



## How perceived autonomy support and controlling coach behaviors are related to well- and ill-being in elite soccer players: A within-person changes and between-person differences analysis



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Grounded in Basic Psychological Needs Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002), this study examined the temporal relationships between perception of coaches' autonomy support and different facets of controlling behaviors, the satisfaction-frustration of athletes' basic needs, and subjective vitality, self-esteem and burnout in elite sportsmen.

**Methods:** Participants (N = 110 males) from three elite youth soccer academies in northwest France completed a questionnaire on three occasions during the last three months of the competitive season.

**Results:** Linear mixed models revealed that perceptions of coach-autonomy support and only two facets of controlling coach behaviors (excessive personal control and negative conditional regard) were related to basic need satisfaction-frustration, which in turn were related to the indices of well- and ill-being. In most cases, the relationships were observed both at the within- and between-person levels, but some were observed only at one level.

**Conclusions:** The findings highlight the importance of considering the different facets of controlling coach behaviors separately and disaggregating the between-person and within-person effects.

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Sport participation is associated with emotional well-being (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008) and lower risk of depression (Jacka et al., 2011) among children and adolescents. However, participation in sport is not always health conducive; the physical and mental demands placed on athletes can lead to negative psychological experiences (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Because they are actively involved in training and competition, coaches are assumed to play a critical role in shaping the quality of players' sport experience, depending on their motivational style (Duda, 2013). It is therefore crucial to identify which coach behaviors result in psychological well- and ill-being for their athletes, as well as the social-psychological processes that might explain these outcomes.

Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), a sub-theory of self-determination theory (SDT; e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2002), appears to be a relevant framework to account for both the "dark" and "bright" side of people's functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It specifies three innate psychological needs, the satisfaction or frustration of which affects psychological well- and ill-being: the needs for competence (i.e., feelings of effectiveness in interacting with one's environment), autonomy (i.e., feelings of volition and the self-endorsement of one's activity), and relatedness (i.e., feelings of love and care by significant others such as coaches and teammates). Whereas the satisfaction of the psychological needs results in optimal human functioning and personal well-being, need frustration contributes to diminished personal functioning and ill-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Need frustration is experienced when athletes' basic psychological needs are not just unsatisfied, but actively thwarted by others within the sporting context, leading the athlete to feel incompetent, isolated, and controlled by others (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

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Importantly, SDT considers that the perceived social environment - notably autonomy supportive and controlling behaviors of an authority figure such as a coach - is an important determinant of basic needs satisfaction and frustration. Autonomy support is evidenced when a coach involves others in decisions, provides real choice, reduces pressures, and takes others' perspectives into account (e.g., Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In autonomy supportive environments, athletes are more likely to experience higher need satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Adie et al., 2008; Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Felton & Jowett, 2013; Quested & Duda, 2011). In contrast, a controlling style of coaching is "a coercive, pressuring, and authoritarian way to impose a specific and preconceived way of thinking and behaving upon athletes" (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010, p. 194). In such an environment, athletes are more likely to report lower needs satisfaction (e.g., Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, & Provencher, 2009; Felton & Jowett, 2013; Isoard-Gauthier, Guillet-Descas, & Lemyre, 2012; Kipp & Weiss, 2013), higher needs frustration (e.g., Balaguer et al., 2012; Bartholomew et al., 2011), maladaptive health outcomes (e.g., eating disorders, burnout, and physical symptoms), and perturbed physiological arousal prior to training (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011).

A number of studies in sport have supported SDT's mediation hypothesis, which predicts that autonomy supportive and/or controlling coach behaviors are conducive to well- or ill-being through basic needs satisfaction or frustration (see Ntoumanis, 2012 for a review). The present study aims to extend this line of research in two important ways: Firstly, we will investigate the unique impact of different facets of controlling coach behaviors and autonomy-supportive styles upon the satisfaction-frustration of psychological needs.<sup>1</sup> Secondly we will separate within-person changes from between-person differences. Past research has only considered the controlling coaching style in a global manner (e.g., Balaguer et al., 2012; Bartholomew et al., 2011; Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2012). However, this style includes specific types of behaviors likely to differentially impact athletes' satisfaction-frustration of needs and well- or ill-being. In the sport context, Bartholomew et al. (2010) have identified four distinct ways that coaches can be controlling: *controlling use of rewards* (i.e., using extrinsic rewards and praise to induce engagement or persistence in certain behaviors and secure athlete compliance), *negative conditional regard* (i.e., ignoring the athlete and withdrawing attention and affection when desired attributes or behaviors are not displayed), *intimidation* (i.e., displaying power-assertive strategies designed to humiliate and belittle), and *excessive personal control* (i.e., using intrusive monitoring and decreasing strict limits in areas of life that are not directly related to the sport). As far as we know, no study has examined whether these distinct ways that coaches can control athletes are differentially related to the satisfaction-frustration of basic needs and in turn, to well- and ill-being.

