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An analytical study of coaching behavior, need satisfaction and the psychological and physical welfare of young athletes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study grounded in Self-Determination Theory, was to examine the relationship of dimensions of coaching behavior to intrinsic need satisfaction and indices of psychological and physical well-being among male adolescent athletes. The present study utilized two measures of well-being to be essential to the experience of eudaimonia (subjective vitality and intrinsic satisfaction/interest in the activity) and one measure of ill-being (self-reported physical symptoms). What is particularly attractive about the concept of need satisfaction is that it allows researchers to identify the conditions under which the three needs should be satisfied and, in turn, promote well-being. One key social environmental factor in the self-determination framework assumed to nurture the fundamental need for autonomy is autonomy support. Autonomy support refers to the readiness of an individual in a position of authority (e.g., a coach) to take the other's (e.g., the athlete's) perspective, provide appropriate and meaningful information, offer opportunities for choice, while at the same time minimize external pressures and demands.

Keywords: Behavior, satisfaction, psychological and welfare

Introduction

In today's world of sport, pain rather than pleasure is often presented as the hallmark of what the motivated young athlete should feel. In quest of "the right body," many athletes starve themselves to be lighter or thinner, or inflate their body size via banned substances. Overtraining in the pursuit of higher performance, although often leading to burnout and overuse injuries, is part of the sport experience for a number of sport participants. The present study utilized two measures of well-being to be essential to the experience of eudaimonia (subjective vitality and intrinsic satisfaction/interest in the activity) and one measure of ill-being (self-reported physical symptoms). What is particularly attractive about the concept of need satisfaction is that it allows researchers to identify the conditions under which the three needs should be satisfied and, in turn, promote well-being. One key social environmental factor in the self-determination framework assumed to nurture the fundamental need for autonomy is autonomy support. Autonomy support refers to the readiness of an individual in a position of authority (e.g., a coach) to take the other's (e.g., the athlete's) perspective, provide appropriate and meaningful information, offer opportunities for choice, while at the same time minimize external pressures and demands. Mental and Physical Welfare of Young Athletes Studies conducted in the sport setting have provided support for the basic tenets of SDT with respect to the relationship of autonomy support to need satisfaction. For example, research by Blanchard and Vallerand (1996, cited in Vallerand & Losier, 1999), on basketball players, revealed that the more the coach was perceived as autonomy supportive by his or her athletes, the more autonomous the athletes felt. In a study by Standage, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2003) in the context of physical education (PE), perceptions of an autonomy-supportive climate were strong positive predictors of students' perceptions of autonomy.

Self-determination theory and motivation

In psychology, self-determination is an important concept that refers to each person's ability to make choices and manage their own life. This ability plays an important role in psychological health and wellbeing.

Self-determination allows people to feel that they have control over their choices and lives. It also has an impact on motivation—people feel more motivated to take action when they feel that what they do will have an effect on the outcome. The concept of self-determination has been applied to a wide variety of areas including education, work, parenting, exercise, and health. Research suggests that having high self-determination can foster success in many different domains of life.

What is Self-Determination Theory?

Self-determination theory suggests that people are motivated to grow and change by three innate and universal psychological needs.

The concept of intrinsic motivation, or engaging in activities for the inherent rewards of the behavior itself, plays an important role in self-determination theory.

Self-determination theory grew out of the work of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, who first introduced their ideas in their 1985 book *Self-Determination and Intrinsic Motivation in Human Behavior*. They developed a theory of motivation which suggested that people tend to be driven by a need to grow and gain fulfillment.

Two key assumptions of the theory:

The need for growth drives behavior: The first assumption of self-determination theory is that people are actively directed toward growth. Gaining mastery over challenges and taking in new experiences are essential for developing a cohesive sense of self.

Autonomous motivation is important: While people are often motivated to act by external rewards such as money, prizes, and acclaim (known as extrinsic motivation), self-determination theory focuses primarily on internal sources of motivation such as a need to gain knowledge or independence (known as intrinsic motivation).

According to self-determination theory, people need to feel the following in order to achieve psychological growth:

- **Autonomy:** People need to feel in control of their own behaviors and goals. This sense of being able to take direct action that will result in real change plays a major part in helping people feel self-determined.
- **Competence:** People need to gain mastery of tasks and learn different skills. When people feel that they have the skills needed for success, they are more likely to take actions that will help them achieve their goals.
- **Connection or relatedness:** People need to experience a sense of belonging and attachment to other people.

Imagine a person who fails to complete an important project at work. If this person is high in self-determination, they will admit their fault, believe that they can do something to fix the problem and take action to correct the mistake.

If that same person was low in self-determination, they might instead look for other things that they can blame. They might make excuses, assign blame, or refuse to admit that their own role. Most importantly, perhaps, is that this person won't feel motivated to fix the mistake. Instead, they might feel helpless to control the situation and believe that nothing that they do will have any real effect.

