

Experiences in Sport, Physical Activity, and Physical Education Among Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu Asian Adolescent Girls

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Abstract:

Multicultural scholarship in sport and exercise psychology should help us understand and apply cultural competencies for all to be physically active. In the present study, two Asian countries, Japan and Singapore, were chosen. The participation rate for physical activities among adolescent girls tends to be lower than that of boys in both countries. Thus, the purpose of the project was to gain knowledge and understanding about sociocultural factors that may explain adolescent girls' perceptions and behaviors toward sport, physical activity, and physical education (PE). A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with focus groups was used to understand meanings of physical activity among Buddhist Japanese, and Hindu Indians and Christian Chinese from Singapore. Each focus group consisted of four or five girls and female researchers. Based on the analysis, we created four themes which were "cultural identities," "Asian girls and sport/physical activities," "PE experiences," "motivation for future involvement." The Buddhist Japanese, Hindu Indian, and Christian Chinese participants each reported unique physical activity experiences, and all the participants were aware of how Asian culture may affect being physically active. Experiences of PE classes were similar but perceptions of their PE attire were different for Christian Chinese and Hindu Indian adolescent girls. Based on the results, the importance of nurturing cultural competencies and ways to encourage girls to be physically active throughout life were discussed.

Keywords: Adolescent | Cultural competency | Diversity | Motor activity

Article:

In Asian countries, adolescent girls have opportunities to participate in physical education (PE) class throughout their school curriculum. For example, all of the junior high schools and high schools in Japan and Singapore offer PE classes. Adolescent girls also participate in sports

through afterschool programs in Japan or co-curricular sporting activities in Singapore. In Japan, 60.2% of female and 82.6% of male students between the ages of 12 to 15 years old reported that they exercise everyday [1]. Moreover, 921 646 female (40.4%) and 1 359 597 male (59.6%) junior high school students participated in afterschool sporting programs. However, it is clear that female students tend to participate less than male students. The most recent findings by the Singapore Sport Council [2] also indicated that 89.0% of 13 to 14 year-old boys and 85.0% of girls participate in sports at least once a week. However, it was also found that after age 15, participation rates decrease. In addition, a reason cited by both male and female adolescents for not participating in sport was lack of interest and motivation [2]. It is thus important for professionals, including PE teachers, to consider how to increase interest and motivation in physical activity among adolescents, especially females, to prevent these adolescents from becoming sedentary adults.

When we try to gain new understandings of physical activity behavior among women, we need to be aware of the 'invisibility' of women and the seeming lack of women's voice in society [3]. This is because the majority of research in this area has been conducted by White male middle-class scholars with White male college students as participants. Thus, conducting research from multicultural perspectives in sport and exercise psychology should be able to help understand and apply cultural competencies for all to be physically active [4]. However, Kamphoff et al. [5] reported that multicultural perspectives are still missing in sport and exercise psychology research. We, as Asian females, should be able to contribute to the understanding of women's lived experiences of physical activity since our religious practices, cultural values, and traditions may differ from others.

Recently, there has been a growing area of research that explores sociocultural factors that influence women's physical activity participation around the world. For example, Yu et al. [6] were of the opinion that Confucian values in Taiwan, the custom of binding feet, and emphasis on academic pursuits are factors that have influenced the under-representation of women in sport. However, social changes, including the arrival of western Christian missionaries, equal opportunities in education, changing family structures and values, and the promotion of physical activity by the government, have been enhancing the participation of women in physical activity in Taiwan. Dagkas and Benn [7] examined young Muslim women's experiences in PE and extra-curricular activity in Greece and Britain. Although the Greek and British groups revealed enjoyment and fun experiences in PE, British Muslim students still found tension between their Islamic requirements and PE settings. Interestingly, the Greek PE teachers' understanding and knowledge of the socio-historical context of Muslim migration to Greece have helped them to develop a more flexible approach toward Muslim students. In contrast, British PE teachers are just beginning to understand the sociocultural complexity brought about by religion and race due to the recent growth in the British Muslim population. The studies showed that race/ethnicity and religious/cultural beliefs can influence women's experiences in physical activity.

