

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Sport, Health, and Rural Community: Curling and Rural Women: A National Photovoice Study

Authors: Beverly Leipert, Lynn Scruby, & Donna Meagher-Stewart

Citation:

Leipert, B., Scruby, L., & Meagher-Stewart, D. (2014). Sport, health, and rural community: Curling and rural women: A national photovoice study. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(4), 128-143.

Publisher: Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.



**BRANDON
UNIVERSITY**

Founded 1899

Editor: Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



Sport, Health, and Rural Community: Curling and Rural Women: A National Photovoice Study

Beverly Leipert

Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing
Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
bleipert@uwo.ca

Lynn Scruby

Faculty of Nursing
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Lynn_Scruby@umanitoba.ca

Donna Meagher-Stewart

School of Nursing
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
donna.meagher-stewart@dal.ca

Abstract

Determinants of health such as physical activity and social inclusion are key to the health of rural women, the basis of effective health promotion endeavors, and essential for rural community life. This study reports on a national curling and health study conducted with 48 rural women and girls ages 12 to 75 years in three provinces in Canada using the innovative photovoice method. Photovoice, with its inclusion of photos taken by study participants, provides a unique opportunity for pertinent data provision and comprehensive analysis by people living the experience. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of curling on the health and community life of rural women. Study participants took pictures, recorded in log books, and participated in two group sessions to discuss the influence of curling on their health and community. Narrative and pictorial findings reveal important implications for rural women's sport participation; physical, mental, and social health; and the sustainability and development of curling and rural community life. Further research is needed to reveal the significance and address the sustainability of curling and its important contributions to rural health and rural communities.

Keywords: curling, rural women, health, rural community, photovoice, Canada

1.0 Introduction

Sport and recreation play important social support and other roles in rural community life (Mair, 2007, 2009; Morrow & Wamsley, 2013a). Determinants of health, such as physical activity and social inclusion, key to the health of rural women (Canadian Institute for Health Information [CIHI], 2006; Leipert & George, 2008; Leipert, Leach, & Thurston, 2012), are the basis of effective health promotion endeavors and essential for community life. However, the role of sport and

recreation in fostering social capital, health, and community development in rural contexts and within the lives of rural women is dramatically understudied (Leipert et al., 2012). This study reports on a national curling study conducted with rural women and girls in three provinces in Canada using the innovative photovoice method. Findings reveal important implications for rural women's sport, health, and community life.

2.0 Background

Health, sustainability, and quality of life in rural communities are greatly fostered by the rural women who reside in those communities (Leipert et al., 2012). In addition to work on and off farms and rural businesses, rural women also often take on care of family members and others in their communities, such as the elderly and infirm and those with minor and sometimes major health, social, and economic issues. They also volunteer tirelessly to foster community resources, such as recreation resources, and support (Kubik & Moore, 2003; Leipert et al., 2012; Skinner, Hanlon, & Halseth, 2012). Yet the commitment and contributions of rural women to rural life have rarely been acknowledged, and the significance of their contributions to and value received from rural recreation is largely unknown.

Sport and recreation are well recognized as fostering social capital, health, and community development (Harvey, Levesque, & Donnelly, 2007; Seippel, 2006), yet their significance in rural contexts is much less studied. Although the oldest curling club in Canada was established in an urban setting (Montreal in 1807; Morrow & Wamsley, 2013a), curling has become central to many rural communities in Canada (Russell, 2003). Indeed, more than 60% of Canada's curling clubs are located in communities with fewer than 10,000 people (Canadian Curling Association [CCA], 2004). For example, in Saskatchewan, a largely rural province, curling was named its official sport in 2001, although many people have thought it so for years (Tourism Saskatchewan, n.d.). Tourism Saskatchewan (n.d.) proudly notes the achievement of both men and women in that "The fabled Richardson brothers...won four Canadian and World men's championships between 1959-63" and that "another extraordinary rink..., the Sandra Schmirler team, won three Canadian and World women's championships in the '90s, followed by the first ever women's Olympic gold medal in curling at 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Japan" (p.1). It must be noted that many members of successful curling rinks were exposed to and honed their early curling skills in small town Canada (Russell, 2003).

Russell (2003) notes that curling is essential to small town life in its ability to "draw people into your community and give them opportunities, particularly in winter" (p. 295). In addition, curling helps people in rural communities to connect with others and, as a mayor of a small town noted: "It's unreal how many people come to see the curling....it keeps our [curling club] kitchen running...which helps support the ...economy. That's why we built it" (Russell, p. 295). Women are still largely expected to manage traditional gendered activities such as cooking, baking, and child-care in many rural settings (Leipert et al., 2012). In addition, rural communities are aging communities, with one in four seniors expected to live in a rural setting by 2021 (Health Canada, 2002), and rural depopulation, especially of younger residents, can have major implications for the nature and sustainability of rural recreation resources, activities, and communities. Exploring the roles and activities of women in curling clubs, and factors such as finances, time, aging, depopulation, and gendered expectations, that affect women's participation could help reveal the

nature and importance of their recreation work for themselves and for the community. The research reported in this paper builds on and is an expansion of research reported elsewhere (Leipert et al., 2011).

