So what is exercise anyway?: A Sociolinguistic Study on the Definition of Exercise

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1 Introduction

What is exercise to you? Although answers to this question will always be similar, they are rarely identical. So then what kinds of activities can be deemed as exercise? Answers to this question vary greatly, but why is that? This divide in definitions, as well as the infrequency of other literature discussing this topic, prompted me to create a survey for undergraduates at my university. In this survey, participants are asked whether certain activities could be considered exercise or not. The purpose of this survey was to simply gain an understanding of exercise among today’s youth to then determine what our next steps should be from that position. In this study, I explore the different perspectives and gray areas surrounding exercise, concluding that individuals have their own varying perceptions of exercise, which in turn leads to a more accessible and enjoyable way for people to be physically active.

2 Background

Sedentary lifestyles have only increased as we have progressed into the 21st century. Our technology keeps us stationary and performs tasks for us, leading to sedentarism. There are numerous negative factors associated with sedentarism, such as increased risk of heart disease and diabetes, and ultimately a shorter life span (Park
et al, 2020). The best way to combat a sedentary lifestyle is to exercise more frequently. Unfortunately, exercise is not appealing for all people. It seems like a daunting task, one that tempts people with large expenses for gym memberships, clothing and equipment. If the expenses don’t intimidate you enough, then the lofty goals created by body images and fitness culture will. (Walton-Smith, 2021). Exercise can be stressful for a good number of people, so the goal now is to alleviate this kind of stress through the approach to it, and the accessibility found in such an approach.

Many people wouldn’t identify very big differences between the terms ‘movement’, ‘physical activity’, and ‘exercise’. That’s because there aren’t very big differences. All that changes is the intention, and the size of their scope. As Katy Bowman notes, exercise is a subset of physical activity, and physical activity is a subset of movement (Bowman 2019). As she states in her speech, we are trying to solve our issues regarding fitness through the narrow lens of exercise. This lens has muddled our definition of exercise, creating a culture in which nobody can agree on a singular definition of exercise, or at the very least where that definition is not well known.

Dr. Scott Lear has published articles encouraging people to broaden their definitions of exercise to break past the barrier of inactivity (Lear 2019). This is the kind of mission I strive for within this survey. A similar study I found was conducted in an assisted living facility, where elderly people found exercise to be a means to express oneself and be creative, while healthcare professionals viewed them more as everyday activities (Mahrs Träff et al, 2017). It is coincidental that my target demographic in this survey was completely opposite to that covered in the previous study, and my
methodology is very different, but there are similar themes that can continue to be explored here.

Exercise is often viewed as a set, where certain activities are members and certain activities are not. Depending on who you ask, the set will look different. Through the results from my survey, I seek to clarify why that is, and which areas of these different perceptions have a consensus.

3 Methodology

The survey used in this study was sent out through the Western Washington University Honors program, linguistics program, and word of mouth. All participants in this survey were students at WWU. Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants were given all required consent information for participation. Additionally, this survey followed all protocols from the IRB. 193 total participants completed this survey.

Participants were asked to determine whether or not the activities could be deemed as exercise. They were prompted with a four-point scale. If the participant answered four, they strongly agreed that the activity is exercise. If the participant answered one, they strongly disagreed, stating that the activity is not exercise. A four-point scale was used to force participants into one end of the spectrum or the other instead of a neutral middle answer. Demographics questions were asked after the content questions so as to not prime subjects through extensive thought about their exercise habits.
The exercise stimulus statements used in the survey are listed below, in the order they appeared in the survey:

- Weightlifting is exercise
- Watching Netflix on your couch is exercise
- Walking to work is exercise
- Synchronized swimming is exercise
- Moving furniture is exercise
- Formula One racing is exercise
- Taking a nap is exercise
- Cold plunging is exercise
- Golf is exercise
- Yoga is exercise
- Playing trombone is exercise
- Ping pong is exercise
- Dancing with friends in a club is exercise
- Vacuuming is exercise
- Playing catch is exercise
- Rowing is exercise

A few controls were used throughout the process. Weight-lifting and rowing were used as controls that anticipated an agreement answer. Taking a nap and watching Netflix were used as controls that anticipated a disagreement answer. Little debate has been shown between these activities and their categorization, which made them good
controls and allowed us to analyze the anticipated gray areas created by the rest of the stimuli.

