistic view about their experiences.

Grounded theory does not assume that data awaits discovery; but rather what researchers see and hear depends on their past history, interests, relationship with participants, previous field experiences and modes of recording materials. Information can often develop from simple conversation where people share a direction with others and tell their story about who they are (Curteis, 2009). For example, Figure 3.10 shows Hawo’s hands. Hawo starts a conversation with me around having her hands painted in henna. Hawo leads the conversation to become her story of her experience in the war where all her possessions were lost, so her ‘real jewellery’ stays in the earth of Somalia. The jewellery she wears here are symbols of her life in Melbourne, Australia. The colours of her dress reflect her bright and resilient nature.

Figure 3.10 Hawo’s hands tell her story

Grounded theory reflects the constructed world of participants and can enhance the focus of the conversations to honour the coyote commitment to foreground the voices of the participants.
3.4.5 “the third space”: using arts to create a new understanding

It was my intention to give the Somali women a voice through the creation of artistic pieces of work that reflect the women’s lives as well as through talking with the women and listening to them. Each piece of art reflects generations of Somali words and meanings and will be displayed to younger generations as a visual representation of the elders’ lives. Nero’s artwork, shown in Figure 3.11, includes an embroidered fish image, selected by her to represent the food she loved to eat in Somalia and her life as a seamstress. Conversations about her travels with her husband and family were interwoven into this image. Each conversation worked its way into another and the simple act of needlework gave her a chance to tell her life story from a point of origin.

![Figure 3.11 Nero embroiders a fish, representing life in Somalia and Europe](image)

Using arts to create a ‘third space’ allows for the creation of something different, something new and even unrecognisable – a space of negotiation of meaning and representation of how older Somali women, negotiate and navigate their lives on the border. An increasing number of studies have attempted to gain an insight into how the arts impact on people’s health (Greaves & Farbus, 2006; MacNaughton White & Stacy, 2005; Phoenix, 2010; Staricoff, 2006). While these have focused on projects in hospital settings there is a gradual movement into community settings. MacNaughton, White and Stacy (2005) argue that “we broadly define this field as comprising all activities that aim to use arts-based approaches to improve individual and community health, health promotion and healthcare, or seek to enhance the healthcare environment through provision of artwork and performances” (p. 333).
MacNaughton, White and Stacy’s (2005) arts and health diamond framework highlights four key dimensions of successful research processes in arts/health:

- “unity in health” (p. 337), highlighting projects that use creativity to enhance social relationships, reflecting the view that this is a major determinant of health
- “engaging groups” (p. 337), which looks at bringing communities and health promotion closer together and uses creative methods to explore, disseminate and communicate messages about health
- “creativity and well being” (p. 337), which highlights creativity as a route to wellbeing and aims to work with individuals to better understand their health using creative approaches as a means to expression
- “supporting care” (p. 337), which works at the softer aspects of ill-health that health services, under the strain of heavy demand, cannot reach.

A common aim and commitment of community arts projects is to encourage participation in creative activities to address social concerns, raising awareness of health issues and improving communication and understanding between the public and health practitioners (Staricoff, 2006). Greaves and Farbus’s (2006) study of older, socially isolated adults used a wide range of activities in a community-based intervention to rekindle older people’s passion in life. They found that tailoring activities to individual abilities and interests maximised the level of personal meaningfulness, making activities more likely to be engaged with and sustained. The range of benefits reported by participants included increased physical activity, more energy and a healthier diet. This was facilitated by providing a non-threatening environment and using mentors to aid in the promotion of psychological wellbeing and better physical health. This study specifically applied arts as a facilitator to encourage conversation rather than straight arts-based research that is concerned with aesthetics. Louise, the trained artist, and I consulted with the USWO, DGCHS and the participants to find out what the older Somali women wanted to do or had done previously in the arts world. I suggested cooking, however the women instantly opposed this idea saying “this is something we do every day, every week, we want something different”. Many of the women had embroidery and ceramic skills so these two chosen fields were then developed over a series of workshops. Strong supportive literature in the arts aims to help researchers develop this new way of thinking when researching small marginalised groups such as older Somali women. Staricoff (2006) describes successful models of creative art as those that include people’s participation in the project, especially those in disadvantaged or difficult to reach communities. The use of art allows participants “to capture on paper or canvas what they mean by ‘inner pictures’; those images which are present in their minds can become visible to the
medical staff” (p. 119). It gives health professionals a better understanding of the person’s health or illness and provides a valuable tool for communication. MacNaughton, White and Stacy (2005) maintain it is not the arts activity alone that provides the health gain, rather its delivery. The environment and conversations around the activity provide the immediate impact of perceived benefits. As in my study, however, arts in health care is often small, local and poorly resourced, usually with deeply committed artists, health care professionals and participants.

Few studies have paid attention to the use of visual methods in understanding the role of cultural, community and contextual resources that promote and sustain physical activity (Fleury, Keller & Perez, 2009). It was my intention to photograph artwork that participants made and use these photographs as a medium to facilitate discussions around health and wellbeing. Photography enhances qualitative inquiry beyond the verbal, to allow women to represent dimensions of their lives though images. Dyck, Lynam and Anderson (1995) highlighted in their study of cross-cultural research methods on migrant women that there is a definite need for “different ways of talking” beyond structured interviews (p. 623). The individualistic method of in-depth interviews is not always the method of choice with women in structurally subordinated positions in society, especially racialised groups. The photographs were a method of gaining information in a relaxed, informal way by stimulating women’s conversations about their position as a mother and as an active member of the Somalia of days gone by. The visual images that were created were subjective and the meanings invested in each of the pieces were viewed differently depending on the audience and the context in which they viewed them. Both researcher-generated and participant-generated visual methods provide “a direction where the material and symbolic significance of the image acts as a vehicle of communication, which contributes to the fabric of social relations” (Phoenix, 2010, p. 103). An example is shown in Figure 3.12, a photograph of Miriam with the ceramic mortar and pestle she made during a ceramic art session and which represented her life as a cook, a mother and an active matriarch in her family. It stimulated conversations around her as a respected cook in the community and her ability to make remedies for the sick using her mortar and pestle. The symbolic image of this cooking apparatus acted as a vehicle to discuss the health and wellbeing of her and her family in Melbourne and in Somalia.
One of Matarasso’s (1997) main findings in his study of arts in communities was that creating artwork was the most effective medium for carrying ideas. It had a positive impact on how people felt, it was an effective means of health education, it helped improve the quality of life of people with poor health, and it provided a unique and deep source of enjoyment. The women in this study found that the artwork gave them the opportunity to reminisce about life in Somalia and they found the engagement with others extremely enjoyable. On many occasions Fadumo would comment that she had never seen the women laugh and enjoy themselves as much as they did when they were making things. Participation in Matarasso’s (1997) arts project gave people the capacity to contribute to the health and social support of vulnerable people. It built the confidence of ethnic minorities and marginalised groups and strengthened people’s commitment to engaging with and tackling problems. He argues “art is activity, process and object, is central to how people experience, understand and then shape the world” (p. 78). South (2006) agrees, stating that “participation in community arts can have a direct effect on an individual’s health and wellbeing through enhancing understanding and expression or through developing the necessary skills to enable the adoption of healthy behaviors” (p. 156). The arts allowed researchers to overcome language and literacy barriers and encouraged individuals to communicate with one another. An example of this was when the embroidery was taken home and brought back the next week in a tightly scrunched ball of material. It’s only our interpretation but Louise and I felt that when the women were doing the embroidery they held the material so tightly that it reflected the stress and anxiety that was part of their daily lives. We suggested this to the women and they said “this is possible, but we did not notice”. Each week Louise would have to
iron out the material to see how much embroidery they had done, knowing that each time she was ‘ironing out’ the women’s lives.

Properly managed community arts projects in a constructive environment can produce positive outcomes, even if everything does not go according to expectations (Matarasso, 1997). Learning to accept unpredictability in individuals and stakeholders or community partners is often the process and “one should accept growing pains” (Matarasso, 1997, p. 62). This occurred on many occasions in this project with women hesitant about starting and using the clay in the ceramics, the cost involved in getting all the ceramics fired and the unpredictability of the use of community facilities. If these problems are anticipated and planned for, they should be viewed as outcomes of change. A strong theme to be explored as part of the research was the positive benefits community-based art projects can have on identifying and changing people’s health behaviours, especially people in marginalised groups.

At the beginning of the project there was a commitment that the pieces of art that were made by the women would become part of an exhibition to be held in conjunction with DGCHS. The exhibition displayed the women’s work and brought together Somali women both young and old. The art represented the women’s lives in Somalia and their transition to a new country. Many of the women had not seen their works displayed together until the day of the exhibition (Figure 3.13). They were overwhelmed and one of the women, Miriam, laughed: “It’s amazing what the whites can do with our small pieces that we made”. I found this comment revealed a wonderful sense of reverse hierarchy – surprise that the dominant culture would view their ‘everydayness’ as ‘art’ and perhaps a mocking of our insensitivity to their real needs of trying to live ‘with us’.

![Figure 3.13 The final exhibition](image)
Arts in this study were used as a form of ‘social activism’ where there was a focus on viewing each person as a part of a larger whole (Keating, 2005b). This recognises Anzaldua’s (1987) work around spiritual dimensions where all things living are interconnected with others and allows the women the opportunity to express this through art and its imagery. Interconnectedness is crucial in art and can often facilitate the “development of new tactics for survival, resistance and transformation at individual and collective levels” (Keating 2005b, p. 245).

3.4.6 “the hands...a story about their lives”: using photography

Visual methods can enhance our understanding of the social world and can uncover multiple meanings embedded within a culture. It can provide “information rich data for extending scientific investigations or as evocative artefacts for challenging or stepping away from a science” (Prosser & Loxley, 2008, p. 9). Figure 3.14 is an image of a participant’s hands created as a talking point for the participants to discuss the colours, the jewellery and the henna; all of which represented a story about their lives.

![Figure 3.14 The colour and vibrancy of a participant’s hand](image)

Visual material created by the researcher that combines three things – repeat photographs of the same site over time; repeat photographs of participants in the change process; and the re-photographing of activities and processes – is similar to the method of triangulation (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). In this project I have photographed the hands of most of the participants over time to add another dimension to check and validate the findings and to provide immediate images with digital cameras and gain the participants’ instant feedback. This method of triangulation is used to double or
triple check the findings. These visual images have allowed me to view change from a different standpoint and have helped form a basis for analysis and interpretation. There were, however, challenges around taking these photographs as only some women agreed to have their photograph taken while others felt strongly that the Islamic religion prohibits photographs. Fadumo (Figure 3.5) and Sharo (Figure 3.15) agreed to be photographed for the project. Although both are religious, Fadumo and Sharo felt it was acceptable to have an image of them in “research for Somalis”.

Figure 3.15 Sharo and her traditional Somali dress, loose hijab and jewellery

Prosser and Loxley (2008) argue that photography is well suited to view social change because it “has the capacity to document a scene with far greater speed and completeness than could ever be accompanied by a human observer taking notes” (p. 10). It enables the researcher to ‘freeze’ a scene in extraordinary detail and is unobtrusive and convenient. The photographs in this thesis provide the reader with a personal connection to the women and create depth and understanding of the participants. In addition, using participant-generated visual methods encourages cooperation with respondents and creates a bond when working alongside them. This promotes a more equitable power relationship and distributes knowledge between participants and researchers (Phoenix, 2010). This occurred over the period of time I
took the photographs and was a way of establishing relationships with the women as we discussed the electronic photograph. Digital cameras allowed for immediate viewing of photos and as the relationships with each participant blossomed, so did their confidence; often asking me to take the picture again if they were not happy with it or having their hands specifically decorated for me to take the photograph that they wanted. Many women approved and were even excited that they were photographed in this way; figures 3.16 and 3.17 show Asha and Asli with their hennaed hands and feet. These photographs represent their identity as older Somali women and highlight their voice, their image, a context to who they are.

![Figure 3.16 Asha’s henna hands](image1)  ![Figure 3.17 Asli’s henna feet](image2)

**3.4.7 “sometimes in darkness”: the writing process as commitment**

For the working coyote, daily life can be fraught with anxiety and loneliness, working “sometimes in darkness” (Valadez & Elsbree 2005, p. 176). This is evident in conducting and writing up such a project. The writing is an important process because it is through the writing that I give the participants a voice. I felt an overwhelming responsibility to make the writing as accurate as possible to ensure the women's voices were heard as accurately as possible.

I feel an enormous responsibility to get this right, to make sure the women's voices are heard and it makes a difference. The hardest thing is explaining to the participants why it is taking so long to ‘see the book’ as they call it. Writing up is taking me longer than expected and my writing skills are really the ‘Achilles heel’ of the project. How do I explain this to the women that it’s going on 12 months and it’s still not
completed? These are hard academic concepts to explain and from their viewpoint all they can see is that nothing is happening. (Field notes, 2012)

The writing process is an important topic of discussion for PhD students who are working on solo projects off campus, with minimal financial support. I was not able to discuss the problems or successes of my project with other students or colleagues because of the distance from campus. I attended the usual library information and referencing sessions but for the main writing I had to practise and refine these skills on my own, sending drafts via email to an independent editor and to my supervisors. It was a daunting and arduous task that required perseverance, which I believe should be acknowledged as part of the project.

Despite their commitment, beginner academic writers face considerable challenges. The process of academic writing is largely mysterious for novices and is only learned through trial and error. It is easy for beginners to only see someone else’s finished product and become filled with self-doubt about their commitment to publish, and anxiety that they will never reach these academic standards. My field notes reflect these anxieties.

I have just seen a completed PhD from a past student of my supervisor and I am overwhelmed by its size and complexity. I feel that I don’t possess the depth of knowledge to write such a huge document, the wording and theory overwhelming. (Field notes, 2011)

Cameron, Nairn and Higgins (2009) developed strategies aimed at addressing the anxieties of beginner academic writers. One is to get novice writers to present their draft work early in the writing process, when the work is incomplete and when ideas are only partially formed, so they can develop their pieces with feedback from colleagues and supervisors. Writing my ethics proposal was the first real document that I had attempted and I struggled with the number of drafts required to achieve the finished product.

Writing this ethics has been a really trying experience in putting the project together in words. Back and forth the drafts go to Maria, I am sure she screams into the computer every time she gets my emails but she remains patient and understanding. I even spell her name wrong for the first three drafts! I wonder if all students suffer this writer’s learning curve or if it’s just me. (Field notes, 2010)
My commitment waivers as I receive the drafts but supportive supervisors assure me that I will be able to complete the thesis. Pairing with more experienced writers offers important learning opportunities about receiving and giving feedback; “the emotionally confronting aspect of exchanging drafts needs also to be acknowledged” (Cameron, Nairn & Higgins, 2009, p. 276). I was not paired with a writer but I did form an independent relationship with an editor outside of the university who provided me with confidence to keep writing and developing my ideas. Drafts were written and re-written with the arguments in an ordered structure, but every time one came back it felt like a huge blow. When I had these moments I would visit the women for ‘tea and talk’ and my commitment to finishing was re-energised.

A second strategy is procedural know-how. The novice writer should be informed that a piece of published writing is created with false starts and dead ends, mistakes, diversions and failures, which all contribute to the writing process. Thirdly, it is helpful for novices to look at how authors write, how they present and progress their ideas and arguments. Look at argument clarity, connections with theoretical concepts and even the use of humour, evocative language and how authors made readers feel included as a part of a conversation (Cameron, Nairn & Higgins, 2009). My reflexive notes provided the reader with a personal view of the mistakes, the joys and the tears that a researcher experiences during a four-year project.

A final strategy is developing technical knowledge. This involves constructing arguments and writing clearly and gracefully and is done by developing a sense of self as an academic writer. I developed this by continually reading and reviewing scholarly journals and forming a literature review. Every month I would send this to my supervisors and they would guide me in developing arguments and being concise. The term ‘writing up’ fails to convey that writing should be “a problematical and tentative exercise in critical reflective thinking” (Badley, 2009, p. 209). Badley (2009) argues that writers tend to present themselves within the text as disconnected to the person who collected and gathered the data. It is essential that writers disconnect to read and analyse but have the ability to connect to the materials and data. To avoid this disconnection the researcher needs to choose words and structures to describe the process of the study and how we see things.

I have started describing and detailing what I see and the emotions this creates in a reflexive journal. It becomes a therapeutic exercise to write all these emotions down but it also forces me to make accurate descriptions about how the project is running. (Field notes, 2009)

Badley’s (2009) argument is that our research is, therefore, best not described as ‘writing up’. We are creators who attempt to describe, interpret and analyse
everyday findings, they are not absolute objectivity but a kind of “rigorous subjectivity” (Badley, 2009, p. 211). He sees it “as a constructive and creative process of learning and transforming what we know” rather than an uncreative, methodical process stating what we already know (p. 212). The challenges that go with this process are often difficult for the researcher; you risk it all, being vulnerable, making mistakes and misunderstanding despite your best efforts; but in the end it is rewarding. It is part of the extension of Valadez and Elsbree’s coyote framework that I have discussed, exposing your vulnerabilities and working with these to achieve successful outcomes. It is the commitment that I made at the beginning of the project four years ago to these older Somali women that keeps me writing and publishing. Further research and a continued activism towards older Somali women’s lives have inspired me to consider post doctorate commitments in the Somali community, for example, exploring other issues the women face, such as the systemic racism they encounter on a daily basis.

3.4.8 “Is this what racism feels like?”: a commitment to challenge racism

My experience throughout this research has strengthened my commitment to address the issue of racism faced by the Muslim community here in Melbourne. Muslims have become one of the most “racialised” groups in Australian society (Noble & Poynting, 2010, p. 491). Noble and Poynting (2010) surveyed 186 Muslim Australians to explore the links between national belonging and the spatial regulation of cultural differences and found that they received a constant barrage of mundane behaviours in public spaces that were perceived as demeaning and insulting. Typical stories include people yelling abuse from cars and in stores, which was a range of ‘low level’ racism as Muslims make their way through public spaces. So common were these incidents that they were deemed too banal to report to authorities and so remain low level. The significance of these experiences, however, underlies their lack of feeling of national belonging and social participation. My small but first taste of feeling isolated and out of place was at one of my first communal gatherings at a participant’s house.

I have just had this moment when I realise that I was the only one out of the group of 20 women who was white. Is this what racism feels like? All of a sudden I feel vulnerable, exposed, out there, unusual, out of place, wanting to suddenly get away. Women are staring and asking ‘why is she here?’ in a cautious and understandable way. I look different, my clothes are different, my blonde hair, my ‘Australian-ness’ stands out, the smell of incense overwhelms me. Is this how these women feel getting on a tram, shopping, going to the bank, trying to learn English? I am not part of
their culture, I don’t understand why things are being done, I’m not catching the words everyone is saying, not sure what the food tastes like, how am I supposed to eat it but wanting to do the right thing, to fit in. (Field notes, 2009)

These everyday experiences of isolation and segregation are constant reminders to Muslim Australians that they do not belong, that they should go home. Unlike them, I can walk out the door and escape to my world of belonging in a white Australia. Their spaces however become “landscapes of social exclusion because they define who belongs and who does not. They are targeted for being who they are, where they are and where they don’t belong” (Noble & Poynting, 2010, p. 496).

On one occasion towards the end of my project I was faced with racism on a personal level when Fadumo and I took the participants on an excursion to the Mount Macedon heritage site picnic area (this is a Parks Victoria recreation site approximately 50km north of Melbourne). This experience tested my commitment to addressing racism and proved to me how connected I was to the women. We had enjoyed a picnic and decided to end the day with a coffee in the local café, where we were faced with what I felt was a direct form of racism that I had not experienced before. Figure 3.18 shows us walking to the café for a coffee and Fadumo in the middle of the photograph turning to tell me that this was an appropriate distance to take the photo. This was because it was mostly of scenery and not just of the women.

![Figure 3.18 Walking to the café for coffee](image)
Once we got to the café it was like we had crossed a border and the ladies and I had entered another country. Surely this was not the Australia I thought I lived in? There was only a handful of people in the café as it was a week day and we ordered our coffees. It was at this moment I realised we were being treated differently and that the waitress did not like us being there. When the coffees arrived we were asked to pay again and I insisted that we had already paid when we ordered. One of the coffees was ordered as a skinny latte and the waitress insisted that this would cost extra. I was lost for words and in fact quite ignorant; I hadn’t thought this was a race issue but the women had already identified that this was happening and tried to be compliant. I then asked what seemed to be the problem and she said there wasn’t one and so I asked for some of the coffees to be take-away. She returned fuming, throwing the coffee on the tables with lids spilling and practically having them spilt across my lap. It was then that I noticed the participants’ subdued reaction and I knew it was because of who they were. I was fuming because I felt like I was one of them, I represented them, I, we are all Australians and I was so ashamed and embarrassed that this had happened.

I let this go and asked the women to come to the gift shop which was attached to the café and look at the products. We were looking at and smelling various soaps and creams and two women went to the counter to purchase some items when all of a sudden the owner started yelling, snatching the products from the women and throwing their money back at them and telling them to leave. I asked calmly what the problem seemed to be, perhaps thinking maybe there has been a misunderstanding in language and she openly said “These are good products that need to be treated properly” and that we were opening the bottles. I knew this was not true and that she just wanted us out of the shop. The ladies just said ‘ok’ and walked out of the store. I was fuming and had said that nobody was being disrespectful of the products and that it was me who was telling the ladies to smell and sample them. She said “No you are all opening the products” and told me to get out with “the rest of them”. I told her she was being a racist and disrespectful to other Australians who had come to this country under humanitarian circumstances. She just flicked her hand and said “I am not a racist, I just don’t want to serve you”. I was ashamed to be Australian, to see this in reality, and angry that I was part of them. And I now knew what it was like to receive this treatment. It was like crossing over and then going
back again, being one of them but also not. The amazing thing was that the ladies were calming me down saying “Don't worry, this happens all the time, you just have to move on”. Where and how did they learn to cope with this? My researcher whiteness was beaming as I don't think I have ever really experienced such blatant discrimination and disrespect. I have been angry for days over the injustice and ashamed that in Australia this is happening to these women all the time. (Field notes, 2010)

Pease (2010) states that “most white people have very little awareness about their own racial identity” (p. 112). It is easier for white people to see themselves as individuals rather than racialised people because they look at their characteristics first rather than the colour of their skin. It is whiteness that “represents normality and humanness” and it was me, as the researcher, in need of seeing myself invisible within a dominant culture of whiteness and seeing that it is highly visible to those who are not white (Pease, 2010, p. 113). My whiteness gives me unearned privileges of being treated with respect and dignity as a consumer but at this moment I felt the racialised gaze that these women feel every day. It was on this day that my underlying white privileges were recognised and I developed “an awareness of one’s whiteness and one’s racial prejudice can be part of challenging racial inequality” (Pease, 2010, p. 121).

My role had become blurred because I had now been accepted as one of them but I was still fully aware of my whiteness and my role in the dominant society. Valadez and Elsbree (2005) refer to this as a border, meaning not just a physical border but a psychological one that represents “a conceptual boundary that we have socially constructed” (p. 173). Their role as mediators was to cross borders and help others to do so by connecting individuals from the straight and queer communities and advocating for their rights. My role was similar, to connect these women into the community in a culturally sensitive way. As an Australian in that coffee shop, I felt I was one of them when we were verbally abused. Coyotes are protective of their participants and could use the language required to defend these women on the border. While the experience of racism was familiar to the women, it was not familiar to me and it served to reinforce my 'sincere compromiso commitment' and strengthen my resolve to address this type of racist behaviour in my dominant culture (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176).

Coyotes like me are determined to make sure these women have a voice and can travel along a path that will benefit them. After the Macedon incident I repeatedly phoned tourism information in the Shire and wrote letters asking for an apology and for the people at the café to be held accountable. I even wrote letters on behalf of DGCHS, all to no avail. I told the women that the university had contacts in the Human Rights Commission and I could really make a fuss but they insisted that they did not
want to cause any undue attention to them and I respected their decisions. My field notes reflect this desire to make sure women's voices have been heard.

I have gone over and over the situation at the picnic many times in my head and I feel torn with making a fuss and embarrassing the women, which I know they would not like, but yet I feel an obligation to correct this injustice. (Field notes, 2010)

The coyote unfortunately belongs in neither world but navigates their way along with others to establish paths for people to take that are safe, beneficial and understanding. In as much as I have been welcomed into Somali culture I can never really be part of it because I can never really know what it is 'to be Somali'. Fadumo, discusses how I fit in.

We will always need and love you, whatever problems we have I know we can come to you and you always have an answer for us no matter how busy you are. You are always trying to help us, we don't have people like you and that is why we struggle in this country. We need strong voices, our language lets us down and this is what we need. (Fadumo)

3.5 “We established a “familia”: summary of the research methodology

This chapter used Valadez and Elsbree's (2005) coyote theory to describe and understand the methodological processes used in this project. Firstly it revealed how I, as a coyote, along with Fadumo and Louise, operated “in secreto” to develop trust and understanding with the older Somali women and the community in order to discuss issues around physical activity and motherhood (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). We established a “familia” or family, which Valadez and Elsbree (2005) describe as connections that enable us to work with and encourage older Somali women to cross borders and “develop fully as authentic humans” (p. 176). I extended the coyote framework to add an issue around the protection and vulnerability of the coyote researcher as I revealed my experience of doubt and a lack of trust in my own strength, capability and efficacy of completing the project. This chapter described how I, as the coyote researcher, had to become skilled at knowing the Somali codes, “los codigos”, around community, food, dress, greetings, mannerisms, social structures and gatekeepers (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). Figure 3.19 shows me trying to tackle this multi-tasking by contributing to the project with my own embroidery, listening and recording stories and getting the translations correct.
I had to blend in to Somali settings and be able to understand borderland culture and smuggle information between Somali and Australian cultures. As a coyote researcher I was also required to develop “la facultad”; that is, to understand the context of older Somali women’s lives on a daily basis, so that I could appreciate the cultural values and influences on physical activity and motherhood (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p.176). Finally, this chapter explored the commitment of the coyote researcher to foreground the stories of the women accurately and ensure that physical activity was understood from their perspective.
Chapter 4

“here it’s nice but not nice like Somalia”: the new mestizas

In this chapter, I introduce some of the research participants who agreed to be photographed and have their stories identified. These women talk about their lives in Somalia and here in Melbourne, often making the distinction that Nero (Figure 4.1) makes when she says “here it’s nice but not nice like Somalia”. These women live in the margin and the centre and on the borders in between. They are the new mestizas, negotiating and navigating to construct new realities. This section gives the reader a personal connection to the women and aims to prevent a dehumanising, formulaic approach to the participants and the research. As discussed in Chapter 1, post-colonial feminist methodology provides for individualism and notices the complex, multilayered aspect of women’s lives. These stories ‘humanise’ the participants, representing them as individual women who have a story to tell and, at the same time, representing the essence of feminist ethnography.

Many of the participants were only seen once or twice during the project, due to a range of reasons, including illness, caregiving commitments or displacement with housing or immigration. The methodology, Chapter 3, section 3.3.2, explored the concerns and issues affecting ethnic minority women and highlighted the complexity
of managing roles that would impact on their ability to commit to the project. Other participants were very consistent, attending every week for the 10 to 12 weeks of data collection. Each participant was asked if they would like to reveal themselves in a short story accompanying an image of their hands. Some agreed; others did not as they feared that their story would be recognised within the Somali community. It appeared that those who were more settled in their housing and immigration status were more likely to agree to being identified. All the women found it very difficult to express something personal about themselves as they said they had never been asked such a question. They had never actually thought that who they were and what they did was unique and distinctive. Schutte (1997) describes this as being the “culturally other” (p. 52); being different as an homogenised group in relation to the main members of the white dominant culture, not necessarily for their individuality. Somali women living in Australia are often portrayed as part of a culture and described using cultural assumptions. This erases important aspects of the women's individuality, relegating the culturally different to a subordinate position. The stories provided here follow feminist research methodologies that provide a position from which women “can articulate a standpoint of cultural, national, regional, or social identity” (Schutte, 1997, p. 59).

During the project I discovered that the majority of the participants could not be photographed due to religious reasons, as discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.8.4. I asked the participants if I could photograph their hands and feet, as these are allowed to be seen by everyone and are usually highly decorated with patterns of henna. Most of the participants were happy to have their hands and feet photographed and each image provided a conversation starter for me as the researcher.