3.0 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to: (1) examine the influence of curling and curling clubs on the social lives and health of rural women and girls using photovoice methodology and methods; (2) understand curling activities and meanings for women across selected rural communities in Canada; and (3) determine how sport and recreation are to be understood within the broader contexts of gender and community change in rural areas.

4.0 Design and Method

Social capital theory (Health Canada, 2006; Lauder, Reel, Farmer, & Griggs, 2006) and feminist approaches (Olesen, 2000) informed the theoretical foundations of the study. These foundational perspectives helped conceptualize social capital, a determinant of health (Health Canada, 2006) that is particularly relevant to rural settings where familiarity among community members is prevalent, and gendered approaches regarding the nature and role of rural women's involvement in rural community life is prevalent (Leipert et al., 2012). For example, social capital theory facilitated understanding regarding the nature of support, self-esteem, belonging, and other social relationships in rural recreation and community settings (Baum, 1999; Lomas, 1998; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Feminist approaches highlighted the role of power and control in personal and collective economic, health, and community contexts (Olesen, 2000; Ward-Griffin & Ploeg, 1997).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Western University, the University of Manitoba, and Dalhousie University. The photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997) formed the basis of the design and method of this research. In the photovoice method, study participants take photos and record perspectives in log books; this occurred in this study over the course of two weeks. The photos and log books are then retrieved, the photos processed, and an audio-recorded group interview conducted. During this interview, the photos are returned to each participant and discussion ensues. In this study, each participant was asked to select and title two pictures that represented the role and significance of curling and curling clubs for rural women's health and social life. These photos were then discussed as a group. The group interviews were each about two hours in length and occurred in curling rinks in the participants' communities. A total of 915 photos were provided by study participants in the study. Participants also completed a brief socio-demographic survey. Researchers gained additional understanding of socio-cultural, recreational, and community contexts by observing in rural curling rinks and engaging in conversations about physical and socio-cultural aspects of the rink, such as how the rink is used by women, men, children, and the community, and the effects of use on individual and community life. For additional details regarding the design and method of the research, see Leipert et al., 2011.

4.1 Setting

Women were recruited from rural curling clubs in two communities in each of Ontario, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia. The communities had populations ranging from just under 800 to just over 4,000 residents, with the average population being

approximately 2,300 people. Each community was at least a 40 minute commute over isolated rural roads to the nearest urban center; four of the six communities were over an hour from the nearest city. Rural in this study is defined as populations living outside the commuting zone of areas with more than 10,000 residents (du Plessis, Beshiri, & Bollman, 2002).

4.2 Sample

Forty-five women and three youths, ranging in age from 12 to 75 years with an average age range of 50-60 years participated in the study. Inclusion criteria were that participants were present or past female members of rural curling clubs. Curling experience ranged from one to 16 or more years with most participants having several years of curling experience.

5.0 Findings

Four main findings were revealed in this study: (1) building social connections, (2) facilitating women's health and resilience, (3) strengthening rural community life, and (4) the past, present, and future of curling. Pseudonyms are used in place of participant's names.

5.1 Building Social Connections

To the participants in this study, building social connections was undoubtedly the most important aspect of curling in their lives (see Figure 1). Factors such as winter weather, distance, challenging road conditions, and limited recreational resources often combined to make rural curling rinks key local hubs for connecting and interacting. Study participants often spoke of curling team members as 'curling family' and everyone appreciated being accepted at the rink, whether as an active curler or as a spectator. Participants noted that curling facilitates social connections with women and men of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and curling experience, thereby fostering a sense of family, inclusion, and community. Sharon, a Nova Scotia curler, aptly described these curling social and community connections: "All ages, all walks of life, always there for one another."

Study participants noted the importance of the "camaraderie" of curling as they built friendships and enjoyed fellowship with women, men, and children. This happened through teamwork both on and off the ice, mentorship, and importantly, the general welcoming environment in the clubs. Curling was described as inclusive - interprofessionally, intergenerationally, and of people of diverse ability. Ann from Nova Scotia commented, "I'm a waitress and I can come here and sit at the same table with the doctors and the lawyers and it doesn't matter." Thus, curling seemed to be a great leveler of ages, classes, and incomes, where everyone was included and curled together.

Participants valued the fact that working moms, women without children, retirees, mentally and physically challenged individuals, and those who were new to the area were all welcome at the rink. Participants in Nova Scotia expressed pride in club members who were residents of a facility for individuals who are mentally challenged or disabled, "They're part of the community, they're not off by themselves" (Barb). As Elma from Manitoba commented, regarding curling involvement, "... And then you become just, you know, like just part of that community." Thus curling helped everyone feel valued and included, which is

especially important in rural communities where populations are small and declining and where experience and ability in sport are varied.

