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## **The Role of Psychological Factors in Recreational Sport Participation**

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**Abstract:** This paper made an attempt to investigate the role of psychological factors in recreational sport participation. Relevant theoretical and empirical evidence is reviewed to find out the psychological factors which influence in recreational sport participation. It would appear that an understanding of what motivates people to participate in recreational sport could be an important psychological factor to consider, especially when considering ways of increasing and maintaining participation in recreational sports. Motivation not only promotes participation in recreational sport because of the internal benefits experienced but it can help overcome perceived participation constraints. Other related factors include locus of control, flow states and goal orientations. In terms of flow states, the findings suggest that creating environments in which individuals can experience optimal flow states could improve prolonged participation in recreational sports. Specifically, a balance between the level of challenge and the skill needed to achieve is required so that individuals do not enter the anxiety or apathy states which may result in withdrawal from the activity. Motivational orientations, perceived constraints and socio - economic information may be key elements to consider.

**Keywords:** *Recreational Sports, Intra-personal, Inter-personal, Psychological Factors.*

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### **Introduction:**

It has been well documented that participation in regular physical activity such as recreational sport has positive effects on both physical (appearance, slimness, conditioned body) and psychological health and well-being (self-esteem, anxiety, depression, vitality, energy) (Bioché & Sarrazin, 2007; Khan et al, 2012; Koivula, 1999). The Department of Health stated that lack of physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality, following

high blood pressure, tobacco use and high blood glucose. The recommendation of 30 minutes at least five days a week helps prevent numerous physical and health problems. Recent research has revealed that young people who participate in sport every day are twice as likely to have high levels of happiness as those who participate in sport on two or fewer days in a week (McFall, 2012).

Overall, more involvement in sport can evidently have positive benefits for both young and old. Physical activity is therefore not only encouraged but is recommended as part of a healthy lifestyle (Khan et al, 2012). Physical activity includes all forms of activity and can range from everyday walking or cycling to active play or playing active games as well as organized and competitive sport (Department of Health, 2011).

Despite the established benefits of physical activity (regardless of age and gender) underlined by scientific research and government recommendations, the role of the psychological factors in physical activity specifically related to recreational sport participation remains limited. An understanding of these factors could provide important information on what causes people to initiate and maintain participation in recreational sports. Understanding these reasons could help practitioners engage more people in recreational sports for longer and help participants enjoy more the benefits of their participation. Whilst there is a lack of research on the psychological factors associated with recreational sport participation, there is a plethora of research exploring the psychological factors associated with elite sport participation. The findings of the research have highlighted that such factors as confidence, concentration, coping, motivation, commitment and support are key for participation at the highest level of sport (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002).

These psychological factors, whilst important for participation in elite sport, may not accurately reflect the psychological factors associated with participation in recreational sport. For the purpose of this study, we define recreational participation as engagement in regular physical activity that involves any organized sport with the focus on fun, learning, and others factors, including competition. What differentiates elite from recreational sport is that while competition and everything that relates to it (eg sponsorships, scholarships, medals, trophies, travelling) is a requirement of elite sport, it is not for recreational sport participation. Thus, this research aims to examine the specific psychological factors associated with recreational sport participation.

### **Psychological Factors in Recreational Sport:**

This section provides an overview of the available literature on recreational sport

participation. Kleiber and Hemmer (1981) examined the role of locus of control in recreational sport participation between males and females. According to the notion of locus of control, there are two dimensions: external and internal locus of control. Individuals with an external locus of control believe that their lives are controlled by outside forces, such as chance and other people. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that they are in control of their lives and are more resistant to outside forces. The study showed that females involved in organized teams were more internal in their locus of control than females who participated for fun. Females participating in organized teams also had a more internal locus of control than males participating in organized teams, but the significance was marginal. Finally, the males in the fun only category had the most internal locus of control of all the categories across genders. While Kleiber and Hemmer suggested that sport is generally a male dominated arena, it may require a strong internal locus of control for females to commit to organized sport teams. It is also possible that females with internal locus of control are more likely to be attracted by competitive recreational sport because they may be more confident and/or have higher levels of self-esteem. Motivation has also been the focus of research for recreational sport participation (Fortier, Vallerand, Brière & Provencher, 1995). The concept of motivation refers to individuals who are neither intrinsically or extrinsically motivated towards participation. Extrinsic motivation is represented in individuals who participate in sport for the external rewards or to avoid negative consequences, not for the fun of participating or an internal love for the sport. Individuals in this state of motivation perceive no control over their actions and question their very involvement in the activity.

Intrinsic motivation is of three types: to know, to accomplish things, and to experience stimulation. Intrinsic motivation to know relates to the pleasure and satisfaction experienced when learning, exploring, or trying to understand a new skill. Intrinsic motivation to accomplish things can be defined as engaging in an activity for the pleasure and satisfaction experienced when trying to accomplish a task. Finally, intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation occurs when someone engages in an activity to experience the stimulating sensations derived from the activity, such as fun and excitement. Results showed that the recreational sport participants demonstrated intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation and to accomplish things. In addition, females were more intrinsically motivated to accomplish things than their male counterparts whilst also demonstrating less external motivation and amotivation.