After taking and viewing many photographs, I began to identify people through their hands. This fascinated me and I wondered if this extends to the eyes of those wearing the full burqa; that is, are people able to recognise each other just from the look of their eyes? As shown in Figure 4.2, I placed the photos on a board in my home office as they helped me to transcribe the conversations and learn more about the women. Viewing the women's hands while transcribing their stories aided my understanding of who they were as individuals.
When my white, middle class friends entered my home office they were often confronted by many of these images; they found them fascinating and considered them ‘works of art’. Equally, the participants were intrigued at seeing their hands on these photo boards, including my white ones, and asked me whether I had shown these to my white friends. They loved the fact that all their hands were together as one and not separate, as together the images represented their collective culture. In contrast, my white, middle class friends saw the hands individually, asking about the colours of the dresses and the difference in skin colour. For me, this reflected the clear differences between cultures; ours the fragmented “who split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements” and theirs the collective, those who understand the world as multiple and interrelated (Lugones, 1992, p. 460). In response, I asked friends (white, middle class and of mixed gender) to see if they could pick the white hands out of the large collection of photographs. This took a few minutes but they managed to find what they called ‘the plain ones’, which represented how I felt about my dull dress sense against the women’s colourful fabrics and jewellery. Friends wanted to know how long the henna lasted and ‘could you wash it off if you wanted to?’, as if I were in a play and the costume makeup could be removed when it was all over. They found the process interesting but always remarked when the henna faded that they were glad I ‘had got over that’ and returned to my so-called normal self. I often felt insulted in a way that this project was being likened to a teenage fad that would pass and people would ‘put up with it’. For me the process of having my hands hennaed was like a ‘crossing over’ into a remarkable world that made me, for some time, part of them. This has been discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.1.6, and earlier in this chapter.
The following images and stories are a sample of the participants in the project; they provide the reader with a context in which they can situate information and stories that the women provided, as presented and discussed more fully earlier in this chapter. The life stories presented here under each image are direct transcriptions from the women and have not been edited. I have added some border culture context from what I know of each of the women and what comes across from their centre. The aim is to promote a deeper connection to the women and their stories and to highlight their struggle through the English words they use. These pictures and stories attempt to represent the women on their own terms and through their words while minimising the researcher’s translations and interpretations. I asked the women to describe their lives. Many descriptions took weeks to gather as women took some time thinking about what they would like written about themselves and translations were checked to ensure that the transcriptions were as accurate as possible. Some participants chose to use their own names while others chose pseudonyms. Many of the names are the same as most women are named after the Prophet Muhammad’s wives and daughters.

These are their stories.
My name is Fadumo. I came to New Zealand till 1997 and I came this country 2001. I was a teacher back home even finished university. I have eight children and three died. We were something back home. My husband, he was a general manager of an importing business. Even one time he became a minister of the government. I can’t find a job that I wanted so I help the community. I try my best, I teach Arabic but it’s never going to be the same as back home. I have nine grandchildren.

**Border culture**

Fadumo is very religious and uses her religion to maintain her centre, her core. It helps her focus for life on the borders. Fadumo teaches young Somali children about Islam and the Koran and tries to transfer these messages into their daily lives. Others turn to Fadumo in times of sickness or for advice as she is extremely knowledgeable about Islam and the Koran. Fadumo blurs the boundaries by making sure that younger generations do not forget their ancestry while understanding their need for change and their hesitancy in committing to Islam.
I came to New Zealand in 94 and came to Australia 2002. I just started being a business woman back home. I have eight children and two die and twelve grandchildren. I can’t work because no English and now I become a pensioner and my life is not benefit, I am just living.

Border culture

Asha's life is very much centred around cooking. She is renowned for her biscuits and sweet jellies, especially during Ramadan. Asha always wore beautiful gold jewellery, had hennaed nails and wore bright dresses which represented her as a strong Somali woman and carer of many. She situates herself on the border between what once was the productive life of a business woman and now a life of “no benefit”.
I am seventeen years living in this country. I have nine children, (and now) living with one grandchild. I am a great grandmother and I was only 36; when my husband died with nine children so what am I supposed to do, I have to become a business woman. Now I am just living in this country, nothing.

**Border culture**

Hawo is representative of a long-term border dweller with many children and grandchildren who either live with her or close by. She does not like to venture too far from the housing estate, she prefers the safety and comfort of those around her. Hawo’s border strategies are extensive and she helps and guides others who come into the community. The clay pot she is making is a symbol of her past but is used now in her kitchen in Australia, taking something old into her new world.
I have nine children, nineteen grandchildren, they’re not all here. I have been fifteen years in this country, living with my husband, it’s good but it’s not like back home in Somalia. It’s nothing like home.

**Border culture**

Allawia did not want her hands photographed and is very quiet and unassuming. She adopted one of the strongest border strategies as she is from Ethiopia but grew up in Somalia from a very young age. Allawia lives on a borderland between three cultures, having multiple selves and being able to mesh them together.
I come here 1995, June 30th. I born in Mogadishu, I grow up and marry in Mogadishu. Between 10 and 13 years I travel to other cities but I married in Mogadishu at 15 and had my first baby at 16. I have 14 children and I finish year 12 in Mogadishu and train as a nurse. I was a working mother. Four die and ten alive, plus my husband’s four kids from someone else and I look after them and I am mother and father to them. I struggle here to go to school here and look after all my children, no help. It is very hard because people not friendly, very new country, miss my own country but it’s better than refugee camp. I very happy now, my children finish university, some working and now 10 grandchildren. I am now working myself doing childcare at home.

Border culture

During her time in Australia, Sharo has struggled to manage her many children alone, however she is now working and her children have grown. While adapting to life in Melbourne, life on the borders, Sharo has held onto the colours and memories of Somalia. She wears traditional Somali dresses and is heavily jewelled to remind herself of the ‘real gold’ she lost in Somalia. The colours of the dress represent the earth and the sun of Somalia, the things she remembers and holds tightly to.
I married at a young age and then I gave my time to eight children. I was a midwife because as a mother I wanted to know about medicine to help my kids so I went to nursing school. I finish in Mogadishu and worked as a nurse in refugee camps for the United Nations. When I came here I become a patient, I am old, I cannot work. Now I am here I am resting and relaxing because I did my kids, my work, it’s all done.

**Border culture**

Hawo feels the loss of her job as a midwife and feels that she has now become a patient since arriving in Australia. She establishes strategies of border behaviour by moving between caring for her children and grandchildren and travelling to Mogadishu regularly for many months at a time. This reinforces the establishment of strong links with home and gives her strength to survive in the Australian culture when she returns.
I came this country October 1996. When I came here my daughter was here who was married. She has children at that time, so I was already a grandma. I have two daughters with me at that time. My son is in America and another daughter in UK. My husband passed away in Kenya. Before I get married I wasn’t doing anything and then I get married I became business lady. I used to get clothing from Italy to sell and now here in Australia I am nothing here, I am just a housewife and government chasing me instead of getting money I have to do something. But I don’t know English so I am learning even at this age.

**Border culture**

Miriam is able to speak four languages, having lived in many parts of Africa and Europe. She was able to translate and converse with many women in different languages and her “aussie”, as she called it, was one of the best in the group. She still always spoke in Somali as she felt she could express herself differently and could change herself to adopt what she termed “white ways”. She lives a strategic border dwelling life, changing herself and her language between what is needed for the whites and what is needed for her ‘Somalia’.
I came in 1998. My husband was well known back home, a general, an ambassador. I have two children only, boy and girl. I travel a lot when I have marriage with my husband. I travel everywhere in Europe, I never went to a refugee camp or anything. I got a sponsor from my son and I come here. Here it is nice but it’s not nice like Somalia for me but I never see a problem.

**Border culture**

Nero means ‘black’ in Somali and she was given this name because of the colour of her skin. She never had her hands hennaed because they were too dark but all the women agreed that Nero’s hands took the best photos as the colour of her skin reflected best with the colours of their dresses. Nero was a world traveller with her husband. She now travels between the world she once knew and the ‘hostile white’ world, one that she does not feel comfortable in. Consequently she enjoys coming together as a group and talking about the Somalia she once knew.
Asli is a seasoned border dweller, moving within and negotiating the health system carefully and consciously. She walks in her Asics runners around Melbourne trying to maintain her health and fitness in order to survive. She has some complex health issues that she addresses with her positive attitude and amazing resilience. Asli uses her English in “aussie words” so that they think she has “been here a long time and won't hassle me”.

**Figure 4.11 Asli**

I came here in 2001, three children with me to Australia. If I could compare my life to what I have done now, I was best when I was young because of my health. Now is fine. In the middle I was in my country and it broke down and I was in a refugee camp a long time. I used to work in a government agency and I had a nice income and I was so happy. Then the war happen and I run and I end up in a refugee camp. They killed my husband in front of me and tortured me and then killed my daughter. I was nearly having my baby at that time, they tried to rape me. After I came here I get recognition, I am so happy now. I have health and I try to forget everything that happened to me.
I came here in 1996, I followed my friend Asha. I lose everything in my life of doing something. Before I was busy and have respect. Now nothing, just our dreams. I have seven children and seven grandchildren.

**Border culture**

Some women, like Asha, find it difficult living on the borders and find safety in the margins where they know they are safe and that family will look after them. Asha is strategically placed in a vantage point of critiquing the centre and her position within this. She can see that moving out of the margins requires energy and can cause a great deal of stress, which she is reluctant to do. Asha prefers to live on the margins with “just our dreams”.
This Asha and I are friends. All I can say, we used to be active ladies, sewing and knitting and that’s all gone because of 20 years of war. I don’t know really where to start. All I know is that we are sitting by the heaters waiting for God.

**Border culture**

Asha faces a similar experience to her very good friend Asha in Figure 4.12, finding safety on the margins. She feels the loss of her independence and gathers strength from being with other women her age from Somalia where they can talk about the good times and what they left behind.
When I married my husband at 16, I had nine children. When the war came we fled with nothing, my house gone no jewellery nothing. We had a good life, my husband an engineer, we travel and happy. We lucky ones, as we were not in a camp. We got out in airplane but nothing ever the same. I don't care about life just take every day as it comes, but still I have a friend in every corner and feet for walking.

Border culture

Nadifo is a world traveller on the streets of Melbourne. She gathers strength from walking and is always shopping for the people of Somalia. Nadifo collects clothes and sends them back to her home country for those who need it most. She loves Australia and what it has given her children but still remembers the good life she once had with her husband.
4.1 “the colour of the sky in Somalia”: summary of the mestizas

The stories and photographs of the hands provide an insight into the lives of some of the participants and I hope the reader can now relate to each woman as an individual.

These stories and photographs, while representing the women as individuals, also reflect some commonalities between them. Spradley (1979) maintained that effective ethnography requires that cultural references be tested over and over again to be certain that people who share these cultural meanings agree that they are a true reflection of themselves. This has been further explored in Chapter 3, section 3.3.1. These photos were taken many times and viewed by the participants and many were not happy with the end result because their hands had not been hennaed or because they were not wearing particular jewellery. Over many weeks, and after hundreds of photos, specific images were chosen by the participants to be placed in this thesis. Most of the women took extreme pride in how their hands were presented and in some cases had their henna done the day before to ensure their hands were beautiful. They also wore their favourite dress to ensure that the colour represented them. For example, Nero in Figure 4.10 always wore blue when I photographed her as she told me it reminded her of the colour of the sky in Somalia; a deep cloudless blue.

There were also some distinct differences between the women; for example, Nero (Figure 4.10) had never had henna on her hands because her skin was “too dark to take it”. Other women, like Allawia in Figure 4.6, would not have her hands photographed because she felt it inappropriate to show any skin; but she was happy to have her dress and feet photographed. Many dresses were worn over the weeks until she was happy with the photograph. Jewellery was also specifically chosen. Asha in Figure 4.4 had collected pieces through her travels around the world and would always comment that the jewellery she has now was nothing like the jewellery she lost in Somalia when the war broke out.

When I had my hands hennaed they became ‘the plain ones’ as labelled by my friends and the ‘white ones’ as labelled by the women. I noticed the lack of ‘story’, the colour, and the chewed nails in my hands (Figure 4.15). The women had allowed me to cross over Anzaldua’s (1987) border into Somali life by being part of the ritual to henna the hands; but the photo will always suggest I am a visitor.
Figure 4.15 ‘the plain ones’: my henna
Chapter 5

“her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits”: research results

In this chapter I discuss the findings from this study, which reveal many themes around physical activity that were interwoven into the older Somali women's lives. The findings are positioned and analysed within Anzaldua’s borderland framework and reflect the in-between-ness these women feel, their “face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 42). Figure 5.1 reflects this space; it is their border, the women walk the perimeter of the Estate along with others from the Estate where they feel safe and secure. This is a ‘neutral space’ between the world of the whites on one side and the meshing of cultures on the other. As mentioned in Chapter 1, section 1.1, the Flemington Housing Estate is home to people from many ethnic backgrounds and they share the spaces surrounding the estate. Here they feel safe; walking as physical activity but knowing that crossing back and forth over this border is not an easy exercise. However, this chapter will also show that the borderlands can be a space for creativity, a development of resistance and agency; learning and developing strength and understanding within themselves and within the Somali community.

Figure 5.1 walking the borders
I walk the laps around the estate with the women, guiding them and providing information about how to survive in the dominant culture. They also cross borders, teaching me the reality of their spaces. Thus the themes developed in this chapter draw on the borderland and coyote frameworks outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 to explore and describe the lives of the older Somali women and to understand the role of physical activity in their lives. While overlays of themes occur, for the purposes of this data analysis, major themes and sub-themes are separated where possible.

Most study participants viewed physical activity in the broad context of their lives, including the range of activities that are traditionally part of a normal day, such as home duties and caring for family members. This chapter explores the major issues in the lives of the participants and discusses how these issues impact on their health, and their attitudes and access to physical activity. Issues such as stress and fatigue, the impact of religion, the complex nature of Somali culture, and being a carer and mother are discussed as they influenced the amount of time each participant had for physical activity. Key barriers to physical activity are highlighted, including lack of time, cost, weather, the perceptions of others, and concepts around what exercise means in Somali culture. Concepts around health and illness are explored and extend into food, family, body image and lifestyle. Finally, language, employment and issues around displacement and migration are examined in relation to participation in physical activity.

The main findings in the study regarding older Somali women’s physical activity levels are:

**Stressful connections to the homeland:**
- High levels of stress and anxiety about relatives left behind in Somalia and the financial strain of supporting them leave the women with little energy for physical activity.

**Collective practices:**
- Participants value family, friends and community. They come together to share their burdens, pray and practise the Islamic faith. They draw comfort from their large families and their friends and reinforce the strong connections within their clan. These gatherings are often places where physical activity occurs.

**The role of religion:**
- Religious rituals are important in the Somali women’s lives and bring physical and mental health benefits, as well as dictate what physical activity is appropriate for aging women.
Cultural perceptions of aging:
- Many women see physical activity as a waste of time at their age and would prefer sitting, talking and eating with friends and family.

Gender roles:
- Older Somali women have specific gendered roles and expectations that have developed from an early age and have allowed for limited exercise experiences.

Concepts around exercise:
- Older Somali women’s conceptualising of exercise is shaped by cultural values and beliefs regarding physical activity, early life experiences and perceiving individualised physical activity as a sign of mental illness.

Food and health:
- The origin of food, where it comes from and how it is eaten affects older Somali women's health and wellbeing.
- Older Somali women prefer larger body sizes as it is a sign of wealth and prosperity. This affects the type and amount of food they consume and their physical activity patterns.

Concepts of health and illness:
- Older Somali women suffer from diseases that are unfamiliar to them, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure and angina, and they perceive these illnesses as something that prevents them from participating in physical activities.

Language and employment:
- Lack of language skills is a major barrier to employment and education opportunities, and can cause isolation, limiting the amount of incidental physical activity older Somali women participate in.
- Older Somali women feel that they are aging out of place and have no purpose or sense of self in a new country. This isolates the women and prevents them from venturing out.

Feelings of displacement:
- Many of the women feel powerless within the new social structures and spaces and this inhibits their confidence to get out and be physically active.
- Most women experience racism on a daily basis and are subject to physical and verbal abuse which prevents them from being physically active.
Other specific barriers to physical activity:

- Weather is a major deterrent to participating in physical activity as the women are not used to the weather variations in Melbourne.
- Existing health conditions prevent many women from exercising as they are afraid of exacerbating existing problems.
- The cost of participating in physical activity prohibits many older Somali women from joining in formal exercise programs.
- Lack of time contributes to low exercise participation for older Somali women as they have many commitments caring for large extended families.

Within these are other issues and experiences of the study participants; these are also explored in this chapter.

5.1 “a state of intimate terrorism”: stressful connections to the homeland

Anzaldúa describes “a state of intimate terrorism” as the space between the different worlds that she inhabits, a place where “the self risks its own familiarity and her being familiar to others” (Lugones, 1992, p. 33). For older Somali women who live in Flemington but remain centred within Somalia, this positionality can cause chaos, both physically and mentally, and a lack of ability to respond, to “keep at bay the fear of the self” (Lugones, 1992, p. 33). The women live on the border between the self they left behind and the self living here in the dominant culture. The stresses experienced by many of the study participants, such as constant anxiety about relatives in Somalia, the financial strain of supporting overseas relatives, and the trauma of a turbulent journey to Australia, are all-consuming and leave the women with little energy to think about being physically active. The strategies they use to cope are strategies of defence and they include religion and coming together to talk, eat and share their day-to-day lives.

5.1.1 “the pressing, the stressing”: a stressful life and the impact of mental fatigue

Along with the challenges of resettlement in an alien environment, Somali refugees face the stress and trauma of their past and the local tensions between existing members of the community and the newly arrived. These tensions cause mental fatigue for many. Anzaldúa describes this as a feeling of oppression between the white world and the world of the “mother culture” and the pressing between these two worlds is scary and a vulnerable stage (Lugones 2000, p. 89). Syrad describes how she constantly worries about her extended family’s welfare.
Everyone that is here we left so many relatives that don’t have nothing and no food to eat. The Australian mother, the white Australian mother, the difference between Somali older women that’s here is the mother here may have her grandmother here, her mother, her great granddad or her great grandmother, they’re all here and there is no one to worry about what they could eat and how they will survive but then the mothers that from Somali that’s here, she is worried about her mum what she is going to eat and are they safe, is someone going to murder them, if the phone rings I am worried someone might tell me that my father died or my uncle has been shot in the head or there are all stresses. (Syrad)

Many women were overwhelmed with the enormity of thinking about relatives back home. Miriam’s words reflect how the worry permeates every day.

Sometimes I don't get the sleep at night because of what is happening back there and that just put us even the pressure of not exercising and it just consuming all of that mentally, thinking all that, that takes time isn’t it. (Miriam)

Community members who have lived and grown up in Australia watch their newly arrived family members suffer this overwhelming worry, which seems to take up so much energy and leaves them with little motivation to exercise. The younger generations tell them that ‘they should move on, forget about the homeland’, but they cannot, they feel tied to their homeland and the people in it. This stress experienced by the Somali women is reflective of Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework, which describes a “psychic restlessness” where the women are torn between wanting their previous homeland and creating a new one (p. 100). They inhabit a state of “mental nepantilism”; a tearing between wanting to be with the land, their loved ones and the Somali country they remember and living here knowing what they have left behind (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 100).

Both physical and psychological unrest are reflected in their bodies with many women putting on a lot of weight as a result of over-eating and lack of daily physical activity, and feeling the strain of living in-between cultures. Caperchione et al. (2011) found similar results in looking at the physical activity behaviours of CALD women aged 30–70 in Australia. Many of the participants in their study were not coping with life in Australia, which led to a lack of motivation for physical activity as well as experiences of depression, stress and over-eating. A community member, Imani, reflects on what she observes is happening to many of the older women in the Somali community.
They worry today when they wake up, last night the conversation we have and what we talk about the exchange of ideas and what’s going on, the war and stuff like that, they sleep with that, they wake up with that. All other things, like exercise and the eating, they forget. (Imani)

Worry and anxiety were often major factors in how the women felt about their lives, their body shape and their overall wellbeing. Renzaho et al. (2010b) stated that migrants born in North Africa and the Middle East experience rapid weight gain following migration and experience being overweight more than Australian-born populations. In their literature review on interventions for migrant groups who have recently arrived in Australia and their risk of obesity and obesity-related diseases, they found a number of socio-cultural factors influenced these patterns. Some of the women brought in photos to show me how they looked when they were in Somalia. Allawia comments that she does not recognise the person in the photo any more.

This photo, it’s not the same person, I can’t believe it is me in that picture. I was so thin and my face is not stressed or worried, I was a different person to now. Now I am fat and sick and worried. (Allawia)

The women in this study recognised that the weight they have gained in Australia is related to stress and worry and this takes up a lot of their energy and, as Allawia explains, affects their weight.

The pressing, the stressing it’s put me a lot of weight when get stressed that’s when I get more fat, yeah, stress from home, home, yeah missing home. I shouldn’t be stressing, I have medication, I have food, I have everything but I am still worried. You have all your relatives over there so that puts me so worried. (Allawia)

My informant, Fadumo, informs me that explaining and translating sad stories is tiring for the women. There is a sadness in their voices when telling their stories, which is in contrast to the usually loud and lively group. Fadumo highlights this and I think that she also gets mentally tired translating the stories of sorrow.

No, even talking about these things is tiring, mental tiring. They don’t have the education to clear their minds and just off, go outside and walk. You know how you guys say ‘I just need to clear my head’. You just go, we don’t do that, we go to the fridge (laughs). (Fadumo, informant)

Many of their study participants migrated to Australia having experienced some sort of trauma through war leading to stress and a lack of motivation to be physically active. These past experiences have affected the amount and type of physical activity participants are involved in. So for these women their past creates a border that they
These women struggle within this space, remembering the past and trying to establish themselves in a new future.

5.1.2 “We can’t send everything, but they keep ringing”: the financial strain

Some of the women faced significant stress due to financial demands. They feel a constant guilt that they are better off here in Australia and have left behind relatives without basic necessities and in unsafe conditions. These feelings of guilt and restlessness drive them to save as much money as they can from a government pension to give back to their homeland. This is a way of creating a new world for themselves, of forging ahead while making a difference to the land and the people they left behind. Amini describes how the pressure to send money to relatives back home in Somalia is ever-present.

This is part of the stress we have because we left family members back in Somalia and the Australian government cannot bring everyone here. This is the stress we have, even how do we feed them, we have limited money here and we can’t send everything back that we have been given by the government that we can support back home. We can’t send everything but they ring and keep saying this is what happened, one woman has been shot and she needs some sort of health that is immediate. But we can’t afford it, we can only send maybe $US100 and that is it. So many people like this, it is so bad and they are poor and don’t have food or anything. (Amini)

Most of the women sacrifice their weekly pensions and are always trying to raise money for their extended families and people within their clans. One of my first roles as a coyote was to make what seemed like endless trips with the women to an Australia Post Office handing over much of their weekly pension into foreign Somali bank accounts. I became protective, talking for hours to Australia Post employees, asking who this money is going to and if the accounts are legitimate. The women gathered at the Post Office and discussed the situation in Somali, talking about whose relatives needed what. Ifrah’s words highlight the importance of this weekly trip.

We come here every week to give our money, to see others and discuss how very bad it is in Somalia. We wait sometimes for many hours in line, but we don’t care, we are not waiting for food and water, we have to remember this. Every week I give what I can, I save but I am stressed, I want to give more, we have to help. (Ifrah)

Many women send money, clothes and food to those they left behind and try to exist in a restlessness that dominates their everyday thoughts.
5.1.3 “it becomes part of your mind and you are back there”: there is no reprieve

The women in this study endure a “cultural collision” where the border dwellers’ lives are permeated by alienation and depression (Ortega, 2005, p.81). As Bryant and Livholts (2007) highlight, there is no reprieve from the worries of Somalia due to the “ interruption and transgression of spaces via material objects like the telephone” (p. 38). The phone provides opportunities for public and private spaces to become blurred. Even when women attempt to find their own space, and in this study a space in a new country, the realities communicated via the phone leave no separation between the self and others. Bryant and Livholts’ (2007) case study shows how the phone demands emotional labour. “It is a medium for voices to immediately enter another space”; it is an “intersect...a space dominated by the presence of bodies at particular points in time” (p. 38). The memories associated with this space fill it with emotional charge. This can create tensions and demands on the quality of everyday life.

Via the phone and television, the women in my study constantly have their space dominated by stories from home; they are always involved in the struggles of family members and loved ones.

Every time you see on the TV what’s happening back there you get upset and worry. Our country has no education, no health, no peace, everyday there is war and the people are getting nothing. I worry so much and then someone rings you at night saying this happened to a relative or friend and it becomes part of your mind, you are back there, you can’t help and you can’t stop thinking, always thinking. (Allawia)

This is an example of what Bryant and Livholts (2007) describe as “having no separation of space for mothering or for self” (p. 38). It is also reflective of the borderland framework; while the borders are supposed to keep undesirable ideas and information out, the phone and television penetrate and require the older Somali women to become flexible and adaptive in their responses. These women have to develop Anzaldua’s (1987) new consciousness where they “undergo a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (p. 108).
5.1.4 “it comes back to me and I am so sad”: the turbulent journey to Australia

Most of the women discussed their turbulent journeys to Australia and the impact that their experiences have on them. Stories such as Fadumo’s (the participant) show how their experiences become integrated into all areas of everyday life. Fadumo recounted the death of her son, telling how she looked for his grave for many days before digging him up and seeing his body. It is distressing for both Fadumo who is interpreting and for Fadumo the participant. I asked Fadumo (participant) how this affects her life here in Australia.

The religion helps, our religion says that everyone will die so nobody will pass their time. When your time is up, it’s up and that’s why my son dies. I try not to think about it but when I see Fadumo (informant) I cry or hear stories it comes back to me and I am so sad, so sad. (Fadumo)

Some women sold all their possessions to escape refugee camps through the United Nations while others lived for up to 10 years in refugee camps supported by relatives in Australia or America. Asli describes her life in a refugee camp and her struggle for survival amongst chaos.

I was in Kenyan refugee camp, nine years, that was too long. I even get a disease all over my body, scratching my skin. There was no peace, there was rape going on there and it’s happening to everyone not just me, I just have to look after my family. (Asli)

Asha explains the tiredness that she feels from the stress of leaving her own country.

When you are so tired and stressed you feel lazy and just sit, sit and do nothing. (Asha)

Similarly, research by Caperchione et al. (2011) revealed that Bosnian and Sudanese women who had fled war experienced stress and a lack of motivation for physical activity. Fadumo (informant), who is younger than the participants in the study, also feels this lack of motivation on occasions.

The other night I watch a documentary on Somalia and I feel so sad, so depressed. I cannot get out of the house for three days I feel so sad. The people, the land it is all destroyed and I can’t believe it, it kills me to see this. (Fadumo, Informant)
5.1.5 “exist with an inner turmoil”: a summary

In this section I have examined how stress-related issues around migration, financial responsibilities and anxiety about those left behind in Somalia contribute to how much physical activity older Somali women perform on a daily basis. Most women suffered post-war trauma leading to a lack of motivation to be active. Many have vivid memories that cause tiredness and stress; others overeat and put on weight. Many women exist with an inner turmoil, feeling torn between a commitment to their homeland and adjusting to their life here in Australia. Strategies and recommendations to address these issues will be presented in Chapter 6.

5.2 “embracing the centre”: collective practices

The women in this study come from a collective culture that values sharing, meeting and helping each other. In collective cultures families are often large and extended and friends are an important part of life. The results of this study reveal the importance of family and community to the Somali women, and the comfort and support they get from coming together. Like Anzaldua (1987), returning to her Chicano culture was always a time when she developed a further self-awareness that reinforced and embraced her centre, herself.

5.2.1 “talk about all the things we have inside”: coming together

Coming together and talking is one of many coping strategies Somali women use to share and relieve their burdens. In Somalia, women gathered every day to discuss their duties and families. In Australia, the women gather to talk about what is happening in their homeland and how they are dealing with the many issues they face. Having places to go outside their homes, away from the housing estates, where they can be outside and still talk and feel secure, provides a relief from their everyday lives.

