

The Driving Force: Motivation in Special Olympians

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Special Olympics programs provide competitive sport opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities. This study investigated athletes' perceptions of motivation in Special Olympics. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a guiding framework to explore athletes' experiences, 38 Special Olympians (21 males and 17 females) from British Columbia, Canada were interviewed. The data suggested that factors that enhanced autonomy, competence, and relatedness were linked to the participants' motivation in Special Olympics programs. These factors included positive feedback, choice, learning skills, demonstrating ability, friendships, social approval, and fun. Social support from significant others was a key factor related to participation motivation. There was also evidence for the motivating aspects of extrinsic rewards. Motivation was undermined primarily by conflicts with coaches and teammates.

Special Olympics programs are designed to provide competitive sport opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The program meets a need for organized physical activity programs, as individuals with intellectual disabilities tend not to participate in as many physical activities as those without intellectual disabilities (Hoge & Dattillo, 1995) and have lower levels of cardiovascular fitness and higher rates of obesity and cardiovascular disease (Graham & Reid, 2000). In addition, Special Olympics programs participation is associated with increased self-esteem, self-confidence, overall social competence, and positive self-perceptions (Dykens & Cohen, 1996; Klein, Gilman, & Zigler, 1993). Experts and parents of athletes also believe that participation in Special Olympics improves social adjustment and quality of life for participants, increases social support for families with members involved, and fosters public understanding of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Klein et al., 1993).

Participation motivation encompasses factors influencing initiation, continuation, and withdrawal from sport and physical activities. It includes behavioral elements such as current participation, intensity, and persistence as well as cognitions such as commitment and future expectancies (Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992). Descriptive research has found that persons with and without disabilities have similar motives to participate in sport including improving sport skills, attaining goals, enjoying competition, being part of a team, being with friends and family,

having fun, increasing fitness and health, and receiving recognition for sport accomplishments (Shapiro, 1995; Weiss & Chaumeton, 1992).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 2000) provides a theoretical framework to understand sport motivation. According to SDT, motivation is self-determined when individuals perceive their behavior to be autonomously controlled and relatively free from external constraints. SDT proposes a continuum of seven types of motivation. However, research on individuals with intellectual disabilities has found that participants can meaningfully differentiate four types of motivation: amotivation (the absence of motivation), external regulation (performing an activity to receive a reward or avoid a punishment), identified regulation (performing an activity because it is perceived to be important to the individual), and intrinsic motivation (performing an activity for the sake of the activity itself and for the inherent pleasure one receives from doing the activity; Reid, Poulin, & Vallerand, 1994). Self-determined forms of motivation (intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) are promoted by social contexts that serve to enhance or support an individual's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Feelings of competence arise when people feel effective at achieving desired outcomes. Autonomy occurs when people feel that they have choice and are in control of their own behavior. Feelings of relatedness develop when people can authentically connect with others and feel involved in the social context. Fostering self-determined motivation is considered desirable as it has positive influences on persistence, performance, and development (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

Sport provides opportunities for optimal challenge, feedback, and personal exploration that foster self-determined forms of motivation (Vallerand, 1999). Extrinsic awards (such as medals and trophies), however, may foster an externally regulated orientation toward participating in an activity (Vallerand, Deci, & Ryan, 1987). Individuals with intellectual disabilities are often encouraged to perform behaviors through the use of extrinsic rewards (Cohen, 1986), which SDT suggests will undermine self-determination and lead to a decline in spontaneous activity. Social contexts that facilitate perceptions of competence, relatedness, or autonomy enhance motivation, with autonomy being necessary for an individual to feel self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Activities perceived to be less inherently interesting, nonetheless, may need to be externally prompted in the beginning stages of participation. Individuals are likely to initiate or continue such behaviors if they are reinforced with extrinsic rewards or if the tasks are valued by significant others with whom they feel related or would like to feel related.

