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Program providers' perspective: Recruitment and retention strategies for women in physical activity programs



Clare Hanlon ^{a,*}, Tony Morris ^{a,1}, Susan Nabbs ^b

^a College of Sport and Exercise Science, Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living, Victoria University, PO Box 14428 MC, Melbourne, VIC 8001, Australia

^b College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University, PO Box 14428 MC, Melbourne, VIC 8001, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the perceptions from eight program providers in Victoria, Australia regarding the recruitment and retention of women in physical activity programs. Eight case studies were conducted. Each involved an in-depth interview with a provider of a successful physical activity program for women. Inductive content analysis generated common themes related to key aspects that enable the recruitment or retention of women. Three core themes were identified, namely creating an environment for women to exercise; facilitating involvement; and promoting the program to the community. In this study, we applied the social-ecological model to determine the levels of influence and the opportunities in the core themes to further enable the recruitment and retention of women in physical activity programs. A key conclusion was that links with several related community organisations leads to both the successful recruitment and the enhanced retention of women in physical activity programs.

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1. Introduction

The benefits of physical activity have been widely researched (Bouchard & Shepard, 1994; World Health Organisation, 2010). Studies have revealed that exercise and sport have a positive effect on individuals' physiological, psychological, and social health (Prious, 2008). Furthermore, physical activity improves quality of life, and reduces the effects of morbidity and the risk of mortality (Bauman, Bellew, Vita, Brown, & Owen, 2002). In relation to women, there are specific health concerns associated with an inactive lifestyle. The risk of diabetes is higher than that for men (Meisinger, Lowel, Thorand, & Doring, 2005), as is the incidence of osteoporotic fractures, which also increases with age (Tuck & Francis, 2002). The risks of myocardial infarction (Yusuf et al., 2004) and breast cancer (Verloop, Rookus, vander Kooy, & van Leeuwen, 2000) are also higher for women. Physical activity also reduces the effect of menstrual symptoms (Choi & Salmon, 1995) and enhances reproductive function (Choi & Mutrie, 1997). For its health benefits alone, participation in physical activity should be maintained throughout the different stages of life, although duration, frequency and type of exercise may change depending on individuals' age.

The purpose of this study was to identify program providers' perceptions of the key aspects that enable the recruitment or retention of women in physical activity programs. To achieve this, we used a case study method. First, successful community sport and active recreation programs were identified in Victoria, Australia. Second, data were collected from eight selected programs by retrieving related documents, interviewing the program providers and compiling field notes. The term

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9919 4383; fax: +61 3 9919 4677.

E-mail addresses: Clare.hanlon@vu.edu.au (C. Hanlon), Tony.morris@vu.edu.au (T. Morris).

¹ Tel.: +61 3 9919 5353; fax: +61 3 9919 4677.

'successful programs' was defined as physical activity programs that are tailored for women, have existed for over three years and effectively recruited and retained women. The term 'program provider' was defined as a person who manages an organisation and develops programs intended to meet the needs of their clients. We identified core and sub-themes and associated strategies incorporated by program providers that led to the successful recruitment and retention of women in physical activity programs. We adopted the social-ecological model as a framework to examine the influence of levels on the program providers' strategies to recruit and retain women. This study contributes to the limited research on program providers who successfully recruit and retain women in sport and active recreation programs.

2. Literature review

2.1. Contributors that affect physical activity programs for women

Approximately half of the individuals who commence an exercise program withdraw within the first six months, often before the most important health effects, such as increased fitness and wellbeing, have materialised (Dishman, 2001). Maintenance of regular physical activity is one of the biggest problems faced in improving the health of communities. Exercise and general physical activity programs are often administered in a non-targeted manner, without considering the specific needs of different populations (White, Ransdell, Vener, & Flohr, 2005). Thus, physical activity programs should be developed to target groups with similar needs. In group-based programs key contributors have been identified that affected participation to physical activity. For example, enjoyment emerged as an important consideration (White et al., 2005) and allowing exercisers to vary the mode of physical activity among activities they enjoy was reported to be a popular strategy (Dacey, Baltzell, & Zaichkowsky, 2003).

Researchers have reported that providers of group-based programs also need to consider the preferred types of physical activity according to gender. For example, walking in a group is frequently cited as a mode of exercise favoured by females (Caperchoine, Mummery, & Joyner, 2009), a trend echoed in Victoria, Australia, where walking has been found to be the most popular exercise for females (Standing Committee on Recreation and Sport, 2010). Failing to consider different physical activity preferences of females and males may adversely affect participation of both genders (White et al., 2005). Gender differences also occur in other facets of participation. Women may find it easier to accumulate several shorter bouts of activity during their day than one long bout, to fit around family or career commitments (White et al., 2005). Providing opportunities to interact may play a key role in encouraging women to adhere to physical activity. Dacey et al. (2003) found that social interaction was more important to women performing vigorous physical activity compared to those involved in moderate physical activity. This interaction was viewed as central to maintaining their participation.

Another contributor that facilitates continued participation in a group-based program is the activity leader who can influence self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation in women. Both of these psychological variables are integral to developing participation in physical activity (Little, Lloyd, & Kiewa, 2003). Activity leaders guide participants through the physical activity and assist in developing feelings of confidence and capability. Further, in developing a non-competitive and supportive environment, leaders can maximise skill acquisition (Lloyd & Little, 2010).

The barriers to and needs for participation in group-based physical activity programs among women require consideration. Caperchoine et al. (2009) identified government defined 'priority groups' who participated in lower levels of physical activity than the general female population in Australia, including women with young children, career-focused, from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, young women, older, disabled, and indigenous women. For example, the demands of looking after young children could be a barrier for women to become involved in physical activity programs, indicating the need to provide child care programs where women can participate with their children. In the study by Eyler et al. (2002), contributors were reported that specifically affected physical activity in ethnically diverse women. These included psychological issues, such as attitudes and beliefs, stress, knowledge of exercise, and past behaviours; socio-cultural issues, such as race, education, age, income, urban versus rural residency, health concerns, and status; and environmental issues, such as social and professional environmental support, and policy issues.

Female-specific barriers to participating in physical activity were identified by Caperchoine et al. (2009). Psychological contributors included perceived lack of time due to family and work demands, low self-esteem, and poor body image. Socio-cultural contributors included difficulties in organising suitable childcare and cultural preferences for different modes of activity, where walking emerged as an approved activity across cultures. Finally, environmental contributors identified as barriers predominantly related to issues of safety, such as traffic, animals, and lighting. Sub-contributors included costs associated with participation, such as equipment and transportation expenses, and climatic conditions.

Identifying the different barriers and needs of women mirrors the type of recruitment strategies required. For example, pregnant women and African-American women reported higher perceptions of barriers to physical activity, so recruitment needs to address these barriers effectively (Peck, Sharp, Boroughs, & Granner, 2008). The most successful strategy to recruit women across ethnicities is word of mouth, followed by newspaper advertisements and articles (Peck et al., 2008).

2.2. Contributors to recruit and retain women from a provider perspective

The literature suggests that researchers have focused on women's perspectives on factors that encourage them to adhere to physical activity, but there is a dearth of research on factors program providers perceives to be important to facilitate the recruitment and retention of women in physical activity programs.

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