To help with the daily stress we have from the women back home that comes here, that is here today is to come together like this or go on excursions and we can talk about our troubles, our stories, talk about all the things we have inside that are built in and the relief is there, our stress is gone. (Ayan)

Figure 5.2 shows the food the women share from communal plates when they come together to discuss and hear stories about life in Somalia and their new lives in Australia. This is an opportunity to remove themselves from the dominant culture, to lose the roles they play and become themselves (Anzaldua, 1990).
This ‘coming together’ is also an example of what Melillo et al. (2001) suggest would be beneficial for older immigrants to promote physical activity. In their study of older Latino adults and their perceptions around physical activity, they found that having “a place of their own...to exercise and congregate” provides a sense of cultural unity and motivated them to initiate exercise programs (p. 44). Coming together revives the self, bringing the Somali woman back to the centre to reconnect to traditional activities like dancing and singing. It allows them to gather strength and energy to refocus on living in the borderlands. Tang et al. (2011) also found in their study of social engagement and health status among older racially diverse women that the women benefited from sustained engagement in a council endorsed senior citizen centre that offered culturally specific activities. Nadifa reveals similar needs in coping with stress.

A place where we can talk to each other maybe if it’s a sunny hot day they can take us to the beach even though we are not swimming because that part is preventing us from the religion, we can’t take our clothes off just like you, but we can enjoy the sun and talking to each other and that’s part of the activity we would love to do but we need people to help us do that. (Nadifa)

For others, coming together took on a more cultural perspective, incorporating traditional buraanbur dancing and poetry readings. Buraanbur dancing is quite an intense activity that involves the women standing in a circle clapping a loud rhythm with their hands and feet to drums. Women take turns entering the circle and perform a dance with their hijab placed over their heads, their arms extended much like a peacock who displays its finest feathers. The whole body shakes to the rhythm of the
It can only be sustained for a few minutes and then the next two or three women enter while the women recuperate on the outer circle. The dance reflects Anzaldúa’s centre and margin, with the women using so much energy dancing in the centre that they have to rest on the margins every so often. Similarly, they do this in their lives, entering and living in the centre or the dominant culture being intense and at times draining, and then moving to the margins, to the ‘Somalilands’ to recoup and gather strength. Ainsworth (2000) acknowledges that the value women place in cultural traditions such as dancing may be important when measuring physical activity. She suggests that “people are more apt to participate in activities that are relevant, personally validating and rewarding” (p. 94). This dancing provided the participants with a time to reinforce their identity as Somali women while engaging with each other and the social structures around them. However, the participants emphasised that dancing is women’s business only and is performed in a closed space that has no access to males.

Also to get our culture back, back home we would do buraanbur dancing. The songs and the poetry and the words we use are important to us. Most of the women love poetry and they can actually talk Somali poetry on our terms and you would love it even though you don’t understand Somali. And that’s also getting the culture back, using activity and telling the younger women about what we know. The women need to come to a community hall, only ourselves, no men allowed and we can do the buraanbur. We would love nights like this so older women would come and those who do not know we can teach them and this is an activity that we would love to do and we don’t have that now. (Sharo)

This is an example of what Eyler et al. (1998) found in their qualitative study of older black, Hispanic and American Indian women, where dancing was described as a favourite physical activity whether it was done in groups at cultural centres or individually. This form of physical activity was practised on a regular basis in Somalia in conjunction with daily domestic activities. Learning traditional dance often took many hours, with elderly women teaching young adults. Opportunities for these types of experiences around physical activity have been dramatically reduced since arriving in Australia and are now limited to celebrations such as weddings. This identity was the centre of their being in Somalia; here in Australia it is something that they cling to while living in the margins.

In McMichael’s (2002) study of Somali refugees in Melbourne, participants told stories of the good life, the familiar food and the strong social networks that supported and connected them. Women told how people shared details about their lives with
each other and helped make decisions (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Similarly, in this study the participants reflected on the communal life they once had.

At the end of the day after we have done all our duty work in our house and the kids may be asleep or at school and we are actually enjoying talking to five or six of our neighbours, that is what I miss the most. I find out who cooked what, some meat, some rice and we all eat together, share stories and laugh. Every woman that lives here, one suburb to another you name it we don't have the time to actually come together and talk and that prevents us from doing things. (Aziza)

For participants like Aziza, this central activity of talking to neighbours was part of a wonderful life, where they were comfortable and self-identity was easily embraced. Women mourned the loss of family support and trusted social networks, which in the Somali community in Melbourne had turned into a lack of trust (Boyle & Ali, 2009). They consequently feel out of place in Melbourne. McMichael (2002) discusses a distinct “narrative contrast between Somalia as home and Melbourne as a site of exile and disorientation” (p. 178). In this study the participants talked about how these narratives help them with blending themselves into life in Melbourne.

Yes, coming together, talking about our lives in Somalia, talking with you like this makes us feel back home, doing all the things we loved, just talking about our memories makes us so happy. (Hawo)

Reminiscing about old times, when Somalia was at peace and the women were happy being mothers, wives and caregivers provides them with a source of comfort. Skrbis (1999) found migrants in their diasporic settings often experience a sieve effect whereby they remember only a selective flow of information. This, however, centres them and provides them with a comfort and solace that is to be respected. Anzaldua (1987) suggests that life on the borderlands is a continual struggle but she never lost touch with her Mexican origins and maintained a centred core; “a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample mestiza heart” (p. 45). This coming together of older Somali women provides opportunities to reinvigorate their mestiza hearts and minds.

5.2.2 “People are taking care of other people”: collectivism

In a society that emphasises collective responsibility, culture is a mix of history, geography, ecology and complex relationships that influence every facet of people’s lives. Cultures that are based on collectivism rely largely on social relationships, identifying within a group, experiencing a shared way of life and having shared goals and attitudes. These are known under a cultural dimension of “embeddedness”
In these cultures, physical activity is not something that would be pursued for individualistic gain but rather done together to benefit others or as a normal part of a working woman's day. Activities are done together as a family, often with extended relatives, while each person is committed to their gender role. Women are still doing the majority of caring and cooking while the men are working. In the following, Asha reflects on these roles in a community of caring for others.

We are always on the move, every family have lots of children and they play nearby and everyone can see them and they can say ‘don't do this, don't do that’, everyone is supervising them, they play close by and we know where they are. The parents can still work and travel to and from and relatives are at home to look after friends and neighbours can also help. People are taking care of other people and people are at home to help. It’s a very different life. (Asha)

Physical activity was part of the everyday life of a collective culture simply through visiting and caring for others, walking to neighbours’ houses and performing domestic duties. Often Somali women will just walk around with the intention of having other relatives or friends enquire about their health and wellbeing. This ritual allows women to connect with the community as they had done for many years in Somalia and increase their daily physical activity levels. During these ‘greetings’, time is not a factor as respect and tradition over-ride everything and you must not appear hurried or wanting to ‘move along’. Fadumo (informant) highlights the respect given to all older people regardless of which clan they are from.

You always stop and say hello to any elderly Somali woman no matter how much of a hurry you are in, you can never be rude, you must say hello, how is the children, how is the family and how is everybody, you must, it's respect, it’s just how things are. This is why we are always late to appointments because if we meet someone on the way we must greet them properly. (Fadumo)

Somali time is about being flexible, mobile and responsive to the context. This notion of ‘Somali time’ was evident throughout the project and often meant that when I organised to meet participants I was always there first, while others often arrived one hour late. At first I found this frustrating, but on one occasion I realised that this ritual of greeting an elderly woman was an integral part of respect for the aged.

Today I had arranged for the older Somali women to meet up with some older Italian women in the area for a morning tea and we were scheduled to be there at 10am. I had arrived at Hawo’s house at 8am to help organise the food and allow for things to hold us up and still we did
not arrive until 10.45am. This was because older women kept arriving at
the house and it was important that we follow the traditional greeting
rituals and listen to the latest stories about their life. This unhurried
lifestyle is in stark contrast to my own but extremely important for
relationships and social support amongst older women in Somalia (Field
notes, 2011).

People in collective cultures are socialised to maintain cooperation between members
and feel concern for others’ welfare. This concern and their desire to share is evident
when it comes to sharing food and visiting relatives and friends. In the following,
Miriam describes the importance of sharing and being together.

We are not separated like whites, we can just go to someone’s house
and we can eat there and be with them, you do not make an
appointment. Nobody is saying bad things about you, she comes and
gives you food and nobody will say why did you come, I did not plan for
you to come, nothing like that, it’s just sharing. (Miriam)

The women have a unique position on the borderlands where they can view
the centre from the margins and see that the either/or classifications which
predominate in the white culture are not part of their collective culture. In contrast to
the dominant culture, their lives adopt fluidity, a working within oneself and with
others.

In Somalia a lot of people come to the house because some of them
can’t afford lunch on their own so that’s how we see, not everyone can
afford food so if you have extra you must share this with others.
(Miriam)

It appears that coming together supports and maintains the collective culture of
Somali life. It gives them strength to adjust their centre and the opportunity to
discuss their positioning with other older Somali women and the dominant culture on
the borderland.

The Somali culture is negotiated and contested in shared spaces. In traditional
Somali life, families lived together as a unit and culture was shared amongst
generations within one space spread across a plot of land. The communal living
conditions are transferred to Australia but are now forced into small, cramped housing
flats in massive estates. They have been physically moved from their land in Somalia,
their housing and way of life and now they are forced onto the margins into housing
where some women feel overwhelmed. At the same time, they are often surrounded
by the dominant culture’s attitude ‘to be grateful for what they get’. Asha describes
her life living on the estate.
I apply here for housing because I cannot cook, I cannot stand and I need help and so I live with my daughter but it is very difficult. There is her husband and four children and one child I look after and he is autistic like ahhhhhhhhhhhh [She screams a high pitch voice and holds her head with both hands very hard]. I sleep in the lounge room and the noise that is why my blood pressure is up because I am living with them. I know, we are thanks for any housing but I don't mind taking care of them I just don't want to live with them. (Asha)

Similarly, in Lewis’s (2009) study of older Cambodian refugees, most of the participants lived in crowded and noisy housing and yet still reported feelings of isolation. Many families try to purchase adjacent flats or on the same estate in order to buffer the effects of living in a foreign land (Lewis, 2009). Many women have waited years to get a flat at the Flemington Housing Estate and some have even moved from other housing estates such as South Melbourne in an attempt to be part of the large Somali community. South Melbourne is a wealthy suburb situated less than 2 km from the city on the edge of Port Phillip Bay. Like Flemington, it has a diverse population that includes very affluent residents as well as public housing residents. I explained to the women that most of the white community would wonder why they would move from the beach and the view of the bay, again reflective of an individualistic lifestyle. They explained that being together to support one another in daily life is essential for them and Somali families will go to great lengths to live on the Flemington Housing Estate to be close to others. In the following, Fadumo (participant) describes how friends had moved from a beachfront housing estate in central Melbourne to Flemington.

Nobody wants to be near the beach, you are never going to wear a bikini, you would rather live and talk to the people you know and understand. (Fadumo, participant)

Their desire to live close to family and friends represents their borderland positioning, trying to hold onto their centre, living a life that was once part of what they knew in Somalia.

We don’t care about the view as long as we stay in our minds in Somalia, talking to the others that you know, they know the tricks on how to live, and know what to do and which glasses are cheaper for you, yeah all important. We prefer connection with Somali, who is telling us all the information, who we know. (Ardo)

What really matters to these older women is the communal nature of the estate, an example of Bourdieu’s (1978) concept of ‘social capital’. Achieving a sense of home and place and the established supportive networks that exist within them is the core of surviving in the dominant culture. ‘The view’, as Ardo described it, over Melbourne’s
skyscape from the higher floors of the housing estate, was a reflection of what the dominant culture may see as part of what these estates offer, but to older Somali women being together, having support and seeing each other is the essence of survival. To better understand the residential needs of refugees and the strength of the relationships they have developed into family life would appear to be conducive to promoting collectivist physical activity programs.

5.2.3 “I end up looking at one wall and then another”: support networks

Women told stories of the good life they had in Somalia, the organic food, the sunny weather and the social networks they forged; it was a time of immense happiness and contentment. Being part of a close community was an immense source of comfort and security. In contrast, life in Australia is remarkably different, much to the disappointment of the women. In the following, Ifrah expresses this disappointment.

Part of that is being socialised with the rest of the community back home. I had neighbours that I talked to and not be isolated in one place, in one house and nobody is talking to me. Whereas here people don’t go to visit each other like they used to and everyone in the family, the whole house, the big community no one needed another part of a family member as neighbours used to talk and we had activities we used to do like go together in a wedding, cook food for a wedding, events and stuff like that. These social events were part of us being happy. (Ifrah)

Many Somalis are dependent on Centrelink welfare payments, have limited employment opportunities and live suburbs away from family and friends, all of which restrict their ability to socialise. Somali women feel trapped in their homes with few transport options and no reason to leave; they are lonely and isolated (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Stewart et al. 2008). Lewis (2009) also found in the study of Cambodian refugees living in the US that many do not drive and feel unable to navigate the streets and shops without the use of the English language. This all impacts on being able to visit neighbours and relatives on other estates or in other neighbourhoods. Syrad explains that the daily conversations they used to have back home are disappearing due to distance.

All the social events, just the day to day of seeing your neighbours, it just doesn’t happen here, I really miss it, it was part of being happy. (Syrad)

Few Somali participants in McMichael and Manderson’s (2004) study felt they were part of an Australian community, with many of their neighbours not sharing their
language, culture or religion and lacking an understanding about their plight and journey. Food and celebrations provide an opportunity of feeling togetherness and a renewed sense of wellbeing. However, these events are only occasional and, as Aziza explains, much of the time is spent in small cramped flats with little to do.

I have seven children and I end up staying home all day and not doing any activity. I end up looking at one wall and then another at home. I end up looking at the cars that go past every day, that’s the main activity I do. I would like somebody that would get me out of the house, make me get out of the house and something, share something like we used to with neighbours and friends. I no longer have women to talk to and have stress free activity. (Aziza)

Aziza describes strategies that would help her to get out and be more physically active. The literature supports the finding that the traditional support of extended family is largely missing and Somalis must deal with the loss of extended support networks in their day-to-day lives. These social outings provided physical activity, a sense of purpose and social connectedness.

5.2.4 “This is what we are given from God, it is a gift and we must accept what happens to us”: family size

Family size is an example of a conflict faced by Somali women in Australia. They have large families in a dominant culture that tends to prefer smaller family size. One of the demographic characteristics that Schwartz (2006) has examined and that researchers often overlook is family size. Schwartz found that family size is often a reflection of cultural values and that larger families hold the greater cultural norms towards collective values and beliefs. However, Schwartz (2006) found that this is often not a personal value but rather a societal expectation about how a family should operate within the culture. Having a large family in countries such as Australia, where individualism is the predominant characteristic of the culture, is unusual. Smaller families with fewer children allow time for women to pursue interests, careers, education and physical activity. In contrast, Somali families are large, with up to 12 or 15 children, leaving little time for women to pursue physical activity. These societal norms dictate how a family should be organised, how to raise children, and their interactions. In the following, Hawo describes the importance of family and the expectations she holds of them.

We are old, it’s time for people to do things for us, a time for the younger people to look after us. We work for each other, our children never leave us. Your kids never leave you, they must look after you even when they get married they will never leave us. (Hawo)
When families are large, Schwartz (2006) argues that it is crucial for the behaviour of members to be predictable. He highlights that "emphasising obedience to authority, conformity to norms, and fulfilling role obligations unquestionably, is functional" (Schwartz, 2006, p. 165). If family members see themselves as inseparable parts of a larger societal collective then the functioning of large families runs smoothly. Hawo describes how her children are part of a larger ideal of caring and respect for elders.

I have a lot of children so I can send one to wash the dishes, one for cleaning the home, one for me sitting around with a friend and talking and my daughters say to me when am I ever going to be that age so I can rest and send everyone to do something for me. So we look forward to this time. It’s for us. (Hawo)

Others hold the belief from their homeland of Somalia that having lots of children is necessary as it is common for children to die of illnesses or accidents. When I told the women that I had two children they were shocked and asked me what if one of them dies, I would only have one to look after me. I realised that this concept had never entered my thoughts when deciding to have children, yet this is at the forefront of their minds along with a religious obligation to Islam.

We are always having more children in case some die, like in Somalia, so much disease and death, we must have many in case. (Aziza)

Having many children is also a religious obligation with the Koran promoting the belief in more followers of Islam. (Fadumo, participant)

We have lots of children as this is what we are given from God, it is a gift and we must accept what happens to us. They will look after us when we are old and be part of the Somali culture, we do not see it as a burden but a gift, something we want in life. (Fadumo, participant)

In the Somali culture, decisions are genuinely made with other members of the family and could include large circles of extended family. Autonomous decision-making is discouraged and pursuing interests and desires on one’s own is undesirable. There is a strong commitment to promoting the family and the society’s values within an in-group and having lots of family members help with this. This is reflected in how Somali women serve food and eat within a household. In the following, Miriam describes the collective nature of family eating patterns.

Everyone helps, for the cooking we bring it all together. The person who has the work, mostly the men we serve first and then the children who eat together and then the women who eat separately. It’s not
like we have our own separate plates, we have three big plates and so we all eat from that plate, one for the men, one for the children and one for the women. (Miriam)

In contrast, in countries such as Australia autonomous values are predominant. Woman’s equality and independence is greater in wealthier countries as material and intellectual resources allow women to move outside the traditional role of sole support for families (Schwartz, 2006).

It appears that family size is an important reflection of cultural values and in the development of what cultures are all about. Chapter 6 will address family size in relation to physical activity programs.

5.2.5 “You are so close in a clan and you are together”: clan connections and conflicts

There are strong connections along lines of clan membership and status, and the literature review (Chapter 2) explored the complexities of clan influence on relationships between families. It is not in the scope of this thesis to explore the complex nature of clans in Somali culture but rather highlight the impact they have on physical activity levels. All the participants in this study are in a clan called the Darood, one of four major clans in Somali culture. There are also sub-clans that separate the women from each other and can either bring people together or create conflict. Fadumo (informant) describes the complexities behind clans and their integral nature in everyday life.

There can be a lot of jealousy between clans, it’s these people getting this and why do they have that and that’s how Amini feels towards me. It runs very deep, the clans, it really separates us and determines how we get along. We all stay out of the other clans, we are married within our clans, that’s much better because no gossiping happening, no complaining about the war back home, what happened like you killed these people, so we don’t talk to you. You are so close in a clan and you are together like this [crossing fingers] you are one, you look after each other. (Fadumo)

Clans have distinct characteristics and behaviours and follow ethical guidelines according to births and marriages. Miriam discusses the marital age amongst different clans.

We have different clans in some parts of Somalia. In ours we get married about 15, 16, maybe 20 but their side, another tribe they get married little, maybe 12. There is arranged marriage, sort of from Arab culture, they have a different colour to us. (Miriam)
Some clans are not discussed because of the intense and continuing trauma of the civil war. Other clans have very strict gender roles that women must follow and these allow very little free time as home duties take priority. Miriam explains further the details surrounding a woman's role in certain sub clans.

That tribe are business people, the men sew and the women cook and stay home and they get married to cousins and the women are not allowed out of the house. They don't want to mix up with the others so that's why they get married so young, their tribe, inside they don't want to change their ways. (Miriam)

There are occasions, however, when clans come together in celebration of religious events or weddings, as they did in Somalia.

When we have wedding events or religious events it doesn’t matter which suburb the family is from or which tribe, we all come together and this is what we do, we eat together, we cook the food together and we are part of each other. (Aziza)

As older Somali women learn to adapt the complex clan system in the Australian culture, there is oppression in trying to maintain traditional ways and resistance in developing new clan codes. As border dwellers, they are dealing with the dominant culture’s values and beliefs around marriage, motherhood and family, and their own central beliefs about the traditional clan roles. Ultimately they develop new ways, somewhere in between that works for them. Consequently, it affects how much physical activity they do. In Chapter 6, the need for program developers to be aware of the restrictions that may exist for women in certain clans and the implications for educating women about exercising, will be presented.

5.2.6 “adopt new realities”: a summary

Being part of a collective culture provides the women with comfort and support in a new land, learning and understanding how to adopt new realities and “feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 43). As will be discussed in Chapter 6, physical activity programs need to provide a supportive environment that recognises the pull of community and family and that accommodates and even capitalises on opportunities for socialising, getting together and sharing.
5.3 “a space for reflection, resistance and transcendence”: the role of religion

The Islamic religion is an integral part of older Somali women’s everyday lives. It provides an anchor to their homeland and a supportive mechanism for their new life in Australia. It creates a space for reflection, resistance and transcendence; a state of being above and beyond the limits of material experiences (Anzaldua, 1987). Islam is a way in which these women recreate their lives, their homes and community.

5.3.1 “Our religion it is everything to us”: the support of prayer

Religion comes to hold a new and increased value after migrating to a new country (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2001; Graham, Bradshaw & Trew 2009; Orb, 2002). As highlighted in Chapter 2, section 2.2.8, religion provides comfort and an overall sense of order to older Somali women while reducing their sense of alienation. Islam for Somali refugees creates a peacefulness, an inner calm in an ever-changing environment. Allawia clearly outlines this in the following.

Our religion is everything to us, it brings us peace and we know God will always be with us, guide us, prepare us, look after us. It is us, who we are and no one can have that but us. (Allawia)

Spiers and Walker (2009) found in their study of older Canadian/Chinese participants that the Asian religion emphasised the development of emotions such as calmness and tranquillity. Similarly, for the Somali women, Islam and reading the Koran promotes an inner peacefulness that helps them cope with the everyday problems they encounter. It gives meaning to their lives, and helps them understand and come to terms with how their life is unfolding in a new country. Prayer provides comfort when feeling depressed or not feeling themselves. In the following, Fadumo (participant) discusses this daily ritual and its important contribution to her daily health.

The first words from the Koran that we say every day, we start with every morning makes you happy and you about it and it just makes you happy, you don’t have to be sad. All of those words, if you repeat them back that makes you strong and happy, we have these kinds of words to follow. (Fadumo)

The women varied in their use of the Koran and their practise of its teachings. Many of the women require total immersion within the religion to keep themselves centred while others were able to adopt some of the Islamic teachings and then centre
themselves in other ways. Some of the women believed that their health was in Allah’s hands and whatever happened to them would be determined by him, while others believed their health was affected by a combination of eating, exercise and Islam.

As was explained in Chapter 3, section 3.2.5, 'Inshall Allah’ is a saying at the end of nearly every sentence and is translated to mean ‘In Gods hands’, that is, whatever happens will happen and Allah will determine that for us. This strong tie to Islamic prayer was often perceived as a form of exercising the mind that was thought to have more health benefits than participating in physical activity. Halima demonstrates that the exercise of prayer was essential to overall health and wellbeing.

We are old, we need to pray to make sure we have a good life when we die. There is nothing else for us to do, this is a time to be with Allah, just to sit and pray, he will look after us, we don’t need to be doing these exercise things, it is all for The Prophet. (Halima)

It seems that many women are committed to following a life under Islam which connects them more to their previous culture while they see following Western culture as a task for the younger generation. As Ardo explains, it is a time for the young not the old.

All these things they are for the young ones, not for us, we no longer needed. (Ardo)

Prayer was a part of a bundle of health promoting activities that provided moments of repose and a way of coping with worries. It was particularly significant in coping with the loss of family members or when women felt sad or depressed (Dyck & Dossa, 2007). Gall et al. (2005) outlined in their literature review of spirituality in relation to health and wellbeing that prayer may be the most profound religious coping behaviour used and can support the use of other positive coping mechanisms. Prayer was associated with greater life satisfaction, lower pain levels, greater happiness, use of social support systems, optimism and better self-rated health. It was significant in coping with life’s turmoils and more important in the participants’ lives to achieving better health than participating in physical activity. Ritual prayer and attendance at religious gatherings increased the participants’ emotional resilience and helped individuals be more patient with their associated pain or anxiety. It created a framework that they could use to support themselves and cope with living on the borders. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Qasmiyeh (2010) in their study of Middle Eastern asylum seekers in the United Kingdom found that the migration experience had in fact strengthened the religious practice, beliefs and perceptions towards Islam, leading to “focus on oneself”; fulfilling one’s spiritual beliefs in an attempt to cope with a new life (p. 303). Most of the women in my study were deeply committed to this view of
spiritual fulfilment and it helped them understand and cope with life on the borderlands. Religious restrictions are given such priority that they can set boundaries for possible decisions and be an important determinant of behaviour.

Waugh (1991) argues that Islam has “an underlying system of sacred values and cultural directives that orientate the believer in a fundamental manner” (p. 70). The participants used Islamic practices like reading and reciting the Koran as a way of directing their behaviours as well as coping with life on the borders; it was a way of thinking and reinforcing their centre, the self. On one of the many excursions with the participants, Islam was ever-present, as my field notes reflect.

Our first excursion was to the Immigration Museum and I had to try and time the whole process around prayer time as the women felt more comfortable praying at home. We travelled on public transport and their brightly coloured dresses, hijab and mannerisms really stood out against the backdrop of white Australia and their frailty and vulnerability instantly became apparent to me. Many recited the Koran constantly as they walked from the train station to the Museum which appeared to provide comfort in unfamiliar surroundings. (Field notes, 2010)

Women recite the Koran even as they walk in an attempt to feel as close to Allah as possible. Hawo maintains “even when I am walking I am thinking about God”, so in all her activities, even cleaning her house or cooking food, Islam is at the forefront of her mind.

5.3.2 “part of a collective”: the rituals of Islam

As was described in Chapter 2, section 2.2.8, the five pillars of Islam are the basic concepts and obligatory acts of worship that each of the women follow in their everyday lives. They focus on themselves as being part of a collective culture where sharing and caring for one another is a priority. In the following sections, these will be explored and explained.

(i) “We go all the way up and down”: the Salat

Praying together, performing the Salat and discussing Islamic practices are ways women come together to be active and mentally rested. Many of the participants found the Salat, a physical act of prostration, the most physically demanding exercise they do. The following words from participants describe how they feel about performing this ritual five times a day.
The best activity we do is the prayer, the Salat five times a day. We go all the way up and down, that’s the best exercise there is for us. It relaxes us. (Halima)

I feel very active after I perform the Salat for five minutes, my body becomes soft and the blood circulation moves and we are fine. (Safa)

The Salat has got two things, it’s healthy and it’s part of the exercise as well and the person who does not do the Salat, don't perform it five times a day then that person is not healthy and healthy is part of doing the Salat performance. (Ifrah)

The standing position to kneeling is quite demanding and, as highlighted in the literature review, provides psychological, musculoskeletal and cerebral benefits. Those women who have become frail or very overweight and find the physicality of the Salat difficult still perform a modified version in a chair. This allows them to mentally recite the Salat without the bending and stretching. Some participants argue that the Salat should be performed by everyone, regardless of age, for the physical and mental health benefits. In the following, Fadumo (informant) describes how the Salat can be modified with age.

If we have a problem with the knee or the back then yes they can sit but otherwise they should be standing as exercise. Some women when they become older and older they can’t do it but they can pray in the mind, praying, thinking the way they should in the mind but they can’t do the bending. They should do it for the physical activity because that’s the only activity they get for the whole day. (Fadumo)

Ohm (2003) discusses the ritual movements integrated into prayer and agrees that the “movements of prayer are a light form of exercise and are intended to remind Muslims to keep their spiritual life active. The ritual of prayer combines spiritual, mental, and physical activity” (p. 482; see also Delaney, 1990). Lawton et al. (2006) also found in their study of older Pakistani participants that praying was seen as keeping active, as this required them to perform a sequence of standing, kneeling and bending motions at regular intervals throughout the day. Halima describes how the Salat is both a physical and spiritual exercise that brings her closer to God.

When we do the Salat or we recite teachings from the Koran during our daily duties I get closer to God, it feels like I am doing something for God and it will be collected for me for judgment day. (Halima)

Most of these older women felt that everyday practices like performing the Salat would provide them with a better and more fulfilling afterlife.
(ii) “All the negatives you have to push away”: Ramadan

Ramadan, a month of self-reflection and discipline, is like a temporary retreat from life on the borderlands where the women can regroup, recharge and regain their strength to fall back into borderland territory. To all the participants, Ramadan is much more than just not eating and drinking, it is a time of personal reflection and bringing their thoughts back to God and Judgment Day. During this time in the study, no artwork classes were organised as the women were focusing on personal religious matters. In my field notes I describe how the women look and act differently during this time. I note that these interpretations of the women’s behaviour are reflective of my culture and remind me that I can never escape the whiteness of my life.

