

Self-Determination Theory as a Framework for Understanding Women's Psychological Well-Being Outcomes from Leisure-Time Physical Activity

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Self-determination theory (SDT) is used as a framework to understand how women's psychological well-being is influenced by participation in leisure-time physical activity and the social context in which activity occurs. Data were collected during in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and analyzed using constant comparison. Findings indicate women's well-being can be enhanced through casual participation in leisure-time physical activity if activity contexts support interaction between the elements of self-determination: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Participant interactions during activities also play an important role in facilitating well-being outcomes. The findings qualitatively add to understanding and development of SDT as a legitimate psychological construct by explaining the key components of the theory through the participants own words and reflections.

Keywords autonomy, competence, social context, relatedness

Research has indicated that physical activity enhances the physical (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 1996, 2004) and mental health (Currie, 2004; Kull, 2002) of women. Leisure researchers have extended this knowledge base by identifying key attributes of the leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) context (e.g., social support, enjoyment, self-determination) that facilitate psychological well-being outcomes for women (Adamson & Parker, 2006; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003). The relationship between LTPA and psychological well-being is particularly important for women with reports on women's mental health worldwide showing depression and psychological distress are more commonly experienced by women than men (World Health Organization (WHO), 2009). Alongside a decline in women's mental health has been a decline in women's participation in physical activity (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2006; Brownson, Boehmer, & Luke, 2005). This situation continues despite countries expanding exercise-oriented definitions of physical activity to include active leisure

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(HHS, 1996), ongoing promotion of the mental health benefits of leading an active lifestyle (Brown, Mishra, Lee, & Bauman, 2000), and increasing evidence that women's psychological well-being can be enhanced with even low-moderate amounts of physical activity (Gill, Williams, Williams, Butki, & Byoung, 1997; Little, Lloyd, & Kiewa, 2003).

Constraints on women's LTPA have been well-documented and include lack of money and skills, lack of a perceived right to participation, and lack of access to leisure spaces in which to participate (Currie, 2004; Henderson, 1994; Miller & Brown, 2005; Wearing, 1994). Leisure spaces and contexts in particular have been reported as gendered, sexualized, racialized, and alienating to women of different ages and socio-economic circumstances (James, 2000; Scraton & Watson, 1998). However, Shogun (2002) argued that although contextual constraints can be restrictive, they can also be enabling. In relation to LTPA, learning about the constraints of an activity (e.g., the structure or rules of engagement and the skills required to participate) can positively impact women's self-perception and enhance their ability to participate safely and successfully (Shogun, 2002). In this way, constraints may be involved in producing the conditions for experiences of greater freedom (Bavinton, 2007) and enable women to achieve enhanced well-being through active lifestyles that offer more and more equitable, leisure choices (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005).

The importance of social context has been noted in the literature surrounding psychological well-being. Self-determination theory (SDT) context is seen to have a significant influence on well-being through the satisfaction of three basic human needs for competence (i.e., a sense of confidence), relatedness (i.e., a sense of connectedness), and autonomy (i.e., a sense of behavior as an expression of self; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social environments that allow satisfaction of these needs are thought to promote optimal outcomes in terms of both personal development and the quality of the experiences within a specific social situation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, these outcomes are only possible if the social context offers certain conditions such as choice, support for individual volition, empathy and a meaningful rationale for engaging in activities (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The literature suggests that leisure contexts can provide similar conditions such as social support and leisure-generated self-determination (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993) and therefore have the potential to enhance women's psychological well-being.

In this study SDT was used as a framework to explore the qualitative meanings women attached to their experiences of LTPA and the social contexts within which activities occurred in relation to their psychological well-being outcomes. The social context for this study was the 2004 Contours Active Women's Festival (CAWF) in New Zealand. This festival has a 10-year history of providing women with the opportunity to experience a diverse range of sport and physical activities with a view to encouraging on-going participation. Extending our knowledge of the influence of social context on women's well-being outcomes will inform researchers, policy makers, and leisure program designers about aspects of LTPA interventions that may allow women to experience leisure as self-determination (Shaw, 1994) and ultimately enhance their psychological well-being.

Literature Review

Active Women and Psychological Well-being

Women of all ages and social circumstances have enhanced their psychological well-being by participating in exercise and physical activity programs. According to Kull (2002), physically active women (18–45 years) felt better about themselves; were more positive toward life, as well as family and friends; had more stable moods; and enjoyed activities more. Older women (70+ years) have also reported better social functioning and mental

health from participation in physical activity (Lee & Russell, 2003). However, Gill et al. (1997) found that although women (65–95 years) experienced increased self-efficacy and confidence through physical activity, 52.5% of respondents exercised less than once a week. Similarly, Little et al. (2003) noted that women felt more confident, enthusiastic, and capable following casual participation in outdoor adventure activities. Thus, if low to moderate levels of physical activity correspond with positive mental health outcomes for women, perhaps other attributes of the experience may be more important determinants of enhanced psychological well-being than, for example, how often women engage in an activity.