For the present study, we purposely chose Japan, a homogeneous society and Singapore, a multicultural society. Based on Singapore's 2000 Census of Population report [8], about 77.0% of the population is Chinese, followed by Malay descent (13.9%) and Indian descent (7.9%). Regarding religious beliefs, 64% of Chinese are Buddhists while 16.5% are Christians. Over 99.0% of Malays and 26.0% of Indians are Muslim. About 55.0% of Indians practice Hinduism. On the other hand, about 94.0% of the population in Japan is Japanese and 95.0% of them believe in either Shinto or Buddhism. Nonetheless, there has been no study in Japan or Singapore that has analyzed women's experiences in physical activity in relation to their race/ethnicity and religious/cultural beliefs. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore phenomena regarding adolescent girls' lived experiences in sport, physical activity, and PE in Asia. Specifically, the present study seeks to gain knowledge and understanding about sociocultural factors that may explain Japanese and Singaporean adolescent girls' perceptions and behaviors toward sport, physical activity, and PE.

METHODS

Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore Japanese and Singapore adolescent's lived experiences in sport, physical activity, and PE. Moustakas [9] explained transcendental phenomenology as a method which focuses on a description of the experiences of participants. As participants share their experiences, researchers identify a phenomenon by reducing individual experiences to the essence. The essence of the experiences of the participants is described using themes. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with focus groups was used to understand the meanings of phenomena such as physical activity among adolescent girls. The objective of using focus group interviews was to conduct "research by, about, and for women" [10,11]. Facilitation and communication among women who share the same sociocultural background can lead to consciousness-raising and build thoughts and opinions to validate women's experiences [12]. The collection of plural voices will contribute to the construction of the research findings so as to promote social changes in sport, physical activity, and PE among adolescent girls in Japan and Singapore.

Participants

A total of 14 adolescent girls participated in the study. The average age was 14.2 years old. The three groups of participants were Buddhist Japanese from Japan (n=4, m=14.1 years), Christian Chinese from Singapore (n=5, m=14.0 years), and Hindu Indians from Singapore (n=5, m=14.4 years). The Japanese participants were from middle class families and living in suburban areas. The Singaporean participants were from upper middle class families and living in urban areas. All of the Hindu Indian girls had immigrated to Singapore when they were younger than five years old. Two of the four Japanese participated in an afterschool sporting program, one was going to a ballet school, and one was not participating in any organized sport. The four Christian girls participated in co-curricular sporting activities, and one participated in community-based sporting programs. None of the Hindu girls were participating in organized sport.

Procedures

Recruitment of participants was initiated by Buddhist female researchers in Japan as well as Buddhist Chinese, Christian Chinese, and Hindu Indian female researchers in Singapore. After institutional review board approval at the institutions in Singapore and Japan and parents' written consent, as well as written consent from participants, focus interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted where the participants felt comfortable, such as their home or church, and for participants' convenience, one interview was conducted in a university classroom.

Data Collection

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire captured important data such as age, race/ethnicity, religion, country of birth, living situation, and current participation in sport and physical activity.

Interviews and analysis

Focus group interviews were conducted by two female researchers. At least one of the researchers shared the same racial and religious background as participants in order to help participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. The interviews lasted about 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews in Japan were conducted in Japanese and interviews in Singapore were conducted in English. The second focus group interviews were conducted with the same participants and researchers. Participants in the interview had a chance to read the summary of the first interview to understand how their own voice has been treated by the researchers.

The method of horizontalization [9] was used to understand the data, and themes were created. Based on the two interviews for each group, two of the interviewers who were sport science and sport psychology professionals analyzed the data and created themes for each interview. Horizontalization consisted of three major steps, which are 1) highlight significant statements, 2) understand how they experienced the phenomenon, and 3) create clusters of meaning. At the end of the analysis, two other sport psychology professionals read all the interviews and make certain that the themes were relevant.