Every time I see a lady during Ramadan they look very peaceful. The ladies are all sitting in the chairs in this most relaxed state of calm; they even have less tension in their voice when they speak to me. There is no more theatrics, no hand gestures, emphatic mannerisms, just calm peaceful tones. (Field notes, 2010)

It looked like the angst and oppression that was within them was temporarily gone from their bodies and they were able to be themselves, to be centred. Ramadan is a time for the women to connect closer with God and restrain the body from being involved in any backbiting or gossip. Many women when they come together during this time only discuss religion in an attempt to focus on the teachings in the Koran and not on social activities. There are no celebrations or weddings held during this time. Fadumo (informant) describes how this is a time of self-reflection for many of the participants.

When we are in Ramadan, we don't have to be talking about people doing bad things, or concentrating on gossip. All the negatives you have to push away and listen to the Koran and its teachings, what they say, they prefer this calmness and that’s why they don't want to be surrounded by other people. (Fadumo)

The fasting during Ramadan aims to encourage a feeling of nearness to God and allow a time for Muslims to express their gratitude for God, atone for their past sins, and think of the needy (Shahid, 1996). Fasting provided energy and physical benefits for nearly all the participants. As an example, Syrad describes how she gets her energy from God during this time.

Being fasting all day you have this belief inside you in your mind that this is what you are doing is right and is part of the religion and you are pleasing Allah and you get that energy and strength from God to give
you and last that day when you are not eating or drinking all day and that’s part of gaining strength. (Syrad)

Again, the women’s lives incorporate activities like fasting during Ramadan while defying Western dominant thoughts and actions by not eating and drinking during daylight hours. This makes them feel strong, centred and able to make clear decisions in their borderland life. In some ways this creates tension, complication and interrogation, with Western culture questioning why a person would do this to themselves. Many of my colleagues in the sporting world always thought that fasting was a ‘ridiculous concept’, especially when being physically active. However, for the women in my study it seems to give them greater power, power to move forward and create new ways of being. I attended many ‘breaking of the fasts’ and was always fascinated by the food that was served. As shown in Figure 5.3, it is often heavily oiled or fried to intensify the calories into one meal that will last you the night and the following day.

![Figure 5.3 ‘Breaking the fast’ with heavily oiled foods](image)

(iii) “you have to stop all that and cleanse yourself”: the Hajj

As was described in Chapter 2, section 2.2.8, the Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca that should be taken at least once in a Muslim’s lifetime. Mecca is sacred and a desire to go there and “wash away the layers of pollution built up over time in order to reveal God’s pristine design” is a lifetime goal (Delaney, 1990, p. 515). Participating in the Hajj is the ultimate cleanse, the ultimate power that a person can receive for life on the borderlands. When women mentioned that they had done the Hajj, all the women
in the group show the utmost respect. Many of the women had done the pilgrimage to Mecca; here Asha describes her journey.

The process is very long, very long. When we arrive we change our dress, very plain and we wear it for days, no underwear, no singlet, nothing and you pray all the time, “Allah, Allah”. We must not gossip, not wish bad things on others, you have to stop all that and cleanse yourself. (Asha)

The rituals of the Hajj include walking seven times around the Kaaba, a cuboid shaped building in Mecca, with millions of others. This has been described as a strenuous process, both physically and mentally. Fadumo (informant) is adamant that she will one day do the Hajj as it grants a person an ultimate religious experience that is carried for the rest of one’s life. The women are deeply committed to performing this journey and are happy to accept the physical demands that it requires. This is another example of how combining physical activity with religious teachings may encourage and enable participation.

(iv) “you are kind of exercising the mind”: the Koran

All the participants agreed that the Koran, their religious text, promotes physical activity and it is a religious obligation to be active, although nearly all conceded that they did not follow this in their daily life. The term ‘exercise’, however, was clearly linked with exercising the mind through reading the Koran and following Islamic teachings. This was part of their daily exercise and was more important than the physical aspect of being active.

The faith makes us stronger. When you believe there is only one God and there is one God only you will be passionate about this then you will be stronger even what happens to you. If you work through your prayers and exercise a lot of things from your prayers, good things, a lot of things, that’s part of doing exercise. What I mean is whatever you are doing, whatever you are reading in the Koran you are kind of exercising the mind and that makes you strong in the heart. And there is some part of the words that makes us strong we use every morning if we are followers, there are those words that make you strong and like you having faith. (Halima)

The border zone becomes the site of much psychological activity for the women where they recite the Koran and create new ways of applying its lessons in their everyday life. In the following, Ayanna describes how a Muslim’s life is busy and that exercising the mind through prayer is vital.
It’s part of the Koran. Our prophet said to us to teach our children how to ride a horse, swimming in case we need it, running faster and bow and arrows and the best poetry you can pass to your children, along with wisdom. If you work through your prayers, good things that’s part of exercise, that is what I believe. Whatever you are doing if you provide a lot of offerings whatever you are doing, you are readings and all of that of exercising the mind and that makes you strong in the heart. (Ayanna)

For the women participating in this study, reading and following the Koran is the core of their identity. It is woven into every waking moment and provides a reassurance that this identity will be with them always and can never be taken away. They take this identity into the borderlands, reciting the Koran as a guide, a reinforcer of who they are and where they sit. As most of their life is unpredictable and displaced, Islam provides a solid base on which they can depend. The Koran has not changed for thousands of years and this sameness provides the women with comfort, faith and hope. Fadumo (participant) believed that the history of Islam and its teachings provided her with daily comfort.

Our religion, it has never changed, thousands of years it is the same. Not like bible, old and new, ours never change, always the true words of the prophet, it is the best for us. (Fadumo)

Some participants felt that their lives were determined by the will of Allah while others felt that they set the path of their future through choices and morals.

The following is a passage often quoted from the Koran by the women.

O ye who believe!
Eat of the good things
That We have provided for you.
And to be grateful to Allah,
If it is Him ye worship. 172

It is from this passage that the Prophet Muhammad discusses the implications of eating and exercising in everyday life, which Fadumo (participant) explains.

The Koran says you don't have to eat too much. Your stomach has three parts, one for air, one for food and one for water. You cannot finish one big meal so you are full, you have to eat moderately and always be doing something. There should be no time that you are not doing something, the prophet says you must always be doing something, being active. (Fadumo)
Stodolska and Livengood’s (2006) study of Muslim immigrants in the US found that their participants possessed a powerful motivation to maintain their customs, such as dress, diet and leisure activities, and that these were rooted in their homelands and held strong spiritual underpinnings. Similarly, the older Somali women in this study were constantly aware of the boundaries set by Islam for food, exercise and diet. This suggests that physical activity programs could provide an opportunity to connect the teachings of Islam with everyday practices of eating the correct foods and food portions and participating in activity that maintains health and vitality. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

(v) “If you do not, evil eyes will look upon you and then you get sick”: the hijab

The hijab is a veil worn by all the participants in the study and all the Muslim women that I encountered in connection with the project. There has never been an association between the hijab itself and the amount of physical activity an older woman does, nor any restrictions placed upon them because of it. However, the hijab is deeply entwined with the women’s religious faith and cultural pride and does affect the type of physical activity they may perform. The image of shared Islamic practices and the visual dress of being Muslim can too easily homogenise all women into one as “passive adherents to an oppressive religion, and of staring eyes seeing their veils as the regulation of all women” (McMichael, 2002, p. 180). In fact the women in the study group held diverse views about Islam and the hijab. Veiling practices predate the formation of Islam as a religious faith. The veil, Croucher (2008) describes, is a product of Judaism as women were required to wear a veil over their heads when praying to God. Somali women differ in its application, from a full length chador to a veil covering their hair, forehead, shoulders and neck, or a cloth tied around their hair. Traditional Somali dress is a loosely worn hijab over a cloth tied around their hair usually of bright colours with a kaftan dress that covers the forearms and ankles. Many of the participants held strong views about dress regulations, especially covering the face.

We are also scared of the ‘Ninja’ [this is the word used for women who wear the full burqa and show only the eyes] because you can’t tell who it is. So that is wrong, it is too much, it is not in the Koran, we don’t like that, it is not part of proper Somali culture. (Fatma)

The women agree that wearing a hijab identifies a woman as Muslim to the rest of the world; however, they felt it was every woman’s right to wear what she was comfortable in and it was their relationship with God that determined what people wear. Hawo expresses her view that it is often the woman’s choice about what she wears.
It is not always the husbands that want their wives to wear the full Ninja, but the woman’s relationship with God and how she wants to show that. (Hawo)

Wearing the hijab because this follows the rules and guidelines of the Koran appears to be an essential ingredient in the lives of Somali women living in Melbourne.

First, I wear the hijab because the Koran says we have to wear it and secondly because women are like gold, they are special so you have to hide this and only show your husband. If you do not, evil eyes will look upon you and then you get sick and sometimes you die or get a mental illness. God is not happy and so you will be punished. (Fadumo, participant)

Others feel the security of having a covering and it has become interwoven into who they are as a Muslim and as a woman in a predominantly non-Muslim country. Croucher’s (2008) research of Muslims living in France considered how they have constructed their identity since the law banning the wearing of the hijab in Islamic public schools and found that it was “a channel between their articulated and unarticulated French identities and their Muslim, female and North African identities” (p. 208). Similarly, Fadumo (participant) expresses that she feels comfortable and secure in her veiled self while out in a public space.

I feel secure, it’s part of me, it’s who I am. If I don’t wear it I feel naked and exposed. I just feel more comfortable as a woman to be covered. I feel confident about who I am and what I can do. (Fadumo)

Again it’s a reflection of Anzaldua’s (1987) centred self, with many of the women wearing the hijab to maintain their identity as a Somali woman. It makes them feel comfortable and confident living on the borderlands and allows them to reappropriate their space where they can survive. During my data collection, the media was in a frenzied debate about banning the burqa, calling it ‘unAustralian’ to allow women to walk the streets in “a sackcloth that dehumanises them” (Haussegger, 2010). Haussegger (2010) took the argument further.

Those who wear it, and those who insist it be worn, subscribe to an ideology in which women are inferior sexual temptresses, whose female form is a problem and must be covered. This is based on the contradictory proposition that men are both superior and yet unable to control their sexual urges if they see women in their natural human state.
Haussegger (2010) neglected to identify that hypersexual forms of Western clothing worn by women may also portray them as ‘sexual temptresses’, yet there is no ban on what Western women wear. The study participants fiercely opposed Haussegger’s arguments and maintained that it was their own choice and their relationship with Allah that predetermined what they wore. It was an expression of their Islamic faith and their identity as Somali women. In the following, Miriam highlights how much wearing the hijab means to her and the extent she would go to if she were banned from wearing it.

We are worried that if they ban the burqa then they will also ban the head scarf, what we wear. If this was so we would be unable to leave the house and rather return to Somalia, even in war and give up living here, everything we would give up. Would you go out without any pants on, that’s what it would be like for us, our dignity, our place, our selves. (Miriam)

As a visual symbol to the community that a woman was of Muslim faith, wearing the hijab attracted racist comments that made the women feel unsafe and prevented them from leaving their houses. It often prohibits them from walking the streets as an activity and participating in anything physical unless they are in a group. Although Noble and Poynting (2010) explored the notion of national belonging with young Muslim-Australians, they too found that many admitted staying at home more often and giving up regular walks and outings. Asli describes how every day she experiences both good and bad behaviours from the Australian public.

Yes, yes, many people they shout at me when I am in the street, even shopping, it’s from the cars, usually the ones in the cars, the boys with the cars they call me a terrorist or say ‘go back to your own fucking country’. Some people they are greeting you and it’s good, some are laughing at you [she shows me the gesture of the finger] and some are using bad words, I don’t talk to them, I just keep going. (Asli)

This is an example of what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2010) found, that religious identity markers have grown to dictate actions, be they real or imagined, from the host community. They found explicit accounts of racism associated with names and the hijab when they interviewed 14 asylum seekers about how they integrated into the community. Many of my participants experienced that fear of abuse on a regular basis. In the following, Amini describes her fear of walking in strange places and how this isolates her to just walking within her community for fear of being attacked.
I am scared of walking in the strange neighbourhood, I go where I know others will be like me, because of the way we are dressed people may attack us because we are a walking stranger, you leave your house for 10 minutes and you start walking towards someone else’s house you might get attacked by someone. (Amini)

5.3.4 “Islamic practices on the borderlands”: a summary

Islam is an overarching framework that shapes how women perceive themselves, their lives and their surroundings, and it influences the amount of physical activity they undertake. They continue their Islamic practices on the borderlands to maintain their centre but also to help them survive life within Western predominantly Christian ideological structures. Islam permeates the daily routines of the women in this study and provides an important transitional state that signifies a break with the dominant culture. It is a travelling framework that they take with them, insulating and centring them from within. Anchoring oneself in one’s religion can help people develop a resistance and cope with life in the margins and on the border.

5.4 “it’s a good time in our culture to be old”: cultural perceptions of aging

Chapter 2, section 2.2.3, highlighted how cultural values and beliefs shape what it means to be old in collective cultures. As discussed earlier in this Chapter in section 5.2.2, in Somali culture, being old is held in high regard; it is a time for rest, to impart wisdom to younger generations and to be looked after by one’s children. Asha explains that “it’s a good time in our culture to be old…a time of rest and being looked after”. In Somalia it would also be a time to meet neighbours and relatives and enjoy social outings. Here in Australia, however, this does not occur and now “we have nothing, just our dreams” (Ardo).

5.4.1 “just let the way we are”: aging Somali women

Understanding what it means to be old or defining what is acceptable behaviour of the old varies considerably between Western and developing worlds. The exercise culture of the West and pursuit of youth are in stark contrast to aging in Somali communities. For many of the participants, being an older woman is linked to religious concepts of modesty and humility. Vertinsky (1995) suggests that old people learn how to become ‘old’, not by how they feel but by how they think they should feel and act. In the following, Hawo and Miriam provide examples of the contrast between a Western concept of aging and Somali aging.
You know how you wear a bra, to raise the chest even when you are old but this means we are lying about our age and that means men will want us and that’s a lie. We don't want to do that, we have great grandchildren so better it’s better to let those things down and just let the way we are. (Hawo)

It could be a lie about wearing a bra, that means we are lying about our body, these will stand up [showing breasts] and I will look younger and the man will just look at that. (Miriam)

Somali women also believe that dying their hair is lying about their age.

If there is a man when they get white hair and putting colour in the hair that’s another thing that you are lying about. It’s not good, you have to accept your age being gradual, natural ways so that’s not misleading other people. (Hawo)

Caperchione et al. (2011) found in their study of the physical activity behaviours of CALD women living in Australia that taking time for themselves to do physical activity would tell people that they were neglecting their role as a mother and a caregiver. Ardo highlights in the following quote how others in her community would think of her.

Now if I wear a bra, a shirt and all those things for the exercise and do some activity here everybody say “oh my god the lady who has depression. We have to tell her family, she go crazy, something's wrong with her”, you see (Ardo)

Many older Muslim women use religion and prayer as strategies to deal with age-related change. Bagheri-Nesami et al.’s (2010) study of elderly Iranian women found that belief in the power of prayer and the concern for spiritual matters were important factors in adjusting to aging change: “Religion is an important thread for a meaningful and integrated old age. And praying to God, especially as one ages, gives peace of mind and the confidence to face or escape the vicissitudes of life” (Bagheri-Nesami et al., 2010, p. 586). Many of the older Somali women reflected this.

Praying helps us when we get old, sometimes it’s all we have. (Ifrah)

5.4.2 “we worked hard and now we need to rest”: the right to rest

For many study participants, moving into old age came with certain rights and privileges, including the right to rest and reflect. There is also an idea that migration offers an opportunity for rest after days of hard manual work in the country of origin, which also contributed to their lack of physical activity uptake after arriving in
Australia. This has been highlighted in Chapter 2 section 2.2.5. Cousins (2001) goes further, finding that inactive older women seemed firmly committed to an inactive lifestyle by reminding themselves that retirement is an opportunity for no commitments, a time for rest and relaxation. A desire was expressed to rest after a life of hard work, as many women had worked on the land or in small business.

We are tired, so tired, it’s a time to rest, we are old. We have had our life, we worked hard and now we need to rest. (Aziza)

This tiredness is like an accumulation of fatigue that has been carried through years of hardship and displacement and, rather than remaining physically active, the women relish the opportunity to be inactive. When life on the borderlands gets over-worked and the body and the mind are constantly in a state of angst, the women retreat to the safety of centre, their ‘Somalilands’. Fadumo (informant) recognises this cycle of age, tiredness, lack of activity and stress levels.

I think the knowledge is limited. They do not understand the benefits of one helping the other. They think they should just sit and pray but they get lonely, sad and more tired. They don't know these things, to exercise, to get together to feel better about yourself. (Fadumo)

The role of physical activity history needs to be addressed when designing physical activity programs and this is discussed in the recommendations in Chapter 6. For older Somali women, serving Allah in the afterlife requires following the Koran and its guidelines in one’s present life. There are questions that were not asked around death and dying in relation to religion and family as it was beyond the scope of this thesis; however it is an important part of the aging process and would be beneficial to explore further.

5.4.3 “when you become nothing in the bed, you want people to respect you”: caring for elders

Many participants like the idea that aging brings respect and assurances of being looked after by family members. Hawo describes how this part of her life has many benefits that she looks forward to.

Even when you become nothing in the bed it’s just that you still want to live and you still want people to respect you and come to you and say what has been happening, how are you? I look forward to getting older and older every day. (Hawo)
Caring for the elderly is considered a family duty and using outside help is viewed as a shameful failure to fulfill this basic role. The obligation to look after elders is expected and provides comfort, as Miriam explains.

We know that we will never be in a nursing home, not like the whites, we have a culture for looking after us always. We all have lots of children so that the care is shared among many, that is why we have many children, to help us when we are old. (Miriam)

It is also beneficial to have many children at this time in life as they are able to share the load of caring for an elderly parent or grandparent. One of the participants’ daughters commented that she is looking forward to being her mother’s age because it will be a time for her to rest and be looked after.

I sometimes tell my mother, ‘look at you, your life, it’s so good, everyone do everything for you, you just sit and enjoy your friends’. I have many children and I know that this will happen to me. (Ayan)

The young Somali women understand that this is part of their role as a daughter, a sister, an aunt and they know that this will be done for them when they are old, so they work towards achieving that respected role.

5.4.4 “a difficult and disruptive life”: a summary

Older Somali women’s perceptions of aging do not include formal exercise; rather they see old age as a time for rest and relaxation. Anzaldua’s (1987) theme of a constant inner struggle, to be present in ‘multiple realities’, to continually switch codes, cross borders and survive can often be a tiring process for the mind and the body. Along with a difficult and disruptive life, many of the women find they now have the opportunity to rest and take time out from living on the borders, having their children and grandchildren look after them. Knowing that they will always have someone to care for them provides comfort and contentment as they age. Chapter 6 discusses how these cultural perceptions of aging can be incorporated into developing suitable physical activity programs.

5.5 “never just for us, no never”: gender roles

Gender roles can have a major influence on the values and meanings associated with physical activity. Hunt et al. (2008) found in their study of Indigenous Australians that physical activity, like food, is positively supported within the context of family and community, but negatively associated with the promotion of individual
physical health. Women were unlikely to participate in activities that only involved themselves. The participants in this study had similar feelings, as expressed by Halima.

We do not do things for ourselves, we never put ourselves first, it is always family, always, never just for us, no never (Halima).

Following traditional gender roles and maintaining strong family connections helps the women identify and centre themselves within Somali culture. They dwell both in the centre and on the margins as they establish patterns of behaviour that work within these roles and the roles expected of them in the white world.

5.5.1 “she is Hawotako”: gender roles

In Somalia a woman is a mother, she is ‘Hawotako’. The story of Hawotako, as discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.3, is an oral historical story that the women told me and is passed from generation to generation. It clearly defines the power of a woman in a family, in a clan and as a Somali. Hawotako was a remarkable woman who played a significant role in the 1948 riots in Mogadishu. She fought and died for the unionisation of territories to unite Somalia as a single nation. She represents the powerful woman, the one who fights, who is strong and capable; Hawotako is idealised by all the participants as the mother warrior. For Somali women, while motherhood represents power and individuality, at the same time it defines the gender roles and responsibilities of women. Family is always first and each daily activity aims to promote and nurture its union. Being physically active is intertwined in the role of mother through the performance of daily chores. Just as the story of Hawotako is embedded in Somali culture, Anzaldua's work is deeply embedded in mystic stories and spiritual dimensions from her Mexican culture (Keating, 2005). Indigenous teachings from many cultures hold this interconnectedness with spirituality and the Somali culture does this through stories of famous women and the connection with the earth and family (Keating, 2005). It gives the women what Anzaldua describes as “a fluid, cosmic spirit or energy, or force that embodies itself throughout all existence” (Keating, 2005, p. 243).

The women in this study were raised to have children, to be good wives and housekeepers. They were never encouraged to participate in physical activity outside the home. Fadumo (participant) describes how the role of a woman in Somali culture is focused on family and the home.

We teach our children to be active, to be well dressed, to be clean, to take pride in our hijab, to provide good food, a clean house and support our husbands. That is what the religion says we should do and that’s what a good woman should do. (Fadumo)
Juarbe et al. (2002) mirrors these sentiments in their qualitative study of aging Latina women, which found that multiple role responsibilities gave the women little if no time for social interaction outside the home. Their priority was directed at improving their roles in the context of family, which was far more important than individualistic gain. Ifrah agrees, emphasising that a woman’s place is really at home.

Family is number one, for woman that’s just it, nothing else. You are a nothing woman without family. (Ifrah)

Similarly, Kriska’s (2000) study found that women from lower socioeconomic groups use occupational activity as a significant contribution to their total energy expenditure. In addition, housework and family care appear to account for a substantial portion of total energy expenditure in an average day, especially significant in ethnic minority women.

Grandparents in many communities are relied on for child care. While grandparents pass on cultural practices and values, caring for children can be very demanding and a source of overwhelming tiredness. In the following quote Fadumo (participant) describes her tiredness and lack of energy to do other things because of caregiving duties.

It is not easy being at home because I look after the grandchildren and we clean and we pick up the grandchildren and take to the hospital sometimes to help the mothers. Husbands don’t often help so grandmother comes to the part of helping the daughter. So we are tired that part, we are not just sitting down we are tired. Back home we have women who helped us, relatives who live around us and we don’t have that here, it is very demanding especially with each daughter having five or six children. (Fadumo)

Many participants found their caregiving demands left little time for themselves and as a result affected their overall wellbeing. They had little time for leisure and physical activity and did not view it as a necessity in life. Many studies report lack of time as a major barrier for older women from ethnic minorities to participate in physical activity (Burns et al., 2000; Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009; Eyler et al., 1998; FECCA, 2009; Haralambous et al., 2003; Harley et al., 2009; Heesch et al., 2000). In the following, Ayan describes how her time is filled with caregiving.

Time is also limited. Somali women who may be looking after children and all the grandchildren, it is very difficult. We are cooking and cleaning for others always. (Ayan)
This group suggested that they had less time for physical activity due to cultural norms that require them to do the bulk of domestic duties. Nearly all of the women lived with extended family and were committed to their care. Taking time to focus on oneself, removing oneself from family obligations, is often not acceptable in migrant minority sub-groups (Kriska & Rexroad, 1998). Participants stated that they had many more important things to do in their life than physical activity and they felt the commitment to their families remained a priority. Similarly, Im et al.’s (2010) study of midlife Hispanic women found that they did not view physical activity as a priority in life as family commitments took up much of their time. However, just by talking about physical activity with the older Somali women and reminiscing about how this was once part of their life in Somalia, encouraged and promoted an increase in exercise. This is further developed and discussed in section 5.6.4.

5.5.2 “We are not in that country any more”: generational displacement

The literature review, Chapter 2, has highlighted that older Somali women feel remorse and regret for having to leave their own country and face an inner turmoil about losing their traditional ways. They leave behind their centre, their very being and follow and create a new way of living in a culture that pushes them to the side. Previously in Somalia, older women would still be active members of the community, cooking, caring, visiting relatives and contributing to the transfer of traditional ways to younger generations. Their daily physical activity was completed with other older women during activities moving from one house to another to teach children, walking and buying food at the markets, and helping with light housework duties. In contrast, in Australia these activities have been abandoned so daily physical activity has been drastically reduced.

Just as traditional gender roles can create and reinforce barriers to physical activity for older Somali women, they can also be diminished in a new culture with serious impacts on older women. Of concern is the displacement that can occur between older generations, children and grandchildren as the latter navigate and adopt the new culture and use less and less of their traditional ways. As mentioned in section 5.4.3, children do provide support for the elderly but often do not want to hear about traditional ways or advice. This can cause a great deal of anger and sadness for older refugees, especially if they are from cultures where elders are respected and looked to for advice (Atwell et al., 2007). Asli describes the values associated with respect in Somali families.

They have to respect their families, respect the grandmother, respect their father, their mother and their friends. (Asli)
Hawo describes how her children and grandchildren have stopped listening to her advice and wisdom now that they are here in Australia.

We are losing our culture, our children not taking our culture any more, they take the Aussie culture. Whenever we mention back home to learn something that will benefit them, back at home they say “noooooo Mum we are not going to that country anymore, stop it Mum”. If I say “But you are related to this person, that one and that one”, they say “What are you telling us that for? Why do I have to know about that?” (Hawo).

This can create a great deal of stress for the women as they deal with unaccustomed responsibilities and conflict with family members. Minh-ha., 1990) suggests that “the struggle is always multiple and transversal – specific but not confined to one side of any border wall” (p. 330). The women are aware of the changes their families are making now that they live in Australia and adopt more Western codes of behaviour and language. Hopkins’ (2010) qualitative study of 37 Somali women found that where the grandchildren of the older participants cannot speak Somali, these women lose the ability to pass on histories and experiences considered to be vital in Somali culture. Hopkins (2010) argues that “speaking Somali extends beyond linguistic capability to becoming part of the cultural-symbolic order” (p. 530). Language becomes integral to establishing belonging in a place that is not one’s country of origin. Ardo expresses her frustration at trying to get her grandchildren to maintain the Somali language.

Many times I am speaking to my grandchildren and they won’t answer me in Somali, they say speak English, or will only answer me in English, it’s very difficult. (Ardo)

Many of the participants found that their wisdom is no longer valuable or applicable to the new culture and they struggle to find a way to connect with the new environment and remain important in their families’ daily lives. Their physical activity is drastically reduced with the lack of activities needed around the house. My study, along with others, highlights that involving all family members involved in physical activities promotes activity levels and this is discussed further in Chapter 6.

5.5.3 “the changing roles of women”: a summary

Traditional gender roles create barriers that limit the amount and type of physical activity undertaken. The traditional and changing roles of women as they age and as they and their families adapt to a new culture need to be recognised. These roles can impact on women’s mental and physical health and on their perceptions of how they fit into a new country, a new culture.
5.6 “it is not part of what we know”: concepts around exercise and physical activity

As discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.1.5, past physical activity experiences were a major influence on the types of activity undertaken later in life, along with the concepts surrounding physical activity and the perception of others within the Somali community. The most common response from all the participants about what type of activities they would enjoy is that “we don’t really know, we never learn these things…it is not part of what we know”.

In Somalia, children learnt to be physically active through song and dance. Ardo explains how learning the songs of the land taught them to undertake and be involved in certain activities.

\[\text{we didn’t know it but we learnt songs to soothe a baby, to herd goats and to gather food while we were playing. We just stayed outside, never inside, always doing something outside. (Ardo)}\]

As discussed in the literature review, Chapter 2, section 2.2.2, these early life experiences were centred on farming, weather patterns and developing strong social cohesion between boys and girls. This was central to the activities they undertook in their future adult roles.

