

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**MAINTAINING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY  
AS A HEALTH-PROMOTING BEHAVIOUR  
FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN:  
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

**JUDITH A. YARWOOD**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (Nursing)

**MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
NEW ZEALAND**

**DECEMBER 1999**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout work on this thesis I have received support and encouragement from many people. To everyone who has been there at differing times, my heartfelt thanks. There are also a few people I would especially like to acknowledge.

Firstly I would like to thank the ten participants, without whom this study would not have been possible. All the women gave so freely of their time and were more than happy to share their thoughts and ideas regarding various aspects of their life experiences.

Both my immediate and extended family have provided constant encouragement and support, particularly Bruce and my daughter Sally, who have lived with the highs and lows that accompany such a process. I especially want to thank Bruce, who has never wavered in his help, encouragement and belief in my work.

Professor Jenny Carryer, my supervisor, provided me not only with the academic challenge and guidance, but also her wonderful sense of humour and confidence in my abilities. Thank you Jenny.

Many thanks to Kaye Milligan, who shared this journey with me in so many ways and with such equanimity. Many thanks also to Julie Batchelor for her critical eye and to Stephen Neville and Marg Campbell for their enduring friendship throughout. To Catherine Dwan my thanks for sharing special moments and great coffees.

To all my friends and colleagues who, in a variety of ways, have offered support and encouragement, my thanks. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial and other support received from Christchurch Polytechnic.

## ABSTRACT

Whilst being physically active is linked to many health benefits, it appears maintenance of activity is both complex and poorly understood. Ten women participated in this research to explore the positive and negative factors that may influence midlife women to maintain physical activity over time. The perceived benefits of physical activity as a health-promoting behaviour have been found to be firmly located within the bio-medical discourse, with disease prevention accorded primacy by a consensus of health and social disciplines. The individualistic nature of this discourse mostly ignores contextual determinants, which has necessitated a feminist approach be taken in this research to ensure that the everyday reality of midlife women living in a gendered society was recognised.

The three discourses of physical activity taken up by the participants – disease prevention, health and well-being and the "body beautiful" – had resonance with the currently competing discourses in society. All three discourses appear to be constituted within a health imperative, which strongly motivated all participants to maintain physical activity. Whilst the desire to maintain such activity was axiomatic, the context in which this occurred was frequently problematic. The interweaving and changing life situations clearly illustrated the relevance of the social context in which these women were physically active.

Nurses' position within health promotion discourses has been located within and constrained by the individualistic bio-medical discourse. The limitations inherent in risk and lifestyle behaviours appear to have prevented examination of the contextual reality of women's lives. Within the political and health ideology currently underpinning health care there are opportunities for nurses to expand their practice to incorporate social determinants. In so doing they can claim their place as autonomous practitioners who emphasize promoting health within a contextual reality, thus acknowledging the uniqueness, diversity and complexity of women's lives.

## CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Definitions of key words .....	2
1.2.1 Midlife.....	2
1.2.2 Physical activity and exercise.....	2
1.3 Aims of the study. ....	3
1.4 Background to the study.....	3
1.5 Physical activity and women .....	4
1.5.1 Maintaining exercise .....	5
1.5.2 A nursing perspective.....	5
1.6 Justification for this study .....	6
1.7 A feminist postmodern methodology .....	7
1.8 My position in this study .....	10
1.9 Review of chapters .....	11
1.10 Conclusion .....	13
<b>CHAPTER TWO : A LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Physical activity .....	14
2.2.1 Physical activity and disease prevention.....	15
2.2.2 Osteoporosis .....	16
2.2.3 Psychological health.....	17
2.2.4 The context of health.....	19
2.2.5 The downside of physical activity .....	21

