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# Peer motivational climate and character development: Testing a practitioner-developed youth sport model

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## ABSTRACT

Youth sport is a key developmental context for many reasons, including the opportunities it provides for building relationships with peers and its potential to support character development. Peers can influence adolescent sport experiences and shape their motivations, and different peer motivational climates may differentially support athlete character. Established models identify different dimensions of peer motivational climate, yet these models do not describe how aspects of peer climate may align with character. We therefore assess profiles of peer motivational climate in relation to a multi-dimensional practitioner-developed theoretical model for character development through sport. Participants were 655 adolescent athletes from the greater Boston area, in the United States. Athletes perceiving a mastery-involved peer climate, even with high intra-team competition, were most likely to exhibit positive character attributes at the three levels of character assessed: themselves, their teammates, and the game. This study also demonstrates the utility of practitioner-developed models for adolescent research.

Peer influence becomes more important as youth enter adolescence and, in youth sports settings, peer acceptance and friendship have the potential to translate into motivation, commitment, and enjoyment (e.g., Weiss & Smith, 2002). Motivated athletes who are committed to, and enjoy participating in, their sport are more likely to continue playing (Balish, McLaren, Rainham, & Blanchard, 2014), and therefore more likely to reap the benefits associated with participation in youth sport (e.g., Gould & Carson, 2008). Thus, it is important to understand and support positive peer climates within youth sport.

In addition, sport participation may contribute to the development of character attributes when the sport context is supportive and provides good role models for moral behavior (Bredemeier & Shields, 1994). Given the aforementioned importance of peer influence in adolescence in general, and in youth sport in particular, in this study we explore the potential links between peer climate and the extent to which adolescent athletes exhibit character. This research draws on, integrates, and extends existing literature on peer motivational climates and character development in sport, using a practitioner-developed multidimensional model.

## 1. Peer motivational climate

The fact that peers can influence youth experiences in sport contexts, and help to shape their motivations, is well established (e.g., Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005). Prior research refers to the motivational climate as comprising the norms and expectations of the team for either performance/ego orientation (emphasizing social comparison) or mastery/task

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orientation (emphasizing personal improvement; Ames, 1992). Peers play an important role in shaping motivational climates (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005; Vazou et al., 2005) and, in turn, the motivational climate can influence youth outcomes and experiences in sport. In particular, motivational climates involving peers with performance/ego orientations have been associated with burnout (Smith, Gustafsson, & Hassmén, 2010), whereas climates promoting mastery/task orientations have been associated with increased self-esteem and commitment to sport (Vazou et al., 2005), and intrinsic motivation (Jõesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011).

Prior studies have also shown that youth perceptions of their team's peer motivational climate were associated with factors at various levels. At the individual level, athletes' achievement orientations were associated with perceptions of peer motivational climate, such that athletes with high task orientation and low ego orientation were most likely to perceive high task-involving peer climates (Vazou, 2010). At the team level, having a successful season record or having a female coach was associated with higher perceptions of task-involving peer climates compared to teams with less successful records or male coaches (Vazou, 2010). Finally, at the level of how athletes approach the game, ego-oriented peer climates have been associated with increased gamesmanship (i.e., tactics aiming to gain psychological advantage; Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2012). However, no team has a singular, uniform peer motivational climate; athletes on the same team may perceive different peer motivational climates (Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2006) and those subjective experiences should be taken into consideration to understand links between team motivational climate and the behavior or development of individual athletes.

In addition, athletes with high task orientations do not necessarily have low ego orientations and vice versa (Hodge & Petlichkoff, 2000). Findings on individual-level goal orientations (often using a mean/median split technique; e.g., Duda, 1989; Roberts, Treasure, & Kavussanu, 1996) generally suggest that high task orientations are adaptive, whereas high ego orientations are maladaptive, although there is some evidence that ego orientation is less problematic when combined with high task orientation (e.g., Roberts et al., 1996). In turn, researchers have used person-centered approaches (e.g., cluster analysis, latent profile analysis) to examine whether certain profiles best promote the positive effects of task orientation or mitigate the negative effects of ego orientation. To our knowledge, these approaches have been used to test the associations with individual-level goal orientations, but not with athletes' perceptions of their peers' goal orientations. In this study, we use a person-centered approach (i.e., latent profile analysis) to identify different profiles of athletes' perceptions of the peer motivational climate, and to test whether profile membership is associated with character attributes at the individual-, team-, and game-levels of youth sport.

## 2. Youth sport and character development

Character attributes such as diligence, generosity, and honesty may be supported in sport contexts, but athletes must also balance moral character against desire to win (Camiré & Trudel, 2010). Thus, despite widespread popular belief that sport promotes character, the literature suggests that although character development may be supported in some sport contexts, it should not be viewed as an inevitable outcome of participation (Coakley, 2011).

Building on this “possible but not guaranteed” link between youth sport and character development, Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a national non-profit dedicated to promoting youth development through sport, developed a model to help sport programs more consistently lead to positive youth outcomes (Thompson, 2010). PCA's Triple-Impact Competitor<sup>®</sup> model posits that athletes can build character through sport by seeking to improve at three levels: Self, Teammates, and Game; and that by doing so they will develop character attributes that can be applied in non-sport settings as well (Thompson, 2010). The hypothesized links between PCA's programing, the Triple-Impact Competitor<sup>®</sup> model, and character development in and outside of sport are currently being tested in a longitudinal study (e.g., Ettekal, Konowitz, Agans, Syer, & Lerner, 2017). However, the purpose of this study is not to test youth outcomes of the PCA intervention, but to test PCA's theory that peer motivational climate is associated with character attributes at the three levels of youth sport conceptualized in their model. The principles of improving the Self, Teammates, and Game are universal to a variety of sports, including sports of different levels (e.g., recreational, competitive) and types (e.g., individual vs. team; contact vs. non-contact). For example, although athletes may compete individually in some sports (e.g., track and field), they train with their teammates and often contribute individual event points to a team score. In this study, we test PCA's theory among a diverse set of high school athletes who participated in several different sports.

## 3. The present study

This study examines links between profiles of peer motivational climate and athletes' contributions to improving the Self, Teammates, and the Game (the PCA Triple-Impact Competitor<sup>®</sup> model). First, based on theory and previous research (e.g., Hodge & Petlichkoff, 2000), we expected at least four profiles of youth athletes' perceptions of peer motivational climate: 1. high task, low competition/conflict; 2. low task, high competition/conflict; 3. high task, high competition/conflict; and 4. low task, low competition/conflict. In addition, we expected that unique classes would emerge with moderate scores on either task orientation and/or the ego orientation scales. Because previous work on individual-level ego orientation has not examined dimensions of competition and conflict separately, we did not have a priori expectations for classes varying across competition and conflict.

Second, as mastery orientation is understood to be beneficial in sport (e.g., Jõesaar et al., 2011; Vazou et al., 2005), we hypothesized that task-involved peer motivational climates would be associated with demonstration of positive character attributes related to Self, Teammates, and Game, as described in the PCA model. However, because previous research presents mixed findings with regard to the impact of ego orientation, we expected *either* that athletes perceiving their peers to be ego-oriented would exhibit less positive character attributes at each level of the PCA model, regardless of the presence of mastery orientation (e.g., Miller, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2005) or that athletes perceiving their peers to be ego-oriented would only exhibit less positive character

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