Another shortcoming of extant research on BPNT is that it has typically relied on cross-sectional (e.g., Adie et al., 2008; Felton & Jowett, 2013) or 2 time-point (e.g., Balaguer et al., 2012; Isoard-Gauthier et al., 2012) data. In past work, analyses have typically been based on between-person effects and this approach is poorly suited to evaluating within-person processes (e.g., Curran & Bauer, 2011). As pointed out by Curran and Bauer (2011), it is important to separate within-person from between-person associations. Within-person changes refer to short-term deviations from a person's average levels. This approach enables researchers to answer

questions such as whether over time variability in need satisfaction-frustration may be explained by over time fluctuations in perceptions of coach behavior. For example, if an athlete feels that in recent weeks the coach is less accepting of him or her than usual if he or she has disappointed him or her (i.e., the negative conditional regard facet of the controlling style) this may lead to feelings of rejection and isolation in relation to the coach (i.e., a decrease in relatedness toward the coach) at that point in time. This type of within-person association between controlling behaviors and relatedness has been shown in parenting literature (e.g., Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). However, these may be fleeting experiences of need frustration that perhaps do not endure, or do not reflect how the athlete typically feels. By contrast, between-person differences reflect a player's average levels over a specified period of time, contrasted with other players in the dataset. This facilitates the answering of questions such as whether variations in need satisfaction-frustration between players can be explained by differences in how controlling players perceive their coach to be. For example, sustained levels of negative conditional regard over a longer period (i.e., when a player reports a higher average level of the coach's controlling behavior over a period than other players) may not necessarily be negatively related to a player's relatedness toward the coach. This may be because an athlete who has extensive sport experience may have become accustomed to such behaviors (which are not uncommon in the domain of high-level sport). As such, the effects may be buffered. In summary, disaggregating within-person changes from between-person differences enables us to specify the respective contribution of each aspect of coaching style on well- and ill-being through basic needs satisfaction-frustration. Thus, it allows us to know if the observed relationships between variables are present only at the within- (i.e., short term intra-individual variations) and/or between- (i.e., inter-individual idiosyncratic differences) person level.

To the best of our knowledge, the study by Adie, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2012) is unique in the approach taken to test BPNT in the area of sport. With a sample of 91 male players from an elite youth soccer academy, results showed that intra-individual changes and inter-individual differences in perceptions of coach-autonomy support positively predicted intra-individual changes and inter-individual differences in basic needs satisfaction. In turn, intra-individual changes, but not inter-individual differences, in the needs for competence and relatedness predicted intra-individual changes in vitality. These findings confirmed that the relationships observed at one level of analysis may not generalize to the other level. Despite these advances in our understanding of BPNT in sport, the study by Adie et al. presented three limitations. First, the study focused solely on coach autonomy support without examining the effects of controlling coach behaviors upon needs. Consequently, it was not possible to determine the extent to which perceptions of coach interpersonal control and coach autonomy support were independently linked to the players' basic needs satisfaction and well- and ill-being. Second, this study only assessed need satisfaction. As highlighted above, low need satisfaction is not synonymous with high need frustration. As such, a scale assessing both satisfaction and frustration associated with basic needs would better capture psychological experience as a whole and should therefore be particularly useful to explain variance in athletes' well-and ill-being indices. Third, the need for relatedness was only assessed with regards to other members of the team. However, athletes also vary in the degree of relatedness they feel towards their coach (e.g., Kipp & Weiss, 2013). Examining whether relatedness towards peers and coaches have independent effects on well- and ill-being is interesting from both a conceptual and applied perspective (see Ntoumanis, 2012). Accordingly, the goal of the present study is to advance understanding of BPNT in

<sup>1</sup> Given that we considered and measured satisfaction and frustration of basic needs as the two ends of a continuum (see measures section), we will use the expression 'satisfaction-frustration' throughout the text.

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