Figure 1: Photo from Manitoba.



Participants viewed curling as a catalyst for strengthening healthy relationships. Participants from all three provinces often referred to curling teammates as ‘curling family’ and some stated that the rink was like a ‘second home’ due to the welcoming atmosphere and care felt there. The women also appreciated the opportunities curling afforded for them to enjoy an activity with their spouses, which was especially important when they worked in different or distant locations and had limited time with each other. A Manitoba participant noted, “When I first started curling...I quickly went to mixed where my husband [and I] could participate... as a couple.”

Relationships amongst women curlers were also identified as a ‘sisterhood’ and highly cherished. Elaine from Manitoba explained that the women at her club formed a “...sisterhood... for me that’s really important...they understand me...I mean, my husband understands me but not this way. This is... really special to have fun with other women.” These relationships truly demonstrated participants’ valuing of female friendships within the club. In Ontario, Mary described curling as “a great bonding [opportunity] for women ... one of the rare times rural women socialize with other adults on a personal level, especially if they have small children at home.”

Building social relationships in curling was also closely associated with mentorship, as Sharon, a Nova Scotia curler explained, “[A member] taught me about the game...made me feel a part of the team...I wrote ‘coaching new players’ [in my log book] and photographed it as I enjoy helping new players learn and feel a sense of belonging, like I did.” The supportive, welcoming, and non-judgemental aspects of curling were clearly key to the development of social relationships for study participants.

Participants emphasized how curling provided opportunities for women to have a feeling of belonging in the club and the broader community. Sheila from Nova

Scotia commented, “We’re getting involved [through curling] in the community and it feels really good.” Curling brought the larger community together and the women felt supported by their community, both inside and outside the curling rink, as explained by Heather and Elma in Manitoba, “The community really supports us. I mean how many tickets did we sell [to our supper] last year? About 400 tickets”, and “...the sense of community that you feel in this curling club and also [curling] really encourages everyone to participate and take part in the community.” All the participants noted that they were committed to their team mates, and spoke about how this helped them to remain engaged in curling, and thus socially connected, when external factors, such as winter weather and fatigue, threatened to derail them. Several participants commented that curling gave them increased confidence as they developed new skills and expanded their social network. In addition, with reference to her photograph called the “Curling Road” (see Figure 2), Dorothy, who was in her 60s and had never been involved in sports, explained how curling changed her life with meeting new friends and gaining confidence, “That road means a lot to me....It’s led me to something I had never even dreamed....It’s brought me...a lot of new people, new friends, a little bit of confidence.... A new world altogether.”

In summary, the participants valued the opportunities at the curling rink for building social interactions which resulted in diverse friendships and personal strengths.

Figure 2: Photo from Nova Scotia.



5.2 Facilitating Women’s Health and Resiliency

Participants described curling as a sport that had a significant influence on their social, physical, and mental health, provided fun and enjoyment, and was important to their overall sense of wellbeing. Suzanne, a Manitoba participant, commented, “...curling is more than the sport, it is the socializing...connecting. I enjoy the non-curling, non-exercise part just as much as I enjoy the stuff on the ice”, and Carol, a Nova Scotia curler and widow in her late 50s, explained, “A lot of it is the social

part, because I am totally by myself, and it is one of the few places you can go... and have a really good time, and not have to worry about being with anybody..."

Middle-aged and older women, who comprised the majority of the study participants, remarked that the enhancement of physical health was seen as a definitely positive consequence of curling. Dorothy, a senior Nova Scotia curler, noted, "My doctor always says when he takes my blood pressure...that everybody should be curling because your blood pressure is fantastic." Additionally, Jane, a Nova Scotia curler commented, "...the physical benefits...at the beginning of the season, my legs hurt until you get back into the groove of things. Sweeping is hard at times too. Balance, it's all about balance."

Many women explained that a big advantage to curling is that one could curl at any age or ability level and intergenerationally (i.e., with children, grandchildren, etc.) to become and remain physically active (see Figure 3). Manitoba curlers noted, "...curling is unique over other sports...to have that opportunity where you [can] have three generations...all on one team ..." (Heather); "There's a certain age where you can't do a lot of the other things but you can still curl..." (Gerta), and "...they're using the stick which...even when you get to be a bit disabled, you can still participate....get out and socialize and get exercise. So...curling gives an advantage that a lot of other sports don't" (Ruth).

Figure 3: Photo from Ontario.



Stick curling and a desire to 'play through the pain' were described by some women as motivators and supports to stay physically healthy and resilient, especially with age and disability effects. Grace, an elderly curler who had been curling for three years, continued to curl despite injuries on the ice (and elsewhere) because she recognized the vital contribution of curling to her physical health.