By exploring sport motivation from a theoretical perspective with this population, it is possible to both further knowledge and suggest new hypotheses about how motivation may operate in a meaningful way (Crocker, 1993). By using a structured interview format, while allowing for in-depth responses, it is hoped that this study will provide unique perspectives of Special Olympics athletes regarding what they enjoy and do not enjoy about participation. As well, we will investigate how Special Olympians feel about certain experiences that have influenced their involvement. This study asked current participants about the reasons they joined and continue to participate in Special Olympics programs. In addition, we solicited participants' ideas about how changes would encourage continued program participation. This study provides a view of athletes' experiences about motivation

toward Special Olympics in their own voice, which can be used to inform program plans, coaching programs, recruitment strategies, and theory.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 38 Special Olympians (21 male and 17 female; mean age of 32.7 years; $SD = 10.9$) from one large urban and four smaller rural areas throughout British Columbia. Participants from rural areas totaled 29, while 9 lived in a major urban center. The mean time spent participating in Special Olympics was 8.6 years ($SD = 4.8$). All participants had a reading IQ of less than 70, the criteria necessary for a participant to join a Special Olympics program. During the time of data collection, Special Olympic athletes were currently participating in soccer, track and field, softball, gymnastics, power lifting, and swimming. They were also involved in a variety of Special Olympics programs throughout the year such as bowling, floor hockey, curling, cross-country skiing, and rhythmic gymnastics. Prior to participating in the interview, athletes and their guardians were informed that their personal identity and personal identifiers to the data would remain anonymous. Each participant completed a consent form.

Interview Guide

Interviews were conducted to gather detailed information regarding Special Olympians' reasons for participating in their current programs. The interview guide consisted of structured questions developed in collaboration with an expert in the study of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, questions were aimed at what athletes liked and disliked about Special Olympics, what kept athletes returning to the program, and suggestions for increasing athletes' enjoyment. Probes from the initial questions were determined a priori based on anticipated themes in an attempt to minimize interviewer bias and to provide participants with specific clearly-worded questions designed to initiate responses. A structured interview guide was used to facilitate comparison across participants. However, the guide was designed to allow for flexibility of responses, and researchers asked participants to expand or further elaborate on their responses whenever possible and/or if clarification of a response was necessary. Prior to the main study, the interview guide was piloted on four Special Olympians to ensure that the wording of questions was easily understood and would elicit responses from interviewees. Following this pilot study, some questions were reworded to enhance clarity.

Procedure

Athletes for this study were selected from a larger sample of Special Olympians who volunteered to participate in a related Special Olympics study. Original contact was established through British Columbia Special Olympics head office, as well as regional coordinators and coaches. Athletes with seemingly good verbal and cognitive functioning were identified by Special Olympics coordinators and coaches as potential participants.

Prior to conducting interviews, three interviewers were trained in both general interviewing techniques and specific guidelines for interviewing individuals with an intellectual disability. All interviewers participated in a 6-hour training workshop with an education professional skilled in interviewing techniques. Preceding the pilot interviews, the first author (who conducted two-thirds of the interviews) met with an expert with knowledge and experience in working with Special Olympics athletes. She assisted in the development of the interview guide and provided ongoing suggestions regarding the interviewing approach for the participants (e.g., how to word questions, allowing extra time for responses, etc.). These techniques were then shared with the other two interviewers. These two interviewers observed the first author conducting an interview prior to starting their interviews. All researchers were made aware of the general purpose of the study prior to their involvement.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of each interview, participants were assured that they could stop the interview without negative consequences. Interviews were conducted at Special Olympics practices and, in some cases, at interviewees' homes, providing that parental/guardian permission was obtained. The majority of the interviews were conducted on an individual basis. However, a few interviewees requested that a parent/guardian remain present, in the event that they were not able to recall or needed to verify information regarding their previous Special Olympics experiences.

To ensure anonymity of participants, all interviews and presented quotations were coded as follows: M = male, F = female, followed by an assigned number. While participants had a range of cognitive functioning levels, efforts were made to select quotations that provide a representation of the perspectives of all 38 Special Olympians.

