

Finishing the Race: Exploring the Meaning of Marathons for Women Who Run Multiple Races

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study focuses on the meaning of marathons for six women living in the Midwest. The women who participated in the study had completed five or more marathons and discussed the reasons why they repeatedly ran this distance. Few individuals will ever run a marathon; fewer women than men participate in the sport. Through in-depth interviews, six themes emerged including struggle, emotion, pride, intimate connections, preparation, and inspiration/transformation. For women who took part in this study, the *essential invariant structure* or essence of running multiple marathons is the creation of a transformative experience—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Limitations and future research are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Marathon running, women, qualitative, phenomenology, leisure activity

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Introduction

Women's motivation to participate in other leisure activities might provide additional insights as to why some women run marathons repeatedly (Axelsen, 2009; Barrell, Chamberlain, Evans, Holt, & MacKean, 1989; Cronan and Scott, 2008; Deyell Hood, 2003; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000; Roster, 2007; Verhoef, Love, & Rose, 1992; Vertinsky, 2002). Vertinsky (2008) noted, "Women today set vastly different exercise standards for themselves than did women even a few decades ago" (p. 83). Nowhere is this more apparent than in women's participation in the marathon. RunningUSA.org reported that in 2011, an estimated 518,000 runners crossed the finish line at marathons throughout the United States; 41% of these participants were women (Running USA's Annual Marathon Report, 2012).

For both men and women, the training leading up to a marathon is long and intense, typically 16 to 20 weeks, culminating in a race that takes multiple hours to finish. Throughout the training and the actual running of the 26.2 miles, the journey can be filled with physical and mental challenges, injuries, blisters, and dehydration. Given these challenges, few individuals will ever run a marathon. Since marathon running is an uncommon human experience, a mystique surrounds participation in these events.

This mystique is even more significant for women, given their minority status in the sport and relatively short participation history. The first woman to officially enter a marathon was in 1967, and the sport was not recognized as an Olympic event for women until 1984 (Pate & O'Neill, 2007). Serravallo (2000) observed that gender differences exist among those who participate in marathons. Through data from the 1998 New York City Marathon, the author noted the ratio of men to women participants was more than two to one. Given the relative late entry of women into marathon running and their minority participation in these races, what benefits do recreational women runners derive from participating in marathons?

Although runners experience numerous health benefits through physical activity, Masters, Ogles, and Jolton (1993) suggested, "...marathon runners expose themselves to stress and strain well beyond what is necessary to achieve these advantages" (p. 134). While the lure of sizable cash prizes and athletic endorsements are motivation for elite athletes to train and compete in marathons, the casual observer might question why recreational runners, men or women, would subject themselves to the mental and physical challenges of running these races, not once, but often time and time again.

Comparative analysis of men and women marathon runners in terms of their participative motives (Ogles, Masters, & Richardson, 1995), performance (Deaner, Masters, Ogles, & LaCaille, 2011; Hunter, Stevens, Magennis, Skelton, & Fauth, 2011; Mountain, Ely, & Chevront, 2007) and perceived benefits of the marathon experience (Ziegler, 1991) is limited and fails to address the complexity of the marathon experience. In two such studies (Ogles et al., 1995; Ziegler, 1991), the sample of identified women is small compared to men (128/482 and 58/300, respectively). Absent from all these analyses is a rich description of women's' marathon running experiences. Ziegler (1991) posited, "A further understanding of the

schema women use to evaluate their own experiences in sport would be useful in predicting not only exercise and sports patterns, but also expected outcomes of participation" (p. 125).

These issues lead to the central question of this qualitative study: What is the meaning of marathons for women who repeatedly train and run multiple races?

Literature Review

Marathon runners are not a homogeneous group; they have a variety of reasons for participating in races (Ogles & Masters, 2003). In order to further understand the psychological and motivational characteristics of these distance runners, Masters et al. (1993) developed an instrument, the *Motivation of Marathoners Scale* (MOMS). It examined the training and participative motives of marathon runners. The scale included four conceptual measures—psychological (including life meaning, self-esteem, and psychological coping), achievement (including personal goal-orientation and competition), social (including recognition/approval and affiliation), and physical (including health orientation and weight concern). The authors posited that learning more about individuals who participate in marathons could inform the scholarly community about the motivations of all types of runners.

Using the MOMS and related scales, researchers have discovered that men and women runners have different motivations for running. Ziegler (1991) noted more women than men suggested running made their lives richer and had a more positive impact on their self-image. Summers, Machin, and Sargent (1983) posited women participated in running for benefits such as meeting people and feeling less shy. Women also reported that running enhanced their mood, reduced their stress levels and allowed them time for personal reflection (Johnsgard, 1985). Additionally, Ogles et al., (1995) observed that running helped women address weight concerns.

In a study with 18 men and 14 women marathon runners, Pierce, Rohaly, and Fritchley (1997) posited that women appeared to exhibit a higher dependence on exercise than men. The researchers surmised this might be due, in part, to women wanting to improve their body image. Ziegler (1991) discovered similar results, "women...were more inclined to indicate that running was something that they have to do. It is unclear why women displayed this more addictive posture..."(p. 125).

