The Role of Outcome Expectancies in Participation Motivation

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An Overview

During the past decade, a substantial number of investigations have concerned the participation motives of individuals involved in physical activity (e.g., children's motives: improve skills, fun, fitness; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988; adults' motives: feel better, control weight, friendship; Myers, Weigel, & Holloway, 1989). The basic objective has been to understand and classify the sources of motivation of involvement. Also, researchers have examined reasons for quitting in contrast to reasons for joining in order to explain dropout from physical activity (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988).

Some investigations have attempted to classify participation motives (also called reasons for joining) into general motivational dimensions or factors that are common to a variety of activities (e.g., Alderman & Wood, 1976). Others have argued that these motives are more specific to each activity and have focused their investigations toward in-depth descriptions of each sport (e.g., swimming; Feltz, Gould, Horn, & Petlichkoff, 1982). Both approaches have emphasized the practical importance of studying participation motivation (PM), for example, being able to persuade people to initiate physical activity based upon the motivational influence of salient, desired outcomes. However, given this importance, why has there been no report in refereed journals of a systematic investigation of the power of these motives to predict future participation intentions or behavior? Although there is no obvious answer, it may be useful to understand the typical features and problems of the participation motivation research. The cumulative nature of these problems does not encourage systematic research because no firm theoretical bases have been established. This may be part of the reason why prediction of participation intention and behavior from various participation motives has not been forthcoming.

Participation Motivation Research

To date, the exercise science literature regarding reasons for joining/participation motives has tended to be descriptive in nature (e.g., Brodkin & Weiss,
The methodologies used in most studies have not been theoretically based. Theoretical explanations, when they have been used at all, have been applied to offer post-hoc explanations of descriptive results (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). To illustrate, Gould (1987; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988), in reviewing the participation motivation literature, proposed a three-tiered organizational model to examine what he called participation motives (also called surface-level motives). In this model, he incorporated three theories previously used in the literature: Maehr and Nicholls’ (1980) achievement orientation, Harter’s (1980) competence motivation, and Smith’s (1986) affective stress. Support for these models in exercise science, however, is limited. For example, support for Maehr and Nicholls’, and Harter’s theories, in relation to the organizational model, is correlational and descriptive (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). It has been found that children who adhere to competitive sport programs in school are more achievement oriented and have higher levels of self-competence than those children who have either dropped out of sport programs or have never participated (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). As yet, there appears to be little empirical support for Smith’s theory in relation to participation motivation (PM). It is only at this first tier of Gould’s model that any theoretical explanation regarding motivated behavior has been offered. Although intuitively appealing, the second (cost-benefit) and third (involvement-withdrawal) tiers, or components, of Gould’s organizational model have not been linked to theory. Gould’s (1987) own review of the participation motivation literature spoke to the nature of its problems. His review lists those limitations we have mentioned as well as others, and the interested reader is referred to his review.

As a whole, the literature largely addresses children and youth sport. By contrast, little attention has been paid to adult participation. The most noticeable absence is the failure to examine participation motives in community-based adult fitness programs. This is surprising in view of the current concern in government and the health sciences for the health of the aging population in North America (Dishman, 1988). Accordingly, both the need for more research concerning prediction of health-related behavior in sport and exercise and PM’s current limited ability in predicting intent and overt behavior served as impetus for this paper.

Objectives of This Paper

The purposes of the present paper are twofold: (a) to suggest a theoretically based approach for the examination of reasons for participation, and (b) to suggest a method of analysis based on that theoretical approach. This method is in direct contrast with descriptive methods typically used. The proposed theoretical approach and related method are drawn from the broad class of expectancy-value models that have demonstrated viability in health and mainstream psychological literatures (e.g., Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 1986; Maddux, Norton, & Stoltenberg, 1986; Strecher, DeVellis, Becker, & Rosenstock, 1986). The idea of using a theoretical approach and related method allows for a quantitative analysis that is more conceptually comprehensive than most descriptive procedures characteristic of research in the area. The proposed method also has the potential to be used in the prediction of behavioral intentions and behavior in future research.