Analyses

Data analysis followed guidelines adapted from qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After the interviews were transcribed, the text was read in its entirety to capture a better understanding of the participants' responses. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using a standard qualitative software analysis tool (Q.S.R. N.U.D.I.S.T., Version 6). The authors read through each transcript section, looking for common "themes" that emerged, based on the interview guide questions. Three of the four authors met to achieve a consensus on themes that emerged from the text documents. The raw data were then divided into segments or "meaning units" (i.e., a word, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire page) based on categories agreed upon by the researchers. Meaning units were compared and regrouped into both categories and subcategories of related information. Any discrepancies were discussed until a label or category name that best represented the contained text was agreed upon. Clustering of data, subsuming particulars into the general and building a logical chain of events were also done following computer analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). New categories and subcategories were then formulated to accommodate emerging concepts.

Interviews relied heavily on participants' retrospective recall of their history and experience with Special Olympics. As many participants could not read, it was decided that interview transcripts would not be returned to interviewees for

review. To review all meaning units and determine their appropriateness within each category, the researchers performed a final consensus check.

Results and Discussion

Findings are presented within the framework of SDT, in particular the concepts of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and their motivational consequences. Within each section, results of the analysis of meaning units are presented, followed by quotations that provide detail and aid data interpretation. To enhance reader understanding and to situate the findings within the research literature, a discussion of results is provided for each section.

Background information on participants will be included only where it provides support for the primary investigated themes. This information included the following categories: hobbies, participation in other sports/physical activity programs, favorite sports (amount of time spent per week), initial interest in and how participants decided to join Special Olympics. For example, if participants discussed how they first heard of Special Olympics in conjunction with factors that influenced their continued participation, then initial interest response(s) were included. Table 1 indicates a breakdown of meaning units and themes that emerged. As the reasons for joining and continuing participation were similar, these results were combined for the analyses.

Autonomy

Some athletes discussed initiating their own participation in Special Olympics, either through reading the newspaper or observing practices, prior to soliciting assistance from parents or friends. One participant also expressed that being involved in the Special Olympics program gave individuals with intellectual disabilities a chance to show others their abilities, "...it shows normal people that just because we're handicapped we can still participate in sports" (M9).

With respect to program involvement, all athletes discussed that Special Olympics coaches or volunteers influenced their motivation to participate. The majority of athletes discussed that their coaches were supportive and did not pressure them: "They're friendly. They don't put pressure on us, like saying, 'you gotta win, and if you don't win . . . ' Like they make you feel good whether you win or not" (F3). An additional reason for liking coaches was that they had an informational coaching style. These coaches were perceived as knowledgeable about the sports and were proficient in assisting athletes with learning sport techniques:

A lot of them actually know what they're doing and it really helps when you have a coach that is actually an athlete as well . . . so having the right coach and having a coach that has experience behind is a real help. (M4)

The participants identified a number of factors they did not like such as coach conflict, lack of opportunity to provide input, and rules/policies perceived to be rigid. Two athletes discussed that their coaches were too strict and "talked down" to them. One athlete, who considered dropping out of Special Olympics, cited a lack of an autonomy-supportive environment from her coach. She stated that her feelings were not being considered and her opinions were not solicited:

Table 1 Number of Meaning Units (MU) and Frequency of Participants Identifying Specific Thematic Subcategories From Interviews

Categories/ Sub-categories	Male (n = 17)	Female (n = 21)	MU
<i>Reasons for participating in Special Olympics</i>			
Friends in program/making new friends	18	17	68
Competition (general)	15	12	42
Competition (winning medals)	2	3	5
Coaches/volunteers	21	17	47
Fun	13	6	24
“Something to do”	6	6	14
The game	8	3	15
Learning to do new things	8	7	18
Being active/fit	7	9	18
Opportunities (i.e., volunteering /coaching)	7	1	12
“Keeps motivated”	1	1	2
Travel	9	5	14
Special events	4	0	5
Increases self-confidence	4	3	9
<i>Dislikes about Special Olympics</i>			
Nothing cited as dislike(s)(“likes everything”)	11	9	18
Conflict (with other athletes)	2	5	9
Disorganization/rules and policies	3	2	5
Conflict with coaches/with communication	0	2	4
Not enough athlete recognition	1	1	4
Communication	1	1	2
Boring	1	0	1
<i>Social support</i>			
Family	18	14	38
Friends	7	4	13
Significant other	2	5	8
Coaches	2	3	7
Spectators	2	0	2
<i>Suggestions for program development</i>			
Changes to sports programming	11	5	16
Fundraising	1	2	4
Recruit more players	3	2	5
Increased social support	4	7	11