Few studies have addressed marathon running qualitatively. Allen Collinson and Hockey (2007) explored how their running injuries impacted their identities as distance runners. In a separate study, the researchers also explored the ways in which a runner visually views his/her world through a technique called ethnography, which the authors described as "...a novel combination of autoethnographic, ethnomethodological and visual sociological approaches..." (Hockey & Allen Collinson, 2006, p. 79). Other qualitative studies looked at the challenges marathon runners experienced as they spent time away from their families while training for a race (Barrell et al., 1989) and how marathon runners balanced running and family life (Goodsell & Harris, 2011). Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) explored the mental changes that occurred with two women as a result of marathon

running. Finally, Kramer's (2005) qualitative ethnography explored communication strategies among a group of individuals raising funds for a charity while simultaneously training for a marathon.

Through a qualitative case study on women who used distance running to cope with stressful life situations, Leedy (2009) discovered that distance running was an empowering activity women could turn to in stressful times. Morgan, O'Connor, Sparling, and Pate (1987), looked at the psychological characteristics of 15 elite women distance runners and 12 (control) sub-elite women distance runners. The authors wondered about the personality and psychological make-up of these athletes. Following surveys and structured interviews, the authors discovered that regardless of their running status (elite versus sub-elite) these women athletes were similar, in terms of their motivation, personality traits, and psychometric profiles. Pate and O'Neill (2007) examined marathon race times for American women during a nearly 30-year period. While marathon finishing times for men have remained fairly consistent, the authors observed, women have continued to make gains throughout the years, and are finishing with faster times. The researchers suggested this might be due in part, to an increasing number of women competing in the marathon.

The literature explores a variety of reason why women participate in leisure activities. Through her autoethnography, Axelsen (2009) related how she overcame an eating disorder through participation in triathlons. She noted, "It contributed to the changing of my self-concept, which subsequently led to positive behavioral changes and personal enrichment..." (Axelsen, 2009, p. 340). A study of women who were recovering from alcoholism showed that participants in leisure activities confirmed their sense of self as they were battling their addictions (Deyell Hood, 2003). Cronan and Scott (2008) examined body image as part of a qualitative study on triathletes. The authors noted that participants who took part in the women-only triathlon not only embraced identities as athletes but also developed a connected and supportive community with the other women. Feelings of empowerment and self-sufficiency were the focus of two other studies, one on women motorcycle riders (Roster, 2007), and another, on women who participated in wilderness recreation (Pohl et al., 2000). Lastly, Vertinsky (2002) suggested society would increasingly see older women participating in sporting and leisure activities.

Yet, this trend does not apply universally to all women. A study with nearly 6,000 Canadian women showed that younger, married women with children did not exercise as frequently as single women or women without children (Verhoef et al., 1992). Barrell et al. (1989) concluded that women more often than men have less time to participate in leisure activities and also observed, "...many women, particularly those who are married and have children, are very often severely constrained by the social expectations incumbent in their roles as wives, mothers, and female employees..." (p. 262).

Research exists on the involvement of women in various leisure activities and more limited research on the involvement of women in distance running. However, I found no peer-reviewed phenomenological research that offered a first-hand account on the meaning of marathon running, from a group of recreational (those

who do not earn a primary living from running) women runners who have each run five or more marathons. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the meaning of marathons for women who have run multiple races.

Methods

Phenomenological design has been utilized in other leisure or sports research (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Burton, VanHeest, Rallis, & Reis, 2006; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Dale, 1996; Sabiston, McDonough, Sedgwick, & Crocker, 2009; Thomas, Lane, & Kingston, 2011). Dale (1996) observed, "As researchers in the field of sport psychology, we can learn a great deal about the experience of athletes if we allow them the opportunity...to describe their experiences" (p. 309).

Phenomenological design mandates that researchers clear their minds of any preconceived notions or suppositions about the research phenomenon prior to beginning a study, a process known as bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). Once interviews with study participants are complete, Gearing (2004) suggested researchers must reintegrate themselves into the study, which includes subjective interpretation of the data. In exploring marathons through the eyes of a group of women runners who participate in multiple races, we are offered a fresh perspective that adds to the scholarly literature. Hatch (2002) suggested phenomenological researchers "... seek to reveal the essence of human experience by asking, 'What is the nature of this phenomenon'" (p. 30)?

Creswell (2007) maintained that in qualitative design, the researcher assumes a worldview that informs the audience about the meaning participants hold. This research involved a constructivist paradigm. Researchers who support a constructivist paradigm believe that participants have their own perspectives about a particular phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). Neuman (2006) referred to this worldview as interpretive, suggesting that meaning is derived "...through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings..." (p. 88). He suggested meaning is constructed through the social interactions of individuals. Through interviews with the women, along with the collection of other data sources, I sought to present a unique understanding about their experiences.

The study focused on six women marathon runners living in a midsized metropolitan community in the Midwest. "Paula," "Nancy," "Joan," "Sarah," "Kate," and "Lisa" are all members of the same running community. Pseudonyms were used in place of the women's real names to respect their privacy and assure anonymity. As the primary author who has also completed five marathons, I conducted the interviews with the women and wrote the final paper. Approval was obtained through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institutional Review Board to conduct this study. Additionally, I contacted participants personally and received written permission to conduct interviews with all of them. These women ranged in age from 37 to 66 years old, and had participated in as few as 7 and as many as 60 marathons. Two of the women have been running marathons for less than five years. One has participated in marathons for nearly 20 years. I used purposeful sampling in order to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Through a criterion sample (Patton, 2002), only women who had completed five

or more marathons were asked to participate in the study. Names of some of the research participants were obtained through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). I asked women who participated in this study for the names of other women who had completed five or more marathons.

