

IS SAFETY A CONCERN FOR WOMEN RUNNERS?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain whether women runners perceive safety as a concern. Twelve female runners were selected for in-depth interviews.

The women runners in this study indicated that they are concerned for their safety. Statements such as "I have a friend that has been attacked" were associated with feelings of "being afraid." Women runners did not perceive their "concern for safety" detrimental to the point that they would not run, but problematic enough that it would influence when, how, and where they ran. Further research is needed to better understand the notion of "power and control" and whether this sense of "empowerment" is present in other exercise and sport activities (Running, Safety, Power and Control).

Introduction

Being fearful or having concern for one's safety is not normally associated with running. Several researchers have explored how fears and coping behavior affect leisure experience (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). In addition, research examining women's perceptions of leisure have contributed insights into how women experience fear in leisure settings and how these fears affect their leisure experience (Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993; Whyte & Shaw, 1994). There has been research exploring the relationship between women, adventure activities and meaning (Little, 2002), and women, fear and solo hiking experience (Coble, Selin & Erickson, 2003). Despite this research, no research has explored the relationship between women runners and fear, in the context of leisure.

Leisure behavior research has examined fear within a leisure constraint context. Leisure constraints have been classified into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Fear functions as an intrapersonal constraint since it reflects an internal psychological condition or emotional state that is individually experienced. Keane (1998) refers to this state as a perceived lack of safety. Therefore, the question is, if women experience this perceived state of fear (leisure constraint) in the context of running, does it influence their running?

Henderson and Dialeschki (1991) suggested that "if women believe that they are entitled to leisure, it may be useful to describe within a feminist framework how women can empower themselves and transform their lives through leisure" (p. 366). Opportunities for empowerment through the leisure aspects of women's lives may have a relationship to other areas of women's lives (Henderson & Dialeschki, 1991). Running may provide an opportunity for women to meet their leisure needs and as a result, may also afford a sense of empowerment. A clearer understanding of the concept of empowerment for women runners in the context of leisure is provided in this study.

Guiding Framework

Despite a variety of theoretical approaches and with rare exception, (Barrell et al., 1989; Nash, 1979; Yair, 1990) distance running has been investigated almost entirely from the quantitative perspective. The major limitation of quantitative research is its inability to represent fully the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Also, much of what is presently known about runners has evolved from studies focusing on supervised exercise programs and/or the so-called elite athlete. This investigation will employ unsupervised runners.

In leisure research, the predominate goals have been to explain why people are attracted to their freely-chosen leisure activities and to identify the benefits that they find from these activities that are differentiated from work and other traditional non-leisure activities. Furthermore, qualitative methods tend to be more fruitful in describing the social psychological essence of leisure generally and predicting the typical patterns of benefits in a given leisure activity as experienced by the participants.

Qualitative research provides the opportunity to better understand the role that running occupies for those who take that activity seriously. A less constrained research design intended to prompt runners to talk about their running "careers" will provide information about meaning and personal investment from a phenomenological perspective. Thus, this investigation will employ qualitative methods utilizing in-depth interviews. In sum, this research design is intended to prompt the runner to talk their way through their running careers to facilitate information from a phenomenological perspective. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to better understand the role that running and safety occupies in the lives of women runners.

Methodology

A small University City in the Southeastern region of the United States was the general setting. Three recently held local 5K road races were conveniently selected. Runners at road races consist of men and women of a wide range of ages, races, levels of education, occupations, cultural backgrounds, languages, socioeconomic status, levels of expertise, and levels of running experience. The sample utilized in this study was derived from a list of runners who had competed in and finished one of the three, 5K road races. This runners list included their names, ages, gender and phone number and was generated by the race director. Names of runners who had been randomly selected were removed from further sampling.

In this investigation, a list of runners who race was secured from the race director and 12 female runners were conveniently randomly selected and contacted by phone for in-depth interviews. The proposed in-depth interviews took place at a mutually agreed-upon time and place. Each selected runner was interviewed once.

Demographics

All informants were Caucasian. Seven female runners were married, five of whom had at least two children, while four female runners were single. The remaining female runner was divorced and had two children. The mean age was 31.

Eleven female runners, ten of whom were employed full-time as University faculty, educators, or administrators had graduate degrees. Of the remaining two female runners, one informant had a medical degree and was employed as a graduate student, while the other female runner had a doctoral degree and was a housewife with two children.

