

Social change and physical activity

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Abstract

Today's Western society is undergoing rapid change, and the speed of this process of change seems to be increasing. One of the major social changes is the gradual changeover from daily lives that contained high levels of physical effort to lives that are increasingly sedentary. A sedentary lifestyle is not without its problems. Several common illnesses are related to physical inactivity. Athletics, exercise, outdoor life and trend sports must be regarded as expressions of lifestyle and not as logical responses to an absence of physical activity. After puberty, there appears to be a genetic need to save energy and not to exert ourselves unnecessarily. There is also no doubt that children's and young people's sports habits, along with the general trends in the present child-rearing culture, are becoming institutionalized to an greater extent. Organized sports carry much of the burden of children's and young people's sports activities. Spontaneous sports, especially traditional team sports, have decreased. The number of children and young people who are inactive in sports has increased over the past few decades, and many of these children do not compensate with other physical activity such as cycling, walking or playing outdoors.

Keywords: *organized sports; physical activity; sedentary lifestyle; social changes; spontaneous sports*

Introduction

Today's Western society is undergoing rapid change, and the speed of this process of change seems to be increasing. There are shifts not only in knowledge, but also in norms and values. Since the world is changing so rapidly people are continuously forced to learn new things to maintain their social position, and need to be prepared to meet new challenges. Sports and fitness activities must also be seen from this perspective.

Personal development and personal expression have become more and more important. The personal sense of duty has to an increasing extent been replaced by demands of self-realization, of having new experiences and finding happiness. The project of the individual is central. We have moved from a society with stable values, distinct messages, distinct hierarchies and aspirations of fundamental security to a society that encourages diversity, changes and new experiences. Concepts such as solidarity and idealism do not seem to be used to the same extent as before; they have been replaced by words such as profitability, efficiency and individual responsibility. This development is also noticeable in sports and fitness activities.

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levels of physical effort to lives that are increasingly sedentary.

Decreased physical activity

In modern society daily life has systematically and successfully been made less and less physically active. This is true in our homes as well as at work. Great changes have taken place, especially in the area of communications and transportation. Earlier generations in Sweden, well into the 1950s and 1960s, were used to walking and cycling long distances to and from work, to go shopping, or to visit friends and relatives. It was quite natural, something that people did not think a lot about, and much less talk about. In addition, daily work tasks required much more muscle power and physical effort.

As communications improved, and with increased automatization and computerization, people's lives have become much less physically demanding. New technology has made it possible to avoid physical effort. People are also expected to choose the alternative that is less physically demanding. In public buildings it can sometimes be very difficult to find the stairs – they are often labelled “Emergency Exit” – and the centrally located elevators and escalators usually appear to be the obvious, com-

fortable way of getting from one floor to another. Even though it is difficult to prove, it seems apparent that many people in the Western world live a more sedentary life than did earlier generations. This situation is uncertain because until now there have been no studies that give clear indications of how things were 20, 30 or 40 years ago. There is considerable evidence, however, that total physical activity has decreased, even though many people are involved in organized sports or other forms of exercise.

A sedentary lifestyle is not without its problems. The human body needs to move in order to function optimally. Avoiding body movement and physical effort has the long-term effect of a deterioration in physical capacity, as well as in muscular, joint and skeletal capacities. Body strength, condition and flexibility are directly related to the extent and focus of physical and motor activity. For the growing individual, as well as for older people, this relationship has particular significance. There is also a scientific consensus about the importance of physical activity to the state of health. Several common illnesses are related to physical inactivity. Among these are cardiovascular diseases, adult-onset diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, osteoporosis, joint and back problems, and colon cancer (1–6). Recently, the number of overweight people has risen dramatically, especially in the USA, as well as in Europe. There is even talk of an epidemic of obesity. The blame is placed on the combination of changed eating habits and reduced physical activity. In Sweden the proportion of overweight young people

has increased during the past few decades (7) (Fig. 1).

