The Importance of Social Support in Encouraging Physical Activity Among International Student Populations

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Introduction

Participation in physical activity (PA) and sport is associated with a number of physical, social, and psychological benefits (see, for example, Penedo & Dahn, 2005), and as a result, sport managers have sought to fully embed these activities into broader public health initiatives (Chalip, 2006). Unfortunately, many individuals face barriers to participating in sport and PA and, therefore, never achieve these benefits. This is particularly the case among racial minorities and recent immigrants (Lox et al., 2010). Therefore, the current study was undertaken to understand the roles that gender expectations and norms played in sport participation while studying in the US, as well as the ability of social support (from both international and domestic acquaintances) to encourage participation in moderate and vigorous PA.

Theoretical Framework

Despite the documented benefits of sport participation and risks of physical inactivity, previous literature suggests that international students are less likely to participate in sufficient levels of PA than domestic students are. When they do participate in PA on campus, though, international students demonstrate improved well-being and social skills (Cheng, et al., 2004). Unfortunately, international students face a number of well-documented barriers preventing their participation in sport, including English language ability, academic pressures, cultural adjustment, financial concern, perceived racial discrimination, and concern for their future (Crespo et al., 2001). In the current study, we sought to extend this understanding by considering other factors associated with PA: gender and social support.

Cultural norms dictate PA participation along gender lines (Evenson et al., 2008). As sport is a gendered activity, privileging men and their participation (Fink, 2008), we expected gender to also influence PA patterns among international students. Therefore, we first hypothesized that, relative to men, women international students would be less likely to engage regularly in moderate (H1a) and vigorous PA (H1b).

As acculturative stress, the negative affect felt when placed within a new cultural context, is often attributed to reduced PA levels in immigrant groups (Crespo et al., 2001). However, social support can help reduce the negative effects of this stress (Alvan et al. 1997). People who receive information about how to be physically active, emotional support for those activities, and have other engage in the activities with them are more likely to participate in PA than their counterparts (Lox et al., 2010). These effects are likely to be particularly relevant for international students; thus, we predicted: social support will be positively related with increased moderate (H2a) and vigorous PA levels (H2b).

Finally, scholars have argued for a multi-dimensional approach in looking at social support, as several factors can often affect its outcomes. For example, Robbins, Stommel, and Hamel (2008), found that age and gender can moderate the perceived value of social support in young women in sport, arguing that these young women valued support from teammates and coaches rather than family members. Following this logic, we hypothesized that gender will moderate the relationship between social support and moderate (H3a) and vigorous PA (H3b).

Method

We collected data from 215 Korean students studying at a major public institution in the US. The sample was limited to Koreans to reduce variance based on cultural differences. The sample included 58 women and 157 men, with a mean age of 29.45 years.
Participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire measuring their PA levels and social support in the US. Items were developed in English, translated to Korean, and back-translated for verification purposes before administration of the instrument, with respondents able to respond in either language as they felt comfortable. We measured social support using Chogahara’s (1999) scale, asking about support from Koreans (alpha = .84) and Americans (alpha = .87). We measured PA using the International PA Questionnaire.

Results

We first conducted a cluster analysis to understand the nature of social support the students received. Results showed three clusters: low social support (n=50), high Korean support (n=90), and high overall social support (n=75). The low social support group reported little support from both Koreans and Americans. The high Korean support group reported high support from Koreans, but low support from Americans. Finally, the high overall support group indicated high support from both groups.

We tested each of our hypotheses through a multivariate analysis of variance, with gender and social support clusters serving as the independent variables, and minutes engaged in moderate PA and vigorous PA serving as the dependent variables. The multivariate effects were significant for gender, F (2, 208) = 6.36, p = .002, and cluster membership, F (4, 416) = 2.98, p = .02, but not the gender by cluster membership interaction, F (4, 418) = .42, p = .80.

Univariate analyses indicated that women and men did not differ in their minutes of moderate PA, F (1, 209) = 3.56, p = .06. Thus, H1a was not supported. However, in support of H1b, men engaged in more minutes of vigorous PA than did women, F (1, 209) = 12.57, p < .001.

In support of H2a, people with high levels of social support (High Korean Support and High Overall Social Support) engaged in more moderate PA than did their counterparts with low levels of social support F (2, 209) = 4.05, p = .02. We also observed support for H2b, as the same pattern emerged for vigorous PA, F (2, 209) = 4.35, p = .01.

Finally, because of the lack of multivariate effects for the gender ´ cluster membership interaction, H3a and H3b were rejected.

Discussion

Critical for sport managers seeking to promote PA and health, our findings indicate that social support is crucial in encouraging sport and PA participation among international student populations. While the source of support was not significant in predicting participation, levels of support were. We also observed gender effects, as women were less likely to engage in vigorous PA than were men. Thus, sport managers should seek to offer and facilitate alternate forms of vigorous sport and PA that might be more attractive to women.