Working with participants, I arranged a convenient time for the interviews to take place. The participant interviews lasted from 45 minutes to more than 1 hour in length. Interviews were conducted in a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 2007). Five of the interviews took place at the participants' homes. One of the interviews took place in my home at the request of the participant.

As part of this qualitative study, I collected three forms of data (Creswell, 2007), including interviews, observations, and artifacts, in the form of photographs of marathon memorabilia. The women shared memorabilia they collected from various marathons, including t-shirts, medals, and race bibs (the paper numbers runners wear during an event for identification). I asked the women to describe the meaning of the memorabilia and took pictures of the items or asked participants to take pictures as a means of further reflection following the interviews.

Several methods of verification were utilized for the study. I looked for evidence of themes through the description from multiple participants. Following the creation of these themes, I asked participants to read passages from the study to verify I was representing their thoughts accurately, a process known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Forms of negative case analysis, or disconfirming evidence of the themes also appeared in the final study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2010). Patton (2002) noted that disconfirming data is important in providing exceptions to what one would assume to be the primary or standard pattern.

Interaction and subjectivity with participants are assumed in a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). I asked participants a series of questions, including clarifying questions and additional probes. Those questions included the following: Tell me a little about yourself? How did you get interested in running marathons? Tell me about the experience of running a marathon? What compels you to run multiple marathons? What interactions or experiences do you have with other runners who participate in these races? What is your most meaningful or memorable marathon? What have you learned from running marathons? How has running impacted your life? Tell me about the mementos you have collected from various races; what meaning do these hold for you?

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were hand-coded, looking for *in vivo* codes, the exact words used by the participants in the study (Creswell, 2007). For the phenomenological analysis, the research study used a method advanced by Moustakas (1994) and adapted by Creswell (2007). I identified significant statements made by participants as they related to the phenomenon, a process known as horizontalization of data (Moustakas, 1994). I developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements, clustered them into meaning units, and developed the final six themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Six themes emerged from the participant interviews: struggle, emotion, pride, intimate connections, preparation, and inspiration/transformation. From the themes, I formed a composite textural description of "what" the participants ex-

perienced and a composite structural description of “how” they experienced the phenomenon to arrive at the *essential invariant structure* or the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Table 1 contains an example of the use of significant statements to develop meaning units and establish the final themes.

Table 1

Example of Significant Statements, Meaning Units, and Theme

Significant Statements	Meaning Units	Theme
“I’m proud of myself because I’m doing this.”	Pride in self	Pride
“...it’s kind of like bragging rights.”	Bragging rights	
“it’s just knowing that you’ve accomplished something... and...didn’t give up...”	Sense of accomplishment	
“...my dad...if he would be here...he would be so proud of me.”	Familial pride	

The initial inspiration for this topic came at a time when I was temporarily sidelined from running; a stress fracture in my tibia kept me from completing a fall marathon for which I had spent months training. The catharsis provided in these conversations reminded me about the very thing that happens when distance runners connect, articulated by one of the participants, “...when you’re running, you talk about everything in the world, except for running and when...(you’re) not running, the only thing you do talk about is running.” Many of the themes discovered through the rich description of the participants were expected. However, a few surprises did emerge.

Struggle

There is a saying shared among many distance runners that the marathon is divided into two halves: the first 20 miles and the last six. While it can happen anytime along the racecourse, it is often in the latter half of the marathon that struggle ensues. The theme of struggle emerged as participants shared stories about the marathons they completed and the challenges they experienced throughout the race. Sarah struggled early in one of her marathons. Around mile 7, she became ill and started vomiting. She said this continued five or six additional times over the course of 26.2 miles. “I didn’t have any strength, but I still wanted to finish my marathon.” Around mile 16, she stopped on the side of the road, pensively

wondering whether she should quit or continue. As Sarah struggled to finish the race, she considered never running marathons again.

I think that the hardest part is when you feel like you're going to collapse while you're running. So that time, I walked and ran, walked and ran. At some point, I don't remember anyplace I ran, I don't remember if I ran that marathon. It was like a nightmare. I just ran.

Kate, another participant, described a marathon she had run multiple times, recalling each time, how she felt at the eighth mile. Although she felt tired during her first marathon, Kate remembered passing the mile marker very easily in subsequent races. However, one year, when the temperatures climbed precipitously, she found herself struggling through the race again.

I remember getting to that eight mile mark and thinking ... I feel now the way I felt in the first one, and I know what else there is to come and it was just kind of a difficult race, very challenging. It was too hot.

Several of the runners described reaching a point in one of their marathons, where they did not think they could continue. Lisa suggested, "...it's a matter of all your energy just kind of disappears ... it's just that you don't have any anything else left to give. And the last six miles seems like another marathon away..."

Others noted strategies they have employed when they began to fade in a race, such as listening to music, playing number or word games in their head, or focusing on various objects, such as landmarks or people. Sometimes, Kate said, these tactics have worked when she struggles with the distance.

You try to focus on something other than what you're feeling. I do notice though, that during the parts where I start feeling weaker, some voice comes in my head that says, what the heck do you think you're doing, are you crazy? That makes things worse, that's part of the challenge, is to get that voice to go away.

Moments of struggle were not exclusively reserved during the actual running of a marathon. Kate described once reaching her limit at the finish line "...that was the only one, the only one I've gotten to the end and seriously had nothing, nothing left. I remember grabbing the chain link fence...and like just sinking to my knees."

