



From liability to challenge: Complex environments are associated with favorable psychosocial outcomes in adolescent sport participants



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify different groups of adolescents who have distinct profiles based upon their perceptions of interpersonal and activity-based dimensions of the sport environment. A sample of 310 adolescents from Eastern Canada ($M_{age} = 14.69 \pm 1.60$ years; 54.8% girls) completed questionnaires assessing selected interpersonal, activity-based, demographic and sport-specific variables. Using TwoStep Cluster Analysis, we identified three groupings of adolescent sport participants. Consistent with the literature, we labeled these groups 'negative context,' 'positive context,' and 'complex context,' respectively. As expected, participants in the last two groups reported greater enjoyment, perceived competence, and commitment to sport. Further, participants in the 'complex context' group showed the highest levels of sport commitment. We draw on insights from Csikszentmihalyi's theory of complexity and relational conceptions of compensation and resilience to interpret the findings, and offer an alternative account of contextual conditions suitable for adolescents involved in competitive sport.

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1. Introduction

Youth sport has been described as a unique social context where there is potential for the psychological, social, and physical development of young people (Weiss, 2008). The question of what characteristics of the environment optimize the experience and outcomes for young people involved in sport has been the focus of considerable attention by researchers in the last decades. Beginning in the late 1970s with the seminal work of Smith, Smoll, and colleagues, (e.g., Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1978, 1979), optimal environments in youth sport have been conceptualized in terms of a positive environment characterized by supportive and instructional coaching behaviors. In such environment, in addition to providing frequent

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instruction, coaches reinforce desirable performances and effort, and provide encouragement and information on how to improve when participants make mistakes.

Findings from research guided by Harter's competence motivation theory (1978, 1981) have provided further support for the notion that positive coaching behaviors (i.e., supportive, instructional behaviors) are linked to positive psychological reactions in young sport participants in terms of self-perceptions, affect, and motivation (e.g., Allen & Howe, 1998; Black & Weiss, 1992; Weiss, Amorose, & Wilko, 2009). Specifically, this work has provided further evidence of the key motivational role of coaches' feedback in response to participants' performance successes and errors. In addition, this body of research highlights the importance of considering individual differences, and particularly gender and age differences, in the way sport participants interpret coaches' feedback and in the way such interpretation may affect participants' perceptions of competence (e.g., Allen & Howe, 1998).

Based on the tenets of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) and the hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 2001) another area of research concerned with maximizing the motivational and developmental potential of social environments in youth sport has focused on the extent to which the sport environment facilitates the satisfaction of the participants' basic psychological needs. Specifically, from this perspective, an environment is optimal as long as the actions and attitudes of a variety of social agents facilitate the fulfillment of the participants' need to feel competent when interacting with the sport environment, autonomous when making decisions, and related or meaningfully connected to others. Evidence in support of this viewpoint in the domain of youth sport has accumulated steadily over the years, particularly concerning the differential implications of autonomy supportive, controlling, and socially supportive coach behaviors (e.g., Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Cury, 2002; Álvarez, Balaguer, Castillo, & Duda, 2009).

Research grounded in achievement goal theory (Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989) illustrates the impact of the motivational climate created by others (notably coaches, peers, and parents) on youth sport participants' achievement patterns and motivation (e.g., Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000; Smith, Cumming, & Smoll, 2008; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005; White, 1998). Moving away from a focus on specific behaviors, the concept of motivational climate broadly reflects the nature of goals to be achieved, the performance evaluation and reward process, and how individuals are requested to relate to each other in the sport environment. Based on the cumulative findings of research framed by this perspective, researchers within this tradition refer to optimal youth sport environments in terms of a task-involving or mastery oriented climate as opposed to an ego-involving climate (e.g., Newton et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2008). Briefly, a task-involving or mastery climate has been described as one that reinforces enjoyment, effort, and self-referenced improvement, and where mistakes are seen as a valuable instrument for learning (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2013). Conversely, an ego-involving climate has been defined as an environment where winning is emphasized, success is achieved through favorable comparison with others, greater attention is paid to the most skilled athletes, and mistakes are negatively evaluated and frequently punished (O'Rourke et al., 2013).

Integrating prominent social environmental dimensions emphasized within self-determination theory and achievement goal theory, Duda (2013) has recently proposed a conceptualization of optimal youth sport environments in terms of 'empowering' environments. According to Duda, an empowering environment is characterized by a task-involving motivational climate where significant others (such as coaches) are autonomy supportive, and socially supportive. In contrast, a 'disempowering' environment would be described by a highly ego-involving climate and controlling significant others. A fundamental assumption of Duda's proposal is that an empowering environment optimizes the what (e.g., goals to achieve), why (e.g., types of motivation), and how (e.g., coach behavior) of young people's involvement in sport. Findings from a study by Fenton, Duda, Appleton, and Barrett (2016) provide initial evidence of the suitability of Duda's formulation to understand and promote optimal social psychological environments for young people involved in competitive sport.

Proponents of a positive youth development (PYD) perspective (e.g., Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005) have typically referred to optimal youth sport environments in the context of the Five Cs model of youth development, which conceptualizes PYD as composed of Five Cs—competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005). In other words, according to this view, optimal youth sport environments are those that facilitate the development of the Five Cs. The Cs are seen as developmental characteristics that well-adjusted and well-functioning young people exhibit as contributing members of society. One of the main challenges of work framed by the Five Cs model is the application of the model to the design and implementation of youth development programs (see Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). Haskins (2010) has provided an example of work to translate the Five Cs model to the development of youth programs in the context of coaching youth sports.

The majority of studies that have attempted to understand the nature and function of optimal environments in youth sport have adopted a social relational or interpersonal focus. However, the characteristics of activities (e.g., practice activities) in which young people take part are also an integral part of youth sport environments. The joint role of social relational and activity-based dimensions of the environment as proximal processes that support the development of individuals is highlighted in influential perspectives on human development, such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), and Activity Theory (e.g., Vygotsky, 1981; Wells, 2004).

Youth sport research provides numerous examples delineating the impact of social relational factors of an interpersonal nature on psychosocial and motivational outcomes in youth sport (e.g., Chelladurai, 2007; Eys, Loughhead, Bray, & Carron, 2009; Fenton et al., 2016; García Bengoechea, Sabiston, & Wilson, 2015; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Smith et al., 2008; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Recently, García Bengoechea, Sabiston, and Wilson (2016) contributed to fill a gap in the literature

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