



“I used to be as fit as a linnet” – Beliefs, attitudes, and environmental supportiveness for physical activity in former mining areas in the North-East of England[☆]



Esther Rind^a, Andy Jones^{b,*}

^a School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK

^b Norwich Medical School, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 2 December 2014

Keywords:
England
Physical activity
Industrial decline
Former mining communities
Changing social and physical environments
Focus groups

ABSTRACT

Studies of geographical variations in physical activity behaviours have suggested that activity levels are particularly low in areas that have undergone employment loss associated with the decline of industry. This is of concern given that affected populations are already at risk of poor health. Applying focus group methodology amongst 19 participants in four groups, this study aims to unpack how broader societal and environmental changes associated with industrial decline affect beliefs and attitudes towards physical activity in ex-mining communities in the North-East of England. Identified core themes comprise the direct impact of deindustrialisation on social and physical environments. Based on our findings, we provide evidence for mechanisms that operate via loss of occupational physical activity as well as the progressive development of environments that are not fit to support population activity levels. Particularly important was the loss of recreational facilities, public green spaces and sports facilities that were owned and organised by the miners themselves with support from the mining companies. Attitudes and beliefs directly related to the areas' industrial past were also seen to be key. We suggest that the development of interventions considering the socio-cultural history and socio-economic reality of communities could be a promising route to encourage more active lifestyles in deprived areas with particularly low levels of physical activity.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, levels of physical activity (PA) have declined considerably throughout many European countries (World Health Organisation, 2006). In England, activity participation is particularly low, and in 2012 60% of the population did not achieve the recommended levels of PA, a figure that has not changed substantially since 2008 (Craig et al., 2009; Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2013). The reasons behind PA declines are varied but there is evidence that they may be partly associated with the broader social and economic effects of industrial decline and restructuring, which includes the transition from a heavy labour-based industry to a service-based and information-orientated

society (Bazen and Thirlwall, 1997). For example, previous work has illustrated that the populations of English districts that have undergone a particular strong transition from industrial to post-industrial economies are more likely to report low levels of PA than those which have not seen such changes (Blaxter, 1990; Ellis et al., 2007; Rind et al., 2014). Indeed the authors have previously described substantial geographical variations in recreational PA in England (Rind and Jones, 2011).

Whilst there is good evidence that the populations of previously industrialised areas show lower levels of activity, the particular causal mechanisms linking socio-cultural characteristics of the post-industrial society to PA are, however, not well understood. Based on ecosocial theory (Krieger, 2001) which considers how present and historical physical, social and cultural conditions impact population patterns of health, we recently developed a conceptual framework linking PA to socio-cultural dimensions of industrial decline (Rind and Jones, 2014) (see Fig. 1). It considers the decline of labour-intensive jobs as a direct pathway which, if not counterbalanced by an increase of PA within other activity domains,

[☆] Type of finch used in coal mining to detect toxic gases (explanation given by focus group member).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: a.p.jones@uea.ac.uk (A. Jones).

