

SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG BLACK ISIXHOSA SPEAKING PROFESSIONAL WOMEN IN THE NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

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ABSTRACT

Chronic diseases of lifestyle in South Africa are on the increase, as shown by recent studies. Black women, who have the country's highest levels of inactivity, overweight and obesity, are particularly at risk. This study used qualitative methods to investigate barriers to physical activity participation in two generations of Black professional women (teachers, nurses, social workers and public managers). The two generations reflect pre- and post-democracy age groups in South Africa. The older generation (n=20), aged 35 to 45 years, spent their formative years in apartheid South Africa, disadvantaged by racial policies. The younger generation (n=27), aged 18 to 21 years, spent their formative years in post-apartheid South Africa, post-1990, under a constitution which guarantees equality and non-discrimination. In-depth qualitative interviews, utilizing an interview guide, were used to collect data from the participants until data saturation was achieved. Data from the interviews were transcribed, analysed and verified in accordance with Cresswell (2003) and Guba's model of trustworthiness (Krefting, 1991). Three sub-themes were identified relating to barriers to physical activity participation: personal, environmental and socio-cultural factors. The socio-cultural factors, the focus of this article, included the lack of social support, exercise "not being a part of African culture", traditional gender roles, dress code, exercise associated with the young, exercise associated with undesirable weight loss and "destructive talk" by the community. The findings have highlighted misconceptions about exercise. Conservative socio-cultural barriers will have to be overcome before physical activity is seen as normative behaviour for Black women in a South African context.

Key words: Physical activity; Socio-cultural barriers; Black women.

INTRODUCTION

Many of today's chronic diseases are associated fundamentally with the pervasive sedentariness of modern life (Sparling *et al.*, 2000). The association between physical inactivity, adverse health conditions and hypokinetic diseases has been widely researched and acknowledged as a growing concern world-wide (Dishman *et al.*, 2004). Recent surveys and studies have revealed that the South African population has moved towards a disease profile similar to Western countries, with increasing deaths attributed to chronic diseases of lifestyle (Steyn, 2006). Black women with the country's highest levels of inactivity, overweight and obesity, have been identified as a high risk group (DoH, 2002; WHO, 2005).

Despite on-going research and a growing body of knowledge on physical activity in South Africa, there is still a lack of data on the determinants and constraints to participation in physical activity (Lambert & Kolbe-Alexander, 2006). Researchers of leisure studies and physical activity have emphasized the complexities surrounding physical activity participation and commitment to active lifestyles (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003).

In both developed and developing countries, cultural patterns as well as economic, political and ideological orders affect the participation of women in sport (Hargreaves, 1994). Historical and social conditions have similarly affected the physical activity and sport participation of Black South African women. This article examines socio-cultural barriers, and focuses on those barriers that are unique to a South African context. Within the complex political history of South Africa, Black women have been severely disadvantaged by the past government's policy of apartheid which included discriminatory laws and practices and encompassed migrant labour, segregation, forced removals and poor living conditions for Blacks (Bernstein, 1985). The oppression of Black women also came from historical and cultural conditions: they have been marginalized in their own patriarchal societies (Goosen & Klugman, 1996; Nauright, 1997). According to Roberts (1992), the majority of Black South African women suffer triple oppression on the basis of their class, colour and gender. This inhibits their participation in various forms of leisure and recreation.

However, the role and position of women in South Africa has changed dramatically over the past transitional decade. South Africa's transition to a new democracy was accompanied with a call by women to address gender inequality at all levels (Seidman, 1999). During the negotiations for a new constitution, between 1992 and 1994, women's organizations played a pivotal role in ensuring that women's needs and interests should become part of the debate about rights. The battle for gender recognition was not in vain and gradually the political demands were for a non-racial, democratic and *non-sexist* South Africa (Meintjes, 1996).

The constitution guarantees the equality of women and allows for affirmative action to address gender and race inequalities (Kadalie, 1995; Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Many laws which discriminated against women have been changed or repealed. The post-apartheid government has shown commitment to gender equality (Hassim, 2003) with the establishment of bodies dealing specifically with gender issues and instituting, more recently, the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and People with Disabilities. While much has been achieved in terms of policies and legislation, the day-to-day social realities of many women remain unchanged (Meintjes, 2005).