The female runners' income ranged from a low of \$15,000 to a high of \$66,000. Six female runners were members of a running club and all the female runners ran between three and six times weekly. They had between two years and 30 years of running experience and weekly mileage varied from a low of nine miles to a high of 35 miles weekly. Nine of the 12 female runners maintained running logs.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured, informal, conversational in-depth interviews (Taylor & Bodgan, 1984) were employed for data collection. The main purpose of the interviews was to explore "what is important in the minds of informants: their meanings, perspectives, and definition; how they view, categorize, and experience the world" (Taylor & Bodgan, 1984, p. 88) while affording them the opportunity to "tell their stories."

This interview included open ended questions to allow informants to respond according to their experience and outlook. The questions: "Is safety an issue for you?" and "Can you tell me something about that?" provided opportunities for informants to respond according to their interpretation of reality.

Data Analysis

Several strategies were employed for data analysis. The constant comparative method was employed by which categories and themes were generated in the course of considering subsequent interview data. While it was anticipated that the questions asking about safety, (e.g. "Is safety an issue for you?") would elicit a discussion of personal meaning and incentives, care was taken not to direct the informant in those directions. Once patterns and concepts emerged, they were addressed routinely during that interview and those that followed until theoretical saturation was achieved. This strategy is consistent with Merriam (1988) who suggested that data collection and analysis occur simultaneously.

Results

Fear Being Attacked

The issue of safety and running became a major theme in this study for female runners. The question: "Is safety an issue for you?" was asked to all female runners.

Although all women runners expressed concern for their safety, only one quarter of them were in fact afraid. These fears were found among married and single women runners alike, and among those of all ages. This was verbalized by one single woman. Tina stated:

"I've had several friends that have been attacked. I mean, Joan's been attacked twice. She had a guy jump out of the bushes at her and grab her, and she managed to get away and ran. She had her mace with her and sprayed him with it. She had a guy stalk her for 3 years. So it's very scary to me; so it is a concern. So that's another reason I like running with somebody else. It feels good to have somebody else with me."

Another important factor for women runners was knowing when to run and when not to run. Nancy reported:

"I don't run when it's dark. I don't run out there in Winterville because there aren't sidewalks, I'm very conscious of running on the roads with cars, so in some ways it is a very efficient form of exercise, but on the other hand, there are some problems with running that has to do with where you can run, and when you can run, safety issues."

Nancy's response was followed up with this question: "Have you had any negative experiences regarding safety?" She spoke about a recent experience she had when she was on one of her long Sunday morning runs.

"Well, I've never had a negative experience when I've been out running and something physically negative has happened to me but there have been things you sort of wonder what if. Let me tell a story. Sunday morning I got up and read the newspaper and went running with a friend and there was that big story about some kids in Atlanta that just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and someone pulled a gun and blew him away. Well, I went out running and I was standing on the corner at Five Points, and you are standing right there on the sidewalk, and the street is right next to you, and some jerk just laid on their horn, just I guess to be a practical joker. Well, I wasn't thinking about that, and it scared me, so I jumped and I turned around to look at them, and this is a van full of maybe late adolescents, and they started laughing, and that got me mad, and I sort of gave them a, nothing bad, but a scowl and went on. So apparently they didn't like that so when they passed me they rolled down their window and out came this barrage of not very nice things to be saying on this Sunday morning. Well the first thing that came to mind is, don't do anything, don't react because if you react what's the next thing that could happen. They could get out, here I was, there weren't a lot of people around and there weren't a lot of houses around. I thought I'm tired, I've been running for eight miles at this point, if these people get out and do something, take it to one step further... so there have been those incidences but never anything where someone has actually done anything to me; but I hope it doesn't get to that point."

Betty, a married female runner with 14 years of running experience, reported:

"Right now for me, I have become almost afraid to run when I travel. Now I don't run as much. I always look for a hotel that has a swimming pool. And I prefer to run. I have not run at home in the morning (6 a.m.) since early spring, it (a man was driving by me when I was running, stopped and tried to get me in his car) scared me enough that I don't run at night by myself. Now, I try to run during the middle of the day. So for me that is the worse thing about running. Now I feel like I can't just go out and do it. There's a constraint, safety, personal safety. To me there is very little negative about running. I usually feel better about myself because I have accomplished something."

