Exploring the Relationship Between Physical Activity and Leisure in the Lives of Young Australians

Kim Jose and Emily Hansen

Background: Leisure-time physical activity is a term used by physical activity researchers to describe physical activity undertaken during nonwork time. In this study we explore how young people speak about physical activity in relation to leisure. Methods: Eight focus groups and one group interview were conducted with 50 participants aged 16–26 years. Participants included males and females, rural and urban dwellers, and a mixture of active/inactive young people. Focus group transcripts underwent an iterative thematic analysis. Results: Participants found it difficult to recognize leisure time activities in their day to day lives and only rarely mentioned their physical activity involvement when asked about leisure time activities. When discussing physical activity study participants commonly focused on high intensity physical activity such as sport and gym use. Three major themes relating to leisure and physical activity were identified: the meanings ascribed to physical activity, the experience of physical activity, and routines of participation. Conclusion: These findings suggest that the relationship between physical activity and leisure is complex and the term leisure with its associated concepts of satisfaction, relaxation and pleasure may not accurately reflect the way young people view their participation in physical activity.

Keywords: youth, qualitative research, young adults, exercise

Leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) is defined as physical activity undertaken as part of nonwork time. As occupational physical activity has decreased in recent decades there has been an increased focus on promoting LTPA. However, identifying leisure is more complicated than time use definitions suggests. Those outside paid employment such as many women, the unemployed, those living in nonwestern societies, and many young people are not recognized in this definition.

Traditional lay definitions of leisure incorporate concepts of choice, pleasure, relaxation, challenge and creativity. The intrinsic value that individuals attach to an activity, such as enjoyment or satisfaction enables them to identify it as leisure. Conversely, instrumental leisure involves leisure activities undertaken for a purpose, such as establishing social networks or self-improvement. Public health policy makers and practitioners have reinforced the concept of instrumental leisure by promoting the use of leisure time for healthy lifestyle activities, such as physical activity, that reduce the risk of disease. Given the importance of affective factors such as enjoyment and satisfaction as motivators for physical activity participation an increasing focus on instrumental leisure outcomes may have unintended negative consequences for participation in LTPA.

The term ‘leisure’ encapsulates multiple meanings that are influenced by individual, contextual, temporal and value related factors. This complexity is reflected in the multiple definitions of leisure, different categorizations of leisure (casual or serious, instrumental, or noninstrumental) and challenges in categorizing particular activities such as sport and gardening. Evidence suggests that leisure meanings are dynamic, with developmental stage as well as situational factors important. A longitudinal study exploring leisure meanings in Australian University students found that leisure meanings changed over 8 years and that they evolved from less to more developed meanings (passing time, exercising choice, escaping pressure, achieving fulfillment). Younger participants had less developed meanings and developmental stage was more important than situational factors.

In Australia, participation in LTPA, is highest for 15- to 17-year-olds (79%) and declines with decreasing age. However, regular participation (average participation twice per week, every month for 12 months) for 18- to 24-year-olds is only 26% compared with 34% for 55- to 64-year-olds. No difference in participation rates exists between those who live in major cities (69% population) and those living outside major cities (31% population) although type of activity varied. Higher educational attainment and income are associated with greater participation. While walking is the most popular LTPA for all Australians younger Australians (15–24 years) prefer to participate in aerobics, fitness, or gym-based physical activity.

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This study investigated how young Australians (age 16–26 years) spoke about LTPA in relation to leisure. Analysis of the focus group data explicitly investigated their perceptions of leisure time, the meanings they attached to physical activity and their experience of physical activity.

**Methods**

**Procedure**

Focus groups were used to explore young people’s engagement with physical activity during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The aim of the focus groups was to build preliminary hypothesis about participation in physical activity during this transitional life phase that will be further explored in follow-up individual interviews. Focus groups were selected as a data collection method because they are well suited to exploratory studies investigating motivations, attitudes and normative assumptions associated with the phenomenon (physical activity) under study.

Fifty young people aged between 16–26 years participated in the focus groups (see Table 1). Participants included rural (n = 21) and urban (n = 29) dwelling young people. Twenty-nine of the young people were aged 16–18 years and 21 were aged 19–26 years. Sixteen young people were employed full time, 12 were studying, 16 were combining study and casual work and 6 participants were unemployed. Recruitment included young people from areas with varying economic status and varying levels of education. For those aged 19–26 years, 10 had completed or were enrolled in a university degree. The remainder had finished school at either year 10, 11, or 12. For those aged 16–18 years, 5 had completed school at the end of year 10; the remainder were still studying.

