A game-to-game investigation of the relation between need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching and moral behavior in soccer

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Although perceived need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching have received considerable attention, the question whether coach behavior fluctuates from game to game, with resulting associations with players' moral behavior has not been examined.
Design and method: A Belgian sample of soccer players ($N = 197$; $M = 26.57$) was followed during five competition games, with players completing measures both prior to and following each game assessing, pre-game and on-game perceived coaching as well as athletes' moral behavior.
Results: Results of multilevel analyses indicated that there exists substantial variation in perceived need-thwarting and need-supportive coaching behavior from game to game. The game-to-game variation in perceived pre-game need-thwarting coaching behavior related positively to variation in the adoption of an objectifying stance, which, in turn, related to variation in antisocial behavior oriented towards the opponent, the referee, and even their own teammates. Variation in perceived on-game need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching behavior yielded an additional relation to team-related moral outcomes. Finally, supplementary analysis indicated that these effects also held for an objective marker of moral functioning (i.e., number of yellow cards) and that players' level of competition-contingent pay related to their antisocial behavior via an objectifying stance.
Conclusion: The discussion highlights the fluctuating and dynamic nature of motivating coaching behavior, and its association with players' moral functioning.

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1. Introduction

Sport plays an important educational and social role (European Commission, 2007, White paper section 1) as it constitutes an ideal context where players can learn to follow rules, to constructively deal with authority figures (e.g., the referee) and to engage in prosocial behaviors. These prosocial behaviors, defined as voluntary acts that aim to help or benefit others, together with the absence of antisocial behaviors, defined as voluntary acts that disadvantage or harm others, are indicative of individuals' moral functioning in sports (Bandura, 1999; Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009; Sage & Kavussanu, 2007). Players' display of both prosocial and antisocial behaviors may vary substantially from game to game. While players may act prosocial during some games, they may

verbally and physically aggress the referee, opponents, or even their teammates (e.g., Bredemeier, 1994) during other games, and as such display antisocial behaviors.

Certainly, such antisocial behaviors are not warranted and to optimize sports' educational and social role, we need to better understand the factors that promote prosocial or moral behaviors (such as helping an injured opponent) and make players vulnerable for the display of antisocial or immoral behaviors (such as retaliating after a bad foul). Among those factors coaches play a key role, as they constitute one of the primary socializing agents for players (e.g., Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Nucci & Kim, 2005). That is, coaches may prevent the occurrence of antisocial or immoral behavior, but they may also actively encourage or elicit such behavior, for instance by being critical or by inducing pressure to win, which can result in a winning-at-all cost attitude and a lack of respect and concern for the opponent, the rules of the game, and the officials (Nucci & Kim, 2005; Vallerand, Brière, Blanchard, & Provencher, 1997). Indeed, although players

possess the self-regulatory capacity to refrain from antisocial behavior and instead engage in prosocial behavior (Bandura, 1991, 1999), under psychological need-thwarting circumstances players' vulnerability for antisocial play may get evoked (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). In the context of a soccer game, the combination of a pressuring coach and a competitive environment may constitute such a need-thwarting context.

Recent cross-sectional research has linked coaching behavior with athletes' moral behavior (e.g., Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015), nevertheless the question whether game-to-game variation in coaching behavior relates to game-to-game variation in players' moral behavior has, to the best of our knowledge, not received any prior attention. Yet, given that the pressure imposed on players and the focus on winning at all costs may vary from game to game, it is sensible to expect that also players' capacity to engage in prosocial behavior as well as their vulnerability for displaying antisocial behavior varies from game to game. Therefore, in the present study, grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013), we adopted a dynamic perspective towards coaching, thereby investigating whether players' engagement in prosocial and antisocial behavior varies from game to game depending, among other factors, on the need-supportive and need-thwarting style used by the coach both prior to and during the game.

1.1. Need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching

Within the SDT-perspective, a distinction is made between two broader coaching styles, that is, need-supportive and need-thwarting coaching. When need-supportive, coaches nurture athletes' basic psychological needs for autonomy (i.e., experience a sense of volition), competence (i.e., feeling effective) and relatedness (i.e., experience a warm relationship; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013), thereby creating an ideal environment for athletes to benefit affectively (e.g., well-being; Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012), cognitively (e.g., learning; Pope & Wilson, 2012), and behaviorally (e.g., prosocial behavior; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011).

