

Mothers, breast cancer survivorship and physical activity promotion

Catherine Mackenzie
BA (Hons)

*Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity
School of Medicine
Faculty of Health Sciences
Flinders University*

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Table of contents

Table of contents	3
Tables and figures	8
Summary	9
Declaration	11
Acknowledgements	12
Chapter 1: Introduction	15
Thesis aims	15
Why this study?	15
Research questions and scope	19
Key concepts used in this thesis	20
Meanings of survival, survivorship and survivor	20
Breast cancer as a journey	22
Everyday/everynight lives	22
Thesis structure	23
Chapter 2: Literature Review	27
Introduction	27
Public health significance of this study	27
Breast cancer in Australia	27
<i>Incidence and survivorship</i>	27
<i>Socioeconomic and social demographic influences on breast cancer incidence and mortality</i>	28
Physical activity participation in Australia	30
<i>Participation in physical activity of women with breast cancer</i>	32
<i>Motherhood and physical activity</i>	34
Breast cancer survivorship and physical activity participation	35
<i>Breast cancer treatments and physical activity participation</i>	36
<i>Recurrence, survival and physical activity participation</i>	38
Exercise intervention studies with women who have/had breast cancer ...	39
Women's accounts of breast cancer survivorship and physical activity ...	41
Theoretical frameworks for exploring women's accounts of breast cancer and physical activity	44
Public health and health promotion	45
The new public health	46
Models of health promotion	49

<i>Breast cancer prevention</i>	49
<i>Breast cancer screening</i>	50
Risk and choice - from public health to private lifestyle.....	52
<i>Heightened risk awareness after breast cancer as a teachable moment?</i>	53
<i>Criticisms of risk promotion</i>	55
Feminist theories and public health.....	58
<i>Feminist critiques of medicalisation</i>	58
<i>Feminist theorising of ideologies of motherhood</i>	60
<i>Motherhood, social support and health</i>	63
<i>Feminist leisure theory</i>	64
<i>Feminist theories of the body</i>	68
Theorising the body and public health	71
<i>Definitions of embodiment</i>	75
<i>Embodied expertise</i>	76
Conclusion	78
Chapter 3: Methodology	81
Introduction	81
Feminist research principles and methodological rigour	82
Feminist research principles	82
Voice and feminist research ethics	84
Voice, lay theorising and embodied expertise.....	85
Methodological rigour and reflexivity	87
Study Methods	88
Purposive sampling method.....	90
Sample recruitment.....	92
Sample description	96
Ethical considerations	100
The study process	100
Small group interviews.....	100
In-depth interviews.....	103
<i>Interview method</i>	104
Advisory group	108
Health promotion sources and materials.....	108
Sample/study limitations	109
Method of analysis	110
Presentation of findings	112
Analysis of demographic forms	112
Analysis of health promotion sources and materials	113
Coding physical activity participation	114
Coding partner support	116
Style and language notes	118
Conclusion	119

Chapter 4: Breast cancer journeys.....	123
Introduction.....	123
The journey begins.....	125
Finding the lump	125
Breast cancer surgery	129
Reconstructive surgery and physical activity.....	139
Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and physical activity	147
Journey into survivorship	154
Conclusion	161
Chapter 5: Responding to health promotion after breast cancer.....	163
Introduction.....	163
Knowledge about health benefits of physical activity	164
Key responses to health promotion messages	169
Theorising causation and risk.....	171
Individualist theories of causation	174
<i>Was it something I ate?</i>	175
<i>Something in me</i>	177
<i>Stress</i>	181
<i>I want to know the cause</i>	184
Taking health promotion with a grain of salt	184
Health promotion information sources	189
Mainstream cancer-related organisations	190
Complementary and alternative cancer-related organisations	199
Breast cancer advocacy and action organisations	204
Conclusion	208
Chapter 6: Mothers, breast cancer and physical activity participation.....	209
Introduction.....	209
Levels of participation	209
Factors influencing physical activity participation	210
Social influences	211
Social support	211
<i>Family support</i>	212
<i>Partner support</i>	213
<i>Support groups</i>	226
Paid work	228
Gendered identity.....	229