Eight focus groups and one group interview were conducted ranging in size from 2 to 12 participants. Focus group participants were predominantly recruited through preexisting groups such as sports clubs, schools and community youth organizations. Snowballing techniques were also used to recruit participants for 2 focus groups. We used a maximum variability purposeful sampling strategy aimed to capture data from a wide range of young people with different backgrounds and different experiences and behaviors related to physical activity.

Focus groups were conducted between November 2008 and June 2009 in a range of venues including school classrooms, meeting rooms at sports venues or community centers, cafes and on site at university. The focus group venue and timing was selected to be easily accessible and to fit within the daily schedules of participants. Each group lasted approximately 35 minutes. All focus groups were organized and facilitated by the first author. All groups were audio-recorded and the facilitator made notes on group dynamics and processes following each focus group. The group interview (n = 2) was intended to be a focus group, but not all expected participants attended.

Group composition varied from single sex to mixed gender groups. The composition of the focus group largely reflected the recruitment process. Where participants were recruited from a female or male sports team then the focus group was single sex. Where recruitment occurred through a coeducational education setting the focus group was commonly mixed. A semistructured interview guide was used to facilitate discussion while allowing for the exploration of new ideas or areas of interest raised by participants. Young people were asked to consider physical activity as more than just sport and provided with examples such as walking the dog, walking for transport or dancing. An interactive exercise was conducted during each focus group. Participants were asked to choose 1 or 2 words that best encompassed

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* This was a group interview.

* Measured in years.

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male; W, working; S, studying; WS, combining work and study; Unemp, unemployed.
what physical activity means for them. Every participant was asked to speak to the group about the word(s) they had chosen. We did provide a list of possible words to ‘get them started,’ however, participants were told they could pick any word they wanted and were not limited to those on the list.

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was obtained through the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network and further approval was granted from the Tasmanian Education Department for recruitment through education settings. Participants who were aged 16 or 17 years required consent from a parent or guardian otherwise participants provided their own consent. Group members were asked to respect the confidentiality of other members and to respect the opinions of others within the group.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed as quickly as possible after the group was run. Notes taken during the focus groups were collated with the transcripts. Transcripts were checked for accuracy against the audio recordings. To assist with data management transcripts were then imported into NVivo 8 (QSR International). Notes and transcripts underwent a process of careful reading and constant comparison with the aim of identifying themes.23,24 This process was led by the first author. Transcripts and notes were coded line by line to identify key concepts and issues, demographic information and to identify and categorize answers to common questions. As this was an iterative research design data collection and analysis were concurrent. Concepts relating to physical activity and leisure were grouped and categorized accordingly. Throughout this process there was reflexive consideration of the analysis and discussion between the 2 investigators. In the following results section each quote is identified by the focus group (FG) number (eg, FG1), their gender (M/F), age (eg, 21) and order of speaking where appropriate (eg, A/B/C).

Results

Perceptions of Leisure Time

The majority of young people (n = 38) considered themselves ‘active’ when asked to distinguish between being active or inactive on participant information sheets completed after the focus group. No measure of physical activity was taken for focus group participants, but participants provided information about the type of physical activity they participated in on information sheets. From the discussions it was apparent that participants were all engaged in physical activity but at varying levels of regularity and intensity.

When responding to the opening question about leisure time, young people found it hard to identify with the concept of leisure time: “do you mean out of school?” (FG9, M18). Many young people talked about activities of daily living such as eating, sleeping or housework as leisure activities. For those young people who were involved in further education they spent “most of my spare time studying” (FG7, F17). Rural participants talked about working on the farm as a leisure activity and some young people felt they had no leisure time or asked “what spare time?” (FG4, F22). The overall impression was that their time and activities were not easily categorized into leisure/nonleisure. When further questioned about their leisure time, the leisure activities they mentioned, such as watching TV, playing computer games, reading and daily activities, were largely home based.

In general, similar patterns were seen for male and females with respect to the categories of leisure activities. Younger participants (16–18 years of age) were more likely to identify solitary leisure activities such as reading and computer use while older participants (19–26 years of age) identified socializing with friends as a leisure activity. Physical activity such as walking and gym use was mentioned by some participants (n = 12). Two participants mentioned swimming training and a few participants mentioned the sports they played as leisure. Decisions about leisure activities were influenced by friends, energy, tiredness levels and the weather. Males were more likely to mention boredom or their mood as influencing their decisions about leisure activities.

Participants for 2 of the focus groups were recruited through sports clubs. Only 1 focus group participant from these 2 focus groups (n = 12) mentioned the sporting activity they were recruited through when asked about their leisure activities. One of these focus groups was held in the sports venue before a game being played. It was this disinclination to identify their sport as leisure that led the researchers to explore the relationship between leisure and physical activity.

