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An exploratory study of group exercise participants: Factors contributing to retention in a medical non- profit fitness setting

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An Exploratory Study of Group Exercise Participants:
Factors Contributing to Retention in a Medical Non-Profit Fitness Setting

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to all the group fitness, specialty and aqua instructors at Augusta Health Lifetime Fitness Center. You are the finest people I know. You are not only my employees, but you are my friends. I love each and every one of you. Also to the members that make my job so enjoyable each day. I love your willingness to work hard. Thank you for making the past 11 years so memorable for me.

I would also like to dedicate this to my family. Cole, my husband: You always support me no matter how crazy you think my adventure may be. I love you for that. Nathan, my oldest son: You are always willing to help me through anything. I am your mom, but many times you are much more level headed than I am. I have immensely enjoyed your input into my life. Ryan, my youngest son: You have shown me what true strength means the last couple of months. I admire and respect you with all my heart. I hope that if I am ever faced with the magnitude of challenges you've seen that I will be as brave as you are. All three of the men in my life are my true inspiration. Mom, thank you for cleaning for me, walking the dog and cooking during the past two years of my graduate school adventure. I love and appreciate you more than you will ever know.

Acknowledgement

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Lastly, I thank God, through Jesus Christ. Without faith in a personal savior, I would not have the strength to try such a task.

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Abstract

An exploratory study of group exercise participants was conducted to link group cohesion theory and perceived effects of social support to the retention of fitness club membership through building relationships. The study explored the level of group cohesion and social support experienced by participants in public group fitness exercise classes. In addition, participant loyalty was reviewed to understand membership retention based on group participation.

A literature review was conducted to study previous research of group cohesive factors, social support and the role group exercise classes play in adherence to programs. Literature was also reviewed to understand effective membership retention efforts deemed successful by public, private and non-profit fitness centers.

A case study was conducted at a medical non-profit fitness center. Data was collected to explore participants' beliefs about their specific exercise class experiences. Participants had an opportunity to describe whether or not group activity is a retention factor in membership retention. Six group exercise participants were interviewed and asked about factors that affect participation in particular classes. Interviews were administered to six facility members from six specific classes. Six group fitness instructors from those specific classes interviewed were asked to journal their perception of the group interactions amongst each other as well as with the instructor. The results were used to aid in the retention efforts of the host facility and to train the group fitness instructors on the factors that influence their participants both positively and negatively.

Keywords: retention, group cohesion, social support, group, leadership qualities

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Membership retention is a main concern for all fitness centers whether the center claims private, profit, non-profit or commercial status. According to Dhurup and Surujlal (2010), targeting, acquiring and retaining the right members are at the core of many successful service organizations. Retaining customers is one of the most critical variables that affect “lifetime profit”. Members with unmet needs are not likely to stay at a facility where they are not relationally involved (Dhurup & Surujlal). According to Annesi (1996), a total of 50% of individuals entering into a regular exercise regimen will not remain through six months. The membership office at the host facility where the research study was conducted tracks reasons for membership cancellations. Some of the reasons include: relocation, job change, death, and low usage. Low usage accounts for forty-four percent of all cancellations according to the membership records at the host facility (CSI Reports, November 1, 2010- October 31, 2011). Since the members sign a one year contract, cancelling because of low usage could indicate the members perceive the price paid for their membership is not worth the benefits they receive from their membership (Kulp, personal communication, October 12, 2010).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study of group exercise participants was to examine the factors impacting retention in group fitness programs and the facility as a whole for a medical non-profit fitness center. Group cohesion theory was used as the framework of inquiry to understand how group fitness participants perceive group fitness class experiences and the relationships created with the instructor and other class participants.

The study explored the level of group cohesion and social support perceived by the participants enrolled in group exercise classes to determine the importance of relationships according to the participants themselves and how those relationships or lack thereof affect their retention of membership to that particular program and the facility as a whole.

Group cohesion is a variable that aids in membership retention through building lasting relationships (Dhurup & Surujlal, 2010). Cohesiveness in the group setting is positively linked to adherence in a program namely fitness classes (Spink & Carron, 1992). According to Spink and Carron (1992), group exercise programs appear to produce higher exercise maintenance than those individuals who exercise independently. Spink and Carron (1992) also state that attendance in the group setting is higher than individual programs. Their research found that group participants collectively perceive that a bond of cohesiveness has formed, therefore the participants view themselves as an integral part of the group as a whole. According to Annesi (1996) and Spink & Carron (1992), 90% of exercisers would rather exercise in a group setting than exercise alone.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to illustrate the potential impact that group fitness participation has on a non-profit medical fitness centers retention efforts. Research by Spink and Carron (1992) indicated that if a member feels a sense of belonging they are more likely to continue coming to a program. Fitness professionals can use the results of this study to capture the actual feelings and perceptions of the group exercise participants as they reveal important factors that influence their continued membership and class participation as well as the leadership qualities that aid or hinder their participation. By

using the data revealed by the participants in this study, group fitness managers have a tool to aid in training instructors on desirable factors that participants feel are important to experience in the group exercise class.

Factors may emerge from participant statements that cause impact on a member's decision to retain their membership at a particular class or possibly the club as a whole. This study provided exploratory research to better understand the factors that could aid in the membership retention process. The findings give fitness center managers valuable information to help improve class and overall membership satisfaction. According to Burke, Carron and Shapcott (2008), teambuilding with group-based intervention is one of the most widely used methods of enhancing perception of cohesion whether it be in organizational teams, health care units, the military, sports teams or group exercise classes. Aiding members in finding a specific group that suits their individual physical, emotional and social needs should be a fitness centers number one priority. If a member feels connected to a specific group in the fitness center whether it is a small or large group, the participant is more likely to continue coming to the center for more than the physical benefit (Burke et al., 2008). Treadmills, free weights, and cross trainers do not converse with members, people do. With advancements in technology, there still has not been a viable replacement found for a kind, encouraging and positive interaction with a human. For example, interaction and socializing are still important to the human race. Positive social interaction with others alleviates and prevents social isolation in the elderly (Cattan, White, Bond & Learmouth, 2005). Negative interactions do not seem to help combat the feelings of loneliness and social isolation in the elderly along with no interaction or intervention (Cattan et al., 2005).

Two group factors generally regarded as important for individuals to adhere to physical exercise are group cohesion and social support (Christensen et al., 2006). In this explorative study, case studies provide support for the reasons group participants attend group exercise classes as well as the participants' feelings toward the instructors, other participants, the group as a whole and about themselves as they continue participation in that particular group.

According to the group fitness participatory records at the research host facility, 23% of all club visits enter a group fitness studio to engage in a class (Les Mills Club Count, retrieved December 31,2011). The same host center sees 44% of their facility cancellation rate is due to low usage (CSI reports, November 1, 2010- October 31, 2011). Comments on low usage are caused by many factors: lack of motivation, accountability, a new born baby in the house, new job, working overtime or caring for an elderly spouse. Low usage shows that the host center became a lesser priority in the canceling member's life. Some of the factors that cause low usage are out of the facility's control, however, helping someone feel welcome is well within the group exercise instructors' reach (CSI Reports, November 1, 2010 - October 31, 2011).

Limitations

Limitations to this exploratory study were as follows: one site research, limited number of group exercise classes participating, small sample size, and the data is not generalizable. Another limitation recognized is the researcher is an employee at the medical non-profit fitness center where the research was conducted. The interview process could be guided by the researcher if the questions are worded improperly or tends to lead the participants toward a particular answer. The interview process is dependent

upon how forthright the participants are in sharing their experiences with the researcher. The group dynamics vary from class to class and can be dependent on the leadership style of the instructor. Although limitations may be present, this research enabled fitness club managers to consider the importance of membership retention by listening to the member's needs and placing them in the proper class or program that allows them to have their physical, emotional and social needs met. Research states an average of 80% of most facility's funds are spent on attracting new members and only 20% on retaining members (Dhurup & Surujlal, 2010). Kulp (2011) confirms and managers agree that it cost a club less to retain one old member than to gain a new one (Dhurup & Surujlal). For the future success of fitness facilities, it is imperative to make every effort to retain members through group exercise class opportunities.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study specific definitions were given for the following terms: group cohesion, social support, group, membership retention and leadership qualities. The definitions are as follows:

- **Group Cohesion**

“A dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental and objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs (Christensen et al., 2006 p. 678).