Class	230
Individual influences	232
Stage in the breast cancer journey - pain/fatigue.....	232
Pre-breast cancer physical activity participation and “being competitive”.....	233
Knowledge of health benefits of physical activity	235
Participation in context.....	235
More active women.....	236
Less active women	246
Conclusion.....	256
Chapter 7: Discussion.....	261
Introduction.....	261
Interpreting risk as cause	262
Individualising risk.....	263
Self-blame.....	266
Resisting self-blame.....	270
Cause as a social and political construct	271
Reflections on the teachable moment.....	272
Social context and participation	274
Gender, class and participation.....	274
Gendered identity, care work and participation	277
The journey, embodiment and health promotion	282
The breast cancer journey and embodied expertise	284
Embodied decision-making.....	286
Conclusion.....	288
Chapter 8: Conclusion	293
Introduction.....	293
Summary of thesis aims, objectives and findings.....	293
Key findings against research questions.....	294
Responses to health promotion information.....	294
Information sources	296
Decision-making about health.....	296
Key influences on participation in physical activity.....	297
Enabling participation.....	298
Study quality and limitations.....	302
Further research	303
Concluding reflections.....	304
References	305

Appendices 329

Tables and figures

Tables

Table 1: Purposive sample – breast cancer description.....	98
Table 2: Purposive sample demographic description	99
Table 3: Physical activity and potential influencing factors	218

Figures

Figure 1: The women’s theories of causation.....	171
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Summary

Breast cancer is the most commonly reported cancer in women in Australia, with increasingly high survival rates. Consequently, the health and wellbeing of breast cancer survivors is becoming an important field of cancer survivorship research. Research shows that regular physical activity participation improves important health outcomes for women after a breast cancer diagnosis. In Australia, rising average age of first birth means more women diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia are mothers of dependent children, but little is known about their experience. This thesis explores the experiences and views on physical activity promotion and participation of this significant but scarcely researched group of women.

This thesis adopts a critical and feminist lens to ask: how do Australian women who were mothers of dependent children at the time of their breast cancer diagnosis respond to information about health benefits of regular participation in physical activity? To answer this question, the thesis asks five sub-questions; firstly, from what sources do the women gather information about physical activity and health and how do they feel about the information? Secondly, how do they make decisions about acting to support their health in general and physical activity in particular? Thirdly, in what ways do factors such as socioeconomic status, gender or location influence their views on and participation in physical activity? Fourthly, what would it take to enable this group of women to undertake physical activity at a level that is likely to produce health benefit? And lastly, how can evidence from women who have had a breast cancer diagnosis assist in promoting physical activity to women at a broader population level?

This thesis answers these research questions principally by analysis of 36 in-depth interviews with rural and metropolitan women living in South Australia and Victoria, who were diagnosed with breast cancer while they were mothers of dependent children.

The analysis shows how the women's responses to health promotion

messages were shaped by their embodied experience of their breast cancer journeys in their social contexts. The women responded to health promotion information in ways that suggest that messages based on data from studies of population risk were unhelpful at an individual level. The women's responses to these types of health promotion messages ranged from resistance to cynicism and/or blaming themselves for their breast cancer diagnosis.

Consistent with both feminist and qualitative public health research, the women reported social, structural and individual enablers and constraints to participation in physical activity including level of intimate partner support, their own/partners' paid work, their everyday/everynight child caring responsibilities, their post-treatment pain and fatigue, their level of priority for physical activity participation, and the pleasure they derived from it. Most of the women spoke of knowing about the biological benefits of participation in physical activity for women after having breast cancer treatment (such as maintaining bone mineral density) whether or not they themselves participated.

The thesis supports a theoretical approach to health promotion after breast cancer that includes the concept of embodied expertise in breast cancer which is developed over the breast cancer journey. The thesis concludes that combining feminist and critical research principles is crucial to developing health promotion strategies that attend to gender and embodiment, to enable health promoters to support women's health after a breast cancer diagnosis.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date:

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