Through our analysis we identified 3 key themes that related to physical activity and leisure. These are the meanings ascribed to physical activity, the experience of physical activity and establishing routines of participation. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

The Meanings of Physical Activity

During the focus groups participants were asked to choose 1 or 2 words that best encompassed what physical activity means for them. When analyzing this section of the data we paired similar words and then classified the words as representing traditional or instrumental leisure (TL/IL) where possible. The words chosen were achievement/challenge (TL), body shape/weight (IL), competition (TL), enjoyment/fun (TL), fitness/energy (IL), health (IL), relaxation/time out (TL), lifestyle (TL), pain (IL), injury (not classified), and desirable/expected (IL). One male participant was unable to identify a word that encompassed the meaning of physical activity for him.

Half the participants identified words that we have categorized as representing an instrumental understanding
of leisure. Similar patterns between males and females, rural and urban dwellers and younger and older participants were observed when the meanings were classified as either traditional or instrumental leisure. However, those who indicated that they participated in lifestyle activities (surfing, rafting) or more traditional forms of exercise such as playing sport appeared more likely to ascribe traditional leisure meanings to their participation. Older females appeared more likely to ascribe instrumental meanings to physical activity. Younger participants (aged 16–18 years) chose achievement or challenge, only females chose competition and relaxation or time out was selected only by those who were working. Males often selected the word fun to describe the meaning of physical activity. Fitness, energy, and health combined were the most common words chosen by participants irrespective of demographic factors.

While fitness, energy and health were all selected as separate words by participants it was difficult to distinguish between the ways young people discussed these meanings of physical activity. Many young people used all 3 terms interchangeably when discussing the meaning of physical activity. The interchangeability of these 3 concepts is clear in the comments made by these young people when explaining why they had chosen health and fitness:

I went with “health” because in high school, I was fit. I was always into athletics, but when I left I went to kitchens which led to unhealthy food eating. . . . I find myself sweating a lot doing simple activity. So, yeah I chose “health” because that’s pretty much my main goal, I want to get back to where I was in high school. (FG3, M23)

I picked “fitness” because I like to know I’m doing something. And doing something makes you feel a lot better I think, really. I suppose it coincides with health as well. Being fit means being healthy as well. (FG2, F20)

Health was rarely discussed in terms of preventing disease or illness. Rather participation in physical activity gave young people the energy or the fitness to “do other things” (FG1, F22) and this was considered an indication of good health.

Despite the focus on obesity in the media and discussions around weight loss only a few of the participants specifically chose weight or body shape as the word they would use to encompass physical activity and its meaning for them. These were nearly all women, For example, one female participant said

I chose the word “weight” because when I think about exercise, it reminds me that I really must do more because I’m getting fat. (FG3, F25)

Older females were much more likely to choose these words than the younger women in the study; however, one young male did talk about the role physical activity had played in overcoming obesity during early adolescence.

Discussions of physical activity as a means of self-improvement contrast with some of the other meanings that participants chose as best representing what physical activity meant for them. These young people selected words such as achievement, relaxation and enjoyment. The way they discussed the meaning of physical activity is illustrated by the following comments:

I picked “achievement,” just because, I don’t know, I really love the way you feel afterwards, you’ve done something. Especially with I suppose bushwalking, it’s a really good feeling. It’s the best. (FG8, F16)

I chose “time out.” If I go, when I go for a run at night time and I run just out the back road where there’s no-one else. . . . You can just forget about everything else and just focus on what you want to do. And think about what you want to do with your life. It’s just your time sort of thing. (FG3, M18)

The meanings these young people gave to physical activity embody more traditional concepts of leisure. While young people who ascribe more traditional leisure meanings to their physical activity participation may be expected to view their participation as leisure in our study there was no consistent pattern between those who identified physical activity as leisure and the meaning they attached to participation.

Experience of Physical Activity

When talking about physical activity some young people described contradictory responses. They distinguished between how they felt during the activity and after it was finished. These participants commonly described not enjoying the physical effort associated with being physically active. Participation in physical activity made them feel “tired” or “stuffed” and they just “wanted it to be over” (FG8, F16). However, many of these same participants described the sense of “accomplishment,” “satisfaction,” and “achievement” they experienced on completion of physical activity. This mixed response to physical activity participation is clearly articulated when this young rural dwelling male explains why he chose the word achievement:

After doing big long walks I sort of always felt a sense of achievement. I hated every minute of the walk, but afterwards you look back and think “I did that. And I achieved that.” (FG3, M18)

In 4 of the 5 focus groups where participants discussed achievement and challenge they also discussed the experience of being active in a negative manner. Many focus group participants recognized that despite the effort required to be physically active it could leave them feeling “good,” “aerated,” or “motivated to do what else you’ve got to do” (FG9, F17).
The majority of participants discussed playing sport, attending the gym, swimming or running when they talked about physical activity. In the 6 focus groups where participants were prompted to discuss less intense forms of physical activity, such as walking, only 1 or 2 talked about it as exercise. The majority of our participants focused on participation in high intensity physical activity and this may have contributed to the contradictory feelings they associated with participation.