Exercise is a cultural manifestation

Since physical activity is no longer a natural part of daily life for most people, modern European and Americans must take their own initiative to expend the effort that daily life does not require, in order to maintain good physical fitness. Thus, some form of extra effort, i.e. what is ordinarily called exercise, must be found to achieve this condition. This reasoning implies that the adult individual would normally, in his or her sedentary daily life, experience a strong need for physical exercise, and that fitness exercise should be understood to be a biological phenomenon, the body's natural reaction to an "enforced" physical inactivity. However, far from everyone engages in fitness exercises and the need for movement does not seem to be genetically programmed into those who have passed puberty. In contrast, the growing child, especially in the early years, is driven by irresistible impulses of physical motion. Adults seem more to be programmed to save energy if possible, a strategy that is certainly necessary for survival under more demanding living conditions than those normally experienced in the Western world. From a biological point of view, humans are endowed in the same way as they were tens of thousands of years ago. Human body functions, sensory organs and musculoskeletal system were thus originally adapted to completely different living conditions to those that prevail in modern industrial society. It must be pointed out, however, that an adult can create a need that can be perceived as being necessary to satisfy, through long-term, regular repetition of a certain behaviour. Physical exercise must always be seen as a cultural manifestation, and cannot be understood from a biological point of view, even though such exercise, or lack of it, has biological and medical consequences.

As daily physical activity is being reduced, the consciously produced fitness activity programme must often be accommodated by special arenas and venues, in specially arranged places or in natural areas that are separate from the places in which people act out their daily lives. Fitness activity also takes place during the extra time that the individual has at his or her disposal. Thus, different forms of culture appear and develop, in which the individual must have a special attitude. These forms also

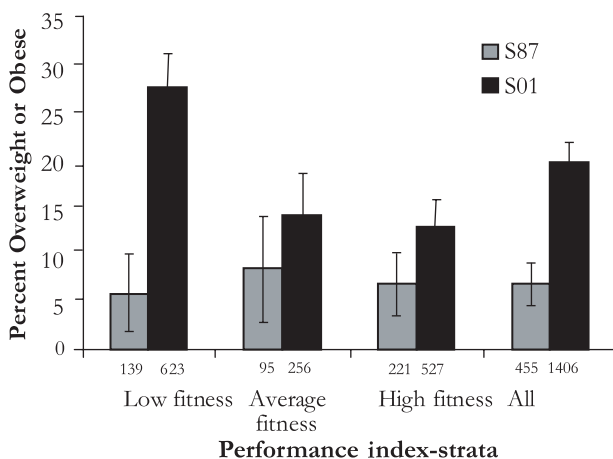


Fig. 1. Prevalence of overweight and obesity in Sweden in different PI strata. Error bars denote the 95% confidence interval of the proportion. [From Ekblom et al., 2004 (7), with permission.]

require training, social and financial investment for successful participation. This is true of fitness sports, competitive sports, outdoor sports and even dancing. In other words, the modern physical exercise forms include various practices, behaviours and rituals that the individual must learn and learn to appreciate in order to participate. How this culture is produced, reproduced and changed, and how people learn various forms of activity and learn to value these is therefore of interest to social science researchers, and especially to educational researchers.

There are also other trends in social development that particularly concern children's and young people's lives and life circumstances, which have great significance for the extent and focus of physical activity. In the following sections, four aspects are discussed: institutionalizing, spontaneous sports activities, body image and lifestyle issues.

Institutionalizing

The situation of children and young people in Western society has gradually undergone great changes. Raising children and children's everyday situation in general has become more and more associated with institutions of different kinds. This is mainly due to the fact that in most families both parents work full-time. Therefore, children are cared for by professional child-carers and educators in the form of daycare personnel, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers and high-school teachers. During leisure time, they are cared for by recreation educators, pedagogues and leaders, youth leaders and sports leaders to an increasing extent. To assist parents, there are paediatricians, welfare officers, psychologists and other experts on children's problems. Many children attend a daycare centre from as early as the age of 1 year, then go on to preschool and elementary school, and in many cases continue in high school until the age of 18 or 19. Childhood and the greater part of youth are thus spent away from the productive side of life. Sports are, consequently, another expression of this educational culture where children's socialization is to an increasing degree taking place outside the family and is tied to different kinds of institution (8).

