

Leisure Sciences, 29: 53–69, 2007
 Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
 C
 ISSN: 0149-0400 print / 1521-0588 online
 DOI: 10.1080/01490400600983420
 “There is Life after Breast Cancer”: Nine Vignettes
 Exploring Dragon Boat Racing for Breast
 Cancer Survivors
 DIANA C. PARRY
 University of Waterloo
 Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

The following representations are about lived experiences with dragon boat racing (DBR) for breast cancer survivors. DBR is a leisure pursuit focused on life after medical treatment for breast cancer. Previous research focused on physiological benefits of DBR and overlooked the broader health implications of this leisure pursuit. Data were collected through active interviews with twelve participants. Using creative analytic practice, the collection of stories included in this text reveal DBR experiences from a survivor’s standpoint. The stories disclose changes to a sense of self, personal identity, and health and well-being. The use of short stories contributes to the dialogue of creative analytic practice within leisure studies.

Keywords creative analytic practice, health, leisure, quality of life

Survivorship is the most important outcome of a breast cancer experience, yet one of the least studied and thus, least understood aspect of the disease. Defined as a life-long, dynamic process, survivorship begins when people have completed medical treatment for cancer, yet live with the memories of their treatment and the possibility of a cancer reoccurrence (Pelusi, 1997; Thomas-MacLean, 2004). Breast cancer remains the most frequently diagnosed cancer in Canadian women, but the number of survivors is increasing. An estimated 21,200 women developed breast cancer in 2004 (Canadian Breast Cancer Federation, 2006). Mortality rates, however, are at their lowest since 1986; the five-year survival rate for breast cancer is approximately 76% (Oh et al., 2004).

These statistics demonstrate that while breast cancer is a serious health issue for many women, so is survivorship. Toward this end Thomas-MacLean (2004) argued, “The growing population of breast cancer survivors affirms that research on [survivorship] is imperative” (p. 628). The current study addresses this gap in the breast cancer literature by examining dragon boat racing as a leisure pursuit for breast cancer survivors. Dragon boat racing is a person-centered community-based leisure pursuit focused on life after medical treatment for breast cancer. I was first introduced to dragon boat racing for survivors when Isawa team profiled on television. A number of women were interviewed and they shared their experiences with dragon boat racing and breast cancer survivorship. Based upon my family experience with cancer, I was particularly interested in the focus on survivorship or life after medical treatment for cancer. I wanted to learn how this leisure pursuit contributed to survivorship. Moreover, I thought in sharing the knowledge gained I could impact the

Received 9 January 2006; accepted 6 June 2006.
 Address correspondence to Diana C. Parry, University of Waterloo, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Centre for Behavioural Research and Program Evaluation, Burt Matthews Hall, 200 University Avenue

West, Waterloo, ON, Canada, N2L 3G1. E-mail: dcparry@healthy.uwaterloo.ca

53

D. C. Parry

survivorship and health of greater numbers of women. Thus, I decided to study one of the dragon boat racing teams in Ontario to further understand this leisure pursuit and its link to health and well-being. The research question that guided the study was, “What roles does dragon boat racing play in health and well-being throughout breast cancer survivorship?”

Dragon Boat Racing

Dragon boat racing originated in China where dragons are a symbol of guardians against

evil spirits (Sofield & Sivan, 2003). Drag boat racing is no longer limited to China and now boasts international participation with both competitive and recreational teams. The sport of dragon boat racing involves “strenuous, repetitive upper body activity of 18 to 20 paddlers propelling a 40–60 foot craft along a race course of 500 to 650 meters” (Harris & Niesen-Vertommen, 2000, p. 95). The bow of the boat is carved into the form of a dragon and participants paddle in unison to the rhythm of a drummer (McNicoll & Doyle, in press). “To achieve high racing speeds,” Unruh and Elvin (2004) explained, “the blade of the paddle must hit the water in a horizontal position with a quick, backward pull, an action that requires considerable trunk and upper extremity muscle strength” (p. 139). A well-trained and experienced team has a rate of approximately 70 to 80 strokes per minute, which is an impressive accomplishment given that boats weigh up to 2,250 kilograms when fully loaded with participants (Unruh & Elvin).

“Abreast in a Boat,” located in British Columbia, Canada, was the first team of dragon boat racers for breast cancer survivors. The pursuit originated with a small research project designed to study the impact of paddling upon lymphedema (McKenzie, 1998). At the end of the study, which concluded dragon boat racing did not increase lymphedema, the team was expected to disband. The participants, however, were so enthusiastic about their involvement that the team continued to paddle. Moreover, the participants talked to others about their involvement in dragon boat racing. Word spread throughout the breast cancer community initiating a social movement as participation rates in dragon boat racing for survivors climbed across Canada and worldwide. Thus, what started as a small empirical study grew to include 93 dragon boat racing teams for breast cancer survivors worldwide. The pursuit seems popular because dragon boat racing is open to all survivors who are six months post-treatment and attracts people of all ages, including women from underserved ethnocultural groups. Training for dragon boat racing can take place on a lake, river, or pool and can involve dry land training, which makes it accessible to urban and rural women alike. Corporate sponsorship and fundraising frequently offset the financial burden of participation. Training for dragon boat racing takes place year round and requires an ongoing commitment to the team (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2002). If dragon boat racing is shown to provide a range of health benefits, it could be an important component of survivorship for many breast cancer survivors.

Although dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors has the potential to impact upon various components of health, previous research has focused on its physiological benefits. For example, Harris and Niesen-Vertommen (2000) studied exercise-induced lymphedema following breast cancer. Physiotherapists, health professionals, and surgeons had previously warned women who had had auxiliary lymph nodes removed for the management of breast cancer to avoid vigorous, repetitive, or excessive upper body exercise. They believed such activity would induce lymphedema. In addition to the original study by McKenzie (1998) mentioned above, the study by Harris and Niesen-Vertommen also showed that dragon boat racing did not induce lymphedema. A more recent study (Warburton et al., 2004) demonstrated the physiological benefits of dragon boat racing for transplant patients. Moreover, dragon boat racing has been studied with respect to exercise adherence demonstrating the

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

physiological benefits of regular exercise for breast cancer patients (Courneya, Blanchard, & Laing, 2001). These studies revealed that most of the research on dragon boat racing has demonstrated its physiological benefits while scant research has examined how this leisure pursuit addresses other health benefits relevant to breast cancer survivorship. Consequently, despite the popularity of this leisure pursuit for breast cancer survivors, little is known about the broader health benefits of participation in dragon boat racing. I addressed this gap with this research.

