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Women at Mid-life: First-time Marathoners, Embodied Learning and Mainstream Rhetoric

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Keywords: Mid-life women; Embodied learning; Marathon training

Abstract: This paper outlines preliminary findings of a study exploring the experiences of mid-life women training for a first marathon. I focus on how and what these women learn about themselves, aging and the world around them. I address participants' embodied learning and how it aligns with the mainstream definition of mid-life.

Introduction

This paper discusses preliminary findings of research that explores the experience of mid-life for women. I am interested in what learning occurs through the embodied challenge of training for a first marathon at mid-life, what we can learn about the meaning of mid-life by listening to women's descriptions of their experiences and whether women who train for their first marathon at mid-life challenge the mainstream definition of what it means to be a woman in mid-life.

Qualitative Research Framework

Many studies on mid-life women in the literature have a deductive, hypothesis driven basis that focus on the negatives of menopause and health risks. Through interpretive research I seek to contribute to the understanding of mid-life from the described lived experiences of the participants training for a first marathon, while identifying the impossibility of complete researcher bracketing.

Methods and Analytical Approach

For this phenomenological study, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews. Participants were given the interview schedule a few days prior to the interview to allow them time to think about the questions prior to the meeting. Answers to the following four main interview questions were analyzed and emerging themes are noted below.

Participants

The eight women in this study met the criteria of training for their first marathon, being between 40 – 65 years of age (average age = 49.6 years) and willing to journal about their experiences. They self-identified as Canadian, are Caucasian and reside in or around Calgary.

A Typical Day/Week

Participants indicated busy days attending to family and/or out-of-home work. The women spoke of time with spouses, children and friends, community involvement, new friends made through running, time for themselves and caring for aging parents. The overall attitude and outlook identified by seven of the women was positive. "I feel I am in a lucky place to be" (Sue, 6 January 2011), "This is exciting times, both personally and professionally" (Genevieve, 13

January 2011). Lillian indicated a feeling of inconsistency “some days I feel joy and some days I feel lost” (21 January 2011). Very little of what the women shared about their daily experiences related to negative health and menopausal issues. Two of the eight women mentioned these issues.

The Marathon Training Experience

Embodied learning that has occurred revealed that the women were experiencing a new connectedness between mind and body and trust in their abilities. “I’ve learned that you control it, it’s my choice what’s in my head and I can use that with other parts of my life” (Genevieve, 13 January 2011). Some of the women talked about a real connection to nature and of self-growth. “I have this spiritual connection when I see the mountains” (Lillian, 21 January 2011). Women are learning about their limits, their learning styles and experiencing memory recollection from the outdoor smells. One participant related the training to learning in the classroom. “It’s the same sensation of the first class when you see the course outline and think that you can’t do that” (Elaine, 10 January 2011).

Images of Mid-life

Women responded that there is a combination of extremes and inconsistencies portrayed. Genevieve explained, “You see strong and vibrant and then you see unhealthy, overweight and diabetic” (31 January 2011). “Most of it on the media, on the news or Dr. Oz, mid-life is like a disaster” (Elaine, 10 January 2011). One participant described an incident in a running store where “they thought I was some old lady looking for white walking shoes” (Sue, 6 January 2011). “The images being portrayed are much more positive than they were in comparison to my mother; I like the feeling of being respected for the age that I am, for the knowledge that I have” (Dorothy, 7 January 2011).

Describing Mid-life and the Experience of Training for a First Marathon

Participants were asked to describe their mid-life experience and the experience of training for a first marathon using five words or images. The most commonly used words to describe their midlife experiences in general were, body changes, knowledge/experience/wisdom, awareness (of mortality), grateful, and confusing. Of the 26 total descriptors, I considered 62% to be positive while 38% were negative.

The most commonly used words to describe the experience of training for their first marathon at midlife were, motivating/positive, privileged, hopeful, exciting, balanced, invigorated/energized, physically fit/healthy, confidence/powerful, connection and apprehension (about not being able to run). Of the 23 total descriptors, I considered 87% to be positive and 13% were negative.

Discussion

Preliminary findings contribute to understanding that perception, the senses and mind/body action and reaction are important sites and sources of knowledge and learning (Clark, 2005). There is some contradiction to the focus on menopause and the negative portrayals of mid-life for women in the scientific literature and in Western culture (Elavsky, 2006; Stocker, 2009). Some of the women described inconsistencies and confusion about the portrayal of mid-life in mainstream culture and in their own experience. The women’s descriptions were primarily

positive experiences of learning and knowledge, health and physical fitness, hopefulness, excitement and confidence.

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