“One particular coach—I felt she was calling down to us and she was not making us feel good about our training . . . she was treating us more like a mom than a coach” (F5). This participant suggested that coaches could reduce conflict by being more open to athletes’ suggestions and accepting their ideas. Two other athletes also discussed that they would like to see more athlete input into the program, especially their training.

Based on SDT, participants should feel more self-determined toward participation when they have choice and a “voice” in their activity. In contrast, rewards and threats undermine autonomy, decreasing intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Results of this study support this theorized relationship between autonomy and self-determination among Special Olympians. The results are consistent with previous research that found athletes experienced self-determined orientations when coaches provided opportunities for choice, had an informational style, and did not pressure or talk down to athletes (see Vallerand et al., 1987 for a review). The majority of athletes in this study appeared to be experiencing an autonomy-supportive environment. The few who did not perceive such an environment appeared to have less desire to continue participation. These findings suggest that a lack of a supportive coaching relationship may be one contributing factor in sport dropout.

Competency

Participants discussed how their feelings of competency were enhanced by having supportive coaches, an interest to learn new things in their current sports, and the ability to challenge themselves and accomplish personal goals in a competitive environment. One participant commented on his feelings when these elements were present: “It gives me self-confidence in myself and gives me a positive outlook in the world . . . I’m actually proud of myself!” (M4). A second participant stated, “It’s helping me build social skills and being, having confidence in myself” (F11).

Regarding competition, participants spoke openly of enjoying racing and competing in their respective sports. For some, being active in competition was a way to avoid boredom and inactivity. Winning was not a prominent area of discussion relative to competition, though one athlete said, “That’s the moment you get and then the moment’s over and you just have the medal. I guess it’s a memory of the past that you did win it” (F6).

Some athletes who had been involved in Special Olympics for a number of years discussed having the ability and opportunity to assist newer athletes (e.g., through assistant coaching) in the program. Athletes saw this as a positive experience that reinforced their athletic ability and encouraged them to stay involved. Additionally, this intra and interpersonal knowledge building was powerful in terms of individual psychological development:

. . . the athletes, you can take a look at them and you can find yourself . . . in the way that they behave, or the way they enjoy themselves and how they inspire you with courage, and the hope of winning the sport that they really worked hard on. (M7)

On the other hand, two athletes discussed how their feelings of competence and motivation for their activity were undermined by a lack of positive recognition and encouragement: “. . . it’s like we’re basically ignored in our own city” (M4).

Perceived competence can be directly influenced by coaching feedback and is positively associated with intrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Fortier, 1998). Results of the current study support this relationship. Athletes identified competency-supportive experiences including support from coaches, learning new things, competition, and mentoring other athletes as enhancing their enjoyment and motivation. Individuals who lacked such experiences expressed a clear lack of

motivation. Previous research has suggested that the extrinsic rewards present in many competitive environments have the potential to undermine self-determination (Vallerand et al., 1987). It appeared, however, that competition for most participants seemed to provide competency-related information without overemphasizing the extrinsic rewards. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that five athletes discussed winning medals as a main motivator for participating in the Special Olympics program.

Relatedness

Athletes who received social support were appreciative of the support and expressed high levels of satisfaction. Social support was received from a variety of sources including friends, family, coaches, other athletes, and to a lesser extent, partners and spectators (see Table 1). Further, athletes indicated that they would like to receive more social support because it encouraged them to do their best in sport.