Guiding Theoretical Framework: Feminism

The current research on dragon boat racing was guided by a feminist epistemology. A variety of feminist epistemologies exist (Thompson, 1992). Like many feminist scholars, I sought to “enhance the voices of women who have been overlooked in previous . . . research” (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995, p. 882). The particular feminist epistemology I

adopted embraced emotions, values, personal beliefs, empathy, multiple realities and voices, politics, personal and lived experiences, and motivations. I agree with Thompson that:
 (a) all inquiry is value-sustaining, and feminist work is politicized inquiry;
 (b) separation between researcher and researched does not ensure objectivity, and a closer connection between the two may reconcile objectivity and subjectivity;
 (c) women's experience can be considered a source and justification of knowledge;
 and (d) there may be no such thing as truth and objectivity. (p. 9)

Consistent with a feminist epistemology, this study was based on active interviews, which Dupuis (1999) described as conversational in nature. Most important, Dupuis explained that active interviews foster and value a dynamic interplay between researchers and respondents. Consequently, active interviews "involve mutual disclosure, a sharing of information and insight in the meaning-making process" (p. 57). Thus, active interviews enabled the women to discuss to their own stories and explain their own encounters grounding the knowledge gained in their lived experiences. Thus, the active interview created a space where women could share their own narratives and explain their own experiences (Kaufman, 1992). In this sense, "Knowledge was generated through dialogue, listening, and talking" (Thompson, 1992, p. 10).

Selecting and Accessing Participants

Participants were selected purposefully as a rich source of information that "illuminated the questions under study" (Patton, 1990, p.169). More specifically, I used criterion sampling. The rationale behind criterion sampling was to include participants who met "some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, p. 176). In this case, participants needed to be breast cancer survivors involved in dragon boat racing.

I accessed participants through an email correspondence sent out to members of a large dragon boat racing team in southern Ontario, Canada. All members of the team were sent an information letter about the study and were encouraged to contact me through email or the telephone if they wished to participate. Eleven women and one man responded to the letter, expressing a desire to participate in the study. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. I invited each participant to be as involved with the research process as he or she desired. Each participant was informed he or she would receive a transcript of our conversation along with my preliminary thoughts and analysis. In addition to the transcripts and analysis, each participant was sent the findings and the representation I wrote of their

D. C. Parry

experiences. Participants were invited to provide comments, feedback, or raise questions and/or concerns.

About half of the participants responded and provided feedback. The respondents had minor corrections to the findings mostly focused on the chronological order of their experiences as opposed to any substantive changes. For example, one woman commented:

I liked what you wrote. I found it very interesting and realistic. Thank you for sending me the entire article! Please let me know if I can give you more inside information for your research. Focus in the boat! Paddles up! Take it away!

Another woman replied:

and attached a picture of my last chemo . . . so
 ya know I didn't make it up!! Ha! Oh, and Diana . . . did I tell you it is
 beautiful! You did a wonderful job capturing and combining our thoughts and
 feelings.

Last, one other participant replied:

What a wonderful treat to hear from you. Thank you so much for sending the
 analysis. Didn't realize I used the words 'breast cancer' so many times! Your
 study has so much content, I plan to read in more detail when I have more leisure
 time—unfortunately not in the immediate future. You have been so creative with
 'nom de plume.' Call me anything you want but, please, please, please, NOT
 Fannie—Absolutely the top of the list of names I hate to be called! Be well.

All of the changes were incorporated into the findings and sent back to the participants for final approval. Before turning to a detail description of how I wrote the findings, I

describe the participants in the study and my decision to utilize creative analytic practice.

Profile of the Participants

Five of the twelve participants were in their first or second season of dragon boat racing, while the others had been involved for a number of years. The participants ranged in age from mid-40s to early 60s. Although all of the participants had been employed full-time before their diagnosis of breast cancer, few had returned to their previous workload. More specifically, three of the participants were employed full-time, one was working part-time, and the others were on a leave of absence from their positions. All of the participants were breast cancer survivors and at least six months post-treatment. Nine of the participants were married and the other three participants were divorced. All the participants had children who had left home to pursue education and employment opportunities.

Representing the Findings

I wanted to represent the experiences shared with me about breast cancer survivorship and dragon boat racing in a manner that would contextualize these experiences and address the complexity of lived leisure experiences. Representation is described as the depiction, portrayal, or description of social phenomena (Schwandt, 2001) and is essentially an issue of knowledge claims. The debate surrounding representation questions “whether inquirers should claim they ‘represent’ the social world in their studies . . . or represent literally the ways of life, attitudes, practices, beliefs, and so on of those studied” (Schwandt, p. 227, 78).

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

In representing the participants’ lived experiences with dragon boat racing, I wanted to bring those experiences to life. In short, I did not want to write about these women’s experiences in a way where the women’s voices “would be buried beneath layers of analysis” (Denison, 1996, p. 352). Instead, I wanted to represent the findings in a manner that honored the people who taught me about their lived experiences (Richardson, 2000).

