Managing Sport and Physical Activity Spaces to Create Body Weight Inclusivity: Dimensionality and Health Related Outcomes

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Body weight stigma, in which individuals are harassed for, relegated to lower social status because of, and face discrimination due to high levels of body fat, remains prevalent in modern culture. Within the context of this societal hostility towards body fat, the weight loss industry has thrived and perpetuated a message promoting thinness-at-all-costs (Bacon, 2010). These assumptions are particularly salient in the sport and physical activity (PA) context, in which fat individuals are perceived as beginners or as incapable (Cardinal et al., 2014). Given that fitness spaces are often the places that fat individuals report experiencing the most shaming, avoidance, and discrimination (Schmalz, 2010), it is not surprising that those in larger bodies often avoid PA (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). These patterns are troubling for persons involved in the delivery of sport because, as Zeigler (2007) has noted, sport management should be concerned with that all people—irrespective of their personal characteristics—have the chance to engage in sport and be physically active. The current research, therefore, draws on existing literature and previous research to build and test a model of body weight inclusivity in PA with particular attention to examining the hallmarks of body inclusive spaces. After developing a measure of inclusivity in PA spaces, the effects of inclusion on physical and psychological health, as well as individuals’ identification with PA, were then tested.

Literature Review

In the current study, we drew from previous literature to first establish a set practices and attributes of PA organizations that promote inclusion of all body types. Pickett and Cunningham (2015), in their qualitative study of body-positive yoga facilities, found six salient dimensions of body inclusive spaces. Given that this study specifically addresses body-weight stigma, their work serves as an ideal framework for the current study, which we briefly outline below.

**Authentic Leadership.** Leaders have considerable influence on organizational culture, particularly as it relates to diversity and inclusion initiatives (Cunningham, 2008). In particular, leaders model behavior and set standards for inclusion within an organization, which is particularly important when these initiatives oppose deeply entrenched cultural beliefs, such as those surrounding body weight and PA (Boekhorst, 2015).

**Culture of Inclusion.** Cunningham and Singer (2009) argued that, within sport organizations, a cultural commitment to diversity was important to developing and sustaining inclusion for marginalized individuals. Kasser and Lytle (2013) supported these ideas in the PA context, noting the importance of a philosophy of inclusion and respect in developing spaces that were welcoming to a diverse set of individuals. In particular, they note the importance of strategies such as diversity training for the creation and enforcement of body inclusive policies.

**Health Focus.** Given the rates with which individuals in larger bodies avoid PA, particularly in public spaces, several scholars have suggested that a focus on health, rather than weight loss and body transformation, is needed to (re)engage these individuals (e.g., Bacon, 2010; Mansfield & Rich, 2013). Cunningham and Woods (2011) found that individuals perceived fitness centers that marketed health and wellness outcomes more positively than outlets that marketed weight loss and aesthetic changes of participants.

**Inclusive Language.** Language is an important component of any plan to promote diversity and inclusion, particularly with regards to the words or phrases that are used to describe individuals (Arneson, Mietola, & Lahelma, 2007). With regard to body weight and adiposity, language is particularly difficult, given the medicalization of terms that are both inaccurate and offensive (Wann, 2009). Thus, PA spaces that discourage such terminology regarding body weight, and instead use language that celebrates body diversity are likely to engage individuals.
Leader Activism. Cunningham (2015) noted that within sport and PA settings, leaders’ advocacy for participants related to a more inclusive environment. The leader’s defense of marginalized others is likely to make followers feel safe and welcome in a space, particularly when they themselves have one or more marginalized identities. Therefore, as leaders engage in greater levels of advocacy for individuals, they help model and reinforce a culture of inclusion that allows those that are often left out of PA to participate and flourish (Avery, 2011).

Sense of Community. Warner and Dixon (2011) outlined the ways that sport and PA are often tasked with creating a sense of community and social ties among individuals. It has been noted that sense of community is not simply an outcome of PA participation, but also serves as an antecedent to progress towards individual fitness goals and perceived value in that activity (Pickett, Goldsmith, Damon, & Walker, 2016).

Together, we predicted that each of these dimensions would be significantly related to overall body inclusivity of the space (H1-6, respectively). We also expected inclusive PA spaces to affect a number of outcomes for participants, including one’s identification with the activity and both physical and psychological health. Therefore, we further hypothesized that inclusive PA spaces would be positively related with physical (H7) and psychological (H8) health of participants, and that these relationships would be mediated by one’s identification with the activity (H9a,b).

Method and Results

First, a series of items measuring body inclusivity was developed using the method outlined by DeVellis (2012). This included a thorough review of literature and consultation of an expert panel. After developing the scale items, data were collected through an online recruitment website, Amazon’s MTurk, to validate the measure (n = 626). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated good fit of the measurement model to the data, \( \chi^2 = 1685.75, p < .001, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, PNFI = .80, \) and was accepted. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), we then tested each of the hypotheses. The partially mediated structural model also demonstrated good fit to the data \( \chi^2 = 1719.38, p < .001, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, PNFI = .80. \) Each of the six dimensions of inclusivity was supported (H1-H6), given the strong relationships between each factor and the construct \( (\beta \text{ values ranged from } .68 \text{ to } .92, p < .001). \) The relationships between inclusivity and health were also supported (H7-H8), \( (\beta = .24 \text{ and } .32, p < .001, \) respectively). Finally, hypothesis 9a was not supported as the relationship between the mediator (activity identification) and endogenous variable (physical health) was not statistically significant. However, hypothesis 9b was supported, such that the relationship between body weight inclusivity and psychological health was mediated by activity identification.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, a six-factor measurement tool for body inclusivity in PA was developed and tested. Support was found for strong relationships between each of these factors and overall body weight inclusivity of a PA space. Second, SEM was used to test the effects of inclusivity on the physical and psychological health or participants, through a mediated relationship with activity identification. These findings are particularly important to sport management theory and practice, given the current PA landscape, in which a large number of people experience body shaming and stigma when they participate, or choose not to participate entirely out of fear of experiencing such.