

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

College Students' Perceptions of Social Interactions in College Physical Activity Classes

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Abstract

Physical activity (PA) has been found to benefit a person in many ways. One benefit of being physically active is the social component. This deals with interacting with someone before, during, or after the activity. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of social interactions on college-aged students during their PA class. Participants for this study included 408 college-aged students (272 males, 136 females) who were surveyed regarding their interactions during their PA class. The survey contained Likert scale questions and open-ended questions, which required the students to respond with written answers. In short, these students thought that their interactions during their PA were important and that the interactions were enjoyable. These results, along with other results from this study, highlight the positive benefits that come from being involved in PA.

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The literature has strongly endorsed the benefits of physical activity (PA) in a person's life. For example, PA can reduce risks of cardiovascular disease (Altavilla et al., 2018), diabetes (Bassuk & Manson, 2005), osteoporosis (Dhurup, 2012), and depression (Schuch & Stubbs, 2019). Brown and Fry (2014) established the benefits of PA for college-aged students and noted that one of the main opportunities for being physically active comes through PA classes offered through their university or college. Four-year colleges and universities and community and junior colleges all offer physical education classes to their students (Cardinal et al., 2012; Strand et al., 2010). These classes, also known as PA classes, lifetime activity courses, or basic instruction courses, are offered for the purpose of providing PA options for college students (Barney & McGaha, 2006). Friedrich-Cofer (1985), Leigh (1982), and Welch (1967, 1975, 1982) found that PA courses have a long history, which began at Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1861. Amherst provided activities that would help their students maintain their health and that would relieve the strain associated with their "academic courses" (Van Dalen & Bennett, 1953, p. 368). These college PA classes are typically taught by graduate students working toward a master's or doctoral degree (Wahl-Alexander & Curtner-Smith, 2018). Currently, the requirement of a PA class for a student to earn a baccalaureate degree has declined since the inception of PA classes being offered to college students. Cardinal et al. (2012) discovered that only 39.5% of 4-year institutions require students to take PA classes to graduate. With this being the case, large numbers of college students miss out on opportunities on specific days and at designated times to be physically active while attending college.

College students take PA classes for a variety of reasons. Barney and McGaha (2006) studied why college students took basketball or tennis classes and the likelihood of being active in these activities after graduation. They found that college students participated in these PA classes to have fun, to get exercise, to complete credit for graduation, to improve skills in the sport, to have a social outlet, and to relieve stress. One finding about PA classes serving as a social outlet revealed that social interactions with friends led to the development of life skills and positive relationships, positively affecting the PA over a person's lifetime.

The research has highlighted that socializing during PA has positive effects for the individual. The social component of PA can have different effects on a person. Fahey et al. (2017) reported several benefits a person might experience through social interactions with a partner/friend during an activity: motivation, safety purposes, adherence to activities, and time to talk with their partner/friend. Burke et al. (2006) studied the effects of exercising with a group of people as compared to exercising at home alone. The researchers concluded that exercising with a group of people is better than exercising at home alone. They summarized that when someone exercises with a group of people, the amount of contact with the others aids in obtaining the health benefits of exercise. A built-in social support exists in the form of encouragement and social interactions. Another study looked at social interactions in a college PA class, more specifically examining a caring climate in an exercise setting in relationship to well-being, hope, happiness, and perceived self-concept (Brown & Fry, 2014). The researchers defined a caring climate as one that fosters cooperation and in which members feel welcomed by and comfortable with their classmates and instructor. They concluded that college students in college PA classes experienced greater hope and happiness when they perceived a caring climate.

Barney et al. (2014) studied the effects of college students' perceptions of participation in PA classes on stress in their lives. The results of the study indicated that the college students perceived that their participation in the PA class helped them to manage stress while in college. A secondary finding from this study was that the students felt that the socializing they had during their PA classes helped them cope with stress in their overall lives, not necessarily just stress related to being college students. The study found that 75% of the males and 85% of the females felt that the socializing aspect of their PA classes helped them to cope with stress in their life. Student comments dealing with socializing during their PA classes included "I have met people in class and talking to them about anything and how I deal with things," "I can unwind to visit and talk through some of my stressors," and "Because I can talk and joke they [students] don't know anything I'm going through so they don't bring it up" (p. 159).

