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Psychology of Sport and Exercise 8 (2007) 836–853

Psychology

OF SPORT AND EXERCISE

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The relationships between body mass and body image and relative autonomy for exercise among adolescent males and females

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Received 31 May 2006; received in revised form 18 October 2006; accepted 3 November 2006

Available online 16 January 2007

Abstract

Objectives: This study examined the impact of body mass and body image on autonomous motivation for exercise among adolescents. It was predicted that body mass and body size discrepancies would be curvilinearly related to relative autonomy because, from a self-determination theory perspective, being or perceiving that one is under- or over-sized would be experienced as pressure to conform to culturally transmitted standards of an ideal physique, undermining one's sense of autonomy.

Design: Cross-sectional comparative study.

Methods: Fifty males (mean age 16.90) and 48 females (mean age 16.88) completed measures of relative autonomy for exercise, discrepancies between perceived and ideal body size, body mass index and physical activity.

Results: Hierarchical polynomial regression analyses showed that among males relative autonomy was predicted by both body mass and body size discrepancies. The relationships took an inverted-u form: autonomy was at its maximum when body mass index was around 18.50 and when body size discrepancies were zero. Among females, relative autonomy was predicted by body size discrepancies alone and the relationship was r-shaped: autonomy increased as body size discrepancies became less negative, reaching a maximum and leveling off when the discrepancy was +1.

Conclusions: The gender difference in the effect of body mass and perceived body size discrepancies on autonomous motivation for exercise could be explained by different socio-cultural expectations for males

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and females in Western societies. For females the cultural norm is a thin and toned physique whereas for males it is a muscular mesomorphic build that is neither thin nor fat.

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Keywords: Self-determination; Body size; Discrepancies; Physical activity

Introduction

Self-determination theory (SDT) has become a popular framework for understanding exercise and physical activity participation. Most of the research that has applied the theory to this domain has focussed on either the consequences of self-determined versus controlled motivation (e.g., Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002) or on the socio-environmental factors that promote perceptions of self-determination (e.g., Wilson & Rodgers, 2004). Some research has examined the effects of psychological need satisfaction on self-determination for exercise (e.g., Wilson, Rodgers, Blanchard, & Gesell, 2003) but the literature on other intrapersonal influences on self-determination for physical activity is noticeably lacking. Body-related concerns are becoming increasingly prevalent in Western societies (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001, 2003a) and the media promotes exercise as a means of achieving the ideal physique (Lindeman, 1999). Thus concerns about the body represent intrapersonal factors that are likely to have motivational consequences. The aim of the present study was to extend previous research by Ingledew, Hardy, and de Sousa (1995) and Ingledew and Sullivan (2002) on the effects of body mass and body image on exercise participation motives in order to examine gender differences in the influence of actual body size and perceived body size discrepancies on self-determined motivation for physical activity among adolescents.

There is considerable research evidence that participation in physical activity decreases during adolescence (e.g., Kimm et al., 2000; Kristjansdottir & Vilhjalmsón, 2001; Telama & Yang, 2000). In parallel to this decrease in exercise behaviour, there is evidence for a significant increase among young people in concerns about their weight and an increase in negative body image as adolescents get older (Berg, 1999; Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Ingledew & Sullivan, 2002; Smolak & Levine, 2001). It has been found that both boys and girls who have a larger body mass index desire to be thinner (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001). Negative body image during adolescence places both sexes at risk of a number of problems, including depression (Noles, Cash, & Winstead, 1985) and disordered eating behaviours (Rosen, 1990).

Dissatisfaction with body size has been shown to be related to exercising for weight management reasons (Cash, Novy, & Grant, 1994; Ingledew et al., 1995; Ingledew & Sullivan, 2002; McDonald & Thompson, 1992; Smith, Handley, & Eldredge, 1998). However, being motivated to exercise for such extrinsic reasons as losing weight could be experienced as self-imposed pressure to engage in physical activity, robbing the person of a sense of autonomy and ultimately leading to a reduced likelihood of long-term engagement. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991), there are various forms of extrinsic motivation that can be described as lying along a continuum of relative autonomy, or self-determination, reflecting the extent to which the regulation of a behaviour has become internalised and integrated into the person's sense of self so that they feel that they are engaging in the behaviour freely, with no sense of compulsion and in accordance with their personal values.

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