



Giving and receiving autonomy support in a high-stakes sport context: A field-based experiment during the 2012 London Paralympic Games[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Recognizing that high-stakes competitions tend to pressure coaches toward a maladaptive controlling motivating style, we sought to evaluate the capacity of an intervention to help coaches adopt a more autonomy-supportive style as they and their athletes prepared for the 2012 London Paralympic Games.

Design: We adopted a coach-focused experimental research design that longitudinally assessed coaches' and athletes' self-report, rater-scored, and objective dependent measures.

Method: We randomly assigned 33 coaches and their 64 athletes from 10 sports into either an experimental or control group and assessed their motivation and functioning longitudinally.

Results: In the control group, athletes and coaches both showed a significant longitudinal deterioration in all measures of motivation, engagement, and functioning. In the experimental group, none of the measures of motivation, engagement, and functioning deteriorated but, instead, were generally maintained. In terms of performance, athletes of coaches in the experimental group won significantly more Olympic medals than did athletes in the control group.

Conclusion: Enacting an autonomy-supportive coaching style within the context of a high-stakes sports competition functioned as an antidote to coaches' otherwise situationally-induced controlling style.

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Research informed by self-determination theory confirms that physical education teachers and exercise instructors can learn how to become more autonomy supportive and, when they do, their students and clients experience numerous benefits (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012; Edmund, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2008; Lonsdale et al., 2013; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2010), as do these mentors themselves (Cheon, Reeve, Yu, & Jang, 2014). Benefits from giving and receiving autonomy support are now well established, but a lingering question remains as to whether these benefits continue to accrue when the context changes from teaching novices to engage in leisure activities to coaching life-long elite athletes to prepare for high-stakes, results-oriented, sport competitions. The purpose of the present study was

to test the hypothesis that these benefits would occur even in a high-stakes competitive sport context—namely, the 2012 London Paralympic Games.

In a high-stakes competition participants experience elevated pressure to win; and the higher the stakes become, the more elevated the pressure to win becomes (Fortier, Vallerand, Briere, & Provencher, 1995; Reeve & Deci, 1996). This social process affects competitors, but it also affects coaches, as coaches tend away from supporting autonomy and toward prescribing behaviors and pressuring for outcomes (Pelletier, Séguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002; Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Smith, 2009). The pressure to win also tends coaches toward controlled motivation of their own (Rocchi, Pelletier, & Couture, 2013) and impaired well-being (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009; Stebbings, Taylor, Spray, & Ntoumanis, 2012). In the language of self-determination theory (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Soenens, Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Dochy, 2012; Stebbings et al., 2012),

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the pressure inherent within a high-stakes competition tends to pull a controlling motivating style out of coaches.

While a controlling style may seem situationally appropriate during a high-stakes competition, self-determination theory argues that such a style is actually counterproductive to the quality of both the coach–athlete relationship and to the athletes' motivation, engagement, and performance (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, & Provencher, 2009; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001; Van den Berghe et al., 2013). By controlling, we mean that coaches prioritize tangible extrinsic incentives over experiential intrinsic satisfactions (e.g., win the medal rather than enjoy the activity), display negative conditional regard (e.g., emotionally and physically withdraw after poor performance), use controlling language (e.g., demands), insist on strict compliance paired with constant monitoring, belittle and counter-argue against any athlete resistance to the coach's procedures, impose coach-prescribed values while simultaneously invalidating the athlete's feelings and opinions, display power-assertive intimidation tactics, and show impatience (Bartholomew et al., 2009, 2010; Reeve, 2009).

Because high-stakes competitive contexts pressure coaches toward a maladaptive controlling motivating style, we sought to evaluate the capacity of an intervention to help coaches not default into a situationally-induced controlling style when placed into an extremely results-oriented sporting context (i.e., the 2012 London Paralympic Games). We chose to study this particular population of coaches because the press to win Olympic medals was extremely strong and highly prioritized by the athletic association of the home nation of the authors—namely, Korea. For instance, coaches commonly heard administrator-uttered statements, such as “If you cannot bring home a medal, then we will find a coach who can.”

