



Peer motivational climate and burnout perceptions of adolescent athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The role of social environment in fostering athlete burnout is understudied, in particular with regard to the peer social context. We therefore examined the association between perceptions of the peer-created motivational climate and athlete burnout in adolescent athletes while controlling for weekly training hours and perceived stress. We also examined potential gender differences on peer-created motivational climate perceptions.

Method: Adolescent athletes ($N = 206$, M age = 17.2 yr) completed questionnaires assessing weekly training hours and perceptions of stress, task-involving (i.e., improvement, relatedness support, effort) and ego-involving (i.e., intra-team competition and ability, intra-team conflict) peer motivational climate, and burnout (i.e., emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, sport devaluation).

Results: Multivariate multiple regression analysis with training hours, stress, and peer motivational climate variables predicting the burnout components showed a significant multivariate relationship with 24.6% of burnout variance explained. Canonical loadings indicated that lower scores on weekly training hours, higher perceived stress and intra-team conflict peer climate perception scores, and lower improvement, relatedness support, and effort peer climate perception scores associate with higher scores on all burnout components. Intra-team competition and ability did not contribute to prediction of burnout. Stronger prediction was observed for individual compared to team sport athletes. Gender differences were in line with expectations. Males scored higher on the two ego-involving peer motivational climate components, whereas females scored higher than males on effort.

Conclusion: The findings offer insight on the potential role of social context in shaping burnout perceptions and suggest that attention to peers in the burnout process is warranted.

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A motivational phenomenon linked to organized sport participation that has garnered attention in the sport science literature is athlete burnout (Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Goodger, Gorely, Lavalley, & Harwood, 2007; Gould & Whitley, 2009; Smith, Lemyre, & Raedeke, 2007). Burnout has been forwarded as a contributing factor to decreased training and competitive performance as well as compromised well-being in the social context of sport (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008). As such, understanding conditions that have potential to either cultivate or mitigate burnout in athletes is important for the prevention of this condition. The present investigation is designed to extend our understanding

of this phenomenon in adolescent athletes, with particular attention to the association of the perceived motivational climate endorsed by peers with central burnout perceptions.

Building on Maslach and Jackson's (1984) conceptualization of burnout in organizational contexts, Raedeke (1997) conceived of athlete burnout as a multidimensional syndrome consisting of emotional/physical exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and a negative and detached attitude toward sport that he termed sport devaluation. Though context-specific demands can lead to varying catalysts of burnout, these defining elements are expected to co-occur across contexts (Raedeke & Smith, 2009). Indeed, Raedeke's conception has been supported by in-depth qualitative research on burned out athletes from a variety of sport backgrounds (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006, 2007; Goodger, Wolfenden, & Lavalley, 2007; Gould et al., 1996; Gustafsson et al., 2008). In these investigations, the athletes describe emotional/physical exhaustion as feelings of extreme low energy and feeling constantly

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tired, reduced sense of accomplishment as feelings of lack of improvements/results and no progress despite increased training efforts, and sport devaluation as diminished interest in and a negative attitude toward sport.

Extreme cases of burnout with severe behavioral (e.g., dropout) and psychological ramifications are believed to be rare (see Eklund & Cresswell, 2007; Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007; Raedeke & Smith, 2009), yet there is variation in perceptions of exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and sport devaluation among athletes. Even among samples of relatively healthy athletes the burnout syndrome can be better understood through empirical efforts designed to uncover key predictors of burnout perceptions. As such, many athlete burnout investigations have targeted exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation perceptions in heterogeneous groups of active athletes. These efforts also have drawn from theoretical perspectives that address the burnout experience.

Probably the most influential perspective on athlete burnout is the cognitive-affective model advanced by R. E. Smith (1986). This perspective highlights chronic exposure to stress as underpinning burnout. Smith forwarded that parallel relationships exist among four key components of stress and burnout. The first component pertains to situational demands and the personal and environmental resources available to meet these demands. The second component highlights cognitive appraisals surrounding demands and resources, as well as the consequences of not meeting demands and the personal meaning of those consequences. This component is central to the model, as these appraisals shape the physiological and coping/behavioral outcomes that constitute the third and fourth components of the model, respectively. Indeed, empirical examinations of athlete burnout show perceived stress, operationalized as a perceived inability to meet demands, to have a robust positive association with perceptions of exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Black & Smith, 2007; Raedeke & Smith, 2001, 2004).

