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Peers, parents, and coaches, oh my! The relation of the motivational climate to boys' intention to continue in sport

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Motivational climates (Ames, 1992) and goal orientations (Nicholls, 1989) are essential in understanding children's experiences with sport. We examined the perceived task-involving motivational climates created by parents, peers, and coaches and their task goal orientation in relation to male adolescent athletes' sport competence, self-esteem and enjoyment, and ultimately, their intention to continue participating.
Design: We used a cross-sectional design with a large convenience sample of male adolescent athletes from the U.S. ($N = 405$, ages 12–15 years).
Method: Boys anonymously completed survey questionnaires during their physical education classes at school.
Results: Task goal orientation was explained by task-involving parent, peer, and coach initiated motivational climates, although parent and peer climates were most influential. Boys with higher task goal orientations reported greater sport competence, self-esteem, and more enjoyment in sport. Intention to continue playing sport primarily was predicted by the boys' enjoyment, and secondarily, by their self-esteem.
Conclusions: Consistent with past research, task motivational climates from parents, peers, and coaches play a key role in boys' enjoyment of their sport, which is essential for continued participation.

The *motivational climate* refers to perceptions of situational cues and expectations of significant others that encourage the development of a particular achievement orientation and, at any time, induce a certain goal involvement state (Ames, 1992). Ames (1992) identified two types of motivational climates: task-involving (i.e., encourages effort and rewards task mastery and individual improvement) and ego-involving (i.e., fosters social comparison and emphasizes normative ability). Of the two, a task-involving climate (as compared to an ego-involving one) consistently has been associated with more positive outcomes for children and adolescents, including greater perceptions of physical competence (Newton & Duda, 1999; Treasure, 1997), feeling happier (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999), higher self-esteem (Slutzky & Simpkins, 2009), the desire to stay involved in sport (Duda & Ntoumanis, 2009), and persisting in sport (Le Bars, Gernigno, & Ninot, 2009).

Parents, peers, and coaches all uniquely, yet to some extent interactively (e.g., Le Bars, Gernigon, & Ninot, 2009; O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cummings, 2014), contribute to the motivational climate that athletes experience. The parental motivational climate influences how children perceive, understand, and react to achievement-related contexts, such as practices and competitions (Horn & Horn, 2007; Reinboth & Duda, 2004; Roberts, Treasure, & Conroy, 2007; White, 1996). More specifically, a task-involving climate is characterized by parent behaviors that encourage learning and enjoyment, and where parents express satisfaction when children try something new, make mistakes as a part of the learning process, and subsequently improve as a result (White & Duda, 1993). For example, in a study of female volleyball players (age 14–17 years), when parents emphasized success without exerting effort, an ego-involving climate was perceived, but, when parents encouraged learning and enjoyment, the athletes reported experiencing a mastery-involving climate (White, 1996). Further, among male and female judokas ($M_{age} = 17.9$ years), those who persisted in their sport perceived a stronger parental task-motivational climate than did the judokas who dropped out (Le Bars et al., 2009).

Keegan, Spray, Harwood, and Lavallee (2009, 2010), through interviews with boys and girls ages 7–18 years, concluded that peers influenced each other's motivation through collaborative behaviors (e.g., building confidence in each other), competitive

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behaviors (e.g., fostering rivalry), evaluative communication (e.g., offering criticism and praise), altruistic behaviors (e.g., offering emotional support), and social relationships (e.g., friendship). Similarly, through interviews with boys and girls (age 12 and 16 years), Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2005) identified eleven dimensions that characterized how peers influence motivation including: improvement, equal treatment, relatedness support, cooperation, effort, intra-team competition, intra-team conflict, normative ability, autonomy support, mistakes, and evaluation of competence. Subsequently, Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2006) operationalized task-involving peer interactions as being based on the aspects of improvement, relatedness support, and effort. Le Bars et al. (2009) found that, among six different task- and ego-focused motivational climates, the only significant independent predictor of adolescent athletes' continued participation in their sport was the peer-induced task-involving climate.

Research on coaching suggests that certain supportive and emotionally-composed behaviors, such as positive reinforcement, mistake-contingent encouragement, positive and encouraging corrective instruction, and technical instruction, are consistent with and help create task-involving motivational climates and have been related to a reduction in performance anxiety and an increase in self-esteem among adolescent baseball players (Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1996). Further, Smith, Smoll, and Cumming (2007) found that 10–14 year old male and female athletes who were coached by adults trained in a mastery-approach (e.g., emphasized giving maximum effort rather than winning or outperforming others) reported reductions in trait and state anxiety pre-to post-season. Among young male and female adolescent swimmers, the athletes' perception of a coach-induced mastery climate was related to higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and more intrinsic motivation (O'Rourke, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2014). Male and female adolescent athletes who persisted in their sport reported stronger perceptions of their coaches promoting a task-focused motivational climate than those who dropped out (Le Bars et al., 2009). Thus, coaches who, through their behaviors and communications, create task-involving environments can provide direct psychological and behavioral benefits to their athletes.

