



Quality participation experiences in the physical activity domain: Perspectives of veterans with a physical disability



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: An important consideration for physical activity (PA) participation for individuals with a physical disability, including veterans, is that opportunities exist for full participation. Full participation can be understood as both the quantity and quality of participation. The objective of this study is to explore perceptions of a quality PA experience for military veterans with a physical disability.

Design: Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore perspectives of a quality PA experience.

Method: Eighteen veterans (15 men, 3 women) with a physical disability were recruited using maximum variation sampling to take part in interviews. The interviews explored their PA experiences, with a focus on exploring participants' perspective of a quality PA experience. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Two overarching themes, elements of a quality experience and conditions enabling access to a quality experience, were identified. Within the overarching theme of elements of a quality experience, four key themes were identified: group cohesion, challenge, having a role, and independence and choice. A further three key themes (the physical and social environments, and program structure) were identified within the overarching theme of conditions for accessing the quality experience.

Conclusion: The findings both support and extend previous conceptualizations of quality participation. They provide insight into context-specific understandings of quality for PA and veterans. More broadly, the study contributes towards the literature on adapted PA participation, and provides a framework for practitioners aiming to foster quality PA experiences.

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The risk of disability for military personnel as a result of critical injuries has grown exponentially with recent conflicts (Bell, Schwartz, Harford, Hollander, & Amoroso, 2008). Veterans with a physical disability are unique compared to civilians with a physical disability due to the circumstances surrounding their injuries. For example, if injured in combat or while still a serving member of the military, they must deal with additional factors beyond their physical condition, including the transition to life following deployment, potential retraining for future deployment, or the

transition to civilian life (Resnik & Allen, 2007). These transitions potentially present additional psychosocial difficulties not present in a civilian population (Resnik & Allen, 2007). Furthermore, injured service members and veterans are often young and physically fit (Benetato, 2011). As a result, many ill and injured service members and veterans demonstrate a desire to maintain active lifestyles (Chivers, 2009; Reiber et al., 2010). Physical activity (PA) participation (i.e. bodily movement requiring energy expenditure, which includes sport and exercise; Caspersen, Powell, & Christenson, 1985) is thus becoming a widely used strategy to support the rehabilitation of the growing number of military veterans with injuries resulting in disability (Brittain & Green, 2012).

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For veterans with a physical disability, participating in PA post-injury is often demonstrated to have physical, psychological, and social benefits (Brittain & Green, 2012; Caddick & Smith, 2014). These benefits are particularly salient given the physical, psychological, and social impact of acquiring a physical disability and the life transitions that may often follow (Resnik & Allen, 2007). Indeed, providing veterans with the opportunity to fully participate in PA can be a beneficial component of rehabilitation and adjusting to life post-injury.

Full PA participation entails having access to programs and opportunities, as well as having quality experiences within these programs (Martin Ginis, Evans, Mortenson, & Noreau, 2016). The contrast between access to or amount of PA (i.e., quantity) and the quality of experiences within PA is an important distinction. Notably, whereas quantity is often examined, there has been minimal systematic effort to determine what constitutes a quality PA experience among people with a physical disability, let alone among veterans with a disability. The concept of quality participation experiences is one which, to this point, has solely been examined within the literature in occupational therapy (Martin Ginis, Evans, et al., 2016). Several participation frameworks have been developed within this field, the most prominent of which include Hammel et al. (2008) conceptualization for participation of individuals with disabilities, and the “Do-Live-Well” framework (Moll et al., 2015).

