Coaches’ Provision of Structure for Players’ Competence Development: Perspectives of Professional Soccer Coaches and Players in Norway

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Developing athletes’ actual and perceived competence is critical to enhancing performance and considered central to coaching. According to self-determination theory, the provision of competence-supportive structure is critical for psychological need satisfaction, optimal motivation, and well-being. Coaches use of structure such as providing clear expectations, instructional guidance, and feedback are well-established coaching practices; however, little is known about how, and to what extent, these types of structure support or thwart players’ perceptions of competence, particularly in high-performance contexts. Five head coaches working in the highest soccer league in Norway, and three players from each of the participating head coach’s squads (N = 15) participated in semistructured interviews. Through abductive analysis, we generated five themes: structure to promote competence; coaching for competence development; relatedness support as a foundation for effective structure; freedom within structure is useful; and shared ownership of, and with, structure. The findings provide evidence that professional soccer coaches and players in this study desire and deliver structure. It is provided in an autonomy-supportive way and built on a relatedness supportive foundation. This study contributes new insight into the importance of competence-supportive structure in coaching, which coaches and those supporting the development of coaches may find useful.

Keywords: autonomy support, coach–athlete relationships, competence-supportive structure, psychological needs, relatedness support, self-determination theory

Key Points
- Professional soccer coaches and players in this study desired and delivered structure in an autonomy-supportive way built on a relatedness supportive foundation.
- Coaches’ provision of structure before activity promoted players’ actual and perceived competence by conveying tactical clarity (how they seek to play the game) and clear roles (what competent looks like).
- Coaches’ provision of structure during and after activity supported individual and team competence when it reinforced the team’s established playing principles and involves task-focused feedback.

Developing athletes’ actual and perceived competence is critical to enhancing performance and frequently considered central to coaching (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). In high-performance sport such as professional soccer in Norway, the context of this study, there is an emphasis on preparation for, and performance at, the highest level (International Council for Coaching Excellence [ICCE], 2013). Feeling confident in your ability to perform to this level is considered critical to these performances (Hays et al., 2009). In addition, coaching has been described as a “process of guided improvement and development” (ICCE, 2013, p. 14) focused on the purposeful improvement of performance in sport (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). This suggests athletes’ competence development is central to coaching. According to self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), the psychological need for competence concerns an individual feeling effective and engaging confidently in the task at hand. It is fostered through structure—interpersonal coaching strategies that provide an appropriate amount and clarity of information (instruction and feedback) about what is expected, and how expectations can be met (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Pope & Wilson, 2015).

Researchers employing SDT to explore coaches’ influence on sport participants have focused on the provision of autonomy support (for a review, see Standage, 2023). Much less is known about the interpersonal behaviours that facilitate competence (i.e., structure) or support relatedness (i.e., involvement; Mossman et al., 2022; Rocchi et al., 2017). Furthermore, little is known about the interplay between structure, autonomy support, and involvement in the support of athletes’ psychological needs (Standage, 2023). In addition, whilst SDT-informed research extends across
competitive levels, few studies have focused on high-performance sport (Mossman et al., 2022). Therefore, to extend our understanding of the interpersonal nature of coaching, specifically with regard to competence development, this study explored professional soccer coaches’ and players’ perceptions of coaches’ provision of structure, support for players’ competence development, and the interplay with support for autonomy and relatedness.

Self-Determination Theory

Central to SDT, and in particular the mini theory—Basic Needs Theory (BNT), is that self-determined motivation is affected by the extent to which the fundamental psychological needs for competence, autonomy (sense of choice and volition), and relatedness (sense of security and connection with others) are satisfied. Furthermore, need satisfaction can be supported or thwarted by the social context (e.g., interpersonal behaviours of coaches). In sport, Mageau and Vallerand (2003) proposed a model, based on SDT assumptions, that connected interpersonal coaching behaviours to basic psychological needs and in turn to motivation and functioning. These interpersonal behaviours were the provision of structure (providing a clear understanding of expected behaviours and utilising appropriate instruction and feedback) to support competence; involvement (conveying genuine interest in and care for athletes) for relatedness support; and autonomy support (providing choice and opportunities for initiative taking whilst minimising pressure and demands) to support volition.

Researchers drawing on SDT to examine coaches’ influences on athletes have found autonomy-supportive coaching behaviours are associated with a range of adaptive outcomes for athletes such as psychological need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, continued engagement, well-being, and performance (for reviews, see Mossman et al., 2022; Occhino et al., 2014). However, the findings are more varied than is often portrayed (Hassmén et al., 2016). For example, similar to findings across competitive levels (e.g., Mossman et al., 2022; Trigueros et al., 2019), research with Paralympic athletes found that the relationships among autonomy support, autonomy, and relatedness were stronger than autonomy support and competence (Banack et al., 2011). In large-scale quantitative research, a single composite, need satisfaction variable is commonly used (e.g., Haerens et al., 2018; Stenling et al., 2015; Van Puyenbroeck et al., 2017), and behaviours described as autonomy supportive, and the measures employed to assess them, contain behaviours that may also support other needs (Occhino et al., 2014; Rocchi et al., 2017; Standage, 2023). These approaches limit our understanding of the relationships between coaches’ behaviours and each of the psychological needs, how coaches influence each of the needs separately, in combination, or which (if any) are more important in particular circumstances or contexts. Therefore, to enhance our understanding of the multiple manifestations of need support, more detailed consideration is warranted. This includes exploring the interpersonal strategies other than autonomy support that might support competence and relatedness such as structure (Occhino et al., 2014; Standage, 2023). As well as adopting qualitative methods (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020) and exploring the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (e.g., coaches and athletes; Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2020).