With these aims in mind, I decided to represent the findings as vignettes for a few reasons. First, I wanted to offer a rich, interesting, and engaging narrative of my interpretations of dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors that reflected my empathic identification with the participants. Second, I realized with vignettes “I could avoid closure, enabling the reader to see that interpretation is never finished” (Denison, 1996, p.352). I hope the representations communicate multiple interpretations of data. These representations are only one of many possible interpretations. Third, I believe it was not enough just to do qualitative methods. Methods must be undertaken for political, strategic, and critical purposes (Denzin, 2000). In this case, I assert the experience of breast cancer does not end with medical treatment for the disease. Also, knowing and knowledge about breast cancer survivorship must begin with the people who have experienced it. Fourth, my feminist epistemology lends itself to a framework of alternative forms of representation such as vignettes. As stated by Richardson (1997):

Representational issues are of feminist concern, even when the representation is not seemingly about women or women’s issues, because wherever text is being produced, there is the question of what social, power, and sexual relationships of production are being reproduced” (p. 57, original emphasis).

Writing the Findings

Knowing that I wanted to represent the findings as vignettes, I started to write the findings by rereading each transcript. As I read, I underlined comments, questions, quotes, experiences, emotions, and stories, which seemed to reflect the participants’ lived experience with dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors. I reread each transcript a number of times and thought about how and why each participant got involved in dragon boat racing, her or his level of involvement in dragon boat racing, the impact of dragon boat on each participant’s quality of life, the type of rewards each participant gained through their involvement including physical, social, emotional, and spiritual outcomes. I went through each transcript and pulled out a participant’s language, stories, descriptions, and comments. Many participants described situations that I identified as a key point in their lived experiences. All of the vignettes include language, descriptions, and stories that are pulled directly from the interview transcripts, often verbatim. I wrote one representation per participant,

but decided to only include nine vignettes in the current manuscript. In part, my decision was upon space limitations. I knew I would not be able to include all twelve representations. I decided to pick the representations that I thought represented some diversity in the group of participants. In addition, I selected the vignettes that evoked emotion, were humorous, and demonstrated the strength, courage, and inspiration the participants shared with me.

Despite my attempts to involve the participants and use their own words, experiences and descriptions, I wish to be clear that I am the author of these representations. I am aware of how each representation reflects my interpretations of the participants' experiences with dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors. Even though I use the participants' language and detail their experiences as shared with me, I am the one who read through the transcripts and decided to pursue the representations included. Moreover, I sorted through the participants' experiences and chose among those I wanted to present. I agree with Diversi (1998) who stated:

D. C. Parry

I am the author of these stories and, as such, have made important choices in the writing process that both carry my own interpretations of the lived experiences and define the possibilities of the reader's interpretations. The view from 'nowhere' is impossible from an epistemological standpoint that is founded on the social construction of reality (i.e., reality can only be understood through consciousness, through symbolic systems created and inscribed by historically situated humans), and therefore, the view from somewhere' is the closest an author can get to a text that gives voices to the people she or he writes about. (p. 133)

Please keep both my role and those who graciously shared their experiences with me in mind when you read the representations.

Criteria to Judge the Representations

Richardson (1997, 2000) suggested five criteria for judging texts that include creative representations such as vignettes.

1. Substantive contribution of the text. For a text to succeed substantively, it must contribute to a deeper understanding of social life including being grounded or embedded in a human perspective. The human perspective must then inform the ways the text itself is constructed. For example, if people make sense of their lives through stories, then a vignette or a short story may be the best way to represent their experience.
2. Aesthetic merit. Aesthetically, a text should draw the audience in and encourage them to form their own interpretation of the social world being presented. The text needs to be complex, interesting, engaging—in other words, not boring!
3. Reflexivity. The author of a text needs to be clear about how the text is created including the role of the researcher. In this sense, the author of a text needs to hold him or herself accountable for the knowledge they put forth. The author needs to disclose any ethical issues surrounding the creation of the text and bring adequate self-awareness/self-exposure to the text so that readers are able to judge their point of view.
4. Impact of the text. Richardson (2000) suggested asking how the text affects you as a reader on an emotional and intellectual level. A good text created through creative means should generate new questions, motivate you to write, and/or to try new research practices. Because texts created through creative analytic processes draw the reader in and are open for interpretation, they often motivate readers towards social action or change.
5. Expression of a reality. A text needs to convey an embodied sense of lived experience. A text needs to be believable and convey a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real" (Richardson, 2000, p.254).

A reader should keep these criteria in mind. In addition, all names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Findings

Secret Sisterhood

Before my breast cancer diagnosis, I was a strong, independent, and individually oriented

woman. I was totally focused on my career and my family. My independent nature was evident as I successfully ran my own company and participated in sports. I had competed from the time I was 15 years old in an individual sport. I had close friends in my life, but

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

never considered myself into “woman’s sisterhood.” My friends and I would celebrate each other’s birthdays, and take each other’s kids in a jam when they were young, but it was not what I would call sisterhood. All that changed when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Hearing of my diagnosis, I thought, “ohmigod, I have got to find more ladies like me.” Through a friend I met at a cancer support group, I learned of dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors. I knew all the other paddlers would be breast cancer survivors. I liked the idea of being with more girls who had the same diagnosis as I did. In essence, I joined dragon boat racing not for the physical activity, but rather for the emotional support. I found it.

The emotional support I receive through my new friendships is huge. A number of girls in the group are my best friends. Everyone on the team is supportive of each other, and that’s the goal. To the outside world, the goal is to demonstrate that survivors of breast cancer can be strong and do physical athletic pursuits. From inside the group, it’s all about supporting each other. And it’s so beautiful. We share a hugely intimate bond that develops friendship on a level that few experience. This bond helps us deal with our own mortality. As a group, we know that some of us will face breast cancer again. It could kill us in a matter of months. When we share these insights with regular women who do not have breast cancer, they do not get it. They reply, “Yeah, and I could be hit by a car and killed.” It’s not that regular women do not empathize, it’s simply that they do not understand. An “us” and a “them” world is created by breast cancer, and now I am part of the us. But I no longer feel so much like an individual. Dragon boat racing makes me feel like part of a team, like a member of a group, and like part of secret sisterhood. Breast cancer has taught me that sisterhood is powerful and I am thankful I have it my life.