Yet several of the runners maintained they do not always experience struggle during a race. Paula said although she has found a number of her marathons taxing, at her first race, she completed the marathon in a relatively easy fashion. "I heard at mile 18 to 20, that's all you hear . . . 18 to 20, 18 to 20, 18 to 20. And I just remember telling myself mentally, there is no wall, there is no wall, there is no wall." Joan suggested that because she has followed her training schedule diligently, and does not push her pace at the beginning of a race, she has not found it challenging to finish a race. Her experiences were unique from the other women who participated in this study.

Emotion

Participants in this study experienced a multitude of emotions, both negative and positive, sometimes simultaneously, during the marathons in which they participated. Kate offered,

I mean put yourself in any situation when you've been under pain or just achiness that keeps going on and on and on and it doesn't end and when it finally does stop, any of those emotions you have ... anger that it happened in the first place, anger that you couldn't have handled it better, happy that you're finally done, relief that it's finally done, pride because you did finish it. It's just a mix. That's the emotion part of it.

When the marathon does not go as planned, negative emotions can surface. Lisa said when that happens, "I'll beat myself up ... it's disappointing, because there's a possibility that you might not finish..." Kate said she was scared at the start of her first race, and remembered crying, wondering if she would be able to finish it. "I just remember being so petrified. You know, almost like I don't belong here, but I want to be here and I do belong here, it was just a very odd mix." A nervous energy now replaces fear for some of these women. Sarah commented, "Once you've done a couple of marathons...you respect the distance." Paula agreed, "I've learned a lot about dedication. I've learned a lot about commitment. I've learned a lot about heartache."

Lisa commented, watching other runners complete their race was an emotional experience in itself.

I stood at the finish line and watched the rest of the runners come in to the full, and I was just overcome by emotion. I just wanted to cry for each person that came across because you could see that, whether they were struggling or whether they were happy or whether, whatever that was, it was just ... the energy of just sitting at the finish line, you can't help but absorb it and be overcome by it in some respect.

Yet, Sarah suggested she was wistful once she crossed the finish line "all of a sudden, you feel empty ... something is missing, something is gone." Sarah knew that once she finished a race, she could not immediately run another, but must give her body time to recover. In those moments, she felt extremely sad and depressed.

Marathoners like Kate recalled being "hooked" after she finished her first race "...what was so wild, is I was like stoned. I was so high on that race for probably the next four months." Later, she remembered running two marathons less than a month apart, which, she said, in hindsight, was not wise. Yet, Kate has relished the marathon atmosphere "...everyone's got their energy and it's almost palpable, you can feel it. And that's very addictive..."

Lisa described her races in a similar fashion. "Oh my gosh, it's just the best high for at least a week, even though your muscles hurt like crazy, it's like oh, this hurts SO good." Lisa added that training for her marathons has provided

emotional release through trying personal situations: "Running has helped me a lot through a couple of relationships where it was better than drinking or doing drugs..."

Kate also shared that her first marathon was a bittersweet experience. She completed her training and the race at a time of family crisis, when her stepson's mother was sick with cancer. "...She has mentioned she has always wanted to run a marathon and she couldn't. She was diagnosed in June and passed away in early December. So ... she was on my mind a lot."

For these women, marathon mementos, such as the race medals, have provided vivid memories of the day. Kate offered, "It's a physical memento of everything you associate with that race ... all the emotion that goes with it, the training that goes with it, the good, the bad, all that, it's in a medal. And that's cool." Lisa shared similar views.

Getting that medal at the finish line is kind of like, here's my reward, here's my badge of honor, here's everything I've worked for and it's just a goofy piece of metal, but it signifies all that work, all the emotions, all of the stuff that went into being prepared and accomplishing the finish of crossing the finish line.

Pride

The theme of pride, both personal and familial, emerged during interviews with these women. The ability to finish a marathon is a great undertaking. Not surprisingly, all the women have reveled in the accomplishment, saying things like, "I'm proud of myself that I can do this" and "I'm proud of myself because I can do so many things that others can't do." One runner described herself as "special." Yet, it is important to note, that these women did not appear to exhibit hubris in recognition of this accomplishment; instead, the tone was one of quiet acknowledgement that they had achieved something only a few others would attain.

Paula described the pride she felt, saying, "just being able to say I've done something that not everybody can do and the rush you get from it ... after you've run 26 miles, well, what's going out for a 3-mile jog anymore?"

Lisa commented, "There's like a little adrenaline rush that goes through and (long pause.) I don't know, it's just knowing that you've accomplished something and prepared hard and worked hard and met that goal and ... didn't give up ..." Joan offered, "... it's just an accomplishment ... something that you've done that a lot of people can't do. It's something that you've done for yourself, without realizing you were going to do it when you started out ..."

Several of the participants have placed their medals in locations visible to them. Although not their sole focus, these mementos have offered visual reminders of the pride in their accomplishment; they have provided motivation to continue running. Sarah said, "Every day, when I go and get my clothes, I see them ... I'm proud of myself because I'm doing this." Kate occasionally has worn one of her marathon t-shirts to the gym, "... obviously, if you're wearing it, that means you've run it, and so it's kind of like bragging rights (laughing)."