In post-apartheid South Africa the legacies of colonialism and apartheid still shape women's access to sport (Pelak, 2005). A report by the South African Sports Commission (SASC, 2004), aimed at establishing the impact of democracy on the status of South African girls and women in different sectors of recreation and sport, highlighted the adversities facing women. A patriarchal society, poverty, sexual harassment, and a lack of access to appropriate facilities are some of the reasons given for the continuing position of women in sport in South Africa (SASC, 2004).

Although democratization has encouraged South African women to imagine new possibilities (McFadden, 1992; Seidman, 1999; Pelak, 2005), the extent to which the new dispensation has

improved the lives of Black women is debatable. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid, as well as historical and cultural patriarchy, still shape their lives. Patterns of social change do not emerge immediately with legislated change, but manifest over time.

This article emanates from a larger study that used a mixed method approach to achieve a holistic understanding of physical activity in the lives of two generations of Black, isiXhosa speaking, professional women (N=180) in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. To assess cross-generational change that indicated the effect of formative years spent under different political dispensations, the two groups were chosen to reflect pre- and post-democracy age groups in South Africa. The older generation (OG) (n=111, aged 35 to 45 years, mean age=39.87 years) spent their formative years under the Apartheid system, subjected to its discriminatory laws and practices. The OG was comprised of community teachers, nurses, social workers and public managers. These women, through their various occupations, were in constant contact with their communities and could be regarded as role models who influence community lifestyle, attitudes and behaviour. The younger generation (YG) (n=69, aged 18 to 21 years, mean age=20.12 years) spent their formative years in post-apartheid South Africa, post-1990, under a constitution which guaranteed equality and non-discrimination (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). The YG was comprised of teaching, nursing, social work and public management students.

Quantitative data which included the height, body mass and various health and physical activity measurements — the Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile (HPLP) (Walker *et al.*, 1987), the Global Physical Activity Questionnaire (GPAQ) (WHO, 2009) and ActiGraph GT1M accelerometer — provided baseline information on the health status and physical activity patterns of the participants. The results indicated that both the OG and YG had lower health promoting behavioural practices than expected, and significantly higher levels of overweight and obesity and significantly lower levels of physical activity than the South African norms (Walter, 2008). The GPAQ scores indicated that 100% of the OG and 95% of the YG were sedentary or minimally active (Walter, 2008).

This finding prompted questions about the nature of constraints to physical activity participation experienced by the participants. This article reports on this specific objective of the larger study, in which qualitative data were used to explore and describe — amongst other obstacles — the socio-cultural barriers to physical activity amongst both the OG and YG of Black isiXhosa speaking women participating in the study.

After an outline of the methodology used in the qualitative study, which is the focus of this article, results are described, and the findings discussed.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a group of 47 women (20 from the OG, mean age 39.9, SD=3.3 years; and 27 from the YG, mean age 19.8, SD=0.9 years), using an interview guide. The final number of interviews was determined by data saturation (data adequacy, involving the collection of data until no new information was obtained) (Morse, 1994). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data were managed and analysed according to the steps described in Cresswell (2003). These steps engage a researcher in a systematic

process of categorizing and analysing textual data. Data verification was done according to Guba's model of trustworthiness (Krefting, 1991). An independent coder, experienced in qualitative methodology, verified the coding. A set of transcripts with a protocol on how to do an open analysis was given to the independent coder for analysis. After the analysis, the researcher and independent coder met for a consensus discussion on the identified themes, sub-themes and categories in the data.

RESULTS

The three sub-themes (as identified by the researcher and independent coder) relating to barriers to physical activity participation were: personal, environmental and socio-cultural factors. The socio-cultural factors, the focus of this paper, are determined by the norms and values acceptable to the community. The professional women in the present study formed a unique target group, sharing a similar demographic profile in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status and education. Their shared cultural heritage, as Black isiXhosa-speaking women living in an urban environment, revealed unique barriers to participation in physical activity in relation to their way of life, their sense of themselves as people, and their sense of themselves as women (Coakley, 2007).

The socio-cultural barriers included a lack of social support, exercise "not being a part of African culture", traditional gender roles, dress code, exercise being associated with the young, exercise associated with undesirable weight loss and with negative comments ("destructive talk") by the community.

The discussion below includes direct representative quotations from participant interviews. Quotations from participants are indented. The language is quoted verbatim and no effort has been made to formalize language usage in the participants' verbal responses. Where clarification is required, explanations are given in parenthesis.