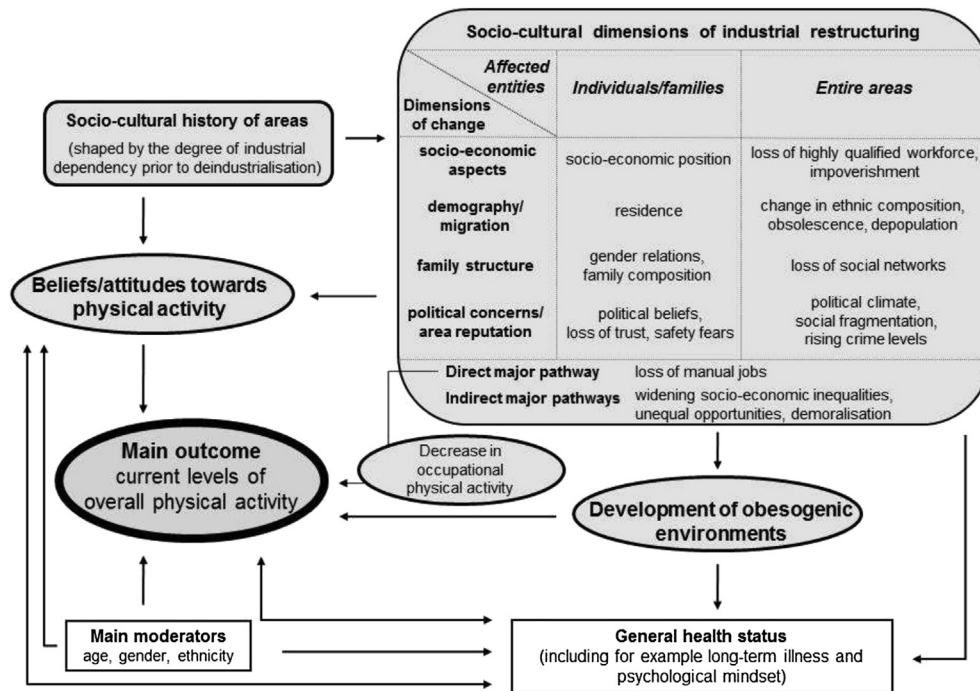


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework linking PA to socio-cultural dimensions of industrial decline.

will lead to overall activity declines in those areas affected. The effects of losses of work related PA may be particularly strongly felt if areas of industrial decline hold inherited cultures and regional identities that are resistant to change and the adoption of alternative PA behaviours. Indeed, in the late 1940s Ferdynand Zweig (1948) published a detailed portrayal of English pitmen, writing that “*The force of habit is nowhere stronger than in the colliery and the mining village. A change of habits is most difficult to accomplish, even if the change proves beneficial and the habit has no longer a functional value.*” (Zweig, 1948: 8). This raises the question as to the capacity of these communities to adapt to the very substantial changes to the social and physical environment that have been associated with the loss of such industries.

Perhaps more importantly from a population perspective, the framework incorporates ways through which the socio-cultural history of areas may shape beliefs and attitudes towards PA, and how the changes observed in local environments may reduce opportunities for a sufficiently active lifestyle. For example, activity behaviours may be influenced through role models established by peer, friend, family and community networks which are, in turn, related to socio-cultural backgrounds (Legh-Jones and Moore, 2012; Yu et al., 2011). This may be problematic if industrial decline and increasing socio-economic inequalities act to weaken established community and family structures via high unemployment, demoralisation, obsolescence and movement of labour (Altena and van der Linden, 2002).

There may also be influences associated with physical decline due to a prior history of manual labour. Living in an area with a history of mining for example has generally been associated with a relatively high risk of poor health (Shucksmith et al., 2010), which is, in turn, likely to directly impact levels of PA. For example, for some time it has been recognised that overall mortality rates in former coalfield areas were higher than those for Great Britain generally, and that levels of reported limiting long term illness are greater than would be expected based on the population characteristics of such localities (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Wiggins et al.,

1998). More recently, Riva et al. (2011) used data from the 2004–2006 Health Surveys for England to examine whether poorer health outcomes still characterise coalfield areas today. They found that those residing in these areas were significantly more likely to report limiting long term illness and less than good health although there was substantial variability within communities, suggesting local conditions were important. The potential impact of these health disparities on physical activity in these communities is not known.

If activity declines are to be reversed at a population level, we suggest an important first step is to identify likely causal mechanisms that operate on the ground. A number of recent studies have suggested individual (e.g. lack of time and money, cultural background, health problems, social isolation, safety fears) as well as contextual (e.g. neighbourhood support, community participation, physical environment) factors as important barriers to being active (Allender et al., 2006; Hoebeke, 2008; e.g. McNeill et al., 2006; Wendel-Vos et al., 2007). It may be that some of these factors are acting to mediate the association between the losses of manual employment and declining physical activity, but it is unknown which may be important and to what degree.

Using a qualitative approach, this study explores the implications of industrial decline on the opportunities for physical activity and attitudes towards activity of the residents of effected areas. We focus on coal mining communities, once at the heart of the UK economy but experiencing harsh economic decline since the mid-1970s due to pit closures. The 170,000 jobs lost between 1984 and 1997 represent a quarter of all male employment in affected areas (Riva et al., 2011). By undertaking focus groups with 19 residents of ex-mining communities in the North-East region of England, we aim to gather a better understanding of how the process of employment decline in the physically demanding mining industry may have led to structural, socio-cultural and environmental changes in former pit communities, and whether this may have contributed to the generation of cultures of non-participation in PA. We argue that gaining such understanding by talking to those who

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