In alignment with research, direction is given to PA instructors to purposefully provide socializing opportunities for students. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) has created a document titled *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* (NASPE, 2014), which gives “guidance to colleges and universities for offering quality instructional physical activity programs” (p. 3). The document has seven topic areas to assist the college PA instructor: (1) Administration/Support, (2) Assessment, (3) Curriculum, (4) Instruction Strategies, (5) Program Staffing, (6) Learning Environment, and (7) Professionalism. An example of an appropriate instructional practice in the Curriculum section, states,

Program offerings include content that allows students to develop social skills (cooperation and communication) and responsible behavior that will lead them to become productive members of society. Curriculum is designed to ensure that these skills are taught intentionally and are not left for “teachable moments” only. (p. 26)

This statement encourages college PA instructors to put students in situations to socialize in a positive manner, which allows them to be responsible in social situations when involved in PA. With the literature and research presented, we hope that this study will shed light on the important benefits of social interactions for college-aged students during PA. Thus, the purpose of this study was to further investigate the effects of social interactions on college-aged students during their PA classes.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study included 408 college-aged students (272 males, 136 females) from a private university in the Western United States. Participants comprised both undergraduate students (94 freshman, 96 sophomores, 86 juniors, and 119 seniors) and graduate students (13). The participants were enrolled in volleyball, basketball, bowling, Zumba, and badminton activity classes. The

university Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for this study to be conducted.

Instrumentation

A review of the literature failed to identify an instrument specific to addressing social interactions during PA. Therefore, after reading through the literature, we developed a 14-question survey instrument (see Table 1). The survey consists of three Likert scale questions, eight open-ended questions, and three demographic questions. To establish content validity, we had college-aged students and three physical education faculty review the survey questions for clarity and understanding (Barney et al., 2012). The survey was pilot-tested on college-aged students who did not participate in this study. Following the pilot test, we performed checks on the instrument and found it reliable.

Table 1

Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes

The following survey questions will ask you about experiences dealing with social interactions you have had in your physical activity class. Questions will ask you to circle your answer and respond from your experiences dealing with your social interactions in your physical activity class. Thank you for participating in this survey.

1. How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?
Very Important Important Not a Big Deal
Not Important Not at All
2. Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?
Enjoyable Neutral Not Enjoyable
3. What positive interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity class? Please give some examples.
4. What negative interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity classes?

Table 1 (cont.)

5. Have your interactions with your classmates during your physical activity class been beneficial or non-beneficial? Please explain your answer.
6. Have your interactions you have had with classmates carried on outside of your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.
7. Have your interactions with classmates positively or negatively affected your experience in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.
8. Have you noticed if your interactions with your classmates in your physical activity class have helped you manage stress in your life (school, family, dating and others)? Please explain your answer.
9. What factors led to you forming interactions (or not) in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.
10. When do your social interactions take place?
 During Class
 Before or After Class
 Both
11. Do you feel these social interactions you have in your physical activity class will have a positive or negative effect on your physical activity throughout your life? Please explain your answer.

Gender: Male Female

Academic Year: Freshman Sophomore Junior
 Senior Grad Student

STAC Class (ex. Volleyball, basketball, Bowling)

Procedures

Convenience sampling was employed for data collection for the study. We contacted the instructors of the PA course, explaining both the study and the survey. After obtaining instructor agreement, we attended each PA class (16 total classes) and administered the survey to the students. For this study, 97% of the students agreed to participate by taking the survey. All students were assured that their

voluntary decision to participate in the study would not affect their grade in the class or their class standing.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics were derived from the survey. We conducted qualitative data analysis consisting of thematic content analysis. To accomplish thematic content analysis of respondents' short answers, we completed multiple readings of the data, noting emerging themes that became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics about student interactions in PA class. The first statement on the survey asked college students, "How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?" For this statement, a majority of the male participants felt their interactions were very important (17%) or important (42%), and a majority of female participants also felt their interactions were very important (16%) or important (51%). A third of the college students were neutral (38% males, 33% females) regarding their interactions in their PA class. The second statement asked the college students, "Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?" A majority of the students (88% males, 89% females) felt the interactions were enjoyable. Statement 10 asked, "When do your social interactions take place?" Again, a majority (60% males, 63% females) had interactions before and after class, while 37% of the males and 30% of the females had interactions only during class.

