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Getting the Ball Rolling: Sport and Leisure Time Physical Activity Promotion Among Individuals with Acquired Physical Disabilities

Project Summary

Despite the physical and psychosocial benefits on engaging in sport as a form of leisure time physical activity (LTPA), only 3% of individuals with acquired physical disabilities participate in sport. This project was composed of four studies that the theoretical and contextual factors that influence sport participation in this population. The first study investigated the possible use of a specific behaviour theory, the Health Action Process Approach, and athletic identity, the extent to which people see themselves as athletes, to explain participation in sport. The second study explored how athletic identity could be built or lost after acquiring a physical disability. The third study explored influence of the perceived self and peers had on the participation in general leisure time physical activity after acquiring a spinal cord injury. The final study explored the way peer athletes with spinal cord injury responded to individuals who did not think of disability in the same manner. As a whole, this project enables a more nuanced understanding of the theoretical and contextual determinants of sport among individuals with acquired physical disabilities. This is necessary to better inform and identify opportunities for interventions that increase sport participation among this population.

Research methods

This project used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to address the research questions. In the first study, a cohort 201 individuals with acquired physical disabilities completed questionnaires to assess the Health Action Process Approach constructs and athletic identity. Sport participation was measured two weeks later using the LTPAQ-SCI. The model was tested using a statistical technique called Structural Equation Modeling. In the second study, eleven participants from the cohort participated in semi-structured interviews, informed by identity theory. Data were analysed using a qualitative method called narrative analysis. In the third study, fourteen participants completed semi-structured life story interviews. Interview data were analysed using narrative analysis. The final study used four vignettes, based on real individuals with spinal cord injury, to elicit peer athletes with SCIs' responses to people who may not see sport or disability in a similar manner. The responses to the vignettes were analysed using a narrative analysis.

Research results

In study one, higher instrumental (i.e., perceived health benefits of sport) and affective (i.e., perceived enjoyment) outcome expectancies, lower negative outcome expectancies (i.e., perceptions of negative outcomes like pain and injury), and higher athletic identity were significant predictors of intentions to participate in sport. Greater intentions were related to more plans to participate in sport, in turn, greater planning was related to greater confidence to overcome barriers to sport. Participants with greater confidence to overcome barriers accrued more minutes of sport participation two weeks later. In study two, three distinct perspectives on athletic identity emerged: *non-athlete*, *athlete as a future self*, and the *present self as athlete*. The *non-athlete* narrative focused on physical changes in the body and experienced difficulties

with disability and athletic identities that could not co-exist; more time was spent ruminating on past selves and lost possibilities for the future self as athlete. The other two narratives primarily focused on present sport behaviour and goals. Athletic identity was influenced directly by sport participation rather than loss of physical function; among those who returned to sport, peer athletes supported identity by encouraging new comers to play and by sharing sport experiences. In study 3, perceptions of disabilities were associated with different motivations and types of physical activity. Individuals who desired to walk in the future were drawn to functional types of physical activity based on the desire to maintain the body for a cure. In contrast, individuals who saw their spinal cord injuries as a challenge to be overcome were drawn to a variety of physical activity options, including sport and outdoor activities. In study 4, peer athlete mentors responded to the least hesitant sport vignettes by drawing on mentee narratives rather than privileging their own view of disability and sport. As such, peer athlete mentors provided individualized sport recommendations rather than a generic list of options for individuals. For the most resistant vignette, peer athlete mentors expressed one of two responses: one that challenged the mentees' disability narrative and one that allowed mentees to express their own story of disability.

Policy implications

Messages and sport programs should target Health Action Process Approach constructs to increase both motivation to try sport, as well as enhance sport participation, among individuals with acquired disabilities like spinal cord injury. In particular, messages and programs for non-sport participants should focus on enhancing perceptions of the outcomes of sport, such as it being enjoyable and beneficial for health, and increasing confidence in the ability to do sport-related tasks.

Perceptions of the self as an athlete and disability are influential on people's openness to sport after a spinal cord injury. Peer athlete mentors seem to be able to provide information that aligns with these perceptions. Consultation with peer athlete mentors may help shape and form sport promotion messages that are sensitive to these different perceptions of disability.

Next steps

Test the effectiveness of sport promotion messages based on the Health Action Process Approach. Incorporate elements of the Health Action Process Approach into current sport programs and test effectiveness.

Explore current peer mentorship programs to identify peers' informational training needs and support.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Canadian Wheelchair Sport Association
- Canadian Paralympic Committee
- Active Living Alliance