A Qualitative Look at College Students Perceptions of Social Interactions in College Physical Activity Classes

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Barney, David C. and Leavitt, Teresa, "A Qualitative Look at College Students Perceptions of Social Interactions in College Physical Activity Classes" (2020). Faculty Publications. 3785.
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Abstract

Physical activity (PA) has been found to benefit a person in many ways. One of the benefits of being physically active is the social component. This deals with interacting with someone before, during or after the activity. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of social interactions on college-aged students during their PA class. Participants for this study included 408 college-aged students (272 males & 136 females) who were surveyed regarding their interactions during their PA class. The survey contained Likert scale questions and open-ended questions, requiring the students to respond with written answers. In short, it was discovered from these students that their interactions during their physical activity were important to them and that the interactions were enjoyable. These results along with other results from this study, highlight the positive benefits that come from being involved in PA.

Keywords: Socializing, Interactions, College-Aged Students, Physical Activity
The literature has strongly endorsed the benefits of physical activity (PA) in a person’s life. For example, PA can reduce risks of cardiovascular disease (Altavilla, D’Elia, & Raiola, 2018), diabetes (Bassuk & Manson, 2005), osteoporosis (Dhurup 2012), and depression (Schuch & Stubbs, 2019). Brown and Fry (2014) established the benefits of PA for college-aged students with one of the main opportunities to be physically active coming through PA classes offered through the university or college they attend. Four-year colleges, universities, and community and junior colleges all offered physical education (PE) classes to their students (Cardinal, Sorensen, and Cardinal (2012); Strand, Edgberg, & Mozumdar (2010). These PE classes also titled or known as physical activity classes, lifetime activity courses or basic instruction courses, are offered for the purpose of providing PA options for college students (Barney & McGaha, 2006). Friedrich, (1985), Leigh, (1982), and Welch, (1967, 1975, 1982) found that PA courses have a long history, which began at Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1861, to provide activities that would help Amherst students maintain their health and relieve the strain associated with their “academic courses” (Van Dalen, Mitchell, & Bennett, 1953, p. 368). These college PA classes are typically taught by graduate students, working towards a masters or doctoral degree (Wahl-Alexander & Curtner-Smith, 2018). Currently, four-year institutions requiring students to take a PA class to earn a baccalaureate degree has declined from the inception of PA classes being offered to college students. Cardinal, Sorensen, and Cardinal (2012) discovered that only 39.5% of four-year institutions are requiring students to take PA classes in order to graduate. With this being the case, large numbers of college students miss out on opportunities on specific days and at designated times to be physically active while they are attending college.

College students take PA classes for a variety of reasons. Barney and McGaha (2006) studied why college students took basketball or tennis classes and the likelihood of being active
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in these activities after graduation. It was discovered that college students participated in these
PA classes to have fun, get exercise, complete credit for graduation, improve skills in the sport,
as a social outlet, and to relieve stress. One finding dealing with PA classes serving as a social
outlet revealed that social interactions with friends led to the development of life skills and
positive relationships, positively affecting the PA over a person’s lifetime.

The research has highlighted socializing during PA to have positive effects for the
individual. The social component of PA can have different effects on a person. Fahey, Insel,
Roth and Insell (2017) reported several benefits a person might experience through social
interactions of having a partner/friend to work with and/or during the participation of an activity:
motivation, serve safety purposes, help to adhere to activities, as well as simply provide time to
talk with their partner/friend. Burke, Carron, Eys, Ntoumanis, & Estabrooks (2006) studied the
effects of exercising with a group of people as compared to exercising at home alone. The
researchers concluded that exercising with a group of people is better than exercising at home
alone. The researchers summarized that when someone exercises with a group of people the
amount of contact with the others aids in obtaining the health benefits of exercise. A built-in
social support exists in the form of encouragement and social interactions. Another study looked
at social interactions in a college PA class, more specifically examining a caring climate in an
exercise setting in relationship to well-being, hope, happiness and perceived self-concept (Brown
& Fry, 2014). The researchers defined a caring climate as one that fosters cooperation and where
members feel welcomed and comfortable with their classmates and instructor. The researchers
concluded that college students in college PA classes experienced greater hope and happiness
when they perceived a caring climate.
Barney, Benham and Haslem (2014) studied the effects of college student’s perceptions of participation in PA classes on stress in their lives. The results of the study indicated that the college students perceived that their participation in the PA class did help them to manage stress they experienced as a college student. A secondary finding from this study was that the students felt that the socializing they had during their PA classes helped them cope with stress in their overall lives, and not necessarily just stress related to being college students. It was found that 75% of the males and 85% of the females felt that the socializing aspect of their PA classes was helpful in coping with stress in their life. Student comments dealing with socializing during their PA classes were “I have met people in class and talking to them about anything and how I deal with things”, “I can unwind to visit and talk through some of my stressors”, and “Because I can talk and joke they (students) don’t know anything I’m going through so they don’t bring it up.”

