Reliability and Discriminant Validity of Subjective Norm, Social Support, and Cohesion in an Exercise Setting

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A number of social cognitive theories applied in the exercise domain hypothesize various social constructs to be important determinants of behavior (e.g., interpersonal behavior, personal investment, planned behavior). Social constructs are particularly important in the exercise domain because intervention strategies are often based on changing the social milieu within a group setting (e.g., Carron & Spink, 1993; King & Frederiksen, 1984; Kravitz & Furst, 1991; McAuley, Courneya, Rudolph, & Lox, 1994; Spink & Carron, 1993; Wankel, Yardley, & Graham, 1985). Moreover, 65% of those who exercise choose to do so in groups rather than alone (Stephens & Craig, 1990). It is not surprising therefore that considerable research has focused on the relationship between group/social constructs and exercise adherence. The three most popular social constructs in the exercise domain have been subjective norm (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), social support (Weiss, 1974), and cohesion (Carron, 1982). The following is a brief overview of each.

Social Constructs

Subjective Norm

Subjective norm is drawn from the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and appears to have both a broad and a narrow conceptual definition. The broad conceptual definition of subjective norm is "the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188). Sometimes, however, subjective norm is more narrowly defined as the perception that significant others think one should perform or not perform the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Godin (1993) reviewed 21 studies that have applied subjective norm to the exercise domain.

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Godin’s conclusion, as with other reviews (McAuley & Courneya, 1993; Rejeski, 1992), was that subjective norm is not a consistent predictor of intention to exercise when attitude and perceived behavioral control are statistically controlled. The majority of studies, however, do reveal a significant simple correlation between subjective norm and intention (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Gatch & Kendzierski, 1990; Godin & Shephard, 1986a, 1986b; Pender & Pender, 1986; Riddle, 1980; Theodorakis, 1992), indicating that perhaps the effects of subjective norm on intention are mediated by attitude and/or perceived behavioral control.

Social Support

Presently there is little agreement on a conceptual definition of social support (O'Reilly, 1988). A general definition proffered by Wallston, Alagna, DeVellis, and DeVellis (1983) is that social support “describes the comfort, assistance, and/or information one receives through formal or informal contacts with individuals or groups” (p. 369). An important distinction is made between social support and social network. Social network encompasses structural (e.g., type, number, density, proximity) and interactional (frequency, durability, and intensity) aspects of social relations whereas social support focuses on behavioral or functional aspects of social relations (i.e., the provision of supportive behavior). Thus social support is distinguished from social network in that the latter refers only to the linkages between people that may or may not provide social support (Israel & Schurman, 1990).

Social support was originally conceptualized as a unidimensional construct, but more recent efforts have analyzed social support into component functions (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). Although a variety of social support dimensions have been identified, Cutrona and Russell (1987) have argued that Weiss’ (1974) model of social provisions incorporates all of the major components proposed by other theorists plus one additional component. The six social support provisions proposed by Weiss are guidance (advice or information), reliable alliance (material assistance), reassurance of worth (recognition of competence and value), attachment (emotional closeness), social integration (a sense of belonging to a group that shares similar interests and concerns), and opportunity for nurturance (the sense that others rely upon one for personal well-being). Duncan and colleagues (Duncan, Duncan, & McAuley, 1993; Duncan & McAuley, 1993; Duncan, McAuley, Stoolmiller, & Duncan, 1993; Duncan & Stoolmiller, 1993) have provided empirical support for Weiss’ model in the exercise domain.

Cohesion

Cohesion is defined as “a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency of a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of goals and objectives” (Carron, 1982, p. 124). Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley (1985) view cohesion as a multidimensional construct consisting of four dimensions labeled group integration–social (closeness and bonding within the group related to social aspects of the group), group integration–task (closeness and bonding within the group related to group goals and objectives), individual attraction to the group–social (individual’s feelings about the group pertaining to aspects of social relationships), and individual attraction to the group–task (individual’s feelings