Creating a New Life

Telling my children that I had breast cancer was the most difficult moment of my life. A few weeks before Christmas, I discovered a lump in my breast while showering. As soon as I felt the lump, I knew it was cancer. Shortly thereafter a biopsy confirmed I had breast cancer. Not wanting to spoil Christmas for my children, I decided to hold off telling them until after the holidays. It was a difficult couple of weeks for me. When I found the lump it was like a death sentence. I thought, “This is cancer, I am going to die.” So, my breast cancer diagnosis was hard to accept. As a mother, I did not want to cause my children grief. I wanted to protect my children and keep them safe from harm, be it emotional or physical. In the weeks before telling my family the news, I kept running to bathroom and privately crying. I think they suspected something was wrong, but were completely shocked when they heard the news.

To make the diagnosis a little easier to swallow, I also announced another decision I had made: I was joining a dragon boat racing team for breast cancer survivors! My children were involved in dragon boat racing and I had seen the breast cancer teams at the various different festivals. I was impressed that women who had survived breast cancer were out paddling. I found it inspirational and believed I could dragon boat as well. I wanted my children to know from the outset that I was going to fight cancer. Dragon boat racing would be my vehicle to demonstrate that commitment to them. On that faithful day when I told my children I had breast cancer, I also promised them my dragon boat team would whip their butts!

From the beginning of my diagnosis, dragon boat racing enabled me to have fun with my children and was a source of comic rivalry between the three of us. But, dragon boat racing means so much more to me than just having a good time. When first diagnosed with breast cancer I was devastated because I had to let go of my whole life to focus on getting

D. C. Parry

better. I let go of my role as a mother, wife, and employee because I could no longer fulfill

those responsibilities in the same capacity. I let go and presumed a new identity: cancer patient. This part was difficult because I instinctively knew that once I had let go of my cancer patient identity, I wouldn't be able to go back to the way things were before my breast cancer diagnosis. Throughout my time as a cancer patient, I just focused on getting better. I knew I could not start dragon boat racing until I was six months post-treatment and I kept focused on that date.

With completion of my chemo treatments, I discovered that my previous life no longer existed. I felt my life had been shattered. My year in treatment for breast cancer left me with a different mindset and outlook on life. I tried to pick up some pieces from my previous life, but found I couldn't continue where I left off. I had changed. Things that I accepted before the disease, I wouldn't accept because I did not want to settle any more. For example, in my previous life I tried to juggle everything including the kids, my husband, and my job. There had been a major imbalance because my needs had come last. My new outlook made me realize that life was too short and too precious to live like that again. When I tried to pick up where I left off, it didn't feel right. My old life did not fit with my new mindset and outlook on life. The promise of tomorrow and innocence of presuming I would live to a ripe old age had been ripped away from me. I no longer wanted to sacrifice today to save for tomorrow. Consequently, I found myself without an identity. I did not feel comfortable in my own skin and was shocked to find myself left with a void. I concluded that even though being a cancer patient is not a good thing, it is still an identity. I could not go back to the way things were, but I still had to build a new life that suited the new me. It was difficult and it did not always feel right, because it was so new.

Dragon boat racing helped tremendously. It became part of my new identity. The women I met through dragon boat racing understood my new mindset. The four hours a week I spent dragon boating was a reprieve for me. The women made me feel normal and helped me realize I could cope with what my life had to offer. My new friends helped me realize I was not a bad or weird person for what I was experiencing. They gave me the reassurance and strength to carry on with life and to create my new life.

In the Same Boat

I joined dragon boat racing because I wanted to be physically active and meet other women who were breast cancer survivors. I quickly learned that the physical component of dragon boat racing was only one of the many rewards I gained through my involvement in the team. The camaraderie I feel with the other women is heartwarming. We joke around and I find it a great stress relief. Most important my dragon boat racing team members taught me to laugh. We all notice how dragon boat racing has helped us take life less seriously and to laugh when we would have cried. It helps that we are all in the same boat—literally and figuratively!

Pinked up

Before each dragon boat race I get “pinked up.” My ritual begins with the purchase of some pink costume paint for kids. I think because I am six feet tall and ride a motorcycle, the store clerk used to give me a strange look when I would walk up to the counter to buy my pink paint, but now she's used to me. Pink, the official color of breast cancer survivorship, is what we all wear to the dragon boat races. Most of the women wear pink hats, pink t-shirts, or pink lipstick to signify their commitment. I take things to another level by dying my hair and goatee pink in addition to wearing my pink t-shirt. I am the only man on the team.

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

Approximately 1% of people diagnosed with breast cancer are men, but few are public about their experiences. The silence has cost men their lives, literally. About 50–60% of men diagnosed with breast cancer die. Because so few men are diagnosed with breast cancer and those who are don't want to talk about, I felt alone.

My experiences demonstrate absolutely no support for men with breast cancer. In fact, when I told people I had breast cancer they laughed not at the disease but at the suggestion that I had it. The medical community doesn't even know how to deal with men with breast cancer. The doctor I saw dismissed the lump in my breast as a cyst. Months later when this apparent cyst turned my whole nipple black, I went back to my doctor who immediately

sent me for a mammogram. When I went for the mammogram, the technician kept calling out for “Pauline” to come forward assuming my name, Paul, was a misprint on her sheet. This happened after trying to fit myself into the hospital gowns made for women. I had to wear two gowns.

When I looked around at the support that women with breast cancer had available to them I felt jealous. All that changed with the dragon boat racing. I was welcomed into the group with open arms. The friendships I made through dragon boat racing were genuine. Before my experience with breast cancer I would talk about social support and it would roll easily off my tongue. With my diagnosis I learned what social support really means. The ladies I meet through dragon boat racing come up and give me hugs and ask how I am and it’s not bullshit. It’s not superficial. At first, I couldn’t believe the support. Now I just appreciate the immediate unconditional acceptance I receive through dragon boat racing. The funny thing, or not so funny, about breast cancer is that it is the great equalizer. Anybody and everybody can be diagnosed regardless of race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or the other divides that happen within our society. The support within the team is like that too. It’s given to everybody. Nobody on the team is happy to have breast cancer, but without it we wouldn’t have met. I think it is safe to say that our lives are more enriched by the friendships we made. My goal is for more men to receive that type of support. It is incredibly important to get the message out that men are diagnosed with breast cancer. They need support too! So, for now I am the only man on the dragon boat team wearing pink, but I hope my openness about my experiences will help others come forward. Paddles up!