Need Support and High-Performance Sport

Need-supportive behaviours manifest differently in different contexts and ages; therefore, understanding practices that are salient and applicable to specific contexts is needed (ICCE, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). There is, however, a paucity of SDT-grounded research in high-performance sport contexts (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2020; Mossman et al., 2022). As a result, much less is known about coaches’ interpersonal strategies and support for psychological needs in this context in general, and structure and competence specifically. In fact, only four studies were identified that have focused on high-performance athletes and/or coaches, of which three employed qualitative methods. Two were coaches’ reflective accounts (Lyons et al., 2012; Mallett, 2005), one of which included interviews with athletes (Lyons et al., 2012), and the third (Froyen & Pensgaard, 2014) employed interviews with athletes and coaches. In all three studies, most athletes had opportunities for input into training. Feedback that was noncontrolling and process-focused (cf. outcome-focused) was important to athletes and enabled the coaches to support athletes’ competence, confidence, and performance development. This work suggests coaches’ provision of structure in an autonomy-supportive manner can develop athletes’ competence; however, explicit exploration of this assumption has yet to be conducted. This may, in part, be due to the view that autonomy support is a pedagogical approach focusing on satisfaction of all three needs, including elements of structure (e.g., Lyons et al., 2012; Mallett, 2005). Such a view limits our understanding of the specific contributions of structure to competence development. Furthermore, Froyen and Pensgaard found that coaches’ ability to convey confidence in athletes led to a sense of security in the coach–athlete relationship. This supported relatedness and provided a foundation from which athletes developed self-confidence in their ability to perform at the highest level (i.e., supported their need for competence).

Somewhat in contrast, research in professional soccer suggests coaches adopt demanding, authoritarian, or directive coaching approaches. This appears to be based on a resolve coaching culture, influenced by expectations from stakeholders (Cushion, 2013), which some soccer coaches have reported to be more effective, even considered as best practice and what players were conditioned to anticipate (Potrac et al., 2002, 2007). Potrac et al. (2002) found a top-level English coach used direct instruction designed to retain respect from players. Although providing an element of structure, this behaviour could be seen as controlling rather than autonomy supportive. However, there was also a belief that clear, instructive guidelines were beneficial to “give players rope to express themselves” (p. 191). This offers some insight into the positive dimension of structure and a more autonomy-supportive approach. Furthermore, Høigaard et al. (2008) examination of preferred coach leadership behaviours in Norwegian soccer found that to enhance their performance, players’ desired instruction and training with emphasis on tactical and technical aspects. They also desired more responsibility in the decision-making process, preferring democratic over authoritarian coaching. The research to date therefore suggests structure is evident in coaching in high-performance contexts; however, soccer presents a more “mixed picture.” An environment characterised by direct instruction and control with limited player involvement or shared ownership of the process (e.g., Cushion, 2013; Potrac et al., 2007). Yet, there are also examples of aspects of competence-supportive structure (e.g., Høigaard et al., 2008).

Competence-Supportive Structure

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) argued that structure is an important determinant of competence and without “coaches’ instruction and structure, athletes lack the necessary information and experience to
progress in their discipline” (p. 893). Definitions and operationalisations of structure in sport have included reference to guidelines and rules (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003); provision of instruction, feedback, and a rationale for expectations of behaviour (Pope & Wilson, 2015); and expectations and strategies to achieve desired outcomes (Curran et al., 2013). In education contexts, researchers have suggested the provision of structure includes three components: (a) presenting clearly communicated expectations and detailed directions before an activity, (b) offering guidance, and supervision during an activity, and (c) giving constructive feedback that is task-focused and enhances personal-control over outcomes after an activity (Cheon et al., 2020; Jang et al., 2010). Within these categories, behaviours can include clarifying what competent in relation to the activity looks like, providing step-by-step guidance when needed on how to attain desired outcomes, scaffolding progress, and adjusting task difficulty as needed. These actions support individuals’ sense of control over progress toward achieving desired outcomes resulting in enhanced perceptions of competence (Cheon et al., 2020).

To date, only a small number of studies have sought to examine structure in sport (Fransen et al., 2018; Mossman et al., 2022). Of these, most have assessed competence support through feedback and with youth, collegiate, or developing performance athletes (e.g., Fransen et al., 2018; Pope & Wilson, 2015; Rocchi et al., 2017). While this research supports the relationship between structure and competence satisfaction, it provides only a partial view of structure and no insight into structure within high-performance contexts. The work of Van Puyenbroeck et al. (2017) begins to address these gaps. In their assessment of senior national-level club volleyball players’ perceptions of structure, they operationalised structure as conveying expectations and providing guidance. They demonstrated that taken together, need-supportive coaching (i.e., structure, autonomy support and involvement) was associated with players’ proactivity. Combining need support in this way, however, limits understanding of the individual contributions of each of the three dimensions of interpersonal coaching. Further research is therefore needed to explore the nature of structure and how its provision influences competence development, including in high-performance contexts.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore professional Norwegian Eliteserien (Premier League) soccer coaches’ and players’ perceptions of structure provision to support players’ competence development and the interplay with support for autonomy and relatedness.

