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Democracy predicts sport and recreation membership: Insights from 52 countries



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Abstract Although evidence suggests sport and recreation are powerful contributors to worldwide public health, sizable gender differences persist. It is unknown whether country characteristics moderate gender differences across countries. The primary purpose of this study was to examine if countries' levels of democracy and/or gender inequality moderate gender differences in sport and recreation membership across countries. The secondary purpose was to examine if democracy and/or gender inequality predicts overall rates of sport and recreation membership for both males and females. This study involved a nested cross-sectional design and employed the sixth wave (2013) of the world value survey ($n_{SS} = 71,901$, $n_{countries} = 52$). Multiple hierarchical nonlinear Bernoulli models tested: (1) if countries' levels of democracy moderate gender differences in sport and recreation membership; and (2) if democracy is associated with increased sport and recreation membership for both males and females. Countries' level of democracy fully moderated gender differences in sport and recreation membership across countries. Moreover, democracy was positively associated with both male and female membership, even when controlling for individual and country-level covariates. Democratic political regimes may confer health benefits via increased levels of sport and recreation membership, especially for females. Future research should test mediating mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

Converging evidence suggests sport and recreation are powerful contributors to worldwide public health [1]. For example, sport participation has been associated not only with healthy lifestyle habits such as long-term physical activity and healthier nutrition [2,3], but also happiness [4], life satisfaction [5], increased academic achievement [6], and decreased depression and suicidal ideation [7]. Indeed, the importance of sport was recognized by the United Nations General Assembly when they adopted the “use of sport as a vehicle to foster development, strengthen education, prevent disease, empower girls and women, promote the inclusion and well-being of persons with disabilities, and support conflict prevention and peace building” [8].

Although the importance of sport and recreation for public health is increasingly understood, there is little understanding of how sport and recreation membership varies across countries, and what factors may explain this variance. This is important, given that unearthing the determinants of sport and recreation that are situated at higher analytic levels (e.g., country-level determinants) will benefit national and international organizations (e.g., International Olympic Committee, United Nations Office for Sport Development and Peace, World Health Organization) that require evidence-based strategies to guide programs and policies [9].

The primary aim of this study is to test moderators of gender differences in sport and recreation membership across countries. Specifically, this study focused on two main country-level measures. The first is the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII) [10]. Previous research has demonstrated that a country’s level of gender inequality can help explain gender differences in health behavior, such as physical inactivity. For example, in countries characterized by low levels of gender inequality, gender differences in leisure time physical inactivity are inconsistent and negligible [11]. In regards to international sporting competitions, countries’ gender inequality is negatively associated with higher Olympic participation and performance, for both females and males, even when accounting for known predictors of Olympic success such as a measure of democracy, gross domestic product (GDP), population, and the percentage of a country’s population that is Muslim [12].

The second country-level factor that may help explain gender differences in recreation across countries is Polity2, a graded measure that captures the presence of authority within a country’s

political institutions [13]. The Polity2 measure is a composite of qualities of both democratic and autocratic social structures within a country, and represents the dimension between fully institutionalized democracies and, on the other end, fully institutionalized autocracies. Although the Polity2 measure has been associated with various economic processes and outcomes, including health economics [14], it has yet to be applied to the question of gender differences in sport and recreation membership.

Theoretically, there are at least two reasons why Polity2 should moderate sex differences in sport and recreation membership. First, given that democratic regimes have increased per capita healthcare and general government expenditures [14], it should follow that democratic regimes also have increased per capita expenditures on organized sport and recreational facilities and programming. This increased spending on organized sport and recreational facilities and programming may increase the overall opportunities to participate in sport and recreation, thus increasing membership to such organizations. Although there is very little evidence to appraise this hypothesis, recent research has found that Polity2 is not associated with participation or performance outcomes in the Olympics [12]. The primary purpose of this study is to test if countries’ Polity2 and gender inequality moderate gender differences in sport and recreation participation. Our secondary purpose is to examine how GII and Polity2 are associated with overall rates of both male and female sport and recreation participation.

2. Methods

2.1. Individual data

Individual level data were acquired from the World Values Study Group, which is a research group that administers the World Value Survey (WVS) to various countries across the world [15]. The WVS is collected according to a rigorous systematic process that adheres to common ethical guidelines [15]. Our analysis of WVS data received full ethical approval from Dalhousie University’s ethical committee, given that the WVS data were publically available, de-identified data. The WVS is constructed to acquire nationally representative data on human values across a number of disparate countries, and it also measures lifestyle characteristics such as how individuals spend their leisure time [15]. The WVS data were largely collected through face-to-face interviews. Only data from

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