A recurring theme in leisure research is women's need to make space for themselves through leisure away from their daily lives (Currie, 2004; Miller & Brown, 2005). For example, Currie reported that mothers who took part in a physical exercise program had been able to establish an active leisure space of their own (physically and psychologically) that allowed them to value themselves as individuals, challenge restrictions on personal freedom, and cope more adequately with their daily lives and roles as mothers. Research has also identified key attributes of leisure spaces that facilitate and enhance women's outcomes from LTPA including social support, enjoyment, and self-determination. Social support (e.g., engaging in LTPA with others) can provide women with a supportive space for sharing thoughts and feelings (Adamson & Parker, 2006) as well as a greater sense of control over their lives through access to emotional support, companionship, reciprocity, and potential partners for physical activity (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003).

Henderson and Ainsworth (2003) also noted that women were more intrinsically motivated to be active (e.g., walk) and enjoyed the activity more when it was not associated with exercise and was perceived to involve choices (e.g., where, how often, at what intensity and with whom walking was undertaken). Similarly, Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) found elements of self-determination related to enjoyment and choice as both a cause and an effect of the health value of LTPA. Thus, when women take time and space for themselves, pursue self-motivated goals, and participate in leisure activities that focus on their own needs and interests, they experience a sense of competence and confidence and a source of identity and self-esteem which can enhance their mental health (Currie, 2004; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Parry & Shaw, 1999).

Challenges to Women's Mental Health and Participation in Leisure-Time Physical Activity

According to the World Health Organization (2009), women experience greater mental health issues related to depression, psychological distress, anxiety, and mood change than men. These findings reflect reports emanating from a range of developed countries, including Australia (Office for Women, 2004), New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2004), the United States (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004), and Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). In contrast, as women's mental health problems have increased, physical activity trends in these countries have decreased (ABS, 2006; Brownson et al., 2005; Sport and Recreation New Zealand, 2007–2008; Statistics Canada, 2006). However, Henderson and Bialeschski (2005) noted that opportunities and support must exist for participation in active lifestyles. For women this requires negotiation of a wide range of constraints.

According to Shaw (1994), the constraint unique to women or significantly more prevalent among women is the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982). Women “provide for the needs of others first (e.g., children, domestic partner) and neglect their own leisure needs” (Henderson & Allen, 1991, p. 11) because they lack a sense of entitlement to leisure. Studies of LTPA provide numerous examples where women's love of, sense of entitlement to, and

participation in LTPA have been compromised throughout their lives. This is largely due to women's roles both within and outside of their physical pursuits remaining delineated in terms of otherness (e.g., as the "supportive wife" and "good mother/grandmother") (Boyle & McKay, 1995; Heuser, 2005; Miller & Brown, 2005; Thompson, 1992). Furthermore, differences also exist among women in relation to access to leisure (Henderson, 1994) due to aspects of age, race, class, marital status, and sexual preference. These differences may dramatically influence access to leisure opportunities and choices (Henderson, 1990); social support (Eyler et al., 1999); opportunities, facilities, and transport (Deem, 1986); and safe locations in which to participate (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1989; James, 2000).

Leisure spaces, in particular, have been described as both sites for inclusion and exclusion for women (Scraton & Watson, 1998). For example, James (2000) reported young girls' alienation from swimming pools was due to poor body image and fear of exposure to negative comments and the derision of others. In James's study the social context was a barrier to use of space and participation in active leisure. However, Wearing (1998, p. 133) argued that when people occupy, use and interact in space it becomes open to many "possibilities for expression of the self through leisure experiences." Thus, the freedom to engage in LTPA and experience the outcomes associated with participation may not rely on abolishing constraints but on the reinterpretation and negotiated utilization of constraints in certain leisure contexts (Bavinton, 2007).