There is agreement that parents, peers, and coaches, collectively, define the motivational climate (e.g., Smith et al., 2007; Vazou et al., 2006), yet the relative influence of these agents on youth and adolescent athletes' psychological development and continuation in sport has not been sufficiently studied. Atkins, Johnson, Force, and Petrie (2013) examined how female adolescent and parent-initiated task-involving climates related to girls' psychological well-being and, ultimately, their intention to continue playing their sports. They found that parentally constructed, but not peer-created, task climates were related significantly to higher self-esteem, more sport competence, and greater enjoyment when playing their best sport; only enjoyment predicted the athletes' intention to continue participating. Similarly, O'Rourke et al. (2014) examined the relative influence of parental and coach-initiated motivational climates on various psychological outcomes in a sample of male and female adolescent swimmers (M_{age} = 11.90 years). They found that although both parent and coach motivational climates were correlated with the athletes' self-esteem, anxiety and intrinsic motivation scores, only parental motivational climates predicted these outcomes when controlling for the other motivational climate. Although these studies independently support the idea that parents' influences may be the most important among these three social agents (i.e., parents, peers, and coaches), there were two important limitations to these studies that preclude this conclusion being drawn yet. First, neither study assessed all three social agents at one time, the relative importance of all three could not be considered simultaneously. Second, these researchers did not determine the extent to which the motivational messages (from coaches and parents, or parents and peers) were internalized, that is how they related to the adolescents' goal orientation, and how these situational and dispositional factors might interact (if at all) to predict psychological and behavioral outcomes among young athletes.

Goal orientations are internalizations of the messages within the motivational climate and explain how individuals interpret, approach, and ultimately respond to achievement/performance related situations (Nicholls, 1989). Theoretically (Ames, 1992), athletes' goal orientations, once internalized, should determine their responses across different achievement-related contexts, such as practices and competitions. Goal orientations can therefore be described as schemas that guide how athletes will approach and respond to the achievement-related situations (e.g., practices) they experience (Kaplan & Maehr, 2006). Thus, children's exposure to task-involving motivational climates in their formative years (i.e., ages 10–14) is expected to foster the development of a task goal orientation (Treasure & Roberts, 1998), which in turn, would influence their responses to future achievement situations. In this sense, a task goal orientation results from internalizing the messages and values present in a task environment. Consequently, a task goal orientation involves thoughts and behaviors that are focused on putting forth effort to improve skills (Nicholls, 1989) and the belief that competition is an opportunity for learning and ultimately, mastery.

A few studies have investigated the relative influence of goal orientations and motivational climates, though primarily in relation to behaviors and intentions in physical education classes. For example, Cury et al. (1996) examined adolescent girls' perceptions of the motivational climate and their interest in school physical education (PE) classes. Students' perceptions of a task-involving environment were related to having a task goal orientation (R^2 = .47), which in turn, was associated with feeling intrinsically motivated in PE class (R^2 = .09). Similarly, the more male and female PE students (ages 14–15 years) perceived their PE environment as being focused on learning, growth, and development, the more likely they were to report having a task goal orientation, which then was associated with fewer self-reported behavioral problems. In one study that did examine the influences of task- and ego-involving motivational climates (parent, coach, peer) and goal orientations in male and female adolescent athletes' (judokas) continued participation in their sport, Le Bars et al. (2009) found no significant relations between any of the ego-involving climate, and ego goal orientation, measures and the athletes' persistence. Instead, the best predictor of whether or not the athletes stayed involved in their sport was the extent to which they perceived a task-involving peer climate. Parent, coach, and peer task-involving climates also interacted significantly to predict persistence, though the researchers recognized that this finding was based on a very small number of athletes and thus urged caution in its interpretation. These studies' results support continued examination of the roles of contextual motivational factors, specifically task-involving climates as determined by parents, peers, and coaches, and dispositional schemas of achievement, specifically task goal orientation, in relation to psychological and behavioral outcomes among adolescent athletes. Future studies, though, would benefit from the use of larger samples and statistical approaches that allow for testing of the simultaneous relationships in complex models.

In the current study, we selected three psychological outcomes – self-esteem, sport competence, and enjoyment – to examine in relation to male adolescent athletes' intention to continue participating in their sports. Previous research has demonstrated strong associations between children's goal orientations and these three outcomes (e.g., Fox, Goudas, Biddle, Duda, & Armstrong, 1994;