Aligned with research, direction is given to class instructors of PA to purposefully provide socializing opportunities for students. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) has created a document titled Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs (NASPE, 2014), the purpose of which is to give “guidance to college and universities for offering quality instructional physical activity programs” (pg.3). The document has seven topic areas to assist the college PA instructor. They are: 1) Administration/Support, 2) Assessment, 3) Curriculum, 4) Instruction Strategies, 5) Program Staffing, 6) Learning Environment and 7) Professionalism. An example of an appropriate instructional practice in the Curriculum section, states:

“Program offerings include content that allows students to develop social skills
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(cooperation and communication) and responsible behavior that will lead them to become productive members of society. Curriculum is designed to ensure that these skills are taught intentionally and are not left for “teachable moments” only.”

This statement encourages college PA instructors to put students in situations to socialize in a positive manner allowing them to be responsible in social situations when involved in physical activity. With the literature and research presented, it is hoped that this study will shed light on the important benefits social interactions can have on college-aged students during PA. Thus, the purpose of this study was to further investigate social interactions effects on college-aged students during their physical activity classes.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study included 408 college-aged students (272 males and 136 females) from a private university located in the western United States. Participants were comprised of both undergraduates (94 freshman, 96 sophomores, 86 juniors, and 119 seniors) and graduate (13) students. The participants were enrolled in volleyball, basketball, bowling, Zumba and badminton activity classes. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval to conduct this study.

Instrumentation

A review of the literature failed to identify an instrument specific to addressing social interactions during PA. Therefore, after reading through the literature, the researcher developed a 14-question survey instrument (See Table 1). The survey consisted of three Likert scale questions, eight open-ended questions and three demographic questions. To establish content validity, the researcher had college-aged students review survey questions for clarity and
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understanding (Barney, Gust, & Liguori, 2012). For reliability, the instrument was further pilot-tested on college-aged students that did not participate in the subsequent study. Following the pilot test, the instrument was deemed to be reliable.

**Procedures**

Convenience sampling was employed to collect data for the study. The researcher contacted the instructors of the PA course explaining both the study and the survey. After obtaining instructor agreement, the researcher attended each PA class (16 total classes) and administered the survey to the students. For this study 97% of the students agreed to participate by taking the survey. All students were assured that their voluntary decision to participate in the study would not affect their grade in the class or class standing.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were derived from the survey. Qualitative data analysis consisting of thematic content analysis was conducted. To accomplish thematic content analysis of respondent’s short answers, the researcher completed multiple readings of the data noting emerging themes that became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

**Results**

The descriptive statistics about student interactions in their PA class is found in Table 2. The first statement on the survey asked college students “How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?” For this statement, a majority of the male participants felt their interactions were very important (17%) or important (42%), while a majority of female’s participants also felt their interactions were very important (16%) or important (51%). Interestingly, a third of the college students were neutral (38% males and 33%
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females) regarding their interactions in their PA class. The second statement asked the college students: “Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?” A large majority of the students (88% males and 89% females) felt the interactions were enjoyable to them. Statement 10 asked, “When do your social interactions take place?” Here again, a majority (60% males and 63% females) had interactions before and after class, while 37% of the males and 30% of the females had interactions only during class.

Other data collected for this study included short answer responses from seven survey statements. The following are common responses from the college students. When asked what positive interactions they had with classmates in their PA classes (statement 3), student responses were, “I made new friends”, “It’s fun to get to know people and share experiences”, and “People have been friendly and not judgmental when I or anyone else get something wrong. For example, if I ever mess up with a serve, no one judges or minds.” Students were asked what negative interactions they have had with classmates in their physical activity class (statement 4). Two common responses to this survey question was students were “too competitive” and “ball hogs.” Other comments dealing with this survey statement were, “Trash talking. People who think they know the sport” and “Being co-ed classes I’ve found it takes about a third of the semester for guys to take girls seriously as athletes with skills equal to theirs.”

