Unmasking the Political Power of Physical Activity Research: Harnessing the “Apolitical-Ness” as a Catalyst for Addressing the Challenges of Our Time

Eun-Young Lee1,2 and Mark S. Tremblay3

1School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON, Canada; 2Department of Gender Studies, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON, Canada; 3Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Key Points

- The physical activity sector is facing a decline in funding due to its neoliberal orientation with a strong emphasis on generating biomedical evidence that places health as an individual responsibility.
- The sector is also confronted with competing, more urgent challenges, such as climate change, economic inequality, and racial violence, all of which have been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.
- We must redefine and position physical activity as a vital part of the solution for addressing the complex challenges that we currently face, moving beyond a narrow public health focus.

Multifaceted Benefits of Physical Activity

Physical activity has a range of direct health and well-being benefits at the individual level.1 When it comes to the community level, the extent of physical activity’s impact on complex social and environmental issues remains relatively unexplored and poorly understood. However, emerging evidence suggests that physical activity may buffer the devastating impact of climate change on health,2,3 reduce crime rates with improved mental health and well-being,4,5 help alleviate poverty by enhancing self-confidence and leadership skills, thereby increasing employability,6,7 and bridge divides by promoting a sense of unity.8 For instance, recent reviews4,5 have shown that physical activity could lessen the negative impact of climate change on health by helping people recover from disasters, heat waves, trauma, and related challenges, thus lessening the negative impact of climate change on their well-being. Furthermore, cross-sectional evidence4,5 shows that communities with higher levels of physical activity tend to experience lower rates of neighborhood crime.

Critique of Neoliberal “Apolitical-Ness” in Physical Activity Research and Reduced Support for Physical Activity

Physical activity, particularly in the form of sports, has been suggested as a valuable tool for crime prevention, community integration, and social cohesion in disciplines such as humanities, sociology, and criminal justice studies.9 However, in physical activity scholarship, the predominant focus has often been on investigating correlates, determinants, and health outcomes of physical activity, driven by quantitative research with a strong biomedical emphasis at an individual level. As a result, the potential benefits of physical activity in positively addressing macrolevel challenges have received comparatively less attention. Nevertheless, Bailey et al’s10,11 work published in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health in early 2010s brought attention to physical activity as an often overlooked investment for human and social capital. Their work introduced the human capital model,11 which recognizes the underappreciated value of physical activity despite its importance for overall well-being beyond health benefits. The model proposes that different types of “capitals” are generated through physical activity, encompassing emotional, financial, individual, intellectual, physical, and social domains. The authors argue that investing in these capitals, particularly during early life stages, can yield significant individual and social rewards. It is worth noting that although we appreciate the deliberate effort made by these authors to positively frame the multifaceted benefits of physical activity, their suggested reframing of “physical activity” as a solution remains closely aligned with neoliberal ideology prevalent in the dominant public health discourse.

Neoliberalism is an ideology that emphasizes free markets, limited government intervention, privatization, deregulation, and individual responsibility. When applied to public health, neoliberal ideology emphasizes individual responsibility for health and encourages individuals to take a more active role in managing and improving their health. This includes promoting consumer choice, empowering individuals to make decisions to stay physically active, sleep well, eat a healthy diet, and avoid unhealthy behaviors, such as cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption. The strong foundation of neoliberal ideology in physical activity research, particularly in quantitative investigations with an emphasis on biomedical approaches, has been subjected to scrutiny by critical health researchers.12–15 This scrutiny arises from the perception that the field is “apolitical” due to its primary focus on individual lifestyle modification and interventions for better health outcomes while shifting focus away from the structural determinants and
policy changes necessary for creating supportive environments for physical activity. Consequently, physical activity has often been utilized to enhance individual health, framing physical (in)activity as a public health concern that places accountability on individuals for their own well-being. Regrettably, this perceived lack of political engagement in physical activity research is contributing to its diminishing prioritization among politicians and decision makers in various countries. An illustrative example can be seen in Canada where ParticipACTION, the largest nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting physical activity among Canadians, recently faced significant budget cuts from the federal government. This reduced governmental support can be attributed, in part, to physical (in)activity not being considered as a priority issue when compared with other pressing matters, either emerging or persisting, such as climate change, Indigenous rights and reconciliation, economic inequality, affordable housing and homelessness, an ineffective health care system, and immigration and refugee integration. 16

Harnessing the “Apolitical-Ness” as a Catalyst for Solving Complex Issues

We recognize that physical (in)activity, when positioned as a public health concern, may not be prioritized given the existence of more critical challenges that demand comprehensive and upstream approaches. However, it is important to acknowledge that physical activity could effectively serve as a catalyst and adjunct for addressing complex social and environmental issues while also providing individual-level benefits. For instance, active outdoor play can simultaneously promote the health and well-being of children, develop their ecoconsciousness, and equip them with resilience in the face of climate change. Specifically, active outdoor play offers a multitude of benefits for the physical and mental health of children and youth as well as their overall well-being.17,18 Furthermore, immersive nature experiences during outdoor play have demonstrated positive impacts on children’s mental, physical, and social development.19 In addition to the various holistic health benefits, active outdoor play also holds potential for fostering environmental stewardship, climate action, and planetary health among children and youth.20,21

We want to emphasize that physical activity research is “apolitical” because physical activity itself is inherently apolitical. Unlike other behavior change interventions yielding mixed outcomes or polarized by different political ideologies, industries, or media (eg, mask wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic,22 tobacco control,23 Cannabis legalization24), a substantial body of evidence spanning many years supports the notion that engaging in physical activity is beneficial for health and well-being.1 Consequently, physical activity is considered “apolitical” as the benefits it offers to human health and well-being are unequivocal.

By highlighting the potential of physical activity as a contributing solution to the major challenges we face today, we can demonstrate to policymakers that investing in physical activity is not only advantageous for individuals’ health and well-being but also essential for resolving complex societal and environmental issues. As physical activity researchers, we can present a compelling case for the significance of physical activity by connecting its benefits to larger concerns, such as climate change. Specifically, exploring the role of physical activity in mitigating and adapting to climate change can contribute to better preparedness for the changing climate. Moreover, rather than focusing on physical inactivity solely as a public health problem, we can, instead, advocate for physical activity as a viable solution to complex social and environmental challenges. By reframing physical activity as a comprehensive public health solution, rather than solely focusing on physical inactivity as a health issue, we can inspire collective, multisectoral action toward achieving a range of benefits that extend beyond individual health and contribute to a harmonious and thriving ecosystem that encompasses all living things, also known as One Health.1 This inclusive and inherently integrated approach to physical activity promotion can lead to multifaceted outcomes, encompassing improved health and mental well-being, enhanced social cohesion, increased health equity, improved gender and income equality, and enhanced environmental sustainability.

Note

1 One Health: A collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach that aims to harmonize and enhance the health of humans, animals, and the environment through integration. The goal of One Health is to promote optimal health outcomes for all while also preserving and protecting the health of ecosystems and the planet.

References


