To Live a Better Life: A Sense of Community and Psychological Well-being in the USTA Community Tennis Programs

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Physical inactivity is recognized as a global public health crisis (Janssen, Ruiter, & Waters, 2018). The delivery of experiences that increase physical activity levels is becoming a central component of promoting active living within communities (Funk, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2011). Population-based sport interventions represent a promising strategy to foster a sense of community that may produce positive health outcomes (Sato, Jordan & Funk, 2016). However, there have been few empirical investigations of the relationship between a sense of community shaped through participation in local sport programs and health-related outcomes.

Involvement in a local community sports league is distinct from other sport participation such as unorganized pick-up games. It has been argued that sport participation is linked to positive health outcomes, compared to exercise, because of the activity’s social nature (Berg et al., 2015). However, the evidence of psychological and social benefits of programmatic sport participation is mixed and fragmented (Webb et al., 2017). The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of community-based sports programs in eliciting psychological health outcomes while examining the mediating effect of social relationships from a social epidemiological perspective.

One hundred and fifty players from a USTA community tennis program were recruited. The USTA league participants were chosen because the organization oversees one of the largest local leagues in the United States based on segmentation by age and skill level. The invitation to participate was posted twice in newsletters published by the local coordinators in the Southeastern region of the United States. The instrumentation included five measures: sense of community (SCS) (Warner et al., 2013), depression (DEP) (Radloff, 1977), life satisfaction (LSAT) (Sato et al., 2016), social relationship (SOR) (Shaw et al., 2007), and demographic characteristics.

The results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated adequate internal consistency and construct validity for the included latent variables. Multivariate structural equation modeling (SEM) with MPlus 7.5 was conducted to test the hypothesized nomological networks among SCS, SOR, and psychological well-being outcomes. The global fit indices provided evidence of good fit ($\chi^2=402.98$, CFI=0.92, TLI=0.90, RMSEA=.048, SRMR=.056). SCS (i.e., Administrative Consideration, Common Interest, Equity, Leadership Opportunities, Social Aspects, and Competition) combined with SOR (i.e., Social Embeddedness, Enacted Support, Provided Support, and Perceived Support) had significant positive effects on life satisfaction (LSAT) ($\beta_{SCS} = .33$, $p<.001$; $\beta_{SOR} = .28$, $p<.001$; $R^2=31.5\%$) and negative influences on depression (DEP) ($\beta_{SCS} = -0.17$, $p<.01$; $\beta_{SOR} = -0.21$, $p<.01$; $R^2=12.4\%$). Two significant indirect effects based on the Bias-corrected Bootstrapping results were also identified ($\beta_{SCS->SOR->LSAT} = .07$, $p<.01$; $\beta_{SCS->SOR->DEP} = -0.05$, $p<.05$), indicating that SOR represented a key pathway through which positive mental health outcomes were transmitted to the league participants. Theoretical and practical contributions will be discussed for generating a better understanding of organizational capacity in community sports, and identifying strategies to enhance the effectiveness of promoting health through these programs.