

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

In May 2013 some of the findings of a physiological PhD project on the physical work demands and fitness levels of cleaners (Korshøj et al., 2013; Korshøj, 2015) made the headlines in Danish newspapers (see, for example, Damløv, 2013; Keiding & Garde Petersen, 2013): despite the fact that many cleaners walk more than 20,000 steps per day – twice as many as the 10,000 steps a day that countless campaigns worldwide and in Demark promote as a key part of a healthy and active lifestyle (see, for example, Danish Company Sports Federation, 2015), cleaners have a poor health status and low levels of cardiorespiratory fitness (see also Jørgensen et al., 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2012; Sjögren et al., 2003). Physiologists assert that, although cleaning is hard physical labour, it is not an intensive physical activity that would increase cardiorespiratory fitness levels. Therefore, physiologists recommend that cleaners engage in recreational physical activity¹ (PA) to improve their fitness levels and, as a consequence, reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (Korshøj et al., 2013; see also Li, Loerbroks & Angerer, 2013). Recreational PA may, however, not only have positive effects on the physical health of cleaners, but may also provide other benefits such as opportunities for enjoyment, social contact or relaxation that can enhance their well-being. The question remains, though, whether cleaners want to and are able to engage in recreational PA.

The **purpose of this PhD thesis** is, therefore, to explore the recreational PA participation of female cleaners – an occupational group consisting of many minority ethnic women (see, for example, Eurofound, 2012; EU-OSHA, 2009). The focus is on the perspectives of the cleaners, giving them a voice and listening to their narratives about their lived experiences. As my PhD project was integrated in and financially supported by the Copenhagen Centre for Team Sport and Health, I will

¹ Throughout this thesis I will use the term ‘recreational physical activity’ to refer to a wide range of physical activities such as swimming, running or cycling which are not competitive.

begin this thesis with background information about the centre. I will proceed with a review of the international literature related to the occupational group of cleaners, worksite PA initiatives and minority ethnic women's participation in sport and recreational PA and will then outline the research questions guiding this paper-based thesis. After describing social constructionism as the paradigm informing my research, I will present the used theories, the research design and the methods of the study and assess the quality of the study. I will then introduce the four articles that comprise the main body of this thesis. Finally, in the conclusion I will summarize the most important findings of the four papers, draw implications, reflect on the limitations of the project and provide suggestions for further research.