The physical activity that participants were able to engage in through curling in their rural communities, which generally have few recreational resources, during the long, cold winters, was highly valued. Suzanne, a participant in Manitoba, explained, "I

think [in] a small town, especially with a long winter, it's really important to have something like this [curling]. Keeps us busy and active." The participants also recognized that although curling requires and facilitates some level of fitness, everyone was welcome regardless of their fitness level.

Curling helped participants to unwind from everyday stresses of life. Participants commented, "I have a very stressful job so curling is my release" (Jane), and "It clears your mind about everything else...I think it transcends you... [to] feel emotionally centred" (Sheila). For several participants curling provided one of the few opportunities for female friendship and personal time. As Jane noted,

[The curling rink is] a big stress reliever ... we can just get away and deal with our issues in a fun way... to have female time... When I joined, it was mainly to get out of the house. My night out...away from family responsibilities and the job and to really just have fun and...time for myself.

Aline commented that, "Curling also helped participants keep mentally agile and alert, it keeps you sharp too because it is like a chess game, so you're always thinking ahead and...planning what your next step is going to be" (Aline), and "It's the...mental aspect of being able to see...3 or 4 moves ahead...you're not just thinking about the shot that's about to happen" (Elaine).

Curling also enhanced participants' mental health by fostering positive life perspectives and enriched activity during the frigid dark days of winter. To illustrate, two Nova Scotia curlers commented, "It makes me get out in the wintertime. In the evenings, I would sit and be a couch potato otherwise throughout the winter months during the evenings" (Mary), and, "Since the curling rink opened in 2008 it has helped everyone, young and old, to live through winter easier" (Barb). Participants in Ontario had similar views. Grace, a senior curler, noted that "[curling] gives you something to look forward to and as you get older you have less and less of those things."

Several participants in Manitoba noted that curling contributed to their personal growth and confidence, "Personal growth, which I never thought that's something I could get [from] curling, but I did get" (Heather), and Marie noted that,

I was never a leader before...I would stand back and watch and I never wanted to step up...But once you do, it builds your [confidence] I can do this...And then maybe I can do something else... And that's what really helped me...

Curling also provided a venue for the development and expression of women's creative talents and leadership skills especially during the planning and implementation of bonspiels, curling dinners, and other social events. In addition, a sense of appreciation of personal and others' new or developing talents clearly fostered continuing personal growth.

Curling was viewed as a catalyst for many of the women to take on additional sport and recreational activities at other times of the year. Ann, a senior curler from Nova Scotia, commented, "I have curled now for many years and have made many friends that I [now] spend time with doing other things as well, like kayaking, hiking, skiing, and so on." Gerta from Manitoba stated, "Well for myself, now that curling is done for the year, I have to come up with another sport to keep me active..."

In summary, the voices of the women who participated in this study are testimony to how the game of curling and curling clubs significantly enhanced their health and resiliency, with reference to their social, physical, and mental and emotional health. Their comments reveal that curling provides impetus to be active and involved in rural settings that have few opportunities for interaction and involvement, and curling can be a facilitator for building women's and young girls' confidence and leadership skills.

5.3 Strengthening Rural Community Life

The game of curling and the curling clubs were clearly identified across the three provinces as making significant contributions to strengthening rural community life. Curling provided a much needed social and sport outlet in rural communities where there were few winter sport and recreational activities to engage in, particularly for women. Rural communities tend to be patriarchal (Leipert et al., 2012), and sports such as hockey that predominate in many small communities favor boys' and men's, rather than girls' and women's, participation. A common thread through the women's pictures and narratives was how curling provided the women opportunities to meet people and develop a sense of connection to the community. For example, Mary, a Nova Scotia curler, noted, "Each year when the season starts you can feel the joy in the rink when we are reunited with people we have rarely seen during the summer months, and hopefully... a few new members to add to our group."

Volunteerism was valued by the women as foundational to building connectedness for club viability and as an important way of contributing to and profiling their communities. In general, volunteers assumed significant responsibilities: planning and implementing curling events, taking turns at the bar, cooking, and cleaning. Barb pointed out that there is no shortage of volunteers at their Nova Scotia club; often the same people volunteer so frequently that they have to be asked to give others a chance to volunteer so they won't feel left out. To quote Leslie, a Manitoba curler, "...part of the curling club that really keeps it going and thriving is the volunteerism." Through their substantial volunteering, the women helped to sustain curling as a viable resource for community members and for visiting curlers and, as such, as the place to be, i.e., to put their community 'on the map'.

