



Understanding participation in sport: What determines sports participation among recently retired people?

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Research Summary

"If you're thinking about exercise as meaning doing a triathlon, I'm certainly not. I'm thinking about being able to do DIY, decorating, cutting the grass and doing the garden."

"If I go too far my calf muscles will ache, I won't be able to do anything – I will be in bed."

"The biggest obstacle is that we can't even stretch our arms and legs, we are so old now. Everything creaks now anyway so we are not capable of anything else."

"A keep fit class...in a gentle, nice way...a social thing. Gentle exercise, not aerobics or anything serious."

Background

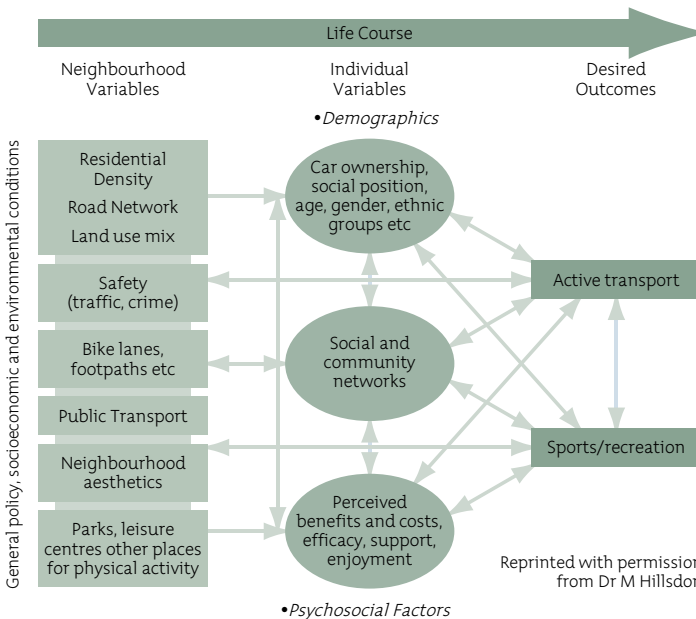
Historically, research into determinants of sport and physical activity has tended to focus on quantitative methods. Sport England commissioned the University of Oxford to undertake a review of existing qualitative research to help identify priority groups for a potential qualitative research programme¹. Oxford's review identified that more qualitative research needs to be undertaken to better understand non-participation in sport and sedentary behaviours.

Based on the evidence available, Oxford devised a framework which links together the factors (potential determinants) that are likely to influence an individual's participation in sport and physical activity.

When undertaking research the framework can be used as a checklist to ensure all factors that influence participation or non-participation are explored and that the interrelationship between those factors is evaluated. It also helps to establish what interventions could deal with the barriers associated with each of the determinants (see framework below).

The 'life course' element within the Oxford framework helped to identify several 'transitional' lifestages that required qualitative investigation, one of which was recent retirees.

¹ Understanding Participation in Sport - a Systematic Review. A study on behalf of Sport England by the University of Oxford British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group



Framework of the determinants of sports participation

Background continued

Considerable inequities exist in participation in sport by different groups in the population, and one important dimension is age. Participation in sport declines with age. Participation in at least one activity (excluding walking) during the previous four weeks among 60-69 year olds is half that of 30-44 year olds (27% compared to 54% respectively)².

The Framework for Sport in England³, published in 2004, highlighted the key drivers that will influence Sport England's ability to achieve the Game Plan target of 70% of the population being active by 2020⁴. One of these key drivers is the ageing population, as by 2020 almost half of the UK population will be over 50 years old.

Given the drop-off in participation associated with age, if the ageing population phenomenon persists this will have a significant negative affect on overall sports participation. In light of Sport England's policy imperative of driving up participation, and the evidence of decreasing participation rates with age, there is therefore a need to understand the underlying factors that determine attitudes and propensity to take up sport and physical activity amongst older people and, in particular, amongst those who have recently retired.

This piece of research is part of an ongoing programme of research into understanding participation.