Many participants obviously enjoyed their involvement in physical activity. When talking about physical activity their enjoyment was obvious, they just “love(d) sport” (FG4, F18), “love(d)” surfing (FG9, F17), “like competing” (FG2, F21), or found “hanging around with mates fun” (FG6, M18). The source of enjoyment varied from the competitive nature of playing sport, participating with friends or family, achieving personal goals with respect to fitness or skill development as well as the physical sensation associated with particular types of physical activity such as the “rush” or “thrill” (FG9, M17) associated with rock climbing.

Some participants recognized that their enjoyment varied depending upon what type of physical activity they were participating in. This idea is clear in the following discussion from FG1 about how being active makes them feel:

I feel really good when I’m playing team sports. I don’t notice that I’m doing lots of work, but if . . . I’m on a crosstrainer or like a stepper or something at the gym, . . . I get really tired. Like I just hate like “Oh 10 minutes to go, 9 minutes to go.” (FG1, FA24)

That’s why I like exercise classes. (FG1, FB24)

I’m the same. (FG1, FA24)

You don’t clock watch. You’ve got the music and it’s all like lots of changing. (FG1, FB24)

I was just about to say that. When I’m on the treadmill, the internal motivation that I have to get and sustain is sometimes hard. But when I do the classes, even though it can be tough, like the work, but you just don’t feel it as much. (FG1, FC23)

This discussion demonstrates how individuals may associate different feelings with different types of physical activity.

Discussions of the enjoyment, sense of satisfaction and the ‘energy’ experienced as a result of participation in physical activity by some participants contrast with the negative associations with physical activity and discussions of the effort involved in participation in high intensity physical activity. It was clear that some participants experienced a combination of these contrasting responses and that responses could vary depending upon the type of activity they were discussing.

Routine

Establishing physical activity routines with the resulting habituation of the behavior is the focus of many policy makers and practitioners hoping to increase levels of physical activity. Participants in our study recognized the value of establishing routines to facilitate an on-going commitment to regular physical activity. However, this could be challenging due to other life circumstances as clearly articulated during the discussion about the gym attendance in FG2:

It’s just depends on my work. Because like that first week I was working 7–11 in the mornings, and then I went to the gym in the afternoons, which was fine. (FG2, FA22)

Oh that would have been . . . you would have been motivated. (FG2, FB20)

But lately I’ve been working 4–9 at night. And I don’t really want to go to the gym, and then have to go and have another shower and then get ready for work. It’s just too much hassle. (FG2, FA22)

I wouldn’t be going so much if I wasn’t on holidays. . . . It’s like I’m not doing anything . . . working 1 shift per week. (FG2, FB20)

It’s all about routine, I think. Like once you, if you get in a routine of like going for a run or something every morning it’s not as, it’s harder to break I guess, than if you just. It’s a bit like netball because we’re all in a routine of training once and playing once, than sort of when you’re not doing it. (FG2, FC20)

Some participants used membership of a sports team to ensure that they were physically active on a regular basis. Other young people participated in individual activities as participation was more flexible.

While recognizing the benefits of establishing and maintaining physical activities routines this was not always easy as other aspects of our participants lives were not structured in this way. Working irregular and flexible hours and fluctuating study demands made committing to regular physical activity difficult. Participation in physical activity commonly altered to accommodate these changing life circumstances. While well-established routines of participation, as evident for the group of netballers, facilitated participation for some young people where these routines clashed with work, study or family commitments participation was commonly modified or ceased altogether.
Discussion

Our interest in physical activity as leisure in the lives of young people arose from the disinclination of many of our participants to identify physical activity, particularly sport, as leisure. This lack of resonance between leisure and physical activity is easier to understand when we consider the 3 key themes identified: meaning of physical activity, experience of physical activity, and routines of participation.

