



Exploring the experience of introjected regulation for exercise across gender in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study explored the experience of introjected regulation (i.e. a controlling motivational regulation in which people act due to internal pressures that are regulated by contingent self-esteem; [Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 54–56]) in relation to sport and exercise in mid-adolescence.

Methods: Adolescents reporting strong introjected regulation of sport and/or exercise relative to their peers were identified using quantitative questionnaires, and invited for interview. Semi-structured interviews were recorded with 10 boys and 8 girls (mean age 14 years), transcribed verbatim, and analysed using an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Results: Introjected regulation accompanied high levels of self-determined motivation, and was associated with high levels of physical activity in the present sample. Two major themes emerged: (i) gender differences in the basis for introjected regulation; and (ii) differences in the reasons and goals underpinning self-determined versus introjected regulations for exercise. In boys, introjected regulation was largely related to social factors, such as avoiding social disapproval and attaining ego enhancement. Girls rarely exercised with their friends, and introjected regulation more commonly reflected the partial internalization of a health and fitness rationale. In many cases, self-determined and introjected regulations were underpinned by different goals or reasons, supporting the importance of assessing an individual's multiple motives towards activities.

Conclusions: Introjected regulation for exercise was associated with higher than expected levels of participation in sport and exercise, regardless of whether it was founded on contingent self-worth, or the partial internalization of adaptive reasons for exercise. The implications of social control on future exercise participation are discussed.

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Introduction

Declining physical activity levels in Western societies are an increasing problem for public health. Inactivity is implicated in the development of numerous life-threatening or debilitating diseases, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and an increased risk in obesity ([DoH], 2004). As exercise levels tend to decrease over the lifespan, low levels of exercise in childhood and adolescence are of particular concern. For example, in the UK, it is estimated that while 75% of boys and 52% of girls at age 11 are sufficiently active for health, by young adulthood these proportions drop to only 58% and 35% respectively (Biddle, Gorely, Marshall, Murdey, & Cameron, 2004; DoH, 2004).

Motivation underpins purposeful behaviour and has been shown to be useful in understanding behaviour change, and in differentiating between adaptive and maladaptive outcomes in physical activity settings (see Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007). Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991) is a framework of motivation that proposes motivation to be multidimensional, and reside along a continuum of self-determination ranging from amotivation (i.e., when a person lacks the motivation to act) through extrinsic motivation (i.e., when a person acts to attain separable outcomes), to intrinsic motivation (i.e., when a person acts for the interest inherent within a particular activity). Four distinct types of extrinsic regulation are defined which vary in the degree to which they are self-determined. From the least to the most self-determined these are: external regulation (i.e., acting to avoid punishment or gain rewards), introjected regulation (i.e., acting to avoid feeling guilty, or to obtain contingent self-worth),

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identified regulation (i.e., acting as one feels it is personally important) and integrated regulation (i.e., behaviours that contribute to defining who one is) (see Ryan & Deci, 2000 for a review). Within SDT, greater self-determined motivation is hypothesized to positively predict adaptive outcomes such as increased behavioural engagement and enhanced psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research in the context of exercise has supported this premise by showing autonomous motivation towards exercise to positively predict an array of adaptive outcomes including physical self-esteem (e.g., Wilson & Rodgers, 2002), more positive attitudes towards exercise (e.g., Wilson, Rodgers, Blanchard, & Gessell, 2003) and objectively assessed behavioural engagement (e.g., Standage, Sebire, & Loney, 2008).

