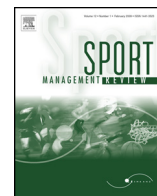




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# Examining the participation patterns of an ageing population with disabilities in Australia<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Social policies facilitate equity of access for participation in physical activity by all groups of people in society. While the sport participation of able-bodied people has been widely examined, much less attention has been given to the participation of people with disabilities. The purpose of this study is to investigate the patterns of participation in physical activity of people with disabilities. Based on the leisure constraint theory, a theoretical framework is developed that describes participation as a function of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. The framework is tested using a comprehensive sample of people in Australia from 2009 and 2010. From the dataset a sub-sample of people with disabilities was identified ( $n = 4342$ ). As 78.1% of participants were aged 45 years and older, the sample represents an ageing population and a selected segment of the population of people with disabilities. Therefore, generalisations to disability sport need to be made with caution. The results show that 57% of the respondents participate in physical activity for an average of 4 h per week. The regression results indicate that the type of disability, the extent to which the person is restricted by the disability, age, gender, and education have a significant effect on participation. People with high workloads who are in a relationship participate less frequently. The cluster analysis resulted in two non-participant clusters and three participant clusters. The results inform policy makers and sport managers on ways to better support the participation of people with disabilities and specifically target their needs.

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## 1. Introduction

The term 'social policy' refers to the actions adopted by governments, non-governmental organisations, and businesses to remedy or avert social problems and make society better (Hall & Midgley, 2004). Such policies affect leisure and sport participation behaviours globally (Dawson, 2010; Richmond, 2004). In light of their significance, the World Leisure Organization (2008) calls for governments throughout the world to implement social policies in order to optimise leisure opportunities for their citizens. Typically, people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream sport practices (Abells, Burbidge, & Minners, 2008). The introduction of specific policy initiatives has helped the legitimate integration and

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inclusion of people with disabilities into sport wherever this can be accommodated (DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000; Harada & Siperstein, 2009).

In Australia, it was not until the 1980s that such policy changes occurred and legislation (Australian Government, 2011a, 2011b) resulted in the promotion of the inclusion of people with disabilities in all forms of social life, including sport. More recently, an inquiry into Australia's sport policy (the Crawford report) questioned the adequacy of sport development opportunities for people with disabilities and created a climate which was conducive to the funding and facilitation of sport development practices for them (Crawford, 2009). In response to the Crawford report, the Australian Government's outline of its new sport policy direction, *Australian Sport: The Pathway to Success*, calls for an increase in the number of all Australians participating in sport and active recreation regardless of age, gender, and ability through an integrated, whole-of-sport approach (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). The Australian Sports Commission (ASC), the federal government agency responsible for sport in Australia, argued that in building better communities, it is critical that Australia increases "community participation and social inclusion by minimising the disadvantages and constraints that have an impact on the participation of many marginalised groups, such as people with disability" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p. viii). These aspirations are further outlined in the government's National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011).

Research on marginalised groups, including those living with a disability, continues to exclude people with a disability from decision-making in the research endeavour (Dupuis et al., 2012). If social policies aim to improve living conditions, enhance society and prevent social injustice, a commitment to providing inclusive sport participation policies for people with disabilities is an obvious corollary. Therefore, it is important to guide future policy initiatives and to know more about the participation patterns of people with disabilities. Yet, previous research has mainly looked at the participation patterns of able-bodied people (for an overview see Downward & Rasciute, 2010) and at barriers to the participation of people with disabilities (for an overview see Smith, Austin, Kennedy, Lee, & Hutchison, 2005), but not at their actual participation patterns.

The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the literature and examine the participation patterns of people with disabilities. This study advances the following three research questions: (1) what are the participation patterns of people with disabilities? (2) What factors constrain participation in physical activity by people with disabilities? And (3) what groups can participants and non-participants with disabilities be classified into? The research context for this study is Australia where 18.5% of the population (four million people) have a disability (Queensland Government, 2012) and where "the participation rates of people with disability are significantly lower than that of the general population" (ASC, 2011, p. 4). The leisure constraint theory is used to explain and classify constraints on the participation of people with disabilities. The research questions are analysed using a sub-sample of people with disabilities stemming from a comprehensive survey dataset ( $n = 4342$ ). The findings should be used by policy makers and sport managers to better support participation of people with disabilities. This study contributes to the body of research on sport participation by examining one specific population group, people with disabilities, which has been largely neglected in previous research.

## 2. Literature review

Constraints on sport participation are important and on-going considerations for sport organisations and other providers of sport and leisure related opportunities (Hinch & Jackson, 2000). Constraints which restrict or inhibit the formation of sport participation activities or preferences affect people's choices and decisions (Jackson, 1991). A constraint has been defined as a "subset of reasons for not engaging in a particular behaviour" (Jackson, 1988, p. 69). Such reasons may affect some groups of people more than others, and may be overcome (Kennedy, Smith, & Austin, 1991). Some, but not all, constraints are permanent (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). This study uses the word *constraint* since not all constraints under investigation are permanent conditions. Previous research can be summarised into studies looking at (1) the constraints on the participation of the general population, (2) the constraints of people with disabilities, and (3) specific constraints of people with disabilities in an Australian context.

First, prior studies have examined constraints on the participation of the general population and identified issues such as lack of time, disposable income, ability, gender, awareness and opportunity, access, and programming (e.g., Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). Constraints have also been examined in view of the needs of specific groups of people. It was shown that different groups face different constraints. For example women are constrained by negative experiences at school and the dominance of males; youth are often averse to highly structured or competitive activities; and older people are constrained by unclear guidance and a shortage of role models (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). Finally, previous research has demonstrated that a person's health status has a positive influence on their sport participation in general (Downward, 2007; Downward & Rasciute, 2010) and frequency of participation (Downward & Riordan, 2007). If one assumes that people with disabilities rate their health status lower than able-bodied people, these findings suggest that their participation rates will also tend to be lower.

Second, previous research indicated that the difficulties faced by marginalised groups such as women and ethnic minorities are similar to those that people with disabilities encounter (DePauw & Gavron, 1995). Previous research has shown that on average people with a disability participate 15% less than the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). Similar patterns of restricted access and opportunity are evident among people with disabilities, but in a magnified form. Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, and Schuler (1995), for instance, focused on participation constraints of

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