How the Self-Determination Theory Works

It is important to realize that the psychological growth described by self-determination theory does not simply

happen automatically. While people might be oriented toward such growth, it requires continual sustenance.

Ryan and Deci have suggested that the tendency to be either proactive or passive is largely influenced by the social conditions in which people are raised. Social support is key. Through our relationships and interactions with others, we can either foster or thwart well-being and personal growth.

While social support is important, there are other factors that can also help or hinder the three elements needed for growth.

- **Extrinsic motivators can sometimes lower self-determination:** According to Deci, giving people extrinsic rewards for already intrinsically motivated behavior can undermine autonomy. As the behavior becomes increasingly controlled by external rewards, people begin to feel less in control of their own behavior and intrinsic motivation is diminished.
- **Positive feedback and boost self-determination:** Deci also suggests that offering unexpected positive encouragement and feedback on a person's performance on a task can increase intrinsic motivation. This type of feedback helps people to feel more competent, which is one of the key needs for personal growth.

Method

Two hundred and sixty-five State adolescent (Male = 16.44; SD = 1.32) male soccer and cricket players participated in this study. In terms of ethnicity breakdown, 51.3% reported to be Meerut, 24.2% Ghaziabad 5.7% Muzaffarnagar and 4.5% mixed. Thirty-eight participants did not state their ethnic background. Secretaries and coaches of the teams that had agreed to take part were contacted and received a letter explaining the purpose of the study. All athletes under the age of 18 also received informed consent forms that were signed by their parents/guardians. None of the athletes were denied permission to participate. A multisession questionnaire, also containing other variables that are not reported here, was administered by the principal investigator either before or after a normal practice in a team clubhouse or a classroom. At all meetings, instructions on how to fill in the questionnaire were given, emphasizing that they do so as personally and honestly as possible, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their responses would be kept confidential. On average, the questionnaire required approximately 25 min to complete.

Measures: Environmental factors

To assess the sporting environment created by the coach, participants were asked to think about what the environment is like on their team in general. To measure athletes' perceptions of coach autonomy support, seven items were drawn and adapted to sport from the Health-Care Climate Questionnaire (Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996). In line with the work of Kasser and Ryan (1999), the chosen items focused exclusively on the coach's support for self-determination (e.g., "the coach provides players with choices and options").

Data analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) utilizing EQS 5.7 (Bentler, 1995) [5] was employed to test the hypothesized model. Because the normalized estimate of Mardia's coefficient was relatively large (multivariate kurtosis = 18.33), the data were analyzed using robust maximum likelihood analysis, as recommended by Bentler (1995) [5]. This analysis adjusts the chi-square statistic (X²) and the

standard errors under conditions of nonnormality to protect from Type I error. To examine the hypothesized model, we followed the two-step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988)^[3]. Firstly, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed in regard to the hypothesized measurement model to determine whether the indicators were related to the latent factors in a satisfactory manner. Secondly, after a satisfactory fit was achieved for the measurement model, we tested the fit of the structural model which linked the latent factors.

Results

The analysis report presents the means and standard deviations of, and correlations between the variables used in the study. Pearson product moment correlations revealed that the dimensions of coach behavior were significantly and positively related among themselves as well as to the three needs and the well-being variables (subjective vitality and intrinsic satisfaction). The three psychological needs were positively and moderately inter correlated. Positive and significant relationships emerged between the need satisfaction variables and the well-being variables. The three need satisfaction variables were negatively correlated with the reported physical symptoms.

Discussion

Grounded in SDT the purpose of this study was to test a model that considered how three dimensions of the social environment embedded within the SDT, achievement goal, and social support literatures would predict need satisfaction and indices of mental/physical welfare among a sample of team sport participants. Overall, the results were supportive of the proposed pattern of sequences in the model.

Conclusions and practical implications

The present study tested and found preliminary support for Deci and Ryan's (2000)^[6] basic needs theory in the context of sport. Our findings tentatively suggest that a social environment which is autonomy supportive, emphasizes improvement and effort, and is socially supportive, may help maximize the satisfaction of athletes' basic needs which in turn may possibly foster eudemonic well-being among adolescent sport participants. Coaches are assumed to play a very active role in training and competition. They spend a lot of time interacting with athletes, trying to motivate them, and providing instruction and feedback. Therefore, it makes sense to investigate the psychological environment/climate they create and how that environment corresponds to the quality of athletes' sport experience and subjective well-being. Coaches can foster the satisfaction of the need for autonomy by giving athletes' choices and options, providing rationales for requested behaviors, and encouraging self-regulation. For example, they may provide athletes with the necessary information to solve a problem or learn a new skill or strategy, while encouraging them to solve the problem or develop the skill/strategy in their own way.

To promote athletes' sense of competence, coaches might develop evaluation criteria based on self-referenced improvement and the degree to which effort is exerted in training and competition. They could also encourage athletes to develop internalized performance standards and help them learn to self-monitor. Finally, to satisfy the need for relatedness, coaches may do well in accepting, caring for, and valuing players as people, not just as performing athletes.

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