- **Social Support**

Evidence toward a strong association (Christensen et al., 2006).

- Group
Social aggregates that involve mutual awareness and potential mutual interaction (Burke et al., 2005).
- Membership Retention
Sustained participation in fitness club membership (Mullen & Whaley, 2010).
- Leadership qualities
According to the interviewed group exercise participants desired leadership qualities include: motivation, knowledgeable and friendly (Participants #3, personal communication, December 2, 2011), knowledgeable and supportive (Participant #1, personal communication, November 28, 2011), safe, personable, knowledgeable and motivational (Participant #2, personal communication, November 29, 2011).

Research Goals

- To explore the nature of membership retention in the fitness club setting as it pertains to group fitness class participation.
- To explore the nature of group cohesion that takes place in a group exercise class and does it affect membership retention.
- To understand the nature of social support that takes place in a group fitness class and does it affect membership retention.
- To explore the importance the leader or instructor plays in the group exercise class arena and discover the leadership qualities that are desirable.
- To discover other factors that affect group exercise class participation and

membership retention through interview emergent themes.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the nature of membership retention, group cohesion, social support and desired leadership that members experienced during participation in group exercise classes. This study explained the significance of the experiences of members who participate in group exercise classes at a non-profit medical center fitness facility. The study focused on qualitative methods for better understanding the experiences of group exercise participants and group exercise instructors. The study aims to be an effective resource for non-profit fitness club managers.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study of group exercise participants was to examine the factors impacting retention in group exercise programs and the facility as a whole for a medical non-profit fitness center. Group Cohesion Theory was used as the framework of inquiry to understand how group fitness participants perceive group exercise class experiences and the relationships created with the instructor and other class participants. The study explored the level of group cohesion and social support perceived by the participants enrolled in group exercise classes to determine the importance of relationships according to the participants themselves and how those relationships or lack thereof affect their retention of membership to that particular program and the facility as a whole.

Group Cohesion

Group cohesion is a term used by sport psychologist that is essential to understand group processes that may stimulate desirable outcomes of belonging to a group (Midtgaard, Rorth, Shelter & Adamsen, 2006). Midtgarrd, Rorth, Shelter and Adamsen state many studies have observed and tested the affects a group has on the task orientation of reaching a common goal, although that goal may have an individual reward. Midtgarrd, Rorth, Shelter and Adamsen (2006) researched group cohesion in exercise groups for cancer patients. A statement from that article revealed the relationships was one of the most important aspects. Being united by something concrete caused the participants to become more like family or a team. The commonality of having cancer was not the only factor found holding them together. Physical exercise

allowed participants to approach each other and also brought comradeship to each of the participants. The social context and pattern development created the sense of “we”, which supports the theory that group exercise togetherness can impact the individuals’ psychosocial well-being dependent on that unique social context (Midtgarrd et al., 2006). According to Burke Carron, Patterson, Estabrooks, Hill and Loughhead, (2005) from a group dynamic perspective, exercise classes possess few of the commonly associated characteristics with true groups, but later on concluded that group exercise classes did indeed offer moderate cohesive properties.

Christensen, Schmidt, Budtz-Jørgensen and Avlund, (2006) performed a Danish Intervention study that reviewed group cohesion and social support among former sedentary adults in exercise classes. Defining group cohesion as “a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental and objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Christensen et al., 2006 p 678). The aim of the study was to examine the formation of group cohesion and social support amongst a group of sedentary adults participating in the Danish community based intervention project. Another aspect of the aim was to analyze the impact that exercise had on the participants. At the end of the intervention period, 37% of the respondents with no close relationships in the exercise class reported that there was no intent to join the exercise program again. However, 13% who had obtained close relationships did not intend to rejoin the program. The remaining participants would join the group again due mainly to the formation of close relationships. The analysis showed that the integrated groups were characterized by feelings of acceptance, solidarity, and mutual trust of the participants. Caperchione and

Mummary, (2007) used the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) to demonstrate concurrent and predictive validity to measure group cohesion in older adult exercisers. The GEQ identified four dimensions of group cohesive factors: (a) individual attraction to the group task, (b) individual attraction to the group-social, (c) group integration-task, and (d) group integration-social. At least three of the four dimensions seem to be identified in Christensen, Schmidt, Budtz-Jørgensen, and Avlund, (2006) research analysis were present in the interviewed group; individual attraction to the group-social, group integration-social, and group integration task. Christensen, Schmidt, Budtz-Jørgensen, and Avlund (2006) also stated the mutual support toward exercise activity originated in the cohesive group.

Social Support

Based on literature social support is integrated with group cohesion. According to Christensen, Schmidt, Budtz-Jørgensen, and Avlund, (2006) social support is related to the perception and/or reception of required supportive behaviors that may, or may not result from the group. Group cohesion focuses on the group sticking together. Building and maintaining long term relationships is just as important as attracting new members to your organization (Dhurup & Surujlal, 2010). A descriptive study of exercise drop outs concluded that lack of interest came with lack of social support in a particular program. The same study stated that social support enhanced regular attendance to the class (Spink & Carron, 1992).

Another study researched older adults and physical exercise. Caperchione and Mummary (2007) stated that group cohesion and the development of personal relationships play a significant and motivational role in increasing activity levels and

positively affecting overall health and wellbeing of older adults. According to McAuley, Blissmer, Marquez, Jerome, Kramer, and Katula (2000), social relation is integral to the exercise environment and significant for well-being in older adults. McAuley, Blissmer, Marquez, Jerome, Kramer, and Katula indicated that social support plays an important role in adherence of physical activity and has been demonstrated to have beneficial effects on a variety of medical condition outcomes such as endocrine secretion, heightened immune system, cardiovascular functions as well as positive psychological outcomes in the elderly population (McAuley et al., 2000). McAuley, Blissmer, Marquez, Jerome, Kramer, and Katula state that it is reasonable to assume that the interactive nature of group exercise environments serve to foster the development of social relations and support systems and that such influences might operate independently of any physical activity influence on Subjective Well-Being (SWB) in a study of social relations, physical activity and well-being of older adults.

Research examining the role of social support and group cohesion in the compliance behavior of females required to exercise for health related reasons. Participants reporting high scores on the support provision of reliable alliance and the cohesive factor of ATG-Task, along with low scores on social provision for guidance were more likely to attend a higher number of classes (Fraser & Spink, 2002). Spink and Carron (1992) have positively linked group cohesion with adherence to exercise programs. In addition, studies have linked social support with adherence as well (Fraser & Spink). Exercise adherence behavior was associated with perception of social support in exercising adults (Fraser & Spink). Research that focuses on the social nature of an exercise class has found it to be important for adherence behavior (Loughead, Colman, &

Carron, (2001). Loughead, Colman, and Carron state that a participant being in a highly task cohesive class setting has a moderate to large effect on adherence and that strong social support is well documented to aid in the adherence. This implies that the stronger the task and social bond by the individual exercisers the more likelihood of adherence (Loughead et al.).

In the reviewed study by Fraser and Spink (2002), the GEQ was used to measure group cohesion. The Social Provision Scale (SPS) was used to measure social support perceptions (Fraser & Spink). The study drew a conclusion that group cohesion, ATG-Task, ATG-Social and Group Individual positively affected participation, just as past literature indicated. However, social support measure of guidance was perplexing, in fact higher scores on that measure yielded poor attendance. The study concluded that the social support measure of guidance would be dependent upon an outside factor, such as the leader. The study was inconclusive on social support measure thus requiring further study (Fraser & Spink). When the study looked at drop out behavior, social support was able to predict compliance behavior without the cohesive factors, which was contradictory to other researched literature. In conclusion, both social support and group cohesion contributed unique variance to attendance behavior over and above the variance contributed by the other predictor suggesting that both measures may be important in understanding the individual's attendance behavior (Fraser & Spink).