Social aspects of participation were frequently cited as powerful motivators to join and continue in Special Olympics. Most athletes ($n = 32$) cited positive support in the form of initial and ongoing encouragement from family members. Additionally, athletes identified friendships in the program as the key reason they enjoyed Special Olympics. The program allowed them to meet new friends and helped them to develop stronger relationships, as evidenced in the following quotations: “You build stronger relationships with friends [and] make new friends. You are helping other peers that need your help” (F5); “It makes you feel good. Makes you feel wanted. And another thing is that we can all joke with each other and nobody takes it serious. We all laugh and have fun” (F3).

Some athletes also recognized that they could apply the social skills learned in Special Olympics to their lives outside of sport: “It’s a good opportunity for life. To speak with people and not be so shy . . . Going through life with having friends. It makes it worthwhile” (M8). Two of the athletes saw Special Olympics as their key social connection. One athlete said, “If it wasn’t for Special Olympics, I’d be a loner. Just by myself” (M4). Another athlete was conflicted because he felt he was getting too old to participate, but was afraid he would lose his social contacts: “I want to stay, I want to go . . . but it’s hurting me, you know? I don’t want to lose all these friends . . . and if I do quit, I won’t see none of them. That’s what’s hurting me” (M9). In addition, many athletes mentioned that they appreciated the support from Special Olympics, reporting that the programs had given them the opportunity to meet and stay in touch with other athletes across Canada: “There’s always new people on other teams—like when you go out of town you get to meet new people . . . that’s how you actually get to meet new friends and hopefully you get to see them next year again” (M10). Finally, some friendships within the Special Olympics seemed to be very close and unconditional. For example, when asked what was good about meeting new friends through Special Olympics, one athlete said, “They last a lifetime” (F6).

Coaches were also a significant source of social support. Athletes described their coaches as “nice” and “encouraging” and appreciated their approach to teaching skills. Overall, the majority of coaches involved with these participants were seen as positive guides, solid motivators, and possessed strong instructional skills. Coaches were viewed as serious, yet fun, and knowledgeable about the sports. In addition, coaches were supportive of athletes’ accomplishments: “Your coaches

are standing there, cheering you on and as soon as you finish going over that line, your coach gives you a big hug and boy you are just jumping and screaming and feeling good” (M7). One participant was appreciative of her coaches’ support when she wasn’t feeling up to playing softball: “. . . he came down personally to talk to me in person and told me there’s always a spot for me, and that’s what made me come out tonight” (F3).

Significant family members, primarily parents and siblings, were another substantial source of social support. Family members provided both logistical (e.g., driving athlete to venues or practices) as well as personal support (e.g., supporting individuals’ choices of sports, attending competitions). Participants seemed to recognize and openly appreciate the availability of this support. The following quotes illustrate positive emotions associated with receiving others’ approval: “It feels good inside that they’re [family] there to support me when I’m playing ball” (M16); “Your family is up there clapping. I mean you couldn’t ask for anything better. You go home knowing . . . ‘look mom, I’m an athlete, I did it!’ And that is incredible. . . it’s great” (M7). For many athletes involved in this study, mothers were often their biggest supporter ($n = 10$). Mothers’ encouragement and support at practices and games, driving athletes to and from practices, and/or volunteering with Special Olympics were mentioned as examples of this support: “. . . I joined with my mom’s support. She’s been great. She has come to every practice and every competition” (F11).

For seven athletes, romantic partners also served as personal support. Some participants had boyfriends and/or girlfriends who were also Special Olympics members and stated that they had met through Special Olympics participation.

In addition to friends, coaches, and family support, a few athletes discussed the importance of teammates in encouraging them: “Yeah . . . we all say good luck to each other and like if someone gets a strike, we clap our hands to support them” (M12). A small number of participants spoke openly about audience encouragement: “I love the feeling of running and trying to beat my opponent, to improve myself, but mostly I enjoy running because I love the fact that the crowd supports you to finish the race” (M7). Seeing the smiles on the spectators’ faces increased another participant’s level of enjoyment and happiness, “. . . watching the people smile, hearing them breathe when I throw so high they think I’m going to miss it, exhilaration” (F11).