5.6.1 “we never saw her exercise, like you say”: early life experiences

Early life experiences can be predictive of later life activity. Cohen-Mansfield, Marx and Guralnik’s (2003) study of 324 community-dwelling adults aged 74–85 found that lack of experience and enjoyment with exercise in their early life remained a barrier to physical activity as people aged. Many of the participants in my study had very limited experience with skill-based physical activity, such as bike riding and ball games, which many Australians have been exposed to since childhood.

\[\text{One day even if we went to exercise we would not go again, that’s just the way our culture is, that’s the nature. We never put ourselves first, never take care of ourselves. It’s our upbringing, they never see their mothers doing so we never learn, we see no benefit out of it. (Asha)}\]

Asha’s response reflects her experience within the context of her gendered culture that steered her away from Westernised concepts around ‘learning an activity’. Many of the studies examined in the literature review, such as Cousins (1997), have not considered mastering physical skills at a young age within a gendered context. Perceived self-efficacy or confidence in one’s ability to exercise was an important
motivator for older women to participate in physical activity, but it appears for older Somali women that these abilities were moulded by context and culture rather than lack of confidence. Bourdieu’s (1978) analogy of having a ‘feel for the game’ identifies women’s participation in physical activity as a ‘game’ that is worth playing and pursuing. In the following, Miriam describes how formal exercising was not part of her life, which mirrors Asha’s context and gendered moulding within Somali culture.

You guys have started the exercising when you are little so we just didn’t need to exercise but we weren’t big but we came here and we don’t know how to exercise because we never get used to it and that’s how it goes. (Miriam)

Older women whose parents were less encouraging to be active and who were not active themselves were less likely to participate in physical activity in later life (Dishman et al., 1995; Hillsdon et al., 2008). Early life physical activity experiences were limited to walking, domestic duties and traditional dancing.

It is interesting how you guys have this mind of since you were young until you die just exercising, we don’t have that in our culture. Our mothers were busy looking after families and working to get money, we never saw her exercise like you say, doing activity, only work and cook and clean. (Miriam)

Miriam’s comments reflect the rejection of Western dominant discourses around physical activity and the ability to comment on the centre as a border dweller, able to see both the centre and the margin quite clearly. Most of the participants described their life in terms of working hard for many hours in small trades, raising their children, caring for homes and families. Lifelong low levels of formal physical activity, despite their busy lives, reflect that there was very little leisure time available to participate in physical activities. As Ayanna points out, exercising without a purpose is considered a waste of time.

Why would I walk for nothing, it is not worth it, we like to sit, talk and eat (laughs) (Ayanna)

This research found that older Somali women have a limited individual exercise repertoire, which raises questions around incorporating traditional manual labour into daily exercise behaviours and considering ways to increase incidental exercise within the women's existing environments and traditional gendered culture.
The previous section discussed physical activity in relation to the experiences of individuals early in life and how these influenced their later physical activity patterns. This section examines how the participants define the term ‘physical activity’ in a cultural setting. The term ‘physical activity’ seems to encompass a broader range of activities than the term ‘exercise’ (Tortolero et al., 1999). Concepts about ‘exercise’ and ‘physical activity’ appear to be culturally specific and not easily identifiable.

CALD communities often have their own definitions of what it means to be physically active and this may influence their attitude towards physical activity. Koo and Rowling’s (2006) study of older Chinese Australians found that the term ‘physical activity’ was associated with the body moving in daily living, such as housework and caregiving chores, which they did not perceive as beneficial to health. In the following, Asli describes the differences surrounding the meanings of exercise and physical activity.

The confusing thing is we have two different cultures, maybe we have a different meaning about exercise, we have a different exercise what you call and you call something else exercise. We walk all day long, that’s our exercise, that’s what activity is. We never sit down but we don't know this is exercise; we just do it. (Asli)

Most of the Somali women's experiences around physical activity were for productive purposes and the skills of cooking, working and gathering food were the traditional forms of activity learnt from their mothers. The following quotes from participants describe what physical activity means to them and how it was integral in a labour intensive daily life in Somalia.

Back home, we had so many activities like the families here may only have 2 or 3 children but back home there was maybe 10 or more and the mother is doing most of the work, she takes them to school, some of them they go with her, some of her relatives live at home with her and she used to clean their house, do their dishes, feed them every day, maybe three different dishes every day. Back home the mother does everything like there are so many physical things that she used to do that here she does not compared to back home. (Halima)

Back home we used to do farming like having crops and we used to do it with our own hand. Most of us lived in the rural areas not like the city Mogadishu so we used to do that sort of work, we miss that kind of thing. We had animals like goats and we look after them, we used
to milk them, cows we used to milk, naturally we used to have to do it ourselves. (Syrad)

The women often commented that their physical activity was out of necessity and that the lack of modern appliances or public transport made life in Somalia very active. Everything had to be done by hand and they walked, often very long distances carrying goods or children. Asha describes the many activities she would do in a day’s work.

Yes, cleaning and washing and there was no car and everyone look after their homes and carry a lot of things and then walk by themselves, that’s all they do. Shopping by hand, by walking, no taxi, no car and doing visits for relatives, going walking there. There were no dishwashers, there is no machines. We depend on our activity, looking after the children, taking the children and bringing things to the house. (Asha)

As discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.2.6, many women reported a dramatic decrease in physical activity because of the changing roles in home duties and the incidental movement of day to day living. Hawo and Asha describe how much activity was part of their daily role as mothers and care providers.

Back home we are sweating, you have no car you just get everything for food and coal and then you start a fire and keep it going all day, fanning and keeping the heat, wash the dishes and all that. I mean the shop is not even close to you sometimes very far away so you have to get up early in the morning to get that food so there is much walking. And there is no washing machine, you have to wash by hand and scrub with the soap, it’s all exercise. (Hawo)

The children you always had strapped to your back with them all the time we are working and walking as well as carrying our goods and food. It was hard work but we enjoyed being busy and we didn’t know that this was good for us. (Asha)

These women are surprised that so many Australians were walking or running around with “no purpose”, as mentioned in 5.6.1. They thought that exercising for “no reason” was a waste of time or that it reflected one’s fragile mental state.

When I come here I didn’t know this kind of race you have or these things like you want to exercise for nothing else but just walking, I thought “what for, where are they going?” (Asli)

Older Somali women were traditionally very active in their own country but have now lost that identity and the need to be physically active. There is the need for
physical educators to be aware of what older Somali women believe the terms ‘physical activity’ and ‘exercise’ mean and why they may not engage in activity here.

5.6.3 “me without no reason just go out there and exercise, I can’t do that it’s just a bit crazy”: cultural perceptions of exercise

The Somali women discussed how the attitudes and opinions of other people within their own culture was a major barrier to starting an exercise program. As highlighted in Chapter 2, section 2.2.1, ‘exercise appropriateness’ for women was a contributing factor in adopting an exercise regime. If the community in which they live does not offer appropriate culturally-based exercise classes that are sensitive to older women’s needs, then it is unlikely women will participate (Burns et al., 2000; Sriskantharajah & Kai, 2007). Amina explains what people in her community would think if she was to undertake formal physical activity.

If I started to now and put it that sports shoes and sport things and started walking and things and making all my shapes like that they saying I go crazy; the Somali community they think I go crazy! (Amina)

On the borderlands the women often experience both oppression and resistance from their own culture and the dominant culture. Hawo explains how the younger generation attempt to get them to adopt a more Western style of behaviour.

When I first came to this country my son coming in every morning to me and even though I am staying in a dark room he put the lights on and the curtains up and say “Mum you have to exercise like the Chinese ladies”. Doing this I would think “Are you crazy, me without no reason just go out there and exercise, I can’t do that it’s just a bit crazy”. I have to be going for a reason, getting something, milk or something. (Hawo)

When the women were introduced to Western concepts of exercise and to gymnasiums, they wondered why women needed to always ‘run from something’. In a Western country, exercise is interwoven into concepts around what it means to be healthy. Minh-ha (1990) suggested that a woman narrates a displacement as she relentlessly shuttles between the centre and the margin. Older Somali women do this when trying to develop their own understandings of physical activity. Fadumo (participant) explains her amusement with the Western fitness practice of running on a treadmill.

I thought you were crazy. Running from animals, no running from guns, no. What are they doing that for, running to nowhere? (Fadumo)
Window shopping and ‘mall walking’ (walking inside shopping centres, combining window shopping and exercise) were behaviours that were difficult to link to health. Some of the women had tried mall walking but found it unproductive and irrelevant. This shopping and walking just for looking, I tried. Old ladies they just look around and that’s exercise for them, we can’t do that it’s just like they are a bit crazy. People would look at me and say “Look look Miriam, she crazy, she get depression, she just walking at the shops” (laughing). (Miriam)

Miriam attempted to merge the behaviour of two but found that this moved her too far from her central identity. For older Somali women, even discussing physical activity seemed something that they had never thought of.

We never know about these things, we don’t even talk about, it’s not something we think about at all. We have so much other things to do. (Fadumo, participant)

Look, it’s just not a priority to us. We want to pray and rest, it’s our time to do other things. (Hawo)

Thus, Western concepts surrounding physical activity are central values that older Somali women do not see as being part of their identity. This individualistic pursuit is not part of who they are, rather they see themselves in a more communal framework.

5.6.4 “I have started to think to get out of the house”: action due to research

During the project, women commented on the discussions we were having around physical activity and began to change their own health behaviours. About half way through the project at one of the data collection discussions, Fadumo (informant) mentioned to some of the ladies that she ‘had caught’ them on the weekend doing their walking laps around the estate. They laughed heartedly but it seemed that they would not have told us if Fadumo had not mentioned that she had seen them. It was just something they had developed within their own small groups having discussed how their lives used to be. They began to create a new space where traditional identity and physical activity were combining with the dominant culture. An example was when Hawo started to exercise with the other women outside the group after the many discussions around the benefits of exercising.

Since I have started coming here, I have started to think to get out of the house in the afternoons and then walk and walk and when I get tired I sit down a little bit and then walk, until I come back home. It’s nice. (Hawo)
The runners shown in Figure 5.4 were the product of many discussions I had with my connections within the white world; they were donated from a company that heard about this project. This was part of the coyote behaviour I had adopted, which has been discussed in the introduction to Chapter 3. I felt that providing the runners was a good way of giving back to the women after they had discussed the difficulty of walking long distances in open-toed shoes.

We wear these shoes because they are easy to slip on and off when we enter a Somali family house but we know they cannot be used for walking long distances. In Somalia we walked in either bare feet or open shoes because of the heat, but we don’t need to do that here. Now, because we are old we can slip over, it’s not good, we need to learn better ways. (Aziza)

All the women were fitted in their new runners and from that moment on they would wear them every week and even at other times when they arranged to meet to walk and shop. Many of the women who started exercising weekly would tell me how much they had done and the benefits they felt. Fadumo (informant) highlights this after seeing the ladies walking together one weekend.

I saw you all walking on the weekend going around the estate and your shoes, you all were wearing the shoes. You looked like you were enjoying yourselves, Georgia and I are very proud of you for this. (Fadumo)

The women replied, “We have been enjoying ourselves, and nobody thought that we were crazy”.
The women developed this behaviour as a direct result of the research project. While participating in exercise challenged their familiar ways of knowing, they were able to dismantle the traditional white mindset about what physical activity means as well as dismantle traditional Somali ways and reconstruct a mestiza sense of who they are and how physical activity fits on the borderlands (Hernandez-Wolfe, 2011). This is visually represented by the traditional dress and modern runners in Figure 5.4. Most older, ethnic women recognise the usefulness of exercise and often express a strong desire to participate but have difficulty initiating this. Border dwellers find strategies around participating in exercise that fits within their identity; “she realises she has to fit in to be accepted, recognised and allowed access to opportunities” (Hernandez-Wolfe, 2011, p. 299).

5.6.5 “adopting new ways of exercising”: a summary

Older Somali women’s attitudes towards exercise and what they believe exercise to mean are shaped by their upbringing, their culture and their lifestyle. Living on the borderlands the women are able to recognise the dominant culture’s physical activity structures and the values imposed on them and then navigate and negotiate themselves and their traditional selves to new ways of exercising. Discussions around physical activity during data collection prompted the women to develop and adopt new health behaviours. These findings point to the need to understand and address concepts and beliefs around exercise when developing programs or opportunities for women from non-Western cultures. It is also about the time needed to build trust, discuss and chat about their concerns, and opportunities like the runners. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

5.7 “it’s hard to change”: other barriers to physical activity

There are several other major barriers that prevent older Somali women from participating in regular physical activity. The changes in migration required the women to develop behaviours that work with the changing weather patterns, changes in their health, and the financial costs of participating in exercise in Western social structures such as gymnasiums. In response, women like Ariana have developed behaviours that explore and validate their experiences.

We try and fit in so I try and make time to do activity, but it’s hard to change (Ariana).

This section explores these barriers and how the women like Ariana navigate and negotiate their physical activity behaviours on the border.
5.7.1 “we used to be skinny because the weather was so hot”: the effects of weather on physical activity levels

For the Somali women, the weather in Melbourne was a major barrier to participating in physical activity. In Somalia, the weather was hot, humid and predictable. Nadifa and Ariana describe how much the type of weather and its unpredictability affects them.

Yes the weather affects us big time. When it’s hot it’s not the normal hot we know back there. Here it’s really goes through to your skin and make you very hot and the cold, well we don’t know that either because we never really had cold. (Nadifa)

Also back home, our land back home in Somali we had one fixed weather, not changing everyday like here and was all healthy, the land itself was healthy. (Ariana)

The weather isolated some women in their homes and prevented them from being physically active. Tu et al. (2004) found weather as a major barrier to exercise for older women living in inner city areas, especially high wind chill factors or extreme heat. In the following, both Safa and Syrad describe how the weather affects their activity levels.

It’s so freezing cold we can’t do nothing, we are not used to this cold. Most of the time the way we are different from your grandmother when we are back home we used to do all the activity your grandmother used to do and we get used to that part of our life but this part of our life because of the weather we can’t even get out of the blankets, it’s so freezing, we never have this in our life. (Safa)

In summer time it’s ok, but winter nobody talk to us, we don’t go out and that’s when we become alone and isolated. (Syrad)

The heat in Somalia caused women to sweat, which they believe cleansed their bodies, kept their weight down and was an essential part of maintaining their health and wellbeing.

In Somalia you just sweat and I believe sweat is some kind of saturated fat coming out of your body and this affects the health of the older woman. (Asha)

Back home, we used to be skinny because the weather was so hot we used to sweat, whatever we eat we would not actually stay with us, it would be destroyed because everything is gone all the bad fats. Here we have put on so much weight because we don’t sweat. (Halima)
It appears weather is a major barrier to being active and prevents women from getting out and seeing each other. The need for program developers to be aware of this is further discussed in Chapter 6.

5.7.2 “it's too much, the worry of my heart”: ill health

Ill health was both a motivator and barrier to activity. Many of the participants in the study had physical health problems that coincided with the worry and anxiety that constantly plagues them. Most were either overweight or obese and spoke of issues such as high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma, diabetes, high cholesterol levels and arthritis, which they had only experienced after migration. They found it difficult to understand and cope with these diseases and, as they believed that physical activity would exacerbate these conditions, they generally avoided it. Melillo et al. (2001) found similar results in their study of older Latino adults and their perceptions around physical activity, with many afraid that it further deteriorates their health. They also found that many believed that because of their age, physical activity would actually make them worse and not better. My field notes and comments from participants reflect similar observations.

Today we decided to go for a walk around the estate walking paths and I noticed how the older women really struggled to make just one lap. In some cases, women looked distressed and unwell and were forced to sit on park benches explaining that their chests were hurting or that their heart was beating too fast. Most of the women are extremely overweight and found even the slow pace difficult to maintain. I notice that those feelings of puffing, getting hot or even panting made them nervous and unsure of how their bodies were reacting. These physical activity experiences were in many cases traumatic and I understood why they tried to avoid these sensations. It was completely foreign to them and something that ‘Australia’ had done to them since arriving here. The food, the lack of resources, the racism, the social structures have all contributed to their body shapes. (Field notes, 2010)

I cannot do too much, my heart, I already had heart operation so I have to be careful, sometimes it’s too much, the worry of my heart. (Halima)

Halima’s words represent Anzaldúa’s “coatlicue state” (1987) which describes an inability to respond to a problem, instead choosing to stop and rest and attempt to insulate herself (p. 68). Trying to be physically active, to follow the Anglo creation of how exercise should be and living on the borderlands sometimes becomes
overwhelming. The border dweller has to stop, return to her centre and gather strength. Cohen-Mansfield et al. (2003) suggest that this may introduce a vicious cycle where physical activity symptoms prevent participation which further exacerbates health problems and depression. In contrast, one participant found that after being desperately ill for many years and having recovered, she was determined to maintain her fitness and weight through walking. Asli, a true border dweller, had merged her behaviours with the Western culture of ‘walking for no reason’ in order to maintain her health. Asli describes her new daily routine.

I have to stay fit now or I will get sick again so I walk, I walk everywhere and lose 10 kilos, I like doing this as I used to walk everywhere back home. (Asli)

It appears that some of the participants cope quite differently within this borderland space and adopt strategies to maintain their health, like walking, that draw from experiences back home. Developing confidence to exercise and understanding health problems is further discussed in Chapter 6.

5.7.3 “being a Somali woman is very expensive especially going to the gym like any other woman”: the cost of being physically active

Many studies have acknowledged that cost is a barrier to migrant women’s participation in physical activity (Bertera, 1999; Cohen-Mansfield et al 2004; Eyler et al., 1998; Schrop et al., 2006; Woodward et al., 1989). Many women felt that they could not exercise because they could not afford the gymnasium fees or a personal trainer. The fitness industry of the white world is happy for older Somali women to have their culture as long as they assimilate with white culture when it comes to physical activity. This thinking however assumes that both cultures inform the processes of everyday life. When one joins a gymnasium, one is assimilating, joining the dominant group. Membership is legitimate, acceptable and unified and makes those who don’t fit in ‘outsiders’. Older Somali women feel that they do not belong and the gym does not offer culturally appropriate options. Fadumo (informant) first brought this to my attention when she went to an ‘open day’ at a local fitness centre. She was there as part of a DGCHS promotion to encourage families from non-English speaking backgrounds to attend the centre.

We will never go there Georgia, it’s just not for us. For me it really was, I know no Somali families will ever go, it just doesn’t feel like we belong here. There is nothing really for us to fit into; it’s just not us (Fadumo, informant)
The women are reluctant to participate in exercise classes and request exercise that “would suit us and our religion”. Women like Asli are able to see that the theories and practices that deal with providing cultural physical activities are developed within an Eurocentric framework. She describes her dilemma in wanting to exercise but finding much of it culturally inappropriate and beyond her financial resources. It has been shown that access to health services is closely related to social class and for women like Asli fitness centres are not an option (Ahmad & Bradby, 2008).

I like walking, I could do that one, the treadmill but I couldn’t afford it, it’s expensive. If I could go out and I do little steps up and down and I am shamed, it’s not my culture to lift the skirt up. I need something I can do and to wear proper trousers and then I would do it. (Asli)

The need for public modesty for women was indeed a barrier to physical activity outside of the home. Caperchione et al. (2011) had similar findings in their study of physical activity behaviours in CALD women living in Australia, with Arabic-speaking women expressing the need for formal indoor facilities where activities such as swimming and gym could be undertaken in the presence of women only. This is an example of overlapping spaces on the borderland, where the women have developed behaviours that incorporate the traditional Somali rules, enabling them to transcend the barriers that the dominant group has imposed. They have developed a strategy that would allow them to exercise in a Western social structure like a gymnasium if they were able to dress and practise physical activity modestly.

Ariana also explains the difficulties around trying to find culturally appropriate physical activity venues and the cost involved in attending them.

Being active here in Australia being a Somali woman is very expensive especially going to the gym like any other woman is very expensive financial wise and you have to join the gym. It’s like thousands of dollars and it’s hard to find a place only women designed for and I know there is Fernwood gyms (a franchise of women only gymnasiums), I know but still again, it’s the limitation of going to that gym because of the financial reason is very hard, financially very expensive to have that activity. (Ariana)

Woodward et al. (1989) found that women who earn their own money through paid work are in a much stronger position to determine their leisure activities. In their study of 700 women in the UK, the more affluent women were, the higher their rates of participation in all home-based leisure activities. Access to public transport or the ability to drive also influenced participation in leisure activities. Nearly all the participants in this study did not drive, were on pensioner incomes and had restricted
income resources. The need for low cost activity programs that are culturally appropriate for older Somali women is explored in Chapter 6.

5.7.4 “inaccuracies and misunderstandings”: a summary

The barriers of weather, ill health, cost and what are considered inappropriate locations such as gyms need to be addressed if the women in this study are to consider regular participation in physical activity. However, as their attitudes are often based on inaccuracies or misunderstandings of the effects of activity, education will play a major role in encouraging participation amongst these women. In Chapter 6, recommendations will be made around designing programs and activities that address issues such as cost, weather, women’s existing health concerns, and concerns around modesty.

5.8 “food mestizas”: food and health

Many cultural practices are centred on food and where it comes from. Older Somali women are concerned about how the food is grown here in Australia and how to cook and eat certain foods. They also feel a deep sense of sorrow about how much food is wasted. There is a ‘push and pull’ between traditional foods and new ‘Australian’ foods bringing together a new ‘food mestiza’; Somali women blending and merging new and old foods to create a new way of eating. Reflections of Somalia are always around weather and food; “it’s all sunny and beautiful and everything was organic”. Pre-migration food patterns dictate when and how food is eaten and traditional food remedies are used to cure illnesses and promote health and wellbeing. This section will explore food and its connection to health and how this affects older Somali women’s wellbeing and their physical activity patterns.

5.8.1 “Everything was organic and was all natural, nothing to be forced”: quality and choice in food

Many of the study participants were concerned about the food they purchased in Australia. Many considered the foods in Somalia to be “more natural” and organic, not genetically modified. In Somalia, the land and the food from it were integral to their overall health and wellbeing as they use the herbs and foods grown to cure and treat illness. The following quotes highlight how much the land contributes to the quality of the food.

There was no pollution, no nothing, the whole weather, everything in the country was down to earth, was healthy, there were no big chemical places. (Ariana)
Everything was organic and was all natural, nothing to be forced, not the weather, there was no cold weather where you needed a heater on, it’s all sunny and beautiful and everything was organic. Everyday organic, the milk was even organic and natural. As the people get older they are supposed to get more healthy as they get old, they should not get sick. (Ayan)

Many women commented that in Somalia they ate the foods that were in season rather than eating the same foods all year round. They had little refrigeration and foods were bought and eaten on a daily basis rather than kept in storage to eat later on. Several participants describe how important the origin of food is in relation to their health.

Our food back home is original, organic. It’s organic just the way you get it, just organic. Here it’s like the chemical food. One day you just produce a lot of food. Our food has minerals and our livestock, the goats and they eat the grass which is original grass and the benefit we are getting and it’s sweet, nice and fresh. Also we didn’t have the fridge we collected the things that day and it’s just eat it at that time. (Fadumo, participant)

Back home we used to eat organic food, our teeth perfect, but now because of this food that we eat here, all the chemicals, all the pollutions our teeth come out and we just don’t have the energy we used to (Halima)

Many women described that eating organic food and being healthy in old age was a normal part of Somali life. Older men and women were described as having all their teeth, perfect eyesight and mobility. It should be acknowledged that the women may hold nostalgic and selective views about their homeland. As highlighted in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1, people in diaspora settings may recall their homeland as idyllic, a notion that provides them with comfort and solace and is reflected in the meshing of their past and future lives (Skrbis, 1999, 2007). Here Asha describes the relationship between food and health.

110 maybe 120 years old woman and men live to and you can count their teeth, they are all perfect. You see these people reading the paper like it’s normal, their eyes are so perfect and it’s all the food, no chemicals, perfect health. Here we see our grandchildren wearing glasses at the age of three or four and that’s what amazes me. (Asha)
The African tea that Somali women drink is very sweet and sugared. In Somalia it was consumed once a day, first thing in the morning to give energy for the working day. In Australia, it is drunk throughout the day and they do not undertake the activity required to burn the calories. Miriam describes why sugared tea is so important in a working life of a Somali woman.

The only thing we had back home was the tea, the Somali tea, so sweet but here in Australia you have chocolate, cakes, lollies so many sweet things and we did not have any of these, only the tea. We used this for work and the sun used to burn the calories and so that tea if you have five of them won’t be stored as cholesterol, it will be stored as energy and that’s what you want for all your work you have to do. (Miriam)

The taste of food is transferred from Somalia to Australia. Participants describe this preference for meat and oil-based dishes as ‘the oily mouth’, one that is only satisfied with these types of food. Figure 5.5 is a photo of fried honey balls, a traditional Somali food that is heavily based in oil. Many of the women realise that this food is not appropriate in Australia because they do not do the kind of activity that this food allowed them to do. Still they find it difficult to change their cooking habits as the food reminds them of Somalia and what their lives used to be. Allawia describes this taste preference for oil.

My mouth is for oily food and for meat and that’s what I knows and that’s how it’s always been. This taste always stays with me. (Allawia)

Cooking for families also requires the women to ‘create a taste’ that their families would eat, making them feel a sense of home and familiarity with Somali culture. It was also a reflection of their culinary, homemaking and caregiving skills. Fadumo (informant) describes how it is important to please the family with traditional food that tastes good rather than what is good for you.

If I cook something for my husband he would never appreciate, he would never say “Oh my goodness this food is healthy”, he understands that it is good for him but he tells me “Next time can we have goat”. When I cook goat he loves it, the oils and the rice, the richness and he tells me “This is what I like and I am happy”. (Fadumo)
The participants were often confused about the different types of food available in Australia and how to cook them in a traditional way. Not being familiar with language and foods makes older Somali women hesitant about buying different types of foods and integrating them into their cooking. They do, however, try to blend or substitute many of the Somali traditional foods with food that is offered here in Australia, for example camel meat and goat’s milk are replaced by lamb and cow’s milk. The problem is these substitutes are expensive, high in fat and do not provide the health benefits that the women are familiar with. Miriam describes her food life in Somalia.

We had camels and goats that we used to milk every day, it was fresh and organic. Here in Australia foods very fatty and so we get fat. We try to cook like we used to but we know that food is oily and we are lazy so we get fat. In Somalia we work hard and need the food (Miriam).

Fadumo (informant) also describes the difficulties in exploring different foods and the problems associated with ‘cooking on the border’.

We don’t know what some of the foods are. I can speak English a little bit and when I go to the fruit shop it’s just what to do with this one, so I just stick to what I know that’s all. We only know the foods and shops from Somalia, they have the rice, the pasta, the things we eat every day. Now we shop at the big supermarkets we don’t know what half of the food or how to cook it is, we just stick to what we know. (Fadumo)
The common theme that has emerged in this discussion is that the type of food older Somali women purchase and eat in Australia has a negative effect on their health. Many of them are unaware of the food available here or how to use it in their traditional cooking. They live on a food border, trying to combine what they know with the foods here in Australia but still finding that the combination of lack of activity and over-eating is a common problem.

5.8.2 “what we consume at night, it shows in our body”: food borders

Eating patterns in Australia are very different to Somalia, where lunch was the main meal of the day, followed by a rest period and return to work late in the afternoon. This was so work could be done either early or in the late afternoon to avoid the heat of the day. In the following, Fadumo (participant) and Hawo describe how eating patterns have changed since they have migrated to Australia.

We don't know this concept of a sandwich for lunch, we have food and rest and then sweet tea to keep us going for the work. We talk and eat and rest and this is good for us. (Fadumo, participant)

It’s all about the food, what we consume at night, it shows in our body. We used to eat during the day but here it is at night and it’s not how our body works. We like to eat a lot and we serve lots so everyone has enough. (Hawo)

Hawo recognises that eating at different times, along with a lack of incidental activity, has affected her weight. Many participants now give advice to relatives who come to Australia about the food and how it endangers their health. It seems the women have developed a health belief model that interweaves Western lifestyle and traditional Somali ways. Miriam discusses how life is different in Australia.

We tell them, don't eat a lot of meat in this country and not too much sweets. There is no walk here, no sweating here, be careful with meat, meat, meat, cholesterol too much cholesterol. (Miriam)

Many participants related food with the cultural practices of sharing stories and being together as families in the middle of the day. Figure 5.6 shows traditional Somali food being served at ‘a coming together’ on large communal plates. It represents their food border, incorporating salad, chilli, rice and bread. The chilli drinks in Figure 5.6 are to help create heat and sweating to rid the body of toxins; they are an example of how food is merged with health ‘the Somali way’.
5.8.3 “many people are dying from no food and you can’t leave that meat”: the distress with food wastage

Participants see wasting food as sinful because many of their relatives in Somalia were suffering from famine or they themselves had suffered from lack of food in Somalia. In their study of sub-Saharan African post-migration food habits and eating patterns, Renzaho and Burns (2006) described how many participants had run out of food prior to migration due to war, flooding, drought, living in refugee camps, poverty and unemployment. These experiences were similar to those of the women in this study. Eating all the food on your plate or having the opportunity to eat meat is a sign of wealth and privilege (Renzaho & Burns, 2006). The opportunity to eat at any time and in abundance is taken up by many of the women because of their history with food insecurity and famine in their country of birth. Any food that is left over is evenly distributed or given to those who need it most. No food is ever thrown away. I first experienced this when I was given a special plate of meat at one of the participant’s houses whose daughter had her first child. The meat had been reconstituted from its dried form and it was to provide health and stamina to new mothers, reflecting the local understanding of food and health.