Beyond childhood, it is argued that the majority of our behaviours are extrinsically motivated, as few activities are undertaken purely for pleasure (Mullan & Markland, 1997). However, extrinsic motivation may still result in positive outcomes if they are located towards the self-determined extreme of the motivational continuum, as motivation becomes more self-endorsed and the external factors driving behaviour are taken on board as personally valued and meaningful (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). The basis for movement along the continuum stems from the proposal that people have an innate tendency to integrate themselves within their environment, such that behaviour that is initiated through external regulation (e.g., abiding by societal rules to avoid punishment or gain rewards) can become more autonomous if these rules can be adopted as having personal meaning, and to reflect one's identity (e.g., in adopting societal values as a personal moral code). This dynamic process by which individuals may move through the continuum of motivation to become more self-determined in their actions is termed *internalization*, and is of particular interest to the study of behaviour change (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The study of motivation for sport and exercise is pertinent to adolescence, as while this population is generally more active than adults, motivation and behaviour may be less closely aligned; as a result of mandatory physical education lessons and/or parental control few adolescents are permitted to become completely sedentary regardless of their own preferences. Thus, exercise is likely to be driven by external regulation to some extent. The resultant implication for long-term participation is that once such external controls are removed, adolescents are unlikely to maintain their existing exercise levels into adulthood unless the motivation to do so has been at least partially internalized (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991). Accordingly, gaining a better understanding of the factors that help adolescents to embark on the process of internalization to become more self-determined in their motivation towards exercise could provide valuable information for the development of public health interventions.

Recently, an in-depth understanding of introjected regulation has been singled out as holding much promise for researchers and practitioners aiming to encourage more autonomous functioning in adolescents in relation to exercise (Standage, Gillison, & Treasure, 2007; Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Vandereycken, 2005). Introjected regulation is considered to be a relatively controlling form of motivation in which behaviour is regulated by internal sanctions and/or pressures that are directed towards attaining reward (e.g., ego enhancement and pride) or avoiding punishment (e.g., guilt and shame) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In observational research, introjected regulation has been associated with short-term but not with long-term behavioural persistence (e.g., Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001). However, introjected regulation also represents the first step in the adaptive process of the internalization of behaviour, and thus may play a pivotal role in how adolescents first come to adopt activities introduced to them by others, such as health behaviours (Deci et al., 1994; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Indeed, it is argued that without external influences driving the early stages

of behaviour change, an individual may not gather sufficient experience to become competent and familiar with the new activity, an essential precursor to internalization. Past research has quantified introjected regulation in adolescent samples through questionnaire studies (e.g., Pelletier et al., 2001; Sheldon & Betencourt, 2002; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2006). However, no qualitative studies could be identified that explored this specific regulation in-depth with school-aged adolescents.

To obtain insight into adolescents' experience of introjected regulation towards sport and exercise, the present study set out to analyse interview data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a method of analysis that can be used to investigate the process that individuals use to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As such, it is particularly well suited to the study of motivation as advanced by SDT, which is based on individuals' subjective perceptions of their environment and their reactions to it rather than its objective attributes (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The IPA method typically involves a small number of cases, as it is not so much concerned with generalisations but with investigating the meaning that particular events or situations hold for different people. A phenomenological approach has been used to good effect in other areas of psychology to obtain in-depth descriptions of adolescent experience (e.g., Kinavey, 2006; Peterson, Sword, Charles, & DiCenso, 2007). Our aim was to explore the broad research question: "*what reasons and goals for undertaking sports and exercise underpin introjected regulation in adolescents?*".

Method

Participants

Participants were Year 9 students recruited from two large coeducational secondary schools in South West England (M age = 14.24; SD = 0.30). Both schools served towns in rural areas, and had a low number (<2%) of students from ethnic minorities. School A served students with slightly below average socio-economic status (SES) indicated by a high entitlement to free school meals, and School B served students with slightly above average SES. Ethical approval was granted from the local Research Ethics Committee. Written consent for questionnaire completion was provided by Head Teachers of each school acting in loco parentis, and by both parents and students for those students attending interviews.

Measures

To identify students exhibiting high levels of introjected regulation for interview, all students in the year group were asked to complete a brief questionnaire assessing their motivation towards exercise (BREQ-2; Markland & Tobin, 2004). The BREQ-2 consists of 19 items relating to the 5 types of regulation identified by SDT (i.e., amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation). Responses were recorded on a five point Likert-type scale anchored from 0 (*not true for me*) to 4 (*very true for me*). Adequate factorial validity and reliability has been previously reported for the BREQ-2 in a sample of 404 UK school children (M age = 13.25 years; range = 11–15 years; Gillison & Standage, 2005). To obtain a sample of students reporting high introjected regulation relative to the cohort average, and a sufficient pool of participants to account for those declining to be interviewed, students reporting the highest 15% of scores for introjected regulation were invited for interview (47 students).

Procedure

The study was presented to all students in the year group, emphasising that the research was optional, and that their

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