Interestingly, during separate interviews with all six participants, several of the women talked about familial pride, specifically about a parents' recognition of their achievement. Sarah, whose father had recently gone blind and who lived some distance from her, shared, "I was thinking, my dad, if he would be here, even though he can't see, he would be so proud of me."

Kate discussed her performance at one race where it was "... a little bit of a pride thing, I wanted to do better, because my dad was there." Lisa talked about her father's interest in her races, attending various marathons and getting caught up in the fervor of the events.

I'd never seen him really want to encourage me so much and he'd run along the race route with me. My father's like, Mr. Beer Belly Boy, that, you'd never see him do anything like that...So, that was heartwarming and it really touched me deeply because, (eyes misting) you know, I did something to make my dad proud.

Several of the women have been successful in the races in which they have participated, winning age categories, and in one case, winning the marathon itself. Paula described her mother's ardent pride following a race.

... it was funny ... my dad was laughing because wherever we'd go, my mom would say, 'Yeah, my daughter won the marathon today, my daughter... and I'm like, 'Mom, stop.' And she's like, 'Well, they want to know.' And I'm like, 'Whatever.' So I mean, they were so proud. It was awesome to see how proud they were and how happy they were after the race.

Familial pride extended beyond parents. Lisa talked about her adult nieces who were now beginning to run half-marathons. She has felt proud of their early achievements and has hoped that in some way, she has inspired their interest in distance races. Nancy said her favorite marathon was the one where her children and husband were waiting with roses at the finish line, proud of her accomplishment.

Intimate Connections

The runners interviewed talked about the deep bonds that were created during the course of their training and the actual running of their marathons. Connections with strangers, connections with friends, and connections to outside supporters were three subthemes that emerged in this area.

During the 26.2 miles, these marathon runners encountered many kindred spirits, striving for the same goal. It was during the course of these several hours that the women made connections and even shared intimate details about their lives with complete strangers—information they would not have normally shared in other settings, "... part of what keeps taking me back is that connection that you make with other people." Lisa said she has made it a point to meet at least 10 people while running her races. "The fun is meeting different people from different places and learning why they are running a marathon and it's always interesting, their race for whatever reason."

Nearly all of the runners said that sometime during one of their marathons, other runners have helped them or they have helped another runner when they were struggling to finish. Nancy said, "I've had people come up to me after a race and say, 'Thank you. I was going to quit, but you kept me going.' I've had that same feeling, too, where people talk to me and ... keep me going." During the race where she became ill, Sarah remembered, "... There was a girl actually that came and helped me. She was giving me Gatorade and then some ice; she was putting some ice on my back. She didn't even think about her time." Kate shared another story about a fellow runner helping her complete her first marathon, "... we finished it together, and then at the end, we both took our sunglasses off so we could see one another and thanked each other for running together ... he helped me get through my first race."

Lisa said the intimate details discussed during a long training run or during a marathon range from nasty divorces to the death of a parent.

I ran with a guy ... about mile 5, we connected with each other and we ran the whole way and he told me about his whole life story and how his mom had died And it was really fun to listen to the life stories in what he's experienced And how he had evolved and how he wanted to do something special that he knew that she would be proud of him for.

Participants described the bond with friends and acquaintances as even more intimate. They found the sharing of life histories to be important. They suggested that people who knew one another deeply could help to encourage and to motivate. Paula said all of the hours spent with running partners result in many private conversations, "... there's no holds barred, I don't think. When you have a training partner or a few close training partners, I mean there's nothing you're not going to talk about."

Lisa commented, "... here's my spirituality again ... you know, we all need to talk about what's bothering us, and what's important and what our passions are. And I think running has given me that opportunity to be able to connect ..." Distance running has offered these women a bonding experience, in which deep trust has developed between them and others. Sarah found that to be the case when she struggled to finish a marathon and was joined by a friend, who ran with her to the finish line.

... one of my friends ... he joined me at mile 23 and he ran with me ... that last three miles. There was a point that I could not run and I got cramps so bad He's like 'OK, you have to pick off that runner,' and then he dragged me into passing each runner ...

Nancy said she has found a kinship among other women marathon runners because they know the difficulty in training for and completing these races. She shared she was especially appreciative of her running friends' support following the death of her husband.

... women are very caring, especially running women. I mentioned I was a church secretary for 15 years and I didn't get one-fourth of the support from my church group as I did from my running community. And so, I repeat, I don't know where I would have been without them.

Lisa has also experienced this connection among fellow runners. "I've gotten to know people really well and become very good friends with someone that I didn't think we'd ever have anything in common. Because people start talking about intimate stuff when they're running." Yet Kate suggested that although she has made close connections with those she runs with, in the end, "... you are the one who's going to finish the race, one way or the other on your own. So, even if you start with someone ... it needs to be clear up front, you do what you need to do."

When I asked participants about this intimate connection, a few suggested that the outdoor environment contributed to the ease of sharing. Lisa said, "I think it's nature and the bottom bare connection of ... we're not at work ... we're not in somebody's house, we're just out there, all working toward the same common goals." Kate agreed. "It's basically you know, your pared-down version of yourself ... it's basic raw people, is what it is. It's really easy to begin talking."

The intimate connections also came in unexpected ways. Lisa talked about her father not attending her sporting events in high school. She found a connection with him when he began attending her marathons. She remembered deciding to participate in one marathon, at her father's request.

