

Public Abstract

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This dissertation explores the experience and meaning of menopause and aging within a community of lesbian women residing in the Ozarks. Using multiple methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation, this qualitative study places the embodied experience of the woman at the center of analysis. Contrasted with social discourses such as the pharmaceutical discourse, and the practices of Western medicine, this study privileges the words of the women who have experienced menopause and aging. Being lesbian separatist feminists from the second wave of the women's movement, the stories these women tell are imbued with a social critique which examines patriarchy, the dominant paradigm of western medicine and its propensity for the disease model, and ageism. Ultimately, they offer an alternative discourse which promotes embracing menopause as a natural life passage; advocating agency for women in their own healthcare; promoting an engagement in social critique of the "relations of ruling" at work in the "business" of women's healthcare; and believing in the transformative power of aging.