Defining Group

Defining what constitutes a group was shown to be a realm of controversy. Questions have been raised to determine if exercise groups are actually considered to be a "real" group (Burke, Carron & Shapcott, 2008). The study asks if cohesion even a

construct in group fitness classes (Burke et al.). From a group dynamic perspective, three sets of statistical criteria help to determine the degree at which group-ness is present (Burke et al.). The three criteria reflect the degree of connectivity, uniqueness and the amount of shared belief within the collective (Burke et al. 2008). After the GEQ was administered to 130 group fitness classes, studies were shown to provide a moderate degree of group cohesiveness. This study did reveal some controversy to the Annesi, (1996) and Spink and Carron (1992) study. Some statistics stated that a majority of women over 40 prefer to exercise alone. College students leaned toward exercising together but not in a particular group setting, but still some of the research was true to previous literature stating those between the ages of thirty and sixty both male and female tend to appreciate working in an organized group setting slightly more than any other form of exercise (Burke et al.). Even though statistics show a contrast in actual percentages, studies still show favor for group cohesion taking place in group fitness classes (Burke et al.).

Leadership

Leadership qualities seem to be a determining factor on the group cohesion and social support perceived by a group, so a review of past literature was warranted. Leadership styles and the stages of development of a group is the basis for a study done by Maurice Phipps from the Western State College of Colorado in 1991-1992 (Phipps, 1992). Phipps states the Situational Leadership is based on the amount of direction (task behavior) and the amount of socio-emotional support (relationship behavior). Phipps states that given the maturity level and readiness of the followers, the leader must pick the leadership styles that will best suit the group. There are four stages of group

development to choose from. Each state has a personal relation (dependency, conflict, cohesion, and interdependence) and a task function (orientation, organization, data-flow and problem-solving) (Phipps).

“Experiential Leadership Education”, teaches leadership skills such as leadership styles and group dynamics (Phipps, 1992). Motivation is often the single most important factor that the leader must consider when picking which leadership style they will be using (Phipps). This leadership theory which is based on motivation through empowerment is Situational Leadership (Phipps). In Situational Leadership, the leader wants to be able to take their participants through stages (telling, selling, participating and eventually delegating). This is also true with growth development of the task. At first they are dependent, learning the task may cause conflict, after mastering the task cohesion should take place then interdependence is the end result. This process may start over with every new task and or group. The group development also brings in the complexity of group dynamics (Phipps).

In Phipps (1992) study to educate leaders to be able to lead the best way that suits their specific group, he has used a Group Dynamics Questionnaire (GDQ) to examine group climate. The GDQ helps to pinpoint specific problems in a qualitative study that can be discussed and worked on. GDQ offers a check point for the leaders allowing them to visualize points in their leadership styles that are sometimes difficult to see (Phipps).

Relative research statistics were found in an article researching coach leadership styles, team cohesion and team success in an Iran football club professional league. Even though group cohesion and team cohesion have different characteristics, the group dynamics show relative qualities that warrant sharing. There is empirical evidence that

team cohesion is related to coaching behavior (Nezhad & Keshtan, 2010). This particular article defined an “effective coach” as one who brings about successful outcomes or positive psychological responses on the part of his or her athlete (Nezhad & Keshtan). Effective coaches are the ones who are prepared to meet the individual needs of their athlete and realize that they can make a difference in the team performance by improving their own coaching skills and understanding the effects of their behavior on their athlete (Nezhad & Keshtan). Even though group fitness classes may not exhibit wins and losses, the effects of the coach/instructor can also affect the cohesion of the group. Leadership styles in a fitness studio are much like that of a coach/team or teacher/classroom. Chelladurai’s Multidimensional Model of Leadership (MML) and his Leadership Scale of Sports (LSS) were used as models for the above stated study of Nezhad and Keshtan. The LSS consist of five dimensions of leadership behavior: (a) Training and instruction, (b) Positive feedback, (c) Social support, (d) Democratic and autocratic behavior, and (e) The leaders’ behavior. The study also used the GEQ survey method (Nezhad & Keshtan). The coaches’ behavior that positively correlated to the team cohesion was social support, training and instruction, positive feedback, and democratic style of leadership, while autocratic behavior negatively impacted group cohesiveness (Nezhad & Keshtan).

Membership Retention

According to Mullen and Whaley (2010), over 41 million Americans belong to a private or public health club and 34.5% per year (IHRSA) drop out. Active adults at the level of recommendations are ringing in at only 12-22% (Mullen & Whaley). Given this information, it is important to see why sustained involvement in a fitness facility is

important (Mullen & Whaley). Mullen and Whaley claimed the number one reason for joining a club was socialization, which was defined as opportunities to interact with other members. However, the number one reason in their research for sustained membership was physical fitness results, even though the social aspect was “somewhat” important to all the groups studied (Mullen & Whaley). Mullen and Whaley also state that social support networks have been shown to increase self-efficacy and expectancies of success, but contradicting studies show that social support may be more important for initial physical activity than for the maintenance of long term exercise behavior.

According to Gormley (2011), the cost of gaining a new member in your fitness club is seven times more expensive than retaining an old one. Gormley lists ways that you can help retain members. Sixth on the list is to “Get Members Active in the Club, ASAP” either by getting them in a fitness program which is free with their members or with one on one personal training right away (Gormley).

The Membership Retention Questionnaire (MRQ) is used to help identify adherence and retention components by surveying fitness clubs members (Watts & Francis-Smythe, 2008). The components that are measured in the questionnaire are attitudinal, normative and control beliefs towards attending their fitness club, levels of self-determination towards attending fitness clubs, habitual attendance, social anxiety, and social identity, perceived service quality, brand identification and commitment (Watts & Francis-Smythe).

Kulp (2011) is a president of Mid-Atlantic Club Management Association, a company that focuses on fitness club retention efforts. Kulp states that retention is reliant on programs and people that want to make members excited to come into your facility

day after day. Kulp states that clubs tend to cater to the “fit” members, leaving the “unfit” member feeling awkward and not wanting to join our facilities. The key to retention efforts is to change the membership process to integrate new members in programs and services that suit the members’ needs (Kulp).

Summary

The literature reviewed indicated social support, group cohesion and leadership qualities as important factors contributing to retention efforts in group exercise classes. Social support and group cohesion are closely linked but used as separate themes in most literature reviewed.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative paradigm approach was used as a method of inquiry for this study. Qualitative research is an approach that enables a study to be facilitated with freedom from an interpretative point of view (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Inductive qualitative research allows for the collection of the data to develop a theory, model or explanation (Gratton & Jones). Qualitative questions such as ‘why’ and ‘how’ are asked to understand the perceptions of those individuals being studied. The research design is flexible and allows for continual adaptation (Gatton & Jones). Qualitative approaches offer more feeling and description since qualitative research is based upon a non-numerical analysis of words, feelings, and emotions (Gatton & Jones).

Research Design

Case study research was conducted at Augusta Health Lifetime Fitness Center in Fishersville, Virginia (Lifetime). Lifetime is a non-profit medical facility housed on the campus of Augusta Health hospital. Lifetime has approximately 6200 members offering two pools, three indoor tennis courts, four outdoor tennis courts, free-weights, cardio machines, strength machines, cycling studio, group fitness studio, specialty studio, nutrition services, personal training, sports store and cafe’.

Lifetime offers 125 to 152 exercise classes per week from aqua to zumba. Collaborative efforts with physical therapy, cardiac rehabilitation, cancer center and wellness allow Lifetime to touch the lives of the larger community. Lifetime offers individual, family and senior memberships. The variety of classes enhanced this study.

Case Study Research

The specific type of qualitative research conducted in this study was a descriptive case study. Case study research involved the intensive study of a specific case. A case refers to a specific instance (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The use of a case study research is based upon the argument that understanding human activity requires analysis of both its development over time, and the environment and context within which the activity occurs (Gratton & Jones). Case study designs are used to gain a holistic understanding of a set of issues and how they relate to a particular group, organization, sports team, or even an individual (Gratton & Jones). There are four characteristics of a case study research. (a) Phenomena are studied through focusing on specific cases, (b) Each case is studied in depth, (c) Phenomena are studied in their natural context, and (d) Case study research takes the perspective of those within the case, rather than the researcher's perspective (Gratton & Jones).