When need-supportive, coaches take their athletes' perspective, provide choices and stimulate initiative, as well as provide their athletes with meaningful rationales for assigned roles, tasks, or exercises (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Reeve, 2016). They also create a predictable and competence-enhancing environment, for instance by providing clear instructions, encouragements, and showing confidence in their athletes' abilities (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Reeve, 2009). Finally, when need-supportive, coaches are warm, helpful, and available to their athletes as to address their worries and anxieties (Williams, Whipp, Jackson, & Dimmock, 2013). Several studies have convincingly shown the presence of a "bright pathway" (see Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011) where coach need support relates to better adjustment and performance because athletes' psychological needs get better met (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

In contrast, some recent studies have revealed a "dark pathway" where coach need thwarting relates to need frustration which, in turn, relates to suboptimal or even maladaptive outcomes (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, et al., 2011) among which is antisocial behavior (Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015). Need thwarting — which does not simply mean the absence of need support (see Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013) as it engenders feelings of pressure (i.e., autonomy frustration), inferiority or failure (i.e., competence frustration) and social alienation and loneliness (i.e., relatedness frustration) — actively undermines athletes' basic psychological needs (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Haerens, Vansteenkiste, Aelterman, & Van den Berghe, 2016).

In particular, athletes' need for autonomy gets frustrated when their coach forces them to act, think, and feel in a prescribed way, for instance by using intimidation, displaying conditional regard, or exerting excessive control (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Reeve, 2009). Likewise, athletes' needs for competence and relatedness are thwarted when their coach is critical and destructive as well as distant and cold (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, et al., 2011). Such need frustrating experiences, in turn, relate to suboptimal or negative athlete outcomes such as a greater probability of burnout, depressive symptoms (Balaguer et al., 2012; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, et al., 2011) and antisocial behavior (Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015).

1.2. Coaching and moral behavior

As suggested by Bandura (1999) morality implies not only doing good to others (i.e. prosocial behaviors), but also avoiding provoking harm to others (i.e., absence of antisocial behaviors), a distinction which has been shown to be relevant in the context of sport (e.g., Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). To illustrate, in soccer, players may display prosocial behavior by helping an injured opponent or encouraging a team mate. In contrast, they may exhibit antisocial behavior by deliberately injuring an opponent or being critical towards teammates. Moreover, the social context — and therefore in part also the coach — can influence players' capacity to apply moral standards (Bandura, 1991,1999) such that players' more natural tendency to act prosocial may get supported or overridden.

Consistent with the presumed role of coaches, a few cross-sectional studies have shown perceived coach autonomy support to relate negatively to athletes' antisocial behavior towards both their own teammates and the opponent, and positively to prosocial behavior towards the teammates (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; see also; Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009). In another cross-sectional study, Hodge and Gucciardi (2015) found perceived controlling coaching to relate positively to antisocial behavior towards both the opponents and teammates. In that study, these associations could be accounted for by athletes' moral disengagement, which refers to the psychological maneuvers that individuals use to transgress moral standards without experiencing negative affect (Bandura, 2002). One such maneuver is dehumanization, the process by which individuals perceive others not as humans but rather as animals (i.e., animalistic dehumanization) or objects (i.e., objectification). Concerning the latter, Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, and Lens (2010), found that soccer players' objectification of the opponent helped to explain why their experienced pressure to outperform their opponents related positively to antisocial behavior towards these opponents. Apparently, the pressure to win may lead soccer players to treat their opponents as barriers to be removed in the service of winning, thereby lowering the threshold to aggress opponents.

Another source of pressure may constitute of the monetary rewards soccer players receive for winning a game. According to Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET; Deci, 1975), one of the mini-theories of SDT, tangible extrinsic rewards could be a potential source of pressure especially if the reward is made contingent upon the outcome of the behavior (Reeve & Deci, 1996; Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003). Presumably, the higher the competition-contingent bonus players receive, the more they may feel pressured to win the game. Such heightened pressure may lead players to engage in any possible means necessary to attain the outcome of winning, even engaging in antisocial behavior. The threshold to engage in such antisocial behavior would be more easily achieved if the more the opponent is denied of human-like properties, that is, the more the opponent is objectified, a process that is more likely to occur if higher stakes are at play (i.e., if more money can be gained; see Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Given that competition-contingent