



Personal factors and perceived barriers to participation in leisure activities for young and adults with developmental disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Participation in leisure activities has been identified as a factor that favors inclusion in the community and it also contributes to a better quality of life. This study analyzed the influence of certain personal characteristics and environmental factors in the participation in leisure activities of youngsters and adults with developmental disabilities. A cross-sectional design was used with a convenience sample of 237 people, aged 17–65, living in the community. The participants completed the Spanish version of the Leisure Assessment Inventory, and information about the personal and disability-related factors was obtained through a questionnaire. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the personal factors, disability-related factors, and perceived barriers to leisure participation. The results show that participation in leisure activities is determined more by personal factors and perceived barriers than by disability-related factors.

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1. Introduction

Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2006 of the United Nations Organization (UN, 2006) affirms the obligation of the states to “identify and eliminate the barriers encountered by people with disabilities in the exercise of their rights” (p. 24). This obligation aligns with the models of human functioning endorsed by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF, World Health Organization, 2001) and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) (Schalock et al., 2010). In both models, contextual factors are included as an essential dimension. According to the ICF, contextual factors comprise environmental factors and personal factors that may affect a person with a health condition. Similarly, the AAIDD defines context as “the interrelated conditions in which people spend their daily life; the context includes environmental factors (physical, social and attitudinal environment) and personal factors (for example, age, sex, motivation, life styles, and educational level) that represent the individual’s entire vital environment, his or her performance in life activities, and it is related to the person’s functioning in society” (Schalock et al., 2010, p. 17). Therefore, from this perspective, the environment is considered a relevant and noteworthy factor influencing one’s participation and engagement in life situations, including leisure activities.

Currently, the available research on the impact of contextual factors on developmentally disabled youngsters’ and adults’ participation in leisure activities is limited. However, because environmental factors, as defined by the ICF (2001), refer to physical, social, and attitudinal surroundings across the lifespan, the potentially modifiable nature of such variables has allowed environmental factors to increasingly become an object of study (Verdonschot, de Witte, Reichrath, Buntinx, & Curfs, 2009). Moreover, it is important to understand the way in which environmental factors and characteristics of the individual interact to affect participation in recreational activities (Arvidsson, Granlund, & Thyberg, 2008).

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From the perspective of human functioning, individual characteristics influence the specific details of a person's life and lifestyle. Among these factors, age has been shown to affect participation in leisure activities. Zijlstra and Vlaskamp (2005) reported that older people with intellectual disabilities (ID) participated in fewer activities. At the same time, gender has not been found to affect the frequency, variety, or duration of leisure activities. According to Umb-Carlsson and Sonnander (2006), both men and women with ID participated more or less in the same types of leisure activities, although women participated more in specific activities, including going to the cinema, restaurants, or the library, reading books, and engaging in a hobby. Likewise, no differences were found between men and women with ID in the extent of physical activity; men and women were similarly inactive (Draheim, Williams, & McCubbin, 2002; Robertson et al., 2000).

Other studies have reported an association between the severity of the disability and participation in leisure activities. Specifically, motor problems, sensory deficits, and communication problems have been related to the quantity, variety, and quality of leisure activities in people with ID (Abells, Burbidge, & Minnes, 2008; Bray & Gates, 2003; Zijlstra & Vlaskamp, 2005). Concerning the type of disability, it has been shown that people with physical disabilities tend to have fewer opportunities to participate in leisure activities than people without ID (Lippold & Burns, 2009).

Participation in leisure activities can also be closely related to one's educational level and the type of schooling that one has received. Studies have revealed that the experience of ordinary schooling and secondary education can increase one's tendency to participate in leisure activities with their friends with no disability (Imms, Reilly, Carlin, & Dodd, 2009; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997; Orlin et al., 2010; Van Naarden Braun, Yeargin-Allsopp, & Lollar, 2006). It has also been shown that supported work programs provide people with ID more opportunities to establish new social relations and to show greater satisfaction and participation in leisure activities (Forrester-Jones, Jones, Heason, & DiTerlizzi, 2004). Nevertheless, it has been noted that the characteristics of the work setting may have a greater impact than the type of work on participation in leisure activities (Storey & Horner, 1991).

A common concept underlying all definitions of leisure is freedom, which refers to having control over what one wants to do in one's free time. However, people with developmental disabilities tend to have limited freedom to make their own choices. Instead, relatives and professionals tend to take over the responsibility of choosing the type of activities that people with ID can perform in their free time (Hawkins & Freeman, 1993; Zijlstra & Vlaskamp, 2005). Along similar lines, studies examining the influence of individual and environmental variables on self-determination have shown that it is the educational, work, and residential environment that surrounds a person (Chambers et al., 2007), rather than an individual's intellectual capacity (Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003), that determines one's freedom to choose one's own activities. For example, in a study on the relationship between environmental factors and opportunities to choose, Wehmeyer (1995) found that self-determination was significantly and positively related to the physical size of the residence; the larger the residential modality, the lower a person's degree of self-determination. Based on this observation, Wehmeyer (1995) concluded that people with ID who live semi-independently in community environments have a higher degree of self-determination. Therefore, one's level of self-determination may depend on how restrictive the environment, and on the availability of opportunities to choose, make decisions, and express preferences in this environment (Stancliffe, Abery, & Smith, 2000; Wehmeyer & Metzler, 1995).

Other studies have demonstrated that people with developmental disabilities report they "don't have enough time" and "they are not allowed" to participate in the leisure activities that they would like to carry out (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005; Renblad, 2002). However, it has been shown that leisure activities can help people with developmental disabilities to become more self-determined, because such activities are carried out in environments that present opportunities to choose (Dattilo, Kleiber, & Williams, 1998; McGuire & McDonnell, 2008; Modell & Valdez, 2002).

Various studies have revealed the impact of family income on participation in leisure activities. Research has shown that economically disadvantaged people participate less in leisure activities (Cordes & Howard, 2005; Kraemer, McIntyre, & Blacher, 2003; Van Naarden Braun et al., 2006).

Participation in leisure activities for adults with developmental disabilities is understood as the result of complex interactions between personal and environmental factors (ICF, 2001). However, few studies have analyzed the way which youngsters and adults with developmental disabilities perceive barriers to participation in leisure activities.

Emotional support from family, friends, and professionals has been found to relate to greater participation in leisure activities in people with disabilities (Heller, Miller, & Hsieh, 2002; Renblad, 2002). In their study, Abraham, Gregory, Wolf, and Pemberton (2002) stated that social support is associated with higher rates of participation in leisure activities and concluded that, although the family can boost participation, this would not increase more independent participation. Buttimer and Tierney (2005) also reported that not feeling accepted is perceived as a barrier to participation in leisure activities.

According to Heller (2002), the family is often the primary source of expanding social networks beyond the residences where people with ID live; the more involved the family is, the more likely a person is to participate in the community. Likewise, professionals play an important role in promoting participation in leisure activities, as they can both facilitate and hinder the relationship between the society and the person with ID.

Studies on the friendship networks of people with developmental disabilities indicate that most of their friends also have some kind of disability and that, in general, their most frequent contacts tend to be with their families and professionals (Forrester-Jones et al., 2004; Lippold & Burns, 2009). Prior studies have also shown that adolescents and adults with developmental disabilities have few friends of their own age and few relations beyond their school or workplace (Hall et al., 2005; Orsmond, Krauss, & Seltzer, 2004).

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