2.3	Maintenance of physical activity .....	22
2.4	Measurement tools for physical activity .....	23
2.5	Gender bias in studies .....	25
2.6	Physical activity and midlife women.....	27
2.6.1	Perimenopausal years .....	27
2.6.2	Nursing literature.....	28
2.6.3	Maintenance of physical activity for midlife women.....	30
2.7	Health promotion .....	32
2.7.1	Lay theorizing and health promotion.....	34
2.7.2	Health promotion and women.....	36
2.7.3	Health promotion and nursing .....	36
2.8	Conclusion .....	38

### **CHAPTER THREE : THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THE RESEARCH METHOD..... 40**

3.1	Introduction.....	40
3.2	Epistemology and Ontology .....	40
3.3	A postmodern perspective .....	41
3.3.1	Discourse.....	42
3.3.2	Language .....	44
3.4	Feminist methodology .....	45
3.4.1	Intersubjectivity.....	45
3.4.2	The perception of contradiction and action.....	46
3.4.3	The centrality of women and their experiences .....	46
3.4.4	Gender.....	47
3.4.5	Understanding of gender in this study .....	49
3.4.6	Rigour and validity .....	49
3.4.6.1	Construct validity .....	50
3.4.6.2	Face validity .....	50
3.4.6.3	Catalytic validity .....	51
3.4.6.4	Rigour in transcription.....	52
3.4.7	Feminist research in nursing .....	52
3.5	The research method .....	54
3.5.1	Participant Selection.....	54
3.5.2	Participants .....	55
3.5.3	Interviews .....	63
3.5.4	First interview .....	64

3.5.5	Second interview .....	65
3.5.6	Ethical issues.....	66
3.5.7	Informed consent.....	67
3.5.8	Confidentiality.....	67
3.6	Method of Analysis : An overview.....	68
3.6.1	Reductionism.....	69
3.6.2	Interpretation.....	69
3.6.3	The audit trail .....	71
3.6.4	Emerging themes.....	71
3.6.5	The final four emergent themes.....	72
3.6.6	Triangulation .....	73
3.7	Conclusion .....	74
<b>CHAPTER FOUR : EXERCISE FOR SELF .....</b>		<b>76</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	76
4.2	Exercise is part of me, part of my life.....	77
4.2.1	Self concept, self esteem, and body image .....	78
4.2.2	Positive feelings related to exercise.....	83
4.2.3	Exercise and aging.....	89
4.3	The importance of being fit and healthy .....	90
4.3.1	Disease prevention .....	91
4.3.2	Mental health.....	94
4.3.3	Stress release .....	96
4.3.4	Weight control.....	98
4.4	Conclusion .....	103
<b>CHAPTER FIVE : EXERCISE IN CONTEXT.....</b>		<b>104</b>
5.1	Introduction.....	104
5.2	Exercise interweaves and changes with life situations.....	105
5.3	Participation in physical activity .....	105
5.3.1	Physical activity from childhood to adolescence .....	106
5.3.2	Childhood.....	106
5.3.3	Adolescence .....	109
5.3.4	Physical activity in adulthood and at midlife.....	111
5.3.4.1	Walking .....	111
5.3.4.2	Gym.....	113
5.3.5	Maintaining exercise .....	116

5.3.6	Healthy lifestyles .....	119
5.3.7	Social roles .....	121
5.4	Constraints and conflicts .....	124
5.4.1	Time, work, and family constraints .....	126
5.4.2	Financial constraints .....	128
5.4.3	Guilt .....	129
5.5	Conclusion .....	131
<b>CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING STATEMENTS .....</b>		<b>133</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	133
6.2	The aim revisited .....	133
6.3	Health promotion discourses .....	134
6.3.1	Disease prevention discourse .....	136
6.3.2	Health and well-being discourse .....	138
6.3.3	The "body beautiful" .....	141
6.3.4	The lay discourse .....	143
6.3.5	Maintenance of exercise .....	145
6.3.6	Implications for nursing .....	148
6.3.7	Limitations of the study .....	153
6.4	Concluding statements .....	154
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>		<b>156</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS .....</b>		<b>181</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM .....</b>		<b>183</b>