All athletes who received social support expressed enjoyment and appreciation for this received support. A few athletes suggested motivation could be enhanced by receiving more support: “It could really drive you to do your best and having those people around you allows you to set your own goals to try and achieve” (M1). In the words of one participant, social support makes them feel “. . . good . . . like an Olympian!” (M12).

Nevertheless, some athletes had minimal or nonexistent family/friend involvement in their sport activities. Feelings of hurt and rejection were evident in these participants. One athlete whose friends in the program doubted her ability to perform well said that she did not always feel like participating: “Some of them think I can’t do it . . . and it makes me mad and upset . . . it kind of hurts me” (F17). A second said, “They do pick on me. They hit me, they tease me . . . I don’t know, they just bug me all the time, and once I had a cry and came over here and cried and they don’t care how much I don’t want to do Special Olympics” (F18). This lack of relatedness clearly undermined this participant’s motivation to participate. One

athlete also discussed the importance of having personal attention more generally, stating, “I guess I feel like I need to be needed, and it’s like if I don’t feel wanted or needed then I just disappear” (M4).

These results support the relationship between relatedness and self-determined motivation. According to SDT, the role of relatedness is generally less critical than that of autonomy and competence in the motivation process (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Vallerand, 2000). In this study, however, social support appears to have a strong connection to self-determined forms of motivation. Social support may be especially important for individuals with intellectual disabilities who likely have a smaller social sport circle than individuals without intellectual disabilities. Further, the ability to make new friends in sport and maintain these friendships outside of the program may also be important to these participants. These possibilities are supported in the literature, where it has been suggested that in activities where social aspects are important, perceived relatedness can be an important predictor of self-determined motivational orientations (Vallerand, 2000). In addition, Vallerand argued that relatedness is the key link to value transmission, wherein the beliefs and values held by significant others or groups are eventually internalized by the individual. It is not surprising then that the majority of athletes interviewed reported participating in Special Olympics because of the friends they have made through the program and because it has assisted them in building stronger relationships and enhancing social skills. The importance of social relations is consistent with previous work with individuals with physical disabilities that found that social approval is highly associated with positive emotion during physical activity (Crocker & Bouffard, 1992).

Motivational Consequences

Athletes discussed both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for participating in the Special Olympics program. Participating in activities for sheer fun was evident in many of the interviews. Nineteen athletes spoke directly about fun and/or enjoyment: “It’s the fun factor—something that you enjoy to do. Like I don’t have to do it if I don’t want to, but I really enjoy it, and that’s basically it—I just enjoy it” (M1). This athlete also discussed the concept of choosing to participate in the activity—a key component of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Some athletes seemed to have internalized the merits of participation, displaying identified regulation toward their program participation. One athlete who had previously retired from the Special Olympics swimming program returned to Special Olympics because the sport had become an important part of his identity: “And I felt like, you know, I’m missing a part of me. I used to swim a lot and I shouldn’t have quit. So I said to myself, I’m going back. I’m going to return to the pool” (M2).

The primary dislikes with participants were negative feedback, not enough feedback from coaches and teammates, and problems with program policies. These experiences foster external regulation and in severe instances, contribute to amotivation. One athlete felt that the coaches never asked her opinion, that athletes’ feelings were not considered, and that athletes were never asked about what they thought of the coaching provided. In addition, she was under the impression that people in the program do not really care about her:

Encourage me more. Like ask me why I haven’t been coming or what’s wrong? Is there anything we can do to help? How can we make it better so

that you want to come back? ...like have an open door policy like you are willing to talk to us. (F5)

This athlete mentioned that better coaching initiated communication would likely enhance her motivation to stay in Special Olympics, clearly illustrating how a lack of a relatedness and autonomy-supportive environment can decrease motivation to continue in an activity.