Spontaneous versus organized activities

Demands from school, in combination with the pressure of belonging to an organization in leisure time, are taking a larger and larger place in children's lives, making it easier to understand why the spontaneous activities are decreasing. Figure 2 shows that among 15–16-year-olds in 1968 and 2001, respectively, the proportion of young people who devote themselves to organized sports has increased, as has as the proportion of non-active children.

Organized sports today support a large number of young people's physical activities during their leisure time. At the end of the 1960s, the majority of physical activities took place outside a club's direction. Only about two young people out of 10 trained exclusively on their own initiative in 2001, if the requirement is set at two occasions per week. At the end of the 1960s, every other girl and boy engaged in such spontaneous sporting activity. In 2001 almost 40% of the girls and around one-quarter of the boys did not reach this level of activity at all.

Furthermore, those who were physically inactive during leisure time did not compensate for this in school or in any other ways; in fact, it was the other way around. Figure 3 shows that those who were physically inactive during physical education sessions in school were not very active during leisure time and vice versa.

Many middle-aged people will remember how they spent afternoons and evenings during their

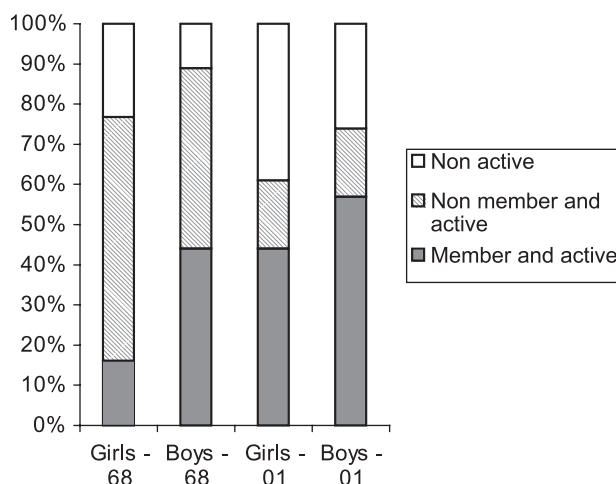


Fig. 2. Proportion of athletically active Swedish children, i.e. exercising at least twice a week, inside or outside a sports club, among 15-year-olds in 1968 and 16-year-olds in 2001. [Presented by Lars-Magnus Engström at the 8th Annual Congress of the European College of Sport Science (ECSS Congress), Salzburg, July 2003.]

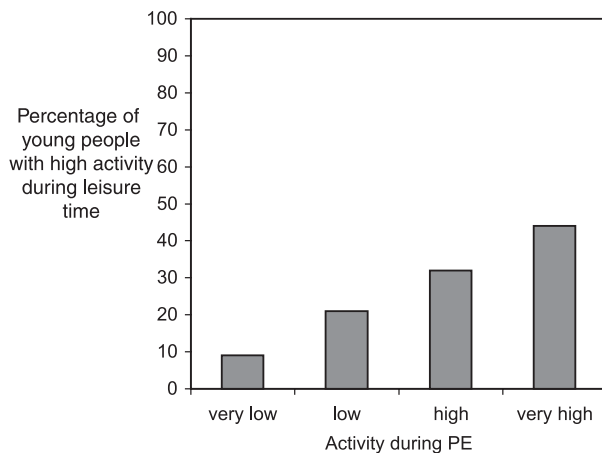


Fig. 3. Percentage of young people in Sweden with a high level of physical activity during leisure time in relation to activity level during physical education (PE) sessions in school. (Unpublished data from Skola-Idrott-Hälsa projektet; for more information go to www.ihs.se)

childhood at sports fields, in meadows, on skating rinks and on the street, playing all kinds of games and sports. Many adults have learnt many sporting activities, such as cycling, swimming and skating, in this way. Some have even reached world elite status in spite of, or thanks to, their spontaneous sporting activities during childhood and adolescence. These kinds of sports are now decreasing. Instead, children (and/or their parents) are now looking for organized activities in sport clubs.