Exploratory Question

The exploratory question proposed for this study was as follows: *How do group exercise participants perceive and describe their experience in a group exercise class as a contribution to retention for a specific fitness facility?*

Journaling

This case study assists in explaining the interactions and feelings toward other class participants and instructors. The instructors' perception of class participants was gathered through electronic and hand written journal entries. Each instructor was asked to submit a minimum of four journal entries from four specific classes. They were asked to reflect on the happenings in their specific class, interactions with other members and

instructor. They were allowed to report any reflective thoughts or observations related to the study. Journal entries were reviewed by the researchers individually and collectively at the end of the four class period.

Interviews

During the process of having the instructors conduct journal entries, volunteer participants were interviewed. The process of interactive interviews occurred over three weeks with six participants representing six classes chosen in advance. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes each. The host facility offers between 125 and 152 classes weekly depending on the season, thus a sample was chosen to interview. A sample refers to a subset of a specific population. The population refers to everyone who shares those characteristics defined by the researcher as relevant to the investigation (Gratton & Jones, 2010). This researcher chose six groups across a wide range of classes. The classes chosen for the study are as follows: aqua, chi kung, body combat, young at heart, cardio/body sculpt and cycling. All interviews were conducted onsite in a café of the fitness facility and were tape-recorded. Open ended questions prepared in advance were used to capture the participant experiences, feelings and perceptions.

Using the interview process as a data collection tool allowed the researcher to explore issues, which helped the researcher understand the group exercise participants' perspective and meaning. Journaling enabled the researcher to understand the factors that influence group exercise participation and the interactions of the class through the instructor's perception.

Participants

Participants for this study were actively involved in group exercise classes. To gain access to participants the researcher asked group fitness instructors to give a brief description of the study in their classes and asked volunteers to contact the researcher. The first volunteer from each of the six classes was set up for an interview with the researcher. Each instructor from the six classes was asked to journal about class interactions for four classes.

Data Collection

A face to face interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes each and were audio-taped. Participants were asked to read and fill out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) asking questions about their age, group fitness classes taken, gender and exercise outside of the group experience. A consent form (Appendix B) was also included for each participant to sign which explained the use of the study and the use of the information shared by the participants. The information was voluntary and not mandatory for participation in the study. During the interview, the researcher asked open ended questions (Appendix C) such as "What are the reasons you participate in group exercise classes?"; "How does the instructor illustrate leadership in the class you participate in?" and "What would you do if the facility did not offer group exercise classes?" The participant was allowed to speak freely without interference from the researcher. The interviews were held at the Courtyard Café housed in the host facility.

The group fitness instructors volunteered to journal their perceptions of the class' dynamics to include the same classes from each volunteered participants. The six class

chosen were cycling, cardio/body sculpt, chi Kung, body combat, young at heart and aqua power. Each instructor was asked to watch for interactions amongst the participants, how the participants interacted with the instructor, leadership qualities they felt important to exhibit, and any other observations they felt necessary in the study. The instructor followed the volunteer procedures set forth by the IRB as did the participants. After four weeks of observing their perspective classes, the instructors either hand wrote in the journal or sent their observations to researcher via email.

Data Management

The data from each of the data sources were initially organized and stored in the group exercise coordinator office in a locked desk drawer. This drawer contains membership information, original audio tapes, hand written journal entries and hand written observations. The electronic data is stored on the personal computer of the researcher and left at her home in Microsoft Word documents filed as thesis.

Data Analysis

Audio tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Data reduction began by looking for similar clusters of information given by the participants. A priori approach was used to analyze the data, since the initial thoughts of the data were based off previously researched theories. Group cohesion theory was the basis of this approach. Interpreting the material was guided by the following description of interpretivist theory by Lincoln (2010). Lincoln (2010) describes this theory as a method for describing how to answer why, stating that interpretivist theories are generous with human endeavor, human decision making, human emotion and human frailty. Interpretivist theories do not appeal to pure reason or statistical logic but rather are derived from pure lived

experiences (Lincoln, 2010).

Guidelines for the research were followed by the guidelines proposed by Lincoln (1995). Lincoln, (1995) has eight steps to follow for quality qualitative research

1. Standards of publication which are appropriate within the inquiry community: Lincoln (1995) states that the goal should be publication and should validate relationships between participants and the researcher in the study. The study should be conducted for the knowledge of the community and be available for the participants of the study.
2. Positionality, which stands for honest regard of the researcher and the research. The researcher should try at all cost to not show bias. (Lincoln, 1995). This researcher acknowledges some participants are prior acquaintances since she is the group fitness coordinator at the host facility.
3. The recognition of the community the research takes place in and who the research is addressed to. Lincoln (1995) states that it is important that the research serves the community in which it is observed. The host facility plans to use the outcome of this research to train instructors and other staff to enhance group fitness class experiences and qualities to help with membership retention.
4. The voice of the research is defined, who is speaking and to whom. Lincoln (1995) describes this as requiring enthusiastic participation by the researcher who must be open to many voices and interpretations.

Researcher must exhaust literature to remove all bias and preconceived ideas about the subject. Researcher is aware of the potential to have preconceived notions due to the nature of her job. Exhausting literature is an important aspect to remove all bias. Qualitative analysis has the potential to provide 'richer' more detailed findings, greater explanation and the opportunity for unexpected findings (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

5. Critical subjectivity and reflexivity, as to understand the participants' emotional and mental states during the research. Lincoln (1995) states the importance of subjectivity and reflexivity while transforming the data information received. Researcher kept continual records during the transcribing of all data material to help with accuracy of transcriptions.
6. Reciprocity, sharing deeply with a sense of caring and mutuality, which is essential to person-centered interpretive inquiry (Lincoln, 1995). This research will be available for participants to view, clarify and correct upon request.
7. Sacredness for human dignity, justice and respect (Lincoln, 1995). This research was conducted to respect the opinions of each participant and listen intently to their feelings.
8. Sharing the benefits of the research with the participants. Lincoln (1995) states that sharing the benefits with the participants' enables individuals to claim and collectively voice an experience. This researcher acknowledged the participation of the group fitness participants at the defense of the thesis as well as thanked them at the time of the

interview. Researcher offered each participant the outcome results of the research at the time of the interview as well as the completion of the project.

Data reduction was analyzed once the data collection process was completed. Irrelevant data was discarded. Data crucial to the results was organized and checked for appropriateness to achieve the research goal (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The three procedural steps followed include data reduction, data display in the form of tables, and conclusion drawings/verification (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

According to Gratton & Jones (2010), Stages of Coding framework was followed to ensure proper coding of all data collected.

1. The data was carefully read, all statement relating to the research question was identified and each was assigned a code or category. Codes are then noted and each relevant statement is organized under its appropriate code (Gratton & Jones, 2010).
2. Using the codes developed in stage 1, the researcher rereads the data and searches for statements that may fit into any other category (Gratton & Jones, 2010).
3. Once the first two stages of coding are completed, the researcher becomes more analytical and begins to look for patterns, clusters and explanations in the coding. Through this process of clustering, important themes will emerge from the study (Gratton & Jones, 2010).
4. The fourth stage is 'selective coding' which involves reading through the raw data for cases that illustrate the analysis or explain the concept. Contradictory

data is also searched for in this stage, so the researcher is careful not to commit 'confirmation bias' (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

This study is based on prior research, thus providing insight into the possible development of the thematic codes (Boyatzis, 1998). By using prior studies, the researcher accepts another researcher's assumptions, projections and biases (Boyatzis, 1998). The researcher was open to any new emerging themes that may be outside of the initial a priori approach. Participant #3 was given their transcribed interview written notes to view for accuracy. Chi Kung Instructor was given his handwritten journal entries rewritten into electronic form to verified for accuracy

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is of the utmost importance when considering a qualitative study approach. Anfara, Brown and Mangione (1999) proposed an assessment for quality and rigor. This assessment is made up of four terms. *Credibility* is the equivalent to the conventional term internal validity. The strategy looks at prolonged engagement in the field, use of peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks and time sampling (Anfara et al., 2009). *Transferability* is the equivalent to the conventional term external validity. The strategy looks at thick descriptions purposive sampling or in other words would this transfer for another reader to make judgment about the studies application (Anfara et al.). *Dependability* is the equivalent to the conventional term reliability. Strategies include creation of an audit trail, code and recode strategy, triangulation or, and peer examination (Anfara et al.). Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection (Anfara et al.). Lastly, *confirmability* is the equivalent to the conventional term objectivity. This strategy is

based on triangulations and the practice of reflexivity (Anfara et al.)

