Social support, physical exercise and life satisfaction in women

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Received 1 October 2015; accepted 9 August 2016

Abstract This study examined the predictive relationship between perceived autonomy support from the family and fitness instructors, psychological needs, intrinsic motivation, health goal, regular physical activity and life satisfaction in a group of women. 355 physically active women aged 18–82 (M = 35.30, SD = 12.20) participated in the study. The results of the structural equation model showed that the results of the analysis of the structural equations model established a positive relation between perceived autonomy support and psychological needs, which related positively to intrinsic motivation. Likewise, intrinsic motivation related positively to health goal, which in turn related positively to regular physical activity, and finally, physical education showed a positive relation with life satisfaction. The results of this study show the need for social-cognitive physical interventions in order to maximize the benefits of physical exercise among women.

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KEYWORDS
Gender;
Physical exercise;
Autonomy support;
Basic psychological needs;
Motivation

PALABRAS CLAVE
Género;
Actividad física;
Apoyo a la autonomía;
Necesidades psicológicas básicas;
Motivación

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rlp.2016.08.002
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Please cite this article in press as: Moreno-Murcia, J. A., et al. Social support, physical exercise and life satisfaction in women. Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rlp.2016.08.002
La motivación intrínseca predijo positivamente la salud –que pronosticó positivamente la práctica de actividad física habitual– la cual predijo positivamente la satisfacción con la vida. Estos resultados revelan la necesidad de intervenir sobre el contexto social de la mujer practicante, en pro de maximizar los beneficios de la práctica de la actividad físico-deportiva.

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For over a decade, studies have indicated that self-reported physical exercise combined with satisfactory and stimulating experiences within the family circle are recommendable behaviors for an active and healthy lifestyle (Lee et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Silva, Lott, Mota, & Welk, 2014; Vallarand & Rousseau, 2001). This is reflected in the guaranteed physical and psychosocial benefits that self-reported physical exercise entails (Wójcicki et al., 2013), as well as the positive relation between physical exercise and greater life satisfaction (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007; Moraes, Corte-Real, Dias, & Fonseca, 2009). However, it has been pointed out in several studies that the level of exercise for women is currently lower than it is for men (Álvarez, 1992; García & Llopis, 2011), and that the proportion of women to men that manage to integrate the habit of exercise in their lifestyle (Kassavou, Turner, & French, 2013) as well as their perceived sports identity (Peiró, Valencia, Fos, & Devis, 2016) is also very low. This being the case, it is important to be aware of the amount of leisure time devoted to doing physical activity, and its role in improving motivation and increasing the feeling of competence in women. For these reasons, this study analyzed the possible influence of autonomy support from the family and fitness instructor with respect to basic psychological needs, intrinsic motivation and positive consequences on the physical and psychological health of women.

Social support, intrinsic motivation and positive consequences

The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) establishes that different types of motivation (on a continuum that goes from more to less self-determination) could be determined by social factors like motivational climate. Different studies (Kinnafick, Thogersen-Ntoumani, & Duda, 2014; Ntoumanis, Pensgaard, Martin, & Pipe, 2004; Vallarand, 2007) have observed that if a task is developed in a motivational climate, it could satisfy the basic psychological needs of autonomy (having the freedom to choose), competence (feeling effective) and relatedness, which are in turn associated to more self-determined forms of motivation. Therefore, through a motivational climate generated by social context (fitness instructor, family, peers, the media), women would be able to experience intrinsic motivation in physical exercise. This self-determined motivation could lead to positive consequences like better psychological health (Gunnell, Crocker, Mack, Wilson, & Zumbo, 2014), the habit of doing sport (Ryan, Federick, Lepes, Rubio, & Sheldom, 1997) and greater life satisfaction (Moraes et al., 2009). Added to this, having a high level of internalized motivation would favor the creation and maintenance of more positive behavioral patterns (Ng et al., 2012; Villardich, Torregrosa, & Cruz, 2011). With regard to health, the recent Goal Contents Theory (GCT; Ryan, Williams, Patrick, & Deci, 2009; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010) states that goals can be differentiated between extrinsic and intrinsic, and this line has created a questionnaire to measure them (Sebire, Standage, & Vansteenkiste, 2008). Interestingly, intrinsic goals (e.g. health management) are positively associated with the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and welfare (Sebire, Standage, & Vansteenkiste, 2009, 2011).

The general social context – mediated by gender relations and especially by figures of authority (fitness instructor) – also plays a fundamental role in satisfying or frustrating basic psychological needs – regarded as the psychological mediators between social factors and motivation. In this sense, based on the self-determined theory, Vallarand (1997, 2001) developed the Hierarchical Model of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation (HMIEM), which has marked a step forward in the study of motivation. This model relates different constructs and suggests that motivation is determined by social factors, such as the motivational climate transmitted by trainers, fitness instructors or teachers. It also proposes that each level of motivation can influence the closest level below, which means that global motivation can influence contextual motivation, and consequently contextual motivation can influence situational motivation. This means that the global and contextual motivation of women who do physical activity could be conditioned through the accumulation of positive situations (situational motivation), fostered by the family and fitness instructor through a motivational climate of autonomy support. For example, families’ positive opinion about women doing physical exercise and the positive emotion that fitness instructors transmit in each session could make women feel valued and respected within their social context. In this vein, different studies (Castillo, Molina-García, & Álvarez, 2013) suggest that intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, autonomy, self-esteem and life satisfaction are indicators of positive psychological states which improve people’s capacity to be happy. That is to say, these factors influence the acquisition of a balanced mental health in women, which can be defined as their having no psychological disorders, and a greater capacity to be satisfied with life.

At this point, it would be interesting to know what factors contribute for women to overcome these static intentions
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