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The *why* and the *how* of goal pursuit: Self-determination, goal process cognition, and participation in physical exercise

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine goal process cognition as a mediator of the relationship between self-determined motivational ratings and strenuous exercise participation.

Design: Cross-Sectional Survey.

Methods: University students ($N = 535$) identified their most important exercise goal and rated this goal according to the nine goal process dimensions of the Goal Systems Assessment Battery (GSAB; [Karoly, P., & Ruehlman, L.S. (1995). Goal cognition and its clinical implications: Development and validation of four motivational assessment instruments. *Assessment*, 2, 113–129]), an instrument derived from Ford's [Ford, D.H. (1987). *Humans as self-constructing living systems: A developmental perspective on behavior and personality*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum] control systems model of self-regulation. Additionally, students completed measures of self-determination for exercise and leisure-time exercise participation. A multiple mediator model was tested using the Preacher and Hayes [Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2007a). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in simple and multiple mediator models. Manuscript submitted for publication; Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2007b). SPSS and SAS macros for estimating and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. Retrieved February 9, 2007, from <http://www.comm.ohio-state.edu/ahayes/SPSS%20programs/indirect.htm>] bootstrapping procedure.

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Results: The effect of self-determination for exercise on strenuous leisure-time exercise was fully mediated. Self-determination did not exert a significant direct effect and 72% of its total effect on strenuous exercise was indirect via the goal processes of self-monitoring, planning, and positive arousal for exercise goals.

Conclusions: Findings support the utility of goal process cognition as a means of understanding how self-determination influences strenuous exercise behavior.

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Keywords: Control systems theory; Goals; Multiple mediation; Self-determination

Introduction

Health behavior change has proven to be extremely difficult to accomplish, and the adoption and maintenance of leisure-time exercise has emerged as a particularly daunting task for the average individual. Although many people voice a desire to more frequently engage in exercise activities (Norcross, Mrykalo, & Blagys, 2002), few are able to successfully adhere to the exercise regimens that they initially adopt (Dishman, 1994). This is unfortunate because regular physical activity is associated with a range of beneficial health outcomes such as prevention of cardiovascular disease and obesity (Dietz, 2004; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). In light of the so-called “obesity epidemic” in the United States (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Johnson, 2002) and the disappointing results of many programmatic efforts to increase exercise adoption and adherence (Baranowski, Anderson, & Carmack, 1998), some researchers have called for a broadening of theoretical approaches and the inclusion of theory-derived mediating variables in the domain of exercise (Baronowski et al., 1998; Bauman, Sallis, Dzewaltowski, & Owen, 2002; Masse, Dassa, Gauvin, Giles-Corti, & Motl, 2002).

Despite the call for integration, achieving a synthesis of constructs from the diverse theoretical frameworks applied to the study of exercise remains a significant challenge. Karoly (1999) proposed that the complex system of goals and self-regulatory skills articulated by numerous investigators over the past 25 years (cf. Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bandura, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Karoly, 1993; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) might enable researchers to study motivationally relevant constructs across diverse but interconnected analytic levels (e.g., traits, motives, situations, etc.). The present research was designed to assess the utility of a *self-regulatory process perspective* as a means of enriching the capability of our theoretical frameworks for understanding exercise participation. Specifically, we sought to address the utility of goal process cognition to explain the link between perceptions of self-determination and exercise participation. In this manner, the present research addresses whether goal cognition can help to explicate how self-determination exerts its influence on exercise behavior.

Researchers using constructs derived from *self-determination theory* (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000) has consistently accounted for significant (and meaningful) variance in exercise behavior (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006; Li, 1999; Vallerand, 1997; Wilson, Rodgers, Blanchard, & Gessell, 2003). By contrast, goal-centered self-regulatory theory has been sparingly applied to the study of exercise. Thus, the present research holds the promise of combining an established theoretical paradigm with an emergent approach, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the human motivational system in the context of exercise strivings.

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