... it was pretty much because I wanted to please my father, and um, he hadn't really taken an interest and so I thought, wow, this is a chance for me to connect with my dad (crying). Gosh, you're getting me all choked up here. Um....(long pause)(crying).

Joan also shared that while she has tended to run her marathons solo, she has enjoyed running with others during long training runs, suggesting it was a practical way to combat the boredom that came from running multiple hours at a time.

When you run so often, it's nice to have somebody out there and you're running slower, so you have time to socialize, so you don't just feel like you're running and running and running ... you're socializing in there too.

Preparation

Having the fortitude to participate in a marathon is often the result of preparation many months before the event even took place. For the women who participated in this study, preparation for a marathon, both mentally and physically,

began long before they even crossed the starting line. The women described not only what they did in advance of the race to prepare themselves for the marathon, they also discussed the strategies they employed during a marathon to keep moving forward.

During the interviews, the women all discussed the physical discipline they needed, both in their training and during the race. Lisa suggested, "... it does take some preparation on a body to be able to run a race. And that might be ...nutrition, changing your eating habits ...". Kate also mentioned that she has tried to be more conscious of her diet and lifestyle while preparing for a marathon; her children have benefitted from her healthy habits. "It's very rare that we go to restaurants ... partly because it's difficult to find a good, truly healthy restaurant You have to eat correctly if you're going to run." She believed her running, along with these healthful habits, would benefit her and other runners as they aged. "It's going to keep us going much, much longer."

When Paula first began running marathons, she found the races so enjoyable, "... I never would only do two a year if I didn't have to. It would be three or four." To prepare for these earlier races, she found herself running two and a half hours a day, seven days a week. This training schedule took its toll on her body. Eventually, Paula changed the way she prepared for her races.

Sarah said in order to prepare for her marathons, she has worked at controlling her pace. By not starting out too fast at the beginning of the race "... you can get to the finish line if you control the pace If not, you're done." She suggested the marathon was a metaphor for life; controlling her pace was akin to balancing her life priorities, making sure nothing was done to excess.

While runners must physically prepare themselves to cover the distance of 26.2 miles, participants in this study acknowledged that preparing their minds for this endurance event was equally important. Paula said the marathon tests a person's mental limits.

... they learn about how strong their mind can be, and I think that's probably the biggest thing, is just learning humanly what you can do with your mind and what you can get through. I mean, anyone who's run one knows, you hit a hard phase, how much mind power there is. Your body's done, it's given up, but what your mind can get you through.

Sarah said she has practiced breathing meditation during her races as a way to calm her mind and body, so she can remain relaxed in her running. When she has been able to concentrate on her meditation, "You're not thinking about anyone who is passing you, you're not thinking about anyone competing with you. You're just running your marathon ..."

Lisa has tried to be mindful of where she was running during her marathons, saying, "I try to ... pay attention to the environment, and if it's a pretty route, if there's trees, if there's houses ...". Lisa said she has looked forward to seeing family along her race route, saying it provided her with a distraction from the long distance.

Nancy has harnessed the power of positive thinking to help her run her marathons.

You've just got to get into the mode where you just don't even think about anything other than to keep going and the accomplishment that you're doing it. Instead of thinking you have 10 miles to go, gee, I've done 16. It's really mental. I think maybe two-thirds of a marathon is mental.

All of the women have appreciated what running has done for them mentally, in terms of helping them cope with life's ups and downs. Sarah said she has enjoyed going for a run after a bad day at work, because it has alleviated stress. Kate added, "... your head gets cleared ... when you're running, you've got all this stuff going in your head ... but when you're done ... there's sense of clarity ... a sense of calmness..."

Inspiration/Transformation

Finally, research participants shared stories about how their marathons were transformative and inspirational. Lisa began running at a time when few women participated in distance events. She said shoe manufacturers did not even make running shoes for women; she had to purchase a men's pair, then stuff the toes with cotton so the shoes would fit her. The increasing number of people, especially women, who train and participate in marathons, has inspired her.

Paula agreed that marathon running has provided her with personal inspiration she hopes she can pass along to others.

I try to tell myself in anything at work if I'm getting stressed out, if I'm getting bombarded with stuff, to know that it's going to quit, it's going to get better. You know, the whole thing of 'this too shall pass' is something I say in my races and it's something I try to use in daily life. And I just think, with me too, my biggest thing through running is that I want it to be a way for me to inspire other people, not only in running, but in other things.

Sarah said she has continued to be awed and inspired by her marathon experiences "... when I look at these marathons, it's not only young people. There are so many older people running. And it's inspiring to me when I see those old people come to the finish line, even though I know how painful it is ..." Kate offered a similar story of inspiration.

... there was a woman that I spoke with during the race that was 85 years old that was running my pace, and mind you, it's not that fast of a pace, but this woman is 85 years old. She looks like she's almost 70. And she finished a little behind me and I'm like, man I was blown away. I'm like, I want to run a marathon when I'm 85.

Among the women I interviewed, running marathons was also transformative, allowing them to achieve what they never thought they were capable of initially, and providing them with memories they would cherish throughout their lives. Like Sarah, Kate also suggested running a marathon was a metaphor for life. “I would imagine when you get toward the end of your life, if you’ve made choices the way you want to make them, you’re going to feel satisfied And I think the marathon is a lot like that too.” Nancy saw marathon training as analogous to living one’s life, in both good times and bad times.