The procedures to ensure trustworthiness for this study were prolonged engagement, triangulations, clarification of research bias presented in the weaknesses of the study, member and instructor checks, and peer reviews by advisor and committee.

Case Reports

Gratton & Jones (2010) refer to case studies as the holistic understanding of a set of issues, and how they relate to a particular group or individual. Case studies are based on the argument that understanding human activity requires analysis of both its development over time and the environment and context within which the activity occurs (Gratton & Jones). Case report which includes detailed description and triangulation data through detailed interviews, journal entries and emergent themes can be found in chapter four.

Protection of Human Subjects

The research project was reviewed by the thesis committee to ensure the protection of human subjects. Materials were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university where the research was conducted. The interview protocol was approved by IRB prior to conducting the interviews. Participation in the study was voluntary and allowed for the participants to withdraw at any time. No physical risks were involved in this study. Participants were informed that they could avoid answering any questions they chose. An audio tape would be made of the interview. During the interview process, participants were notified that the use of study was to enhance the group exercise programming as well as the membership retention efforts of the host facility as well as the circulation of the final project would be given to the thesis

committee. The consent form indicated that all attempts would be made to respect confidentiality. Names would not be placed on any transcripts or audio tapes. All material collected was kept in a locked file drawer in the group fitness coordinators office until completion of the study. One year after completion of the project audio tapes will be destroyed. All other transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet for three years.

CHAPTER 4

Results

The participants in this study were six group exercise class participants from various classes at host facility consisting of four females and two males. Class participants interviewed were chosen from a variety of classes including cycling, cardio/body sculpt, chi kung, body combat, young at heart and aqua power. The six main instructors from each of the prior mentioned classes also wrote four journals on their classes' interactions. The interactions observed consisted of participants' interactions with each other, the instructor and the surrounding environment. The instructors were five females and one male. The group fitness instructors' demographic information is given in Table 1 and listed by their specific class. Table 2 illustrates the demographic information of each interviewed group exercise participant.

Table 1:

Instructor Journal Statistics. Group Exercise Classes: Breakdown per class

Class:	Cycling	Cardio/Body Sculpt	Chi Kung	Body Combat	Young at Heart	Aqua Power
Age Range:	40- 65 years old	36- 62 years old	40-70 years old	20-50 years old	50-78 years old	55-84 years old
# of Class Participants	15-17	14-20	12- 17	27-32	20-32	21-30
Gender % estimations	Female 70% Male 30%	Female 95% Male 5%	Female 65% Male 35%	Female 85% Male 15%	Female 80% Male 20%	Females 75% Males 25%

Table 2:
Group Exercise Participant Class Demographics

Participants	Participant # 1	Participant # 2	Participant # 3	Participant #4	Participant #5	Participant #6
Age	64	47	67	39	74	61
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
Occupation	Retired Military	Medical Manufacture	Retired Teachers	Elementary Teacher	Retired PE Teacher	Retired
Health Risks	Diabetes	Depression	Arthritis	Depression	none	Obesity Arthritis
Years in classes	4	24	8	20	8	2
Exercise other than classes	Weights Walking	Hiking, Free Weights, Wood split	Use a Personal Trainer	Walk 2 miles a day 4 days a week	Bike, machines, walk	Housework
Membership in years at host facility	2	10	9	16	11	4

Categories

From the six interviews and instructor journals, 33 pages of transcribed data were collected. Through the content analysis of the interview transcripts, six major categories emerged. These categories are outlined in Table 3 and include perceived group cohesion of class, perceived social support of participants and instructor, membership retention loyalty, perceived important qualities and illustration of leadership, reason for class attendance, and connectivity with the instructor. Excerpts from the interviews were categorized into groupings that represented sub categories. Examples of individual verbatim responses of the participants were reported for each sub category.

Table 3

Categories and Subcategories

Categories	Subcategories
Group Cohesion/Group Relationship	“Ah fantastic, we just gel. I mean and when you come in as a newcomer they just surround you and welcome you and you know we go out and do things together as a group” (Participant #6, personal communication, December 13, 2011)
Social Support	“We all have a relationship with the instructor and with each other and I just it has been a total social thing for me as well as the exercise I have met so many nice people and made friends, people I never ever expected to meet I have met here so it provides a great social relationship as well as one where I can exercise and accomplish my goals of keeping physically fit.” (Participant #5, personal communication, December 12, 2011)
Membership Retention	“I would keep coming and continue working with my personal trainer who has greatly benefited my health and fitness. I would be sad because I like the classes. I like the social interaction and the support I get from my friends.” (Participants #3, personal communication, December 2, 2011)
Qualities and Illustrations of Leadership	“The instructors show that they are by getting to know us personally you know learning our names, you know coming up to us during class you know checking if someone is not doing something right. They show that they care by going, you need to do it this way.” (Participant #4, personal communication,

	December 7, 2011) “The instructor has to be knowledgeable” (Participants #2, personal communication, November 29, 2011)
Reason for Participation in Group Exercise Classes	“ motivation and structure is the main thing” Participant #2, personal communication, November 29, 2011)
Connection with Instructor	“The connection between the instructor and the class is vital if the class is going to get something from it and because of that the instructors is going to have to know their class.” (Participant #1, personal communication, November 29, 2011)

Theme 1: Group Cohesion/Group Relationship

Group cohesion/group relationship was important to seven of the eight group exercise participants. Six females and one male felt that the group was an important factor of the group exercise classes. The group helps with motivation and accountability. The group encouraged them to exercise regularly and gives them positive reinforcement.

“Class members are encouraging”

“We coach each other a lot”

“We use humor to motivate each other”

“I love my friends in the class. We send cards and visit when someone is sick or absent from class. We care about each other deeply”

“There are different levels of friendships in the class, some just speak and others I go out to lunch with. It’s almost like a family. My friends encourage me to come.”

“I need to have the group and I have made so many friends. I will not come and do the exercise alone.”

“The class relationship is motivating, positive and fun. We hold each

other accountable.”

“I love my friends in the class, I get used to the same people in their spots.

It is like we are partners.”

“I have made so many friends. We keep up with each other medical problems. We send cards, go visit in the hospital. We are like a family.

They worry about me and I worry about them.”

“The group is a total social thing for me. We have relationships with each other and the instructors. I have made so many friends.”

“The class gels. We care about each other like family and hold each other accountable.”

The one male that did not feel like the group cohesion factors was as important as other participants’ stated:

“I do not come for the participants. I do not care if they change”

“Some chatter is good, but can be distracting. I come for the instruction not the people, but informal connection is good.”

The instructors’ perceptions of group cohesion/group relationships appear to be consistent with the participants’ view.

“Some of the class members seem to be closer than others. Some chatter constantly while others step back and observe.”

“The participants mainly stand in the same place each class. They do not like for someone else to get their spot.”

“They are very welcoming to new members. EVERYONE is always so accepting, honest and friendly.”

“The clients gather outside the fitness studio waiting for class. Friendly conversations with each other and myself”

“I can tell they are very comfortable speaking in front of the entire class no matter what the subject.”

“As on occasions, they will stay after class and chat. At times I hear them planning to get together for future dates, such as running races, birthday celebrations etc.”

“Three women in the class are organizers. They are the ones who get the birthday cards, bring the cookies for the break after class and seem to keep up with such things.”

Theme Two: Social Support

The feeling of social support was another leading factor that emerged from the interviews of group class participants’ as well as the perception of the instructor as they observed the class interactions. The need for the social support felt from the instructor and other participants was a theme that resounded in all eight participants. One participant did not feel the need for the social support of the group but was highly dependent upon the support of the instructor.

“It is nice to know the instructor supports you. When she calls out my name it is good to hear. I am not concerned with the other participants in class”

“If someone in the class is struggling, we encourage them by making eye contact and with verbal and non-verbal gestures. You can do it!”

“I have everyone in the class' address and phone number. We call and

keep up with each other. We go out to breakfast once a month as a group.”

“I love my friends here. We talk before class and hold each other accountable.”

