From pleasure and pride to the fear of decline: Exploring the emotions in older women's physical activity narratives

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Abstract

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the emotion narratives in older women's ageing body and physical activity-related stories.

Method: The study was informed by narrative inquiry. We conducted two semi-structured interviews with 21 women aged 65 to 94 and asked them about their physical activity engagement, and body perceptions, experiences, and management strategies. Using thematic narrative analysis, we analysed the content of participants’ stories pertaining to physical activity, the core patterns within them, and considered the cultural context in which they were embedded.

Results: Emotion narratives of anxiety/fear, shame, guilt, pride, and pleasure permeated the women's stories. Participants feared physical and cognitive decline, and engaged in physical activity to stave off the ageing process. Body-related shame and guilt transected their stories; they were frustrated by their inabilities to engage in certain activities and with their move away from the healthy and physically fit cultural ideal. To negotiate this body-related anxiety/fear, shame, and guilt, the women drew attention to their accomplishments in the physical domain with pride, reinforcing their efforts to take personal responsibility for their health. Participants were also physically active for pleasure, gaining satisfaction from the social connections and mindfulness derived from being active, and through their participation in challenging yet rewarding activities.

Conclusions: The findings are novel as they highlight the importance of cultural age and body norms coupled with complex emotional experiences in shaping later life physical activity experiences, and draw attention to the usefulness of stories to explore emotions in the physical domain.

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1. Introduction

The global population is ageing rapidly; estimates suggest that 20% of individuals worldwide will be 60 years or older by 2050 (World Health Organization, 2015). The factors influencing older men’s and women’s perceptions and experiences of ageing have therefore become of interest to researchers, with physical activity at the centre of this inquiry given its association with enhanced health and well-being in later life (World Health Organization, 2017). Older adults have reported engaging in physical activity for health and independence, pleasure, social connection, and to resist society's devaluation of older bodies (Bidonde, Goodwin, & Drinkwater, 2009; Hudson, Day, & Oliver, 2015; Kluge, Tang, Glick, LeCompte, & Willis, 2012; Phoenix & Orr, 2014). However, examination of their ageing body and physical activity-related emotions has been limited. Building on the extant literature and aiming to address this research gap, the purpose of this study was to explore how the internalization of Western cultural age and body norms emphasizing health and youthfulness shaped the emotions present within the ageing body and physical activity-related stories recounted by 21 women aged 65 to 94. The research questions addressed were: (a) what emotions permeate older women’s ageing body and physical activity-related stories?; (b) what functions do the emotions present within the women's stories perform?; and (c) what role do cultural age and body norms play in shaping older women's emotions in the physical domain? An exploration of older women's ageing body and physical activity-related emotions advances our understanding of the role that the
bodily changes accompanying ageing may play in delimiting later life physical activity.

1.1. Women, the body, and physical activity in later life

Western culture's feminine body norms emphasizing thin yet toned, wrinkle-free, healthy, and youthful bodies (Grogan, 2016) have influenced older women's ageing body perceptions and experiences. Many older women have reported managing their bodies using dieting, physical activity, anti-ageing creams and non-surgical cosmetic procedures, strategic clothing choices, and hair dye to retain their femininity, physical attractiveness, and youthful appearances (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, & Harcourt, 2016). Women have engaged in cognitive reframing by adjusting their expectations as they have moved away from the societal ideal (Piran, 2016), have shifted their focus from appearance to health with advancing age (Hurd, 2000), and have become increasingly accepting of their bodies in later life (Bailey, Cline, & Gammage, 2016). Older women have also stressed the importance of engaging in physical activity to maintain their health and body's functioning (Bailey et al., 2016), and because they have felt responsible for their own health (Hurd Clarke & Bennett, 2012).

Given the role that physical activity may play in the management of the ageing body, the links between older women's body perceptions and physical activity behaviours have been examined (Evans & Slep, 2012; Liebch & Yarnal, 2010; McGannon, Busanich, Chad, Witcher, & Schinke, 2014). Appearance concerns, the fear of embarrassment, a perceived lack of physical ability, and the perceived risks associated with exercise have rendered some older women self-conscious and uncomfortable to engage in physical activity (Evans & Slep, 2012; McGannon, Busanich, Witcher, & Schinke, 2014). In addition, changes to body functioning and health have made it difficult for some older women to remain physically active (Evans & Slep, 2012; Heuser, 2005). Other older women, however, have reported that physical activity engagement fostered the development of positive attitudes towards the ageing body and enhanced their sense of self (Henwood, Tuckett, Edelstein, & Bartlett, 2011; Sims-Gould, Hurd Clarke, Ashe, Nslund, & Liu-Ambrose, 2010). Some have also utilized physical activity as a resistance tool to slow down the ageing process (Hudson et al., 2015; McGannon et al., 2014). While the cognitive and behavioural management of the ageing physically active body has been well-documented, little research has addressed the emotions elicited by and contributing to body and physical activity experiences in later life.