² Participation in Sport in Great Britain: Trends 1987 to 2002. Data from the General Household Survey

³ The Framework for Sport in England. Making England an active and successful sporting nation: a vision for 2020

⁴ Game Plan: a strategy for delivering Government's sport and physical activity, A joint DCMS/Strategy Unit report, December 2002



Research Objectives

The aim of this research was to significantly improve our understanding of determinants of participation in sport and physical activity among those who have recently retired. This will enable the better design of interventions that will encourage people into involvement in sport and physical activity.

Methodology

The research was undertaken by Arkenford Ltd. A total of twenty one focus groups (each focus group was attended by 6-8 respondents) were carried out across England amongst older people who have recently retired.

Respondents had to have retired between six months and two years ago. Also included were a small proportion of individuals who had part time employment (defined as working up to three days a week in a different job to that held at the time or age of employment).

Using a short screening questionnaire, the respondents in each focus group were classified as 'inactive' or 'active' based on their answers to a series of questions on how they spent their spare time.



Summary of findings

The findings are structured around a number of headings representing the key areas of the focus group discussions:

Lifestage

- Retirement represents a very radical change, with the key positives being freedom and reduced stress. Missing people at work and the camaraderie associated with this was seen to be a key negative of retirement.
- With the freedom comes the desire to keep busy and fill the available time. Many feel the need to impose a purpose or achieve something on a daily basis.
- Retirement also signals a change in priorities. Women value freedom and independence more, money becomes less important and health becomes more of a concern. For men, health is also more of a concern but retirement means getting their life back and doing things when they want to and spending more time with friends and family.
- There are distinct changes in the way retirees see themselves and how they view others. For most women who are younger and 'active' their life seems largely unchanged but the older 'inactives' recognise that they tire more easily and sometimes feel a decline in their self-esteem.
- There is recognition that we live in an 'ageist' society where they are identified as pensioners on the one hand but as a spare set of hands to help by their own family.

Attitudes to exercise and sport

- Across many groups it was felt that any form of physical activity with some exertion counts as exercise (for example, gardening and housework). Consequently, quite a few of the respondents classified as 'inactives' think that they regularly take exercise.
- Generally all groups were aware of the benefits and value of exercise and many see a strong correlation between a healthy body and healthy mind. Amongst the female groups physical benefits were the most often mentioned both for 'now' and the long term and amongst men there was an emphasis on health and mobility aspects of exercise (stops body seizing up, general well being, keeps medical conditions under control).
- Recently retired people feel that only certain forms of exercise are suitable for their age group. These tend to be the more gentle forms of exercise (walking, swimming, bowling, yoga). Any exercise that is more strenuous or dangerous is deemed unsuitable.
- The perceived downsides of exercise seen by women are: causing injury that could jeopardise their independence; becoming addicted and obsessive; it can be costly; and it's boring.
- Women saw current participants of their age as admirable, but lucky and 'different'.
- Men were less likely to fear injury but the downsides of exercise were: concerns about general health and the time it would take them to recover; feeling that enjoyment would be lost because of their inability to compete at a level they would like (mainly the 'inactives'); vanity and not wanting to look stupid; and the cost.
- Generally the word 'sport' is not received well by this age group, especially the 'inactives', as it implies strenuous or serious exercise.



Participation in exercise and sport

- The majority of the 'inactive' group had done some activity in the past. For women this was usually some time ago and mostly short term in nature. Although classified as 'inactive' because they didn't do activity on a regular, weekly basis, some of the women did do exercise informally (e.g. exercises at home), some did exercise occasionally, and did activities which they saw as exercise (e.g. gardening, housework).
- Most of the 'inactive' males did some sort of sport when they were younger and it was seen as part of the structure of their younger lives. Nowadays there was a greater emphasis on general exercise, (gardening, walking, DIY) rather than actual sport.
- Most of the 'active' group members had a history of participation. Nowadays the activities women were doing were: walking, keep fit, swimming, bowling, yoga and dancing. Sports undertaken by 'active' men were less team orientated (e.g. walking, golf, tennis, badminton) than those done in the past. They miss the competitiveness of sports but felt they can't join teams at their age as there is no opportunity to do so.