Shogun (2002, p. 28) put forward the view that while constraints shape or restrict leisure behavior, they also enable leisure experiences. For example, in order to engage in LTPA and experience it, it may be necessary to acquire certain skills. The acquisition of these skills requires subjecting oneself to spatial and temporal constraints that shape movement requirements for an activity. In this way, constraints make possible activities and the experience within them by prescribing, for example, the rules of the game and set the parameters within which actions and experiences occur. These constraints may also have an impact on how an individual understands his or her identity when subjected to actions not typically associated with the group with which they are identified (e.g., women's perceptions of themselves in outdoor adventure or sport contexts). In Shogun's (p. 36) view, we must not look simply to remove restrictive constraints but "to introduce those enabling constraints that make participation and choice possible" for women in different leisure contexts.

Understanding Well-being through Self-determination in Leisure-Time Physical Activity

According to Shaw (1994, p. 19), leisure as self-determination (i.e., leisure in which women feel they have the freedom of choice to do what they want to do) has "the potential to challenge traditional notions of constraints and may help women to regain or create a sense of themselves." However, Deci and Ryan (1987, p. 1030) noted that "it is only when people learn to experience their environment as supporting self-determination, only when they become more autonomous, that there will be long-term positive effects on their health." SDT contends that socio-contextual factors can either facilitate or inhibit a person's ability to achieve psychological well-being within specific social contexts by affecting three basic and innate needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). These needs are to feel competent (i.e., effective in one's ongoing interactions with the social environment and experience opportunities to exercise and express one's capacities), autonomous (i.e., have a sense of ownership in one's actions and act from a point of personal interest and integrated values), and relatedness (i.e., form meaningful relationships with others and with one's community). Socio-contextual

environments that foster and satisfy these needs and influence psychological well-being are said to be autonomy-supportive.

Autonomy-supportive environments actively take the perspective of individuals into consideration and acknowledge negative feelings (i.e., provide empathy), provide a meaningful rationale for engaging in activities and positive feedback, provide opportunities for choice and minimize pressure and control (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009). Consequently, if LTPA participation is to enhance women's psychological well-being, the socio-contextual environment must foster self-determination (Coleman & Iso Ahola, 1993; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992) within clear behavioral bounds that do not constrain women's freedom to actively exercise choice and discretion (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Shogun, 2002). To date, STD studies in the leisure context have focused on the influence of social agents (e.g., family, friends, teachers) on initial participation, exercise regulation, and behavioral intentions (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Wilson & Rodgers, 2004). However, these studies have overlooked the importance of the LTPA experience itself and the role of participants in the production of the conditions that support self-determination and enhance well-being. In this study, the socio-contextual environment and participants were seen to play a central role in enabling women's experiences of and well-being outcomes from LTPA.

Research Context and Setting

The 2004 Contours Active Women's Festival was promoted as a vehicle for women to access diverse leisure opportunities, experience new activities, and learn new skills in a supportive environment. The main goal of the festival was to increase the sporting and physical recreation participation of women in order to improve their health and well-being. Attributes of the festival designed to achieve this goal included: offering a broad range of activities (e.g., outdoor recreation, sport, exercise); running multiple sessions at different times to enhance accessibility; delivering activities through community-based organizations that offered affordable, social, and competitive forms of these activities; and designing sessions that met the needs of women experiencing these activities for the first time. Thus, the festival provided an appropriate context for a focused exploration of the unique experiences of women in LTPA and the influence of the socio-contextual environment on their self-reported psychological well-being outcomes. As such, this research considered (a) how women described their experiences and outcomes from participation in CAWF in relation to well-being and (b) how the socio-contextual environment of CAWF influenced women's well-being outcomes.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore women's experiences of LTPA and the influence of these experiences and the activity context on women's psychological well-being. A qualitative and interpretive paradigm was adopted to guide this study with the focus being on encouraging women to express their perceptions and experiences, and exploring what these experiences meant for them (Denzin, 2001; Neuman, 1997). Semi-structured interviews were used to enable the women's understandings to emerge in their own words (Merriam, 1998; Reinhartz, 1992). Patton (1980) suggested that this process allows better access to the phenomenon that cannot be observed (e.g., feelings, thoughts, previous interactions). SDT was subsequently used as a framework for understanding the women's experiences as they related to psychological well-being. However, the intention was not to generalize the women's stories to the wider population but rather to consider them in the light of the theoretical propositions outlined in SDT (Bryman, 1988).

