A Critical Examination of Women with Acquired Physical [dis]abilities: Reclaiming a Sense of Community Belonging through Physically Active Leisure

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Socio-Cultural - Community (Physical Activity)
virtual asynchronous
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Session: Community

Abstract 2020-229

Rationale: Understanding the perspectives of women with acquired physical [dis]abilities is important as women who have lived only with [dis]ability have different experiences of [dis]ability than women who acquire a disability later in life (Charmaz, 1991; Rohrer, 2005; Sherill, 1993). The term “acquired physical disability” encompasses a broad array of [dis]abilities resulting from trauma or disease (Dunn & Brody, 2008). Adjustment to living with an acquired [dis]ability is an on-going process (Tagaki, 2016). Women who acquire a physical [dis]ability such as a spinal cord injury have to negotiate many kinds of constraints in daily life and deal with continual adjustment (Lee, Dattilo, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1996). For example, individuals with acquired physical [dis]abilities may experience psychological conditions such as depression, lower quality of life, and isolation (e.g. McKinley & Meade, 2004; Tonack et al., 2008). Additionally, some women experience changes in the way people act toward or interact with them (Brittain, 2004).

However, as argued by Tagaki (2016), “experiences of people with disabilities cannot be simply examined from positive aspects or negative ones; both aspects are required” (p.1). For example, research has shown that physically active leisure (e.g. competitive team sport) has allowed women to “actively reconstruct their subjectivities around notions of disability very soon after their accidents or illnesses, drawing instead upon identities based on being an athlete” (Ashton-Shaeffer et. al, 2001, p. 11).

Aim of the Study: The purpose of this study is to understand the physically active leisure experiences of women with acquired physical [dis]abilities. Specifically, it aims to critically examine how women with acquired physical [dis]abilities negotiate, resist and/or become empowered through physically active leisure in the community context. Drawing from feminist social constructivist theory and sensitized by critical [dis]ability studies, this paper frames the construct of [dis]ability as “the way society ‘disables’ people with impairments through attitudes, policies and built environments that exclude, oppress and/or make it difficult to participate in mainstream society” (Wedgewood’s, 2011, p. 101).

Methods: A grounded theory approach was used and a purposive sample of eight women, between the ages of 27-45, participated in this study. Consistent with grounded theory, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary methods of data collection to understand the participants’ perspectives (Birks & Mills, 2011). Data analysis was guided by the qualitative techniques characteristic of grounded theory: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings: Three major themes emerged that best reflect the researchers’ interpretations of the participants’ experiences: 1) The Essentiality of Physically Active Leisure to Negotiating her Changing Health Considerations, 2) Confronting the Stigmatizing Gaze as a Woman with an Acquired Physical [dis]ability, and 3) Building Agency and Sense of Connection in the Community. Moreover, the major themes resulted in the culmination of experiences leading to the Core Theme: Reclaiming a Sense of Community Belonging Through Physically Active Leisure.

Implications: This study highlights the opportunity for women with acquired physical [dis]abilities to re-engage with physically active leisure and develop a sense of belonging within both [dis]ability specific and mainstream community spaces.