Motivation in Youth Sport: Examination of the Antecedents and Importance

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Youth sport participation is prevalent in American culture (Theokas, 2009). In fact, approximately 20 million children aged between 6 and 16 are involved in organized sport in some capacity (Coakley, 2009). Types of youth sport programs include, but are not limited to, the Police Athletic League (PAL), Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), Pop Warner Football, the Catholic Youth Association (CYO), and Little League (Dixon & Bruening, 2014).

Many positive outcomes have been attributed to youth sport participation, including character development (Camire & Trudel, 2010), psychological well-being (Greenleaf, Boyer, & Petrie, 2009), and enhanced academic achievement (Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). However, dropout rates can reach up to 35% annually (Nache, Bar-Eli, Perrin, & Laurencelle, 2005). Additionally, low socioeconomic status and limited access to resources have correlated with lack of involvement (Dollman & Lewis, 2010). Recruitment and retention of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds presents enhanced challenges, mostly related to access and interest (Anderson-Butcher, 2005). Based on these observations, it is necessary to examine the factors that encourage or limit athletic participation among youth. Of the antecedents of athletic involvement, the process of motivation has been emphasized (Roberts, 2001). Therefore, this study will focus upon the process and importance of motivation development within the context of youth sport.

Within sport, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) has been the most commonly utilized theoretical framework to examine motivation. In accordance with this approach, this research inquiry will employ SDT to examine the concept of motivation among youth athletes. SDT is a motivational theory based on need fulfillment. According to this theory, motivation of individuals exists along a continuum of amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within this continuum, individuals that maintain a more internal locus of control (i.e., intrinsic motivation) are more motivated than those that are extrinsically motivated and amotivated.

A subtheory of SDT is Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). BPNT states that individuals’ placement along the amotivation-extrinsic motivation-intrinsic motivation continuum relates to their perceptions of fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence has been defined as “a propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Autonomy refers to “the experience of integration and freedom” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Relatedness involves “the desire to feel connected to others” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Within SDT, it was hypothesized that satisfaction of the needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness correspond to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Furthermore, during evaluation of the antecedents of motivation among youth athletes, the influence of interpersonal socialization has been acknowledged. Parents, peers, and coaches have demonstrated a significant ability to either encourage or thwart the motivational development of youth athletes (Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, 2012). This study revealed the importance of socialization toward the motivation process: “In the children’s data, social influence predictors accounted for 57.0% of the variance in effort, as well as substantial portions of variance in enjoyment (43.1%), competence (24.9%), and anxiety (35.1%)” (Chan et al., 2012).

While many scholars have studied the independent effects of these social agents toward childrens’ experiences, they have often failed to account for the interaction between these sources of influence (Bengoechea, Sabiston, and Wilson, 2015). This presents an exciting opportunity to assess the extent to which parents, peers, and coaches combine to influence the athletic experiences of youth. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the interactions of social influence (i.e. parents, peers, coaches) toward the motivational profiles of disadvantaged youth sport participants. Utilizing an SDT framework, motivational profiles will be measured through fulfillment of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
In terms of methodological approach, this study will employ a quantitative, correlational design. The Interpersonal Context in Youth Sport Questionnaire (ICYSQ; Bengoechea et al., 2015) will be administered to disadvantaged youth sport participants in a large Midwestern city to measure the influence of interpersonal socialization toward youth athletes' levels of motivation. Data analysis will consist of separate regression analyses designed to measure motivation, perceptions of need fulfillment, and influence of interpersonal socialization.

Due to the prevalence of youth sport participation, there are a variety of stakeholders within sport programs. Through this study, program administrators would develop a deeper understanding of the process of sport socialization that would benefit program implementation. Other social agents, including parents, peers, and coaches, would also receive valuable recommendations toward strategies to support young athletes. Many youth and adolescents reap the benefits of athletic participation. However, a large segment of the population encounters negative experiences through sport. Researchers have demonstrated that children who fail to achieve fulfillment of basic psychological needs will suffer from burnout and disillusionment from sport. This study will attempt to identify the antecedents and outcomes associated with youth athletes’ motivation levels.