In addition, participants' many talents and skills were committed to formal club positions, weekly league curling events, Little Rocks (children's) program, informal events such as bonspiels, and in managing the day- to-day life of the curling rink. Participants' extensive involvement in not only curling but other community organizations and events required significant commitments of time, energy, and sometimes personal funds. Such volunteer involvement, although necessary in small and depopulating rural communities, often lead to fatigue and burn out. Some participants also noted that the associated expectation for volunteering that accompanied curling club membership was a discouragement for some community members to curl, and thus negatively affected growth and sustainability of the club. Nevertheless, participants valued maintaining the curling rink in their community and so continued to volunteer in spite of fatigue and burn out.

The significance of curling to small rural communities was especially exemplified by participants from clubs in Nova Scotia and Manitoba that had burnt down and were rapidly rebuilt. Although these were devastating losses, club members and the community rallied together to rebuild both clubs within one year. The clubs were not only rebuilt for utility for curling, they were also enthusiastically decorated, for

example, the club in Nova Scotia now includes a stained glass window celebrating curling. In her log book, Sharon wrote beside the picture of the stained glass window, "Giving of time, skills, talents, sharing, and mentoring". By the Nova Scotia fire, the curling rocks were destroyed and were a great cost to replace. Members of the club and the community sponsored new rocks by purchasing them and dedicating them to members past and present, and in so doing replaced all the rocks. This extensive rebuilding deepened the sense of community, and represented the tremendous commitment of volunteers, sense of ownership members felt for their club, and a revitalized sense of curling community. The importance of curling to these and other surrounding small communities is clearly and poignantly expressed in the following comments. Glynnis, a Manitoba participant, noted, "... [after our] curling club...had burned...I don't think we missed a season. ... The neighbouring community took in our league where we could curl while [we] built a new one." Nova Scotia participants described what the opening of the rebuilt club with a hundred year history (1908-2008) meant to the community, "It's beautiful. People were so happy and excited. There was energy in the club, on the ice, in the community" (Jane), and, "This [rebuilding], to me, illustrates the love we have for the game, the desire to remember those who also loved the game, and the continuity of the sport within the community" (Sharon).

All participants explained that the curling clubs clearly represent a special gathering place, a community centre or hub that goes beyond curling to reach into the broader community (see Figure 4). To quote Nova Scotia participants, "The curling club has become a hub and the centre of winter" (Donna); "In the morning (7 am) coffee is always on seven days a week. It's a great gathering [place]." (Barb); and "...you have curlers ...people playing cards... people just come to watch the game, and...people working in the kitchen...there's a lot of things going on at once." (Ann).

The curling club was identified by many participants as the best place to be for them as women, if they are looking for fun or a friendly face. Michelle, a Manitoba participant who was new to the community, explained, "Because I was new in the community, it was a way for me to meet people here because I didn't have children in school any more.... curling helped a lot". Heather, a retired Manitoba curler, stated, "We lived in Winnipeg. But I knew we were moving [here] in 3 years. And I wanted to get to know people on my own, not just always be somebody's wife. And so I actually traveled from Winnipeg for 3 years, just to curl."

Curling was also important in creating and sustaining rural identity and being part of a larger community. Participants felt supported by their community, both inside and outside the curling rink. Elma, a Manitoba curler, stated, "...the sense of community that you feel in this curling club and also [curling] really encourages everyone to participate and take part in the community." In addition, curling was described as a vehicle to connect rural curlers to the larger world, as they enjoyed watching provincial, national, and international games on television or having the opportunity to host a provincial or national curling event.

In summary, the women were very committed to their communities and to curling. Rural curling clubs represent a special gathering place, a hub of rural camaraderie and identity for all ages and abilities that open up new and exciting possibilities for women curlers and their rural communities.

Figure 4: Photo from Nova Scotia.



5.4 The Past, Present, and Future of Curling

The past, present, and future of curling in rural communities were all noted as important in the three provinces in this study. Dawn explained her picture of a photograph on the wall of the club in her log book, “Picture of Nova Scotia Ladies Curling Champions 1945-1950—Notice the skirts and corn brooms. I look at this picture and feel proud to be a lady curler.” A book written by one of the Nova Scotia women curlers on the history of the club reminded them of the rich heritage of curling in their community and was a source of inspiration to keep up women’s curling, as Dawn noted,

The Book...gives us the history of the curling club, a hundred years 1908-2008. It tells of the struggles and determination of the women before and here with us, who love the game, and work hard to make it available to us.

Study participants recognized the importance of human resources that had sustained curling over the years and that were essential to its continued viability. Of particular importance was the club president who was highly valued for her accessibility and helpfulness, “This is our president...she’s important...because...if it wouldn’t be for somebody like her or others, we probably wouldn’t have a club” (Madeline).

Past curling events held at the clubs and club facilities instilled and reflected pride about the curling facilities, rural abilities, and rural communities. Participants noted, “[Comments about the national Scotties Tournament of Hearts held here] were always very positive”; “We’ve had a lot of compliments on this facility. Anybody who’s come in here for the first time has been very impressed”; and “...you have a lot of pride in it and it’s a great facility”.