**Methods**

**Methodology**

Coaching and coaches’ practices are complex and dynamic and yet, also have regularities (Allen & Muir, 2020). Researchers adopting existing theory (i.e., SDT) to examine, at least some of these regularities (e.g., interpersonal behaviours that influence players’ need satisfaction) typically employ large-scale quantitative research. This research is arguably, more than explicitly, underpinned by a positivistic ontology and realist epistemology. In contrast, for this study, we adopted an abductive analysis approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), which is philosophically located within pragmatism, underpinned by a relativist ontology and neither objective nor subjective epistemology (Poucher et al., 2020). This world view and thinking allowed us to speak to existing theory (i.e., SDT) and yet, remain open to generating new theoretical insights.

Abductive analysis is “aimed at generating creative and novel theoretical insights through a dialectic of cultivated theoretical sensitivity and methodological heuristics” (p. 180). The foregrounding of theory, the iterative dialogue between data and existing theory, and openness to surprise which may lead to novel theoretical insights are core elements of abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and made this approach appropriate for our investigation. Given our aim was to explore perceptions of structure for competence development, “casing” structure provision with SDT (i.e., exploring fit) was useful to extend our understanding of coaching practices for competence development and the explanatory suitability of SDT. We recognise that SDT is not without criticism (e.g., Hassmén et al., 2016), indeed the way in which relationships are often portrayed as uncomplicated and stronger than perhaps is the case, contributed to our desire to analyse the topic in greater depth. However, given that coaching is complex, the central concepts of SDT (e.g., coaches’ use of structure, autonomy support, and involvement, basic psychological needs) were useful in structuring our investigation, shaping the interview questions, and focusing our abductive analysis.

Understanding our position in the research (as coaches, researchers, middle class, and White), we recognise that our interpretations are shaped by our own backgrounds and understanding of coaching research, including research framed by SDT. The first author is a professional coach in the context in which the study took place. This provided us with insights and understanding of the “work” of coaches including the context of professional soccer. It also allows access to a “hard to reach” context (i.e., professional soccer) and participants (professional coaches and players) but may also shape the way participants interact with us. The second author is an academic with a background in psychology of sport whose research explores coaching and coach development. She also has experience coaching and developing coaches. Our knowledge of coaching reinforced our desire for detailed exploration of coaching practices connected to players’ competence development and the potential of SDT. However, we were mindful that we brought with us prototheories of the ways we perceive coaching (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Therefore, again abductive analysis was useful in that it encouraged us to remain open to difference and novel insights that may not “fit” easily with SDT.

**Participants**

Five head coaches (male) working in the Norwegian Men’s Eliteserien (Premier League) and three players from each of the participating head coaches’ squads participated in the study (N = 15). To be considered for inclusion, coaches were required to be holders of the UEFA Pro License or actively participating to obtain it. The coaches ranged in age from 41 to 61 years (M = 50 years) and had between 8 and 28 years of coaching experience (M = 16.8 years) including coaching a team who won the Norwegian league championship. Three coaches had formerly achieved promotion with their current team. The players participating ranged in age from 20 to 31 years (M = 26.47 years), varied in experience in the game, and were not all regular starters for their clubs. All participants were considered sport professionals because they were employed by their clubs on a full-time basis to coach or play soccer.
Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, eight head coaches were initially contacted through mutual acquaintances of the first author and invited to share their perspectives on competence-supportive structure in their training. Five coaches agreed to participate in the study. The coaches were aware that three players from their squad would be participating in the study; however, they had no influence on recruiting them or knowledge of their identity. After the coaches agreed to participate, 15 players were contacted through mutual acquaintances of the first author and invited to participate. All participants were then emailed a formal letter, informing them of the nature and purpose of the study. Coaches and players were assured that their comments would remain anonymous, and all data would be treated confidentially. Convenient dates and times for the interviews were confirmed and informed consent was obtained before data collection. The interviews with players lasted approximately 35 minutes and with coaches approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were either carried out face to face, or through Microsoft Teams, and were audio recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed to support our analysis.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted with coaches and players. Using semistructured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ perspectives, while providing flexibility to discuss topics that arose as the conversation developed, thus providing unique and additional insights. Furthermore, the participants had the scope to direct the conversation so they could contribute what was meaningful to them (Smith & Sparks, 2016). Due to the focus of the study, interview guides were developed to ensure conversations with participants focused on exploring participants’ interpretations of interpersonal behaviours in relation to structure and competence development. For coaches, questions such as “What is your philosophy on developing players and how is this best achieved?” allowed for enquiry into coaches’ general coaching practice, and influences on their coaching approach (Patton, 2002). Further questions explored how coaches develop players’ competence, probing into how they do this, and why. For example, the questions “In what ways do you develop a feeling of competence in your players?” and “How important is giving clear expectations, and how to achieve those expectations?” were used to explore the coaches’ competence development strategies and interpretations of the use of structure in their practice. The interviews with the players followed a similar line of enquiry. Questions included “Describe how important clear expectations are for you before each training session or match?” and “Can you describe how important consistency in the message expressed to the playing squad is for you?” These helped to generate information about players’ interpretations of coaches’ interpersonal behaviours, use of structure, and how their coach promotes development of competence. Throughout the interviews, additional probing and follow-up questions were used to gather more detail and establish understanding (Patton, 2002). At the end of the interview, participants were invited to discuss any additional topics they felt were relevant.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the coaches and players’ perspectives, we adopted an abductive analysis approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Abduction involves “conjecturing about the world that is shaped by the solutions a researcher has ‘ready-to-hand’” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 172). Theories and theoretical concepts are sensitising notions that inform, but do not constrain, the research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Therefore, theory (i.e., SDT) helped us to interpret the coaches’ and players’ perspectives on structure provision and competence development. Similar to thematic analysis processes (e.g., Braun et al., 2019), initial analysis involved becoming familiar with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts, coding, making notes (memos) about patterns, and formulating themes. However, the abductive analysis methods also encouraged us to revisit and rethink our observations.

