



Swedish youth football players' attitudes towards moral decision in sport as predicted by the parent-initiated motivational climate



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to examine associations between late adolescent football players' perceptions of the motivational climate – as initiated by mothers and fathers – and attitudes towards moral decision making in sports.

Design: Cross-sectional.

Methods: Participants were 213 Swedish football players (144 males, 67 females) aged 16–19 years who completed measures assessing perceived parent-initiated motivational climate (i.e., success-without-effort climate [SWEC]; worry conducive climate [WCC]; and learning/enjoyment climate [LEC]) and attitudes towards moral decision-making in sport (i.e., acceptance of cheating [AOC]; acceptance of gamesmanship [AOG] and keeping winning in proportion [KWIP]).

Results: Canonical correlations demonstrated moderate positive relations between parent-initiated – both mother and father – performance climates (WCC and SWEC) and AOC and AOG. Moreover, the relationship between mother and father-initiated learning/enjoyment climate (LEC) were shown to be moderately and positively associated with the prosocial attitude dimension of KWIP. Results also showed that a mother-initiated LEC and a mother-initiated SWEC were stronger predictors of the criterion variables (AOC, AOG, and KWIP) than equivalent father-initiated climate dimensions.

Conclusions: The results highlight the importance of considering the relationship between parent-initiated climates – especially initiated by mothers – and the development of moral decision-making among youth football players.

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A general premise held by many sport enthusiasts is that sport provides a context in which every participant has an equal opportunity for success and where respect for players and opponents are upheld at all times (Shields & Bredemeier, 2007). These so-called fair-play or sportsmanship ideals provide the rationale upon which parents often place their children into organized sport (Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007). Despite the potential for sport to act as a context for positive youth development, ample evidence suggests that fair play ideals are routinely compromised. Countless examples of athletes demonstrating immoral behavior both inside (e.g., feigning injury, trash talk, and cheating), and outside sport (e.g., binge drinking, bullying, or beating others), leading to the

logical question of whether sport is in fact a tool for positive youth development (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Studies have shown that sport can elicit positive features and attributes among its participants, attributes which may transfer to non-sport environments (e.g., Rutten, et al., 2007). The direction and the strength of these effects however, are largely dependent on the form and quality of interactions between athletes and significant others such as coaches, peers, and parents (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Because parents are among the most salient socialization agents and typically initiate youth sport involvement (Partridge, Brustad, & Stellino, 2008), this study focuses on parent-adolescent interactions as they relate to moral attitudes in sports. The predictive influence on behavior, in combination with the relative ease of collecting attitudinal data, has led researchers in the field of moral development to take an attitudinal approach (Lee, Whitehead, Ntoumanis, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2013). Moreover, it has been argued that it is necessary for researchers to identify the attitudes of significant others towards unethical behaviour in order to

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discover the processes by which youth athletes make unfair decisions or behave in unethical ways (Whitehead, Telfer, & Lambert, 2013).

Using achievement goal theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1989) as a theoretical framework, several researchers have examined the link between persons' achievement motivation and different morality issues in sports (e.g., Kavussanu, 2007; Stuntz & Weiss, 2003). According to AGT, individuals have a tendency to define the meaning of achievement and success in either self-referenced terms (i. e., task-oriented) or other-referenced terms (i.e., ego-oriented) (Nicholls, 1989). Overall, findings have shown that an ego-orientation has been positively related with a series of problematic moral constructs, while a task-orientation has been negatively related to the same constructs (Shields & Bredemeier, 2007).

Individuals' goal orientations are developed and altered through the interplay with important socialization agents such as parents, peers and coaches (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989). The type of achievement goals emphasized by relevant socializing agents in specific contexts reflects the motivational climate of that environment. Research has indicated that the perceived parent-initiated motivational climate consists of three separate dimensions including: worry-conducive climate (WCC), success-without-effort climate (SWEC) and learning/enjoyment climate (LEC; White, 1996; White, Duda, & Hart, 1992). The first two – worry-conducive climate and success-without-effort climate – are dimensions of a perceived parent-initiated performance climate. The learning/enjoyment climate is indicative of a perceived parent-initiated mastery climate. The worry-conducive climate reflects the child's perceptions of parents' negative reactions to failing, making mistakes, and not performing as well as others. The success-without-effort climate emphasizes the child's perception of their parents' satisfaction when they achieve desired outcomes in an effortless manner. Finally, the learning/enjoyment climate refers to the perception of parents' expressed approval when the child learns something new, when he or she improves in relation to former standards, and when mistakes are permissible and acknowledged as part of the learning process (White, 1996; White et al., 1992).