The history of being involved in large successful events in small, even tiny, rural communities helped participants to recognize and feel proud of their abilities and communities. Histories and stories of successful local curling events seemed to help

participants believe not only in the sustainability of curling—that it could survive, but also, by extension, the sustainability and survivability, of rural communities, as Dawn from Nova Scotia indicated, “[our curling history book]...gives us hope for the future”. These comments of pride and hope indicate participants’ awareness not only of the vulnerability of their clubs and communities, but also of their valuing of their successes, and of the interconnectedness between curling and community.

Participants noted that the future viability of rural curling depends upon several social, community, and economic factors. Donna in Nova Scotia commented that elementary students who curl at the club are our “next generation of women on ice” (see Figure 5). Amelia, a youth curler, described her involvement in curling as a health promoting activity “I curl for the social aspect and also for my exercise. And just cuz I find it fun and interesting. Meeting new people and travelling.” Accordingly, two participants offered Sunday morning Little Rock curling lessons and Friday night curling to facilitate youth curling. However, formal coaching and mentoring of girl curlers was noted by Ontario participants to be limited in quantity and quality. The girls noted that their current school coach does not have any formal coaching qualifications, nor is she an active curler although she has curled in the past. One girl stated, “When Miss X left as coach, we needed a representative from the school and at that point [our current coach] was the only one who curled ... [but] she didn’t have a lot of experience.”

Figure 5: Photo from Manitoba.



To foster a viable curling club, participants recommended ways to alleviate membership and financial issues, including maintaining day as well as evening curling opportunities, and seeking other sources of revenue such as from local businesses or increased membership fees. However, participants noted that the latter source of funds, although beneficial, might also serve to exclude those of lower income, such as rural seniors, a growing population in rural communities (CIHI, 2006). Teresa, a member of an Ontario club’s executive, noted that a fee increase, while helpful, might result in the loss of members who can’t afford the new fee. Thus, curling in rural communities,

although highly prized, is experiencing financial and social challenges over which rural clubs have little control and for which they have few resources to cope.

Sponsorship, sustainability, and recruitment were identified as critical for the survival and future advancement of the rural curling club. New members, if they could be found in depopulating rural communities, enhanced revenues and interest in the club, and sponsorships added to the club's sustainability. Comments and suggestions by Manitoba participants revealed the significant effort that was and is needed to ensure curling viability, "It got so much community involvement...and a lot of private sponsorship to make it [the] facility that it is now"; "...Two of us...phone every year...And we keep phoning and phoning and encouraging... And asking...Do you have a friend that would like to curl?"; "[Reaching newcomers]...Advertise in [newspaper] ...free clinics for learners"; "...more learn-to-curl programs ... let people know that we're welcoming new people..." Clearly much effort is needed to maintain the highly valued and significant sport of curling in small communities. However, it was clear from our interviews with participants that this effort may be reaching its local limit, and that additional financial and other support from outside the community, such as through local, provincial, and national media, are needed if curling is to remain viable in rural Canada. Yet, curling provided hope, goals, and ways to connect locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally, important for isolated rural communities with few opportunities and role models, especially for girls and women.

In summary, this study revealed that curling is vitally important to the health of women and the health of their rural communities. However, the sustainability and future of curling in isolated settings with low populations are precarious. Enriched support is required if this important physical and social activity, and thus the health of rural people and communities, is to be sustained and advanced.

6.0 Discussion

Participants in this study highly valued their involvement in curling and the curling clubs in their communities. A clear manifestation of this valuing of curling was revealed when the Manitoba and Nova Scotia participants described in some detail the rapid rebuilding of the two curling rinks that had burned in their communities. Although the destruction of these curling clubs by fire was devastating, participants noted the renewed sense of community connection and health that came out of the rebuilding the clubs. Thus, participants' comments and perspectives indicated that the past, present, and anticipated future of curling, the social capital inherent in its structures and its people, are significant, personally and community-wide, and consequently that the sustainability of curling in rural communities is very important.

However, participants revealed that various factors affect the sustainability of curling in rural communities. Because of declining rural populations, particularly in more remote locations (CIHI, 2006), sustaining sufficient numbers of club members to finance and manage the club as well as provide satisfactory numbers of curlers for games can be problematic. This is especially concerning, as the more remote the rural community, the more limited are resources, such as numbers of residents/curlers and availability of recreational resources, yet the more essential is the sustainability of these limited community resources, such as curling clubs. In addition, although rural communities are aging communities, with residents who may have the time and interest to curl, the more limited financial resources of many seniors, especially older women (Keating, 2008), may preclude their ability to participate. Furthermore, fewer youth in rural settings and limited coaching for girls,

as the youth in this study noted, compromise the development of the present and the future of curling and its inherent health and social effects. These changing rural demographics have implications for the support, belonging, and social relationships that exist, are needed, or potentially can be provided (Lomas, 1998) in and by small rural communities and their organizations, such as curling clubs. This may be particularly pertinent to girls, women who are older, and for those with more limited funds, as these groups may have less power and ability to address needs locally or at more distant locations (Leipert, 2005; Leipert & George, 2008; Ward-Griffin, & Ploeg, 1997).