Lack of social support

The majority of the participants (both YG and OG) reported very little social support for physical activity participation. They reported not receiving any support and encouragement for participation in physical activity from their family while growing up, "because I was raised like this, you know, and my family and extended family did not show interest in it" (OG).

Indeed, both the OG and YG were actively discouraged from exercising:

My parents did not allow me to go and play sport. (OG)

She [the grandmother] said, "Where do you get such ideas, that's for White people."
(YG)

My mom doesn't want me to exercise 'cause she likes my body, she wants me to be fat. (YG)

Friends and peers were not involved in any form of exercise:

I don't have friends that like to exercise. (OG)

[N]obody around I know is doing it, so I'm not doing it also. (YG)

“Not in my culture”

Many participants in the study grew up in communities where exercise, particularly for women, was not seen as part of their Black culture, and therefore not seen as important, or encouraged. It was not common to see women exercising: “it has never been a part of their lives at all” (OG).

In our culture the women are always at home, you never see the woman in our Black townships taking a walk or doing something. (OG)

Many of the YG concurred with the OG that exercise was not seen as an important part of their Black culture. The quotes below describe this perception in different ways:

It's not in our culture ... I've been living without it for such a long time so why should I start now?

They'll tell you, hey, in the olden days we were healthy without exercising.

If you do your duties at home then you're fit, they'll tell you.

Black women aren't meant to exercise, it's for White people.

Normally jogging and eating healthy diet or doing sports, it's not in our culture.

In addition, no intrinsic value was attached to the games and sport children played. Children were encouraged to go and play outside but not for any educational, recreational or developmental needs, but “to keep the house clean”.

I would say our culture may have played a part because it is not something that was encouraged. We used to play a lot outside when we were children. We like to play ball, and anything that was outside. But we were pushed towards the outside to play rather than inside. They would say go outside because you are making the house dirty. They did not think of it as us exercising, it was just trying to keep the house clean, and if you want to play, go outside.

Traditional roles of males and females

From a young age, Xhosa boys and girls have traditionally been socialized into particular roles. Girls were required to do domestic chores while boys in this urban setting could often play. Responsibilities to home and family were central in the lives of girls growing up, leading to the natural transition of assuming this role in adulthood:

But the reality of this matter is in our Black culture. If you are Black and you are a girl there are more responsibilities that are expected of you. The boy can just play. No one expects him to come back and wash the dishes or sweep the floor or dust the room. It is like a boy is exempted from it. There is more responsibility that is given to girls

than boys. We girls we learn from a very early age that there are things to be taken care of. The treatment of boys and girls is totally different. (OG)

It is the culture that has an impact, in our culture the boys do nothing and just play and the girls have to clean and do everything, so now mothers say your place is here at home. (OG)

I think we have come to expect that girls don't exercise because guys play soccer ... But with us the sport is cooking, cleaning and doing the washing. (YG)

They [boys] play soccer and they run around...

[And the girls?]

Working, what else, cooking, preparing lunch, supper and breakfast, ... there's no exercising thing. (YG)

Dress code

There is a perception that it is not acceptable for Black women to wear revealing sport attire such as tights or running shorts. Participants would not feel comfortable wearing revealing sport attire when exercising in the township. It was fine for them to wear such clothes while exercising in the suburbs and at suburban gyms, away from the criticism of the Black community:

You must make sure when you run there you don't wear tights. Like where I am staying in Bridgemead [a historically White suburb] you can run with tights on but not in KwaZakhele [a historically Black township] because people will call you, shout at you. It is because women shouldn't be dressed like that. (OG)

Yes, they can in a way, when I am going to a gym I will have to wear the tights and things and the community will say that why is an old female wearing such things so to them, they will say it's not acceptable. (OG)

They see people when they jog they just put on shorts, so maybe they think you are not wearing enough clothes. (YG)

From interviews with the participants the researcher gleaned that it was more acceptable for younger women to be seen wearing shorts or tights while exercising, but once the women were married, it was not acceptable.

Exercise associated with the young

Exercise was seen to be associated with what children and young people did, and it was not acceptable for women (particularly married women) to be seen exercising. Women were discouraged by the "destructive talk" of community members:

When someone is exercising they will perceive that person as someone trying to pretend to be younger than their age. Somebody who thinks she is young when they are old. (OG)

In my area where I am I would not find women exercising. I would see the school going children, the teenagers, but not women. (OG)

It is something for children or young ladies or young children. (YG)

Exercise associated with undesirable weight loss

Participants may have been aware of the health and other benefits of exercise, but only considered exercising when they perceived that they were overweight and therefore needed to lose weight:

The people who are concerned about exercise are the people who have heavy weights, and who are overweight. Exercise is associated with losing weight. (OG)

Most of the time we join or want to exercise because of weight. I don't remember anybody who I've come across talking about exercising. Only when they want to lose weight then they want to exercise. (OG)

Many of the YG related exercise to weight loss so, if body weight were not an issue, there was no need to exercise:

I don't think I need to. I'm thin.

