Some new directions in walking research

CURRENT APPROACHES

Researchers and institutions seeking to encourage regular walking routines generally focus on one of the following approaches.

“Active Living” approach

This approach investigates how various environmental factors influence walking behavior, focusing on:

- Identifying specific environmental attributes associated with walking/physical activity.
- Examining degree to which people accurately perceive these objectively measured environmental attributes.

Research suggests that environmental factors such as accessibility, safety, aesthetics, and climate play a role in determining levels of physical activity (Brown, Werner, Amburgey, & Szalay, 2007; Eyster, Brownson, Bacak, & Housmann, 2003; Giles-Corti & Donovan, 2003; Humpel, Owen, Iverson, Leslie, & Bauman, 2004).

As a result, practitioners work on design-based solutions, advocating for more thoughtful design of new communities or, in many cases, the renovation of existing communities.

Clinical or Prescription-based approach

Prescription-based approaches, focus on individual-level factors (e.g., knowledge, motivation, skills) that influence walking. This approach uses a fairly standard set of behavioral strategies, such as:

- Providing declarative information about the physical health benefits of exercise and suggested levels of physical activity.
- Examining effectiveness of specific strategies, or combinations of strategies, such as goal setting, use of schedules, social support, contingency contracts, and self-monitoring of activity.

While many of these strategies are effective at initiating a walking routine, research indicated that they are weaker at encouraging long-term adherence (Dishman, 2001; Morjan & Dishman, 2001).

WHAT’S MISSING?

While existing approaches continue to provide valuable insights, there are several issues that need more attention, including:

Are some walking environments better than others?

While regular exercise is strongly associated with both physical and psychological health (Biddle, 1995; Boutcher, 2000; Fox, 1999), research also suggests that exposure to nature may offer special benefits, including improvements to cognitive functioning and psychological well-being (R. Kaplan, 2001; S. Kaplan, 1995; Ku, 2001; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Tennesen & Cimprich, 1996; Wells, 2000).

Based on these findings, some researchers are suggesting that physical activity in natural environments produces synergistic effects (Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005).

People also may have an easier time maintaining regular walking routines in certain types of environments. For instance, environments that simultaneously allow one to be physically active and accomplish other valued tasks may be better able to encourage regular walking.

How do we cope with existing, non-ideal environments?

Some communities lack the resources and political will needed to pursue the large-scale, design-based solutions being proposed. Therefore, it is important to develop strategies that help individuals maintain walking routines in existing settings.

How do we keep familiar environments interesting?

Eventually even extremely walkable settings can become predictable and boring. This may occur as one becomes more familiar with a setting or during certain time of the year. Strategies that keep individuals interested and engaged in the setting may have the effect of making walking more fascinating and thus easier to sustain.

How do we cope with seasonal fluctuations?

While mild temperatures and beautiful vistas may be associated with increases in physical activity, many individuals do not reside in such settings. Instead, they must deal with significant seasonal and weather changes. Crafting strategies that help individuals reframe seasonal changes and cope with weather challenges is essential if we believe that year-round physical activity is important in all climates.

THE WALKOUT INITIATIVE

To generate new ideas, the Environmental Psychology Lab at the University of Michigan has launched the WalkOut Initiative.

Some current research

The study described on the poster below addresses some of the gaps in current research. It worked with experienced walkers and asked about:

1. Strategies most useful in helping people to walk regularly.
2. Types of environments they found supported regular walking.

The study also tested a new methodology, the Conceptual Content Cognitive Mapping (3CM) technique (see Figure A for sample output). 3CM is a relatively new interview technique designed to assess “what’s in people’s heads” about a given issue. 3CM has several advantages over more traditional survey and interview techniques, including:

1. 3CM allows researchers to closely explore a single individuals’ knowledge about an issue.
2. 3CM is reported to be enjoyable by many participants.
3. 3CM allows participants to immediately gain personal insight.

Figure A. Example of an individual 3CM map

Future research

Upcoming studies will investigate how a technique called mental engagement may help to support regular outdoor physical activity. This research will ask:

1. Can strategies that facilitate engagement in the environment be effective at initiating and sustaining outdoor walking routines?
2. Do engagement strategies promote greater improvement to psychological health than more traditional approaches?