1.2. Emotions, physical activity, and the body

Psychological perspectives on emotion suggest that emotions arise as a result of the meaning one assigns to their activities (Lazarus, 1999). According to Lazarus (1999), the notion of appraisal, or how one interprets the significance of an event in relation their goals, values, and beliefs, is central to their emotional experiences. Basic emotions, including anger, anxiety, disgust, fear, happiness/joy, sadness, and surprise, are neurophysiological and evolutionary in nature (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). Research on basic emotions and physical activity in later life has revealed that older adults derive pleasure from physical activity engagement, including the sensory experiences associated with activity such as the smell of freshly mown grass on a golf course or the touch of water on the skin while swimming (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). They have also experienced pleasure from the purpose gained from being active, the stress relief associated with activity engagement, as well as from the documentation of their activity pursuits (Phoenix & Orr, 2014).

Older women have also enjoyed engaging in physical activity with others as it fostered interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging (Bidonde et al., 2009; Chrisler & Palatino, 2016; Evans & Slep, 2012; Heuser, 2005; Kluge et al., 2012).

Self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt, and pride have been thought to necessitate more complex cognitive processing, as they involve one's appraisal of the perceptions or evaluations of and by others (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). Shame occurs when an individual perceives that they do not meet the cultural ideal (e.g., not measuring up to the youthful and healthy cultural body ideal; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Guilt involves the regret that one has not engaged in a specific desirable behaviour (e.g., having not engaged in sufficient physical activity to enhance health; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Finally, pride is communicated to others to showcase an individual's success, thereby enhancing their social status (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Two types of pride have been identified. Authentic pride refers to attributes made to unstable and specific causes (e.g., an individual perceives they did a good thing) and is related to self-esteem (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009), whereas hubristic pride is attributed to stable and aspects of the global self (e.g., the individual perceives they are a good person) and is related to narcissism (Tracy et al., 2009).

Research on self-conscious emotions across the lifespan has suggested that adaptive self-conscious emotions (e.g., guilt as it can motivate individuals to engage in reparative behaviours) were more likely to be experienced by older adults, whereas maladaptive self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame) were more prevalent in adolescents and younger adults (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010). Research addressing younger women's self-conscious emotions in the physical domain has suggested that body-related shame, guilt, and pride influence motivation for physical activity (Sabiston et al., 2010). In addition, middle-aged adults have reported experiencing higher levels of body-related shame and lower levels of body-related pride than their younger counterparts (Pila, Brunet, Croker, Kowalski, & Sabiston, 2016). Collectively, the research suggests that body-related self-conscious emotions influence individuals' body perceptions and physical activity behaviours, yet the bulk of the research has been on younger and middle-aged adults, rendering older women relatively absent from the extant literature.

1.3. Narrative inquiry

Emotions in physical activity contexts can be explored adopting a narrative approach. Narrative inquiry is underpinned by the notion that individuals tell stories to assign meaning to their everyday lives (Riessman, 2008). Narratives encompass a series of events linked together in a meaningful way, thereby providing individuals with a structure to ascribe meaning to their selfhood and identities (Riessman, 2008). Thus, narratives can be thought of as certain experiences “organized around consequential events [which are] constructed, creatively adorned, rhetorical, and replete with assumptions” (Riessman, 2008, p. 5). Personal narratives are also social in nature; they occur in the context of social interactions (Frank, 2012). Individuals recount events and structure their stories in ways that create the meaning they want others to take away from the story, thereby eliciting emotions in the teller and listener (Riessman, 2008). At the same time, stories are constructed based on the narrative resources, or “community of life stories”, present within the culture in which individuals are embedded (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). Researchers can thus analyse narratives to shed light on what they tell us about a person, but can also illuminate how the narratives are told and why they are told in a specific way, including the emotions they elicit, to better understand how individuals construct their identities.
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