Ja, it is important for some people, for fat people.

The YG also reported being discouraged from losing weight by older family members because "African ladies are not skinny" and "Black girls are supposed to be nice and heavy".

A serious implication with regard to weight loss is its association with HIV and Aids. There is still a stigma surrounding HIV/Aids in South Africa and loss of weight through exercise might be conceived to be associated with HIV/Aids:

Where I live it would be so strange to wake up in the morning and go jogging, people will look at you strangely, and then if you all of a sudden lose weight, people would say things like you're sick or HIV positive or things like that. So sometimes you're scared of losing weight because of what people might say about you, so the society also play a very big role. (YG)

Negative comments ("destructive talk") by people in the community

The OG reported on the "destructive talk" by the community when older women are seen exercising. This "destructive talk" in a community-centred culture is extremely isolating:

If an older fat person in our culture starts doing exercises or going to gym ... there is a Xhosa word "uflayi" that they would use. There are women in our communities would say so and so wants to be young and starts destructive talk.

The YG reported being accused of "wanting to be White". They would be laughed at, called mad and crazy and ridiculed, and be accused of being HIV positive:

You know Black people. People there don't like exercising. If they see you jogging, they'll say ah, this one wants to be White or she doesn't have anything to do or something like that.

No, it will be very awkward to see a girl exercising. They will like laugh at you and say you're wasting time.

No, they would think I am mad. They would think I am crazy.

DISCUSSION

The above results highlight the many barriers, both real and perceived, to physical activity participation among the Black urban South African women in this study. Socio-cultural barriers are considered to be problematic because they are not visible (Henderson, 1993). These factors are determined by the norms and values acceptable to the community, and may not be quantitatively measurable, but still have far-reaching influences on women's behaviour.

Regardless of how firmly people may believe that physical activity is beneficial to their health, barriers – whether real or perceived – represent potential obstructions to the adoption and maintenance of participation in physical activity (Booth *et al.*, 1997). The participants in the present study recognized the importance of exercise to physical and mental well-being, stress reduction, and maintaining a moderate body weight (Walter, 2008). However, the majority of them as revealed in the larger study (100% of the OG, n=111) and 95% of the YG, n=69) did not meet the recommendation of the Centre of Disease Control (CDC) and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) of engaging in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, and preferably all, days of the week (CDC and ACSM, 1995).

A few misconceptions about exercise were evident from the socio-cultural barriers: you only need to exercise if you want to or need to lose weight; exercise is only important or necessary for fat people and there is no need for thin people to exercise. Even though the participants in the study recognized the importance of exercise in enhancing health and well-being, they only considered exercising when they needed to lose weight. To add to the misconception, some participants were discouraged from exercising and losing weight by older family members, because “African ladies are not skinny” and “Black girls are supposed to be nice and heavy”.

Overweight and obesity is a complex issue in Black women, with deep socio-cultural connotations. When shown a range of body types, from very thin to very obese, black women chose a more ample body type as their ideal, while White women thought a leaner physique was more desirable (Mciza, 2006).

A serious implication with regard to weight loss is its association with HIV/Aids. According to Van der Merwe (2006) of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, HIV/Aids has created the fear among Black women that if they were seen to be losing weight it would be assumed they have the disease. It has been argued that in the Black community being overweight symbolises beauty, affluence, good health and a negative HIV status (Jennings,

2004). All these different perceptions, associations and implications of weight loss are bound to have a detrimental effect on physical activity participation.

Another misconception is that older people in the community have questioned the need to exercise when “in the olden days we were healthy without exercising” or “if you do your duties at home, then you’re fit”. But life is not the same as it was in the past. Urban lives have become increasingly sedentary through automation and technological advancement, as well as through passive forms of recreation, like watching television and listening to music (Statistics South Africa, 2001). Life in the townships is also sedentary with the provision of electricity and the subsequent use of appliances in the home, buses and taxis for transportation, and shops and other amenities in close proximity to home.