I arrive at Miriam’s house to visit her daughter and her new granddaughter. There are many other women there and we are all offered ‘orica’, a reconstituted meat chopped into small pieces, a delicacy for new mothers to regain their health and strength.
Everyone insists I try it and it’s a strong flavour, a bit like beef jerky and I struggle to have a few bites. I comment on its flavour and place the plate down in front of me while I admire the baby. Other women notice that I am not eating all the meat and scold me “do you know that many people are dying from no food and you can’t leave that meat, it is wrong, you MUST eat it”. I know that food wastage is a no-no so I reluctantly eat so as not to make more fuss in the room of women. Epilogue: I spend the next 2 days sick with stomach cramps and diarrhoea and all I can taste in my mouth is the meat. The things we do for research! (Field notes, 2010)

5.8.4 “We never be sick because of our food and tradition”: the relationship between food and health

Many of the women associated certain foods with health and conversations centred on fixing health problems with traditional foods or remedies. Mixtures of herbs and garlic were made to lower cholesterol or relieve coughs, colds, asthma and skin conditions. These local understandings of food and health were provided as a source of advice to other women, Fadumo and myself. Lewis’ (2009) study of older Cambodian refugees in the US found that elders were here to rest and provide advice and traditional remedies for common health problems. Dyck and Dossa (2007) studied the health practices of immigrant and refugee women living in Canada and found that women had a rich knowledge of alternative healing practice, transmitted over generations. They also discussed that the West often thought that their homelands were primitive and outdated when in fact prior to their country’s civil war, a viable health care system and alternative healing allowed people to choose which would work best for them. Similarly, participants in this study, like Aziza, spoke of traditional forms of healing that kept them healthy and active.

In Somalia, everything was good before the war. People lived a long time, we used special foods for the sick and kept well with the organic food. We never be sick because of our food and tradition. (Aziza)

The women have had to shift their frame of reference in relation to food and health. Hernandez-Avila (2000) argues that women of colour have to “reframe the issue or situation being looked at, connect the disparate parts of information in new ways or form a perspective that is new” (p. 178). Older Somali women do this with food and traditional ways of viewing health, producing a new way of cooking and eating for themselves and their families.
5.8.5 “food border strategies”: a summary

The above discussions indicate a need to understand that food has cultural and social links and is interwoven into traditional remedies for health and illness. Where food comes from and how it is eaten in Australia is reflected in the changes in the women’s body shape and cultural practices around eating. Wasting food is frowned upon and causes distress as it reminds the women of the plight of relatives left behind in Somalia. The women expressed that weight gain was associated with the food eaten in Australia in conjunction with reduced activity levels. These beliefs and practices associated with food highlight their food border strategies and the need for education to help newly arrived people understand local foods, their value and how to incorporate them into their diet.

5.9 “the person die and that’s life for us”: concepts of health and illness

Many participants experienced deteriorating health since migration and difficulty understanding the illnesses based on their traditional knowledge of health and illness. Asha declares “we have no idea, the person die and that’s life for us”. In this section, women reveal their struggle with gaining weight and trying to understand the diseases they have developed since migration.

5.9.1 “we can see it, we are not the same as when we were back home”: body image and migration

Women in the study recognise that they were very different to the older women who lived in Somalia. They understand that physical activity is part of a healthy lifestyle and is one reason why they are not as healthy now. They find difficulty in developing strategies to cope with these changes. Miriam describes the differences she sees between herself and the women back home in Somalia.

Yes we know, we can see it, we are not the same as when we were back home and now we are different. The women back home are much healthier than us. They are walking, women of our age they are walking now and they are doing better than us and we are just, we don’t sweat enough, no more. (Miriam)

The participants in this study could be placed in what Renzaho et al. (2008) call the “assimilation group”, where they hold strong identities about what body shape is appropriate for a Somali woman and yet they recognise that these sizes are changing now they are in Australia (p. 2). Food and body size were also related to financial status and attractiveness to men. Miriam describes how a more voluptuous body shape was preferred in order to attract a man for marriage.
Back home the food is natural and the person becomes naturally fat, here the food is damaged so the people become unhealthy fat, so we need to lose the weight and get skinny like you. But back home we need the fat to attract the men, they like the little bit of fat. (Miriam)

Many women tell stories of feeding the less fortunate people in their country, those who were in need of a decent meal. I was frequently told I was in need of some decent food as I “eat more like a bird than a woman” and in Somalia I would be considered “poor”. This created discussions around different body types.

I have the poetry from Somalia where it tells us if you are skinny, skinny means when you have no food, you are poor or you come from a poor family. (Asha)

The people who are poor only eat at night. If you can afford to eat three meals a day you are rich person. (Asha)

The food offered in Australia was seen as ‘not nourishing’ and large amounts needed to be eaten in order to be satisfied. Miriam explains how the food is making them fat.

Here in Australia we can’t control our body, this time it’s just bigger and bigger because of the food. The food it’s just starving us to do this, it’s not natural and you eating and you keep eating. (Miriam)

Yes, we like little bit of fat but we know here the food is different so you have to be careful because little bit of fat here means you have diseases, so we know we have to be careful, especially with the meat. (Miriam)

The study participants’ body image had changed over time and many of the women who have been here over 10 years have developed a more Westernised view of body image and health behaviours. Being lean was associated with poverty and disease and now they have merged these concepts of health and body image with Western ideals. Fadumo (participant) describes how these attitudes have changed over time.

Now we would love for the skinny body, before it was shameful, part of being poor. But now, not anymore, we know the fat is bad but we can’t change having a lot of babies that make our stomach big and the food here makes us big bottoms. It’s Somalis, we can’t change that, all of us are becoming ashamed we have big bottoms. (Fadumo)
It seems that the women have identified the cultural differences in body shape and have merged their past and present identities to have this ‘little bit of fat’ as this represents a Somali woman, a mother and a good wife. Renzaho et al. (2008, 2010a, 2010b) mention the struggle of parents to adapt to their children’s changing body images as they adopt more Western ideals of thinness over their parents’ preference for larger body sizes. The older women recognise this and still encourage younger generations to adopt ‘a little fat’ to ensure good marriage and motherhood prospects. This is another example of the border culture of merging traditional and Western ideals around health and wellbeing.

5.9.2 “People die out of nature or for the sake of god”: knowledge of health and illness

In Somalia many participants were not aware of how or why people died. Usually people aged and then died “naturally”; they did not have any medical facilities to measure things like cholesterol or high blood pressure. Ardo explains the reasons why people died in Somalia.

We only die from nature that’s what we thought even when we have the Prophet, we don’t know anything; it is something new to us. Maybe we have to get used to the idea of not knowing anything about the health of the body, when somebody died, they just died. If they had a kidney problem we didn’t know we have a kidney problem, back home when a person dies, we say “oh this person dies”, that’s it! (Ardo)

Nobody knew their medical conditions, we don’t even know what the name of cholesterol is, we have no idea, the person die and that’s life for us (Miriam)

Many women were not familiar with the many ailments they have developed since arriving in Australia and believe they are not part of a traditional aging life. As Ayanna describes, these diseases are completely unknown to them.

We are getting sick of different diseases, like diabetes, cholesterol, high blood pressure. There are so many things you name, we have it. Back home there was no such thing that older people get, we die out of nature. People die out of nature or for the sake of God not because they are sick, because that was their time; that is why they die. (Ayanna)
Due to a changed lifestyle, diet and increase in weight experienced since they arrived in Australia, the women had to learn what all these conditions meant, why they were happening and how to go about fixing them. Asha describes how confusing all these ailments are.

Again, when we first arrived in the country we don’t have knowledge of what to expect when we come here, so if you put on weight or get diabetes we do not know these things. If you walk the streets with tiny pieces of clothing on you may end up getting asthma, we don’t know these things or some sort of cold. (Asha)

Overall, there were different understandings of health and the illnesses that they experienced post migration. Many of the women tried to incorporate their traditional ways of eating and taking herbs with Western medicine in an attempt to fix their ailments and these strategies seem to provide some relief.

I try to do traditional ways like garlic and warm water and herbs to help with the sickness, it helps me but it is hard. (Ayanna)

Melillo et al. (2001) experienced similar findings in their study of older Latino adults who had difficulty understanding their conditions of heart disease and asthma. They suggested using bilingual professionals to explain medical conditions clearly and educate older adults on how health conditions can be managed.

5.9.3 “viewing the healer as the holder of knowledge”: negotiating and navigating health and illness

Examining health and illness in relation to conversation and stories, Minh-ha (1989) reveals a combination of “musical, historical, poetical, ethical, educational, magical and religious” meanings (p. 139). Her description of traditional, communal, holistic cultures views the healer as the holder of technical knowledge who fully understands the problems of the communities and family affairs. They listen to how the patient talks. It appears the mother, the teacher, influences the lessons of health practices through storytelling. This may be done through religious teachings or moral stories. Figure 5.7 is Asha, cradling her grandchild’s feet. She describes how the teachings of physical activity were not part of the stories passed onto them; rather what was taught was the obligation to keep family first and foremost.

Subsequently, oral explanations about health and wellbeing are often held in high regard in ethnic minority groups as the information sources are friends and relatives. Many of the participants in this study provided weekly remedies for the health ailments experienced by their children, husbands and extended relatives.
Fadumo mentioned today that she loves coming to the group every week because she comes with all her kids' ailments along with her own, and the women provide her with remedies. Everything is talked about from asthma to knee pain and is cured with crushed herbs, lots of garlic and certain dried meats that restore energy and vitality. Fadumo says ‘it’s like going to the doctor but it’s free’ (laughing). (Field notes, 2010)

Greenhalgh et al.’s (1998) study of Bangladeshi women and diabetes overturned the assumption that health education is merely addressing a lack of knowledge. Education seminars, flyers and leaflets were a traditional form of knowledge transfer. However, their study used constructs familiar to the Bangladeshi culture as a starting point for transferring health information. It was through oral explanations that the study found that sport and organised physical activity held no cultural meaning for the study participants and were considered inappropriate for women.

5.9.4 “a little bit of fat”: a summary

Since migrating to Australia, the older Somali women in this study were less acculturated and did have a sedentary lifestyle. There were varied perceptions around body image and its association with wealth and status. Being ‘a little bit fat’ was a sign of prosperity and good health and was an integral part of a Somali woman’s identity. The women take pride in their culture and take the symbols of body image and work with them into Western frameworks. There were difficulties in understanding newly
acquired Western diseases, how these affected their body shape and health, and the possible links to a premature death.

5.10 “we used to be something”: language and employment services

In migrating to Australia, the Somali women in this study have altered traditional roles, which included entering the workforce, supporting families, purchasing food, accessing transport, health care and schooling – all in an environment where their language, religion and culture differ from the mainstream. One of the participants, Nero, describes this clearly when she says “there are no jobs that we can do here, we used to be something and now our English gets worse”. Ozanne (2009) identifies aging migrants as particularly at risk in Australia because of low paid unskilled jobs and the restructuring of the manufacturing sector further constricting their ability to find employment. Consequently, aging migrants born in non-English speaking countries can face barriers in accessing appropriate health and aged care services.

5.10.1 “the forked tongue”: language that crosses borders

Women who live in a country in which English is the dominant language and who cannot identify solely with the Somali language yet cannot understand English, develop their own language. As highlighted in 3.1.13 this is what Anzaldua (1987) describes as “the forked tongue” (p. 77); a language that can cross borders, that connects them to their identity as Somali and communicates their realities and values. It is a combination of Somali and English, one that can be used when dealing with the whites and one they can use that represents the “husks of her culture” (Anzaldua, 1987, p.103).

Often the whites criticise the lack of English skills these women have even after many years of living in Australia; however, for these women being Somali is about pride in the language and pride in themselves rather than accommodating the English speakers with their English skills. Many women would come from English class to the group and when I asked them what they learned that day they would recite greetings in a humorous tongue-in-cheek Australian accent. I realised this patronising form of learning English was a real crossroads, a language that is used with the whites, but not really part of who they are. They would quickly slip back into their mother tongue with its rich tones and volumes coming from deep in their hearts. Being Somali is what Anzaldua describes as “a state of soul - not one of mind, not one of citizenship”(p. 84). Everyday chores such as shopping or taking public transport required the women to switch language codes; some were very good at this, others were not. Those who
found this crossing difficult did much less incidental physical activity and were isolated, often bored and less confident in performing everyday activities. Those women who had crafted this linguistic challenge felt more at ease in dealing with the dominant culture and were more active in the community.

5.10.2 "the grandmother like me is left at home": lack of English

Many immigrants, who are now moving into old age, have little opportunity to learn English due to work and family responsibilities and dealing with the challenges of living in a new country. Atwell et al. (2007) and Chenoweth and Burdick (2001) agree, stating that lacking English often affects confidence and willingness to venture far from home and can intensify isolation. Many older people do not learn many phrases in English because they are not in paid employment where they have the opportunity to learn and refine these skills (Atwell et al., 2007). They, therefore, have little exposure to the new culture and environment in which their families are rebuilding their lives. Learning English is difficult and the help they received was culturally inappropriate for many women. All of the participants had little opportunity to take advantage of the 500 hours of mandatory learning delivered through the Federal Government Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) as their time and effort was taken up dealing with the challenges of living in a new country. As Ardo and Ayan explain, trying to learn English while coping with resettlement becomes all too much.

I try to go to the English, I must go to get the money from Centrelink, but they go so fast, I cannot read pages and pages and then try to practise at home. I have too many children, cooking cleaning, I am so tired it’s all too much (Ardo)

When I came to this country I was told to go to the community centres and the 500 hours, after three days I attended to the class I did not go back. The class was not designed for older people like me. It wasn’t a place for me, this was not my facility. I was given papers to read in English which I know nothing about and I have to take it home and study. When I think about that at that time they did not design those things for me to start from my basic knowledge. (Ayan)

It is not my intention to criticise the AMEP but rather reflect on the women's difficulties in merging themselves into the Western frameworks.

Acquiring English has created some problems in everyday life for the older Somali women. They often do not have sufficient command of English to shop for food, apply for aid or contact police or other services when needed. Many of the women have been years away from a structured learning experience and some have
little formal education even in their own language. Syrad describes how her age is a barrier to having opportunities to learn English language skills.

The first barrier is definitely the language. When we first came here, most younger middle age women may go and do something like work in the workforces in Australia but the grandmother, like me she is left at home and nobody is staying with her and she needs like all the women here places where she can communicate. There might be a teacher who speaks English as well as Somali or maybe there is someone the government can employ where we can learn at least the basic language of English so we can understand the people in this land. (Syrad)

Langellier (2010) explored Somali identity in Western culture through the storytelling of a young woman refugee in Maine, USA. She acknowledged the difficulty in resettlement, and while learning English and finding employment were high priorities for newly arrived Somalis, this was accompanied by low literacy levels in their own language. Hawo explains how even everyday activities are difficult and this contributes to isolation.

We have no language, even when you are crossing the road we need someone to watch it and read it, the signs because we don't know. If there is police that catch us we don’t know nothing to say to them. (Hawo)

In addition, attending structured formal exercise sessions where the instructor only speaks English and the facilities are culturally inadequate further discourages incidental physical activity participation by getting out and about. Incorporating learning English into programs in order to build women’s confidence in participating in other everyday incidental activities is further discussed in Chapter 6.

5.10.3 “I am old now and I don't speak the English properly to work here”: employment opportunities for older Somali women

Language proficiency, as discussed previously, is an important factor in successful resettlement as it enables individuals to negotiate with the host society leading to employment opportunities. Difficulty in finding a suitable job has limited the women’s opportunity to develop and maintain their language skills. Anzaldúa (1987) suggests that “people of color suffer economically for not acculturating” (p. 85). A forced alienation makes for “psychological content, a kind of dual identity” where Somali women do not identify with the Anglo-Australian cultural values and do not or
are unable to identify with Somali cultural values (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 85). They do not have the skills that ‘fit’ Australian life or the Australian white culture does not accept their Somali employment skills. In the following, Hawo describes her frustration in finding and keeping employment in Australia.

Women of our age, Australian women are still working in the workforce. When women in Somalia come here the government did not provide the things that we can do, the jobs that we can do even if we don't get paid high money at least we are doing something. There are no jobs that we can do here. (Hawo)

Most of the women were very productive in their own country, they were employed or ran their own business to support their families.

I used to do sewing, making mosquito nets and underwear, but not anymore because I am old now and I don't speak the English properly to work here. (Fadumo, participant)

Many participants lost their husbands early in life and were forced to work hard to feed the family and keep their children at school. In Australia they find the lack of employment opportunities frustrating and it contributes to their loneliness and isolation.

Some of the women have set up small businesses within the Somali community like selling Somali dresses or caring for Somali children during the day. Asli imports clothes from Dubai and sells them to the ladies on the estate.

I like doing this, it's not much money but it gives me something to do, people to talk to. (Asli)

Asli has developed new codes and ways of working that draw on her business knowledge within the Somali community and within the dominant culture to create a new ‘working life’ for herself. Manderson and Rapala (2005), in their study of ailing Polish immigrants in Melbourne, Australia, see that employment relieves isolation and depression by enabling individuals to interact and create new social networks. Similarly, the older Somali women feel isolated and withdrawn as the time they have becomes increasingly idle. Thomas (2003) found that older immigrants are bored and have little to do, especially if they arrived at an age too old for employment. Hawo and Miriam describe their feelings of worthlessness.

What do you think I just get up and I am sitting here, I have nothing to do. Kids come, “how are you mum?” “I'm good”, then I sit again, sitting just doing nothing ah. We are just doing nothing here. If we are
not contributing to society we are not doing anything, that is how I see it. (Hawo)

When we are in our country, you know the business you know the language you know, here we are nothing, we are just dependent on our children, we can’t just go without work, without them. (Miriam)

Miriam’s comment reflects the centre that she once had; it was comfortable and a source of inner power. The skills that she and others had do not apply here and they have been “pushed to the other side” (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 70). Some of the women recognise that they still have skills from their country of origin that could be used in employment or further training. Halima and Asli describe how lack of finances and overall health prevents them from starting their own business.

I want to study my religion more, the Koran, I wish I could have a shop near my house or in my house so that traditional clothes I could sell, but I can’t and I want to give to the poor but I have no money and not enough space. (Halima)

I could do some kind of packaging, I can’t stand long hours but I want to sit sometimes, then stand still and do something and earn some money. (Asli)

From living on the borders both these women can see that there are new possibilities, new ways of adapting themselves into the workforce. Inclusion of occupational training and employment opportunities is further discussed in Chapter 6.

5.10.4 “people just go places and point to buildings and statues”: mobility and isolation

No longer being able to drive, and unsafe and expensive alternatives such as public transport or taxi services, all impact on older women’s sense of independence and autonomy. Atwell et al. (2007) explored the needs of older people from 14 recently arrived refugee communities in Melbourne, Australia. They highlighted lack of transport as a major contributing factor to isolation, with dependence on family members to get around leaving many older people unable to travel beyond their immediate neighbourhood. They argue that older women were at greater risk of social isolation because they were less confident about leaving the home and more reluctant to visit public places without family members. In addition, the women lack opportunities to keep busy and focused on the present, and may spend long periods alone. In Somalia, the written language is usually not used to navigate around a town or city, as people use landmarks and statues to guide them to where they want to go.
Public transport here we have to know the language and read the language. In Somalia I just say have I been here or have I came back to the same place I walked before? That’s how we know. We used to go to one place then to another where there is no signs, no recognition of building or statues, nothing you can point at, just how the land works. (Fadumo, participant)

There is no such thing as a map in Somalia, people just go places and point to buildings and statues and this is where I have been yesterday and this is where I go and at the end of that tree you go left there. There is no need to read maps or signs. (Ariana)

In Melbourne, the ability to move around on public transport is dependent on being able to speak English and being mobile enough to participate. The women arrived here and have been overwhelmed, they have to try and learn about ways of getting around Melbourne. Haralambous et al. (2003) identified that there is insufficient public transport in Melbourne’s western suburbs and there needs to be an increase in the number of meeting places for CALD communities that would provide opportunities to promote physical activity.

5.10.5 “my tongue will be illegitimate”: a summary

After being immersed for their lifetime in their native tongue and feeling comfortable using it, hearing it on the radio and reading it in the newspaper, the Somali women are faced with this centre being taken away from them. They learn to develop a new language, a border language that combines English and Somali, one they can use according to the reality they are facing. They always feel as Anzaldua (1987) described: “as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (p. 81). The Somali women support a need to provide language services in a more culturally appropriate environment, such as learning English in women-only groups and with a bilingual teacher who would encourage women to pursue their desire to learn the language and learn to work the “forked tongue” strategies (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 77). Improved language skills have the potential to reduce the women’s social isolation by involving them in the workforce and in the community. It will also give them confidence in conducting daily activities such as shopping.
5.11 “strategies used to make this new border culture”: displacement

Many of the women in this study feel displaced from Somalia, their centre, however they still identify as Somali and are grateful to Australia for giving them freedom and rights. These older women often felt remorse and regret for leaving their own country and losing their traditional ways. This feeling out of place represents the ability to hold multiple realities and multiple social perspectives while at the same time “maintaining a core centre around which revolve concrete material oppressions” (Hurtado, 2000, p. 144). I found it amazing that the study participants can be so warm towards a country yet experience so much hardship getting here and interweaving themselves into the Australian culture. This section will highlight the powerlessness faced by older Somali women during their daily activities, the racism they experience, the strategies used to make this new border culture, and how these factors influence their physical activity levels.

5.11.1 “I used to be a figure, a role model”: a second country

Some of the participants felt a strong sense of displacement and would return immediately if it were possible. To go back to their centre would mean going back to their true identity, their comfort. In their own country they felt a safety and security of being able to move about freely and be physically active with others and with their own families. Here they are “rooted and rootless...walking on masterless and ownerless land is living always anew the exiles’ condition; which is here not quite an imposition nor a choice, but a necessity” (Minh-ha, 1992, p. 335). Hawo, Fadumo (participant) and Ifrah realise that life in Australia is good but still they long to return home to their land and their people.

We have nowhere to go back to but if it’s no war back home we wouldn’t stay here, but we have no problem staying here, it’s good to live. (Hawo)

This is now our second country, we raise our children here, we have to accept that. (Ifrah)

I used to be a figure, a role model for Somalia as a teacher, but not anymore here. I am nothing here, I was independent over there but now I am dependent on someone else. (Fadumo, participant)

As discussed earlier, many women recognised that they would still be active if they lived in Somalia now, even at their current age. Most of the elderly in Somalia participate in family businesses or as teachers to the younger generation. Asha describes how she would still be active at her age.
If I was in Somalia now, I would be selling something, doing something for myself to support the family in some way. Here we are nothing. (Asha)

This would be Asha’s centre, a space where she is accepted and acknowledged. Lewis (2009) had similar findings in his study of Cambodian refugees in the US; he found there was only a marginal sense of belonging and that many felt they were aging out of place, even if they had been American residents for many years. The older Somali women present similar feelings, hoping one day to return to Somalia but knowing that it is highly unlikely. This aging out of place appears to have changed their physical activity levels because they feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their new environment and prefer to stay within the boundaries of the housing estate. As discussed in Chapter 1, Anzaldua (1987) describes this as a border, in this case a physical one, which separates the women from the host culture. Within their own culture they feel safe and secure and when they walk into another they must face restlessness and complexity.

5.11.2 “complain to who, another white person?”: powerlessness

Feelings of powerlessness were an overriding theme in the women’s everyday activities and their interactions with social structures. Many women are frightened to leave their flats as they fear for their safety and do not feel that the power structures in place will support them. All these factors reduce the women’s confidence and prevent them from getting out and being physically active. Miriam describes the issues around reporting the activities of her neighbours.

I feel this powerlessness. My neighbours they sell drugs and I have a problem with them and I went to the police, but nobody listening to me. I don't believe they are helping me because of who I am. I don't trust the police, I think the police know that they are selling drugs but they just don't do anything. (Miriam)

Many of the participants found that government processes for complaints were confusing and ineffective.

It’s housing responsibility to look after us and we’re not doing the bad things but they say if you complain they say you have rights but so do they have the rights, but they are doing the wrong thing and we are not. You complain, we have rights we know but they people you are complaining about also have rights so that confuses us. (Fadumo, participant)
Some participants complained of harassment by police and security guards and they believed they were powerless to report it, they did not know what to do: “complain to who, another white person?” (Aziza).

If we complain about a dog barking close to us and living in a small apartment and you complain they just look at you like that and they say “why, what are you complaining, this is not your country”, that’s how I feel. Even the dogs have a right and power over them. (Miriam)

This reflects the alienation the women feel from the dominant culture, feeling “blocked, immobilized, we can’t move forward, can’t move backward” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 43). These findings reflect the need to offer safe and reliable activity programs where older Somali women can feel comfortable.

5.11.3 “A simple walk we cannot do”: racism

As highlighted in Chapter 2, Muslim immigrants are subject to many forms of racism as the constant barrage of news stories about terrorism and illegal refugees permeates the media. These stories amplify the discrimination against traditional Muslim names, Muslim’s women’s dress and those with limited English. The hijab is a visual representation to the community of their religion and caused all the women to be subjected to daily racism. Noble and Poynting (2010) found that Muslims face racism at a ‘low level’ as they make their way through public spaces. Incidents of racism were considered so common they were deemed too banal to report to authorities. As Safa and Nadifa highlight, everyday life is constantly associated with racist remarks and taunts.

If we go for a job interview we are often refused because of the way we are dressed and we do not have many chances to be active, especially in the streets walking. A simple walk we cannot do. (Safa)

When I am walking they see me in hijab and yell at me from the cars, stick their finger up. I just try and ignore them, but it’s not nice. It happens every day. (Nadifa)

The coping mechanisms women use to overcome these daily acts of racism prevent them from being physically active and further displaces them. Fadumo (participant) and Asli describe how they cope.

I survive by trying to say it’s just one person who is ignorant and doesn’t give you the time and wherever you go you will find one of these persons. (Fadumo)
You cannot take revenge for someone like that who is behaving badly. (Asli)

These everyday experiences are constant reminders to Muslim Australians that they do not belong, ‘to go home’. Spaces consequently become “landscapes of social exclusion because they define who belongs and who does not” (Noble & Poynting, 2010, p. 496). They are targeted for being who they are, where they are and where they do not belong. Asha describes the displacement she feels living in Australia.

Yes, we know that that individual is bad but then we feel like what are we doing in this country? It’s our fault that we end up here, if we were in our country we would never have this problem. (Asha)

Often, like Asha, the women would blame themselves, their behaviour or who they were for the treatment they received. This represents what Pheterson (1986) labels as ‘internalised oppression’; that is “the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society” (p. 148). This is likely to result in the women feeling inferior, powerless, in fear of violence and grateful that they are allowed to stay in Australia. In many ways the racist behaviour from the dominant group builds feelings of subservience in the minds of the oppressed. Anzaldua (1987) describes this as behaviour that is unconsciously accepted; “we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong’” (p. 67). The significance of these experiences, however, underlies their feelings of national belonging and social participation. Allawia describes how sometimes she is accepted warmly by some people while others verbally abuse her.

Some people they smile at us on the tram, some look at us and say “Go back to your own country”. I look away, try not to make a fuss, make it worse. (Allawia)

Allawia has adopted the strategy of ‘letting go’ in order to protect herself and conserve her energy for other things. Weiland (2000) argues that even small acts of racism “take your energy and whatever takes your energy and attention enthrals you, enslaves you. If you dwell on this person who did you wrong, you are giving them energy which you could be using in more positive ways” (p. 76).

