

Physical Activity and Body Image Among Men in the Military: An Examination of Exercise Motives

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Abstract

This study examined the fitness habits of 122 men currently serving in the military in order to gauge the relationship between their fitness level and psychological well-being. In particular, we investigated the relationship between exercise and body image with a focus on the motives associated with individuals' incentive for exercise. We hypothesized that although exercise would be positively related to body image, intrinsically motivated exercise would be more strongly related to body satisfaction than would obligatory exercise among adult males. Our results support our hypotheses; participants report positive benefits of exercise when their motives are not obligatory. These findings have implications for our understanding of the success of various exercise interventions. This data may assist laypersons, professionals, as well as military leadership in adapting current fitness programs to encourage increased physical activity for internal reasons by educating members about the probable benefits.

Introduction

- ❖ Past research has revealed a positive correlation between exercise and body image for both men and women (Garner, 1997).
- ❖ There has been little examination of the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation associated with physical activity, especially with regards to obligatory exercise.
- ❖ Motives associated with physical activity may be particularly important to understanding men's body image (Furnham & Calnan, 1998).

Research Questions

- ❖ Is the amount of exercise associated with the benefits of exercise?
- ❖ Are extrinsic (i.e., obligatory) versus intrinsic motives for exercise associated with the amount men exercised?
- ❖ Are extrinsic versus intrinsic motives for exercise associated with the perceived benefits of exercise?
- ❖ What is the relative importance of different motives in predicting men's body satisfaction?

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Method

Participants

- ❖ One-hundred and twenty-two adult males participated in the present study as part of an examination of the potential benefits men receive from regular fitness. (mean age=31.43, age range=19-56; mean time in service=10.66 years)
- ❖ In order to be eligible for this study, participants were required to be active duty Air Force members.

Measures

- ❖ **Background Information**
A measure that assessed demographic qualities including gender, ethnicity, age, rank and time in service was created for the purpose of this study.
- ❖ **Fitness Habits**
Current level of exercise involvement was assessed via self-report survey. The number of days per week the men exercised was the focus of this report.
- ❖ **Motive Measure**
Reasons for Exercise Inventory (Silberstein et al., 1988). (27 items, 7 pt scale)
This scale was adapted to add military motive items.
Items comprised four motive categories:
Military- (5) *"To avoid military disciplinary action"*
Appearance- (10) *"To be slim"*
Mood- (3) *"To cope with stress & anxiety"*
Health- (7) *"To increase my resistance to disease"*
- ❖ **Body image & Well being Measure**
A Health & Satisfaction Dimensional Survey was created for the purpose of this study. (5 items; 10 pt scale)
This measure focused on five elements of well-being:
Perceptions of health
Perceptions of fitness level
Satisfaction with health
Satisfaction with physical appearance
Satisfaction with body

Results

- ❖ Data relating to research questions one, two, and three are addressed in figure 1. Analyses of the men's exercise motives indicated that the amount of exercise men participated in was positively correlated with benefits of exercise they experienced. Further, benefits were positively correlated with all of the health items, the majority of the mood and appearance items, yet were not associated with any military motive items.



Figure 1. *Correlations between men's motives for exercise and their perceived benefits of exercise.*

	Exercise Motives			
	Military	Health	Appear.	Mood
Days of exercise per week	.07	.44**	.36**	.32**
Perceptions of health	.05	.36**	.20*	.17+
Sat. w/ health	.12	.25**	.20*	.09
Fitness level	.03	.39**	.24**	.22*
Sat. w/ phys appear.	.04	.22*	.07	.02
Sat. w/ body	.02	.18+	.07	-.02

Note. ** significant $p < .01$, * significant $p < .05$, + significant $p < .10$

- ❖ Figure 2 addresses research question four. Motives of health, appearance, and mood explain unique variance in body satisfaction, but military motives (obligatory reasons for exercise) did not.

Fig 2. *Regression analysis predicting body satisfaction*

	B	SE	β
Military	-.00	.02	-.01
Health	-.04	.02	-.29*
Appear.	.03	.01	.23*
Mood	.04	.02	.19+

Note. *significant $p < .05$, + significant $p < .10$

Discussion

- ❖ The present study extends past research examining associations between body image and physical activity by investigating a unique sample (men in the military) and focusing on exercise motives: obligatory versus intrinsic.
- ❖ Our findings suggest that when men exercise because they have to in order to maintain their job in the military, they do not reap the benefits of exercise in terms of how they feel about their health, appearance, and body image.
- ❖ This study presents significant findings which demonstrate the likely value of implementing military physical training programs that emphasize the intrinsic reasons for exercise over obligatory motivations. A program adapted to focus on internal motivation might prove more successful and beneficial to the individuals and the military.