

BARRIERS TO BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CROSS NATIONAL COMPARISON

John Essex Saunders, Eng Hoe Wee, Elizabeth Aumand

Aim

This paper reports on a study of students in two universities – one in Melbourne the other in Kuala Lumpur. Its purpose was to identify the characteristic physical activity patterns of these two groups and compare their perceptions on the barriers they faced to being active.

Literature review

Despite emphasis on the health benefits of being physically active, individuals around the world have become ever more inactive. In the USA, 2008 data revealed that approximately 72% of adults did not engage in a minimum of 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity for at least 3 days per week. About 47% high school graduates and 15% of college graduates did not involve themselves in leisure time physical activity. Approximately 19% of individuals ages 18-24 reported no leisure time activity. (Center for Disease Control, 2008).

In Malaysia, in 2006, a study on exercise participation of 4,807 youth reported a lack of interest in exercise and sports activities participation among youth. In addition, the Fourth National Health and Morbidity survey revealed unhealthy Malaysian lifestyle and dietary habits. Only 64.8% of adults exercised, 15% were obese. Three in ten Malaysians have high blood pressure. Approximately 61% of Malaysians above fifteen have been reported as physically inactive. The consequences are predictable. About 5.8 million Malaysians (21% of the total population) suffer from hypertension compared to 4.2 million six years ago and 6.2 million have hypercholesterolaemia (Edward & Lim Wey Wen, 2012).

A similar picture has emerged in Australia with over a third of university aged students (18-24 years old) overweight or obese (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). ABS has also reported that only 64% of Australians aged 15 years and over had participated in sport or physical recreation at least once within the last 12 months. Clearly there is a need to know more about how people in the adolescent age groups engage in physical activity in order to be able to develop and implement future strategies to address what has become a global health issue.

Methodology

Participants comprise a convenience sample of 511 undergraduate students from a private university college in Kuala Lumpur and 507 undergraduate students from a metropolitan university campus in Melbourne. Pencil and paper questionnaires were used to gather data relevant to student characteristics, their living conditions, and the nature of their physical activity involvement. Individuals' physical activity index (PAI) was assessed following the procedures outlined by Griffin (2006) and perceptions concerning barriers to physical activity assessed by means of the Overcoming Barriers to Being Active Inventory (OBTBAI) (Fahey, Insel & Roth, 2009). Means and standard deviations were calculated for all variables using SPSS version 19 for windows. T-test and ANOVA were used to test for significance in the difference between means in variables of interest.

Results

The sample comprised a majority of female students (60%) and 65% of all respondents were under 20 years of age. Fifty eight percent of participants lived at home with their family, but there was a significant difference between the two groups with 70% of the Melbourne sample as opposed to 45% of the Kuala Lumpur sample enjoying these living conditions. With regard to Physical Activity Index Scores a difference was also noted between the two groups with 58% of the Melbourne students scoring above 60 which indicated a good or excellent rating as compared to only 22% of those from KL. From the whole sample, over 15% were scored as needing improvement and almost a quarter were rated as fair or worse. With regard to the barriers to being physical active, for the sample as a whole Fear of injury, Lack of skill and social influence were seen as the most important barriers. Differences in importance were however found with regard to the two national groups, gender and age and these are discussed.

Conclusions

Although the sampling strategies adopted do not allow for generalizations to be made, differences observed between these two groups suggest some interesting cultural differences in the ways in which students in these two contexts participate in physical activity. Identifying the major barriers they experience to being physically active provides a starting point for understanding how more supportive environments may be developed to enhance the participation of this important group in greater and more frequent amounts of activity at higher levels of intensity.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2010). Measures of Australia's progress, Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by>

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2008) Prevention of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data. Accessed at http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/annual_data/annual_2008.htm
- Edwards, A. & Lim Wey Wen (2012,). "Fitting rewards for keeping fit". *The Star*, July 16, p.4
- Fahey, T.D., Insel, P.M. & Roth, W.T. (2009). *Core concepts and labs in physical fitness and wellness* (8th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill., Lab 2.2, page 51-52
- Griffin, J.C. (2006). *Client-centered exercise prescription* (2nd ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.