Peer motivational climate and burnout perceptions of adolescent athletes

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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, Lavallee, & 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, & Lavallee, 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...
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, Køntå, 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 perspective highlights chronic exposure to stress as underpinning the cognitive-affective model advanced by R. E. Smith (1986). This approach targets 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; Reinhoth & 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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