Sample

Interviews were conducted with 20 participants of the 2004 CAWF. These women were identified following a larger scale survey of all festival participants. At the end of the survey, the qualitative stage of the study was explained and respondents could nominate to be contacted for a personal interview. Of the 78 women who expressed a willingness to be interviewed, 20 were chosen through a combination of self selection and purposive sampling (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This meant that women were selected because they were still interested in participating in an interview during the interview period, had experienced two or more festival activities, or represented the diversity of the socio-demographics of festival participants. The desire to purposefully select women emerged as many of the 78 potential research participants tended to represent a shared demographic of being white (61), 26–45 years old (56), and in full-time employment (32). The researchers sought to examine a diversity of women's experiences more representative of the regional population; therefore, the mix of interviewees included women who ranged in age from 23 to 64, one indigenous Maori woman, two emigrants, and one full-time homemaker (see Table 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

A semistructured interview guide was used to gather data. Open-ended questions were developed based on findings from the survey and relevant literature. Topics included women's expectations of outcomes from the festival, how they felt their participation affected their sense of well-being, and the importance of the social environment of the activities to their

TABLE 1 Demographic Details of CAWF Interview Participants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Dependent Children	Employment Status
Simone	45	Separated	1	Full-time
Sandy	45	Divorced/new partner	2	Full-time
Jill	30	Partner	None	Full-time
Lisa	38	Single	None	Full-time
Vivienne	43	Married	2	Full-time
Sarah	23	Single	None	Full-time
Helen	50	Widow	None	Full-time, self-employed
Melanie	27	Single	None	Full-time
Lesley	52	Married	None	Part-time
Penny	40	Married	4	Part-time
Robyn	39	Married	3	Homemaker
Louise	39	Married	2	Full-time
Mindy	44	Separated	3	Full-time
Claire	28	Partner	None	Full-time
Glenda	46	Married	2	Part-time, shift-worker
Wendy	51	Single	None	Full-time
Joan	62	Married	None	Retired
Edna	64	Single	None	Full-time
Jane	52	Married	2	Full-time
Tina	39	Married	1	Part-time

overall experience at the festival. Each woman was encouraged to talk about their participation with prompts offered where relevant by the researchers to encourage women to consider what happened for them during the festival, what was memorable for them, and how the experience affected them. While similar questions were asked of each woman, the interviews evolved based on an individual's response and capacity to describe their experiences. Thus, the order of questions was modified according to the progression of the interview (Henderson, 1991).

All interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the women. Participants were fully aware that their responses would be used to inform the review of the CAWF and to support academic research but that their anonymity would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The interviews took place in locations selected by the women taking into consideration a request for a space with few interruptions. As a result, interviews occurred in women's homes, workplaces, and at the researchers' hotel. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes but also included time for informal conversation both pre- and post-interview to build rapport and respond to the women's questions about the study (Henderson, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992). This was an invaluable part of the interview which helped to establish a level of understanding between the interviewer and the respondent (Henderson, 1991). Interviews were transcribed verbatim as they were completed and analyzed to identify any new themes or issues that may not have been considered by the researchers prior to the commencement of data collection. Data saturation was seen to be reached when data collection and analysis had achieved a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within the data set (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Guest et al. suggested that in research which aims to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals (e.g., a purposive sample) 12 interviews should suffice.

A process of constant comparison across participants was used to identify major themes and concepts that reflected the women's experiences of participation at the festival (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) and located the women's stories in the broader context of their lives (e.g., past experiences of LTPA, marital and household status, employment situations). As such, transcripts were systematically coded in a process that moved data from general (e.g., open) codes to more focused (e.g., selective) codes that related to the broad research questions. At this point the theoretical constructs embedded in SDT were not identified specifically as themes to allow the women's words to speak for themselves. The researchers' analysis and interpretations were verified through (a) inter-coder reliability and (b) peer examination (Merriam, 1998). Initially, both researchers separately open-coded the transcripts and then compared their results looking for inconsistencies of interpretation or meaning. Discrepancies were identified, discussed, and resolved by the researchers before the next stage of analysis. Two informed peers also coded three of the transcripts to cross check the intention of the researchers coding categories (Henderson, 1991; Patton, 1980). This process produced a sense of trustworthiness in the analysis and the resulting themes depicting the women's understanding of their festival experiences.

Findings

Six key themes emerged from the women's stories that revealed how their experiences during CAWF had enhanced their sense of well-being. Broadly, these themes reflected the key elements of SDT. For example, competence was reflected in how women stepped out of their comfort zone to participate in new activities and gained confidence and a sense of success as they learned new skills. Autonomy was reflected in their ability to make choices in relation to participation and their determination to create a leisure space for themselves.

Connectedness was experienced through interactions with other women during, and often after, activity sessions and with family, friends, and work colleagues through sharing these experiences. However, the women's stories showed that in the context of CAWF these outcomes were not mutually exclusive, and in many cases the festival setting facilitated interaction between these elements. As such, the themes reflect the diverse meanings women attached to their experiences of the festival activities and context.

Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone

Participating in a new activity was often the initial boost to women's confidence as they realized they could be an effective participant despite initially having self-doubts and/or low expectations of their abilities. For instance, Simone attended one of the mountain biking sessions and was "inspired to think I could do it myself" and truly believed that she now had "the confidence to do it." The idea that these women could display a level of competence in an activity encouraged them to consider further possibilities. As Sandy stated:

When you do things outside your comfort zone you feel like you can do anything, that you can conquer the world. I overcame my own fear and doubt. I wanted to be an active participant and doubted that, but I did it and that was great.

Another major issue for young as well as older women was attending new experiences alone. However, Claire, felt that "having the festival takes away that fear of being the only person going and I will be out of my depth." Similarly, Helen, who was originally too shy to do something about her interests in the end decided, "I'm gonna do this and I'm gonna do it on my own. I'm fairly new at being confident, so it helped me cross that line."

Other women viewed their chosen activities as a "challenge" and were motivated to push themselves to a new level by broadening their experiences and enhancing existing skills. Jill participated because she wanted to be "more than I was." She also felt the stable environment of the festival provided an opportunity to "try and next time do better" and this contributed to her sense of achievement: "I'm challenging my comfort zone and ability." The women reported that the challenge was always within their capabilities.

Confidence and Success through Structured Learning

For the most part, CAWF sessions were designed to facilitate women's first experience in an activity and help them acquire new knowledge and skills. After one session of sea-kayaking, Lisa was eager to repeat the experience:

I will definitely do it again. Having the skill now it's the sort of activity you could take many places. I just felt awesome afterwards, just buzzing . . . from the thrill of it and I felt more confident. It's just the fun that I got out of it.

Similarly, Sarah felt the structure of the rowing session gave her a sense of achievement "because I figured out the basics, what it feels like, how unsteady the boat can be kind of thing which is really good." For these women, confidence and the capacity to learn were enhanced in an environment that was described as "safe," "comfortable," and "fun." As Glenda explained, it was important that the women "had the same previous experience in the activity and just wanted to give it a go and learn the basics." This took a "lot of pressure off" and she felt she "didn't have to compete or be perfect" and could take the time to learn and make mistakes without being embarrassed.

In Helen's case, the positive learning environment of rowing became the first step to a longer-term commitment:

Now I would definitely feel confident in joining a club. It's knowing a bit more, demystifying the sport. Just the simple things like who to get in touch with, that there is a group of people out there like me, that you don't have to be experienced, you don't have to be competitive, there are just recreation groups, it does something for you.

However, the session gave Helen something more than just confidence in the activity; it also gave her the self-belief that she could eventually "... backpack around the world on my own, on a limited budget before I'm 60." Helen's confidence and sense of success supported a growing desire to gain new skills, identify challenges, and seek opportunities for personal development. This was also the case for Melanie, who had been "at least a little bit successful" in her rock climbing session and now felt that "this is something I might want to do on a regular basis... I didn't for a minute think I'd be very good at it, but I'm pleased that I tried." Melanie's success was facilitated in a context that allowed her to learn at her own pace and at a level appropriate for her experience. Jane felt the same way and described how the pressure of coming from a "family that was really good at rowing" was alleviated because the sessions focused on social participation and "there weren't big names trying to make a fancy crew out of us straight away." In this environment, the women felt no pressure to achieve externally imposed standards of success.

Individual Goals, Individual Choice

The dramatic changes in Helen's life due to the loss of her husband had set her on a path of personal discovery and choice: "I wake up and say to myself I've only got one shot at this day so I've gotta give it a hundred percent... If you have a goal just go out there and strive to get it... it's just fulfillment." For Sandy, although her goals were not as life-changing as Helen's, she now felt she could make her own choices in relation to physical activity such as when and how she participated in the future: "I'd wait for the festival to come again to abseil but for wind surfing, we have learned enough that we can go along for a couple of hours and hire a board ourselves."

However, not all of the women intended to pursue the CAWF activities more often. For Lesley, just the single experience of abseiling, knowing that she had controlled her fear and could do it again if she wanted was enough: "I was afraid, but it didn't matter that I didn't do the second one. That was such an achievement, I gave that a shot and now I probably would try something else that I was anxious about." In Lesley's mind, she was in control of her decision during the session and did not feel pressured to continue participation unless she decided to. She had achieved her immediate goal, was satisfied with the outcome, supported in that decision and was now looking to try other activities that would test her. Even Penny, who was looking for something that she could potentially do in the long term, chose an activity that she (and family and friends) had never thought she would choose: "People laugh when I tell them I'm going to the gym, it's so not me, but I'm really excited about it because it's something just for me." Penny wanted to get fit but she wanted freedom of choice and diversity in activity: "I'm going to the gym because I can do Pilates or yoga, or weights or classes. It's all there, I'm committed but I can have choices." Thus, although the gym was perceived to be an atypical option for Penny, she could choose what to do, when, and secure time to focus on herself.