Research conducted by Stein, Kimiecik, Daniels and Jackson (1995) aimed to examine the

psychological antecedents of flow in recreational sport, specifically, the psychological factors of goals, competence, and confidence. The concept of flow is a psychological state that typically occurs in individuals who perceive a balance between the challenges associated with a situation and their ability to meet those challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). An individual can also experience non-flow which can be categorized into three contexts; anxiety, boredom and apathy. The anxiety non-flow state is experienced when the challenge of an activity is greater than the individual's average and the ability to cope is less than average. Boredom is experienced when the challenge is less than the individual's average and the abilities are greater. Apathy occurs when both the challenge and the individual's ability to cope are below average.

The findings from many studies showed that the flow and non-flow state of boredom resulted in a better perceived quality of experience within the competitive environment. Having higher levels of skill than the task requires (i.e. boredom non-flow) is considered helpful in competition and so the quality of the experience does not suffer. By contrast, only the flow state in which the challenge and skills required were balanced with the individual's average resulted in better quality experience within the learning environment. Therefore, when learning new activities individuals gain a better quality of experience when the challenge is greater than they normally face and the skills required are above what they have. This leads to individuals gaining a sense of accomplishment when they learn the skills needed to overcome the challenge. Whilst the boredom state may result in achieving good performance in a learning environment, individuals will not feel that they are learning anything new and therefore overall satisfaction will be low. The findings also showed that the psychological factors of competence, goals, and confidence were not identified as antecedents of flow experience in recreational sport. Stein suggested this may have been a result of the psychological antecedents measured being linked more to performance - flow is a more subjective state and not an objective occurrence.

In a study to examine the relationship between goal orientations, beliefs about the causes of success, and trait anxiety among high school, intercollegiate, and recreational sport participants, White and Zellner (1996) observed that the recreational male participants equated effort (working hard at the task) as the way to succeed in and enjoy their sport. Recreational sport participants reported using a task based goal orientation in which motivation to improve and train hard were important, as opposed to an ego orientation in which winning and proving oneself to be superior was more important. By contrast, high school and intercollegiate competitive or elite sport participants within this study were found

to have higher levels of ego orientation and thus outperforming others and winning was a primary motivation.

Recreational sport participants who placed a high emphasis on task (eg hard work with an emphasis on improving one's own skill level) were more likely to have participated in their sport longer and practiced their sport more in their free time (Duda, 1988). Duda also found that goal orientations were significantly varied as a function of participant gender and previous competitive sport involvement. Females were less oriented than males to ego goals, where outperforming others and winning are focal elements of participation. This was especially true among both males and females who had previously engaged in competitive sports. In line with achievement goal orientation (Nicholls, 1989), it was concluded that a task orientation would foster intrinsic motivation and in turn would lead to long-term participation in recreational sport. Alexandris and Carroll (1997) examined the constraints associated with recreational sport participation levels. Such constraints have been defined as "the factors that inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure" (Jackson, 1993). Time and availability of facilities are the most important constraints. In addition, individuals who did not participate in recreational sport were significantly more constrained than those who did, especially in terms of perceived health and fitness, competence, and knowledge levels. Help from significant others, such as family and friends and appropriate introductory programmes may overcome perceived barriers to participation. Findings indicated that perceptions of perceived constraints reduced with increased participation. It was thus concluded that if initial constraints can be overcome and individuals can begin participating in recreational sports, they would view fewer constraints, encouraging continued participation.

Finally, Lera-López and Rapún-Gárate (2011) found that participation in recreational sport was constrained by economic, sociological and psychological variables such as gender, age, time available to participate and motivational factors. Specifically, it was reported that women showed higher sports participation frequency than men and that as age increased so did participation frequency. Furthermore, motivational factors such as fun, slimness, fitness and competition have shown to increase participation.

### **Summary and Conclusion:**

The paper has highlighted a range of important factors associated with recreational sport participation ranging from intra-personal (eg confidence, motivation), interpersonal (eg coach support and others), and environmental (eg facilities, types of recreational sport programmes).

It is evident that a range of constraints to recreational sport participation exist including time and money as well as availability of facilities or indeed appropriate recreational sport opportunities.

It would appear that an understanding of what motivates people to participate in recreational sport could be an important psychological factor to consider, especially when considering ways of increasing and maintaining participation in recreational sports. Motivation not only promotes participation in recreational sport because of the internal benefits experienced but it can help overcome perceived participation constraints. Other related factors include locus of control, flow states and goal orientations. In terms of flow states, the findings suggest that creating environments in which individuals can experience optimal flow states could improve prolonged participation in recreational sports. Specifically, a balance between the level of challenge and the skill needed to achieve is required so that individuals do not enter the anxiety or apathy states which may result in withdrawal from the activity. Motivational orientations, perceived constraints and socio-economic information may be key elements to consider.

Whilst research into the psychological factors involved in recreational sport participation is comparatively limited, this paper has identified a number of factors that appear to have an important influence in recreational sport. This research, however, has only examined a very limited range of psychological factors. A comprehensive examination into the psychological factors in recreational sport participation that incorporates intra-personal, inter-personal and environmental dimensions would provide extensive empirical and practical information. From a practical viewpoint, better understanding of the psychological factors involved in recreational sport would help increase and maintain high levels of participation leading to a healthier and happier nation.

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