Wonder Woman

I went to my last chemo treatment dressed like Wonder Woman to mark this important ending as a celebration. Because I had no hair and no eyelashes, it was empowering to be dressed like a super hero. And that is exactly what I felt like after battling this evil disease! The morning started with a breakfast that my friends hosted for me at the YMCA. Their support during treatment was as important to my healing as the chemo drugs. I walked from the Y to the hospital to get my last treatment in my costume. I got a few strange looks from people on their way to work. I am sure they thought I was a drag queen. At the hospital, the nurses and doctors all wanted to take my picture. In fact, my doctor put the picture she had taken of us at my last chemo treatment on her computer screen saver. I dressed again as Wonder Woman for the Run for the Cure the following October. Someone forwarded a picture of me to one of the executive directors of a dragon boat racing team for breast cancer survivors. Upon seeing the picture she e-mailed me and said, “We need someone like you on our team.”

The idea of getting together with a bunch of other survivors did not appeal to me. I had always hated team sports and was not much of an athlete before breast cancer. Nonetheless, I agreed to go to a meeting on dragon boat racing for survivors. Afterwards, I thought, “I’m

D. C. Parry

not going to do this. I’ll just go the first session.” So, the whole time I was like “I’ll just do this” and then “I’ll just do that.” Pretty soon I was on the boat with no turning back.

I love dragon boat racing. When you are out on the lake paddling in absolute rhythm, your mind is completely blank. It’s better than yoga. I can’t paddle faster than the woman in front of me or beside me. If I do, I’ll throw the boat off. We have to paddle together in unison to be successful as a team. I was touched by the experience. It was a grand epiphany for me. It was religious. It is magical. It may not be something that I do forever, but I am enjoying it now. It can be difficult when some members have reoccurrences of cancer. I love these women and it is hard to deal with the thought of death constantly. We don’t deal with death while we paddle, though. When we paddle, we just paddle and that’s what keeps me there.

Racing Against the Dragon

My best friend was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago. I went through the trauma of breast cancer with her as well as her discovery of dragon boat racing for survivors. Two years later I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time, I was hysterical because I was

convinced I was going to die. My friend responded to the news by stating, “Don’t worry Marnie, next year you’ll be in the boat with me.” That’s exactly what happened.

Dragon boat racing helped me deal with life after treatment, but it also helped me deal with my diagnosis. I had a goal and a focus. I knew I had to be six months post-treatment to start dragon boat racing, and I was determined to get there. I had hope knowing that if other women could paddle after breast cancer so could I. And that is the mission of the team. We demonstrate that life after breast cancer can be active, positive, and healthy. There is life after breast cancer. Yet, when we paddle we don’t think about breast cancer. We are solely focused on the goal, which is paddling in unison. We paddle as one and that is symbolic of our experiences with cancer. We are not alone. We are fighting cancer with many other women. We are part of a community.

When we paddle, we also do so for those who can’t. We paddle for those who are no longer with us. When we race against other teams, it doesn’t matter what position we come in because we are always first in our own lane. We always win. What we are really racing against is the dragon, the cancer dragon. Dragon boat racing is empowering not only to be a part of the team all working together, but the symbolism involved. When we paddle we are crushing the dragon or beating the dragon and we’re winning!

Back in the Driver’s Seat

Cancer is a weird thing. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I didn’t feel sick and I had no idea that my body was misbehaving. I went to see my doctor for a small thing that I thought might be a problem, which turned out to be nothing. In the process, my doctor found a lump, which turned out to be a serious problem. It was breast cancer. I had never had surgery in my life and within a month I had a mastectomy. My body suddenly was doing things I didn’t like. After the surgery, it took me weeks to even look at my chest. When I did, I was shocked by the size of the scar and the number of staples keeping my chest together. What happened to my body? How would I ever feel normal again?

A friend of mine who also had breast cancer was involved in dragon boat racing for survivors. My friend assured me that dragon boat racing would help me regain my life. It did. Dragon boat racing put me back in the driver’s seat. I can say to my body, “You’re not going to like this, but we’re going to paddle with twenty other women and move a sixty foot boat that weighs up to 2250 kilograms when loaded with participants along a racecourse of

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

500–650 meters.” Being able to take control over my body and my life is reassuring to me. I love the other women I met through my involvement with the team. My new friends are like family. Going to dragon boat has been like attending a floating support group.

Life Support

No one wants to be a member of the breast cancer club. It’s not something that women aspire to in life. If you do join the club, there are certain perks. One such perk is being eligible to join a dragon boat racing team for survivors. After my own diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer, a friend whose sister was a member introduced me to dragon boat racing for survivors. I got started because I had been physically active all of my life and wanted to continue with those types of pursuits after breast cancer. Plus, I love water sports! When I went and watched the team for the first time everyone was having a great time and I wanted to be part of it. It was something new to try. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I made myself a promise that I was not going to turn down new opportunities. In the past, I had turned down a lot of opportunities in my life for the wrong reasons. Dragon boating was an opportunity for a new challenge.

Dragon boat racing was different from any other sport I had previously joined. I played baseball and field hockey and other similar types of sports, but I had never been involved in an activity with everyone so dependent on each other. On a baseball team you could be out picking your nose in outfield and it doesn’t matter if it’s an infield play. With field hockey, if the play is down on the other end of the field, it doesn’t matter whether you are there.

But with dragon boating, everybody counts all the time. I’m sure other sports operate the same way, but it was a new concept and challenge for me. I thought everyone being so dependent on each other would be a challenge given that we are such a diverse group, but

it's not.

