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Bridging the gap between self-determination theory and coaching soccer to disadvantaged youth

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Abstract

Embedded in self-determination theory, the purpose of this study was to explore the coaching in a soccer program aimed at promoting life skills to disadvantaged youth. Non-participant observation and video footage of the coaching styles and behaviors, combined with interviews with program participants, revealed that some autonomy-supportive strategies may be difficult to employ and potentially counterproductive in some circumstances. Further, coaches who were interpersonally involved with participants were able to offset some negative consequences of controlling behaviors. This study gives new insight into the complex relationships that exist between SDT-based coaching behaviors, positive youth development, and the soccer context.
Bridging the gap between self-determination theory and coaching soccer to disadvantaged youth

In recent years a number of sports-based educational and diversionary programs have been introduced in an attempt to tackle anti-social behavior, promote positive developmental experiences, and provide a route into employment for young people (e.g., Smith & Waddington, 2004; Tacon, 2007). Youth from disadvantaged backgrounds may be in particular need of attention because the communities that these young people live in can make positive developmental experiences unlikely to materialize (Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012). Within this youth development context, a positive relationship with non-familial adult mentors has been underlined as an important social process in attempting to achieve these goals (e.g., Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Despite this proposal, scant research has explored the interpersonal dynamics between coaches and disadvantaged youth that are required for positive life development to occur. To fill this gap, the present study aimed to provide rich descriptions of the coaching styles and behaviors witnessed in an education program that used soccer as a vehicle for life-skill development. Additionally, we adopted the theoretical lens of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) to interpret and evaluate the coaching behaviors, with the aim of providing insights and suggestions for the development of theory and practice.

The relationship between coach and participant is central to determining the effects of youth sport participation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Coaches not only have the responsibility to develop the sport-specific skills of a participant, their influence can also extend into other areas of a young person’s life (e.g., Nichols, 1997; Smoll & Smith, 1989). For example, Crabbe (2000) observed a UK sports-based program that combined educational, diversionary and rehabilitation elements through the use of soccer in an attempt to tackle drug use and crime.
Crabbe acknowledged the ‘universal admiration’ that the program participants had for the coach as an individual, which led to participants approaching the sessions with enthusiasm and dedication.

This example underlines the wider role coaches have to play in the growth of disadvantaged adolescents. A common notion in the extant literature, however, is that merely the presence of an adult in a mentoring position is enough to facilitate adaptive consequences in adolescents (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). This approach is overly simplistic, for example, the presence of a coach who controls, intimidates, and publicly criticises their athletes may lead to negative developmental outcomes in adolescents (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thørgesen-Ntoumani, 2009). Therefore, a closer inspection of the interpersonal components within the coach-participant relationship seems warranted. SDT is a theoretical framework that has received extensive empirical support within the sport context (e.g., Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Mallett, 2005; Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004), and its focus on the social-contextual ingredients required for optimal growth and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000) make it particularly useful when studying disadvantaged youth.

Self-determination theorists propose that the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs; namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, will lead to optimal functioning, development, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to the desire to engage in activities of one’s choosing and to be the origin of one’s behavior. Competence reflects the need to have an effect on the environment and to achieve desired outcomes. Relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected to valued others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This hypothesis has received extensive empirical support in a variety of different contexts, such as parenting (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008), sport (Reinboth et al., 2004), education (Taylor & Lonsdale, 2010),...
and the workplace (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Thus, scholarly attention has been given to investigating how leadership figures (e.g., parents, coaches, teachers, and managers) can fulfill the psychological needs of those under their supervision.

According to SDT researchers, a central component of the social context that has substantial impact upon psychological need fulfillment, well-being and growth is the degree to which the context is autonomy-supportive versus controlling (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Autonomy support describes a broad range of behaviors (e.g. providing choice, providing a rationale for tasks, and acknowledging the perspectives of others), which are posited to satisfy one’s need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Within sport contexts an autonomy-supportive coaching style has been positively associated with the psychological need satisfaction of athletes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007) and self-determined motivation (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007). In contrast, a controlling coaching style is considered to be damaging to individuals’ psychological health. For example, Bartholomew and colleagues (2009) proposed a taxonomy of six controlling coach behaviors (e.g., intimidation, excessive personal control, and the use of coercive rewards) that are hypothesized to thwart, rather than satisfy, athletes’ psychological needs. Research based on alternative theoretical paradigms has indicated that an autocratic and negative style of coaching is linked to lower athlete satisfaction with the coach and less intrinsic motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Baker, Yardley, & Côté, 2003).

This compelling empirical support for the positive effects of autonomy-supportive coaching implies that these strategies should be integrated into coaching practice. Similarly, the literature concerning controlling styles of coaching suggests that these interpersonal behaviors should be minimized. Nonetheless, the majority of the research detailed above has examined
athlete self-reports of general autonomy-supportive coaching styles using cross-sectional data. Thus, a greater understanding of the complexities associated with autonomy-supportive versus controlling coaching in specific contexts needs to be developed. For example, is autonomy support universally adaptive and controlling coaching negative, or do specific situations call for some flexibility? Do the complex and dynamic relationships among coach, disadvantaged youth participant, and soccer context present specific barriers to such successful implementation of autonomy-supportive coaching? This deeper exploration seems particularly important in a sport, such as soccer, which traditionally promotes directive and authoritarian coaching as a prevailing style (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Kelly & Waddington, 2006).

