Motivation is not always black and white: Attending to African American athletes' psychological needs for sport involvement

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Abstract:

Athletics in the current society is a place of diversity with athletes coming from all walks of life and cultural backgrounds. Athletes of different cultural backgrounds, African American athletes in particular, have experienced barriers and biases and subsequently different motivational factors from Caucasian athletes that influence their overall participation in sports. Thus, it becomes important to understand potential differences in athlete's involvement in athletics and implementing changes to help promote a positive climate for African American athletes to feel motivated in pursuing involvement in sports, especially since a majority of professional coaches are Caucasian. In this article, we review prior research that highlights motivational differences between African American and Caucasian athletes and translate them to coaching practices.

Article:

Athletics and organized sports have become an ever-increasing field of inclusion of individuals from every walk of life. Team diversity in every level of performance has gone from the aspect of being all Caucasian athletes to that of primarily ethnic minorities in sports and athletics (Duda & Gano-Overway, Citation2001). Specifically, the proportion of the African American population in athletics is much larger than that in the overall U.S. population; African Americans constitute nearly 70 to 80% of the National Football League and National Basketball Association/Women's National Basketball Association athlete population but only 12% of the total population (Shakib & Veliz, Citation2013). With sport involvement not being limited to the participation of only Caucasians, the overall team dynamic changes with the incorporation of diverse athletes of differing cultural backgrounds.

African American athletes experience motivational factors differently due to cultural barriers or promoters (Abshire et al., Citation2019; Stodolska et al., Citation2014). These barriers included stereotypes and monetary costs (e.g., equipment, transportation) in regard to lower-income and some middle-class African American families (Stodolska et al., Citation2014). This can lead to restrictions in accessing training facilities to improve skills or even compete.

Additionally, African Americans, both male and female, report a decrease in motivation toward physical activities due to a lack of social support and access to certain resources (i.e., density of recreation resources, facility access, and sport equipment) in terms of being engaged in physical activities (Abshire et al., Citation2019; Sweeney et al., Citation2019). Although African American athletes are influenced by cultural promoters that may lead them to be active in athletics, these promoters can be understood as historic myths of African American athletes being naturally gifted for sports (Shakib & Veliz, Citation2013). The athletic community has internalized historic myths and misconceptions, which are propagated by the extensive media coverage of African American athletes in major professional leagues (Shakib & Veliz, Citation2013). Younger African American athletes are then more likely to pursue involvement in sports and hopes of achieving a higher level of competition. Thus, it becomes crucial to understand how culture and race/ethnicity may influence motivation for sport involvement (Duda & Gano-Overway, Citation2001). In a qualitative study on African American college athletes' view on race and athlete activism, participants stated that "race will always matter," and "It's been a big impact [race] on everybody because that's what everybody really judge you off" (Agyemang et al., Citation2010, p. 425). Therefore, coaches should take into account race in coaching practices, such as diversifying the overall team composition and small-group interactions intentionally to reduce racial biases in coaches and athletes (Oosting & Chu, Citation2020). These repeated interactions can foster familiarity and deeper connections between racial groups based on personality, attitude, and values instead of surface-level traits, such as skin color and associated presumptions (Zhang, Citation2017).

Without acknowledging athletes' diverse cultures and races/ethnicities, a coach could fall victim to generalizing that all athletes go through the same motivational processes and using the same way to coach all of them. Yet each athlete has their own drives and reasons for participating in sports, typically formed by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motives (Abshire et al., Citation2019). Effective coaches need to consider the congregation of multiple cultural backgrounds and values that affect athletes' sport motivation and involvement. This article, guided by self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, Citation2000), is intended to provide insights for coaches to create sport environments that promote positive motivational factors for African American youth's sport involvement.

Self-Determination Theory and Coaching Practice

The pursuit to understand motivational factors for participation and engagement in sports and physical activities has long been considered an important field of study for both researchers and coaches (Ramos et al., Citation2018; Shakib & Veliz, Citation2013). Recent research has sought to test and identify the key motivational factors that affect minority athlete participation in sports. In doing so, SDT, consisting of the most comprehensive evidence for coaches to apply to practice, postulates that all humans have three innate psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness and competence—that need to be met to form the basis for optimal motivation (Ryan & Deci, Citation2000). These psychological needs are universal, whereas ways to satisfy them differ across cultures and races/ethnicities.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a feeling of internal, rather than external, perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, Citation2000). In other words, it is the sense of volition and personal control of one's decisions and achievements. Thus, those who are able to freely decide on what is most important and become task-oriented on such matters will be motivated. Duda and Gano-Overway's (Citation2001) research on autonomy and task orientation supported this idea, with strong evidence that task-oriented individuals assume personal responsibility in increasing one's ability and performance. This becomes important for African American athletes as they face negative stereotypes that negatively affect their self-perceptions (Duda & Gano-Overway, Citation2001), which reciprocally affects their overall sense of task orientation and self-esteem in their sport participation. Thus, by promoting the feelings of autonomy and task-orientation, this will support African American athletes' overall positive self-esteem and motivation to participate in athletics. To put autonomy into practice, coaches can implement opportunities for their athletes to decide on what (e.g., techniques, tactics) they believe is best to work toward in terms of their personal goals. This can be accomplished by allotting time during normal practice time frames for athletes to work on their personal goals of improvement. When athletes feel in control to work toward their personal goals, they will promote their sense of autonomy, and in turn their motivation in their desired sport.