Our membership includes women of all ages and ethnocultural groups. We also have gay women, straight women, married women, single women, and divorced women. The one thing we all have in common is breast cancer, but that's not our focus. I didn't join the team to talk about breast cancer. I had that type of support through family and friends. Support is something that happens spontaneously because you are a part of this group. We get support just by being together, but it's not necessarily breast cancer support. I think of it as life support. Because our team is quite large, you're not going to be bosom buddies (no pun intended) with everyone. But the support is there if you need it because all of us have experienced the terror, the fear, and dread with the diagnosis of breast cancer.

Social support is not the only benefit I gain through my involvement in dragon boat racing, however. I love the races. At the end of the race, I feel a natural high. The coaches say "paddle 'till you puke," so I give it all I've got. Good physical, emotional, and spiritual feelings occur when you've worked so hard. At the end of the race when I hear the coach yell out "let it run!" I'm thankful because I can't do another stroke. That's how you're supposed to feel at the end of a race. You are supposed to have nothing left. It's a great feeling. For me, it's like a natural high.

I also enjoy the dark humor that is a part of the team, humor that people who have not had cancer often can't appreciate. For example, one night at practice we had this really young coach who put us through a few drills. We stopped to stretch and regroup and he said, "We're a little flat tonight ladies." Quick as a flash up one side of the boat and down the other women shout out, "only on the left side" or "only on the right side." We also have a standing joke before a race that there is no prosthesis on the boat so we don't have extra weight. There's camaraderie because everyone has had breast cancer and that makes dragon boat racing fun. As I see it your glass can either be half full or half empty. Being involved

D. C. Parry

in dragon boat racing and surrounding myself with so many positive women definitely contributes to my glass being half full.

Facing the Unexpected

Breast cancer was a disease I never expected to get. I did not smoke, rarely drank, ate a healthy diet, exercised regularly, and breastfed my now grown son when he was a baby. I had done all the right things and I was convinced I would not be the one in nine women who develops breast cancer. I was wrong. One night after returning home from a course feeling tired and achy, I was getting ready for bed when I noticed my right breast was swollen and sore. I checked my breast and quickly found a large lump. Where had this lump come from? I didn't notice it in the shower that morning. I didn't notice it when I had completed my monthly breast self-exam earlier that month. This lump had not been identified by my doctor three months earlier at my yearly check-up. I knew that cysts could behave in this way, but made an appointment to see my doctor the following day just to be sure. My doctor also believed this lump to be a cyst. But, she sent me for a mammogram and ultrasound.

The mammogram confirmed I had a suspicious lump and the ultrasound determined it was not a cyst. I was given the opportunity to have a core biopsy on the spot, which I accepted. One week later I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was upset by this news and went to see my family doctor to fill her in on everything that had happened. My doctor said, "There is a positive side to breast cancer. You can now join an elite group of women in an international sport where you, at your age, can compete at a world class level internationally." I looked at her. "Yes" she said. "You can join dragon boat racing. There are teams for breast cancer survivors."

I remembered seeing a little snippet on the news last year of a team of dragon boat racers who were breast cancer survivors. They were doing the flower ceremony where a pink flower is thrown into the water by each paddler to honor those no longer able to participate. I was touched by the ceremony particularly because the wife of one of my colleagues had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. "You mean I will be healthy enough to participate in something like that?" I asked my doctor. "I don't see why not" she responded. "You'll have to work at your fitness, but it can do nothing but help you."

Over the next seven months I had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. It was not an easy time for me. With the surgery, I risked losing my breast. Chemotherapy made me sick, I lost my hair, and each subsequent treatment left me weaker so I found it harder to bounce back. I managed to make it through all my radiation treatments before getting burnt. Throughout all of it, dragon boat racing was my goal. I believed that if I was able to overcome a life threatening illness and physically be able to compete at an international level then I could handle anything else that life through my way.

When my treatments ended, I was not the same person I had been seven months earlier. I was weak and I needed to take extra vitamins and minerals to deal with all the poisons I had put in my body. I also had damage to my lung and had developed lymphedema triggered by the radiation. I had side effects from Tamoxifen and suffered from memory loss as a result of chemotherapy. I would be living with the consequences of breast cancer for the rest of my life. I started to worry that I was not going to be able to dragon boat. It is a physically demanding sport that utilizes the full body through various movement combinations using the upper body, trunk, and legs. I had little energy, no stamina, and had put on weight throughout the treatments. I was unhappy with myself and worried also about the cancer returning. I met with my surgeon who stated, "We have done everything possible to beat this cancer. If it comes back, you've already beaten it once. Plus, the success rate is even greater the second time around. Don't worry! Go out and live your life. What are you planning to do?" he asked. "Dragon boat" I replied.

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

I got in touch with a local dragon boat team for survivors and started paddling with the team that March. I had never done anything like dragon boat racing before. I had tried team sports in the past, but never made the team that competed. I was too short, too slow, and ended up on recreational teams instead. With dragon boating, I was able to compete at the top level. I trained hard physically. I started walking and gradually worked up to running and lifting weights. I have become a great dragon boat racer. When I am out dragon boat racing, nothing else matters. Through dragon boat racing I am able to live in the moment and enjoy life. When we get together as a team to practice, we laugh, we have fun, and we work hard. The goal is to work together as a team getting everyone from start to finish doing the best we can. We show ourselves and everyone watching that breast cancer survivors are just as capable as anyone else.

We are also competitive. Winning is not the sole purpose of our participation, but we do want to win. Winning the race is analogous to beating cancer. It helps us realize that we are strong, healthy, and we can win. We can beat cancer. Dragon boat racing helps me feel in control, not like I'm sitting around letting life pass me by. With the medical side of breast cancer, things are imposed on me. With dragon boat racing, I'm taking charge. I choose to join dragon boat racing. I choose to commit to dragon boat racing. I choose to be physically involved. Rather than relying on the medical profession and giving myself over to them saying, "Here I am, fix me," I am looking after myself.