General Discussion

Based on SDT, motivation experienced by athletes in this study can be classified into (a) self-determined, including intrinsic motivation (fun, playing the game, learning new things, building confidence) and identified regulation (building friendships, competition/self-challenge, building relationships with coaches and volunteers, being active and fit, opportunities to help others); (b) non-self determined, such as external regulation (winning medals/trophies, travel, special events/meeting celebrities); and (c) amotivation (the desire to drop out of the program).

These findings support the predictions of SDT in that the participants' main motivation orientations were self-determined and fostered by environments that fulfilled their needs for autonomy, competency, and relatedness. When factors which enhanced autonomy (supportive coaching, choice), competence (positive and informational feedback, challenge), and relatedness (meeting friends, mentoring others, building relationships) were present and supported by positive social support, Special Olympics athletes were motivated and satisfied. Athletes were also motivated through external regulation such as winning medals and meeting celebrities. When factors supporting motivation and social support were lacking, athletes displayed amotivation (feeling unwarranted, desire to drop out). The experiences reported by participants suggest that structured forms of sport can provide an instructive and supportive environment that can increase motivation to continue participation. When these needs are met, Special Olympians may be just as likely to participate in long-term sport and physical activity and do so for the same reasons as individuals without intellectual disabilities.

SDT also predicts that self-determined forms of motivation should lead to more positive consequences. Specifically, previous studies have shown a positive relationship between self-determined forms of motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) and sport and exercise persistence (see Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2002). The current study supports these predictions in that the majority of athletes were motivated to participate in Special Olympics for self-determined reasons. Some athletes, however, were motivated through extrinsic rewards (e.g., trophies and medals). This latter finding is consistent with previous literature (Vallerand & Reid, 1990), though it is unclear whether these types of incentives would encourage long-term motivation. In addition, athletes suggested that adding more sports, improving athlete/coach communication, increasing family involvement, and recruiting new coaches and athletes would help them to enjoy the program more, all of which should enhance self-determined forms of motivation. It is expected that this enjoyment would encourage continued participation in Special Olympics.

SDT theory suggests that in addition to autonomy and competence, relatedness can enhance self-determination (Deci et al., 1991; Vallerand, 2000). It was clear that relatedness played a primary role in promoting self-determined motivation for many

participants. Athletes expressed enjoyment and appreciation when they reported receiving social support from either coaches, teammates, or parents. Many athletes reported they would like to receive more social support because it encouraged them to do their best in sport and produced positive emotions. The beneficial motivational consequences of positive social support from significant others is consistent with research with individuals without intellectual disabilities (Cote, 1999; Smith, 1999), but the importance placed on relatedness by these participants was striking. Relatedness may be the strongest link to self-determined motivation, as people with intellectual disabilities may have a more limited friendship network than their peers without intellectual disabilities (Clegg & Standen, 1991). The ability to make new friends in sport and maintain these friendships outside of the program may be particularly significant to these participants. Adults with intellectual disabilities rate establishing and maintaining personal relationships as one of the most difficult aspects of living independently (Halpern, Close, & Nelson, 1986).

Conclusions

This research supports the utility of using Self-Determination Theory to examine organized sport programs such as Special Olympics. Consistent with previous studies, the experiences recalled by the participants support the need for programs that foster self-determination (intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Vallerand & Reid, 1990; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Nevertheless, the results should be interpreted with some caution. There are several challenges in interviewing individuals with intellectual disabilities that may limit capturing the full extent of the participants' experiences. The interviewees had varying levels of ability to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. This difference resulted in disproportionate responses across individuals, where some responses were in-depth and detailed and others were one- or two-word answers. Further, some participants requested the presence of a relative or social worker. Although these individuals were used only to verify information reported by the athlete (e.g., if the participants language was difficult to understand), their presence may have influenced the participants responses.

Despite these limitations, the present study provides some important insight into the experiences of Special Olympians. There are several areas that further research should explore, including the long-term effects of external regulation on athletes' participation motivation and the importance of relatedness in self-determined sport participation motivation. Social support from both within and outside sport may be a critical factor in joining and continuing to participate in Special Olympics.

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