Letter From the Outgoing Editor: Interpreting JAPA’s Mission

It is hard to believe that my 3 years as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Aging and Physical Activity (JAPA) are coming to an end. It has been a real pleasure to serve in this role, and I value the personal and professional growth that I have enjoyed as a result. In this 3-year period I have relied heavily on the incredible service provided to the journal and to the profession by the countless reviewers, the invaluable Editorial Board Members, and the indefatigable Associate Editors for JAPA. Given the large volume of submissions received, the efforts of these individuals are critical in JAPA’s efforts to publish high-quality research focused on the relationship between physical activity and aging, and they are much appreciated. I also want to thank Human Kinetics and, in particular, Greg Reed and Julia Glahn for their guidance and support of me and of the journal. Lastly, I would like to introduce Dr. Diane Whaley as the new Editor-in-Chief of JAPA. Dr. Whaley has been serving as an Associate Editor for JAPA since 2006 and will no doubt be exceptional in her new role as Editor.

As my tenure as Editor comes to a close, the topic that I want to discuss is that of the mission of JAPA and its interpretation, as I think this is a fascinating point to consider. JAPA’s mission is to provide a publication outlet for manuscripts that examine either “the impact of physical activity on physiological, psychological, and social aspects of older adults” or “the effect of advancing age or the aging process on physical activity among older adults.” As Editor, one of the first steps that I take before entering a manuscript into the review process is to decide if the research fits the mission of the journal. Surprisingly, this is not as easy a decision as it might seem.

The first decision to be made relates to whether or not the research is focused on “older adults.” This relatively simple question cannot be taken at face value because of the challenges in defining older (not to mention aging, which I am electing not to go into here). As a simple, playful example, readers may be aware that discounts for seniors at McDonalds and Greyhound start at 62 years of age, the International House of Pancakes offers discounts at age 55, and AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) offers membership to those 50 years and older. So, at exactly what age does one become “older”?

One way that older has been defined is to consider it to mean “postretirement.” However, if retirement age is used as the guideline, this presents a challenge because retirement ages are not the same in all countries. For example, data indicate that for the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the ranges of official retirement age are 60–67 years for men and 58–67 years for women (OECD, 2010). An additional challenge with using retirement age as the criterion for the definition of older is that official retirement ages have show increased in many countries in recent history. For example, in the United States for many years full Social Security benefits became available to those who were 65
years old. However, in 2003 the age for full benefits began to gradually increase (by 2 months per year) so that the retirement age for full benefits is now 66 years. This particular age for full Social Security retirement benefits will remain the same until 2021, at which time it will begin to increase by 2 months annually again so that the retirement age for those born after 1960 will be 67 years.

A second method is to use age categories or definitions as published by organizations or experts working with older adults. A commonly used age criterion is 65 years and over. This is used by a variety of organizations including the American Psychological Association, the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging. However, some individuals have suggested that the term older actually is no longer specific enough, given the increase in life expectancy and the burgeoning population of “older” adults. For example, Spirduso, Francis, and MacRae (2005) described people 45–64 years of age as middle-aged adults, those 65–74 years as young-old, 75- to 84-year-olds as old, 85–99 as old-old, and 100+ as oldest-old.

So, the question of how to determine whether or not a manuscript submitted to JAPA meets the mission of studying older adults is one that is not as easy to answer as it might seem and is one that may evolve with the advancing life span and as we learn more about the relationship between chronological age and factors relevant to physical activity.

This brings up the second challenge—identifying whether or not manuscripts meet the journal’s mission with regard to the focus on physical activity. This challenge was particularly surprising to me. Given that I have two graduate degrees from departments that now call themselves departments of kinesiology and that I am currently employed in a department of kinesiology, I thought that my understanding of physical activity was quite clear. I have largely based my definition on the American College of Sports Medicine’s guidelines (Thompson, 2010), which say that physical activity is “any bodily movement produced by the contraction of skeletal muscles that result[s] in a substantial increase over resting energy expenditure” (p. 2). However, because substantial is not operationalized in this definition, I have been basing my thoughts about the physical activity mission of JAPA on the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008), which acknowledge the ACSM definition but then go on to differentiate between baseline activity, which is described as encompassing “light-intensity activities of daily life” (p. 2), and physical activity that is of sufficient duration and intensity to enhance health. This definition has worked fine for judgments about most manuscripts and their “fit” with the JAPA mission.

Nonetheless, there are some manuscripts that have been submitted to JAPA that are challenging to consider relative to this aspect of the mission. Here are some examples of papers that have been submitted to JAPA that challenged my interpretation of whether or not they meet JAPA’s mission with regard to a focus on physical activity:

- A manuscript providing descriptive information about sedentary behavior
- A study focused on the ability of physical measures to predict physical function
- A paper looking at relationships between physical function and falls
Clearly, all of these manuscripts have implications for physical activity; however, none has physical activity as a variable in the research design. So, to my way of thinking, the link to physical activity is not implicit in the research, and my decision about whether or not to enter a paper into the review process would be partly determined by the extent to which the authors discussed the implications for physical activity.

I would like to speak more about the first example, which is the idea of research focusing on sedentary behavior, because I think this is a particularly intriguing point. There is a growing body of evidence indicating that sedentary behavior is related to all-cause and cardiovascular-disease mortality (Dunstan et al., 2010; Inoue et al., 2008; Katzmarzyk, Church, Craig, & Bouchard, 2009). In fact, current evidence suggests that sedentary behavior has independent effects on health outcomes but that the potentially interactive effects of sedentary behavior and physical activity on health outcomes are not clear (Katzmarzyk, 2010). This evidence certainly indicates that a focus on increasing the amount of time spent in lifestyle activity or decreasing the amount of time spent in sedentary behavior could have important health benefits. Furthermore, Katzmarzyk argues that this “emergence of the physical inactivity paradigm” (p. 2723), our ineffectiveness in changing physical activity behavior, and the relatively small portion of waking hours spent in physical activity support the need for a paradigm shift. The argument is that our focus as researchers should change from increasing moderate to vigorous physical activity to decreasing sedentary behavior. This argument then might suggest that JAPA should include manuscripts focused on sedentary behavior. But, the question is whether this really has implications for physical activity. My current thinking on this is that because a decrease in sedentary behavior could be achieved by increasing lifestyle activities (which do not themselves meet the definition of physical activity), the implications for physical activity per se are not a given. What makes this particularly intriguing, however, is that when I have broached this thinking with several of my colleagues in the Department of Kinesiology, they have disagreed with me. Their view is that research on sedentary behavior by its nature has clear implications for physical activity, the rationale being that a reduction of sedentary behavior will, in the long run, result in a “substantial” increase in energy expenditure. This would be evidenced by a reduction in weight gain and a decrease in the development of hypokinetic morbidities.

So, I have written this commentary as a means of opening a dialogue about the JAPA mission, and I look forward to continued conversations with colleagues about these issues as we continue to conduct, consume, and disseminate research exploring physical activity questions relative to older adults. On that note, I again welcome Dr. Whaley as the new Editor-in-Chief of JAPA, and I look forward to her guidance and leadership in the continued high-quality work of the journal.

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References


