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Using the construct of perceived autonomy support to understand social influence within the theory of planned behavior

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Abstract

Objectives: The present study examined the role of perceived autonomy support within the theory of planned behavior in a physical activity context. In accordance with self-determination theory [Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68–78], it was hypothesized that perceived autonomy support would predict intentions to participate in physical activity behavior directly and indirectly via attitudes.

Design: The study followed a prospective design where variables contained in the theory of planned behavior and past behavior were assessed at baseline and physical activity was measured 5 weeks later.

Method: Two hundred and thirty-five participants (male = 91, female = 144; $M = 20.28$ years, $SD = 6.59$ years) completed self-report measures of intentions, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, perceived autonomy support and behavior in a physical activity context.

Results: Results indicated that perceived autonomy support predicted physical activity behavior indirectly via the mediation of attitudes and intentions. Past behavior did not reduce the influence that perceived autonomy support exerted on physical activity.

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Conclusions: It was concluded that perceived autonomy support assists in the explanation of the social influences on intentions and physical activity behavior.

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Keywords: Autonomy support; Theory of planned behavior; Past behavior

Introduction

Self-determination theory is becoming a popular theory of human motivation in sport and exercise psychology (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Its popularity stems primarily from the fact that it can explain a great deal of variance in exercise and sport behavior on the basis of few principles related to psychological needs of self-determination, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, self-determination theory is attractive because it addresses limitations of other important theories of human motivation such as the theory of planned behavior (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2005). For example, research conducted by Chatzisarantis, Biddle, and Meek (1997) has shown that assumptions underlying self-determination theory are useful in understanding why intentions do not always translate into actions. The present study uses the construct of perceived autonomy support from self-determination theory to explain why Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior is insufficient in capturing social influence.

The theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior postulates that a person's intention to perform a given behavior such as physical exercise is a central determinant of that behavior (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Intention is an indicator of how hard people are willing to try, and of how much effort they are planning to exert toward performance of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Intention is determined by three conceptually distinct variables: attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Attitudes reflect a summary evaluation of a given behavior captured in evaluative dimensions such as good–bad, harmful–beneficial, pleasant–unpleasant (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Subjective norms reflect the perceived social pressure that individuals may feel to perform or not to perform a given behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Perceived behavioral control describes the perceived ease or difficulty associated with execution of future behavior (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Finally, the theory of planned behavior posits that perceived behavioral control predicts behavior directly only when behavior is not under complete volitional control and when perceived control reflects actual control accurately (Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

Assumptions underlying the theory of planned behavior have been corroborated by numerous meta-analytic reviews across a number of different behaviors (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Sheeran & Orbell, 1998) including physical activity (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002). Tests of the theory of planned behavior have provided strong evidence for the overall predictive validity of intentions, and have shown that attitudes and perceived behavioral control influence intentions and behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hagger et al., 2002). For example, in a meta-analysis conducted by Hagger et al. (2002) the effects (beta coefficients) of attitudes and perceived control

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