Choosing Me—My Time and Space

The mothers with dependent children saw CAWF as a way to dedicate a part of their busy lives to themselves and to explore “who they were.” For example, Robyn found that participating in CAWF gave her personal space, free time, and personal satisfaction and had a marked affect on how she felt about herself and how she coped with the rest of her day:

I say to my husband that the exercise gives me good head space and I need it. I’m happy when I have done something. I just feel good to focus on my health and fitness and I feel good about me. I think for me it doesn’t matter what hits the fan later in the day, I know I’ve started well, it doesn’t matter then what happens.

Jane also sought space to “just think about myself for a change and not everyone else.” Similarly, Louise spoke of her need to take time out to do her “own thing.” She felt she had a right to this space and that it was essential to her family life and to her as an individual: “I just see it as something that’s very positive, to have time away. It’s getting that balance right, so you enjoy both of them without the guilt and all the rubbish that goes along with childcare.” Mindy took this further by stating that as a mother, the opportunity to go mountain biking and to take golf lessons allowed her to “get some of my life back. It’s nice to be outside and you just realize how good life is . . . just how lucky you are.” Having recently separated from her husband, she saw the activities as “a positive experience” that “enhanced her view of her life and herself.” Furthermore, Tina saw taking time out for physical activity as “essential for my mental health.” Claire, who did not have children, recognized the value of taking personal time and participating in activities based on their own interest and satisfaction but also felt the festival:

. . . get’s you out of the daily rut. If you have things like archery or fencing it gives you something different and you get a change of pace and something else to consider in your life. That helps you have other perspectives, which is important.

The women clearly valued the chance to do something that was intentionally focused on themselves, without obligation to others and which made them feel good. This shared sense of purpose also enhanced the learning experience.

Learning with and from Other Women

The women-only environment of the festival was a key attraction for participants. They felt more “secure, at ease and supported” in this environment. As Glenda stated, “we were all women. There were no macho males. It’s just a woman thing and you feel a bit more secure.” For Sarah, it was also about the enjoyment of being with women who shared the same goals and were at the same level of ability because “you were kind of a team, all in the same boat.” According to Jane, this created a “supportive atmosphere” which would not be the case in a mixed gender environment, where men’s perceived need to compete and be “good at any activity” would immediately change the dynamic. As Melanie explained, “if it had of been mixed I’m not sure I would have entered as many activities as I did. We were all laughing and encouraging each other.” Camaraderie among strangers was, according to Louise something you “don’t get in the midst of men” and was especially important as it was “something I’ve never done before.” Thus, in this women-only context participants “were much more ready to be supportive and also to admit they couldn’t do things. If

someone had a problem or was frightened, it wasn't intimidating" (Vivienne) and this gave them the security to test themselves and grow.

The women's stories also included references to learning from, and being inspired by other women. For instance, Sandy had taken her daughter along to a mother/daughter abseiling session for the specific purpose of letting her see what women were capable of:

I found this was a great way for her to see me in a different light and to show her there were ways for her to be her physical self and challenged that were positive. She can find the daredevil in her can be expressed in positive ways.

The concept of role modeling was not only applicable to younger participants. Wendy was surprised to find that as much as the adventure activities were inspiring, some of the older women were also "quite inspirational" and she enjoyed "the conversation and the social aspects as much as the hiking." Similarly Joan, recently retired and seeking new challenges, was particularly motivated by one older woman:

At 78 she was the oldest and had a bilateral hip replacement over eight years ago. She was a wonderful woman who'd been a dairy farmer and was just such fun, so inspirational. That made me think wow there is just so much out there to do.

In this sense, the festival brought women together who may never have crossed paths in their normal daily lives. As Edna found "a lot of women go along to these things as they love that there are other women there and they can make friendships."

Creating Connections

Apart from the supportive environment of the festival, another outcome for women was finding new partners for future participation. For example, Sarah had agreed to do the 'Krypton challenge' (a form of triathlon) with women from her abseiling activity then go out at night time: "It'll be a good fun day, female bonding, shared memories, a laugh." Mindy also found her interest in pursuing golf was shared by others:

Several of the women have said when we finish let's get Karen to take a clinic and go a bit further then we can play some rounds of golf. I've got a couple of other friends who are interested too. It was a good bunch of women, friendly and wanting to keep in touch.