I feel my participation in dragon boat racing communicates to the medical profession that yes I need them. We're a team in the fight against cancer. But I am the main part of this team and you're on my committee. I need information from my medical committee, but at the same time I need other input too. Dragon boat racing helps me contribute to my health emotionally, mentally, and physically. Because all the members of the team have had breast cancer, no one pities you. No one treats you like a leper in the group. Being a part of the dragon boat team means you're not alone. We're a diverse group of women and one man, who come from all walks of life. But, we have all had breast cancer so we can empathize and understand.

I am now in my second season of dragon boat racing. Physically, emotionally, and mentally I am feeling stronger than ever before largely due to dragon boating. Dragon boat racing has helped me to beat cancer and made me realize I can do a lot of things. If I can paddle, I can make other changes in my life too. These days I am wondering what other doors can open for me. If I had not done dragon boating, I think I would be more afraid of change. It was a huge change in my life to join the team and commit to something so major.

But now I have the courage and the strength to look around and ask myself, “What else can I do?”

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the roles of dragon boat racing in breast cancer survivorship. The representations demonstrate how dragon boat racing contributed social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental dimensions of health. In turn, feeling healthy in these five dimensions enhanced the women’s survivorship of breast cancer. The significance of the study lies not only in the investigation of the leisure pursuit of dragon boat racing and its link to health, but also in its focus on survivorship after medical treatment for breast cancer. Moreover, the study is significant because the knowledge is grounded in women’s personal and private perspectives of breast cancer survivorship. This study addressed the gap in knowledge on experiences with survivorship as women describe them (Thomas-MacLean, 2004).

The findings of the current research demonstrate the valuable role of leisure pursuits as a coping mechanism for stressful life events such as breast cancer. Previous research

D. C. Parry

has demonstrated that leisure pursuits, experiences, and satisfactions play an important role in promoting health and maintaining well-being in daily life. A considerable body of research suggests that exercise or physically active leisure has numerous health benefits for the population in general including improved cardiovascular health and reduced risk of diabetes and osteoporosis (Bouchard, Shephard, & Stebbins, 1994; Bouchard, Shepard, Stephens, Sutton, & McPherson, 1990). Apart from these physical health benefits, leisure in general whether physically active or not is beneficial in other ways. In particular, leisure can lead to improved psychological well-being through such mechanisms as stress reduction, improved mood, and increased self-esteem (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Some of the positive outcomes associated with leisure participation are especially relevant to breast cancer survivors who are dragon boat racers including the role of leisure in the promotion of self-determination, a sense of personal entitlement, and resistance to prescribed gender roles (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Shaw, 2001). Leisure has also been found to positively enhance spiritual well-being (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003) and to reduce anxiety (Szabo, 2003), which was evident in the stories by the dragon boat racers.

The stories also reinforced that health is manifested through involvement in enjoyable and meaningful leisure activities (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2002). Health, in this sense, is conceptualized holistically to encompass a variety of dimensions. Insel and Roth (2006) identified dimensions of health including social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and physical dimensions. This multidimensional view of health resists the separation of mind, body, and spirit but does not necessarily preclude a biomedical perspective. It redefines health as the ability to live life fully with vitality and meaning (Insel & Roth). Health is determined by decisions about living one’s life including leisure decisions. The current research extended this body of literature, however, by demonstrating how individual dimensions of health can cumulatively enhance health, and in particular contribute to life after a life-threatening illness such as breast cancer. The findings demonstrated the importance of leisure pursuits such as dragon boat racing to health and well being. In other words, the current research reveals the social relevance of leisure in the context of women’s health and well being.

The health literature has tended to view leisure as trivial, if not completely irrelevant, to health outcomes due to the medicalization of health. Medicalization occurs when health experiences come to be understood narrowly as questions of illness and are then subjected to the authority of medical institutions (Thomas-MacLean, 2004). Once a health experience becomes medicalized it is then described in medical terminology, treated in medical institutions, and the people affected by it are regarded as patients. Critics of a narrow medical model argue that the biological and individualistic focus of medicalization has provided few other ways for people to understand or make sense of their health and well being (Woliver, 2002). Consequently, the general trend toward the medicalization of health and the resultant

emphasis on medical research for solutions have been widely criticized by scholars and activists alike for failing to appreciate other factors and contexts that impact on health. Clearly, the current research demonstrates the need to reframe health research so that a broader more holistic approach to health, including leisure pursuits, is appreciated as also impacting women's health. In short, dragon boat racing demonstrated the role and impact of leisure in women's health.

This finding was evident in that dragon boat racing was a top priority in the lives of the survivors in the current research due its contribution to their health. Their stories demonstrated that through their leisure, the survivors were able to focus on quality of life, not quantity of life. In their words dragon boat racing contributed to being a "thrifer, not just a survivor." Shannon and Shaw (2005) studied the ways that breast cancer alters a

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

woman's leisure experiences and choices post-treatment. Their research demonstrated that as a result of breast cancer, leisure is more meaningful and a new priority in life, which was clearly evident in the current study. Moreover, similar to the survivors in the current research, Shannon and Shaw found leisure is a context in which women who are survivors of breast cancer seek out health promoting activities.

Despite the benefits associated with their participation, a number of survivors noted a few drawbacks to their participation in dragon boat racing. For example, a number of the women discussed the challenges associated with cancer reoccurrences and deaths within the group. A few of the women stated that they would not continue dragon boating indefinitely due to the loss associated with being around other breast cancer survivors. Other participants discussed some tensions connected to the level of competition. More specifically, dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors is not meant to be a competitive sport. The team motto is "we're always first in our own lane," meaning they win each race. Some participants, however, want the team to be more competitive with other dragon boat racing teams and see the potential for the group to compete at a higher level. These issues speak some of the tensions that occur within the team and highlight some of the drawbacks associated with this leisure pursuit. Thus, while a number of benefits are associated with this leisure pursuit, it is important to note that not all leisure participation is always positive and participation may have some drawbacks (Shaw, 1996).

