Antecedents of need fulfillment among elite athletes and coaches: A qualitative approach

Anne F. Froyen*, & Anne Marte Pensgaard
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway

Abstract

The main objective of study 1 and 2 was to provide, within the framework of basic psychological need theory (BPNT), a mini-theory in self-determination theory (SDT), more in-depth understanding of the needs which athletes and coaches have in relation to each other. In particular, we wanted to investigate antecedents of the three basic psychological needs of athletes and coaches who compete at the elite level in sport. The two studies were conducted with the use of semi-structured interviews. Six former Norwegian world-class athletes participated in study 1 and four coaches with extensive experience within elite sport participated in study 2. In study 1, being seen as a whole person and being recognized in the planning process and the execution of athletes’ training emerged as antecedents of autonomy. Help to improve skills and feeling supported as an athlete emerged as important for need satisfaction of competence and relatedness. Potential antecedents of need thwarting were also illuminated. In study 2, feedback on the quality of the coaches’ work emerged as an antecedents of need satisfaction of competence. The need to know their athletes’ life situation and how they would think and feel in different competitive situations emerged as antecedents of the coaches’ need satisfaction of relatedness as it provided them with a sense of security. The results did not reveal any antecedents of need fulfillment of autonomy among the coaches. It was, however, revealed that athletes have the potential to thwart coaches’ needs. 241 words

Key words: Self-Determination Theory, Basic Psychological Needs, Elite Sport, Coaches, Athletes

Introduction

Elite sport is a context wherein its participants are very much concerned with performance development in striving for success. There is a constant focus on good results, and thus it is an environment that can be very competitive and potentially stressful. Elite athletes and coaches also often spend more than 150 days together in any one year (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002), and it is important that this relationship is effective as the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is highly relevant for the development of performance, satisfaction (Jowett & Meek, 2000) and motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

According to the theoretical framework of the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), individuals have an innate motivation to take part in meaningful activities, develop and exercise skills, and search for a sense of belonging to other people and
social groups. Basic psychological need theory (BPNT, Ryan & Deci, 2002), one of the mini-theories within SDT, pays specific attention to the concept of innate psychological needs; the need for autonomy, the need for competence and the need for relatedness, and their direct influence on the development of integrity, psychological growth and health (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). The need for autonomy is satisfied when one feels that one is the origin of one's own actions, as one act in accordance with one's own interests and integrated values (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Behavior influenced by external sources can also be perceived as autonomous if it is experienced to coincide with one's initiative and values and consequently express part of oneself (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The need for competence is satisfied when one experiences mastery, and at the same time has the possibility to develop further within one's environment/social context. The need for competence makes people seek challenges that are optimal according to their capacities, which in turn contributes to ongoing effort to maintain and improve relevant skills through the activity. The need for relatedness is satisfied when one feels connected to others and that one cares for them and vice versa (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2002). The feeling of belonging to other people and one's environment is important as it contributes to the experience of acceptance by one's fellows, companions and peers.

Research using the theoretical framework of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to study relationship functioning and need satisfaction within sport has until now focused primarily on how coaches influence need satisfaction of the basic psychological needs, motivation and well-being among athletes (Adie et al., 2008; Gillett et al., 2010). In other words, the focus has thus far not been directed at how athletes contribute to need satisfaction among coaches. With these contextual characteristics in mind and the fact that elite athletes perceive the quality of the coach-athlete relationship to play a pivotal role in their development (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), it makes it interesting to gain more in-depth knowledge about their experiences in relation to each other.

According to BPNT, need satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is directly linked to well-being, whereas hindrance of the needs will directly lead to thwarting of a healthy development of the self and its functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2002). New research argues, however, that it is not necessarily correct to assume that low need satisfaction indicates that there is high need thwarting (Bartholomew et al., 2011). The reason for this is that need thwarting involves an active opposition to need satisfaction, whereas low need satisfaction demands that needs are not sufficiently satisfied. Consequently, Bartholomew et al. (2011) argue that it is more accurate to measure the degree of need thwarting to predict instances of need thwarting rather than measure need satisfaction. By representing two different constructs, need thwarting and need satisfaction could also be present in the same context. When we investigate the perceived needs of athletes and coaches in relation to each other and how they found their counterpart influenced them during their career, it provides us with an opportunity to obtain further insight into how the mechanisms of both need satisfaction and need thwarting may operate within the context of elite sport.

There is now an increased recognition of the fact that other people do play a very important role when it comes to the effect on an individual's well-being through need satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (Patrick et al., 2007). According to La Guardia and Patrick (2008) a relationship partner will be autonomy-supportive when he or she tries to understand the other's perspective, interests and preferences. Provision of clear, reasonable expectations and structures allows the need for competence to be supported. Relatedness support is provided by involvement and interest in the other person, and by showing that the other is important. If the relationship partner, however, is excessively controlling, too challenging or dismissive, the needs will not be met and optimal functioning will