Interview questions

In order to understand adolescent girls' experiences in sport, physical activity, and PE within their sociocultural context, developing meaningful interview questions is critical. Questions were developed based on the following overarching questions: 1) To what extent are Japanese and Singaporean adolescent girls involved in sport, physical activity, and PE? 2) What sociocultural characteristics of adolescent girls' lives influence decisions about physical activity involvement? 3) How do adolescent girls perceive physical activity and its relation to health and wellness?

Because of the phenomenological nature of the proposed study, the questions served as a guide during the interview. With the semi-structured interview, the participants drove the interview as it progressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found four major themes to explain adolescent girls' experiences, which were cultural identity, Asian girls and sport/physical activity, experience in PE, and motivation for future involvement. Under each theme, the experiences of each group of girls were found to be unique based on their religion or race/ethnicity.

Cultural Identity

Based on their own ethnicity and religion, girls identified themselves differently. The two groups from Singapore also differed from each other. Thus, how their religious beliefs and race/ethnicity influence the girls' experiences in sport, physical activity, and PE were revealed.

Buddhist Japanese

Japan is not diverse compared to Singapore; thus daily practice, culture, and religion are integrated as they live their lives. In fact, the Buddhist Japanese girls said "What is Buddhist?" during the interview. It was also clearly stated that the girls did not have an opportunity to think about religion separately from other practices in their life. It seems contradictory, but it actually showed their 'lived' experiences rather than 'known' experiences as Buddhist Japanese. They eventually reached to the point during their discussion and referred to the Japanese in general as 'concerned,' 'kind,' and 'pretty reserved.' For example, a girl who had participated a ballet contest overseas explained how the Japanese were reserved and concerned with giving others space when they rehearsed. "When we warm up, everybody comes to the space to rehearse...(the Japanese) stays in the corner...tell others they can go. But foreigners are like, "I go." They push others and go for the better positions. So, my teacher told me to do the same."

Girls also notice their own conservatism by watching TV. They believe they have a common sensibility as a Buddhist and that aggressive play is not well-received. For example, "We are concerned about common sense. US (basketball) team is just too aggressive." "I saw guys' soccer game (on TV). So many penalties, you know! They pushed players and said something not very nice." Japanese girls described the Japanese as conservative with a common sensibility even in a sport setting. They also felt 'happy' to be concerned and kind.

Hindu Indian

Throughout the interviews, the girls referred to themselves as 'Indian' and not as 'Singaporean.' All of the girls had immigrated to Singapore when they were younger than five years old. They seemed to have strong connections to India both physically and psychologically. As the interviewers asked the girls the reason why it seemed easy for them to compare Singapore and

India, they responded "Because we go there (to India) every December" to spend time with relatives. Thus, the girls were extremely conscious about being Hindu Indian in Singapore. At the same time, being Hindu Indian seems like a daily struggle for the girls.

"It is good to stand up when someone makes fun of your race... I am the only Indian-born in the entire level. So, when I go there, I am kind of representing, I feel I am representing my race. Or religion, if someone puts it down, I would stand up."

Hinduism also influences their physical activities such as camping and school trips. Lack of understanding of their religious practices caused the girls to suffer. "When I went for the camp, the vegetarian food was so disgusting.... What they served was all seafood stuff, I saw the creature in front of me... the tears were just rolling." "I am going to go there (school trip) and lose weight because the food they are going to give me over there. Definitely, I am just going to eat the plain rice and throw away the rest."

Despite their unhappy experiences, the girls did not try discussing how their own religious practice might not be respected at school. This is because the Singaporean government promotes a multiracial society and racial harmony as "unity regardless of race, language, or religion" [13]. As a result of this campaign, they felt their religious and cultural differences would not be well received. A girl even tried to avoid particular discussions regarding race by saying to a friend, "Pratika! You should shut your mouth. You may get arrested for this race thing."

