A Prospective Study of the Influence of Perceived Coaching Style on Burnout Propensity in High Level Young Athletes: Using a Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Elite Training Centers

The ability to cope with the demands of excelling in both sport and academia, and with the pressure put on athletes by their coach and parents; is an important success factor for adolescents in elite training centers. In a French survey (i.e., Observatoire régional de la santé, 1996) elite adolescent student-athletes reported lower levels of subjective well-being than other adolescents because they often lacked the necessary psychosocial support. In the context of elite level youth sport, many studies have highlighted the importance of motivational factors. They have also shown that there is an important risk for young elite competitors to lose their motivation, to overreach, and to feel exhausted by their sports life. Due to a total devotion to their goals, unfulfillment of basic psychological needs, excessive training, insufficient recovery and perceived insufficient psychosocial support, the athletes are unable to reach their full athletic potential (Lemyre, Roberts & Stray-Gundersen, 2007). Even though there have been many studies on the motivational antecedents of maladaptive sport participation outcomes such as athlete burnout, these have only looked at a very limited number of motivational factors (e.g., Cresswell & Eklund, 2005, 2006). Thus the purpose of this study is to further investigate motivational antecedents (i.e., coaching style, fundamental psychological needs, and self-determined regulations, based on self-determination theory; Deci & Ryan, 2000) of athlete burnout using a prospective six-month-follow-up.

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Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a theoretical approach that could explain the implications of the social environment (lack of psychosocial support in sport) on the well-being of young athletes. This theoretical framework suggests two distinct styles of coaching, leading to qualitatively different outcomes. A coach is deemed “controlling” when he/she is perceived as authoritarian and coercive and when athletes do not feel autonomous toward making sport related choices. A coach is deemed “autonomy supportive” when he/she is perceived as explaining and justifying his or her decisions, encouraging individuals to participate in said decisions, providing appropriate information, minimizing external pressures and demands, and giving them the opportunity to choose by themselves (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010).

Several studies have shown higher levels of well-being in individuals who evolve in an autonomy supportive context (e.g., Gagné, Ryan & Bargmann, 2003). In the same way, an autonomy supportive coaching style has been associated with well-being in athletes (e.g., Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008). In these studies, the authors also found that the coaching style is linked to the well-being of athletes through the satisfaction of the three psychological needs (i.e., competence, autonomy, relatedness). It then appears that the perception of contextual factors will be able to feed the three human basic psychological needs.

According to the SDT, an individual aims to satisfy these three innate needs. The need for autonomy implies that the individual voluntarily decides his actions and that he is the one to perform these actions in a way that is in congruence with him. He can then totally endorse them (Decharms, 1968). The individual’s need for competence refers to the feeling of being effective in the interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express his capacities (Deci, 1975). Finally, his need for relatedness implies a sense of belonging to a group, and the feeling of being connected to significant others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). If the fulfillment of these needs is neglected, there will be a negative impact on the individual’s psychological development, integrity and well-being. Several studies have shown that the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs was linked to higher levels of well-being, and that it also influenced well-being through one’s level of self-determined motivation (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe & Ryan, 2000; Wilson, Longley, Muon, Rodgers & Murray, 2006).

Deci and Ryan (2000) have postulated the existence of a continuum of self-determination going from intrinsic motivation, which is the most self-determined motivation, to extrinsic motivation (i.e., integrated, identified, introjected and external regulations) and finally to amotivation. Intrinsic motivation means that individuals perform the activity for the pleasure and satisfaction it provides them and for the pleasure of learning something new. Integrated regulation means that individuals joined the activity, in which they are able to fulfill important personal aims; as something consistent with their values and needs. Identified regulation applies to individuals who have identified why they are doing the activity even if it is not interesting in itself: They work for the benefits they may reap from it, they also perceive that the action is initiated by themselves, they do it by choice. Introjected regulation deals with individuals who are doing the activity due to internal pressure such as guilt. External regulation represents behavior regulated