Following Timmermans and Tavory (2012) suggestion, we employed three main elements in our abductive analysis: revisiting, defamiliarisation, and alternative casing. Rather than steps to be taken in a linear manner, they represent a dialogue between theory and data. In addition to familiarising ourselves with the data, coding and making memos, revisiting the phenomena also involved a focus on reevaluating and rethinking data as immediate interpretations may change with subsequent readings and time to reflect. Defamiliarisation focuses on “seeing” what may have been taken for granted and overlooked. Conversations between the researchers where we discussed our interpretations of the data made alternative interpretations apparent, which then encouraged us to revisit the data to reevaluate and rethink our interpretations further. Alternative casing involves defamiliarisation and revisiting in the context of existing theory. As such, we explored how our perceptions of the phenomenon fit with existing theory (i.e., SDT). Where interpretations were more difficult to fit, further discussion ensued, and alternatives were proposed. As a result of this process, five themes each with a number of sub themes were developed.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Despite qualitative research within sport and exercise flourishing in recent years, questions remain about the rigour and reliability of such research (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Contributing to trustworthiness of our interpretations was the first author’s prolonged engagement within soccer. His coaching, playing, and knowledge of language specific to the context was beneficial to construct meaning behind coaches’ and players’ thoughts (Berger, 2015). This affiliation with the sport and mutual personal contacts created an environment of trust in which the participants felt secure in divulging personal accounts relevant to the study (Smith & Sparks, 2016). Both players and coaches, at times, discussed experiences that might paint them or others in a less than favourable light (e.g., coach recognising his overcoaching due to his insecurities), which suggested we were receiving authentic accounts from participants. The use of a self-reflexive journal enabled the first author to record initial responses to interviews, including reflections on the extent to which participants’ perspectives “felt authentic,” and assimilate thoughts and feelings that arose from the dialogue (Smith & Sparks, 2016). The process of member reflection was used to allow participants to discuss the interpretations of the data and explore gaps or further insights (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The abductive analysis processes of revisiting, defamiliarising, alternate casing, and the resulting discussion and (re)interrogation of the data also served to ensure we reflected critically on our interpretations, their fit with theory, and possible alternative explanations. This served to deepen our understanding and final representation of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).
Results

The five themes developed comprised 18 subthemes. They captured how coaches and players described the provision of structure and the consequences it had for their perceptions of competence (Table 1). The five themes were: structure to promote competence; coaching for competence development; relatedness support provides a foundation for effective structure; freedom within structure is useful; and shared ownership of, and with, structure. The following section describes each theme and the connections amongst the subthemes.

Structure to Promote Competence

The structure to promote competence theme reflected the importance coaches and players placed on a clearly communicated, consistent playing philosophy, which assisted individual and collective development. This theme comprised four subthemes: defined game model; clear direction; team co-ordination; and feelings of competence ensued.

Defined Game Model

The players believed it was important that a coach could clearly define the desired game model, so individuals can be held accountable, and training could be devised that focused on the playing style. Player 6 illustrated this perspective:

"We could be clearer on exactly what we are looking to do here, and there is too much focus on winning duels, second balls. I am more concerned about what we shall do as a team! I do not need someone to motivate me or make me play physically. I want everyone in the team fully aware of our tactics, and what their role demands are."

Clear Direction

Some of the players equated coaches setting a clear direction with the ability to stay grounded during difficult periods. Player 11 indicated:

"It is so important as a coach, that you keep your [players’] heads calm, and you preach the same things consistently . . . . I do not mind if the coach tells us to kick long balls for 90 minutes if that is a consistent style."

Table 1 Subthemes, Themes, and Theme Summaries of Coaches’ and Players’ Perspectives on Structure Provision and Its Influence on Competence Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Theme summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Structure to promote competence</td>
<td>Defined game model</td>
<td>A defined game model (overarching tactical approach conceived by the coaching staff) was the starting point in providing competence-supportive structure in a team invasion sport. Once the game model was clarified, the players appreciated consistency in the tactical approach giving them clear direction. Consequently, the players could focus on their role demands that created team co-ordination. Perceived feelings of competence ensued as a result of the structure provided.</td>
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<td>Clear direction</td>
<td>Learning was driven through coaches teaching details and led to players’ confidence and respect in the coach’s ability. Confidence in their coaches’ knowledge helped players’ own perceptions of competence. Providing simple, concise messages helped players understand detailed instruction and illustrated the coach’s self-confidence. Task-involving feedback supported the previous two lower order themes, by focusing on players’ decision making, and the expression of their strengths.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role demands generate team co-ordination</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feelings of competence ensued</td>
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<td>Coaching for competence development</td>
<td>Teaching details</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Simple, concise messages</td>
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<td>Task-involving feedback</td>
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<td>Relatedness support as a foundation for effective structure</td>
<td>Coaches’ sport knowledge and involvement</td>
<td>Coaches and players recognised that ideally coaches would have sport knowledge and involvement with players to optimally support players’ competence development. To do this, it was important to build relationships between the coach and player. To help to strengthen the relationship involved appreciating the individual, which meant some adaptation of coaching practices between players. This approach reflected coaches’ and players’ acknowledgement that everyone deserves equal opportunities and respect in society, which led them to foster equality in relations.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Building coach–player relationships</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appreciate the individual</td>
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<td>Equality in relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom within structure is useful</td>
<td>Quality of player influences structure</td>
<td>Some of the coaches indicated that the quality of player influences structure provided, affecting how strict the guidelines provided were. Players’ experiences also played a role in how much freedom within a framework a coach was willing to encourage. Coaches and players agreed that freedom was necessary, for players to feel motivated from the enjoyment and responsibility given. This was linked to coaches trusting the players’ ability. In contrast, controlling coach behaviour, led to players’ feeling restricted and stifled in their play and creativity.</td>
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<td>Freedom within a framework</td>
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<td>Trusting the players’ ability</td>
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<td>Controlling coach behaviour is counterproductive</td>
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<td>Shared ownership of, and with, structure</td>
<td>Taking the players’ perspective</td>
<td>Through coaches taking the players’ perspective, they created a connection and recognition that all members of the squad were equally important. Taking this approach respected players’ opinions encouraging player involvement, which led to coach–athlete collaboration based on the trust and respect both parties have for each other and produced shared ownership of the process and performance.</td>
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<td>Player involvement</td>
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<td>Coach–athlete collaboration</td>
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Team Coordination