The feelings of belonging, security, and shared values with other participants who were "all in the same boat" provided women with a greater sense of connection to the broader community. As Wendy stated: "It offers a community of people who largely feel the same way about an activity as I do and there's a sense of core energy that goes with that."

Women also came away from the activities with new stories that were totally unexpected and removed from their daily lives. For Lisa, the festival experiences brought greater acknowledgement, attention, and perceived respect from co-workers: "I think people at work look at you when you describe it and I don't think many could go out and do it." Penny also found that her family was interested and excited, even envious of her activities: "People were like, wow, archery. My brother-in-law, who is an outdoor guy, wished he could have done it. People were interested and I got a buzz out of sharing the experiences." Friends showed similar responses when Tina shared her experiences at a coffee morning:

I'm a stay at home mum so instead of talking about the children, it's "I've fenced and I went scuba diving." I didn't do any housework this week but I did all this other stuff. I had something to talk about and when people are talking I can go, "Well, I tried that once."

The women realized that not only did other people look at them "differently somehow" but also that they had, in some instances, "upset people's expectations" of who they were. As a result, their experiences, achievements, and newfound confidence had allowed them to create a new sense of self and connect in new ways with family, friends, and work colleagues. Perhaps this concept is best expressed by Joan, who initially thought the festival was "all about the activity, about the physical, and that's what I went for." Instead she found that "it's not, it's more. There's a sense of community and belonging here, there's recognition of the future and hope."

Discussion

This research explored women's experiences of participation in LTPA and the impact of the socio-contextual environment on their self-reported well-being outcomes. Overall, the findings support the view that self-determination through LTPA can influence women's psychological well-being through a range of outcomes related to the broad theoretical propositions outlined in SDT (i.e., competence, autonomy, and relatedness) (Deci & Ryan, 2002). For example, findings indicate that women's well-being can be enhanced through experiences that foster social support and self-determination (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992) within an autonomy supportive context (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 1987) that facilitates women's freedom to actively exercise choice and discretion in their LTPA (Shogun, 2002). Furthermore, the study shows that there is potential for women to achieve well-being outcomes during even limited (e.g., one-off or casual) participation in LTPA (Gill et al., 1997; Little et al., 2003) if the conditions that support self-determination exist.

Trying new activities and learning new skills were stated outcomes of CAWF and key motivations for the interviewed women to take part in the festival. Shogun (2002) argued that in an appropriate leisure context skill acquisition becomes an enabling constraint that opens up the possibility of engagement in an activity for women. Thus, although many of the women initially had doubts about their abilities and feared failure these fears were ultimately dispelled and afterwards women felt "confident" and some "inspired" to take activities further or pursue other goals (Shogun, 2002). These feelings of "achievement" and "success" were in part due to challenges being set "at the right level" and women being able to acquire skills at their own pace. According to Deci and Ryan (2002), all people seek challenges that are optimal for their capacities and the skills to undertake these challenges. For these women, the social context in which skills were acquired and where differences in learning were supported, enhanced their sense of competence.

The women's stories revealed descriptions of "fun," "safe," "comfortable," and "supportive" environments where they could learn, make mistakes, ask questions, solve problems, and be afraid without feeling intimidated. These contextual elements align with SDT's requirement for environments that enhance competence to provide positive feedback to participants and freedom from demeaning evaluations of performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, they also link to the importance of social support (Adamson & Parker, 2006; Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003) in promoting enjoyment and participation in LTPA as well as the impact of women's freedom to choose activities that interest them and to pursue

individual goals (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Parry & Shaw, 1999) on their increased competence and confidence.

SDT contends that well-being is enhanced in environments that emphasize minimal control, a focus on other people's perspectives, and choice (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A number of respondents referred to how the activities and experiences influenced their willingness and ability to make choices for themselves in relation to: participating in a range of new and challenging activities, using new skills to pursue activities beyond the festival, and planning future directions in life. In this study, women sought the opportunity to pursue goals that redefined their ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) from a perceived constraint to a source of possibilities for leisure (Henderson & Allen, 1991). For example, women with (and without) children variously described their CAWF experiences as providing them with "head space," opportunities to "do their own thing," "get some of their life back," and "get out of the daily rut." These experiences provided opportunities for respondents to make spaces for themselves over which they had some autonomy (Wearing, 1994). This is one way women can regain a neglected sense of self that is often subsumed by their everyday roles (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992) and expectations that they should put others needs before their own (Currie, 2004). Thus, when leisure is seen as a "situation of choice, control, and self-determination, women's participation in activities, especially nontraditional activity, can be seen to challenge restrictive social roles" (Shaw, 1994, p. 9) and as a form of resistance to dominant discourses which keep them in passive and subordinate positions in society (Wearing, 1994, p. 9).