Other women runners expressed similar thoughts and feelings. Penny stated:

"I try to pay attention when I run. You never know what might happen. It could be a dog, a car, maybe a man. I had a friend who was followed so now she carries mace when she runs. I don't see myself doing that, but I try to be careful."

Although all women runners were concerned for their safety, three quarters of the women runners did not feel afraid. They were, however, selective about where and when they ran. For example, in response to the question, "Is safety an issue for you?" May stated:

"I have never felt unsafe running during the day. Maybe I should be more cautious but I'm not. I mean if my schedule forced me to run more in the dark then I would be more concerned, but it doesn't bother me."

However, Kate said:

"No, no, that doesn't bother me. We've seen the exhibitionist a number of times and it was right after the first time we saw him that I thought twice, you know. That kind of spooked us, but usually that's not on my mind at all."

In this study, safety emerged as a major theme for all but one female runner. Regardless of the number of years of running experience, marital status, income, or occupations, the meaning that safety held in the lives of women runners was consistent. Participants were concerned for their safety although not necessarily afraid for their safety. As a result, they altered their running routine by either running with others, running at certain times of the day, or intentionally avoiding certain places. Another female runner, Mary shared her thoughts this way:

"I live in a small town, and I can't always run when it is convenient, or where it's convenient, so I try and run during the daytime when there is light. I try not to run when it is dark. It just doesn't make sense to take a chance. You never know what might happen out there with the cars, narrow roads and poor lighting. I love running and how I feel about myself but there are safety issues as well."

Mary's responded to this follow up question: "What safety issues are you concerned about?" by stating: "There are some problems with running that has to do with where you can run, and when you can run, you know, safety issues. One of the reasons I run is because I feel better about myself, I have accomplished something."

Women runners, tend to feel vulnerable with the possibility of being attacked from other people. They are also concerned with the danger from automobiles and traffic. However, they fear the threat of violence most.

Power and Control

Some female runners tied the sense of accomplishment and self-confidence to a sense of power and control. For ten women who ran, it appeared that it was the power and control associated with running that enhanced their sense of self. Maehr (1984) and Maehr and Braskamp, (1986) suggested that a sense of self is the individual's collection of thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings related to who they are. Maehr (1984) suggested that a sense of competence is a powerful determinant on one's personal investment in that it leads individuals to select activities which are self-enhancing. For these women runners, their subjective judgment of their ability to do something successfully significantly contributed to their self-confidence and enhanced sense of self.

Henderson and Dialeschki (1991) suggested that the priority of leisure in a women's life may be an important aspect of entitlement and may be related to how women gain empowerment through a sense of entitlement to leisure with their lives. A lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure is viewed as a leisure constraint. Correspondingly, a sense of entitlement to leisure is viewed as empowerment (Henderson & Dialeschki, 1991). Running in the context of leisure provides one such opportunity for women to gain a sense of empowerment.

For example, Elizabeth is a 56-year old married women who chose to stay home and raise her family. When her children had left "the nest," she went back to school and reentered the work force. She noted that, "There is a sense of being in control of your life when you run, you've accomplished something," and added: "It's amazing how much running has helped me to just feel good about myself. I feel empowered, which is an overused word, but I just feel that way about myself."

The importance of power and control was not restricted to those of Elizabeth's age. Another female runner, Penny, a 34 year old, single, graduate student and veterinarian reported:

"Having control over the upper part of my mind, which has control over my body to make myself do it. It's probably one of the reasons I've chosen to go into running, instead of something like playing soccer or tennis. I can't analyze for myself but there is a connection between being in control of my life and running."

Polly added: "I think it has changed the way men look at me. Men come up to me after races that I have beaten. They don't expect that (she laughs). It gives you a feeling of a bit of power".

Conclusion

This study has attempted to capture whether safety is a concern for female runners. It is evident that runners do consider running a safety issue. A sense of power and control or empowerment was also realized for the majority of female runners.

Fear for one's safety emerged as a major concept in this study. Eleven of the 12 female runners articulated that concern for their safety was an issue. Their concern for their safety influenced when, where and with whom they ran.

Future research may prove fruitful to examine whether this sense of "power and control" is experienced in other leisure activities. In addition, does this sense of power and control experienced by women in this leisure activity affect other facets of their lives? The results of this study are limited to the cultural variables of the participants and are, therefore, limited in generalization of results in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and education.

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