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Psychosocial impact of involvement in the Special Olympics



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ABSTRACT

Existing evidence suggests that people with intellectual disabilities are vulnerable to low self-esteem leading to additional psychosocial issues such as social exclusion and stress. Previous research into the involvement of Special Olympics (SO) of people with intellectual disabilities has indicated positive psychosocial outcomes. Involvement in sport is known generally to have psychological and social benefits. This study aimed to compare the psychosocial impact of involvement in sport through the SO to no or limited sports involvement, for a sample of people with intellectual disabilities. A cross sectional design was employed comparing three groups, SO, Mencap Sports, and Mencap No Sports on the variables: Self-esteem, quality of life, stress levels and social networks. One hundred and one participants were recruited either through the SO or Mencap. Data were collected through the completion of validated questionnaires by one to one interviews with the participants. Analysis revealed that self-esteem, quality of life, and stress were all significantly associated with SO involvement. Logistic regression analysis was used to explore whether scores on these variables were able to predict group membership. Self-esteem was found to be a significant predictor of group membership, those in the SO having the highest self-esteem. The findings provide further evidence of a positive association between sport involvement and increased psychological wellbeing, especially for those involved in the SO. The implications of these findings for practice and future research into the relationship between sport and psychological wellbeing within the learning disabled population are considered.

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1. Introduction

Health outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities have been shown to be inferior to those of the mainstream population (Anderson et al., 2013; Emerson et al., 2009; Evenhuis, Henderson, Beange, Lennox, & Chicoine, 2000). In addition to poorer physical health, people with intellectual disabilities are estimated to experience significantly more mental health problems (30–50%) than the general population (Smiley, 2005). In a large scale audit of the mental health of young people with intellectual disabilities in the UK, Emerson and Hatton (2008) found that the high levels of mental health problems in this population were ‘not a consequence of their learning disability, but simply because of their increased chances of being exposed to poverty, social exclusion and more challenging family environments’ (p. 7). Similar findings have been replicated

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in other countries across the world, e.g. Australia (Howlett, Florio, Xu, & Trollor, 2014); Brazil (Surjus & Campos, 2014) and the US (Scott & Haverkamp, 2014).

The pathway to a reduced quality of life has been well documented, with social isolation resulting from poor social support networks being clearly implicated (Lippold & Burns, 2009). Intra-personal resources have also been shown to mediate between vulnerability and resilience in facing challenging life circumstances, with low self-esteem being highly prevalent in this population (Paterson, McKenzie, & Lindsay, 2012). Such contextual and intra-personal circumstances contribute to potential heightened levels of stress and an iterative process resulting in a self-maintaining system of reduced quality of life.

It is recognised within the wider population that engaging in sport and exercise is an effective intervention to address poor psychological well-being. Studies have shown that engaging in sport significantly lowers levels of depression, anxiety, stress, panic disorder, negative affect, distrust and anger (e.g. Hassmen, Koivula, & Uutela, 2000; Gilman, 2001; Paluska & Schwenk, 2000). Not only has involvement in sport been shown to ameliorate existing psychological problems, but it has also been shown to strengthen resilience factors (Alvord & Grados, 2005). For example, increased self-esteem has been found to be positively correlated with physical activity and sports involvement (Fox, 1999; McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, & Kawachi, 2006). Such findings are especially important when considering how to support disenfranchised and potentially vulnerable groups.

Within the context of the general population, sport involvement leads to engaging with wider networks (team mates, competitors, coaches, family, peers, and officials) which form a multifaceted and complex social network, adding to the general psychological well-being of the participants (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad & Partridge, 2002; Côté, 1999; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Such involvement has not only individual benefits but also potentially societal ones. For example, Bailey (2005) found in a sample of young people that involvement in physical education programmes had a powerful effect not just on upon their self-esteem and confidence, but also on acceptance by their peers.

People with intellectual disabilities are clearly a population who may benefit from participation in sports and exercise, yet studies from across the globe have demonstrated that participation in sport and exercise for this population is consistently lower than the average population (e.g. Barnes, Howie, Mcdermott, & Mann, 2013; King, Shields, Imms, Black, Arden, 2013; Marquis & Baker, 2015; Sports England, 2010). Sport and exercise interventions to date have been largely targeted at weight management and the use of this type of intervention to address wider psychological issues as yet remains a neglected area (Bartlo & Klein, 2011). Despite this recent reviews of the limited existing literature suggest good potential for such interventions. Four key papers have reviewed the studies researching sports and exercise within the learning disabled population (Bartlo & Klein, 2011; Hutzler & Korsensky, 2010; Johnson, 2009; Lancioni & O'Reilly, 1998). These reviews described similar benefits to the general population, including: (1) improved physical factors, e.g. aerobic capacity; gross motor function; physical fitness and endurance; skill levels; balance and muscle strength; (2) improved psychological factors, e.g. self-concept; body image; perceptions of self-efficacy; self-esteem; satisfaction; quality of life; and reduced maladaptive behaviour such as aggression; and (3) improved social factors, e.g. social competence; popularity; and high levels of parent satisfaction.

Nevertheless, the reviewers concluded that the literature exploring sports involvement for people with intellectual disabilities is narrow, and that further research of greater scientific rigour is needed, including larger sample sizes, adopting replicable methodologies. A lack of consistency of the methodologies used within these studies has been described as limiting comparison, although intervention studies were described as being of moderate scientific quality (Hutzler & Korsensky, 2010). Additionally much of the qualitative research exploring the benefits of sports involvement for people with intellectual disabilities has focused upon parental and coach views, not the participants themselves.

In contrast to the research evidence base the Special Olympics (SO) is a well-known, global organisation with 3.5 million participating members (Special Olympics, 2013). The SO is the main international movement for sport and people with intellectual disabilities and welcomes both children and adults with intellectual disabilities, inviting them to compete in events regardless of skill level. The aims of the SO are to provide quality sports training, and to encourage fitness, commitment and discipline through sport, with the opportunity to participate, train and compete in a wide variety of sports and events. Additionally the organisation promotes the integration of disabled and non-disabled participants through their inclusive sports programme.

Hence, in terms of a context in which to study the psychological benefits of sports involvement the SO offers a unique and potentially rich opportunity. Previous research suggests that the SO offers added value over and above sports participation as a consequence of its large organisational infra-structure and well-established supportive culture (e.g. Weiss, Diamond, Denmark, & Lovald, 2003). However, this is yet to be examined empirically. The aim of this research was to investigate the relationship of psychological resilience and vulnerability factors of involvement in the SO compared to being involved in sport not through the SO, and no sports activity.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The study employed a cross-sectional design comparing three groups of people with intellectual disabilities; those involved in sport via the SO, those involved in sport but not via the SO and those not involved in sport. The predictor variables

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