Evidence from VicHealth (2007) indicates that race-based discrimination against people from non-English speaking countries occurs in sporting or other large public events, in the workplace, in restaurants and shops, and in educational settings. Discrimination can provoke stress, fear and other emotions that have been found to have negative impacts on mental health and on immune, endocrine and cardiovascular systems (VicHealth, 2007).
there is a growing body of evidence that persistent low-level harassment affects the health and wellbeing of people subjected to it. It leaves physical and psychological scars which are passed on from person to person in the community and remembered by generations to come. Living in fear because one belongs to a race or a group of people who are subjected to violence and constant harassment is a major cause of [poor] mental health and low self-esteem. (VicHealth, 2007, p. 34)

Paradies (2006) also acknowledges that discrimination affects health by restricting access to resources required for health, such as employment. Fadumo (participant) reveals her frustration around trying to gain employment.

I am telling you right now that I have been discriminated by going to study and I was told on one occasion, “you are old, there are young people we can train, go and sit at home and do nothing” and that’s what I have been told so that’s what I feel, nothing but frustration. (Fadumo)

Many people changed their names and dates of celebrations in order to disassociate themselves from the September 11 terrorist attacks, Islamic extremists and other incidents that permeate the media. There appear to be border negotiations about what to disclose about dates and names and what needs to be changed. There were limits, however, to the extent of negotiations. For example, Fadumo (informant) was once asked by an employment officer to change her name in order to ‘get a decent job’. Fadumo explains the situation with frustration and anger.

I finished my diploma 1999 and I said my friend all went to the course, some only one semester and one year and they all get a job, all Aussie. I know them and straight away they get a job, they have been sent when they finish the year, they were all sent to places and he said to me, ‘maybe it’s your name, Fadumo, why don’t you call yourself Fiona and you will be surprised how many people would call you’. I said my name is Fadumo, not Fiona and he said ‘well try it and you may get more work, when people look at your resume they see Fadumo and they don’t like it’. (Fadumo)

It appears that ethnic groups such as older Somali women are subject to this kind of racism. They are required to constantly monitor their own behaviour, their names, what they wear and where they go. Frisina (2010) argues in her study of young Muslims of Italian origin and their sense of belonging in a post 9/11 setting that living their difference as a stigma causes suffering. Although they were young Muslims, they felt frustrated and disappointed in trying to negotiate everyday social spaces and in
many cases preferred to become isolated or stay with other stigmatised youth. Participants also felt that they were discriminated against, sometimes to the extent of being physically harmed, because of the colour of their skin.

They throw, they throw the eggs at me from the car. The car is running and the eggs come out and hit me but I just walk on. (Asli)

It’s because we are black and the way we dress, they say “go back” to us all the time, “go back black!” (Miriam)

Noble and Poynting (2010) looked at various theories around these continuous everyday acts of racism and concluded that “these ‘little acts’ add up to a bigger picture for those experiencing it and how ‘big’ occurrences of racism are related to the everyday and the taken-for-granted” (p. 493). These occurrences of race-based discrimination are strongly linked to ill health. In particular, there is a risk for these women of developing a range of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, along with physical health problems (Paradies, 2006; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; VicHealth, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

5.11.4 “an everyday part of older Somali women’s lives”: a summary

Despite Victoria’s relatively high level of support for cultural diversity and feelings of security with people from different cultures, the indications are that a substantial proportion of Victorians (more than one in three) do not support people from different cultural backgrounds (VicHealth, 2009). Discrimination is an everyday part of older Somali women’s lives and is often not reported or is just accepted as something that happens to Muslims in Australia. It affects their personal safety and comfort and consequently the amount of physical activity these women participate in. These conversations with the women highlight a need for community strengthening activities that involve sustained efforts to increase connectedness and active engagement amongst all members of the community. These will be further explored in Chapter 6.

5.12 “an all consuming internal whirlwind”: summary of findings and discussion

The results of this study reflect the strong feelings and inner turmoil most of the participants feel trying to exist in the multiple realities of two very different worlds. They cross Anzaldua’s borders (1987) struggling to be part of both worlds and often venturing into unknown and sometimes dangerous territory. This causes a constant state of tiredness or what Anzaldua (1987) describes as “la coatlicue...an all consuming internal whirlwind” (p. 68). This contributes to the women’s lack of physical activity.
and often their mental health. Older Somali women feel constantly aware of living amongst those who reject them. Coming together with each other alleviates a lot of these feelings and provides the women with comfort and an opportunity to embrace their culture. Physical activity may also provide an opportunity to come together as a group, to alleviate the internal suffering and borderland conflict.

The findings also show that the majority of participants were highly active in Somalia but have a sedentary lifestyle since arriving in Australia. In the past, physical activity was unstructured and entwined in gendered and cultural roles that were performed on a daily basis. Similar to the African-Americans and American Indians in the studies of Henderson (2011) and Henderson and Ainsworth (2000, 2001), most of the older Somali women believed that physical activity was good for them but most were not physically active on a regular basis.

Constraints to physical activity included a range of perceptions around the meaning behind physical activity and finding the time and space to feel safe doing exercise. There were individual perceived barriers such as physical tiredness, illnesses and ailments, as well as concern about what others in the community would think and fear of being labelled as having some kind of mental illness. Economic constraints and the stress of relatives back home prevented many women from being active. In addition, environmental concerns included safety issues, concern at being abused when wearing a hijab, a lack of public transport options, the impact of the weather, a lack of facilities and the foods available.

The majority of participants found empowerment through social networks and found that ‘coming together’ with other Somali women was a source of comfort and support. The Islamic religion and reading the Koran played a vital role in their physical and mental health and was their main source of physical activity. Some women found their days busy with caring for grandchildren and cooking for many, while others felt isolated and alone. Language was one of the major barriers to participating in physical activity, gaining employment, travelling around the city and venturing away from the estate. All the women felt that they had worked hard their whole lives in manual jobs and coming to Australia was an opportunity to rest and socialise. Many women were taking the opportunity to be sedentary and commit themselves to the Islamic religion in the hope for a better after-life. All these cultural, economic, social and gender factors have impacted on the type and amount of physical activity older Somali women participate in.

In presenting the older Somali women’s voices, perceptions and experiences, I have attempted to explain their lifestyles and consider how and where physical activity fits into their days. The next chapter brings together the key findings in relation to the research questions and outlines their implications for future policy directions.
“the fullness of exploration means a return, with a better understanding, to the point where you started”: conclusions and recommendations

The photograph in Figure 6.1 reflects my understanding that every experience is integrated with all the others, so that the “fullness of exploration means a return, with a better understanding, to the point where you started” (T.S. Eliot, 2004, p. 466). I, like Hawo and Allawia pictured in Figure 6.1, have walked the circle of the estate and I have begun a new journey of understanding myself as a researcher. In the photograph, Hawo and Allawia have their walking runners on and their traditional Somali dress. When this photograph was taken, towards the end of the project, the women asked me to wait until they reached a point where they were not identifiable. As they left to walk ahead Hawo commented: “This is nice for us, this is where we fit in”.

Figure 6.1 The constant changing of forms, a new reality
Framed by Eliot’s (2004) reflection above that the “fullness of exploration” requires a revisiting of the journey, this chapter provides a summary of the literature review, the methodology and the findings (p. 466). It also responds to the research questions, highlighting the implications of the findings for policy makers, and suggesting strategies to respond to the needs of the research group. This chapter acknowledges the strengths and limitations of the research and presents my own understandings and perspectives.

Anzaldúa’s (1987) borderland theory has been a major theoretical framework for this thesis. Figure 6.1 visually summarises Anzaldúa’s borderland, “This is her home/this thin edge of /barbwire” (p. 35). Older Somali women constantly straddle both the physical border of the estate and the psychological border between Somali culture and the dominant culture; they have created a new culture, a new way of navigating and negotiating themselves between the two.

“And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – **una cultura mestiza** – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 44).

Every day the women walk out of one culture and into another; in doing so they have created a new way of thinking and surviving, “a new mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99). These women, like Hawo and Allawia in Figure 6.1, have learnt to juggle cultures and subconsciously adjust their inner selves to create an energy that sometimes causes intense pain and anxiety. Their space is also a place of creativity, of agency and resistance, as reflected in the photo, where new mestiza energy is created.

“And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and valleys, magnetized toward the center. **Completa**” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 73)

This thesis has provided the stories around how physical activity gradually becomes intertwined into this new mestiza consciousness.

In addition, I have used Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) metaphor of the coyote to describe my role as a coyote researcher and the role of my coyote informant, Fadumo. Both of us are skilled at knowing the codes and conducts of both sides of the borders. I became fiercely protective of my research participants and of Fadumo, supporting them and providing information about surviving in the dominant culture. Similarly, Fadumo allowed me to move deeply into the Somali culture and experience and understand the context of participants’ lives. In a reciprocal relationship she guided me and provided information about how to live in Somali women’s culture and challenged my understanding of the dominant culture and of myself.
6.1 “from three perspectives”: a summary of the literature

In this thesis the literature surrounding physical activity and motherhood was reviewed from three perspectives: from the Western centre, from the non-dominant culture, and from the border dwellers.

Literature from the Western centre reflected a traditional, individualistic framework where perceptions, meanings and levels of intensity of activity reflected Western colonised thought and where marginalised groups, such as Somali women, were unable or unwilling to meet these standards. While many of the reviewed studies provided consistent evidence of barriers to and enablers of physical activity, many did not include women from CALD backgrounds or they assumed that studies conducted on white Anglo Saxon women were transferable to other cultures. Many of the reviewed studies provided evidence that participating in physical activity can provide important physical and mental health benefits; however, many studies that measure activity levels ignored cultural and gender perspectives. Early life experiences around physical activity fell under the dominant white culture’s experiences of organised sport, structured schooling and weekend leisure activities. For many older ethnic women the concept of physical activity and exercise was strongly correlated with domestic duties and caregiving, rather than with a formal structured exercise pattern.

Literature from research into the experiences of people from the non-dominant cultures examined how people position themselves and are positioned by others to understand and experience physical activity. The literature highlighted the influence that a person’s background and early life experiences can have on their past and current participation in physical activity. It was clearly stated that people over 65 years of age born in North Africa or the Middle East have the lowest physical activity participation rate, with less than one in five women from this region participating in any form of physical activity compared with three in five Australian women (ABS, 2006; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009). There was a lack of studies examining what happens when a person emigrates and the physical activities they participated in their country of origin are not available or culturally adaptable, relevant or appropriate in their new home. Studies showed that being a mother and caregiver can mean older women have many domestic duties and their opportunities to socialise and connect with the broader community are limited. Experiences of physical activity for Somali women were found to be associated with the necessity of daily survival and consist mainly of walking, domestic duties and traditional dancing. Most of the physical activity was done in conjunction with social interaction and was part of everyday communal life in Somalia. Concepts around aging
successfully as an ethnic woman took on different meanings across cultures but often focused on lifestyle, household composition and gender. Interaction with the broader community also depended on factors such as a person’s mobility, language skills, caregiving duties, experiences with racism and relationships with family and friends. Many studies reported that physical activity was not a priority for older women from ethnic communities, with family responsibilities taking priority over any leisure activities. Many believed that caregiving, housework and everyday life provided enough activity and that old age was a time for rest and being taken care of (see Hankonen et al., 2010; Perez et al., 2009; Sternfeld et al., 1999; Wilcox et al., 2000).

The literature also highlighted that the religion of Islam is interwoven into the older Somali women’s daily lives and acts as a coping mechanism when adapting to a new country and dealing with past traumas (see Ali, 1998; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Chenoweth & Burdick, 2001; Klocker, Trenerry & Webster, 2011; Orb, 2002). Religious restrictions are given such priority that they can set boundaries for possible decisions and be an important determinant of behaviour. Many women who follow the Islamic faith believe that praying, specifically the Salat, provides enough daily physical activity.

Thirdly, the literature review examined studies that surrounded a new way of thinking about how physical activity and motherhood were regarded for Somali and other migrant women who live on the borders. While some studies used cultural and gender specific definitions and measures of physical activity, most focused on scientific measurements of physical activity. Many CALD communities, including the Somali community, have their own definitions of what it means to be physically active and this influences their attitude towards physical activity in Australia. The research highlighted many factors that influence border dwellers’ perceptions of, and participation in, physical activity. These include the stress associated with the migration experience and the trauma from their past, the changing roles and move away from tradition, social connections and support, and lack of proficiency in English. The border dwellers must negotiate their border positionings to reflect their self in relation to exercise. As border dwellers, social support is an essential component of coping with living in a new country and with a traumatic past. Social connection allows women to share stories, to re-centre themselves and gather energy for life on the borderlands. It also provides a forum for them to understand and transfer health information, including information about food and physical activity.

Finally, an increasing number of studies attempted to gain an insight into how the arts impact on people’s health. Increasingly the arts are being used in community-based settings as a facilitator to work with individuals to better understand their health using creative approaches as a means of expression and to encourage verbal expression (see Greaves & Farbus, 2006; Phoenix, 2010; Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Staricoff, 2006).
On the basis of the overall literature review, it was found that older women from ethnic backgrounds were not included in most studies around physical activity and many studies lacked cultural and gender specific factors.

6.2 “coyote ethnography”: a summary of the research methodology

The research methodology used for this thesis was framed within Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote framework. Using their four characteristics I developed a ‘coyote ethnography’ that allowed me to reflect and work within a variety of different “worlds” and incorporate a combination of interpretive methods (Lugones, 1987, p. 5). This qualitative research process was primarily concerned with collecting older Somali women’s experiences around physical activity through ‘tea and talk’, observation and spending time in the community. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe this process as “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p. 10). The interpretive methods used included the following:

- Preliminary fieldwork was done through participating in community festivals, traditional celebrations and volunteering as a mentor for a DGCHS Care Connection program at the Flemington Housing Estate over six months. Observations and interpretations gained as an observer shaped my course of action and helped me design research that was culturally appropriate for older Somali women.
- Weekly art sessions provided a forum to ask questions about the women’s physical activity levels both in Australia and in Somalia. Those women who did not want to be part of the arts activities were also included in the conversations and their narratives were collected.
- Each week conversations were transcribed and questions used to initiate conversations about feelings and experiences associated with all aspects of physical activity. Some women preferred to discuss these experiences outside of the group, so these were followed up in their own homes with the informant and myself. The conversations allowed for a broad depth of responses and allowed women to relay their experiences.
- During the 18-month field analysis, field notes were taken and used to supplement the data analysis to provide context and a greater depth of understanding for the reader. The field notes also provided me with an outlet for feelings and emotions after hearing some very confronting conversations. Hopefully, they also provide the reader with a sense of attachment to the women and the stories they tell.
Fadumo, Louise and I became coyotes, guiding others through different worlds, transforming us to cross borders and understand the context of each other’s lives. We developed trust and understanding (“in secreto”) of the participants’ border positionings and they trusted us to listen to them and hear their perspectives around physical activity and motherhood (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). As coyote researchers we were able to understand the codes (“los codigos”) and help guide the participants between life on the margins and the dominant culture (Valadez and Elsbree, 2005, p.176). We were also able to read situations quickly, (“La facultad”) and understand the realities that these participants were living (p. 176). Finally as coyotes we expressed a “sincere compromiso commitment” to the women having a voice and reaching a destination that will benefit them (Valadez & Elsbree, 2005, p. 176). I extended the coyote framework to include issues of protection and trust around the researcher and the effects of research on the coyote’s position within her own community. As a coyote researcher, I experienced a lack of trust in my own strengths and capabilities. This questioning adds another dimension to the coyote framework, highlighting the confidence of the coyote as an issue and the displacement within the dominant world, being on the borders of her own culture.

6.3 “a dual identity”: a summary of the findings

This research has highlighted the important influences on older Somali women’s participation in physical activity, which include:

- the migration experience
- the influence of culture and religion
- expectations of motherhood
- climate, food and health
- language and life.

6.3.1 “creating a new story”: the migration experience

Throughout the research, a number of Western assumptions and predictors of physical activity participation amongst older white women emerged, which do not apply to older Somali women. Many of the Somali women participating in this study experienced turmoil and unrest in their home country. Some were subjected to horrific events, others were in fairly good health when they arrived here. However, as Caperchione et al.’s (2009) literature review led them to conclude, these ‘healthy’ conditions erode over time. This is often due to the adoption of detrimental Western-style behaviours. For the participants in this study, this has been a major factor with
many gaining weight and, as a result, experiencing health problems since moving to 
Australia. All the women have had to create a new culture, a new story to explain how 
they have navigated and negotiated the new Western culture yet remain “tightly 
wrapped in the husks of her own culture” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 103). This has been 
shown in their rejecting a Western-style formal exercise regime and wanting to 
incorporate physical activity into social activities, housework, caregiving and daily 
chores.

6.3.2 “the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave”: the influence of culture

Many participants feel overwhelmed with the enormity of thinking about 
relatives back home. Anzaldua (1987) described this as intense energy working in the 
subconscious to continually create a new “mythos – that is a change in the way we 
perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (p. 102). 
Straddling the borders between what is happening in the Somali homeland and living 
in Australia causes constant angst, leaving the women with little energy to be 
physically active. Coming together as a group in a social setting, specifically with 
women from their clan, is one of the many coping strategies used by the women to 
maintain some normality in their lives. It provides an opportunity to talk about their 
thoughts and feelings in an intimate environment where women’s business can be 
discussed. It also holds their centre, their inner core which strengthens their 
spirituality and resilience to merge with the dominant culture. Reminiscing about old 
times, when Somalia was at peace, is a source of comfort and reminds them that there 
were good times in their country. These gatherings are often combined with 
traditional food and dancing which provides them with vital physical activity and social 
structure. They cling to the husks of their culture in order to survive the cross roads, to 
continually cross the borders (Anzaldua, 1987).

6.3.3 “holding on tight to the earth”: the influence of religion

The Islamic religion and the teachings of the Koran are an integral part of older 
Somali women’s lives. Islam provides an important support when women from 
Somalia living in Melbourne are faced with anxiety, sadness, loneliness and depression. 
It gives meaning to their lives and helps them cope with distressing events. The Islamic 
religion also provides a way of holding on “tight to the earth”, of maintaining their 
inner beliefs and gathering strength to develop this new mestiza consciousness 
(Anzaldua, 1987, p 103). The Salat – the prayer that is performed five times daily – 
provides vital physical activity and mental relaxation while following the Islamic 
teachings. The visual dress of veiling inhibits women from walking the streets as 
activity and further isolates them in their homes for fear of being attacked. They have 
come to accept that they are socially restricted to certain places and the freedoms
some spaces hold. They have learnt the codes, knowing where they can cross the borders safely and where they should maintain their distance. A border is a dividing line that defines the places that are safe and unsafe and can distinguish the women from the Western dominant culture. This dominates everyday activities like shopping, exercising and using public transport, and limits their participation in physical activity. The women have discovered that they “can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” as “rigidity means death” and so by remaining on the border they have to be flexible, “to stretch their psyche horizontally and vertically” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 101).

6.3.4 “role of humility and selflessness”: expectations of motherhood

Despite older Somali women having large families, they were not exposed to diverse opportunities in activity and family size did not positively influence participation in physical activities. Cultural perceptions around what it means to be a mother or caregiver differ greatly in Somali culture, but they do not include participating in formal physical activity. Motherhood is an ongoing role of humility and selflessness and is highly respected by others in the community. It is at the core of older Somali women’s lives and contributes to the collective nature of Somali culture. This role is demanding physically and mentally and takes priority over individualistic pursuits such as physical activity. Blending the role of motherhood into Western culture is tiring and mentally exhausting as women cross the psychological borders of trying to exist in an “alien culture” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 104).

Collective cultures like the Somali culture rely largely on social relationships, identifying with a group, experiencing a shared way of life and having shared goals and values. Activities are done as a family with an extended network of relatives and each person is committed to a gender role. This invigorates their “mestiza heart” and enriches their ancestral roots (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 45). Older Somali women carry responsibility for traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and caring for others. There is little time to focus on themselves and if they were active in ways that were not involved in their daily duties, this would be viewed by others as neglecting their families. Being seen outdoors being physically active for no particular reason would initiate perceptions that they were in a fragile mental state. Older Somali women have also been given the social role of ‘resting’ after a long life of hard manual labour, trauma from war and refugee camps; they prefer to spend their older years talking, socialising and eating with friends. Anzaldua (1987) describes this role of rest as a result of being battered and bruised from the psychological conflict of their past, and of not identifying with Somali culture and not being part of the dominant culture. The women need to wait until they have gathered strength and recovered, to ‘let go’ and protect themselves.
Despite the literature highlighting that physical activity in the early years of life is a strong determinant of an active lifestyle in older years, this was not the case for older Somali women. They were very active domestically and as a necessity in life within their own country, however, these activities could not be transferred to Australia. They had very little experience of formal structured exercise upon which to draw and they struggled to find activities that were culturally appropriate. The women suffer a ‘dual identity’, not being able to incorporate physical activity into their traditional ways due to Western discourses and not identifying with formal concepts of exercise. This conflict of cultures requires navigation and every step forward is a crossing between cultures, trying to make sense of the border-dwelling life.

6.3.5 “the food mestizas”: climate, food and health

Melbourne’s changing climate and cold winters were also considered a barrier to participating in physical activity. The weather in Somalia was more consistent and the heat made the women sweat, a process they believed cleansed their bodies and kept their weight down. In Australia, older Somali women had become ‘food mestizas’, bringing together traditional foods and the new, ‘different’ foods of the dominant culture. They were concerned about how the food is grown here and how this has affected their health and wellbeing. They were unsure how to cook and eat certain foods and showed a deep sense of sorrow about how much food is wasted. Pre-migration food patterns dictate when and how food is eaten and reflect the use of foods as traditional remedies to cure illnesses and promote health. By negotiating new foods in Australia and blending them on the boundaries with traditional Somali food, the women created a new border food that brings them and their families together. Many of the participants suffered from non-communicable diseases, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol. They found it difficult to understand what these conditions mean and why they had developed them. Western discourses around health and illness were confusing and overwhelming as most women had never had any illnesses like this in Somalia. Traditionally, women in Somalia aged and then died, unaware of whether they suffered any diseases or not. Older Somali women find the assumptions made by Western culture of awareness of a physically active lifestyle and healthy eating difficult to understand and adopt. Western physical activities, like formal exercise sessions, are not transferable to older Somali women. Their experiences are held deeply in their social, cultural and contextual environments and their culture has provided different early life physical activity and eating experiences. The mixture of messages from the dominant culture and from their culture cause confusion and unrest as the women learn how to mesh their past physical activity and eating experiences with a new formalised Western culture.
6.3.6 “switching of language codes”: language and life

In Australia, the Somali women have combined their traditional Somali language with English to create a new language that helps them navigate and negotiate border life. They can use their ‘practised’ English from the classes they attend when they are with the whites and then combine this with their Somali language for their children and grandchildren. When they are with each other the traditional Somali language is often combined with Arabic or Italian, depending on which area the women are from. Everyday life requires them to perform this switching of the language codes and some women are confident at doing it while others are not. Those women who are not strong navigators of language crossings are less confident in getting out and doing daily activities, and these women did much less incidental physical activity.

Powerlessness was an overriding theme in the women’s everyday activities and interactions with social structures. Participants complained of harassment by authorities and a lack of justice when it came to complaining about an issue with housing or immigration. Every day there was racist abuse in public spaces that was demeaning, insulting and a source of stress and fear. This highlights Anzaldua’s ‘los intersticios’, that space in which the women exist between the different worlds they inhabit; their life in the borderlands where “the woman of colour does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 42). Often petrified, she cannot respond in an unknown and often dangerous territory and so she retreats and tries to remain centred, holding onto the ancestral roots that she knows. This further isolated the women. In response, they avoided everyday activities such as shopping alone or taking public transport to meet friends and relatives.

Based on the findings of the research, these are the major factors that have affected the amount of physical activity older Somali women participate in. The future belongs to the new mestiza, “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms” and creating a new interwoven understanding of physical activity for older Somali women (Anzaldua, 1987, p.102).

6.4 “need to be culturally sensitive”: recommendations in response to research objectives

This study has clearly illustrated and argued that we must not adopt a ‘one size fits all approach’ to engaging women from ethnic backgrounds in physical activity. Also, we cannot simply transfer activities from English-speaking communities to newly arrived communities. This has proven to be problematic and unsuccessful as ethnic
groups have different needs and expectations (CEH, 2006). In addition, just writing
information in different languages is not enough to motivate CALD communities to
exercise (CEH, 2006). Ultimately, better communication techniques are required to
promote and motivate people to participate in physical activities.

The main finding of this research is that physical activity programs and
communication about physical activity need to be culturally sensitive, displaying a
caring attitude while encouraging open communication. The study findings also
demonstrate the relevance of participants’ experiences and the social, religious and
cultural influences on how they understand and view physical activity and incorporate
it into their daily lives.

This section summarises the study findings in relation to each of the research
objectives, as stated in Chapter 1, section 1.3.

**Objective 1: To describe what the term ‘physical activity’ represents for older women
from Somalia and if it fits into the National Physical Activity Guidelines (Department
of Health and Aging, 2010).**

Some major findings from this study relate to the terminology and Western
dominant discourses associated with ‘physical activity’. Older Somali women’s physical
activity is clearly intertwined into their gender role as a mother and provider and, as a
consequence, is a part of their normal daily activity of housework and caring for
others. Many women will not participate in any activity unless it has a purpose as
previously, in their country of origin, activity was centred on gathering food and caring
for the family.

According to the Australian National Physical Activity Guidelines (Department
of Health and Aging, 2010), older people should be active in as many ways as possible,
doing a range of physical activities that incorporate fitness, strength, balance and
flexibility. They should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical
activity on most, preferably all, days. The findings clearly show that older Somali
women are not meeting these guidelines and that various cultural, social and gender
specific roles prevent them from doing so. Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework
has highlighted how these roles are difficult to fulfil living in a place occupied by more
than one culture. It has also provided a theoretical way of addressing these difficulties
and developing understandings of how they should be approached.

The absence of clearly defined concepts around physical activity has been
highlighted by researchers who state an urgent need for better measurement of
physical activity at all levels of research (Bauman et al., 2002; Brown et al., 1999;
Dishman et al., 1985). Western concepts of physical activity and exercise are not
transferable to older Somali women’s lives and need to be made culturally adjustable.
to different communities. The literature suggests that family and caregiving duties should be measured as part of the daily activity levels of older Somali women. The following factors need to be recognised when measuring how much physical activity older Somali women are involved in.

- Improving guidelines of what constitutes ‘physical activity’ and ‘exercise’ within ethnic and migrant minority communities. As these concepts can vary across cultures, the guidelines need to understand, incorporate and reflect cultural values and beliefs.

- Designing physical activity opportunities to fit in with everyday activities so that older Somali women can easily participate. An education program that takes time to transfer this knowledge would help guide and inform the women on creating these opportunities.

**Objective 2: To examine why activity diminishes with advancing age in refugee and immigrant women and what strategies can be implemented to minimise this decline.**

The findings highlight several reasons why activity diminishes with age amongst older Somali women. Firstly, it was recognised that older Somali women have other major concerns, such as housing issues, education commitments, and learning English, all of which required a great deal of their time and focus. The trauma and conflict that many women experienced in Somalia has a major impact on their energy and leaves them with little motivation to increase their exercise levels. In addition, living in the space between two cultures creates an inner struggle to continually face the challenges of the dominant culture, adapt and merge.

Traditional roles for older women and notions of successful aging are particularly hard to challenge and overcome (Wray 2003; 2007). There is a strong belief among Somali women that entering old age offers them the opportunity to rest and relax after a lifetime of hard work and manual labour; so they hold little interest in participating in physical activity. Any practice or policy to establish and promote physical activity participation for older Somali women needs to clearly identify stress as a major barrier. In their daily struggle to continually cross the borders, the women want to retreat to their Somali culture, to socialise with others within their community, to express their worries, to centre themselves and to provide support for other women in the same situation. Aging is associated with the opportunity to sit, eat and communicate with family and friends. This is what helps them survive; “it makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 103). This sedentary lifestyle is also a reward for a lifetime of caring for others and an opportunity to pass on Somali traditions to younger generations.
Older Somali women have cultural views about aging that do not include formal exercise. Activity programs or promotions need to recognise this and consider innovative ways to get older women active, or combine activity with other cultural practices. Strategies that need to be implemented to minimise their decline in activity include:

- Establishing specific cultural centres that would draw older Somali women who would not otherwise be involved in any form of physical or social activity.
- Education surrounding the benefits of physical activity and improved mental health would assist women to make better choices about being involved in activity. Long-term recommendations should work towards empowering the women to come together and placing them at the centre of program development that addresses both the physical and mental aspects of their health.
- Combining physical activity with social events as a motivator to increase exercise levels. Coming together and talking is an important aspect of coping with aging and living in a dominant culture, so events that were centred around this would encourage older women to attend.
- Providing child care as the role of women as carers means that physical activity is not a priority. Services that provide child care may encourage women to participate in activities.