When asked if their interactions in their physical activity class were beneficial or non-beneficial (statement 5), a majority (88% males and 89% females) of the students stated that their interactions were beneficial because their PA class was a “good way to meet people.” Another common response was their interactions in PA class helped relieve stress. Other responses for this statement were, “Knowing that I have friends to talk to is comforting” and “This class helps me stay sane.” Despite this, a number of the students were “neutral” in regards with their
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interactions during their class. For statement six, students were asked if their interactions they
had in their PA class has carried on outside of their PA class. For this statement, the researcher
noticed two themes. The first was that a PA class resulted in some students continuing PA
beyond the class by finding players for their intramural teams. One student stated, “As I play
basketball in class, I can find good players to be on my intramural team.” A second theme was
that socializing among students included personal relationship with a classmate from their PA
class. One student said, “I went on a couple dates with a nice girl from my basketball class.”
The next survey question asked the students if their interactions with their classmates positively
or negatively affected their experience in their PA class (statement 7). Student responses were,
“I actually really look forward to the class and not solely because of the bowling”, “they have
very positively affected my experience. I have felt more comfortable and secure and as a result
learned better and enjoyed myself more.” Another student stated, “My first class was negative
because I was intimidated, but now it’s positive.” Another student indicated her experience was
not positive when she stated, “so many boys make me feel inadequate when I played.”
The study also sought to understand what factors led to forming (or not forming)
interactions with classmates (statement 9), whether such interactions would have a positive or
negative impact on their PA throughout their lives (statement 11), and if these interactions
helped them manage stress in their lives (statement 8). In terms of forming interactions, the
students survey responses voiced their interactions “naturally happened” because of the sports
they were participating in. One student stated, “Being part of a team”, another student said,
“You form friendships by just playing.” It seems that interactions are a natural part of PA
courses, though this may come more easily for some than others. Again, students survey
responses were that their participation and experiences in the PA class would translate into their
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lives after college. One student said that this class would make me more willing to sign up for community teams in the future.” A positive effect from interactions in PA classes was found when examining students handling stress. Student responses were “we always talk about how our week has been and sometimes talk about hard things. It’s nice to know someone cares” and “Interactions with people keep me less stressed.” It should be noted that a majority of the students survey responses were that PA relieved their stress and not particularly their interactions with the classmates.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of social interactions effects on college-aged students stemming from their PA class. Results from this study suggest that college students’ interactions do have a positive impact on them in and out of class and potentially long term. The survey results showed what kind of interactions they have had, if their interactions were beneficial, if their interactions positively or negatively affected their experience in the PA class and the effects of their interactions on future PA in their life. The results of this study coincide with previous research. For example, Kahn et. al., (2002) conducted a systematic review of certain interventions to increase PA. One of the interventions the researchers discussed was the social support interventions. Here the researchers discussed building, strengthening and maintaining social networks. They call this having a “buddy system.” Having a buddy system gives the participant a chance to maintain and to strengthen relationships to help with a person’s PA. For this study, students felt that participating with their classmates on teams helped them build friendships by working together during team play, having fun and making new friends. These results imply that having someone to be with during PA greatly helps the person stay on-task with the activity. Thus, as a person stays involved during the activity, they receive
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the benefits of the activity. Another finding from this study that coincides with the literature was that the students felt their interactions with classmates during their PA class was beneficial.

Burke et. al., (2006) studied the effects of people that exercised with people or as a group and those that stayed home and exercised on their own. It was discovered that those that exercised with people had support in the form of being with someone to keep them on-task with their exercises. The researchers stated that exercising with people is better than exercising on your own. The results from this study found that the students felt it was beneficial for them because they were with friends, and because they were with friends they looked forward to coming to class, and in many cases, they wanted to come to class and have those interactions during class activities. These results illustrate that if students look forward to coming to class, they will have better attitudes about their participation, thus leading to greater learning from class participation.