Moreover, the girls experience more physical activities in their daily life in India compared to their life in Singapore. On the other hand, the girls found that Singapore is too organized and it is not easy to find free space to play, which may influence their motivation to be less physically active. "I want some fruits. Here like I will go to some store and get it. But in India, we can just climb a tree and get it. It is like much near to physical activity, right?" "We came from places where there are lots of forest around and lot of nature around... I see the palace at the ground like no one there. So let's go and see..." "You can't go around play (in Singapore). You have to tell like play football here, you play football here."

Christian Chinese

Singaporean society is dominated by Chinese, and thus, the girls did not identify particular experiences regarding their own religion or race/ethnicity. It seemed that the Christian Chinese girls were culturally competent because of multicultural education at school. At the same time, identifying differences between themselves and other religious groups appeared to be taboo for them. A girl clearly said, "Actually, they are exactly the same," and other girls agreed. As they continued their discussions, the girls found differences in Muslim customs related to physical activity. "I don't think our race influence but I think I find it quite sad...Muslims, they have to wear track pants." Interestingly, their discussion ended because one of the girls said, "OK. OK. I think we shouldn't have this kind of topic."

Overall, both Japanese and Singaporean girls are aware of how their identities may influence behaviors in sport and physical activity. Racial harmony promotion from Singapore's government may prevent girls from feeling they have the freedom to share their thoughts and experiences regarding race, ethnicity, and religion, especially for Christian Chinese girls.

Asian Girls and Sport/Physical Activity

Conservatism toward being physically active still exists among Asian girls. One of the Christian Chinese girls compared Asian and Western people and said, "Asians are more conservative than Westerners... For example, some Britney Spears dance or whatever... I am very careful of what I follow. Some dances are really very provocative."

The Buddhist Japanese girls also mentioned the image of Japanese women was still conservative. "Japanese women equals tea ceremony, flower arrangement, traditional dance. Yamato-Nadeshiko (the traditional Japanese image of a woman)." They also noticed that there has been lack of opportunities to see female athletes on TV. Thus, they thought, "Sport is for boys," and, "I can't imagine girls play American football or rugby."

While Buddhist Japanese and Christian Chinese girls were involved in sport and physical activity, Hindu Indian girls do not get involved in sport and physical activity because Hinduism is still conservative about girls being physically active. Mothers and grandmothers still struggle with allowing girls to be physically active. One of the reasons could be the clothing they wear. The mothers need to be 'quite open' or 'open-minded' to understand girls' participation in sport and physical activity. A girl said, "My mom comments on attire sometimes... my grandma was like you cannot wear those but she just said that. But she didn't actually stop me from participating in sport."

There were also interesting thoughts about the shorts girls wear during PE classes. One of Christian Chinese said, "I am from a Christian school, so the lengths of our PE shorts... usually we don't call them shorts. We call them long." However, the Hindu Indian girls said, "The shorts are seriously too short." Thus, it is clear that religious practice influences how they perceive their PE attire. Overall, the girls found that being physically active did not perfectly fit in their image of Asian women, Japanese women, or Hindu women.

Experience in Physical Education

All three groups had PE classes at school. However, their experiences in the classes varied. The Buddhist Japanese and Christian Chinese shared stories about fun experiences. The major reasons for their having fun during the class were interactions with friends. The Buddhist Japanese girls specifically mentioned playing team sports and exclaimed, "Basketball! It is all about team stuff. Fun!" and "Relay! Run, run, run, and pass the baton to a friend! I enjoy it." The Christian Chinese girls said, "When you interact with your friend, that's the most fun." Buddhist Japanese girls also mentioned feelings of accomplishment. One of the girls talked about how

hard it was to run long distances during class in winter and finished by declaring, "I feel very tired but I like it. I feel...accomplishment."

