



A qualitative investigation of the motivational climate in elite sport[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study examined the construction of the motivational climate surrounding elite sports performers by investigating the behaviours of coaches, peers and parents that were perceived to be motivationally relevant by elite athletes.

Design: Qualitative – inductive.

Method: Twenty-eight national, international and world-class athletes (15–29 years old) took part in semi-structured focus groups and interviews investigating how they believe coaches, parents, and peers influence their motivation.

Results: An inductive content analysis indicated that elite athletes perceived a multitude of motivationally-relevant social cues. Coaches and peers were reported to be focal influences, whilst the role of parents appeared to be limited to emotional and moral support. Themes of feedback/evaluation, and pre-performance motivating behaviours were common to all social agents, whereas only the coach–athlete and peer–athlete relationships appeared to be important in moderating and directly influencing motivation towards sport. The influences of social agents related to the specific roles they performed in the athlete's life: instruction and leadership for coaches; emotional support, collaborative and/or competitive behaviours for peers, and for parents, a diminished role relative to when the athletes were younger.

Conclusions: A central finding of the paper is that there was no discernible one-to-one correspondence between specific behaviours and their impact on motivation. Instead, the findings suggest complex contextual interactions between the immediate behaviours of social agents and the impact on the athlete's motivation. If supported, this finding would necessitate new and novel approaches in future research in order to facilitate a more advanced understanding of athlete motivation in elite sport.

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Elite athletes train and make tremendous sacrifices in order to reach the pinnacle of physical condition, technical prowess, and human achievement. Even the most talented athletes are unlikely to realise their potential without significant practice and arduous training (Treasure, Lemyre, Kuczka, & Standage, 2008). Elite athletes need to be highly motivated, over a long period of time, in order to train so frequently and intensely. If this motivation can be influenced by the people who surround the athletes on their journeys – their coaches, team-mates and parents – then a central question becomes: “What do these key social agents do to influence

the motivation of elite athletes?” Motivation has been defined as: “the hypothetical construct used to describe the internal and/or external forces that produce the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of behaviour” (Vallerand & Thill, 1993, p. 18). Researchers frequently focus on the regulation of motivated behaviour, as opposed to the observable outcomes such as effort, persistence, or task choice (cf. Roberts, 1993), and this is best reflected in the title of Deci and Flaste's (1996) paper: motivation is “why we do what we do”.

The motivational influence exerted by key social agents is often referred to as the *motivational climate* which is a term most closely associated with achievement goal theory (AGT – Ames, 1992; Nicholls, 1989). Over the last 30 years, numerous studies have attempted to conceptualise and measure motivational climates, and the majority of this research has used: (a) school and university aged athletes, rarely of an elite level; (b) Nicholls' (1989) model of achievement goals as a theoretical guide; and (c) an exclusive focus

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on one-or-another social agent (usually the coach) – rarely studying the concurrent influences of coaches, peers and parents (see Harwood, Spray, & Keegan, 2008). With respect to the above issues, the present study sets out to: examine the concurrent influence of these three key social agents (issue c) at the elite level of sport participation (issue a), and without an *a priori* commitment to any existing motivational theory (issue b). In taking the approach of not ‘subscribing’ to one theory or another in advance, this study instead critically considered each theory and attempted to draw out similarities and differences between findings and theoretical tenets (cf. Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003).

Defining elite athletes: the ‘investment–mastery’ career stage

Models of career progression in sport have been developed by Bloom (1985), Côté, Baker, and Abernathy (2003) and Wylleman, Alfermann, and Lavallee (2004). In each case, the early career is characterised by participants who are generally prompted to try a number of different sports and see if they either enjoy it or have some talent. This period is termed ‘initiation’ (Côté et al., 2003) or ‘sampling’ (Wylleman et al., 2004). Following this stage, athletes tend to focus on one or two sports in which they specialise, and seek to learn the key skills, tactics and rules. This period (‘specialising’) is characterised by gradual changes from ‘free play’ and ‘deliberate play’ towards greater deliberate practice. Likewise athletes transition from helpful/friendly coaching to specialist coaching, and from significant parental involvement towards indirect parental involvement. Indeed, the models suggest that the influence of parents decreases during the ‘mastery’ or ‘investment’ stage, with peers, coaches and (for some) partners being the most influential. For those athletes who do continue into the investment–mastery stage, their ‘arrival’ is likely to be signified by the completion of all these transitional processes (Côté et al., 2003). This ‘investment–mastery’ stage can begin from approximately 15 years of age, depending on the sport, although 18–19 years of age is proposed to be the average (Wylleman et al., 2004). This stage can be considered to continue until retirement (e.g., Côté et al., 2003). Following recent investigations into motivational influences at the ‘sampling’ stage (Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2009) and the ‘specialisation’ stage (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2010), the current paper addresses the ‘investment–mastery’ stage: encapsulating athletes who have recently entered, or are currently thriving at, the elite level – competing nationally and internationally.

