Cell Block Cardio: Female Inmates’ Physical Activity Involvement

Caroline Heffernan, University of Minnesota
Jeremy Jordan (Advisor), Temple University

Thursday, June 4, 2015
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Bytowne)

Chalip (2006) called upon sport management to become a more distinctive discipline, specifically highlighting the role that sport can play in community development as a point of differentiation. Vail (2007) defines community development as “helping people improve their life conditions by addressing common interests” (p. 572). Community development focuses on populations deemed “at-risk” or “underserved” (Nichols, 1997). The sport development literature has yet to engage with incarcerated individuals and their unique situational barriers to sport based recreational participation.

Prison systems have cut the majority of rehabilitation programs—causing a decrease in sport based recreational opportunities for inmates in the United States (McCorkel, 2013). Within correctional facilities, opportunities for leisure vary depending upon the facility and its respective security needs; however, the most popular activities among inmates tend to be ones that require minimal physical activity, such as reading and watching television, causing inmates to live sedentary lives (Frey & Delaney, 1996; Meek, 2013). Given these factors, it is not surprising that the physical activity rates among inmates tend to be lower than the rates for the general population (Meek, 2013).

The limited amount of research that has been done on sport based physical activity interventions in correctional facilities has focused primarily on men (Elger, 2009; Meek, 2012). The dearth of information regarding the sport activity behaviors of incarcerated women is reflective of the misconception that the female incarceration experience is similar to the male’s experience (NACCJSG, 1973). According to The Sentencing Project (2012), the rate of incarceration of females has increased by 646% between 1980 and 2010. This rapid increase has created a replication of the male penal system for female inmates, where this “one size fits all” approach insufficiently meets women’s needs (Goetting & Howsen, 1983). The present study attempts to fill this void by investigating the effectiveness of a structured physical activity intervention program for incarcerated women. Specifically, the study examines the development of psychological and behavioral involvement with physical activity and role that social connection plays in promoting these relationships.

There is a substantial body of research in leisure and sport management that has examined the role of involvement in sport and physical activity participation, yet limited application of the theory to at-risk communities in a comparable research context. Involvement is a “causal or motivating” state that influences a behavior, with diverging inputs resulting in similar, discrete outputs (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). The use of involvement in sport and leisure looks to encompass not only a person’s engagement through behaviors (behavioral involvement), but also the attitudes a person has towards (psychological involvement) an object or activity (Funk & James, 2001). Behavioral involvement can be clearly operationalized (e.g., frequency of participation), yet is inconclusive at revealing the true attraction or engagement with the activity or object. It is for this reason that behavioral involvement will be measured along with psychological involvement so as to get a comprehensive understanding of the motivating factors and the behavior (Stone, 1984).

One purpose of leisure within a correctional facility is to provide socialization opportunities; therefore, this study would be remiss to exclude its role in incarcerated leisure (Frey & Delaney, 1997). Social connectedness is noted for its ability to promote and produce “identity development, mental and well-being” through social relationships (Hoye et al., 2012, p. 3). Among women, social connectedness leads to development of self-esteem and feelings of security (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Membership to leisure groups is frequently mediated by demographic factors (e.g., income, age); its been shown that women who participate in leisure groups look to satisfy their social needs (Wood & Danyalehuk, 2011). Similarly to involvement, social connectedness has not been applied within the context of sport and leisure with incarcerated populations.
This research attempts to fill the chasm that exists in the literature regarding incarcerated women in the United States and their engagement and behavior towards physical activity. Specifically, by investigating the degree to which psychological involvement is a product of participation in sustained group physical activity classes and the role that social connection among participants plays in influencing attendance with incarcerated women. Given this purpose, the following hypotheses are presented.

H1: Women who complete the program will have higher levels of psychological involvement.
H2: Behavioral involvement will be mediated by social connection to produce higher psychological involvement.

Method
This research partners with Philadelphia-based non-profit, Gearing Up (GU), which provides spinning classes to women in the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS). Given the sensitivity of the population, there were multiple clearances women needed before participation- specifically to ensure PPS was not liable and the inmates were providing informed consent. While this is necessary with all research, it was essential for our study, as it engages such with a vulnerable population. While randomized assignment of participants to an intervention and control group would be ideal, this approach was not applicable for the study, as GU chose not to alter its protocol.

Participants completed both a baseline and eight-week follow up survey to collect psychological involvement and social connectedness measures. Behavioral involvement data was gathered by GU in the form of attendance data; this data not only included daily presence, but also the number of minutes participated. These three pieces will be used in analyses.

Results and Discussion
Data collection for this project began with pilot testing in September 2013, with full data collection in November 2013. Data collection is currently ongoing and results are not finalized. At the date of submission, 159 women had completed baseline and 63 women, follow-ups.

Female inmates experience countless barriers for physical activity participation; this study investigates the mechanisms that support physical activity in this unique population. The dearth of research regarding female inmates' physical activity is reflective of the assumption that women have the same experience while incarcerated as men, and attempts to illuminate the impediments this population faces.