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The use of poetry in qualitative post-hoc analysis

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Abstract

In this brief report three poems stemming from previously completed research into the motivations of 12 Black women who participate in triathlons, are presented. A review of the transcripts revealed impactful stories from the previously identified themes Competition, Triathlete Lifestyle, and Lifespan Participation. A phenomenological approach to this post-hoc qualitative analysis provides an outlet for poetic expression. The poems, each representative of the words and life world sensations recorded within the transcripts, are of varying styles. The first is free form allowing for inconsistency in the poem pattern. The second provides comic relief in a limerick. The last is a sonnet with words that can be put to music. The reexamination of the previous research and development of the poems revealed a theme not previously cited. ‘Time’ is a catalyst for the triathletes and its importance is illuminated in the prose.

Keywords

poetry; triathlon; motivation; Black women; time

Introduction

Poetry, in research, takes the existence of truths within attitudes, feelings, or ideas (Harmon, 2011) and illuminates them through prose that speaks to the mind and heart of readers. According to Ratner (2002) poetry can be used when researchers respect the participants’ reality and are able to accurately comprehend stories. Additionally, researchers should have an awareness of poetic traditions and possess an ability to discuss how poetry informs their work (Faulkner, 2007). When successful, the expressive use of poetry provides an opportunity to: 1) present research findings that may otherwise go unnoticed and 2) gain a new perspective to the researcher (Sparkes, 2008; McCulliss, 2013). The poems for this manuscript were derived from the stories of Black women on their motivations to participate in triathlons.

Methods

Qualitative research, in mixed methods, provides stories that enrich study analysis. However, integration of data can also cause difficulty in choosing which part of the thematic sections

to present. Phenomenology was used to further explore the themes from the original study. First, I reviewed the themes from the previously completed study; following, I reread the transcripts from where the themes emerged. The transcripts captured several aspects of the interviews through the use of auditory recordings (for verbal communication), field notes (for non-verbal communication), and post-interview contact forms (for researcher reflection).

Three themes, *Competition*, *Triathlete Lifestyle*, and *Lifespan Participation* had stories that both embodied the participants' (n= 12) views of life as triathletes. Similar to Lahman et al. (2011) who reflected on their research representation through a composition of three poems, the following manuscript uses poetic illuminations of data results to present an expanded interpretive life world view for participation in triathlons among the triathletes (Brown, 2016). The stories related to the three specific themes became the source of inspiration for this manuscript and are presented as separate poems.

"*My Race*," is written in free verse because the stories that represented the theme, Competition, were spoken with a sense of freedom. The poem, therefore, is not limited to the regular meter of words. The second poem, "*...it happens*" is written in limerick style as the novel theme, Triathlete Lifestyle, developed from realities that often provided comic relief. The last poem, "*Forever Triing*" is a sonnet that was written because life, as a triathlete, is like a song. Following each poem is an inspirational quote from one of the women and a description of the poems' relation to the study themes.

Findings

My Race

Seconds, minutes, days and the months have led to the start.
 My reasons are my own.
 Eyes focus at the water with anticipation.
 Legs jump- the adrenaline is high.
 A cadre of mixed emotions
 produce the triathlete's heart.
 It is racing.
 Go into myself and start my mantra.
 Everyone around starts to fade.
 The yells of encouragement become silent.
 I'm ready.
 Time won't wait for me to finish.
 So, I'll just have to beat my time.

"The only person that I'm competitive against, is myself."

~Nita

"*My Race*" is a description of what occurs before the start of the triathlon. The women described the volume of time and effort placed into their training- for a race that could last up to 18 hours depending on the distance (Sprint to Ironman), their strength and speed, and

elements they were unable to control (e.g. weather). Nita, in particular, was recovering from a knee injury during the time of her interview. During her recovery process she saw other triathletes completing races without her and realized that she is her own competition. Her competition was based on her time of surgery, recovery, rehabilitation, and training for the next triathlon season.

Participants spoke of how they would have either a song to sing or words to speak to help with nervousness or keep focused when racing. Going into oneself is how they would rediscover that place of preparedness. A reminder of readiness was a necessity because one could not quit before beginning. Race regulations have a cut off time and not completing the race in the appointed time means disqualification. So, while a triathlete must be aware of their time, the race is not against anyone else. The race is them against their time.

...it happens

There was a girl who loved to train.
Biking one hundred miles caused pain.
She got to the loop.
And had to go poop.
She now believes she is insane.

“When everybody is crazy, nobody is.”