We expected that without an autonomy-supportive intervention (i.e., the control group in our study), the cultural press to win and bring home medals would pull a controlling motivating style out of the coaches of the Korean national Paralympics team during the two months of training that led up to the Games. We also expected, however, that if coaches from this same population were offered a carefully designed, theory-based autonomy-supportive intervention (i.e., the experimental group), then the intervention experience would encourage coaches to rethink the merits and utility of controlling coaching, orient them toward supporting rather than pressuring their athletes, and provide the guidance coaches would need to enact an autonomy-supportive motivating style toward their athletes. So, Hypothesis 1 was that *coaches in the control group would become significantly more controlling during the two months that led up to the Games, while coaches in the experimental group would become significantly more autonomy supportive*. To assess coaches' motivating style, we used both objective (trained raters scored coaching behavior during practice) and subjective (athletes-reported perceptions of their coach's motivating style) measures.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) concerned the athletes and their receiving of autonomy support. H2 was that *the athletes of coaches who participated in ASIP, compared to the athletes of coaches who did not participate in ASIP, would show greater motivation, engagement, and performance*. For motivation, we assessed need satisfaction and need frustration during practice sessions/coach–athlete interactions. For engagement, we assessed both objective engagement (as rated by coaches) and subjective engagement (as self-reported by athletes). For performance, we assessed whether or not each athlete won an Olympic medal. We expected that the athletes of coaches who participated in ASIP (experimental group) would report greater need satisfaction, lower need frustration, greater engagement, and would win more medals than would the athletes of coaches who did not participate in ASIP (control group).

Hypothesis 3 (H3) concerned the coaches and their giving of autonomy support.

H3 was that *the coaches who participated in ASIP, compared to the coaches who did not participate in ASIP, would show greater coaching motivation, coaching efficacy, and coaching well-being*. H3 was based on Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, and Ryan's (2006) finding that people experience as much well-being from giving autonomy support as they do from receiving it. To assess coaching motivation, efficacy, and well-being, we measured the same three ASIP-induced benefits observed to occur for physical education teachers (Cheon et al., 2014)—namely, psychological need satisfaction during one's coaching, coaching efficacy, and job satisfaction.

Method

Participants, training facilities, and random assignment to conditions

Administrators who managed the Korean national Paralympic team contacted the authors to request a training program to help coaches enhance their athletes' motivation and performance in the Games. To deliver an evidence-based training program, we conducted an experimentally-based, longitudinally-designed research study and asked the administrators to randomly assign the coaches into either the experimental or control condition, using the 10 sports as the unit of random assignment. The Korean national team included one team-based sport (goal ball), but we asked administrators to include only the coaches of the 10 individual sports so that we could test our hypotheses using individually-based data. As shown in Fig. 1, administrators randomly assigned 19 coaches and their 45 athletes from five sports into the experimental condition

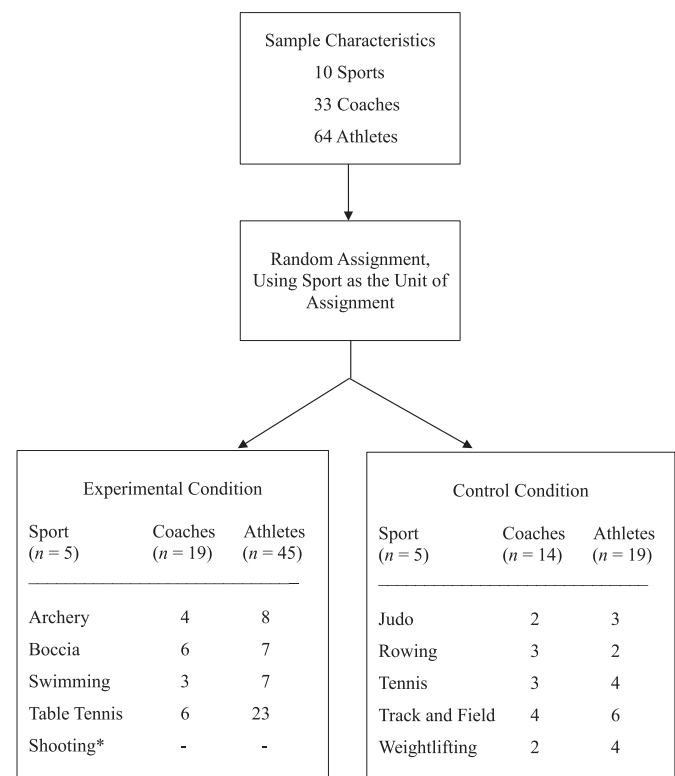


Fig. 1. Number of sports, coaches, and athletes randomly assigned into the experimental and control conditions. * The Shooting sport was not included in the experimental condition sample for reasons explained in the text.

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