The relationship between the objectively rated coach-created motivational climate, and athletes’ basic psychological needs and sport enjoyment

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Introduction:

Self-determination theory (SDT) predicts the extent to which the coach-created climate is autonomy supportive and/or controlling will contribute towards the degree to which athletes experience satisfaction of the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, and in turn, positive emotional responses. The relationship between athletes’ self-reported perceptions of the coach-created motivational climate (as conceptualized in SDT) and athletes’ basic need satisfaction (BNS) and associated outcomes is well understood. However, little is known about the implications of the objectively-measured features of the motivational climate for athletes’ motivation related processes and associated outcomes. Thus, this research examined the relationship between objectively rated coach autonomy support and controlling features of the environment, and athletes’ self-reported BNS and sport enjoyment.

Method:

53 grassroots football coaches (Mage = 37.74 years) and 672 players (Mage = 11.32 years) took part in the study. During the first 10 weeks of the season, the coach was filmed during a training session and athletes completed a questionnaire assessing their autonomy, competence and relatedness need satisfaction and enjoyment in football. Recordings were split into four equal time periods and trained observers coded the potency of the autonomy supportive and controlling features of the climate using the Multi-dimensional Motivational Climate Observation System (MMCOS).

Results:

Analyses suggest that observed autonomy support was positively related to players’ autonomy need satisfaction ($\beta=.36$, $p=.008$), and observed controlling features of the coaching environment emerged as a significant negative predictor of players’ sense of relatedness ($\beta=-.34$, $p=.013$) and enjoyment ($\beta=-.31$, $p=.025$). Relatedness was a significant positive predictor of enjoyment ($\beta=.56$, $p<.01$). Mediation analysis demonstrated relatedness partially mediated the relationship between observed controlling behavior and player enjoyment ($p=.029$).

Discussion:

Findings demonstrate when coaches are observed to coerce behavior by being controlling, players report lower levels of relatedness and consequently enjoy their sport less. Given that players’ enjoyment in sport has been associated with important health-related outcomes, it seems important that coaches try and avoid emphasizing a controlling motivational environment. In future, SDT-based coach education programs that focus on encouraging more adaptive motivational environments may also wish to educate coaches about how to reduce the negative implications of emphasizing maladaptive, controlling coaching practices.