However, except for interactions with friends, the Singaporean girls were not enjoying the classes. A major reason was a lack of varied content in class. The Chinese Christian girls said, "If you play the sport for every single period, it gets very boring." "PE teacher, he don't teach us how to play... He just tell us rules." The Hindu Indian girls also mentioned similar reasons for not enjoying classes, saying, "My PE lesson is damn boring. My PE teacher is damn boring. He just make(s) me run, run, and run. Then you say I am tired. He say(s) I don't care you just continue running, so I hate my PE teacher." "You take one chapter out of that (book) and you do gymnastic thing and you perform. That is your PE grade. So, for the record, we learnt gymnastics but we didn't really learn anything."

Long distance running sounded more accepted among Japanese girls compared to Singaporean girls. It may depend on how the activity is presented to students. Thus, it may be helpful for PE teachers in Singapore to find more attractive ways to demonstrate sport to the class.

Motivation for Future Involvement

There is no doubt that girls should continue participating in sport and physical activities for their physical and psychological well-being. There were different and interesting reasons for each group of girls to continue participating or not. The Buddhist Japanese were motivated to continue being physically active, and their major motivation was for their own health. Another reason was to avoid being like their inactive mothers. A girl simply said, "My mom is fat and I don't want to be like her."

The motivation for future involvement in physical activity was closely related to their identities in Singapore. The Christian Chinese girls felt a responsibility toward society. One girl said, "Singapore, the only resource you have is people," thus, it is crucial to be healthy. As a healthy person, they can "study, study, study...go (university). So you can get a good job and earn money. So that you can contribute to society."

The Hindu Indian girls also mentioned about how spending their time studying was important in Singapore. They clearly had pressure from family to spend their time studying but not in physical activity. It is not only the case for Singaporean society but also for the Hindu Indians. The girls said, "She (mom) only motivate me to study, study, study..., she says like try to not to do it (sports) everyday. Study more." "Because my family is this Hindu thing which is a very high status we can't let it down for granny."

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was to explore Japanese and Singaporean adolescent girls' lived experiences in sport, physical activity, and PE. Buddhist Japanese, Christian Chinese, and Hindu

Indian girls from Japan and Singapore shared their thoughts and feelings about being physically active. Four themes - cultural identity, Asian girls and sport/physical activity, experience in PE, and motivation for future involvement - revealed the way Japanese and Singaporean society and their religious practices influenced the girls' perceptions as well as current and future behaviors toward sports and physical activity, and PE.

The current study was the first attempt in Japan or Singapore to explore phenomena regarding adolescent girls' experiences of physical activity and sport in relation to their race/ethnicity and religious beliefs. We interviewed a total of 14 girls; however the number of participants is a limitation of the present study. Girls from urban areas may experience sport, physical activity, and PE differently in Japan. We were also unable to interview Muslim girls in Singapore. Including more girls to reveal a wider breadth of experiences is truly important for future studies.

We found that religion and traditional practice deeply influenced the girls' value for physical activity as well as their actual participation in physical activity, especially for the Hindu Indians. In addition, the girls' collective voice clearly showed that racial harmony promotion by the Singaporean government does not promote ideal cultural competency. Lack of understanding of one's religious practice led to lower motivation to be physically active, especially for the Hindu Indian girls. Thus, understanding religious identity and values in their society is crucial.

Cultural competency, which is the ability to understand and interact with people who are culturally different from you, should be considered for all to benefit from sport, physical activity, and PE. Understanding how to conduct attractive PE classes for adolescents is also key. All the girls have opportunities to explore and experience various sporting activities through PE classes at school. Training teachers to gain skills and knowledge to help adolescents to have fun and enjoyable experiences may help girls to be more motivated to be physically active. In addition, PE teachers are in a great position to introduce various activities. Going beyond gender ideology in sport, adolescent girls should have opportunities to experience diverse sport and activities. Future studies including adolescents with a variety of religious/cultural backgrounds may help professionals understand how to help adolescents continue to be physically active.

Footnotes

The authors have no conflicts of interest with the material presented in this paper.

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