The experiential dimension of an activity and the value an individual places on that activity has been identified as key factors in defining an activity as leisure or not. More than half of the young people in these focus groups attached instrumental outcomes such as improved fitness, energy, weight loss, or health to their participation in physical activity. Undertaking leisure activities for self-improvement is not uncommon and has been found in other studies of physical activity. Public health messages encourage individuals to participate in instrumental leisure activities to prevent ill health and disease. However, if physical activity is valued primarily because of its future gains then it may lose any inherent enjoyment or pleasure thus making it difficult to identify as a leisure activity.

The young people in this study were generally not focused on long term disease prevention, but on being ‘fit for life.’ This concept has been found in other studies exploring physical activity in the lives of young people. Participation in physical activity enabled them to have more energy or physical fitness to participate in other activities. The focus on the physical gains associated with participation might impact on any inherent pleasure associated with the physical activity thus making it difficult to identify as a leisure activity. Attaching more traditional leisure values to participation such as fun, relaxation and challenge to physical activity may facilitate identification of physical activity as leisure although in our study this did not appear to be the case.

This failure to identify physical activity as leisure despite attaching more traditional leisure meanings to their participation appeared to be associated with the way these young people experienced their participation in physical activity. The physical effort required for participation was commonly not plausurable, but was often accompanied by a sense of satisfaction and achievement on meeting the challenge of participation. Finding physical activity unpleasant is not uncommon and has been associated with exercise intensity. Our participants did focus on physical activity of high intensity and this may have influenced the ways young people discussed their experiences of physical activity. Intensity has been found to be important in defining physical activity as legitimate exercise among people aged 25–35 years and is reflected in young Australians preference for participating in physical activity of higher intensity. However, those participants who identified relaxation or time out with their involvement in physical activity also indicated that they participated in high intensity activities such as running, competitive sport or swimming.

Enjoyment is an emotion commonly associated with leisure. Enjoyment will be greatest where there is a match between the source/s of enjoyment for an individual and the type of activity engaged in. It has been argued that enjoyment of physical activity can be learned as regular participants learn to associate participation with a sense of satisfaction or achievement. Enjoyment varied for some individuals according to the activity being discussed. This highlights the importance of contextual factors when talking about physical activity as leisure as experiences may vary for individuals according to the activity.

Traditionally, leisure activities provided experiences that fell outside the routine of people’s everyday lives. It has been argued that once leisure activities become routine then the emotional dimension of leisure such as pleasure and excitement or anticipation is lost. However, participating in routines of sport or exercise require some degree of preparation and planning (anticipation) as well as mindfulness. The outcome of playing sport is always unknown, the physical experience of exercising may differ each time and the environment in which the activity is undertaken may also vary. However, as leisure was not defined for focus group participants and spare time was the alternative offered their routine involvement in physical activity might have been considered a commitment. Hence, they did not consider this an activity that occurred in their spare or leisure time.

Attaching traditional leisure meanings to their participation appeared to be more dependent upon the type of activities participated in, particularly lifestyle physical activity, or other life circumstances, such as working full time. As the boundaries between leisure and other activities of everyday life blur some people do actively choose to participate in leisure activities that fulfill a desire for sensation seeking, risk taking or experiences that are not possible in day to day living. The intrinsic sense of achievement, challenge and enjoyment associated with participating in lifestyle physical activities or competitive sport, socialization with friends as well as the physical sensations associated with being physically active may not be experienced by these young people in other areas of their lives. For these young people physical activity may provide an extra dimension to their lives that they associate with leisure.

Public health campaigns promoting the benefits of participating in regular physical activity appear to be reaching young Australians. Our participants clearly associated regular participation in physical activity with improved fitness, weight loss and health. However, our participants did appear to associate these outcomes with...
participation in high-intensity exercise despite contemporary public health messages promoting the health benefits of moderate as well as vigorous physical activity. Public health campaigns have focused on promoting physical activity recommendations and associated health benefits. Much of the focus has been on promoting LTPA. However, if leisure meanings are dynamic and impacted upon by developmental as well as individual, situational and contextual factors then public health campaigns promoting LTPA may need to incorporate a more sophisticated understanding of leisure. Promoting LTPA as a means of escaping life pressures or achieving fulfillment may more fully encapsulate the concept of leisure. Alternatively, a term such as discretionary physical activity may more accurately reflect the way many people approach the physical activity they undertake outside the work environment.

Conclusion

Differentiating LTPA from occupational physical activity is common place in physical activity research. Many interventions focus on changing LTPA as it is considered more modifiable than occupational physical activity. The discussions about physical activity by these young people highlighted the contradictory and ambiguous nature of their participation. Generally, these young people failed to identify LTPA as leisure. Physical activity policy makers and practitioners should remain aware that the term leisure, and by extension LTPA, is a complex term with multiple meanings. The term LTPA may not accurately reflect the way young people view their participation in physical activity.

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