... just the fact that you have a program and you abide by that program is good for a life lesson too because sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to do or you don’t feel like doing, but this is the program, like life, this is the program, this is the way it’s going to be

Sarah also said the marathon has challenged and transformed her, not only on the racecourse, but also in how she has lived every day. Running in these races has taught her patience and self-control. Sarah expressed how fortunate she was, knowing that not everyone was capable of running these distances.

Lisa suggested the marathon is “life changing” for people, giving them the encouragement needed to accomplish other life goals.

If I can run a marathon, then why can’t I do something else—achieve a degree or buy a house or start my own business? It just gives ... maybe opens new doors to other possibilities in a person’s life It’s hope. It provides a glimmer of hope and light.

Composite Textural Description: What Participants Experienced

The composite textural description offers insight as to what participants experienced during the running of their marathons (Creswell, 2007). Most of the women who participated in this study admitted experiencing some form of struggle during the marathon, typically near the end of the race. The participants shared various coping strategies to disassociate themselves from the uncomfortable feelings. They also relied on their mental strength to help them finish. “... Anyone who’s run one knows, you hit a hard phase, how much mind power there is. Your body’s done, it’s given up, but what your mind can get you through.”

Yet, in spite of the physical and mental toll of marathons, the women have relished completing the distance. For these women, training with other marathoners has given them an opportunity to share stories, combat boredom, and make deep connections.

... It’s just like there is ... this bond ... and it doesn’t get spoken ... you become so close to the person when you run, you just feel like you can tell them anything. And you do (pause). And you do.

Those connections included family members, particularly parents who validated their daughters’ efforts. The women also expressed personally being “proud”

or having “bragging rights” once they finished a race. They could also see connections between the marathon and everyday life.

Composite Structural Description: How Women Completed the Marathon

The composite structural description offers insight about the situations or contexts in which these women marathon participants described the meaning of marathons (Creswell, 2007). The women in this study who completed the 26.2 mile distance did not just run their marathon in a single race day, but during the many months prior to the event. Participants in this study suggested that the physical preparation for a marathon in the weeks leading up to the race was crucial to their success. “... Every so often, when my training doesn’t go well, it’s grueling. Twenty miles seems like a long ways, and then there’s that other six (laughing).”

In order to prepare for this lengthy distance, the women were more attentive to their eating habits and a consistent training schedule.

It’s just a real ... accomplishment to train. It’s probably the most difficult part, in the sense that you have to stay with it ... and there’s long days of running where you really don’t want to run

In some cases, their attention to their exercise and eating habits not only benefitted themselves, but other family members to whom they were modeling healthy behaviors.

Participants in this study also developed strategies to mentally tackle a distance that would take them many hours to complete. In adjusting their habits and being attentive to the physical and mental preparation necessary to run a marathon, the women were helping to ensure themselves a more comfortable and successful experience on race day.

Essence: The Marathon is Transformative

Creswell (2007) noted that in phenomenological design, the *essential invariant structure*, or the essence, focuses on the commonality or shared experiences of all the participants. For women who took part in this study, the essence of running multiple marathons is the creation of a transformative experience—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Women marathon runners are in an elusive and exclusive club, separated from casual runners and everyday athletes, not only in terms of their tenacity but also in terms of their gender. They are participants in an activity still dominated by men. Through their minority status in the sport and perhaps because of it, the women in this study experienced deep connections and emotions throughout their training runs and during the actual race. These connections came with friends, family members, and even complete strangers who were sharing in the experience, either as fellow participants or as spectators.

As they struggled at times to complete these races, the women discovered the limits of their endurance. Mental and physical preparation in the months leading up to the race helped to sustain them and to see them across the finish line. Participants discovered that running marathons repeatedly was a source of deep satisfaction and pride, both for themselves and family members. “... In the mara-

thon ... you're constantly teaching yourself ... not to give up when it gets tough." Throughout their marathon journey, the women relished the experience. They were transformed by it and realized that if they could complete 26.2 miles, they were capable of accomplishing many other things. "We've come a long way and it's fun being a woman, being out there promoting, yes we can do this."

Discussion

Through their discussion of the meaning of marathons, participants in this study provided rich descriptions of the experiences they had running these races repeatedly. The six themes centered around the impact marathon running had on these women physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Training for and completing a marathon can be physically taxing on distance runners. Van Middlekoop, Kolkman, Van Ochten, Bierma-Zeinstra, and Koes (2008) researched running injuries among 725 men who participated in the Rotterdam marathon. They authors noted that injuries were common in these distance athletes; the majority of those surveyed sustained some type of running injury during training sessions preceding a race. Even among highly trained runners, the 26.2 mile distance can be daunting. In a study involving elite male runners, researchers noted that leg muscle strength is significantly lessened following a marathon (Petersen, Bugge Hansen, Aagaard, & Madsen, 2007).

Yet, in spite of the toll marathon running takes on a body, Trappe (2007) observed that continued running later in life might actually lessen physiological declines and improve a person's overall health. The women in this study believed that running contributed to their overall good health and would help to sustain them as they aged. One of the marathoners, a woman in her 60s, said others have introduced her as an older woman who still runs marathons. She chortled, "So I have a reputation. I guess that I could think of a lot worse reputations than a woman that does marathons."