Poor adaptation to the stress of physical training is argued to be a key situational contributor to burnout (Dale & Weinberg, 1990; Kenttä, Hassmén, & Raglin, 2001; Silva, 1990). This is supported by qualitative research on elite athletes, who cite heavy training as substantially contributing to burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2008). On the other hand, cross-sectional quantitative research has shown no relationship between training and burnout (Black & Smith, 2007; Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007). These contradictory findings may reflect a diversity of pathways to burnout. For example, a qualitative investigation of burned out junior tennis players conducted by Gould et al. (1996) showed burnout to fall into two strains. Though one of the strains was driven by inability to meet the physical demands of training, the dominant strain was social-psychological in nature, either driven predominantly by an athlete's perfectionism or by situational pressures. Other work has corroborated the individual and varying nature of burnout (e.g., Gustafsson, Kenttä, Hassmén, Lundqvist, & Durand-Bush, 2007), suggesting that it is important to simultaneously consider training-related demands and psychosocial factors that potentially shape exhaustion, reduced accomplishment and sport devaluation athlete burnout perceptions.

In pursuing such work, close attention to the social context within which an athlete trains and competes is warranted. According to Coakley's (1992) sociological perspective on athlete burnout, for example, controlling sport contexts underpin athlete burnout. Also, approaches targeting the nature of athletes' commitment to sport (i.e., Raedeke, 1997; Schmidt & Stein, 1991) point to low control and high social constraints as contributing to entrapment, a form of commitment that corresponds to relatively high burnout perceptions. Finally, other work grounded in motivation theory shows that perceptions of

the prevailing motivational climate on one's team associate with athlete burnout perceptions (Lemyre, Hall, & Roberts, 2008; Reinboth & Duda, 2004). Along with research pointing to team atmosphere/culture and peer conflict as factors associated with burnout (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2008), these findings suggest that exploring young athletes' perceptions of the motivational climate reinforced by sport-involved peers is warranted.

Young athletes experience less power imbalance with their peers than with their coaches or parents, interact extensively with peers during training and competition, and use peers as a gauge of competence in sport contexts (see Smith, 2007). As such, peers have potential to be of considerable motivational salience to young athletes (Smith, 2003, 2007; Weiss & Stuntz, 2004) and the peer-created motivational climate would seem particularly important to examine in investigations of motivational phenomena (Ntoumanis, Vazou, & Duda, 2007). Motivational climate pertains to the goal structures and expectations operating within an achievement setting that elicit the formation of certain perspectives on success, and is a key feature of Nicholls' (1984, 1989) achievement goal theory and Ames' (1992) perspective on achievement behavior. Ames specified two forms of motivational climate (Ames, 1992; Ames Archer, 1988). One is referred to as a mastery or task-involving climate, where the context is characterized as emphasizing and rewarding effort and cooperation, focusing on learning, and self-referenced criteria for success. The other is referred to as a performance or ego-involving climate, where the context involves reinforcement of social comparison and evaluation, within-group competition, and punishment of mistakes. Norm-referenced criteria for success predominate in this context. The perceived motivational climate, along with competence perceptions and dispositional tendencies to hold task-involving and ego-involving conceptions of ability are proposed to drive states of goal involvement and psychological outcomes. In general, existing work in the physical domain links perceptions of a task-involving climate with adaptive motivation-related responses and perceptions of an ego-involving climate with maladaptive motivation-related responses (see Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999; Roberts, Treasure, & Conroy, 2007).

Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2005) pursued a thorough description of athletes' views on the peer-created motivational climate in an effort to stimulate peer-focused achievement motivation research. Through individual and focus group interviews with adolescent athletes they elucidated a number of characteristics of peer motivational climate that could be characterized as task-involving and ego-involving. This work served as a foundation for the development of an instrument to measure perceptions of the peer motivational climate (Ntoumanis & Vazou, 2005). Through multiple studies, again targeting adolescent athletes from a range of sports, a streamlined set of three distinct task-involving features and two distinct ego-involving features emerged. The task-involving features were improvement, relatedness support, and effort, whereas the ego-involving features were intra-team competition and ability, and intra-team conflict. *Improvement* pertains to teammates encouraging and cooperating with one another, *relatedness support* involves valuing and accepting one another, and *effort* involves encouraging and reinforcing effortful involvement and persistence. The ego-involving feature of *intra-team competition and ability* captures within-team competition and comparison, along with valuing most highly those teammates of greatest ability. Finally, *intra-team conflict* involves the display of unsupportive behaviors such as criticizing, "putting down", and laughing at teammates as well as complaining when the team loses.

Extending these foundational efforts, Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda (2006) explored the prediction of various motivational indices by perceptions of the peer-created climate and perceptions of the coach-created climate. At the global (i.e., task, ego) level,

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