A second trend is also becoming more apparent among teenagers and young adults. In these age groups new sports, “trend sports”, are developing: sports that require investment in equipment and especially in skills training. These sports, including snowboarding, skateboarding and inline skating, are to all appearances spontaneous in character.

However, there is also no doubt that children’s and young people’s sports habits, along with the general trends in child-rearing culture, are becoming institutionalized to an increasingly greater extent. Organized sports carry much of the burden of children’s and young people’s sporting activities. Spontaneous sports, especially traditional team sports, have decreased. Few people take regular physical exercise on their own initiative as their only form of training, and most people who engage in athletics outside the auspices of an organization are also active members in associations. About half of the Swedish young people in the 15–16 age group state that they participate regularly each week in

some sport in an organized form. The number of children and young people who are inactive in sports has, however, increased over the past few decades. Many of these children do not compensate with other physical activity such as cycling, walking or playing outdoors. In the author’s opinion, therefore, the present situation risks the division of young people into two groups: one group of individuals who belong to sports associations and are otherwise physically active, and a second group of individuals who shun sports and do not compensate by participating in spontaneous sports or other physical activity in school or leisure time.

Body image

To these trends can be added another one that has become glaringly evident: the current interest in the body, its appearance, and its control and shaping (or disciplining). Mass media broadcast the message that a person can “create” his or her own looks (9–13). A Swedish manufacturer of “light” margarine advises you to buy its product “If you’ve decided ...”, implying that you have the appearance you deserve. In its most extreme form, this body fixation trend is manifested in the bodybuilders at the gym. Another less sensational example is the great interest in the body’s appearance and in diets of various kinds that are especially exploited by women’s magazines. The body has become a project. Surface appearance is being focused on as it never has before. The young, well-trained and, especially for women, very slim body is exhibited and held up as an ideal. An example of the many headlines is the cover of a popular Swedish women’s magazine seen recently, shouting “You and your body! Are you happy with it? In lovely form, clad for the gym, the ski slopes, the disco!” It is obvious here that the body’s surface appearance and clothes are linked to a positive young lifestyle in which both the gym and the disco should be visited with the “right” body and clothes. The body should not, as in earlier generations, be concealed by clothes, but rather be emphasized by them. Clothes advertisements often show, paradoxically, bodies that are partially naked, and now men’s bodies are exhibited more and more. Young men pose with bare chests, showing their masculine, laddered abdominal muscles. One of the consequences of this trend is that those who feel that their physical appearance is far from the ideal may believe that they are unattractive, even repulsive. This, in turn, can lead to an unwillingness to

expose one's more or less unclothed body publicly in sports and fitness activity situations. From the same perspective physical signs of ageing can also be experienced as a personal defeat. Anorexia among women and the use of anabolic steroids for muscle building can also be seen in this light. People are also submitting their bodies more and more to plastic surgery to adapt them to the current ideals.

Responsibility for the "inner body", the state of physical health, is also up to the individual. Here, the message is that he or she is responsible for the presence or absence of quite a few illnesses and physical problems. This can be true of everything from back pain to various kinds of cancer that are believed to be related to lifestyle. The positive side of this message is that changes in lifestyle are worthwhile and illnesses are not always decided by fate, but the negative side is also obvious. The person who is overweight, who eats junk food, smokes and does not take sufficient exercise has only him or herself to blame for physical illness.

The body is where good feelings are experienced, but it also signals something of the person's character. It can be seen as an instrument and as a machine, but it also reflects the ego. There is a risk that a person will be judged according to his or her appearance. One *is* one's body, to an increasing degree. A slim, well-trained body seems to make a different statement about a person's character than does an untrained, overweight body. The motivation for training is not only, or not primarily, or perhaps not at all, physiological or medical. It may not be related to a need for recreation, but rather be seen as a cultural expression in a social context, even though the individual justifies his or her activities with the reasons provided by the current debate.