Other data collected for this study included short answer responses from seven survey statements. When asked what positive interactions they had with classmates in their PA classes (Statement 3), common student responses included "I made new friends" (Julie), "It's fun to get to know people and share experiences" (Carol), and "People have been friendly and not judgmental when I or anyone else get something wrong. For example, if I ever mess up with a serve, no one judges or minds" (Susan). Students were asked what negative interactions they have had with classmates in their PA class (Statement 4). Two common responses to this survey question included "too competitive" and "ball hogs." Other comments for this

Table 2*Results From Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes*

Question/answer	Male %	Female %
How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?		
Very Important	17	16
Important	42	51
Not a Big Deal	38	33
Not Important	3	0
Not at All	0	0
Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?		
Enjoyable	88	89
Neutral	12	11
Not Enjoyable	0	0
When do your social interactions take place?		
During	37	30
Before or After Class	3	7
Both	60	63

survey statement included “Trash talking. People who think they know the sport” (Mark) and “Being co-ed classes I’ve found it takes about a third of the semester for guys to take girls seriously as athletes with skills equal to theirs” (Jennifer).

When asked if their interactions in their PA class were beneficial or non-beneficial (Statement 5), a majority (88% males, 89% females) of the students stated that their interactions were beneficial because their PA class was a “good way to meet people” (Rosie). Another common response was that their interactions in PA class helped relieve stress. Other responses for this statement included “Knowing that I have friends to talk to is comforting” (Kathy) and “This class helps me stay sane” (Robert). Despite this, a number of the students were “neutral” in regard to their interactions during

their class. For Statement 6, students were asked if their interactions they had in their PA class have carried on outside of their PA class. For this statement, we noticed two themes. The first was that a PA class resulted in some students continuing PA beyond the class by finding players for their intramural teams. One student stated, “As I play basketball in class, I can find good players to be on my intramural team” (Joe). A second theme was that socializing among students included personal relationship with a classmate from their PA class. One student said, “I went on a couple dates with a nice girl from my basketball class” (Frank). The next survey question asked the students if their interactions with their classmates positively or negatively affected their experience in their PA class (Statement 7). Student responses included “I actually really look forward to the class and not solely because of the bowling” (Stan) and “They have very positively affected my experience. I have felt more comfortable and secure and as a result learned better and enjoyed myself more” (Rose). Another student stated, “My first class was negative because I was intimidated, but now it’s positive” (Wilma). Another student indicated her experience was not positive when she stated, “So many boys make me feel inadequate when I played” (Marilyn).

The study also sought to understand what factors led students to forming (or not forming) interactions with classmates (Statement 9), whether such interactions would have a positive or negative effect on their PA throughout their lives (Statement 11), and if these interactions helped them manage stress in their lives (Statement 8). In terms of forming interactions, the student said their interactions “naturally happened” because of the sports in which they were participating. One student stated, “Being part of a team” (George). Another student said, “You form friendships by just playing” (Edward). It seems that interactions are a natural part of PA courses, though this may come more easily for some than others. Again, students’ survey responses reflected that their participation and experiences in the PA class would translate into their lives after college. One student said that “this class would make me more willing to sign up for community teams in the future” (Stan). A positive effect from interactions in PA classes was found for students in regard to handling stress. Student responses included “We always talk about how our week has been and sometimes talk about hard things. It’s nice to know

someone cares” (Heather) and “Interactions with people keep me less stressed” (Heather). It should be noted that a majority of the students’ survey responses indicated that PA relieved their stress but did not necessarily make it easy to interact with their classmates.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of social interactions on college-aged students during a PA class. It was generally found that college students’ interactions had a positive effect on them in and out of class and potentially long term. These results highlight the power PA can have on a person’s life. The survey results showed what kind of interactions they have had, if their interactions were beneficial, if their interactions positively or negatively affected their experience in the PA class, and the effects of their interactions on future PA in their life.