“Everyone is so supportive. This has taken the place of my job for my social relationships.”

“The core group stays the same. Some other people come and go. We try to support everyone as much as possible. I want everyone to feel welcomed.”

Instructors’ also notice social support for their participants’, some of the journal entry comments include:

“Before class begins, I often see many of the participants walk the track waiting for class. Some walk together and others walk alone. They will typically 'hang out' with the same group but are all friendly toward each other.”

“During my time with them, I noticed that many of them will take care of each other. For example: a participant has asthma, another participant was sure to let me know that she needed the fan on, another had a surgical procedure and a participant informed me and the others about that.”

“I am reminded about the true sense of community with this group.”

“There are a few that have to stay and socialize after class or their experience (in the class) is not near as satisfying.”

“I caught a few sticking tongues out at each other and rolling eyes at me.

They truly have fun and give 100% effort to their workout. I think a lot of the reason they continue to come back to this class is because of the friends they have made.”

“The end of class is interesting. There are those who pause to enjoy the feeling they have after meditation. They discuss what they felt with the others. Then there are a few who grab their coats and out the door. Others stay to resume conversation.”

Theme Three: Membership Retention

This particular theme emerged when participants were asked if classes were no longer held at their fitness center, what they would do. Answers ranging from “I would not be happy” to “I would need to leave and find another facility emerged. Upon further investigation of the demographic information, it seems as though those that would leave the fitness center were answers from the participants that depend highly on group exercise as their main or only source of exercise. The participants that also had a personal trainer or exercised on the machines had a higher tolerance for a fitness center without group exercise classes. In varying degrees all participants would be disappointed and possibly seek a fitness center that did have group exercise classes. According to research, one of the main reasons for fitness center memberships is due to the social interaction that one gains. If that means of social interaction is not present, then members do not feel as connected with the facility. (Mullen & Whaley, 2010).

“I would raise a stink if this facility did not offer group classes. That would be a very bad decision”

“I would still go here if we did not have group classes, but if another

facility offered group classes they would steal me away”

“I am at a loss for words on that question. I would like to stay here and work with my trainer. I would be really sad. I need the class for social interaction.”

“I would leave the facility.”

“I would find somewhere else that offered group fitness.”

“I would be devastated. I just don’t know what I would do. I would be at a loss. I need the classes and nowhere else offers aqua.”

The instructors did not journal on the membership retention aspect of the classes relating to the membership of the club if group fitness classes were not held at the host facility. However comments were made about the adherence factors to the class itself.

“I very rarely see new faces in the class or the regulars absent from the class”.

“They are all regular attendees and have their own particular spot on the studio floor, but some can be vocal if their spot is taken”.

“In spite of impending holidays, the attendance has stayed pretty much the same”.

“The participants will typically stand in the same “spot” for each class, it is rare to see those that typically stand in the back row, switch to the front and vice versa. I haven’t noticed any negative reactions if another person takes their “spot” or space.

“With the exception of the one new student, all have been with the class for years and know the routine well.”

The instructor journal entries from each class stated that even though they see many of the same participants in class each week that the exercise itself is a main source of the reasons for participation. In theme five, reasons for participation were closely linked to continued involvement and retention in a specific class. Membership retention is also closely linked to reasons for participation. If one feels the need for “motivation and structure” (Participant #4, personal communication, December 7, 2011), and the same participant also comments “I will not stay at a facility that does not offer group exercise classes” (Participant #4, personal communication, December 7, 2011). Participation in the class is directly related to membership retention for that participant.

Theme Four: Leadership Qualities

The importance of leadership qualities was also an emergent theme that was important to all studied participants. Each interviewee stated that the instructor must be knowledgeable, supportive, personable and a good motivator. If the instructor did not measure up to the standards, the participants would either find another class or do their “own thing” during the class. This particular host facility appears to have high quality instructors without a lot of complaints from the interviewed participants. However some participant did have a disliking towards some of the instructor, they made a point to just avoid that instructors classes or tolerate the instructor if it was a substitute situation.

“Instructor and instruction is the key to any good program”.

“I don’t mind if the instructor changes as long as she can teach me something”.

“The leadership capability is vital! The instructor must be capable of imparting knowledge. If I don’t like their style, I will walk out. The

instructor must connect and teach to the audience present”.

“Leadership ability is very important. They must know what they are doing”.

“If the instructor changes, I will stay, if she is one that I trust”.

“I like the instructor to hold herself accountable of what she expects of me”.

“I had a class once, not here, with an instructor and I left because I did not get proper instruction”.

“My instructor cares about me. He individualized instruction for the class and educates us to do the moves correctly. He never embarrasses us. He is always constructive”.

“The leadership ability is very important. I need good instruction and personality. I have been in class where the leader lacked those and people would walk out.”

“They must be good motivators”.

“Leadership does not affect me a great deal. I am motivated enough to do what I want to do on my own, but I do like instructors that know what they are doing and are friendly. I like them to be sociable”.

“I can work with any instructor as long as she knows what she is doing”.

“Leadership needs to be positive. I think the class helps mold the instructor as well”.

“The class wants a high energy instructor.”

“The instructors are 100% supportive. They are there for you if you need

anything”.

Leadership was the theme that received the most comments. There was consensus from the group that leadership was important. Knowledge, support, personality and motivation were the four most important leadership qualities the participants wanted to see from their instructors.

Leadership was one of the key emerging factors. Themes five through seven were all linked to the instructor or leadership in some way. The leader seems to play an important role in the adherence factor of most participants.

All six instructors tend to agree that the participants show them a great amount of respect. Even though the class socialized before and after class, during class the participants are very respectful of the instructor and yield to their leadership of the class. Some of the participants play a leadership role by vocally leading out "kias" for energy during the body combat class or by helping others get their equipment ready in the cardio/body sculpt class.

“I don’t see that anyone really holds a leadership role in class. I feel as though they have honored me with being their leader. They are all highly educated in the class skills therefore I have to earn their respect in order to take on leadership”.

“A few will often remind me that they are old enough to be my mother and too old to do the stuff I give them to do. But they don’t stop! It is truly inspiring to be their instructor”.

Illustration of leadership qualities and support can happen in many ways in a group exercise class. The factors that emerged as important to the six interviewed

participants in this project all felt the instructor illustrated leadership by getting to know the participants personally and individualizing the work out to meet their specific needs. The needs of the participants ranged from medical limitations to emotional concerns. All participants agreed that the instructor showing the proper way to do an exercise was an illustration of good leadership. None of the participants seem to feel embarrassed when corrected by the instructor.

“Leadership is illustrated through showing us the correct way to do the exercise and when they push us to do our best and don’t let us back off”.

“Instructors support me by making sure that I am doing the exercise right in class, so that I don’t injure myself”.

“The instructor is excellent support for us. He modifies and individualizes exercises for health issues”.

“Instructors show support for us when they correct form and go around the room and make sure everyone is O.K.”.

“Instructors show support by just being there and motivating us. You can tell if they are happy to be there”.

“Instructors show leadership by talking to individual people in class and explaining the routine and encouraging the individuals in the group”.

The journal entries for the group fitness instructors depict the importance of their knowledge for their exercise discipline. Each journal entry revealed the responsibility that the instructor felt to always do their very best and give the attention to the members that they deserved.

“The members that come to my class deserve the best customer service I

can give them. I never want a member to walk out and regret that they spent the past hour with me.”

“Members expect me to *know my stuff*.”

“I cannot have an “*off*” class.”

“It is my responsibility to create an atmosphere that is positive and that the participants desire to come too. I have to walk into every class knowing that it is not about me.”

Theme Five: Reasons for Participation

As stated in theme three, membership retention, participation in a group exercise class is a key factor in contributing to membership retention. The participants were asked the reasons they continue involvement in their specific group exercise class. Below are some of the comments that the participants revealed:

“I love the energy. It is more fun than exercising alone”.

“The class is more like a family”.

“I need the commitment to come. I know my instructor and friends are counting on me”.

“I need the motivation from the class. I cannot do it on my own”.

“I enjoy the companionship and need the motivation”.

“I like the camaraderie”.

“Motivation and structure is the main thing”.