Demographic information was asked at the end of the survey, including age, gender and major. In addition to this, participants were asked how many days they exercise and how many of those days are spent at the gym. If participants play any sports, they were asked to input that as well. All of the demographic information that was collected was used to evaluate whether there was a correlation between certain participant types and their answers. This survey was sent out to college students at Western Washington University, so most participants were in the 18-24 age range. 63% of participants identified as female, 19% identified as male, 15% identified as non-binary, and the rest preferred not to say. Because this survey was sent out through the linguistics department in addition to other methods, linguistics was the most recurring major in the survey. However, this was only by a slight margin, and most other disciplines and major fields were represented.

4 Results

Figure 1, below, is a table of collected data from the survey, noting the quantity of each answer type for each question, as well as showing the total number of responses. There were 193 participants in this survey. Participants were allowed to omit answers to any questions, which explains any discrepancies in the total quantity for any particular question.
Figure 1: Exercise Survey Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 (Strongly Disagree)</th>
<th>2 (Disagree)</th>
<th>3 (Agree)</th>
<th>4 (Strongly Agree)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Netflix on your couch</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking to work</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronized swimming</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving furniture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formula 1 racing</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking a nap</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold plunging</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing trombone</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping pong</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing with friends in a club</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacuuming</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Catch</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Broad trends were found within the answers as certain activities seemed more likely to be deemed exercise than others, showing that there is some level of consensus on what is and is not exercise. Although age, gender and major were asked for demographic information, no correlation was found between them. A correlation would have been a nice coincidence rather than an expectation, and the lack of correlation
with these factors shows that anybody can have these any thoughts within this broad spectrum in regards to exercise. One may have expected to see constant gym goers have a more strict definition of exercise, but that isn’t reflected in the results. This isn’t to say that they are all very lax on it, but rather that there is no singular consensus from them. Participants who reported for the same number of days while doing the same activity, in this case rowing, had very different responses. The differing responses between similar types of people pointed my research to focus more on the individuals than the broad demographic data present.

5 Discussion

As a part of my research, I conducted follow-up interviews with a select handful of individuals in order to gauge overall definitions of exercise with relations to certain answer trends. The individuals were selected based on their answer types and availability. Each person I interviewed exercised for similar intensities and amounts of time, but their answers were different, ranging from mostly agreement to mostly disagreement. The definitions of exercise varied greatly from subject to subject, demonstrating the individuality and differentiation of perception that the concept contains. Some subjects stated that exercise was a practice or repeated activity that improves the body in areas of strength or stamina. Others stated that exercise was simply something that elevates your heart rate above resting, and still others said that a high level of sweat or exertion was required. In all cases, the definitions each interviewee gave me aligned almost exactly with their answers in the survey. For example, a participant who highlighted heart rate as the main component of exercise
stated in their interview that walking to work is exercise because it elevates your heart rate substantially. Another participant, who cited high levels of exertion as the main component of exercise, stated in their interview that walking to work is not exercise because there isn’t a high enough level of exertion. This shows that the personal definitions each person has for exercise is the main factor in their answers on the survey, as it has been the most consistent way to explain the way each participant answered. In this section, I plan to use these definitions as lenses that highlight the stimuli from the survey and speculate why the results we see fit within those lenses.