When women extend the ethic of care to themselves it also opens up possibilities for practicing and receiving caring and for sustaining relationships with family and friends and establishing relationships with strangers (Day, 2000). The festival was a setting that offered new interpersonal connections, some central to the women's ability to learn, their enjoyment of the activities, and future participation. For the interviewed women, LTPA experiences were enhanced because of the women-only environment which facilitated support, encouragement, sharing, and learning. These findings reflect those of Adamson and Parker (2006), Henderson and Ainsworth (2003), Heuser (2005), and Thompson (1992), who reported that despite the constraints that affected women's participation, within the context of LTPA the bonds between women formed a major component of their enjoyment and fulfillment. The women in this study thrived on the "team atmosphere" and noncompetitive nature of the sessions that made them feel "secure" and under no pressure to be "perfect." Women also connected with other women who wanted to continue participating after the festival. In line with SDT's propositions, these findings show support for the importance of relatedness to women's sense of well-being and to the role of social agents in encouraging LTPA participation and intentions (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Wilson & Rodgers, 2004). However, this finding also extends our understanding of social support by showing the importance of participant interactions and relationships formed within the LTPA context in the production of the conditions required to enhance self-determination and psychological well-being.

Outside of the festival context, the impact of the women's participation was evident in their relationships with significant people in their lives (e.g., family, friends, work colleagues). These findings reinforce previous research that found women had improved social relationships (Kull, 2002) and better social functioning (Lee & Russell, 2003) as a result of participation in physical activity. A number of women spoke of feeling more "confident" in social situations. They felt that they could bring something interesting to a discussion, were perceived differently by people, and could now take a more central role in interactions with others. Thus, for these women, the relational aspects of the activity context were important, if not central, to their sense of relatedness in terms of SDT as well

as their ability to develop a sense of competence and autonomy (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2003).

The results reported here make it apparent that women can achieve enhanced psychological well-being from casual LTPA experiences if social contexts are responsive to these needs. Thus, in general the findings reflect the tenets of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, they also suggest the conditions required to fulfill these needs are not experienced independently and appear to interact within the socio-contextual environment of LTPA to enable women to achieve well-being outcomes. For example, the autonomy-supportive contexts experienced through CAWF enabled participants to negotiate the material-spatial constraints that structure the physical environment of LTPA (Bavinton, 2007) and the time, space, and movement constraints that define participation in LTPA (Shogun, 2002) to the point where they provided women the opportunity for “experiences and interactions that enlarge the self” (Wearing, 1998, p. 137).

While the findings of this study are noteworthy, several limitations should be recognized and potential future research directions outlined. First, the qualitative nature of the research, although providing greater meaning to the results and evidence of well-being outcomes, makes it difficult to attribute findings to women outside of the study sample. Second, the sample was a combination of self-selection (i.e., women chose to take part in the interviews) and purposive sampling (i.e., women were selected based on a range of criteria set by the researchers). Thus, for example, native Maori women were underrepresented in both the survey and interview sample. Therefore, the results of this study should be regarded as tentative prior to replication across more culturally diverse groups of women. Similarly, it would be important to conduct research with women who did not attend the festival to explore their experiences of LTPA and well being. Finally, it is possible that the socio-contextual conditions needed to achieve self-determination in leisure may be unique to this sample. Therefore, future research could examine women in different activity contexts and different groups of women (e.g., women with young children, teenage girls). It would also be useful to conduct longitudinal research to ascertain whether women’s psychological well-being outcomes and their intentions to pursue LTPA were sustained in the months after the festival. Finally, there is potential to enhance our understanding of SDT by examining possible interactions between the key elements of the model.

Conclusion

The results of this study support SDT’s propositions by showing that women can achieve a greater sense of psychological well-being through a range of outcomes related to the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in autonomy-supportive LTPA environments. The results also demonstrate that for these women, the interaction between these elements facilitated within the context of LTPA enhanced their well-being. It is also clear that targeted, short-term LTPA opportunities can affect women’s mental health and that these positive experiences can encourage women to consider continuing participation in the future. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest that SDT is a viable framework from which to study women’s LTPA participation issues and future research exploring this theoretical framework in the LTPA domain appears worthwhile.

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