Reasons for non-activity amongst 'inactives'

- Women rationalised their non-participation as they placed more value on 'active chores'. Many women also see activity as a no-go area because of their age or their health and some have a very distanced take on exercise.
- 'Inactive' men were more likely to feel guilty about non-participation. As with females, more value was placed on 'active chores'.
- Physical restraints and not being able to compete at the standards they would like to were other reasons for male non-participation.
- Whilst most of the 'inactive' men realise the benefits of exercise, most of them find it hard to muster up the motivation to participate.

Exercise and sporting opportunities

- Unsurprisingly the 'inactives' are less likely than 'actives' to be aware of existing local exercise opportunities.
- When thinking of what opportunities exist women think narrowly in terms of very local opportunities whereas men will spread their net further in evaluating potential opportunity.
- With regards to desired future opportunities, 'inactive' women would prefer things specifically for their age group such as gentle keep fit, dancing (and men to dance with), tai chi and badminton.

- The younger men feel some need for opportunities specifically for their age group such as gym sessions or keep fit classes. Some thought bowls was appealing but identified a need for more local facilities. Many had been told by doctors to take up swimming but found public pools too overcrowded and private clubs too expensive.

Motivators and barriers

- The motivators are similar for men and women. Internal motivators include; physical benefits (getting fit and healthier, controlling weight), social benefits, mental and emotional benefits (for self esteem, enjoyment of activity) and retaining independence.
- External motivators are the media, doctors and partners telling them to do something.
- For 'inactives', friends and family encouraging them would be important motivators. Having a companion to do activity with and having a very local activity are also seen as important.
- The motivators are countered by a raft of barriers including lack of time, cost, health and physical limitations.
- Additional barriers were identified by ethnic minorities such as: family commitments; cultural norms of behaviour appropriate to women and older people which may cause gossip; sportswear may be considered immodest; most forms of exercise are seen as unsuitable; they are not able to use mixed sex facilities; instructors and other participants have to be female, Asian and speak their language.

Interventions

A number of potential 'sporting interventions' were tested to gauge what would trigger interest and ultimately future participation.

- Moderately priced activities specifically for their age group and 'taster' sessions were seen as a good idea.
- Expert advice and one-to-one service were also seen as attractive.
- The older respondents and those from ethnic groups thought advice via GP's would be useful.
- Health benefits are already known and not currently increasing participation. Therefore the social component, fun and enjoyment are seen as the most appropriate platform.
- Reassurance is needed in relation to safety and the fact that controlled participation will not result in injury.
- If interventions are to be successful, how they are promoted was seen as important. Suggestions included promotion through local newspapers, direct mail, leaflets, notices in the library, and announcements in community centres, temples and through the Mosque.
- The recently retired are more likely to relate to older people so interventions are likely to be more successful if they used an older person who looks good for their age and who understood their needs rather than a 'super fit' sportsperson.

Recommendations

The research has reported some clear recommendations to address the participation levels of recently retired people.

- **Communicate a need**
 - convey a clear message that exercise is different and better than being generally active.
 - reinforce safety to overcome fear of injury and the need for recovery time from exercise.
- **Provide an opportunity**
 - 'taster sessions' of activities likely to appeal, e.g. yoga, bowling, swimming, keep fit exercises, bend and stretch sessions.
- **Present relevant hooks**
 - position it as fun and enjoyable, and highlight the social aspect.
 - general well being.
- **Address barriers**
 - avoid using the word 'sport'.
 - make opportunities inexpensive and good value for money.
 - stress that there are exercises suitable for their age group and for people who haven't exercised for some time.
- **Make it easy**
 - make opportunities as local as possible (especially for women who think very narrowly in terms of their local area).
 - organise activities specifically for them (over 55's).
- **Make it a possibility for ethnic minority women**
 - use their own community halls and centres.
 - single sex – with assurance of privacy and not in sight of men.
 - instructors to speak their language.
 - exercise that can be done in usual (modest) clothes.
- **Reach them**
 - promote the fact that opportunities are available to this age group.
 - promote through local free press, libraries, GP surgeries, community centres.

Want to find out more?

You can find the full report on the Sport England website (www.sportengland.org), or contact the Sport England research team at research@sportengland.org.

Related research topics

Understanding participation in sport: What determines participation among 15-19 year old women? (January 2006).

Understanding Participation in Sport, A Systematic Review (September 2005).

Participation in Sport in England: Sports Equity Index 2002.