Once the game model was defined and strategy consistently executed, clear role demands were important for the players not only to develop individually, but also collectively. Player 10 valued coaches that clearly defined the expectations for each individual, enabling players “to demonstrate a group understanding on the pitch and stay together in a planned direction assisting [their] development.” This team co-ordination was not always what players experienced, as Coach 11 described:

I have been in clubs that I have felt, week after week, that we have been training not practicing! It is only about intensity, and occasionally quality is mentioned, but I ask myself; What is quality? What do you want from me? For me, it is so important to have something to build your game on, to look for yourself, but most importantly for the team.

Feelings of Competence Ensued

Most of the coaches and the majority of the players noted that clarity in the desired playing style and direction given produces feelings of competence within players. Player 9 described: “It gives me confidence, if I feel the coach knows exactly the solution we need . . . [it] fills the team with confidence.” Conversely, players had experienced confusion when their coach had been unclear on the game model and this affected their perceptions of competence:

Super important that the coach is crystal clear on our game model so we can build on it from week to week, and kneejerk reactions only create insecurity in the playing squad. It creates frustration from the players [who] wish [for] clear guidelines . . . the insecurity creates confusion and affects our confidence. (Player 2)

Coaching for Competence Development

The coaching for competence theme reflected the information and detail coaches gave to encourage players’ optimal performance. The theme comprised three subthemes: teaching details; simple, concise messages; and task-involving feedback.

Teaching Details

Gaining insight from detailed teaching and feeling confident in the soccer knowledge their coach provided helped players feel more competent. Player 9 commented “the coaches I have now are much more interested in detail, and these details decide matches . . . it is the small things that are decisive.” His teammate, Player 8, had a similar view “I feel I learn soccer from my coaches. With the other coaches I had over the last 5 years, I felt as though they never taught me anything worthwhile!” Player 1 described what separated two Championship winning coaches from others he had worked with:

They knew the game deeply from a tactical standpoint. It could mean the others are knowledgeable as well, but the best coaches had the skill to teach details in such a clear manner . . . they had their players’ full respect and gave value when they spoke.

Simple, Concise Messages

Coaches were very honest in admitting to giving too much information at times to the detriment of performance. Coach 5 explained that “these moments when we talk too much are so easy to occur . . . actually we prefer too little information over too much, because I know that players cannot comprehend everything.” Significantly, Coach 1 conceded that he had overloaded the players with information before matches through his own self-doubt:

It was for my own feeling of security. From reflection, it allowed me to feel that I had done everything I could. . . . It was an irrational, stupid way to think . . . . I must put away that my own security is satisfied, because it is irrelevant.

Coach 4 illustrated coaches’ awareness of the importance of clear communication: “If you give information to players, they will stick to it. They will literally do what you ask of them, no matter the situation . . . [so] you must be so careful in how you give the information.”

Task-Involving Feedback

Supplementing the frequency and clarity of information given was the way coaches provided corrective feedback. Players were adamant that genuine mistakes should not be criticised, and coaches should be more concerned with coaching players’ decisions, providing a meaningful rationale, over technical errors. Player 11 explained: “Coaches must coach decision-making more, rather than if a pass is well directed or not . . . there are too many wrong decisions that are praised, and mis-placed passes that are criticised when they were excellent choices.” Feedback geared toward a player’s strengths was a common feature that fostered feelings of competence. Player 2 explained, “I like to use my strengths and receive positive reinforcement when I execute them well. I need to hear that; this is one of your strengths, go for it!” Coach 5 echoed these feelings, describing how he uses feedback to foster confidence in his players. “We try to emphasise the positive actions, but I know there are several coaches that like to scream at negatives . . . we are the opposite here, we highlight the positives, and try to catch individuals doing things well.”

Relatedness Support Provides a Foundation for Effective Structure

The relatedness support theme reflected how the interpersonal climate produced security, trust, and recognition for players. Importantly, these connections between coaches and players were critical if coaches’ use of structure was to effectively foster players’ actual and perceived competence. The theme comprised four sub themes: coaches’ sport knowledge and involvement, building coach–player relationships, appreciate the individual, and equity in relations.

Sport Knowledge and Involvement

For many players, coaches with competent tactical knowledge alone were not enough to get the best from the team. Player 12 explained that “the edge that must be there, to go from a coach with knowledge, to become excellent, lies in interpersonal relations.” Although desired, participants felt it was uncommon for coaches to have both strong sport knowledge and good interpersonal skills. Player 7 commented:

I have rarely had a coach that can combine strong tactical knowledge and human knowledge. I have had excellent tactical coaches . . . that struggle to treat players as people, and the opposite where coaches are good to talk with but do not understand the tactical side enough.
To counter this issue, building a competent staff team around the head coach was considered vital as Coach 3 commented: “to share the workload and capture more that could be occurring … the players are followed up better … this allows more time to observe them, and to build relations even better.”