Hammel and colleagues' conceptualization identifies six key values to consider for experiential participation, all of which are founded on the need for respect and dignity: (1) active and meaningful engagement (i.e. freedom to be part of an activity, context or group); (2) control and choice (i.e. power and agency); (3) access and opportunity/enfranchisement (i.e. desire to contribute, and the resulting social inclusion); (4) personal and social responsibilities (i.e. individuals' responsibility to themselves and society, and society's responsibility to support participation); (5) having an impact and supporting others (i.e. be productive and contribute at different levels of society in order to be impactful); and (6) social connection, inclusion, and membership (i.e. full interaction with the community). Moll et al. (2015) also highlight key aspects of participation experiences, labeled dimensions, within their participation framework. These dimensions include: (1) activating your body, mind, and senses (i.e. regular, stimulating activity); (2) connecting with others (i.e. social integration); (3) contributing to community and society (i.e. prosocial engagement); (4) taking care of yourself (i.e. healthy habits and self-care); (5) building security/prosperity (i.e. economic and social security through engagement in meaningful activities); (6) developing and expressing identity (i.e. cultural and/or community activities that allow an individual to develop a specific identity); (7) developing capabilities and potential (i.e. programming and educational opportunities); and (8) experiencing pleasures and joy (i.e. enjoying engagement).

These different conceptualizations are useful in understanding subjective views of participation, and the multidimensionality of participation. However, both models contain elements or definitions specific to occupation contexts. As a result, Martin Ginis, Evans, et al. (2016) conducted a review of these and other definitions of participation with the aim of developing a conceptualization generalizable to differing participation contexts (e.g. PA). Six themes resulted from this review: (1) autonomy (i.e. independence, choice); (2) belongingness (i.e. a sense of belonging, acceptance, respect); (3) challenge (i.e. appropriate level of challenge); (4) engagement (i.e. feeling motivated and involved); (5) mastery (i.e. feeling competent); and (6) meaning (i.e. goal attainment, feeling responsible to others).

The conceptualization encapsulates the multidimensionality and subjective nature of participation expressed in other

conceptualizations, with general definitions that may be useful when examining participation within different fields. However, further research is necessary as to the relevance, importance, and definition of different experiential elements within different contexts, such as PA. Further knowledge is also required as to how these different dimensions of quality can be fostered within a program context and what conditions enable access to quality PA experiences. Additionally, exploring the concept of quality participation may potentially aid in building an understanding of why some veterans' PA experiences are less positive than others. Indeed, while research often highlights the positive outcomes of PA for veterans post-injury, some PA interventions may not meet participant needs due to their level of readiness or the nature in which PA is presented, and result in psychosocial struggles (Douglas & Carless, 2015).

The extant research that describes and/or evaluates PA programs for injured veterans points to some elements that may contribute to a quality PA experience. For example, elements highlighted include the importance of exploring one's abilities, building confidence and self-awareness, and enjoyment (Jackson, 2013). However, these elements are the result of observations from the perspective of a program provider. Therefore, the results do not present the findings of a critical research process or centrally place the perspective of the athletes the programs are designed to serve. Research would benefit from using the subjective experiences of participants to understand quality participation, so that the elements reflect the views of the individual engaging in the experience (Hammel et al., 2008; Martin Ginis, Evans, et al., 2016).

Caddick and Smith's (2014) systematic review of outcomes associated with PA among veterans with physical and/or psychological injury describes experiential outcomes such as a renewed sense of self and feelings of confidence, enjoyment, and relaxation. However, exploring quality participation was neither the objective of the review nor of the studies included in the review, and the focus was specific to participation outcomes. As a result, the findings cannot build an understanding of quality participation experiences. Moreover, the review was not exclusively focused on veterans with a physical disability. A comprehensive exploration of the elements that constitute and support a quality PA experience for veterans with a physical disability is needed. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of a quality PA experience among military veterans with a physical disability. Understanding veterans' perceptions of quality PA participation moves research forward in conceptualizing full participation in PA, and may provide practitioners with direction for creating PA programs that promote quality experiences.

1. Method

1.1. Philosophical assumptions

The perspective of the researchers in the current study is that multiple context-dependent realities exist, and that knowledge is constructed based upon participants' understanding of their reality. As such, this study is based ontologically in relativism, and epistemologically in constructionism. Applied to this research, we sought rich depictions of each participant's experience, and worked to generate an understanding of quality experiences that also provided room for variations and for each participant to explore quality within his or her own terms. Although we link our results to frameworks of participation, we were nevertheless cautious to ensure that individual stories retained their context dependence.

1.2. Participants

Following receipt of ethics approval, veteran organizations were

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