In conclusion, the significance of this research lies not only in its investigation of the leisure pursuit of dragon boat racing and its link to health and well-being but also in its use of creative analytic practice. Creative analytic practice allows scholars to write findings in a way that enables the voices of the participants. Hopefully the use of creative analytic practice in this text has offered a rich, interesting, and engaging narrative of the roles of dragon boat racing in breast cancer survivorship. I also hope the use of creative analytic practice communicates my belief that knowing and knowledge about dragon boat racing must begin with those who have experienced it. Lastly, I hope the use of creative analytic practice makes the findings accessible to a broader audience thus influencing the health and well-being of greater numbers of people.

References

- Ambert, A., Adler, P. A., Adler, P., & Detzner, D. F. (1995). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57(4), 879–893.
- Bouchard, C., Shephard, R. J., & Stephens, T. (Eds.). (1994). *Physical activity, fitness, and health: International proceedings and international consensus statement*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Bouchard, C., Shephard, R. J., Stephens, T., Sutton, J. R., & McPherson, B. D. (Eds.). (1990). *Exercise, fitness, and health: A consensus of current knowledge*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Canadian Breast Cancer Federation. (2006). Retrieved on July 16, 2005 from <http://www.cbcbf.org/>.
- Courneya, K. S., Blanchard, C. M., & Laing, D. M. (2001). Exercise adherence in breast cancer survivors training for a dragon boat race competition: A preliminary investigation. *Psycho-Oncology*, 10, 444–452.
- Denison, J. (1996). Sport narratives. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2, 351–362.

- Denzin, N. K. (2000). Aesthetics and the practices of qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 256–265.
- Diversi, M. (1998). Glimpses of street life: Representing lived experiences through short stories. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(2), 131–147.
- Driver, B. L., Brown, P. J., & Peterson, G. L. (Eds.). (1991). *The benefits of leisure*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Dupuis, S. (1999). Naked truths: Towards a reflexive methodology in leisure research. *Leisure Sciences*, 21, 43–64.

D. C. Parry

- Freysinger, V. & Flannery, D. (1992). Women's leisure: Affiliation, self-determination, empowerment and resistance? *Leisure and Society*, 15(1), 303–321.
- Harris, S. R. & Niesen-Vertommen, S. L. (2000). Challenging the myth of exercise-induced lymphedema following breast cancer: A series of case reports. *Journal of Surgical Oncology*, 74, 95–99.
- Henderson, K. A. & Ainsworth, B. E. (2002). Enjoyment: A link to physical activity, leisure and health. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 20(4), 130–146.
- Henderson, K. A. & Bialeschki, M. D. (1991). A sense of entitlement as a source of constraint and empowerment for women. *Leisure Sciences*, 12, 51–65.
- Heintzman, P. & Mannell, R. C. (2003). Spiritual functions of leisure and spiritual well-being: Coping with time pressure. *Leisure Sciences*, 25, 207–230.
- Insel, P. M. & Roth, W. T. (2006). *Core concepts in health*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Iwasaki, Y. & Schneider, I. (2003). Leisure, stress and coping: An evolving area of inquiry. *Leisure Sciences*, 25(2/3), 107–113.
- Kaufman, B. J. (1992). Feminist facts: Interview strategies and political subjects in ethnography. *Communication Theory*, 2(3), 187–206.
- Mannell, R. C. & Kleiber, D. A. (1997). *A social psychology of leisure*. State College, PA: Venture.
- McKenzie, D. (1998). Abreast in a boat—a race against breast cancer. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 159(4), 376–378.
- McNicoll, P. & Doyle, K. (in-press). “As if by magic.” Women with breast cancer, dragon boats, and healing in a group. In L. Berman-Rossi, M. Cohen & H. (Eds.) *Creating connections: Celebrating the power of groups*. New York: The Haworth Press. (This is what the author sent me so I am not sure if something is missing...)
- Mitchell, T. & Nielsen, E. (2002). Living life to the limits: Dragon boaters and breast cancer. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 21(3), 50–57.
- Oh, S., Heflin, L., Meyerowitz, B. E., Desmond, K. A., Rowland, J. H., & Ganz, P. A. (2004). Quality of life of breast cancer survivors after a reoccurrence: a follow-up study. *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, 87, 45–57.
- Olesen, V. L. (2000). Feminisms and qualitative research at and into the millennium. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 215–256). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pelusi, J. (1997). The lived experience of surviving breast cancer. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 24(8), 1343–1353.
- Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 923–948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schwandt, T. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shannon, C. S. & Shaw, S. M. (2005). “If the dishes don’t get done today, they’ll get done tomorrow”: Breast cancer as a catalyst for changes to women’s leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 37(2), 195–215.
- Shaw, S. M. (1996). The gendered nature of leisure: Individual and societal outcomes of leisure practice. *World Leisure and Recreation Association Journal*, 38(2), 4–6.
- Shaw, S. M. (2001). Conceptualizing resistance: Women’s leisure as political practice. *Journal of*

Leisure Research, 33(2), 186–201.

Sofield, T. H. B. & Sivan, A. (2003). From cultural festival to international sport—the Hong Kong dragon boat races. *Journal of Sport Tourism*, 8(1), 9–20.

Szabo, A. (2003). The acute effects of humor and exercise on mood and anxiety. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 25, 152–163.

Thompson, L. (1992). Feminist methodology for family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54(1), 3–18.

Dragon Boat Racing for Breast Cancer Survivors

Thomas-MacLean, R. (2004). Memories of treatment: The immediacy of breast cancer. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(5), 628–643.

Unruh, A. M. & Elvin, N. (2004). In the eye of the dragon: Women's experiences of breast cancer and the occupation of dragon boat racing. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(3), 138–149.

Warbuton, D. E. R., Sheel, W. A., Hodeges, A. N. H., Stewart, I. B., Yoshida, E. M., Levy, R. D., & McKenzie, D. C. (2004). Effects of upper extremity exercise training on peak aerobic and anaerobic fitness in patients after transplantation. *The American Journal of Cardiology*, 93, 939–943.

Woliver, L. R. (2002). *The political geographies of pregnancy*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.