**Building Coach–Player Relationships**

Coaches were also aware of the interpersonal nature of coaching:

If you are good with people then you will get a huge return on your investment, players need tender love and comfort … similar to a teacher, it does not matter [that] you are an expert in maths, if you cannot build a relationship so that they want to learn from you. (Coach 4)

This included suggesting an association between the quality of the coach–player relationship and the coaches’ ability to provide direction and feedback that would effectively develop players’ competence. Coach 4 commented:

If I am going to correct a player, he requires 70% comfort and 30% on the actual detail. If I am just going to focus on the 30% and be quite harsh without any relation to the player, then I am not sure he will be able to improve.

**Appreciating the Individual**

A central feature that fostered relatedness and created the opportunity for coaches to impact players was coaches “seeing” their players. They recognised them as people and as individuals with differing backgrounds and needs. Coach 2 explained that “if you see the player, but also you see the person, the person within the player, it gives you a chance to get into him, to coach him, that is what we are doing, helping.” He continued commenting:

You must be patient and be fair to them … also tell the players I cannot treat everyone the same. Because one player has his background, and another player has his background, so I need to treat them a little different to be fair.

Players also recognised that coaches should adapt to the individuals they were working with: “every player is different … some need a harder voice, and some need to be spoken to softly” (Player 7).

**Equity in Relations**

The coaches’ actions reflected their perceptions of wider societal views, where everyone is looked upon as an equal, leading them to be more inclusive and respectful of individuals and of differences. Coach 1 explained, “society has gone from hard, to softer and softer … players are so empathetic toward each other … if one player is treated badly, then all of them would be against the leader.” Coach 4 expanded on this saying “I strongly believe today’s youth … want to be communicated with [with] respect, they want to be seen, and they do not want to be coached in a ‘my way or the highway’ style, especially here in Norway.”

**Freedom Within Structure is Useful**

The freedom within structure theme reflected the delicate balance between strict guidelines and opportunities for creativity and decision making. The theme comprised four subthemes: quality of players influences structure, freedom within a framework, trusting the players’ ability, and controlling coach behaviour is counterproductive.

**Quality of Players Influences Structure**

When discussing the use of guidelines and structure, the coaches referred to player quality. Coach 1 stated, “the less intelligent the players are, the clearer guidelines I believe you need.” The experience of players also had an impact, as Player 4 commented: “with such a young squad, it emphasises the importance of clear principles … [so we are] not confused with exactly what we should do.” His current coach explained:

When I was here last time, people said the team had a defined playing style, but I had extremely clever players, soccer brains! Inside the structure, I could allow imagination to develop because the players could see the solution. (Coach 2)

**Freedom Within a Framework**

Every coach and player agreed structure was necessary, so players could work within the game model, but that freedom was just as crucial. Player 12 explained, “it is impossible to know exactly, what percentage of guidelines compared to freedom a player can have … but you must have a combination to be successful.” As described previously, players considered a clear playing style was vital for success, but they did not “want to be treated like a robot!” (Player 1). Feeling supported and encouraged to “execute in the moment” was mentioned by several players:

Our coach believes soccer is instinctual and players must solve the situation in front of them. Things happen quickly, and you must react in the best possible manner without the coach looking over you to tell you what to do. (Player 8)

**Trusting the Players’ Ability**

The amount of freedom given to players to make their own decisions could be linked to the trust the coach had in his players. Player 7 explained his feelings:

He never mentions; if they do this, then we must do that. He just makes clear the main aspects to look out for and trusts the players can deal with it. I am enjoying having a coach who thinks about what we can do as a team to hurt the opposition, instead of a more negative approach from my previous coach.

**Controlling Coach Behaviour is Counterproductive**

Describing how it felt to play under his last coach who was very controlling, Player 7 said:

Every week you are waiting on him to come up with his genius plan! He thinks he is playing a chess match with the players as the pieces. You start to lose trust that he has your best interest at heart … When it becomes too rigid then the enjoyment comes away from the game and you feel pressured to do what the coach wants … I just stopped thinking as a player. You want to do what the coach says because you want to start matches, but you want to think a little more for yourself … you begin to forget what your own individual strengths are.

Coaches screaming at players were also seen as counterproductive: “I cannot get my head around coaches that shout from the side-lines at players making a genuine mistake. You cannot scare a
player to make a better pass next time just because you shouted at him!” (Player 11).

**Shared Ownership of, and With, Structure**

The shared ownership theme reflected how the coaches’ included players in the coaching process, looking to achieve success together. The theme comprised three subthemes: taking the players’ perspective, player involvement, and coach-athlete collaboration.

**Taking the Players’ Perspective**

Players appreciated coaches that understood their feelings. Coach 3 illustrated how he does this: “you can get a feeling for the challenges each player has, and their mentalities. I like to think over the approach I will take before speaking . . . it is important to reflect on how the player experiences the situation himself.” Recognition of players not involved in the starting 11 was another part of appreciating the players’ perspective. Player 8 suggested that “the mistake some coaches make is that they wait until the player comes to them, but for me the coach should recognise the player might not be happy and be ahead of the game in a way.” Coach 3 explained, “we try to give as much attention to the substitutes the day after a match . . . even after a defeat, this is when we must be at our sharpest for them!”