The socialization happens before and after the class but during the exercise portion itself the participants work very hard to achieve their personal exercise goals. Some of the entries include the following comments:

“Overall, this group of individuals is highly motivated and although they socialize while at the facility, they are there to exercise. The majority like to be pushed and appear to want and enjoy a challenging work-out.”

“Social interaction is important at the beginning of class but subsides when it’s time to work, however chatter picks up after class is over, may have the need to socialize after the class or their workout time is not as satisfying.”

Theme Six: Connection with the Instructor

This emerging theme from the interviews was about creating a connection or relationship with the instructor. If the connection was not present, the adherence or cohesion to the class did not exist. Two of the participants felt very strongly about the instructor and the connection while one participant wanted the instructor to be sociable and friendly but did not have cohesive feeling toward one instructor. Three of the participants felt a strong bond between several instructors but would accept others as long as they were knowledgeable, personable, supportive and motivational.

Some of the comments that emerged about creating a connection or a relationship were:

“I like the instructor talking to me during class. That boosts my morale”.

“The connection between the instructor and the class is vital if the class is going to get something from it and because of that- the instructors are going to have to know their class.”

“The instructor will stand beside me and do the move for me to follow”

“My Instructor cares about me”.

“The instructor gets to know us by name and knows when we miss class”.

“Instructors are right there if you need something”.

Connection was a strong factor for participant number one, three and four. It was moderately strong for participant number two and six. It was not a strong factor for participant number five.

According to the instructors’ journal entries as a whole, the instructors felt the need to exhibit strong leadership qualities as well as be personable, motivational and supportive of the participants. Instructors find that it is easier to accomplish that goal when they are put in a class that is familiar for them to teach. When they are in a comfortable atmosphere and can spend less time concentrating on their routine, then cohesion and support, and motivation can be their main area of focus. Instructor journal entries revealed that if the instructor is placed in an environment where they have to spend a lot of time concentrating on how they are going to conduct the class instead of the participants themselves then they feel not as able to connect with the class.

“I connect with this cycling class that I have been teaching for a long time, however, if I am asked to substitute in a class that I am not as comfortable with my teaching ability in that discipline and connection with the participants’ is harder to achieve.”

“Connectivity between the class and participants is easier to achieve when the class can flow. If I have to concentrate so hard on my routine that I can’t be personable with the clients then the connectivity factor does not happen.”

Summary

The case study conducted at Lifetime took the perception of six group exercise participants from a variety of classes including aqua power, cardio/body sculpt, body combat, cycling, chi kung and young at heart. Furthermore, six instructors from the perspective classes chosen journaled observation from the instructor's point of view. Perceptions were classified into six emergent themes and discussed in detail.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Since, 1992, factors contributing to retention research for group exercise participants focused on the context of coherence or adherence to a class. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that lead to long term retention to exercise classes in a non-profit medical facility. This study researched the importance of group exercise classes for the long term retention of membership to the facility. Emergent factors leading to long term retention included group cohesion, social support, illustrated leadership qualities and connection with the instructor.

Training Instructors

Practitioners in the field will be able to use this study to train instructors to improve the perception of group cohesion, social support, desired leadership qualities and connectivity with the participants. Trainings program allow group exercise managers to aid instructors to be successful, consistent, motivational, supportive and knowledgeable of the expectations of their class participants.

Group cohesion and social support are closely related. For this study, group cohesion is used as the camaraderie that is present during the actual class. Examples such as, working harder because the other participants are giving their all or helping a struggling participant with the routine. Social support indicates the before and after chatter of the classes. Examples would be making plans for a lunch date or the monthly class breakfast.

Christensen, Schmidt, Budtz-Jorgensen and Avlund, (2006) define group cohesion as, “a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency of a group to stick

together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental and objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs”. Instructors should be given the tools to recognize group cohesion potential in the classroom and to nurture participant relationships by acting as a catalyst to positively affect cohesion in their class. Group cohesion can be enhanced by following the model of Midtgarrd, Rorth, Shelter and Adamsen (2006). Midtgarrd, Rorth, Shelter and Adamsen (2006) revealed the relationship was one of the most important aspects: being united by something concrete caused participants to become more like a family or a team. The commonality of having cancer was not the only factor found holding them together. Physical exercise allowed participants to approach each other and also brought comradeship to each of the participants. “The class gels. We care about each other like family and hold each other accountable” (Participant #5, personal communication December 12, 2011). Instructors can plan their classes to allow time for team drills to bring the members into closer connection. When the instructor engages in and supports the groups outside functions either prior to or after class, comradeship is reinforced. “The clients gather outside the fitness studio waiting for class, friendly conversations with each other and myself” (Instructor #4, personal communication, December 5, 2011). Instructors need to realize the physical exercise component for cohesion still remains important. The physical exercise is what brings the participants to the class. Training efforts at the host facility allows instructors 15 minutes of extra pay prior to or after the class to allow time for conversation and questions. The workout itself has the ability to enhance cohesion accountability. Instructors who plan ahead can help create that cohesive atmosphere and stay true to the exercise component.

Social support is closely related to the cohesive factors in the group exercise class. Social relations are integral to the exercise environment and significant for the well-being in older adults (McAuley et al., 2000). According to interviewed participants' demographic information, range in age from 39-67 years of age. "The group is a social thing for me. We have relationships with each other and the instructor. I have made so many friends" (Participant #5, December 12, 2011). Instructors that offer a personable atmosphere and allow, within reason, a certain amount of socialization aid in membership retention. Chattering members are a source of frustration for instructors if it carries on through the class time, however a certain amount of chatter is necessary for those needing social support. Instructor will be trained and must exhibit expectations to the class on appropriateness of socialization. Allowing time prior to class allows for members to enjoy the social aspect of the gathering. Instructors could be trained to set boundaries and strategies to control the class, but also allow time for interaction before and after the class. Comments such as "are we ready to work" or "Friends, we have two more minutes to talk, then, it is time to work", wait the appropriate time allotted, then say, "ready, set, go". Training instructors to have consistent, fair expectations and boundaries is essential for success. This approach also allows for satisfaction for the participants that do not engage in the social aspect. "Some chatter is good, but can be distracting. I come for the instruction not the people, informal connection is good" (Participant #1, personal communication, November 28, 2011).

Desired and illustrated leadership qualities are also extremely important in the training and evaluation process for instructors. In this study, all interviewed participants' claim leadership qualities and illustration is extremely important. "Leadership ability is

very important. They must know what they are doing” (Participant #2, personal communication, November 28, 2011). Managers need to hire instructors that have proper certifications and working knowledge. Each interviewed participant expects the instructor to have knowledge in their field of expertise. Managers need to consistently evaluate and make corrections for instructors’ choice of exercises, consistency of commands safety cues and coaching style.

Motivation is often the single most important factor when choosing a leadership style (Phibbs, 1992). Motivation is important to create an atmosphere of an important event. This is the instructor's responsibility. Motivation was also an important aspect according to all the interviewed participants. “They must be good motivators” (Participant #4, personal communication, December 7, 2011). “I need motivation from a class. I cannot do it on my own” (Participant #4, personal communication, December 7, 2011). Participants also stated that connection with the instructor was an important factor. “The connection between the instructor and the class is vital if the class is going to get something from it and because of that- the instructor is going to have to know their class” (Participant #1, personal communication, November 28, 2011). Connectivity and motivation can be interrelated. If they are not connected to the participants, motivation will be difficult. Training instructors to have eye contact and speak to each participant during the class aids in motivation. Les Mills International trains all of their instructors to face the class during instruction. Facing the class is a great way to maintain eye contact with the class while looking back at the class through a mirror is not effective in capturing face to face contact. Managers should train instructors to teach facing the class.

Reasons for attending group exercise classes emerged from the study, such as: “I

love the energy. It is more fun than exercising alone” (Participants #4, personal communication, December 7, 2012). Reasons given for participation pointed toward needing motivation, connectivity, social support and group cohesion. “I need the commitment to come. I know my instructor and friends are counting on me” (Participant #3, personal communication, December 2, 2011).

Practitioners need to understand the value of training instructors properly. Managers may not be able to change an instructors’ personality, however, techniques can be taught to keep participants' needs in mind and their expectations at the forefront, thus creating a successful encounter.