The stereotypical roles of males and females are still deeply entrenched in Black culture. Girls are socialized into the traditional domestic roles of cleaning the house, washing dishes and doing the cooking. Responsibility to home and family were central to the lives of girls while growing up, which leads to the natural transition of assuming this role into adulthood. What came across strongly in the interviews was that women themselves are perpetuating this gender stereotyping: “Mothers say your place is here at home”. It is also the women who gossip about other women and start the “destructive talk” if they see other women exercising. Black women need to liberate themselves from domestic restrictions as well as from their self-inflicted cultural and gender stereotyping. Women need to be supportive of other women who challenge social norms and customs that are detrimental to their health and well-being. Education, coupled with the empowerment of women, is needed before the participation of women in physical activity can become acceptable behaviour.

In relation to sport and exercise, the participants had been surrounded by a negative socio-cultural environment throughout their lives. There was no support from family and friends. At most apartheid era schools for Blacks, there had been limited opportunities for participation in sport; learners were not encouraged and motivated to participate in sport: “I was studying in Black schools ... they don’t care there ... whether you like sport or not, it is the same thing.” Community members would also subject women to much criticism if they exercised. Studies in sport and socialization indicate that people are socialized into sport, and that the most important “agents of socialization” (those who exert influence) are described as the “significant others” and include parents, siblings, teachers, peers and role models (Moore *et al.*, 1991; Payne *et al.*, 2002; Coakley, 2007). Research has indicated that social support is important for increasing physical activity participation among women in general (Treiber *et al.*, 1991), and in particular for sedentary women of various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Eyler *et al.*, 1999; Wilcox *et al.*, 2000; Sharma *et al.*, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The advent of democracy in South Africa has brought about legislative and policy change which has allowed women more opportunities and choices. However, choices regarding physical activity are influenced detrimentally by the conservative socio-cultural barriers surrounding Black women’s everyday lives.

The shared cultural heritage of the participants revealed unique barriers in relation to their sense of themselves as isiXhosa women. This has highlighted the need for research targeting specific groups based on specific demographic profiles, which in turn would lead to more meaningful targeted interventions for the promotion of physical activity. This has also been a recommendation by studies conducted on a multi-ethnic sample of adolescents (Sallis *et al.*, 1996), women from diverse racial/ethnic groups (Eyler *et al.*, 2003) and African American women (Sanderson *et al.*, 2003). Efforts to promote participation in physical activity are likely to be most effective when they address the needs and interests of a particular target group (Booth *et al.*, 1997).

The socio-cultural impediments to physical activity participation among Black women are also deep-rooted and debilitating. It would require a great deal of determination, self-belief and motivation to go against these cultural norms, values and expectations. This highlights the importance and necessity for the further empowerment of women in South Africa to rally against the stereotypical behavioural expectations which are detrimental to their participation in physical activity and hence to their physical health and well-being. However, women also need to do some introspection and self-examination, because much stereotyping and prejudices are inflicted by women on women. Interventions should target the promotion of physical activity among Black women and should strategize around the social barriers. More positively, interventions can include existing support bases for women, such as the church and women's groups in Black townships that were shown in this study to be centres of community initiatives.

The barriers also highlight the important role that Physical Education in our school curriculum should play in educating people on the importance of leading an active lifestyle and in preparing them for life-time physical activity which learners could carry over into adulthood. In addition, national initiatives and campaigns can speed up "sport participation and exercise as accepted and even normative behaviour" (Scheerder *et al.*, 2005:140) for girls and women. These campaigns should educate people about the simple facts surrounding physical activity, while also targeting misconceptions and negative cultural perceptions towards women's participation in sport and exercise.

The many complexities surrounding physical activity participation revealed by the qualitative measures in the study go some way towards explaining the low levels of physical activity participation indicated by the quantitative measures. In terms of response to physical activity participation, the community examined is far from seeing women's participation as the norm. In order for women to reap the health and psycho-social benefits of increased physical activity participation in the new dispensation, a multi-faceted approach for the promotion of physical activity among Black women in South Africa is needed.

Although these findings cannot be generalized to the larger isiXhosa speaking or Black population, they do provide valuable insight into real barriers to participation in physical activity facing Black women in South African urban contexts. In order to enhance the success rate of intervention programmes, these findings merit further investigation into how typical these barriers might be in an urban South African context, the magnitude of the barriers and ways in which they might be overcome.

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