**Player Involvement**

All the players said their coach involved the players, but to differing degrees, depending on the coach’s approach and expectations from the players:

I have experienced many coaches, but the coaches that are not scared to be challenged tactically, and appreciate questions and discussion, manage to ignite development . . . it is extremely rewarding if a coach is open for discussion and welcomes input. (Player 12)

Player 10 stated “if you feel that you can contribute . . . this motivates you more as an individual to be part of decisions, and there is humility in the process which gives respect to the coach.”

**Coach–Athlete Collaboration**

Some coaches emphasised the importance of empowering the players to come up with their own solutions. Coach 5 commented, “it is one thing what the coaching staff believes is best, but it is the players that must go out and win, so it is important to include them to encourage ownership.” Coach 4 believed the players had a significant role in developing the team:

We are very clear as coaches about how we want to play, you could say what keeps the building standing, but we are open with what can be added within the interior. We want players to help create our building, and by giving ownership to the group, this can be achieved.

Player 11 stated, “The ownership part is very motivating for me. You feel that you are more than just a player . . . you feel it is ‘WE’ that make decisions and you want to do even better when you feel this.”

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore professional soccer coaches’ and players’ perspectives on the provision of structure to support players’ development of actual and perceived competence. The findings contribute to our understanding of (a) features of structure in a high-performance sport context; (b) how structure supported players’ competence development; and (c) the interplay between structure, involvement, and autonomy support. Furthermore, as part of our abductive analysis, alternate casing yielded insights about the fit between interpretations and tenets of SDT. While much of our observations fit with SDT, we also offer additional, perhaps alternative explanations, for the connections we found. In conclusion, we offer a tentative conceptualisation of structure in sport to support future research and application.

Few studies have considered the provision of structure in sport and particularly in high-performance sport (Mossman et al., 2022; Standage, 2023). For the coaches and players in our study, structure involved a range of strategies centred on providing clear expectations, guidance, and task-focused feedback. It focused on “the way we will play” (defined game model) and how to achieve it which provided players with a focus for their performance development. Consistent with SDT (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003) structure fostered players’ perceived competence. Where clarity was lacking, however, players experienced confusion and their sense of competence was adversely affected. We also found that the structure coaches provided facilitated a shared understanding amongst players about how they were seeking to perform which influenced perceptions of competence at an individual and team level. Through structure, players gained direction and guidance on how the team members could divide and co-ordinate their actions to achieve desired outcomes. As team co-ordination is considered critical for effective team performance (Eccles, 2010), this finding suggests that structure may be particularly useful in team sports. However, the extent to which all players within a team experienced team co-ordination was not explored therefore further research is needed to investigate the influences on and connections between structure, team co-ordination, perceptions of competence, and performance.

Structure provision often involved direct input from coaches. The use of direct instruction to convey clear guidelines and clarity on team tactics has been noted in previous research in professional soccer (e.g., Potrac et al., 2002, 2007). However, contrary to that research, we found professional soccer players in our study desired these forms of structure from their coaches. Our finding therefore is more consistent with, and also extends, that of Holgaard et al. (2008) who found that professional soccer players noted preferences for training and instruction behaviours from coaches that were directly related to task-orientated skill development. It is also consistent with research with high-performance athletes from other sports (Froyen & Pensgaard, 2014) and supports Mageau and Vallerand (2003) assertion that without structure athletes may lack the necessary information to progress. Interestingly, acceptance of coaches’ direction is in contrast to recent “devaluing” of direct instruction in sport coaching in favour of approaches that are seen ostensibly as more empowering or “hands off” (c.f., Cope & Cushion, 2020). This suggests an interplay between structure and autonomy, which we discuss later.

Similar to Froyen and Pensgaard (2014), coaches in our study provided feedback that demonstrated to players that they recognised and believed in the players’ ability and performances, which in turn supported players’ confidence to perform (i.e., perceived competence). Coaches’ feedback focused on players’ strengths and reinforced when players performed well. The use of this promotion-oriented feedback (confirming and reinforcing desirable behaviours) to support players’ competence development (Carpenter & Mageau, 2016) may not always be beneficial for the person
receiving it because it can have controlling as well as informational qualities (Carpentier & Mageau, 2016). The comment from one player in our study that he needed to hear reinforcement from the coach suggests there may be some reliance on the coach for approval; and therefore, this feedback might lead to more controlled motivation. However, the player also desired information about his strengths which, if descriptive, rather than evaluative, would enable him to make his own judgements and reduce the likelihood that feedback is controlling.

To advance performance, however, change-oriented feedback (indicating what needs to be modified to achieve athletes’ goals; COF) is also likely to be needed. Players in our study preferred coaches to provide corrective feedback that focused on the decision making behind technical execution rather than just focusing on execution or criticising technical errors. The coaches in Lyons et al. (2012) and Mallett (2005) also emphasised the process rather than the outcome in their coaching strategies. However, similar to Lyons et al. and Mallett, the coaches in our study were also aware that how they provided feedback was critical to its effectiveness, suggesting that feedback should be supportive of competence development as well as autonomy supportive (i.e., appreciate the players’ perspective and provide a meaningful rationale). The importance of this interplay between structure and autonomy support is supported by research that suggests when promotion-oriented feedback and COF are provided in an autonomy-supportive way, feedback is associated with motivationally adaptive outcomes (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, 2016).