~ Lexi

“...it happens” is derived from the stories of self-realization that produced the theme Triathlon Lifestyle. The time to train and race is often interpreted as ‘crazy’ by non-triathletes. Amateur triathletes train in addition to their careers. Professionals, at least, have the opportunity to earn pay at the end of the race as incentive for all their training. Pain accompanies the circular process (i.e. the loop) of training. And long training days equal the less likelihood of being places with washroom facilities. So, it is most important to be prepared to handle “business” during the training session. One cannot always estimate when they are going to ‘need to go’ and this leads to a variety of solutions which usually involve a bush and personal tissue. Experienced triathletes are fully aware of this one example of inconvenience yet, they continue to train and race. Lexi, a marathoner, chose to participate in triathlons following a double mastectomy. Her family thought she was crazy for the endeavor but after talking with other triathletes and learning why they compete, she concluded that every triathlete is crazy in their own right. Triathletes believe themselves to be insane- not ‘mentally ill’, but through the shock of what they make their bodies endure.

Forever Triing

Fifty-two pairs of running shoes.
Innumerable times that bike she mount.
Swimsuits for years that were anew.
All the gear she cannot count.
She sees the future near an end.
All her hair is graying too.
When her skin is wearing thin.
Her unwrinkled face still has youth.

She searches for others who look like her.
 Not as many as she'd like to see.
 She throws her fist to infer.
 Pride and strength to the minority.
 Her race times may start to slow.
 But she will not stop her race.
 She reached a personal plateau.
 And intends to participate.
 She is a lifelong triathlete.
 That is who she will always be.

"I saw the finish line and...I was like, I wanna do this for the rest of my life."

~Marissa

"Forever Triing" speaks to the future of racing. This poem derived from the theme, Lifespan Participation, which was embedded within the Triathlon Lifestyle theme. The word "triing" is dual defined meaning both "to try" and also, "to move toward completing a triathlon". A triathlete needs a lot of sporting gear for the three sporting events and will use many pairs of running and biking shoes and swimsuits throughout their triathlon career. The signs of aging, including graying hair and racing at a slower pace, are apparent. But, the face of anticipation of starting a race, excitement and pain through a race, and relief following completing a race is recognizable- regardless of age. There is a continuous vitality and distinct look of youth in all those who continue to participate.

Marissa has been racing for over 10 years and from the first moment she crossed the finish line, she knew this sport would be hers forever. She has experienced the growth in numbers of Black triathletes; however, these numbers are significantly lower than those of White triathletes. There is a sense of belonging past the culture of being a triathlete. Cultural belonging, within the Black triathlete community, is deeper because social stigmas, such as the inability to swim among Blacks, are proudly disproven. Seeing another Black triathlete at a race is a reminder that one is not alone. The raising of the fist is one to remind others of the pride they should feel as Black triathletes, the strength they should give to all triathletes, and the respect to all who are part of the triathlon community. Throughout the time of the lifespan, changes to body composition may affect the distance, number of triathlons completed in each year, and the allotted time to finish a race. However, aging does not mean quitting, rather this form of sport serves as a life extension.

Discussion

The purpose of this writing was to revisit the conclusions of a previously completed study and provide an interpretation of the themes through poetry. Poetry allows for an "evocative way of communication," in sport (Sparkes, 2008, p. 658). It has been used to share the processes of athletes in golf (Douglas, 2012) and football (Keyes & Gearity, 2011); this piece adds to the use of poetry in sport using triathletes. The three poems were inspired by the stories of midlife to older Black women triathletes. The subjective point of view is considered absolute in qualitative research; however, using objectivism for this manuscript

enabled precision in the cultural analysis of the women as triathletes (Ratner, 2002). The opportunity to compose poems, based on previous data and analysis, unexpectedly revealed “time” as a main theme.

Other research has identified time as a barrier for participation in exercise among Black women (Pekmezi et al., 2013). In this post-hoc analysis, measurements of time are embedded within the lines. In the first poem this is read in the words, “Seconds, minutes, days and the months have led to the start,” and then towards the end of the poem when the triathlete reminds herself that time will not wait for her to finish so she must beat it (time). Although time is not directly mentioned in the second poem, it is inferred in the line, “Biking one hundred miles caused pain,” as it takes hours to ride a bike for that distance. The effects of time are discussed in the first two stanzas of the sonnet. The first stanza is focused more on the accessories of the triathlete: number of shoes, the bike she mounted so often she does not know the count, the worn swimsuits and additional gear that cannot be counted. The second stanza is about how time has affected her body. Her hair is gray, the skin is thin, and her end is near. Through these poems, however, the triathlete does not allow time to have power. She is the master of time and therefore, a lifelong triathlete.

Time is likely an especially important factor for all triathletes as they master their events quickly and efficiently. The concept of time being a major theme around the life world of a triathlete, as it relates to their training schedule, work life (for amateurs), family and friends (who often lend social support), and any additional responsibilities that accompany adulthood is one that could be explored among other triathletes in future studies.

Conclusion

Taking the opportunity to do a post-hoc qualitative analysis of previous research and write the results in the form of poetry, allowed for a new perspective in qualitative research. The poems revealed time as a catalyst for participation in the sport. These women are participating in triathlons for a myriad of reasons. But, perhaps in the end, it is all about time. Out-swimming time. Out-biking time. Out-running time. Out-living time.

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