

Why Do Older Adults Not Participate In Sport?

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Aim

Global populations are ageing and ageing is commonly associated with a decline in health. As physical activity can provide physical, psychological and social health benefits, especially in old age (Haskell et al 2007), diverse physical activity options are needed to enable and encourage healthy ageing.

The concept of sport for health is becoming increasingly popular for other population groups. However despite the growing concern on the impact of ageing populations on health expenditure, this concept has received limited attention for adults aged 50+ years (hereafter referred to as older adults).

Research in sport and ageing for community sport has largely focused on the benefits of and barriers to sport participation. However to further understand why older adults do or do not participate in sport, the reasons for drop out and/or re-entry into sport should be considered. Thus the aim of this research was to explore potential reasons why older adults do not participate in sport and also reasons why they may re-engage in sport at an older age.

Theoretical background

The majority of research into drop out of sport has concentrated on adolescents. Where research relates to adult participation, the focus is predominantly on how adolescent sport participation can influence adult physical activity levels.

Most research studies have found that sport participation rates tend to decline with age (Eime et al 2016), however some longitudinal studies have refuted this, arguing that sport participation trends are more multifaceted (Breuer & Wicker 2009). Despite this, there is limited research on sport and ageing. Most sport participation trend research has focused on large data sets to explore lifelong trends of participation. These provide useful guidance on trends, but are of limited use when attempting to identify potential reasons for drop out and re-engagement in sport. Qualitative research can complement this previous research, by providing an in depth understanding of why older adults may or may not participate in sport.

Leisure Constraints Theory was used to analyse the results. It proposes that three types of constraints can prevent participation in leisure activities, such as sport participation: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints. The theory also considers the negotiation proposition. This concept suggests that participation is dependent on negotiation to overcome these constraints, and that some participants are able to overcome constraints and succeed in participating. Therefore this theory was used to explore the potential reasons for drop out and re-engagement in sport.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Eight focus groups were conducted (n=49). Two groups were undertaken with representatives from two National Sporting Organisations, four with older adult sport club members and two with older adult non-sport club members.

Peer debriefing was undertaken immediately after the focus groups to enable initial data emergence. The data was then transcribed and NVIVO software was utilised to code the emerging themes. The coding of these themes was led by one researcher, with ongoing dialogue between the wider research team to finalise this coding.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Eleven themes emerged relating to older adults dropping out of sport, with six themes exploring why older adults may re-engage with sport.

The key themes on drop out included time constraints, lack of appropriate playing opportunities and low priority from sporting organisations. Key themes for re-engagement in sport included physical health, social opportunities, especially with family/friends, and also being time rich.

Interestingly, the key theme of time was contradicted, as both a barrier and an enabler to participation. Furthermore, the concept of using sport to improve physical health refutes the oft cited reason of poor physical health as a barrier to participation. Thus these results suggest older adults are a heterogeneous demographic group.

To capitalise on using sport to improve health for older adults, policymakers should increase their priority for this demographic group. This would partially alleviate one of the key reasons for older adults dropping out of sport. This would additionally likely result in an increase of appropriate playing opportunities, which would encourage more older adults to participate in sport to derive health benefits.

This research also confirms that sport participation trends are not linear, with some older adults re-engaging in sport at an older age. When designing appropriate participation opportunities, policymakers should consider the reasons why older adults re-engage in sport. In particular, provide opportunities that enable bonding with family and friends.

Previous research has shown that sport clubs can benefit from engaging older adults (Jenkin et al., 2016), therefore sport should capitalise on these benefits by increasing their engagement with this growing population group.

References

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