

# Subjective theories of exercise course instructors: causal attributions for dropout in health and leisure exercise programmes

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## Abstract

*Objectives:* Dropout is a major problem in exercise programmes. Investigations have usually focused on exercise participants. The present study examines dropout from the perspective of exercise course instructors.

*Design:* Course instructors' cognitions about why participants quit their course were examined. Instructors evaluated a number of possible reasons for dropout and assessed the dropout rate in their courses.

*Sample:* Instructors of exercise classes ( $N=343$ ).

*Method:* Self-reported cross-sectional mailed survey.

*Results:* Cluster analysis supported three different types of exercise course instructors. Type 1 attribute the participants' quitting to external reasons ('self-protecting type'). Type 2 evaluate all potential causes as irrelevant ('disregarding type'). Type 3 assign equal weight to internal and external reasons, seemingly reflecting an adaptation to situational requirements ('adaptive type'). Type 3 exercise course instructors report the highest increase in number of participants. They were therefore identified as successful in motivating and attracting participants to their programmes.

*Conclusion:* Exercise course instructors' subjective theories about reasons for dropout may influence their ability to motivate individuals to remain in their programmes or attract them to programmes.

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*Keywords:* Exercise course instructors; Dropout; Subjective theories; Attributions; Cluster analysis; Motivation

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## Introduction

Even though many people manage to initiate a regular exercise or physical activity programme, only few succeed in maintaining this activity over extended periods of time. Almost half of those who begin a supervised exercise programme quit within the first six months (Dishman, 1991). Apparently, it is very difficult to motivate participants to maintain an activity for the long-term (Brawley & Rodgers, 1993). In fact, most exercise course instructors find it much easier to attract people to an activity programme than to keep them in (Willis & Campbell, 1992).

Numerous studies have identified risk factors for dropout from physical activity programmes. These studies have usually examined course participants' motivational and volitional dispositions for exercise involvement (for reviews see Dishman, 1994; Fuchs, 1996; Smith & Biddle, 1995). According to the findings determinants of exercise adherence can be grouped into three categories: personal attributes, environmental or social factors, and characteristics of the physical activity itself (Dishman, 1993). Recent investigations emphasised the *exercise course instructor's behaviour* as particularly important for keeping participants in exercise programmes (Laitakari & Asikainen, 1998; Nupponen & Laukkanen, 1998; Remers, Widmeyer, Williams, & Myers, 1995; Rinne & Toropainen, 1998; Vuori, Paronen, & Oja, 1998). Results of these studies show that participants' rating of perceived competence of their exercise course instructors, in particular their sensitivity and supportive behaviour, are crucial determinants of programme satisfaction and adherence (Duncan, Duncan, & McAuley, 1993; Willis & Campbell, 1992). Hence, course instructors seem to play a major role in motivating participants to continue the exercise programme (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Marinelli & Plummer, 1999; Williams & Lord, 1995).

To further understand the processes of adherence and dropout in exercise, it seems necessary to take a closer look at cognitions and behaviours of exercise course instructors. Three general questions guide the analyses reported in the present paper. First, what are the subjective theories that exercise instructors have about reasons for dropping out of the programme? Second, can different types of instructors be distinguished according to their preference for subjective theories on dropout? Third, what is the relationship between subjective theories and the ability to retain participants in the programme? The methodology employed was to ask exercise instructors for their explanations for dropout occurring in their course. This approach provides insights into what degree instructors are sensitive to motivational problems of their participants and whether they are aware of their own critical role in keeping participants in the programme. Being aware of reasons for dropout and recognising participants at risk for dropping out may be a major precondition for taking action to prevent it (Williams & Lord, 1995).

### *Subjective theories*

The notion of subjective theory is closely linked to attribution research in social psychology. How people explain events can affect how they behave in the future (Groeben, 1990). The ensemble of these explanations or attributions is called 'subjective theories', sometimes labelled as everyday theories, naive theories, or implicit theories. People develop such theories about the occurrence and causes of events and use them to explain events and act upon them. Similar to scientific theories, subjective theories can be conceptualised as enduring cognitive structures (Groeben, Wahl, Schlee, & Scheele, 1988). Subjective theories influence the planning of behaviour

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