In addition to the structure-autonomy support interplay, we also found that when it came to interpretations of giving and receiving feedback, coaches’ involvement seemed to be more important than autonomy support. The coaches suggested that unless there was a strong relationship with players, the players would not want to learn from coaches and that providing corrective feedback would be less effective. The athletes in Frøyen and Pensgaard (2014) also referred to a sense of security as a result of the support of the coach. This provided a platform from which athletes’ could be challenged to improve their performance. A possible explanation for the relationship between involvement and structure is to consider the role relatedness plays in behavioural regulation. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that people take on board information and perform actions that are not initially intrinsically motivating because “the behaviors are prompted, modeled, or valued by significant others to whom they feel (or want to feel) attached or related” (p. 73). Therefore, because of the relationship between the coaches and players, the coaches were able to provide COF that players valued because it was provided by the coach. Furthermore, “people are more likely to adopt activities that relevant social groups value when they feel efficacious with respect to those activities” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Therefore, because of the structure the coaches provided, players felt confident to act on the COF. This interpretation suggests involvement rather than, or at least as well as, autonomy support may be salient in the efficacy of structure.

An alternative explanation for the positive influence of the interplay between structure and involvement is that the coaches created a psychologically safe environment (Edmonson, 1999). Within such an environment an individual’s opinion is appreciated, competence of individuals is respected, and it is safe to experiment and take risks. Although Taylor et al. (2022) urged caution in applying the concept of psychological safety to high-performance contexts, based on our findings, we suggest that this concept may be useful in explaining the influence of coaches’ interpersonal strategies on competence development. That is, involvement formed a foundation from which players felt their competence was recognised and feedback was intended to enhance it further.

According to SDT, social conditions that support all three needs are theorised to foster high-quality human functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Standage, 2023). As discussed already, we found evidence of interplay between structure, involvement, and autonomy support in the effectiveness of feedback provision. Furthermore, coaches’ perceptions of players’ soccer ability and experience influenced the coaches’ provision of structure and autonomy support. For example, to assist with their understanding and learning, less-experienced players desired and received more structure than experienced players. This finding is consistent with the provision of structure in an autonomy-supportive way, as it considers the individual’s perspective (e.g., current knowledge and experience), supports volition, and is invitationable (e.g., provides explanatory rationales for activity; Cheon et al., 2020; Jang et al., 2010). In addition, although players and coaches valued both structure (game model, team tactics, and training methods) and autonomy (ownership and initiative taking) to develop players’ competence, the coaches also desired to remain in overall “control.” As a result, a question might be raised about how much autonomy the players truly had. The players’ comments suggested they were comfortable with autonomy within structure. Therefore, it could be argued that as they “agreed” to coaches’ overall control in the form of structure, it was still possible for them to feel autonomous within their roles (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This again illustrates the interplay between structure and autonomy and the need to consider how they combine to support competence development.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

The study engaged coaches and players working at the highest level in Norwegian soccer. Consequently, the sample was limited in demographic, size, and coaching context. Future research should continue to explore coaches’ provision of structure in other sports and performance levels, investigate the impact of cultural influences on how structure is provided, and how feasible it is to adopt an approach that is appreciative of players’ needs (e.g., Reyners et al., 2019). For example, researchers might consider the “form” (expectations, guidance, and feedback) structure takes and to what extent is it autonomy supportive or controlling in different contexts. As well as the impact it has on participants’ perceptions of competence, and development of sporting competence. Consideration might also be given to understanding the influences on how coaches employ structure (e.g., coaches’ beliefs about coaching, stakeholders’ agendas). Another limitation of the study was reliance on coaches’ and players’ views reported through semistructured interviews at one point in time. Given the dynamic nature of coaching, future research that includes observation of the coaches’ practices, examines fluctuations in need support over time (e.g. Carpenterie & Mageau, 2016), or impact of different contexts (e.g., training, matches) would enrich our understanding of competence-supportive structure.

**Practical Implications**

Based on our findings, we offer coaching strategies that provided structure and supported players’ competence in our study. We hope that others may find them useful to consider and prompt reflection on their own coaching practices and contexts: (a) structure before
activity can promote players’ actual and perceived competence by conveying tactical clarity (how they seek to play the game) and clear roles (what competent looks like); (b) structure during and after activity can support individual and team competence when it reinforces the team’s established playing principles and involves task-focused feedback; (3) direct instruction as part of structure can support competence, particularly when provided in an autonomy-supportive way; (4) developing connections with all players regardless of experience or playing ability can provide a foundation for effective use of structure (e.g., feedback provision); and (5) structure combined with autonomy support can support competence development (e.g., giving options to solutions when needed, supporting players to execute skills/plays, player-led scenario-based training that adjusts challenges set by coaches).

Conclusion

The focus of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding, from coaches’ and players’ perspectives, of the provision of structure for competence development, within professional male Norwegian soccer. We found that structure involved provision of expectations, guidance, and feedback. It positively influenced players’ perceptions of individual and team competence as players felt able to engage effectively with the task at hand, a central feature of perceived competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Structure efficacy was enhanced through support for relatedness and autonomy. When structure was combined with involvement and consideration of the individual, the satisfaction of the players’ psychological needs was met and players’ described feelings of motivation and reward as a result of working with their coaches. Drawing on our findings and those from education research (e.g., Cheon et al., 2020; Jang et al., 2010), we offer a tentative operationalisation of structure in sport as the interpersonal behaviours of coaches that provide information conveying clear expectations before activity; guidance when needed during activity; and task-focused feedback after activity. To enhance our understanding of the influence of coaches’ interpersonal actions on athletes’ needs and performance, future research should continue to examine the role of structure and the interplay between structure, involvement, and autonomy support.

Author Biographies

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