Although researchers have examined the link between a coach-initiated motivational climate and various morality constructs (see Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015 for a review), the relationship between parent-initiated motivational climates and their children's moral attitudes have largely been overlooked (Horn & Horn, 2007). Findings related to the latter focus have been equivocal. A mastery-oriented climate has been positively related to sportspersonship, while a performance climate has been negatively related to sportspersonship (D'Arripe-Longueville, Pantaléon, & Smith, 2006). Others have found that neither a mastery-oriented nor a performance-oriented climate explained any significant variance in acceptance of gamesmanship or cheating (Palou et al., 2013).

It also appears as though the motivational influence of mothers and fathers might differ. In a study of youth hockey players (LaVoi & Stellino, 2008), the perceptions of a mother-initiated performance climate was negatively associated with participants' prosocial sport behavior (i.e., graciousness), whereas a father-initiated performance climate were positively associated with athletes' antisocial sport behaviors (i.e., complaining and whining). Additionally, a father-initiated mastery climate was negatively associated with self-reported behaviors directed to playing and talking tough, for example, fighting on and off the ice and using "trash talk". In a recent study comprising 243 youth ice-hockey players (11–17 years old), a father-initiated mastery climate was the only significant positive predictor of prosocial sport behavior (Davies, Babkes Stellino, Nichols, & Coleman, 2016). These results suggest that a father-initiated motivational climate may be more strongly related

to moral functioning than the mother-initiated climate.

One of the reasons for the lack of significant findings in the LaVoi & Stellino (2008) or Davies et al. (2016) study may be related to the characteristics of the sport investigated. In ice-hockey the acceptance of fighting and trash talking may be more commonplace than in other sports (Weinstein, Smith, & Wiesenthal, 1995). Further studies are therefore needed to examine relationships between parent-initiated climate and moral behaviors in sports other than ice-hockey. As football is not only the most popular and well paid sport in Sweden, but throughout the world, the prospect of becoming a professional football player is likely highly valued by most young football players, and possibly their parents. Consequently, we thought it was relevant to examine relationships between the parent-initiated motivational climate and the development of moral attitudes in a sport like football. Furthermore, researchers have yet to undertake studies focused on highly competitive athletes in a late adolescent stage. Although parental influences have been found to decrease with age, given the level of specialization, time and financial investments required to succeed at a highly competitive level, parental involvement may be more intense and/or sustained among parents whose adolescents have aspirations of competing at a high level (Côté, 1999).

1. Purpose of the study

Given the gaps identified in previous research, the main purpose of the present study was to examine associations between late adolescent football players' perceptions of the motivational climate – as initiated by mothers and fathers – and attitudes towards moral decision making in sports. In particular, we chose to examine football players' acceptance of cheating (i.e., "... infractions of the rules in order to gain some unfair advantage in which there is a degree of successful deception"; Lee, Whitehead, & Ntoumanis, 2007, p. 372), acceptance of gamesmanship (i.e., "... distracting or psychologically destabilising opponents"; Lee et al., 2007, p. 372), and keeping winning in proportion (i.e., "... resist pressure to win at all costs and to value fairness more than winning"; Lee et al., 2007, p. 388), as outcomes variables. In line with AGT, we hypothesized that a parent-initiated – both mother and father – learning/enjoyment climate would be negatively associated with acceptance of cheating and acceptance of gamesmanship attitudes, and positively related to an emphasis on keeping winning in proportion. Furthermore, we hypothesized that a parent-initiated – both mother and father – success-without-effort climate and worry-conducive climate would be positively related to acceptance of cheating and acceptance of gamesmanship attitudes, and negatively related to an emphasis on keeping winning in proportion. Based on earlier research, these relationships were expected to be stronger for the father-initiated dimensions compared to the mother-initiated dimensions.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Swedish junior football players (146 males, 67 females, M age = 17.01 years, SD = 0.90 years, $Range$ = 16–19 years) were recruited from four high schools enrolled in the Swedish national sports program (NIU). Upon receiving the first author's University ethical approval, the principal of each school was contacted and permission was given to collect data. All participants were highly competitive athletes, including county (31%), regional (9%) and national levels (51%), with some representing the national team (9%). They participated in their sport for an average of 10.66 years

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