

LEIPERT, BEVERLY

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Doctoral Stipend 2007

Exploring Social Support, Sport Participation, and Rural Women's Health Using Photovoice

Project Summary

Research Objectives:

- To explore the roles that sport and recreation clubs play as community, social, and health places for rural women
- To understand how sport activities and meanings differ for women across diverse rural communities
- To utilize photovoice with rural women and document their perspectives about health within the context of curling

Conclusions: See Results

Research methods

Study participants used the photovoice method which includes picture taking with cameras, recording in log books, and group interviews. Participants first participated in a Research Orientation session, then took relevant photos and recorded in logbooks for two weeks, following which the log books were retrieved and the photos developed. A group interview was then conducted wherein each participant was provided with copies of her photos, and discussion of the photos ensued. Photo and interview data were analyzed by the research team and a photobook outlining the highlights of the project, using pictures and quotes from the interviews, was produced and sent to all participants and relevant sport organizations.

Women curlers were recruited from rural curling clubs in two communities in each of Ontario, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia, and from one curling club in the North West Territories (NWT). The communities had populations ranging from just under 800 to just over 4,000 residents. Each community was at least a 40 minute commute over isolated rural roads, or by plane, to the nearest urban center; five of the seven communities were more than an hour from the nearest city. Fifty-two women and girls, ranging in age from 12 to 75 years with an average age range of 50-60 years participated in the study.

Research results

Curling clubs are significant community places that are deeply valued by women and girls to:

- establish new (and maintain) longstanding friendships
- increase physical exercise
- develop and improve curling expertise;
- access opportunities for volunteering, mentoring, leadership and community engagement
- share practical, emotional, and affirmational support (e.g. team members frequently referred to as "curling family")

Curling clubs enhance social relationships, community-building and inclusivity by accepting curlers of any ability (e.g., stick curling for seniors, Little Rocks programs for children, multi-generational teams).

Curling fosters community pride and resilience (e.g. through hosting events such as bonspiels and major competitions, which sustain faith in the importance and viability of small communities).

Curling clubs are struggling to survive in some rural communities; participants expressed concern about the lack of government support (local-level support in particular).

In spite of member commitment to keeping clubs viable (primarily through volunteering), external support is needed to ensure sustainability.

The photovoice method was very effective in helping participants to reveal and discuss perspectives and experiences about the meaning and significance of curling.

Major Conclusions

Curling clubs enhance and sustain physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and resiliency in the following ways:

- Building Social Connections - through social interactions which result in diverse friendships and relationships
- Facilitating Women's Health and Resiliency - Curling provides impetus and location to be active and involved in rural settings, which typically have few opportunities for interaction and involvement, and fosters confidence and leadership skills.
- Strengthening Rural Community Life - Rural curling clubs, as hubs of rural camaraderie and identity for all, open up new and exciting possibilities for curlers and communities. Women's involvement provides valued and visible opportunities to contribute to rural community life.
- Ensuring club sustainability - Participants commit substantial resources to the sustainability and enrichment of their curling club. Although these commitments sometimes exceed women's resources, they persist and look for ways to further advance curling in their communities.
- Limitation - This research, with its small sample of women and girls in three Canadian provinces and the NWT, indicates that more research is needed throughout the country to determine effects of and supports for curling for rural people and communities.

Policy implications

This study revealed the important role curling clubs play as a service to the community. This leads to the following policy implications:

- Fund the development of curling. Curling clubs are known sites for community activity and public engagement. Thus, they deserve the same level of financial support (federal, provincial, municipal) afforded to all other sports (e.g. hockey).
- Develop and enhance coaching and support for curling, especially for girls, in schools and rinks and provide resources for curling as part of school programs
- Better acknowledge, publicize, and celebrate the achievements of girls and women curlers locally, nationally, and internationally e.g. through increased media attention to women's curling internationally (e.g. the Olympics, other world competitions), nationally (e.g. CBC, TSN), and locally (e.g. newspapers, billboards).
- Increase resources aimed at valuing and publicizing curling, similar to hockey, in small town Canada. This could be achieved through local community and school newspapers, greater support from local businesses, and the development of greater appreciation for the many contributions of the sport to personal and community wellbeing.

- Support further research on ways to enhance curling participation for youth and men as well as women in rural settings (e.g. enrich research funding from Sport Canada and SSHRC)

Next steps

- Several vital questions arose from this research:
- How does curling support rural people and communities?
- What is the significance of curling for rural community sustainability, resilience, and capacity-building?
- How can we enhance wellbeing and quality of life for individuals and communities through sport and recreation?
- How can curling be supported and enhanced within the changing contexts of rural life?
- How do changing economics, demographics, and environmental conditions affect curling and curling participation, and vice versa?
- How do sports such as curling support the wellbeing of rural women, men, and children?
- What are the needs of these groups regarding participation in sport?
- Building on this research, how can curling be enhanced in other rural communities throughout Canada?

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Canadian Curling Association; All provincial and regional curling associations; The Curling News; The World Curling Federation; Federation of Canadian Municipalities
- Ministries of Health – appreciate why and how to support sport/curling participation in rural settings.
- Rural curling clubs across Canada - would benefit from study suggestions for ways to address issues such as financial support for clubs and ways to strengthen curling participation, which would facilitate the sustainability and thriving of rural clubs.
- Media – national and local media (newspapers, television, radio) should be made more aware of these types of studies and their findings. Dr. Leipert gave over 25 interviews about this research with diverse international, national, and regional media (TV, radio, newspapers). More such profiling would raise the profile, interest, knowledge, and participation in sports in general and curling in particular.
- Sport Canada – research support that Sport Canada provides is vital and requires enrichment and sustainability so that more information can be obtained regarding the significance of curling for rural Canada and ways to enhance curling participation.