Relatedness

Relatedness is a sense of being cared for by others and social connections (Ryan & Deci, Citation2000). African American athletes experience relatedness in ways that differ from those of the majority population. For instance, although all athletes' external encouragement can be identified by receiving social support through both family and nonkin members, including coaches and teachers, Shakib and Veliz (Citation2013) indicated that African American athletes perceived significantly higher levels of external encouragement from family members, as well as from nonkin sources, particularly coaches, to pursue and continue participating in athletics compared to Caucasian athletes (Shakib & Veliz, Citation2013). A reason may be that African American athletes viewed coaches as a role model and even a "father figure" in terms of being a support system for them while participating in sports (Stodolska et al., Citation2014). Therefore, coaches should meet, or at least informally talk with, their African American athletes to support them in the realm of both athletics and general life. Building rapport and connection with African American athletes can promote their perceived external encouragement, as mentioned previously. In addition to family members and coaches, peers, especially their African American teammates, play a crucial role in influencing African Americans' motivation. African American athletes' strong connections with their teammates, along with a sense of support, have been shown to lead to increased motivation (Ramos et al., Citation2018; Stodolska et al., Citation2014). Additionally, SDT emphasizes that connectedness with peers fosters extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to engage in desired activity (Abshire et al., Citation2019). Knowing that African American athletes' ability to build relationships and gain respect is important for their sport motivation, coaches may organize both sport and nonsport social events to building close-knit connections within their team. To help African American athletes feel accepted and cared for, coaches can implement a buddy system to pair athletes for them to work and have fun together.

Competency/Mastery

Competence is a feeling of effectiveness and mastery in their sport (Ryan & Deci, Citation2000). The desire to become a better athlete is a critical influencer in all athletes (Duda & Gano-Overway, Citation2001), especially African Americans who stated that mastering different aspects of their sport is a driving factor for their sport participation (Stodolska et al., Citation2014). However, African American youths mentioned in qualitative studies that cultural and normative/stereotypical beliefs in the dominant society are constraining and tend to negatively affect their personal beliefs about their level of competence and overall motivation in their sport (Elling & Knoppers, Citation2005; Stodolska et al., Citation2014). In some stereotypically "Caucasian sports," such as swimming, minority athletes, including African American athletes, reported significantly lower levels of perceived competence than their Caucasian counterparts (Ramos et al., Citation2018). African American athletes have mentioned in previous research that, due to racism, they have to work harder in order to have the same achievements as their fellow Caucasian athletes: "I'm a black male, my opportunities would be less and I probably would need a little bit more to be able to have [the] same type of position or to succeed and advance as quickly" (Agyemang et al., Citation2010, p. 424). African American athletes further indicated the need to become competent and master their sport due in part to the desire to overcome these constraints and challenge the stereotypical perceptions (Elling & Knoppers, Citation2005; Stodolska et al., Citation2014). Coaches can help them achieve this by implementing regular self-assessments for athletes to track progress and reflect on their own improvements over a season (Chang et al., Citation2017). Coaches can also offer positive personalized encouragement through their communications with the whole team and each athlete by attending to their race and cultural values in order to generate a strong sense of both race- and sport-related competence for the athletes (Chang et al., Citation2017). Additionally, providing educational sessions to coaches and athletes about cultural differences and acceptance can build a positive climate to effectively promote competence in African American athletes.

Conclusion

Sport motivation research highlights key motivators of African American athletes. The motivational factors of African American athletes are generally similar to athletes of other races/ethnicities. However, differences are seen in how such factors are experienced by African American athletes and in which aspects are more important to them compared to their Caucasian counterparts. African American athletes are constantly faced with aspects of normative and stereotypical images and beliefs that impact their perceptions of psychological needs and involvement in athletics. Thus, the culmination of information provided and understanding of such aspects as a current coach or future coach is crucial for the promotion of autonomy, relatedness, and competence necessary for African American athletes to be motivated for their sport involvement.

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