Objective 3: To examine whether the type of physical activity chosen in later years is influenced by factors including exercise history, cultural and social issues (for example, religious beliefs, gender roles, perceptions of leisure, body image), socioeconomic level and previous education.

The findings from this study clearly demonstrate that cultural and social issues are central factors that influence older Somali women’s participation in physical activity. The study participants confirmed that they did not come from a ‘sporty culture’ and could not identify themselves as ‘exercisers’. This Western concept of ‘exerciser’ was confusing and not applicable to a Somali woman’s life. Their exercise experiences were around walking, traditional Somali dancing and manual labour, which provided an enormous amount of incidental activity in their own country. However, in Australia they have lost this need to be physically active. Labour-saving devices and the lack of social connectivity mean less walking to visit other Somali families. Participation in physical activities in one country does not automatically apply in the new country, with many activities practised in Somalia not culturally applicable to an Australian way of life. Exercise programs must also recognise the physical activity skills of participants, for example, older Somali women are unlikely to join a bike riding program as they have no life experience with bikes.
The Islamic religion and reading the Koran is central to older Somali women’s lives and contributes to their physical activity. The Salat is an important physical and mental routine that is essential for their wellbeing. It carries a sense of home and familiarity that provides comfort and guidance in the day-to-day lives of the participants. Following their religious guidelines requires women to exercise in women-only groups where they cannot be seen by men. There is a lack of female-only facilities, which prevents older Somali women from participating in physical activity. Even in facilities that do offer women-only sessions, older Somali women are concerned about the cameras that are placed throughout centres and who is watching them.

Gender roles have a major influence on the values and meanings associated with physical activity. Physical activity was highlighted as something outside family duties which was not given a priority. The findings reflect that the experience of leisure is associated with spending time with family and friends eating, talking and socialising. Leisure is considered a time for rest and relaxation not for physical exertion. The women’s priority was directed at improving their roles within the context of family, which was far more important than individualistic gain. As has been reviewed and highlighted in the literature review, Renzaho et al. (2008) emphasised the need for understanding the process of migrating to a new country, including gender roles, when targeting exercise habits and the acceptance of larger body sizes. It appears that Somali women have a different health belief model to the Western model and research into this would support improved knowledge of this particular group’s understanding of health and wellbeing. This may provide another example of how the women have merged their health and wellbeing behaviours into Western models of health. This thesis has established the methodological structure that would be beneficial in undertaking future study into migrant groups various health belief models.

The findings are consistent with the literature that the cost of physical activities prevents older Somali women from taking part. All the women are from low socioeconomic circumstances and struggle to maintain their lifestyle on minimum Centrelink payments. Due to language problems none of the women were employed in formal paid work outside the home, which further limited their financial positions. The majority of women believed that lack of money was a major constraint to their leisure and to the purchasing of organic food. Many of the women received minimal education in Somalia and were unaware of the non-communicable diseases that many now suffer in Australia, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Women recognised that they had physically changed since arriving in Australia and were aware that this was due to an inactive lifestyle and their diet. However, the diseases they are experiencing now were foreign to them and prevented them from exercising or
exerting themselves for fear of worsening existing health conditions. Given the issues that influence participation in physical activity, the following strategies are recommended:

- Promoting the commitment to women-only sessions and holding ‘come and try’ days with bilingual community workers to ensure women feel safe when exercising. In addition, many older Somali women feel uncomfortable with sporting attire and prefer to wear traditional Somali dresses and loose hijabs when exercising. This needs to be accommodated.
- Structuring physical activity programs around certain times of the day, specifically during the daylight hours, and recognising that exercise is restricted during religious festivals and prayer times.
- Integrating exercise into the daily routines of older Somali women could move them closer to exercise initiation. Health promotion strategies that use community members via conversations may be effective in delivering messages of exercise initiatives.
- Combining physical activity with family obligations and celebrations to encourage the women to be physically active while maintaining family unity.
- Promoting physical activity as a health benefit rather than contributing to weight loss, allowing traditional body shapes to be maintained.
- Minimising the cost of physical activity programs to allow women to participate.
- Educating women around ‘exercise feelings’ and how these are managed in relation to health conditions. This would be beneficial for older Somali women who are starting to consider exercise.
- It would be beneficial for physical activity and social inclusion programs to include occupational training and possibly employment opportunities, which would improve the socioeconomic status of the women as well as their confidence to participate in everyday activities.

Objective 4: To examine the role of motherhood/caregiving in determining exercise participation in older Somali women living in Melbourne.

The present research indicates that the participants’ role of motherhood/caregiving is contextual, complex and diverse. This group of women specifically identified that they had less time for physical activity due to cultural and gender norms that required them to do the bulk of domestic duties, including cooking, cleaning and child care. There were, however, conflicting views about relaxing and resting in old age and the commitments required by family members to look after young children. Some participants reflected that older age was a time of rest and they
were committed to a sedentary lifestyle while others felt that they had little time to exercise due to many caring commitments. In Somalia, a group of grandmothers would look after many children over large areas of land. In Australia, many families are living in cramped conditions and they have nowhere to go to talk to other women or be involved in traditional community activities; as a result they feel lonely and isolated. The following is a strategy that needs to be adopted, which recognises the importance of caregiving and motherhood.

- Establishing a centre specifically for Somali women where they can go and perform traditional activities such as dancing or sewing, while the children are cared for or are welcome to play safely. This would allow activities to run in women-only groups and work in conjunction with social activities. It would also create an opportunity where women could come together to discuss and establish this ‘mestiza consciousness’; a way of juggling and bringing together the cultures that they live in. These centres could act as an important health resource and a major avenue to social integration.

Objective 5: To discover if social support is important in older refugee and immigrant women’s development of exercise-based strategies for regular participation.

The research findings in the present thesis are consistent with Stewart et al. (2008) and McMichael and Manderson (2004), whose studies found that participants rely heavily on social networks of family members, friends and neighbours for support. Coming together and talking to each other is one of the many ways women cope with the transition to a new country and with the trauma they may have experienced. Having places to go outside their homes, away from the estate, where they can be outside and still talk and feel secure would help increase their physical activity levels while maintaining their connections with others. It would reinforce their mestiza status, reminding them of their cultural roots and providing the strength to move forward in everyday life. In addition, coming together within the complex structure of one’s clan is an important part of being socially supported.

It is during these social gatherings that health information may be transferred through conversation and gossip. This is a legitimate form of communication and promoting physical activity through these social gatherings may allow the messages about the benefits of activity and available programs and services to reach inactive older participants. The lack of connection with the local community and the lack of presence of older Somali women at exercise facilities all contribute to low physical activity levels. The following strategies are recommended to increase participation:

- Developing physical activity programs that recognise the importance and role of clan social structures and accommodate or provide a social or family-friendly setting.
• Using respected gatekeepers to provide information around physical activity and health as they can guide and answer questions in a culturally sensitive way.
• Encouraging these gatekeepers to use local facilities to motivate and engage others to be involved.
• Using coyotes who are able to negotiate and navigate older Somali women through culturally appropriate health information. These coyotes must be able to be part of both the dominant culture and the Somali culture and explain the processes and social structures in each.
• Designing and delivering program messages that are culturally specific to older Somali women and ensuring that exercise programs are not ‘add-ons’ to existing mainstream activities.

Objective 6: To investigate how social and cultural contexts affect physical activity participation, exposure, norms and beliefs.

This study used Anzaldua’s (1987) borderland framework when exploring the social and cultural contexts of older Somali women’s lives. The women constantly cross psychological and physical borders to negotiate their way through the dominant culture’s norms and beliefs. They hold tightly to their religion, their cultural heritage and their personal history and face the border life with courage and dignity. Older Somali women would benefit from combining physical activity with religious teachings in women-only groups. These groups could provide spiritual comfort, social connectedness and physical activity for even the oldest women. The women in this study felt safe and secure cocooned within the estate borders and were reluctant to travel outside for fear of discrimination and abuse, as presented at the beginning of this chapter in Figure 6.1, where Hawo and Allawia feel comfortable walking the estate’s boundaries. This constant crossing of borders affects their wellbeing, their health and their willingness to participate in any activity that exposes them to the community. Travelling on the border and living in “the consuming internal whirlwind” of racism adds to established evidence that race-based discrimination against people from non-English speaking countries occurs in daily settings and is strongly linked to ill health (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 68; Mir & Sheikh, 2010; Noble & Poynting, 2010; Paradies et al., 2009; VicHealth, 2009).

This thesis highlighted a lack of safe areas to exercise as well as unsafe and insufficient transport to access physical activity services and facilities in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Effective strategies to overcome this include:

• Council and urban planners could choose to design neighbourhoods that are more walk-able, with both transportation and a variety of recreation destinations (Berke et al., 2007).
• Religious beliefs should become part of determining culturally appropriate exercise programs that include having access to places to pray, including large, family orientated recreational facilities as well as gender segregation for some activities.
• Providing safe exercise options for women wearing a hijab, such as all-women walking groups, easy access to walking paths and good lighting, all of which make women feel comfortable when exercising.
• Providing low cost public transport and/or courtesy bus services to encourage women to participate by offering safe, inexpensive and reliable transport.

Within the Somali community, exercising with ‘no purpose’ would indicate to others that the person was suffering from a mental condition, such as depression, and that person may be stigmatised as a result.

Two effective strategies that address these issues include:

• Promoting awareness around the role of physical activity in maintaining mental as well as physical health.
• Developing an education program that offers information around the benefits of physical activity and mental health. This would have to be done sensitively and incorporated into the strong cultural association that exists in the Somali community that exercising without a purpose is linked to a deterioration in mental health.

6.5 “a deep cultural context”: strengths and limitations of the research

The research has both strengths and limitations. A major strength was the richness of the data. Each conversation with the women exposed layers of meanings through their talk, gestures and behaviours. Although qualitative research with small sample cases prevents conclusions being drawn regarding the wider population of older Somali women in Melbourne, elsewhere in Australia or internationally, it does provide for information-rich themes and these have been presented throughout this thesis. The participants’ stories reflected their experiences around physical activity, along with their migration experience, their life in Somalia and their new life in Melbourne. The participants described in detail their border lives, their feelings about living in a white Western culture and the borders they have to cross each day. While the accounts of the participants may differ from those that would be obtained by being interviewed by a trusted Somali community member or a representative from DGCHS, they are still valid stories that reveal the realities of their lives and the situations and contexts in which they live. The stories would also be different if the women were from different clans and from different areas of Melbourne.
Another major strength of this research is that it offers new information about older Somali women who live on the Flemington Housing Estate in Melbourne and who attempt to be physically active in a culturally and socially defined Western culture. The information and the way it is presented through participant photographs and text contributes to a real understanding of what it’s like to be a refugee establishing oneself in a different culture. The photographs provide a deep cultural context that represents the women’s centre through their dress, their hennaed hands and their jewellery, and recognises the complex, multilayered aspects of the women’s lives. The daily conversations with participants and community workers and the field notes developed from these provide strong material with which to understand the contextual Somali environment. It also offers possibilities for how those understandings might be communicated and researched in the future.

A limitation discussed in Chapter 3 relates to the cross-cultural nature of the research and the issues of insider/outsider, my lack of Somali language, and the challenges of entering a small marginalised community to conduct research. A particular limitation was the variable nature of the women coming to the group, which meant that I was unable to follow-up on the stories of some participants or further develop themes around their physical activity. I also acknowledge that there will always be translation issues, despite my informant’s incredible attention to detail and our discussions after every session to clarify concepts. Small et al. (1999) concluded that the process behind translation and back translation is not simple and that it needs further exploration, advice and comments, particularly when translating meanings despite lengthy discussions between the researcher and the translator. Accuracy of information may be improved by having more than one translator and being mindful of the assumptions and biases one carries into the field. Another limitation was the lack of conversation around the women’s sexuality and their experiences associated with FGM. Although I had thought about these issues I felt that as a white researcher they were beyond my limits as the women seemed cautious about addressing them with me.

Qualitative researchers hear that their emotions can hinder good research in the same way Kleinman and Kopp (1993) expressed their fears that “quantitative sociologists will find out the truth – that our work is subjective as they suspected” (p. 3). The emotional and self-reflective nature of this research may be seen by some as a limitation, as my passion for its completion was due to the feelings of closeness I had developed with the participants, Fadumo and Louise, and my own personal beliefs in social justice. However, the closeness and passion may also be seen as strengths as they may have meant that the participants were more authentic in their answers and more enthusiastic about participating in the study. This study was not an academic pursuit to gain a career at a university; my passion grew from helping others and wanting to give a community a voice.
Another major strength in the methodology was the extension of Valadez and Elsbree’s (2005) coyote framework to consider the situation where the coyote researcher experiences a lack of trust from others within her own culture and within herself. As discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.1.6, I experienced vulnerability and distress in completing the research and I questioned my own ability and perspective. Coyote researchers need protection themselves; perhaps this could come from a supportive independent group that allows coyotes to express their insecurities and be reassured and perhaps even guided in their interactions with all those involved in the project.

Other strengths reflected in Chapter 3 Methodology include the effective communication with participants using an art-based process that brought women together to discuss physical activity in a culturally appropriate way. As Eakin (2003) suggests, arts allow participants to unlock and play back their feelings about themselves and their health, along with creating lasting pieces of work. The strong themes that emerged (discussed in Chapter 5) allowed me to provide recommendations for older Somali women’s future physical activity requirements.

6.6 “a new respect and understanding”: a part of something bigger

I was asked once by Professor Bob Pease, a lecturer and researcher at Deakin University, whether I had ever taken the whiteness test, an online test to register how white a person really is. The test result said that I was ‘gleaming white’, a white middle class woman who represented the essence of the dominant culture. This was the beginning of my passionate sociological project and now that the project draws to an end I think I am more mocha than white, a blended mix of milk white and chocolate, a border colour perhaps. This sociological project has provided a sharp and deep inner experience that has broadened my experiences of seeing myself not as individualistic but as part of something bigger. It has been a passionate affair for both my mind and my body that I do not really ever want to finish. My hope is to further work with the older Somali women in future community projects to increase their physical activity levels, perhaps advising local governments about strategies and guidelines that would enhance this. I would also like to be able to transfer these research skills to other small marginalised communities and conduct further research in other health-related topics.

Game and Metcalfe (1996) suggest that passion in sociology allows for “an open, playful, mutual relation” in which I have been intertwined with the Somali women (p. 5). It “promises to enrich life” which it has done, making me acknowledge my whiteness and gain a new understanding of those who migrate to this country.
Hawo (as shown in Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2) reminded me that these women hold the unique ability to develop powerful strategies to live on the border, to navigate physical activity within their own framework, one that works for Hawo and her family.

First when I came to this country my son came long time ago and he says to me come out of the house mummy walk like Chinese womans, they doing, they doing something. I say am I crazy what I am just walking with no purpose why don’t you leave me alone I’m not just walking for no purpose. Now I am getting used to it all here, I just realise we need that so I am coming now I am sitting here and trying to do some. (Hawo)

Figure 6.2 of Hawo and Asli reveals the negotiation of traditional Somali ways of doing exercise with the dominant white culture, keeping their centre but always navigating the border. As I move within my suburb and see the older ladies walking the back streets of Flemington or at the local post office, I hold a new respect and understanding for their skills and talents at living amongst the dominant culture.

*Figure 6.2 Hawo (left) and Asli (right) ‘trying to do some’*
Epilogue – “I will always have my Georgia”

A knock at the door reveals Fadumo, papers in hand, with requests for help. I know the format and I now know all the forms that she holds. We sit over coffee in my house as I fill out over 200 questions for her new Centrelink payments and it overwhelms me that others who are refugees manage to fill these out. I tell Fadumo in all my years I have never had to fill out such extensive forms and if I did I would have an accountant who did it for me. We laugh at my whiteness and privileged life and she says, “When I look at these forms to fill out I do not worry either as I will always have my Georgia to help me”.

This story is repeated weekly as my coyote life continues in the Somali culture. After the official ‘closure’ of the project, I still attend the group on a weekly basis with Fadumo and we organise excursions to fruit and vegetable markets, take the women to visit the sick or just chat with coffee. Fadumo has had another baby and returned to work part time at DGCHS which has now changed the format of the women gathering once a week to ‘individual consultations’. When they asked the group, to discuss the ‘individualising’ of the program I actually got a call from Miriam (one of the participants) to ask if I could come and help them in their protest as Fadumo was away on maternity leave. On arrival to the meeting a DGCHS representative immediately asked how I knew that the meeting was on and Miriam, whose English is one of the best in the group immediately answered that she had asked me to attend. All the women insisted that they would prefer they meet once a week but the reply was that funding cuts and the need for ‘individual goals and dreams’ was to be pursued. I was saddened that everything about the collective culture of Somalia was being ignored and the white process of ‘fitting in with us’ still dominates organisations that are supposedly there to help CALD communities.

Fadumo must now individually meet with the women to assess their ‘health goals and objectives’ by filling out surveys and graphing their answers. Fadumo still arranges the group to get together on a casual basis as this is what they would prefer and I help her fill out these culturally inappropriate surveys. I continue to be frustrated at how organisations apply white structures and formats to communities like Somali and Fadumo and I are always trying to interweave new ways into these. I still love to attend festivals, celebrations and dinners at women’s houses and Fadumo and I remain steadfast friends. She will call me on many occasions about a family that is newly arrived or experiencing hardship and I have found a group of friends linked to a local church that, within hours, supplies food, personal products and children’s clothes to them. I have also linked with a local food bank and supply many families at the estate with basic products to help them. I enter the car park with my car full of groceries and women come out of their flats with plastic bags ready to fill them. I have
found immense pleasure in doing this and will continue this coyote behaviour in the future.

DGCHS did not continue with the art-based program despite its success and overwhelming approval from all the women involved. I have been immensely disappointed that so much work went into establishing a successful program without any recognition or approval from the stakeholder. In fact they are hesitant to get me involved in anything further as they know I will defend the women to the end and not just accept band aid solutions.

During the time I was doing this study DGCHS ran an older Italian women's group in a nearby suburb and so we used to meet and combine this group with the older Somali women's group. This was done out of some research by Fadumo and myself as many of the participants could speak Italian because in the early 1940s Italy occupied Somalia. It was also an opportunity to link with another researcher, Vivian Gerrand from The University of Melbourne, who is about to submit her PhD thesis, 'Possible Spaces: Representations of Somali Belonging in Italy and Australia'. All of us have combined to create new possibilities for research and to establish new networks for the women, growing and extending the borderlands to embrace new members. The women came together once a term at a local community kitchen and we took turns in cooking traditional food and sharing stories about the good times in their country of origin. It was always a frantic mix of English, Somali and Italian and a wonderful experience of older women coming together and sharing their lives. This along with the older Somali women's group has been disbanded by DGCHS and placed under another program but they are still able to meet weekly on their own.

My house has been rebuilt and so I combined choosing tiles, kitchen sinks and door knobs with transcribing, editing and writing endless drafts. The journey has been turbulent at times trying to juggle teenagers, insurances, moving house a number of times and the rebuilding process. The writing process has swung from being a joy to hating every word I type but I have friends and family who in four years have only ever provided enthusiasm and amazing guidance.

The final section of T.S Eliot’s poem ‘Little Gidding’ develops the idea that “every experience is integrated with all the others, so that the fullness of exploration means a return, with better understanding, to the point where you started”"; and this is where I am today, fully interwoven along with my children to a better understanding of where they have always been (Spears Brooker, 2004, p. 466). The best thing about this research for me was opening my eyes to the privileged life that I live and sharing some of that privilege with those less fortunate, and the worst part has been the systemic discrimination against Muslim women not only within my own community but amongst my extended family and friends. I will continue to be the coyote who guides and crosses borders working with and helping those who need it most.
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Appendix 1 National Physical Activity Guidelines for Older Australians

Recommendations on physical activity for health for older Australians

These recommendations were developed in reference to the existing National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults published by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, namely:

1. Think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience,
2. Be active every day in as many ways as you can,
3. Put together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days,
4. If you can, also enjoy some regular, vigorous activity for extra health and fitness.

The present recommendations are designed to build upon the existing guidelines, by providing advice developed specifically for older Australians. Although the recommendations may be manifested in different ways, according to specific populations or settings, these recommendations apply to older people across all levels of health and ability, and have application for older people living at home or in residential care.

Information supporting the recommendations is available in the National Physical Activity for Older Australians Discussion Document.

Definitions

Older people: For the purposes of this document the term “older people” primarily refers to those aged over 65 years, and over 55 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It is recognised that there are difficulties in ascribing a particular chronological age to define “older people”, and that there is wide variability in health status, function and wellbeing at any age. These recommendations may also have applicability for other age groups, for example, younger people with disabilities.

Physical activity: ‘Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure and produces progressive health benefits’ (National Institute of Health Consensus Conference Statement, 1996). Physical activity includes everyday activities like walking to the shop or gardening through to a wide range of organised activities, such as exercise classes.

Moderate level physical activities: Physical activity at a level that causes your heart to beat faster and some shortness of breath, but that you can still talk comfortably while doing (Glasgow et al, 2005).

Vigorous physical activities: Physical activity at a level that causes your heart to beat a lot faster and shortness of breath that makes talking difficult between deep breaths (Glasgow et al, 2005).

General advice when performing physical activities

- Consider physical activities as opportunities for fun with a partner, friends or family members.
- Eating healthy nutritious food in conjunction with being physically active will help to obtain the best health outcomes.
- Drink water during and after physical activity to avoid dehydration.
- A short period of warm up exercises/muscle stretching at the start and at the end of physical activity will help the body adjust to starting or finishing activities that place a physical demand on the body.
- Include some outdoors physical activity, although where possible keep this to a minimum in the hottest part of the day.
- Use appropriate safety and protection equipment to maximise safety and minimise risk of injury during physical activity, for example, use supportive footwear for walking, and a helmet for bicycle riding.
Recommendations on physical activity for health for older Australians

Recommendation 1
Older people should do some form of physical activity, no matter what their age, weight, health problems or abilities.

Many improved health and well-being outcomes have been shown to occur with regular physical activity. These include helping to:
- maintain or improve physical function and independent living;
- improve social interactions, quality of life, and reduce depression;
- build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints, reducing the risk of injuries from falls; and
- reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, and some cancers.

It’s never too late to start becoming physically active, and to feel the associated benefits. “Too old” or “too frail” are not of themselves reasons for an older person not to undertake physical activity. In fact, older people become sick or disabled more often from not undertaking physical activity, than from participating in a physical activity. Most physical activities can be adjusted to accommodate older people with a range of abilities and health problems, including those living in residential care facilities. Physical activity can also improve health outcomes for older people with chronic health conditions such as stroke or arthritis, although activity may need to be modified in periods of an acute flare up of the condition.

Physical activity is also valuable for well older people, where maintenance of good health, independence, and disease prevention can be achieved.

Many forms of physical activity can be performed with a partner, friends, or in a group, which often increases the enjoyment and takes the mind off the physical nature of the activity.

Recommendation 2
Older people should be active every day in as many ways as possible, doing a range of physical activities that incorporate fitness, strength, balance and flexibility.

There are many different ways that people can be physically active, including:
- incidental activity, which includes all the moderate intensity routine activities which can be performed as part of everyday life, for example housework, walking to the local shop instead of driving, gardening and raking leaves, and vacuuming;
- leisure pursuits that involve physical activity, including golf, lawn bowls, bocce, woodwork, and various types of dancing (for example, ballroom dancing, line dancing);
- structured activities such as walking groups, strength training, tai chi or other group exercise activities, hydrotherapy classes (exercise in water) and yoga. Depending on preference and availability of classes, these activities can be done in a group or alone.
- supervised physical activity (for example, supervised by a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist), which may be of benefit for older people with moderate health problems, at least when starting out. Examples of older people who may benefit from supervision at least when commencing physical activities are those with heart problems, including following heart surgery; people with chronic respiratory problems; people with neurological problems such as stroke and Parkinson’s disease; people with moderately severe arthritis; people with mental health issues such as dementia; and those with a higher risk of falls.

There are three main categories of physical activity types that can achieve improved health, independence and well-being for older people:
endurance / fitness activities, where a major emphasis is on increasing the demand on the heart and
lungs. Examples include brisk walking, bicycle riding, swimming and jogging;
• strength training activities, where the emphasis is on building muscle strength. Examples include
resistance exercise, lifting weights, and stair climbing, and;
• balance, mobility and flexibility (stretching) activities, where the emphasis is on balance, walking,
turning, going up and down steps, muscle flexibility and other mobility related functions.

Sometimes physical activities incorporate just one of these types of activities, while others (such as exercise
classes and Tai Chi) may incorporate elements of two or all three of these categories. The range of health
benefits achieved is likely to be greater with a mixed range of physical activity options within or between
days. In addition, having a number of options or choice in the types of physical activity available can
increase motivation and increase the likelihood of uptake and longer term participation in physical activity.
Try to include some indoor and outdoor physical activities. Your choice of activities will be influenced by
what benefits you want to achieve, what you enjoy doing, and what options are available for you.

There are some health benefits that are most commonly achieved by performing one particular category of
physical activity. For example, to improve balance and reduce risk of falling, an activity needs to
incorporate some balance related movements, while the effect of endurance training on reducing falls does
not appear to be as strong. Therefore there may be a preference for a particular category of physical activity
to achieve a particular health benefit. However, if the aim is to improve general health, a mix of physical
activity from the three categories is recommended.

Recommendation 3
Older people should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most,
preferably all, days.

At least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days has been recommended as the
minimum amount to achieve health and well-being benefits, although physical activity does not have to be
all in the one episode to achieve these benefits. There is a cumulative effect from activity undertaken in
smaller instalments. Therefore, an older person with health problems may be restricted to only doing 10
minutes of physical activity before starting to become short of breath or starting to develop muscle or joint
soreness, but can still achieve health benefits by doing 10 minute periods of physical activity at least three
times throughout the day.

The minimum of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days does not have to be restricted to the
one type of physical activity within the one session.

Older people who have not been physically active for some time may need to start with less than 30 minutes
each day, and gradually build up to 30 minutes or more.

Recommendation 4
Older people who have stopped physical activity, or who are starting a new physical activity, should start at
a level that is easily manageable and gradually build up the recommended amount, type and frequency of
activity.

While the benefits of participating in physical activity can build up fairly quickly, similarly the benefits can
be lost quickly if physical activity is stopped for more than 2-3 weeks. Therefore, if an established physical
activity routine is stopped for several weeks, then recommenced, the level of intensity should gradually be
built back up to the previous level over several weeks to months, depending on how long the break was for,
and the reason for the break (for example, if the break was due to a health problem, then building back up
the physical activity routine should be more gradual). A similar approach of gradual build up should be used if starting a new type of physical activity.

People who have stopped physical activity because of a new health problem may need to discuss resuming physical activity with their doctor, or to resume physical activity in a supervised manner at first (for example, by a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist). People who have recently had surgery, including angioplasty should take into consideration the implications of the surgery with their doctor or health professional when commencing physical activity.

If dizziness, palpitations or chest pain occurs during physical activity, the activity should be ceased and advice sought from a doctor. No component of a physical activity routine should cause severe or uncomfortable pain. If such pain is experienced, the activity should be ceased, and discussed with a doctor or health professional such as a physiotherapist.

Recommendation 5
Older people who continue to enjoy a lifetime of vigorous physical activity should carry on doing so in a manner suited to their capability into later life, provided recommended safety procedures and guidelines are adhered to.

Generally, higher levels of physical activity are associated with greater health outcomes. People who have undertaken vigorous physical activity throughout their lives can often continue safely with vigorous physical activity in later years.

However, when commencing a new form of vigorous physical activity, it is important that the level of physical activity is suitable for any health problems an older person has. Before commencing a vigorous form of physical activity, the benefits and risks should be discussed with a doctor or health professional.

Gradual progression in the amount and intensity of physical activity is important for older people to gain the best health benefits. This applies for well older people, as well as those with multiple health problems. Some older people who have commenced physical activity in later years can gradually progress to the level of vigorous physical activity.