The controlled variables were chosen based on general perceptions of exercise to determine which activities are perceived as high exercise, and which ones are not perceived as exercise at all. Weightlifting and rowing cover all of the ground outlined by the various definitions of exercise. Lifting weights improves bodily strength, elevates heart rate and requires a high level of exertion. All of these attributes can be said about rowing too, and the survey results agreed. 99.5% of survey participants stated that weightlifting is exercise, and 100% of them stated that rowing is exercise. Watching Netflix on your couch and taking a nap do not have any relation to the collective definitions of exercise. There is no bodily improvement, no change in heart rate (caused by movement) and no exertion involved. 99.5% of survey participants stated that watching Netflix is not exercise, and 99% of them stated that taking a nap is not exercise. The controlled variables in this study were used to gauge where the boundaries of exercise are solidly defined in order to further explore the uncertainties with the other variables.
Looking at other activities, we can observe that many of them do involve a fair amount of exertion, and are likely to elevate one’s heart rate and contribute to bodily strength in a similar way to exercise, even if these activities are not typically perceived as exercise within the broader world. Although walking to work and dancing with friends in a club may have an alternative purpose in mind (daily commute and entertainment), we still see in Figure 1 that a majority of participants agreed that they were exercise. It is worth noting that the strength of these agreements is far more widespread than it was with our control variables. This is likely because of preconceived notions about what exercise is, and when seeing these activities alongside weightlifting and rowing, it’s easy to feel like walking to work and dancing in a club with friends are not the same level of exercise. Moving furniture is another activity that participants generally agreed was exercise, although not as strongly. A big reason for this perception, and a reason it was included in the survey, is because the average person does not move furniture for the purpose of exercise.

When compared to the control variables, intentionality behind the activity played a minor role in how participants answered in the survey. The intentionality of vacuuming, playing trombone and cold plunging are all different from a traditional exercise activity, each of which receiving fewer agreements than a majority of other activities. The reason that these activities were largely disagreed with is more likely because of the exertion involved. Compared to some of the activities mentioned earlier, the exertion is low and there is no noticeable change in heart rate or bodily strength. The intentionality of these activities is typically recreation or a household chore, but so is the intentionality of moving furniture and walking to work, which most participants
categorized as exercise. The difference must then be in the activities themselves, showing that intentionality is less of a priority than the exertion and other factors involved.

The three most polarized activities within this survey were golf, ping pong and Formula 1 racing. Solid cases can be made for either side on each of these. When arguing for exercise, you could say that they elevate one’s heart rate and are typically seen as sports. When arguing against exercise, though, you could say that they do not involve much exertion or bodily improvement. It is certainly true that being more physically fit would help improve your abilities in any of these activities, but many would still say that the activity itself does not contribute to bodily improvement. The distinction of sport clearly has an impact on the perceptions of exercise, but it is unclear what that is. It seems as though some people only agreed with these because they are seen as sports, while others agreed because of their personal exercise principles. The variations in personal definitions of exercise were at their strongest in these three terms, as they now create a very split set of results. The very slight discrepancies in what the essence of exercise is and the intensity involved in it is what has caused the public to have such split opinions on what constitutes exercise.

The lack of correlation is logical when the different perceptions and definitions of exercise are taken into consideration. When self-reporting how often they exercise, it is up to the individual to determine what exercise is, and how many times they exercise according to that personal definition. When two individuals report exercising five days a week, it is not inherent that both of their activities are identical in terms of severity. The only requirement is that their activities follow their personal perceptions of what exercise
is. Roughly half of the participants surveyed cited never going to the gym as part of their exercise, and sports/athletics listed were rarely repeated. This points to Western Washington University having a diverse range of activities that make up our collective perception of exercise, and further supports the unique ranges of data gathered by this survey.

6 Conclusion

In this study, I found that the individual perceptions people have about what activities should and should not be considered as exercise are directly influenced by their own definitions of exercise. These definitions vary greatly, and while the general essence of exercise is maintained through all versions of it, the small differences can lead to diverse perspectives on these activities, namely those that directly oppose each other through their differences.

Further explorations of this topic should test other factors such as what activities people do for exercise in order to see if there are any possible correlations between personal perceptions of exercise that were not found within this study. A broader range of people from a variety of ages and locations could potentially yield much different results and should be taken into consideration. Lastly, going more in depth on what each participant defines exercise as through further interviews and survey questions would further support conclusions that personal definitions shape participant answers.

Another finding in this study is that most people do not think an activity has to be done with the intention of exercise in order to be considered as such; it can happen as a
byproduct from another activity, or as something spontaneous, as long as the individual decides to view it that way.

By allowing the individual to decide what exercise means to them, they can then exercise in whatever way is enjoyable and accessible to them. If we unify within this belief, exercise will become greatly accessible to all individuals, avoiding the elitist viewpoints that only certain activities can qualify as exercise. The truth is that most activities can be perceived as exercise if you allow them to be, and you can alter your personal definition of exercise into something that works best for you.
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