However, in spite of challenges, the health and community benefits from curling are clearly significant. Social connections are developed and sustained among newcomers and old-timers in the community alike, as everyone is welcomed to the sport. Many aspects of women's physical, mental, and social health are fostered, which is important during the long cold winter months in Canada and in rural settings that often have few, if any, health-related resources. Rural community life is strengthened, as a deepened sense of commitment to each other and to the community often resulted from involvement in curling. Curling also helped to sustain and give pride and identity to rural communities, as participants reflected on the history of the people and accomplishments associated with the club, past, present, and future. Photos in the clubs of members and curling successes, sponsoring of curling bonspiels, and the commitment of participants to offering curling lessons and mentorship to others clearly highlighted the pride and community instilled by curling in small town Canada.

Curling may have particular resonance for rural women and girls. As women are often the primary caregivers to families and friends in rural communities (Keating, 2008; Leipert et al., 2012; Morrow & Wamsley, 2013b), they must balance family and community responsibilities in order to be able to curl, or may not be able to curl for short periods. Indeed, some participants noted that they did not curl when their husbands were ill or if other family members and friends required care. These commitments to gender expectations and rural needs compromised women's ability to access and contribute to the social capital available in curling situations. Nonetheless, women in the study still returned to or made time for curling in their lives as their commitments allowed. Senior women, due to their longevity, often comprise the majority of the population in rural communities (Keating, 2008). Senior women are thus often single women and may, together with retirees and others, be newcomers to the community; the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere of the curling sport and rink is particularly appreciated by them, as several participants noted. Volunteering was expected at most of the small curling clubs included in the study and sometimes this could be substantial. Still, women in the study appreciated that they could contribute and be respected in enhancing the sustainability and occasional notoriety of their club and community through their volunteer activities. Women's contributions at the club, such as during the planning and implementing of bonspiels, were visible and valued, characteristics that are not often attributed to rural women's activities which are usually taken for granted rather than specifically acknowledged (Leipert, 2005; Leipert et al.; Olesen, 2000). Interestingly, women's curling contributions in the study did not extend to the role of ice maker, a key role in curling; this was reserved for men.

For rural girl participants, curling helped them develop friends, have fun, and renew or initiate community supports, often referred to as their "curling family". Curling provided girls with female role models of dedication, achievement, and success,

important in small rural communities where such female role models may not exist or be readily available or acknowledged. As a result, curling may assist rural girls to think of and plan for achievement and success in their own futures, with support and encouragement from others they have met when curling.

Thus, this study revealed that curling, with its welcoming atmosphere, inclusion of all, and valuing of the local community, is a vital community and health resource in many rural communities in Canada. However, many rural clubs are struggling to survive, along with their rural communities. Although dedicated and resilient in addressing rural issues, still many small communities are at risk of losing their valued and valuable curling sport. Support from external agencies such as Sport Canada, the Canadian Curling Association, and other sport and government agencies is needed if curling, and its positive effects on rural health and community, are to survive and thrive. Additional rural resources, such as improved access to local health care especially for seniors, more support for women caregivers, and coaching for rural girls will also assist rural women and girls to be more engaged with sport and enjoy consequent enhanced health.

Future research can help strengthen and sustain this key rural curling resource. Further knowledge about the effects of and ways to address economic, social, and community factors to preserve the viability of curling in rural communities would assist understanding about ways to support curling locally, provincially, and nationally. Research questions might include: What does the existence or the demise of the rural curling club mean to rural communities? What resources at the local, provincial, and national levels could help support curling clubs in small communities? How could measures such as enhanced coaching be developed to support curling for rural girls? In addition, future research that explores the significance of curling in diverse rural settings (agricultural, forestry, mining, fishing) and more remote locations, with other cultures (Aboriginal, immigrant) and subgroups (seniors, children, teens, men, boys) may help to reveal the significance and sustainability of curling and its important contributions to the health and communities in which diverse rural people dwell.

6.0 Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the study is its exploration of curling for its effects on the health of rural women and girls and on rural community life, both of which are understudied topics with many health, economic, and social challenges. A limitation of the study is that the research represents a small sample of women and girls in three Canadian provinces. Clearly, more research is needed in rural settings throughout the country and in other curling countries to determine health effects of and supports for curling for rural people and communities elsewhere. In particular, understanding the effects of curling in advancing rural community life and the process of sports such as curling in supporting the health of rural women, men, and children, could help rural communities address challenges and utilize facilitators of curling to their best effect for community health and development.