Research to date

There is a sizeable body of quantitative research examining the ‘motivational climate’ (Ames, 1992; reviewed by Harwood et al., 2008) and athlete’s perceptions of having their psychological needs supported (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000). As such, the following section must be prefaced with the acknowledgement that quantitative questionnaires have contributed substantially to current understanding in motivation research. These studies invariably demonstrate correlations between athletes’ generalised perceptions of the climate (e.g., a ‘mastery’ climate) with various outcome measures, such as intrinsic motivation or self-reported perceptions of affect/enjoyment. This research has clearly emphasised the importance of athletes’ perceptions of their social environment in determining motivation (Harwood et al., 2008). However, the heavy reliance on self-report questionnaires has also been critiqued on the grounds that: (a) perceptions of the motivational environment often differ widely, even between team-mates with the same coach (cf. Cumming, Smith, Smoll, & Grossbard, 2007; Papaioannou, 1994) – meaning that the athlete’s responses may not reflect objectively observable coaching behaviours (cf. Duda,

2001; Keegan, Harwood, et al., 2010); (b) the mathematical techniques of developing questionnaires force researchers to study generalised and abstract perceptions, separated from the reality of what social agents actually do to influence athlete motivation; and (c) as an additional consideration, questionnaires have been developed to study the separate influences of coaches (e.g., Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire-2 – Newton, Duda, & Yin, 2000), parents (e.g., Parent Initiated Motivational Climate Questionnaire-2 – White, 1996) and peers (e.g., Peer Motivational Climate in Youth Sport – Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005), each with different questions/items, subscales and factor structures. This separation prevents comparisons between the relative influences of different social agents. These issues, combined with the fundamental rule that correlation must never be conflated with causation (Aldrich, 1995), suggest genuine limitations in studying motivation with questionnaires and correlational modelling. Additionally, in light of the above issues of subjectivism and abstraction, it remains problematic to offer coaches’ or parents’ advice based on these findings; as they are neither behaviourally specific nor robust enough to ensure the desired results (i.e., increased athlete motivation).

In response to these developing criticisms, Keegan et al. (2009) and Keegan, Harwood, et al. (2010) qualitatively explored the factors perceived to be motivationally relevant by young athletes at the start of their participation in sport (*sampling*) and also in the *specialising* years, respectively. Both studies examined the ways that athletes perceived their coaches, parents and peers to influence their motivation. In these studies, the influences of social agents were related to the specific roles they fulfilled for the athlete. For example, the influence of coaches related most strongly to the manner in which they performed the key roles of instruction and evaluation, whereas parents’ influences were most salient in terms of the way they supported participation and learning. Both parents and coaches exerted influences through their leadership styles, affective responses and pre-performance behaviours. Hence, parents and coaches were reported to have similar influences where their roles overlapped, but different influences where their roles diverged (e.g., only parents can perform the roles of buying equipment and arranging weekends around sport). In both studies, peers influenced motivation by being competitive (positively or negatively), collaborative (i.e., meeting up to undertake extra training/play), and via their evaluative comments and social relationship. The similarities between the two studies were interpreted in terms of the common goals of each career stage, with an increasing focus on skill development and fewer sports being the only discernible differences (Côté et al., 2003; Wylleman et al., 2004). Most notably, these studies and others like them (e.g., Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandingo, & Fox, 2009) reported difficulty in attempting to consistently associate specific behaviours of coaches, parents or peers with specific motivational outcomes. For example, a single criticism from the coach could either undermine motivation or lead to an ‘I’ll show you!’ response (e.g., Keegan, Harwood, et al., 2010). If repeated in other ‘theoretically agnostic’ studies, this may be a significant finding in the field, and an important lesson in not insisting on the use of one dominant theory to determine a study’s research questions, methodological choices, and interpretations of data.

Overall, the growing number of qualitative studies in this area suggests that there may be a complex, interactive and multifaceted *motivational atmosphere* (cf. Keegan, Harwood, et al., 2010; Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2010) around sports performers, which contains within it the broad spectrum of influences exerted by coaches, parents, peers and others across a variety of contexts and settings. A useful analogy for the contribution of these studies would be attempting to ‘reverse engineer’ food recipes. Qualitative studies

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