The results of this study coincide with previous research. For example, Kahn et al. (2002) conducted a systematic review of certain interventions to increase PA. One of the interventions the researchers discussed was the social support interventions. They discussed building, strengthening, and maintaining social networks. They call this having a “buddy system.” Having a buddy system gives the participant a chance to maintain and to strengthen relationships that help with a person’s PA. For this study, students felt that participating with their classmates on teams helped them build friendships. These results imply that having someone to be with during PA greatly helps the person stay on task with the activity. Thus, as a person stays involved during the activity, they receive the benefits of the activity.

Another finding from this study that coincides with the literature is that the students felt their interactions with classmates during their PA class were beneficial. Burke et al. (2006) studied the effects of people who exercised with people or as a group and those who stayed home and exercised on their own. They found that those who exercised with people had support in the form of being with someone to keep them on task with their exercises. The researchers stated that exercising with people is better than exercising on one’s own. This study found that the students felt it was beneficial for them because they were with friends—and because they were with friends, they looked forward to coming to class, and in many cases, they wanted to come to class and have those interactions during class activities.

These results illustrate that if students look forward to coming to class, they will have better attitudes about their participation, thus leading to greater learning from class participation.

Other discussion points from the results of this study include student interactions in their PA class and if the PA class helped them manage stress in their life. VanKim and Nelson (2013) studied the association of vigorous PA with mental health, perceived stress, and socializing with college-aged students. They found that when college students' PA was vigorous and they socialized during their PA class, the benefits were positive in regard to mental health and stress. For this study, many of the students felt that the PA relieved their stress more than the socializing did. Yet one student felt that the PA provided opportunities to talk to classmates, which helped them to deal with stress from school. These results hint that PA instructors need to do all they can to have their students as active as possible. PA instructors need to plan activities in which students are not standing in line or waiting around for instructions or activities. A final discussion point from the study was, do the students feel their interactions have any effect on their future PA?

Barney and McGaha (2006) studied college students' perspectives on taking PA courses (basketball and tennis) and if participation in these courses influenced their participation after the courses were completed. One student responded, "As I get older, playing basketball will help me stay fit and give me the chance to be with friends" (p. 25). Many of the other student responses to this question used the word "confident" or "confidence" in regard to future participation later in life. For this study, a majority of the students concurred with previous research when they stated, "I am building healthy habits that will help me be active in my later years" and "I would be willing to sign up for community teams in the future" (p. 25). These results show that even at the relatively young age of a college student, there is a strong possibility for lifelong PA for those who participate in PA classes. These results should be shared with college administrators to inform them of the effect of college PA classes on a person's life. The results from this study add to the limited research highlighting the positive benefits of social interactions that can and do take place in a PA setting. These results provide further evidence that PA courses are important and that when taken these courses can be beneficial

for students. Cardinal et al. (2012) found that many 4-year colleges and universities do not require PA courses for graduation. If this is the case, then, as Li et al. (2009) put forth, “Greater attention must be paid to [college students’] health and physical activity habits to help them establish positive health and physical activity trajectories across their life course” (p. 34).

Implications for College Physical Activity Classes

The results from this study reinforce to college PA programs that they are doing more than helping their students improve their skills, cardiovascular functions, and strengthen muscles. They are helping their students form friendships that have the possibility of lasting throughout their life. In addition, they are talking through situations that they believe to be stressful at this time in the students’ lives and that such interactions are helping the students manage and work through the stress or certain situations in their lives. The interactions students are having affect the learning of activities in which they are participating. The outcomes that students are reporting as positive will benefit college students as they participate during their college experience and throughout their life. One student perfectly conveyed this sentiment by stating, “I think there is more going on here than just playing volleyball.”

Limitations

Two primary limitations to this study are noted. First, the participants came from one university. Second, the research study was conducted at a private university. Thus, the participants may not be representative of participants from other colleges or universities or geographic regions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Thus, the conclusions and implications are limited and perhaps mostly applicable to those participants’ demographics. Further research with a broader demographic would provide a richer data set to ascertain the generalizability of the conclusions and implications in the study.

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