Other discussion points from the results of this study dealt with student interactions in their physical activity class and if it helped them manage stress in their life. Van Kim and Nelson (2013) studied the association of vigorous PA with mental health, perceived stress, and socializing with college-aged students. The results of this study found that when college student’s physical activity was vigorous, and they socialized during their PA class the benefits were positive in regards with mental health and stress they were experiencing. For this study, many of the students felt the PA relieved their stress more than the socializing. Yet, one student stated, “I think to an extent, the physical activity and being able to talk to classmates, it helps me with stress from school.” These results hint that PA instructors need to do all they can do to have their students as active as possible. The PA instructors need to plan activities that do not have students standing in line or waiting around for instructions or activities. And finally, do the students feel their interactions have any effect on their future PA? Barney and McGaha (2006)
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studied college student’s perspectives on taking a physical activity courses (basketball and tennis) and if participation is these courses will influence their participation after the course was completed. A student response was, “As I get older, playing basketball will help me stay fit and give me the chance to be with friends.” Many of the other student responses to this question used the word “confident” or “confidence” in future participation later in their life. For this study, a majority of the students concurred with previous research when they stated, “I am building healthy habits that will help me be active in my later years”, and “I would be willing to sign up for community teams in the future.” Here these results point to the fact that even at the relatively young age of a college student there is a strong possibility for lifelong PA for those that participate in these PA classes. These results should be shared with college administrators to inform them of the impact the college PA classes can have on a person’s life. The results from this study will add to the limited research highlighting the positive benefits of social interactions that can and do take place in a PA setting. These results are further evidence of the importance of PA courses that when taken can be beneficial for students. Cardinal, Sorensen, and Cardinal (2012) found that many four-year colleges and universities are not requiring physical activity courses for graduation. If this is the case, Li, Cardinal and Settersten (2009) have put forth this concern for colleges and universities, when they stated, “Greater attention must be paid to their (college students) health and physical activity habits to help them establish positive health and physical activity trajectories across their life course.”

Implications for College Physical Activity Classes

The results from this study should inform college PA programs and reinforce know they are doing more than helping their students improve their skills, cardiovascular functions, and strengthen muscles. They are helping their students form friendships that have the possibility of
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lasting throughout their life, and that through the interactions the students have during their PA class they are talking through situations that they believe to be stressful at this time in their life and that such interactions are helping the students manage and work through the stress or certain situations in their life they are experiencing. The interactions students are having affects the learning of activities in which they are participating. The outcomes that students are reporting as positive will benefit college students as they participate during their college experience and throughout their life. One student perfectly conveyed this sentiment by stating, “I think there is more going on here than just playing volleyball.”

Study Limitations

Two primary limitations to this study are noted. First, the participants came from one university. Second, the research study was conducted at a private university. These factors may not be a representative sampling of participants from other colleges or universities or geographic regions, which necessarily may limit the generalizability, of the findings. Thus, the conclusions and implications are limited and perhaps mostly applicable to those participant’s demographics. Further research with a broader demographic would provide a richer data set to ascertain the generalizability of the conclusions and implications found in the study.
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References


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Table 1

Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes

The following survey questions will ask you about experiences dealing with social interactions you have had in your physical activity class. Questions will ask you to circle your answer and respond from your experiences dealing with your social interactions in your physical activity class. Thank you for participating in this survey.

1. How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?

| Very Important | Important | Not a big Deal | Not Important | Not at All |

2. Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?

| Enjoyable | Neutral | Not Enjoyable |

3. What positive interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity class?
   Please give some examples.

4. What negative interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity classes?

5. Have your interactions with your classmates during your physical activity class been beneficial or non-beneficial? Please explain your answer.

6. Have your interactions you have had with classmates carried on outside of your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.

7. Have your interactions with classmates positively or negatively affected your experience in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.
8. Have you noticed if your interactions with your classmates in your physical activity class has helped you manage stress in your life (school, family, dating and others)? Please explain your answer.

9. What factors led to you forming interactions (or not) in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.

10. When do your social interactions take place?

   ___ During Class
   ___ Before or After Class
   ___ Both

11. Do you feel these social interactions you have in your physical activity class will have a positive or negative effect on your physical activity throughout your life? Please explain your answer.

Gender: Male ____   Female ____

Academic Year: Freshman ____   Sophomore ____   Junior ____   Senior ____

   Grad Student ____

STAC Class (ex. Volleyball, basketball, Bowling)
### Table 2

Results from Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a Big Deal</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at All</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Enjoyable</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When do your social interactions take place?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before or After Class</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>