7.0 Conclusion

This is the first study in Canada to examine the intersection of sport, health, and rural communities from the perspectives of rural women and girls. Curling was revealed as a vital resource for rural women, youth, and rural communities. For the women and girls, curling was viewed as important, if not more so, than hockey,

which is often given primary importance for boys and men in small town Canada. Thus curling was regarded as a vital way that rural women and girls could also access physical and social activity, as well as community involvement and acknowledgement. As such, the study presents significant new data that address vital and long neglected rural gender, social, and sport issues. Additional research will expand in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of these concepts and their significance for rural women's and girl's health, and rural community health and development.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the rural women and girls who participated so enthusiastically in this study, and the research assistants Robyn Plunkett, Melanie Moore, and Hazel Ann Rona for their dedicated support in the conduct of this national study. We also thank SSHRC and Sport Canada for funding this research.

References

- Baum, F. (1999, March). Social capital and health: Implications for health in rural Australia. Keynote presentation to the National Rural Health Alliance, 5th National Rural Health Conference, Adelaide, Australia.
- Canadian Curling Association [CCA]. (2004). *Survey of Canadian curling facilities*. Retrieved July 28, 2010, from <http://www.curling.ca/start-curling/profile-of-the-canadian-curler>
- Canadian Institute for Health Information [CIHI] (2006). *How healthy are rural Canadians? An assessment of their health status and health determinants*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: CIHI.
- du Plessis, V., Beshiri, R., & Bollman, R. (2002). Definitions of rural. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, 3(3), 1-16.
- Harvey, J., Levesque, M., & Donnelly, P. (2007). Sport volunteerism and social capital. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 24(2), 206-223.
- Health Canada. (2006). Social capital and health: Maximizing the benefits. *Health Policy Research*, 12 (September). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Health Canada.
- Health Canada. (2002). *Canada's aging population*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- Keating, N. (Ed.). (2008). *Rural ageing: A good place to grow old?* Bristol, United Kingdom: The Policy Press.
- Kubik, W., & Moore, R. (2003). Changing roles of Saskatchewan farm women: Qualitative and quantitative perspectives. In R. Blake & A. Nurse (Eds.), *The trajectories of rural life: New perspectives on rural Canada* (pp. 25-36). Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy.
- Lauder, W., Reel, S., Farmer, J., Griggs, H. (2006). Social capital, rural nursing and rural nursing theory. *Nursing Inquiry*, 13(1), 73-79.
- Leipert, B. (2005). Rural women's health in Canada: An overview and implications for policy and research. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 24(4), 109-116.

- Leipert, B., & George, J. (2008). Determinants of rural women's health: A qualitative study in southwest Ontario. *The Journal of Rural Health, 24*(2), 210-218.
- Leipert, B., Leach, B., & Thurston, W. (Eds.). (2012). *Rural women's health*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Leipert, B., Plunkett, R., Meagher-Stewart, D., Scruby, L., Mair, H., & Wamsley, K. (2011). I couldn't imagine my life without it! Curling and health promotion: A photovoice study. *The Canadian Journal of Nursing Research, 43*(1), 60-78.
- Lomas, J. (1998). Social capital and health: Implications for public health and epidemiology. *Social Science and Medicine, 47*(9), 1181-1188.
- Mair, H. (2009). Club life: Third place and shared leisure in rural Canada. *Leisure Sciences, 31*(5), 450-465.
- Mair, H. (2007). Curling in Canada: From gathering place to international spectacle. *International Journal of Canadian Studies, 35*, 39-60.
- Morrow, D., & Wamsley, K. (2013a). *Sport in Canada: A history*. Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.
- Morrow, D., & Wamsley, K. (2013b). Gender, body, and sport. In D. Morrow & K. Wamsley (Eds.), *Sport in Canada: A history* (pp. 179-206). Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.
- Olesen, V. (2000). Feminisms and qualitative research at and into the millennium. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.) (pp. 215-255). London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Russell, S. (2003). *Open house: Canada and the magic of curling*. Ottawa; Ontario, Canada: Doubleday Canada.
- Seippel, Ø. (2006). Sport and social capital. *ACTA Sociologica, 49*(2), 169-183.
- Skinner, M., Hanlon, N., & Halseth, G. (2012). Health and social care issues in aging resource communities. In J. Kulig & A. Williams (Eds.), *Health in rural Canada* (pp. 462-480). Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: UBC Press.
- Tourism Saskatchewan (n.d.). Provincial sport. Retrieved from <http://www.tourismsaskatchewan.com/about-saskatchewan/quick-facts/provincial-sport>
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior, 24*, 369-387.
- Ward-Griffin, C., & Ploeg, J. (1997). A feminist approach to health promotion for older women. *Canadian Journal on Aging, 16* (2), 279-296.
- Woolcock, M. & Narayan, D. (2000). Social capital: Implications for development theory, research and policy. *World Bank Observer, 15*, 225-49.