Sport and exercise as a lifestyle

As physical activity has been shifted over into leisure time and become "culture", leisure time itself has come to have a much greater significance in our lives. Recreational activities constitute, as never before, essential elements of people's lifestyles and offer them new opportunities to express their personalities and show others just who they really are. In today's Swedish society, with its rapid changes, its variegated patterns of living and values, in which people have abandoned much of their sense of duty and their respect for authority, and where the individual's self-realization is central, leisure time has become a new, important arena

for the project of the individual. Rich opportunities are offered for various new experiences, as are choices of activities that express an individual's personal style and profile in relation to others. People in the new middle class, supported by a growing group of "cultural ambassadors" in advertising and mass media, take great interest in their appearance and their personal expression. A lifestyle of this kind often includes a search for new experiences. Life is seen as a project. Among the myriad choices that seem to be available in today's consumer society, even the management of these opportunities becomes an expression of personal taste and lifestyle. Choices regarding where to go on holiday, what style of clothes and music one prefers, as well as body image, choice of recreational activities including sports and exercise habits, all become clear indicators of this lifestyle. The familiar and traditional are discarded and replaced by the new and untried. Leisure time must now be planned and sometimes afforded equal or greater importance than studies and work, a situation that just a few decades ago would have been considered impossible (14).

This is especially true for young people. Almost all young people up to the age of 18–19 years attend school and, until then, have almost the same experiences. Their possibilities for distinguishing themselves from other young people are limited. For this reason, leisure time appears as an arena where they can show other people who they are. A young person may define himself not as a schoolboy but as a guitar player, a basketball player, a computer nerd or a motorbiker. Sports activities must be seen in this perspective. Young girls or boys who give up, or are forced to give up, their involvement in sports lose not only their membership on the team and the activity itself, but also great parts of their identities.

Athletics, exercise, outdoor life and trend sports must be regarded as expressions of lifestyle, not as logical responses to any absent physical activity. It may be tempting to believe that a sedentary life would reinforce the inner need for physical activity, but this does not appear to be the case for individuals past puberty. Humans appear to have a genetic need to save energy and not to undergo unnecessary exertion. Thus, athletics, sports and fitness activities must be seen as forms of culture with which a special relationship develops, one that is related to how and where a person grew up and to

their present living conditions. Screening people's living situations and lifestyles on this basis becomes very important to an understanding of why people are physically active or inactive.

Conclusions

What can be done to increase the opportunities for people to be sufficiently physically active that they can maintain good health and a good quality of life? The author believes that in the case of children and young people of school age, attention should turn first to the schools. Schools must take responsibility for giving all children and young people opportunities for daily physical activity for at least half an hour and preferably an hour every day. In addition, schoolyards and connecting areas should invite active play. The routes to the schools must be made secure enough, with regard to traffic safety, to offer children and young people the chance to walk or cycle to school. Moreover, sports organizations should increase their efforts to recruit those children who are not interested in competitive sports, but who may be tempted to learn various sports in a social environment.

To lure more adults into fitness activities, there should be more publicity for established exercise forms such as jogging and going to the gym. However, in light of the above discussion, arguing that exercise is a form of culture, or rather different forms of culture, it is unreasonable to believe that the number of participants would increase dramatically. The significance of a culture is that it contains specific action patterns and values that attract some people and repel others. Thus, not everyone can or wants to participate, but everyone wants to have the body and the functional capabilities that will allow them to go about their daily lives and take part in their recreational activities without being hindered by physical shortcomings. Therefore, a good plan for increasing the numbers of physically active people may be not to talk about sports and exercise, but rather to inform people of the minimum amount of physical activity necessary per day or per week to allow them to live the lives they want to live: a sort of fitness toothbrush use, as it were.

In conclusion, there is a need consciously to plan for and promote physical activity in daily life and in the workplace, instead of systematically decreasing it, as is the case now. By creating inviting environ-

ments for daily fitness activities, such as cycle and walking paths, and even stairs, more people will be more active in a natural way. Community planners and architects must therefore make it their mission to encourage people to move spontaneously, without necessarily feeling that they are exerting themselves in any kind of fitness programme.

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