Participants vividly described how they struggled at some point during the running of their marathon. In running folklore, such struggle is known to many marathoners as "hitting the wall." Research on hitting the wall is noted in the academic literature on marathon running as a physiological condition when glycogen stores in the body are depleted (Buman, Brewer, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2008; Stevinson & Biddle, 1998; Summers et al., 1983). Stevinson and Biddle (1998) noted this condition "... can be an extremely unpleasant experience ..." (p. 229). In research with 315 marathon participants, Buman et al. (2008), reported that roughly 43% experienced the phenomenon, including traits such as showing general fatigue, slowing of the race pace, desiring to walk, and shifting to a survival mentality. The researchers suggested this condition is not merely physiological, but also involves mental and behavioral issues.

The women prepared themselves for the 26.2 mile distance and the struggles that would ensue by conditioning their bodies as well as their minds. The literature details mental preparation strategies that marathon runners use during their training and during a race. Schüler and Langens (2007) noted that positive self-talk during a race could help a runner overcome a difficult phase. While running long distances, runners will either use association or disassociation to help them

mentally complete the distance. With association strategies, the runner carefully monitors things such as pace and breathing in order to enhance performance; with disassociation strategies, runners "... are thinking about anything but their distress or factors related to their performance" (Masters et al., 1993, p. 137). In research on marathon coping strategies, Masters and Lambert (1989) suggested more than a third of runners in their study used disassociation strategies in training runs, thinking about nature or other positive thoughts. The women revealed their disassociation strategies, such as mentally fixating on objects to keep them moving forward. "Ok, I'm going to that building, and then after that, picking another tree I'm going to that tree"

The women believed running stripped away artificial barriers between people. Dressing in running clothes, with unwashed hair, and no make-up, these women exposed their true selves. Several suggested running outdoors also contributed to their openness and ease of sharing with others. Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) noted running outside enhanced the experience, producing comfortable and peaceful feelings. Nature or natural environments help people feel more connected, peaceful, or spiritual when participating in leisure activities (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

In spite of the potential challenges, studies have noted distance running is not only beneficial for participants physically, but psychologically as well. Johnsgard (1985) suggested "... even though running doesn't always feel good, is often inconvenient, and is sometimes a chore ... runners persist because ... they typically feel better emotionally after running" (p. 142). Gondola and Tuckman (1982) also observed, that in spite of its physical demands, marathon running produced more positive than negative emotions in runners. Lee, Shafer, and Kang (2005) posited that emotions could impact how a person evaluates a particular leisure experience. They noted that over time, emotions could influence an individual's overall perception of a leisure activity.

Participation in distance running appears to have a powerful impact in enhancing women's self-efficacy, allowing women to embrace new challenges (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010). As part of a phenomenological study, the authors explored the mental changes that occurred with two women marathon runners. The authors noted for these two women, running marathons empowered them emotionally, positively impacted their relationship with others, and improved their self-confidence. They posited, "Running reunites her deep inner self, ultimately empowering her to be reborn as a new woman" (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010, p. 260). Marathon running was emotionally and spiritually transformative to the six women who participated in this study. The marathon connected these women to their families and to other runners, providing them a feeling of pride and empowerment. Several described how they have inspired others with their running, including family members. "Just yesterday, the 5-year-old said, 'Grandma look how fast I can run. I can run with you.'" Women can serve as powerful role models for other female family members. "Daughters acknowledge the important role their mothers played in the leisure interest they had as adults" (Shannon & Shaw, 2008, p. 12).

Summers et al. (1983) noted that women are more likely than men to conduct their marathon training with other runners. In research on women's psychological well-being, Lloyd and Little (2010) showed how women developed a strong bond with other women who were participating in the same leisure activity. Women derive more psychological advantages than men from running, including improved self-esteem and inner peace (Ogles et al., 1995). Sabiston et al. (2009) noted women who had participated in a group fitness activity felt empowered by the experience and believed the strength they exhibited through the activity could transfer to other aspects of their life. One of the marathoners in this study described the joy she felt supporting a friend as she paced her through a marathon. "It was awesome. It reminded me why I started running I just want to be an inspiration to others and to help them make their goals." Vertinsky (2008) concluded, "Feeling more capable, more powerful and a greater sense of belonging may be more important to a woman's physical health than whether she exercises more" (p. 100).

Limitations

Since the research addressed only women marathon runners, it is unclear whether the themes described are unique to women or universal to all multiple marathon participants. A study with men may reveal similar findings with themes such as struggle or pride.

This study involved interviews with just six women. Would research with other women expand the narrative contained within these themes or would new themes emerge as a result of additional interviews? Furthermore, while the women varied in age, all participants lived in the Midwest, participated in the same running community, and had similar backgrounds, which may have resulted in a similarity of findings.

Future Research

Several of the participants suggested that marathons were a metaphor for life. Further advancing our understanding of this endurance event may uncover additional knowledge that can be applied in other settings, personally or professionally. Hearing the voices of women as minority participants in the sport may provide a unique perspective and may encourage other women to attempt this or other goals that seem unattainable.

Certain themes merit additional study, such as the theme of struggle. The women who took part in this study fully accepted and even embraced the fact they would struggle during the running of their marathon. What lessons can be learned from this struggle, and what implications does this have for women as they face other life challenges, such as childbirth, menopause, and aging parents?

Furthermore, the participants in this study had completed five or more marathons. Interviews with women who finished only one marathon or who had participated in other challenging leisure activities might reveal unique themes. Lastly, future research may focus on women runners from a variety of cultural, educational, and socioeconomic vantage points, to develop a more complete picture of the leisure female marathon runner.

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