An Examination of Youth Sport and Self-Regulation across Three Domains

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Sport for Development - Other (Youth Sport)
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Background
When strategically organized around youth development principles, sport provides a viable context to enhance cognitive and emotional characteristics in youth. In particular, self-regulation is an important characteristic that significantly influences future developmental trajectories (Baltes et al., 2006). Self-regulation reflects an individual’s outlook on their personal future, and represents a deeper consideration for the behaviors that contribute to future goals (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007). Gestsdóttir and Lerner’s (2007) Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) framework operationalizes this process in three phases. Selection refers to how a person identifies goals, optimization refers to a person’s attempts to leverage resources around the achievement of goals, and compensation refers to a person’s ability to mitigate impediments to goal attainment (Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007).

Participation in sport can help build self-regulation during adolescence. Youth have opportunities to set goals and work toward them in a supportive environment, and learn to “transfer” their cognitive and emotional traits to other contexts (e.g., school) (Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014). Moreover, sport activities provide opportunities to develop strong social relationships that reinforce self-regulatory capacities (Coatsworth & Contry, 2009). Well-trained coaches can provide mentorship during key goal achievement phases, and strong peer relationships can contribute to adaptive goal achievement (Smith et al., 2006). In addition to developing the cognitive and emotion traits associated with self-regulation, youth participating in sport also have opportunities to develop social relationships that positively reinforce these capacities.

Purpose
Interestingly, while self-regulation has been associated with sport participation (Zarrett et al., 2009), very few studies have examined the association between self-regulatory capacities in sport vs. other domains, and the association with key youth development outcomes. This gap in the literature is significant, considering Gestsdottir and colleagues (2015) indicate that self-regulation is not a unilateral trait. In other words, youth may develop strong self-regulation traits related to sport, but not necessarily other academic, health, or social domains. Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze the association between sport-related self-regulation and self-regulation in two other domains, academics and health. In addition to assessing the cognitive aspects of self-regulation, we also account for the social influence of peers/teammates and mentors/coaches. Finally, we assess whether self-regulatory capacities are related to two key positive youth development outcomes, academic competence and healthy lifestyles. The results contribute to the literature by analyzing the association between sport-related self-regulation and self-regulation in two key youth development domains, and link these findings with important youth outcomes.

Methods
Data was collected from participants in a running-based youth development program in a large metropolitan city in the northeastern United States. Surveys were collected from program participants during the 2017 program year (n=303, response rate= 25%) and assessed self-regulation in three domains (i.e., running, health, and academics) (Gestsdottir et al., 2015), academic competence (Harter, 1982) and attitudes toward healthy lifestyles (Tucker et al., 2012), and participants’ grades and levels of physical activity. In addition, participants completed a question regarding their social relationships within the program.

Observed path analysis was utilized to analyze the data. Based on the SOC framework, it was hypothesized that participants with more social relations in the program would report stronger running-based self-regulation. In addition, it was hypothesized that running-based self-regulation would be positively associated with health- and academic-based self-regulation, and that these domains would be positively associated with health and academic
indicators, respectively. These hypotheses formed the basis for our measurement model, which was analyzed using AMOS 24.

Results

Measures of Cronbach’s alpha indicate adequate reliability on all scales (\(0.718 > \alpha > 0.821\)). Preliminary analysis of the baseline structural model indicated acceptable fit (\(\chi^2(21) = 42.149, p < 0.05; \chi^2/df = 2.007; \text{CFI} = 0.935; \text{RMSEA} = 0.084\)). Results indicate a positive association between the participants’ number of friends in the program and running-based self-regulation (\(\beta = 0.046, SE = 0.01, p < 0.01\)), as well as running-based self-regulation and both academic- and health-based self-regulation (\(\beta = 0.703, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001\) and \(\beta = 0.768, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001\) respectively). More specifically, running-based self-regulation explained 35.5% of the variance in academic self-regulation, and 56.8% of the variance in health-based self-regulation.

Academic self-regulation was positively associated with both perceived academic competence (\(\beta = 0.680, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001\) and grades (\(\beta = 0.208, SE = 0.07, p < 0.01\)). Similarly, health-based self-regulation was positively associated with both healthy attitudes (\(\beta = 0.469, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001\)) and reported levels of physical activity (\(\beta = 0.848, SE = 0.32, p < 0.01\)). It should be noted that the association between domain-based self-regulation and attitudinal outcomes (academic competence and healthy attitudes) was stronger than behavioral outcomes (grades and physical activity).

Conclusion

Results indicate a positive association between the number of social relations identified within the program and running-related self-regulation. This highlights the potential influence of peers and mentors on promoting self-regulation within the running domain. In addition, results indicate a positive association between self-regulation in the running domain and self-regulation in the academic and health domains. Interestingly, this association was stronger between running and health domains than running and academic domains, which could be attributable to the programs’ heavier emphasis on health. Finally, self-regulation in both academic and health domains were positively related to both attitudinal and behavioral youth outcomes.

These findings highlight several opportunities for future research. Most notably, longitudinal research is needed to elucidate potential causal relationships between sport-related self-regulation and self-regulation in other domains. In addition, studies focused on alternative sport activities might highlight important differences between running and other sport options, particularly team sports. Finally, mixed method study designs are essential to understanding the transference of self-regulatory capacities between sport and other domains.