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Social climate profiles in adolescent sports: Associations with enjoyment and intention to continue



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ABSTRACT

This study explored whether adolescent sports participants' perceptions of the social climate fall into distinct profiles, and whether these profiles are related to enjoyment and intention to continue. A Latent Profile Analysis using 313 Australian sports participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.03$ years) revealed four distinct profiles: positive social climate (45.1%), diminished social climate (19.8%), positive coach relationship quality (19.8%), and positive friendship quality (15.3%). Individuals within the positive social climate and the positive coach relationship quality profiles reported relatively higher levels of enjoyment and intention to continue than individuals in the diminished social climate and the positive friendship quality profiles. Indirect path analyses found the social climate profiles were linked with intention to continue through enjoyment. Results highlight the value of investigating multiple dimensions of the social climate and suggest that the coach may be of particular importance in this age group. Findings have implications for understanding youth sports participation and preventing dropout.

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Understanding how aspects of the social climate – defined by the influence of key social figures (namely parents, coaches, and peers) – influence sports participation is valuable given that sports participation during childhood and adolescence has consistently been linked with positive health outcomes (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). For example, sports participation has been linked with a range of positive physical and psychosocial health outcomes including reduced rates of overweight and obesity, improved social skills, resilience, greater self-esteem, improved emotional regulation, fewer mental health problems, and less problem behaviors (Eime et al., 2013; Hebert, Møller, Andersen, & Wedderkopp, 2015; Janssen & Leblanc, 2010). Notably, the psychosocial health benefits associated with sports participation surpass those attributable to unstructured physical activity alone (Eime et al., 2013; Vella, Cliff, Magee, & Okely, 2015). Additionally, research shows that sports participants experience less psychological difficulties and greater health-related quality of life compared to individuals who drop out or do not participate in sport (Vella, Cliff, Magee, & Okely, 2014; Vella et al., 2015). The purpose of the current study is to investigate how individual differences in perceptions of key social relationships are associated with youth sports participation.

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The social climate and adolescent sport

Parents represent a key component of the social climate as they play a vital role in early sports participation where they are responsible for introducing children to their chosen sport and providing ongoing support (Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Parental support can include tangible support (e.g., financial costs and transport), socio-emotional support (e.g., encouragement and aiding understanding), informational support (e.g., explaining the rules), and companionship (e.g., watching sports events) (Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté, 1999). Parental support has been linked with a range of important psychological and behavioral outcomes in youth sports. For example, children who perceive their parents to be more supportive tend to experience greater enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and are more likely to continue participating in sport (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2013; Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014). However, parents can also have negative influences. For example, parental pressure is one of the most common interpersonal reasons for youth sports dropout (Crane & Temple, 2015). Therefore, gaining an understanding of perceptions of parental support could provide valuable information in regards to adolescent sports participation and dropout.

Coaches are often considered to play a similar role to parents given their position of authority and responsibility to provide support. However, the role of a coach is different as they are also relied upon for technical instruction to aid skill development (Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2010). Positive coach–athlete relationships represent a key component of the social climate because they have been linked with a number of motivational outcomes including increased motivation and greater persistence in youth sports (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Riley & Smith, 2011). High quality coach–athlete relationships are characterized by high perceptions of closeness (e.g., feelings such as respect, trust, and appreciation), commitment (e.g., intentions to maintain the relationship), complementarity (e.g., the cooperative and reciprocal behaviors), and co-orientation (e.g., perceptions about shared views and common ground) (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). However, research suggests that the coach–athlete relationship is commonly implicated in the decision to withdraw from youth sports (Rottensteiner, Kontinen, & Laakso, 2015). Contributing factors may include coach conflict, a controlling and autocratic coaching style, lack of encouragement, and an overemphasis on winning (Gearity & Murray, 2011; Gould, 2007; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001). It is therefore important to understand the role of coaches, and more specifically the coach–athlete relationship, in the context of youth sports participation and dropout.

Peers represent another core component of the social climate in the context of youth sport. The role of peers is very different to that of parents and coaches, and has received relatively less empirical attention (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009; Smith, Ullrich-French, Walker, & Hurley, 2006). The two main dimensions of peer relationships that tend to be targeted in youth sports research are peer acceptance and friendship quality (Smith et al., 2006). Peer acceptance refers to popularity and liking by the larger peer group, whereas friendship quality refers to having a close and reciprocated dyadic relationship (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). From a developmental perspective, Sullivan (1953) argued that the two dimensions make distinct contributions yet they can also compensate for other relationship shortcomings. For example, it is theorized that a close and high quality friendship may buffer against the negative outcomes associated with low peer acceptance (Smith, 1999; Sullivan, 1953). Additionally, Ullrich-French and Smith (2006; 2009) found peer acceptance and friendship quality to be uniquely and positively associated with enjoyment and continuation in soccer. Therefore, given that these dimensions have distinct influences on motivational outcomes in youth sport, they both need to be considered (Smith, 1999; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). This may be particularly salient when the two facets of peer relationships are functioning at different levels as they could have an interactive effect.

Key motivational outcomes in youth sports

Enjoyment and intention to continue are two key motivational processes that could influence participation and dropout in youth sports (Balish, McLaren, Rainham, & Blanchard, 2014; Crane & Temple, 2015). Sports enjoyment refers to a positive emotional response acquired from the sports experience (Scanlan & Simons, 1992). Enjoyment has consistently been linked with continued participation, whereas lack of enjoyment is reported to be the single most common reason for dropout in youth sports (Crane & Temple, 2015; Gould, 2007). Intentions refer to an individual's motivation and plans for future behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and have been shown to directly predict actual sports behaviors, including participation and dropout (Balish et al., 2014). Although a number of other factors may contribute to continued participation in youth sports, the consistent findings in the youth sports literature linking enjoyment and intention to continue with participation suggests that the two factors are particularly important to future sports participation behavior (Balish et al., 2014; Crane & Temple, 2015). Furthermore, according to research using behavioral change theories such as the theory of planned behavior, the self-determination theory, and achievement goal theory, both factors should be considered because enjoyment can be conceptualized as an antecedent of intention (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2015; Quested et al., 2013). This suggests that enjoyment could have an indirect effect on sports participation through its influence on intentions to continue.

Although these theories suggest that components of the social climate could influence sports participation via their effects on the motivational processes outlined above, few studies have examined all three key figures in the social climate. Available studies have tended to focus narrowly on the motivational climates created by parents, coaches, and peers (Atkins et al., 2015; Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, 2012; Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Cury, 2002). The motivational climate refers to the perception that social agents are promoting an environment for effort and learning (i.e., a task-involving climate) or emphasizing success in comparison to others (i.e., an ego-involving climate) (Ames, 1992). This research indicated task-

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