Membership Retention Training

Practitioners could use this study to assist membership services to profile each new member. New members that are at risk of dropping out would be placed in a group that could potentially help members settle in to an exercise routine without dropping out in the first six months. A descriptive study of exercise dropouts illustrated that lack of interest came with lack of social support in a particular program. The same study stated that social support enhanced regular attendance to the class (Spink & Carron, 1992). The membership service team and the group exercise team could work together to find the best fit for the new members. The two teams would continue to evaluate the new member’s participation and needs until a class that was the “right fit” for the member was found. Not all members would need this type of placement, only those that are “at risk” of not continuing an exercise program without the social support. By profiling the new member, membership services could identify if class placement would be in the best interest of the joining member. Membership services would be trained to track the new

member for the first year of their membership to increase the success of retaining that particular member. Connection with the members would take place within the first week, month then quarterly to ensure the member has settled in with a group that suits their needs. Mullen and Whaley (2010), stated research claims the number one reason for joining a club was socialization, which was defined as opportunities to interact with other members.

According to this study, two members would not stay connected with the facility if group exercises classes did not exist, two members would continue coming but would look for another facility that offered group fitness classes. Those two participants would switch if they found that facility and the remaining two would be very upset with the removal of the classes but would continue their membership and engage in other activities as well. Out of the six interviews conducted, the action of the removal of group exercise classes would cause a drop in group exercise members by 33.3% if the two participants would leave the facility and a potential of 66.6% if the other two members found a facility that offered group exercise classes. Thus a conclusion of this study links the importance of group exercise classes as part of this fitness centers membership retention efforts. Comparable data was not found to support or negate the above stated findings.

Further Research

This study would be enhanced by future research in the following areas: in-depth research into gender differences in group exercise classes, development of an assessment tool used by membership services from incoming members, and group exercise instructor leadership development programs.

In-depth research into gender differences in group exercise classes could be beneficial to group fitness managers. Two males were interviewed out of the six participants. The males' perspective differed from the females in the area of group cohesion. Male Participant #1 made the statement that he did not care who was participating in the class and was unaffected if the participants changed. Male Participant #1 was there for the leadership from the instructor. He was driven more by the music, program and motivation of the instructor than the cohesiveness amongst participants. Male Participant #1 stated chatter was distracting. Male Participant #2 liked having the other members as part of the program, but similar the Male Participant #1 was more interested in the motivation and leadership of the instructor. Since the classes interviewed are primarily females. A study focusing on males and group exercise would be very beneficial to tap into a new group exercise market specifically for males. If group exercise managers could market the qualities that males found important, they would find increased utilization from the male population.

An assessment tool for membership services to use for incoming members to determine the needs for the member at the onset of their membership commitment could play an important role in lowering attrition. Retaining members is of utmost importance to fitness clubs in order to run a lucrative business (Dhurup & Surujlal, 2010). If the new member does not become relationally involved early into their program they may feel uncomfortable and not frequent the club often. If membership service could create an assessment tool to determine that members needs retaining members may be an easier task. Membership service offices could use the assessment tool to also stay in touch with that member 30, 60 and 90 days out. To ensure that they have found a avenue that suits

their individual work out needs. Member with high drop out risks would be closely monitored for the first year. Another option for at risk members other than group exercise classes would be the buddy system.

A leadership development program would be very beneficial to train new instructors on the qualities the participants desire in their group exercise classes. Even though a manager cannot change the personalities of their instructors they can equip them with tools to aid in their success in the group exercise studio. Leadership was an important aspect to all six participants so a training program could benefit from what each participant shared as important.

Summary

According to Annesi (1996), a total of 50% of individuals entering regular exercise will not remain through six months. Extensive research conducted by Dhurup & Surujlal (2010) claims members with unmet needs are not likely to stay at a facility where they are not relationally involved. Group exercise classes may very well be the link that fitness facilities need in their efforts to retain members, especially since it costs seven times more to gain a new member than keep an old one (Kulp, 2011).

The research conducted points toward the link between group exercise participants and instructors as a viable way to build the relationships desired by participants. The degree of cohesiveness and social support by the six participants varied, but was evident at some level in the study. Illustrated leadership qualities and connectivity were important to all six participants. Interviewed participants and journals by current group fitness instructors offer a valuable tool for training of instructors and membership services. This study provides support for the value of group exercise classes

contributing to membership retention in a medical non-profit fitness center setting.

Appendix A

Please answer the following questions:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Occupation: _____

Health Risks: _____

Years in group exercise classes: _____

Exercise above group exercise classes: _____

Membership years at the host facility: _____

Appendix B

Dear Group Class Participant:

I would like to invite you to participate in an interactive interview. This interview will assist to help instructors and managers awareness of factors that influence group participation and membership retention. This research will also be used as a graduate student thesis project at James Madison University. Your help in this study will aid in the understanding of what group exercise participants perceive as important in their group exercise class experience. This interview will then be used by the Group Fitness Coordinator as a tool to train group fitness instructors through direct feedback given in the interviews.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will not be restricted on the basis of race, gender, age (participants must be 18 years old or older) or any other characteristics. Sharon Stiteler will be conducting this research. The interview will take approximately 30- 40 minutes to complete and will be audio taped to ensure accurate data analysis. The purpose of this research is to explore the perception of group exercise participants. The results will be used to enhance your group exercise class enjoyment.

The research is also being conducted in fulfillment of degree requirements at James Madison University to receive a Master of Science in Sports/Recreation Leadership.

Thank you for your help on this important project. Please contact Sharon Stiteler by email (ssiteler@augustahealth.com) or phone (540-292-7052) to set up your confidential interview. Only one participant per chosen class will be interviewed.

Sincerely,
Sharon Stiteler
Group Fitness Coordinator/JMU Graduate Student

Part Two:

Cover Letter: Dear Group Exercise Participants/Instructor

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sharon Stiteler, Group Fitness Coordinator, Augusta Health Lifetime Fitness Center and Graduate Student at James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to gain a better

understanding and to explore factors that contribute to membership retention in group exercise classes. The results will be used as a training tool to enhance your group class enjoyment.

Research Procedures

This study consists of an interactive interview to gain your perspective on factors that influence your group exercise class participation. The interviews will be audio taped to ensure accurate data collection and procedures.

Instructors will be asked to journal their perception of class interactions amongst the participants for 4 classes (1 per week for 4 weeks).

Time Required

Participation in this study will require 30-40 minutes of your time.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study.

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study will be to train instructors on factors that are important in group exercise classes to increase participants' enjoyment and aid in membership retention efforts at Augusta Health Lifetime Fitness Center.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be used for training purposes and for a thesis project at James Madison University. While individual responses are anonymous and data is kept in the strictest confidence. No identifiable information will be collected from the participant and no identifiable responses will be presented in the final form of this study.

All data will be stored in a secure location only accessible to the researcher. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. At the end of the study, all records will be shredded within 3 years.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate.

Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. However, once your responses have been submitted and anonymously recorded you will not be able to withdraw from the study.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Sharon Stiteler

Augusta Health Lifetime Fitness Center &

Department of Kinesiology

James Madison University

Email: ssiteler@augustahealth.com

Telephone: (540) 292-7052

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. David Cockley

Chair, Institutional Review Board

James Madison University

(540) 568-2834

cocklede@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about this study. I have read this consent and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age. I am consenting to participate in this research.

Sharon Stiteler _____

Name of Researcher (Printed) Date

Participant/Volunteer (Printed) Date

Participant/Volunteer (Sign)

Appendix C

Interview Questions:

1. What are the reasons you prefer to go to group exercise classes?
2. How do you perceive the class relationships?
3. Explain the class interactions with each other and the instructor?
4. How does the leadership ability of the instructor affect your attendance in the class?
5. How supportive is the instructor and other participants?
6. How does the group exercise instructor illustrate leadership qualities in the class?
7. How does the instructor show that he/she cares about each individual participant in the class?
8. How do you feel the instructor and other participants support you in the class?
9. How do you react if the instructor of the class changes?
10. How would you feel if the participants of the class changed?
11. What would you do if this facility did not offer group exercise classes?
12. When your class is canceled and you are unaware before you go, how do you feel and what do you do instead?
13. Please feel free to give me any information I did not ask you about your group exercise experience.

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