The current study aimed to fill this knowledge gap by examining, through the theoretical lens of SDT, the multifaceted relationships between coach, disadvantaged youth, and context in a soccer-based life skills development program. No specific hypothesis testing took place within this research; however, we aimed to explore the potential effects of SDT-supported coaching styles and those practices discouraged by self-determination theorists in a range of specific situations, as opposed to general autonomy-supportive coaching styles. Such effects might include enthusiasm for tasks, enjoyment, boredom, or non-participation but we did not restrict ourselves by looking at specific outcomes. In particular, we wished to investigate potential reasons why such consequences occurred in this unique context and potential opportunities that the soccer coaching context gives to integrate empirically supported coaching strategies, as well as potential barriers to such implementation. In view of the exploratory methods used in this study, we were also mindful of any relevant, but unexpected issues that arose during the data collection phase.

**Methods and Methodology**
Context

A charitable organization that uses sport as an engagement and support tool for disadvantaged youth, organized the delivery of a 12 hours per week sport and education program in two venues in the west of Scotland. Participants were recruited by outreach workers who engaged with local communities and referral agents, such as job centers and local youth services, to identify 18 young people to attend the program. Attendees were 16-19 years old and were not participating in any form of education, employment or training. The 13-week program aimed to build confidence, extend social networks and develops skills, qualifications and goals for moving into educational and vocational pathways. The program organizers proposed to accomplish these objectives by engaging participants through the power of soccer, and developing the necessary skills through a combination of soccer coaching and employability support. The significance of such programs for Scotland was recognized in a UK-wide study that highlighted that the highest proportion of young adults not engaged in any form of education or employment were found in this area (10% of 16-19 year olds; Barham, Walling, Clancy, Hicks, & Conn, 2009). Further, government statistics also revealed that this area has the highest share of the most deprived zones in Scotland (Scottish Executive National Statistics, 2006).

Sessions were delivered by two coaches, John and Dan (pseudonyms are used throughout), who worked full-time for the organization and also worked with professional soccer clubs in the west of Scotland in a part-time capacity. John was 29 years old and had been working for the organization for four years, beginning as an apprentice coach and working as a full-time employee for the last two years. Dan was 30 years old and worked as a part-time coach during his first year and as a full-time coach for the past two years. Both coaches held national governing body qualifications in coaching youth soccer players, while supplementary training
was provided by the organization which exposed the coaches to the additional skills required to work with disadvantaged youth. A typical week at the program would involve four practical soccer sessions delivered by the coach, each with a pre-planned theme (e.g., communication, dribbling skills, creativity).

**Procedures**

Approval from a university ethics committee was granted and full consent was obtained from the coaches and program participants prior to data collection. It was explained to program attendees that nonparticipation in the study would not impact upon their involvement in the program. Further, both coaches were informed that the intention of the study was not to identify weaknesses in their coaching, nor would comments on any individual coach be communicated back to the management of the organization.

This study answers the call for diverse research methods in coaching research (Poczwardowski, Barott, & Jowett, 2006) and builds upon the largely participant self-report evidence base by utilizing multiple sources of data to investigate how SDT can inform soccer coaching to disadvantaged youth. Specifically, an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) was undertaken in which the first author engaged in non-participant observation of the coaching sessions, which included collection of video footage and field notes without actively taking part in the sessions. Instrumental case studies are particularly suitable when the aim of the research is to shed light on a wider issue or to redraw a generalization, rather than exploring ‘the case’ itself (Stake, 2000). In line with this notion, the soccer program itself plays a supporting role to the more broad aim of a greater understanding of SDT-based coaching to disadvantaged youth (Stake, 2000).
Our case study was embedded in a wider interpretivist paradigm which assumes that multiple realities exist (i.e., a relativist ontology) and that researcher and participant create meaning collaboratively (i.e., a subjectivist epistemology; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Employing an instrumental case study embedded within interpretivist traditions allowed us to question generalizations held within positivist SDT-based research, such as the assumption that autonomy-supportive (versus controlling) coaching is adaptive (versus maladaptive) (e.g., Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Couching the study within subjectivism allowed us to merge the experiences and beliefs of the participants with our experiences and pre-existing knowledge regarding coaching and SDT to create subjective meanings of the coaching context.

Utilizing these largely naturalistic methods allowed the first author to gather firsthand information to help understand and capture the context that the coaches and participants interacted within, although we acknowledge that the presence of a researcher may not permit a fully naturalistic study to unfold (Patton, 2002). This was facilitated by maintaining openness to adapting inquiry as situations emerged that were not expected (i.e., emergent design flexibility; Patton, 2002). Observations of the sessions began on the arrival of the first participant, and ended when the coach dismissed the participants. These sessions lasted between 45 minutes to one hour on one or two days per week during the 13 week period. The video footage was collected during eight sessions over the duration of the program and enabled the first author to recap on incidents that had occurred and allowed the second author to offer his reflections on the coaching behaviors. During the first session at each location the coach introduced the first author to the program participants as a former coach within the organization who had extensive knowledge of soccer coaching. This helped to create a rapport with the program participants that facilitated the data collection process. From the observations and video footage, written field
notes were formed which included details of the session environment, content and observations regarding coach behaviors, participants’ reactions and contexts that they took place in. After each session, the first author re-examined, reflected, and added depth to the shorthand field notes to create a more detailed picture of the observed session.

After the 13 week program had ended, semi-structured interviews that were based on the field notes and observations were arranged with three attendees who agreed to discuss their experiences of the program. Two of the interviewees, Billy and Stewart, were both 17 years old and had been unemployed since leaving school at the age of 16. On completion of the program, Billy was appointed the role of an assistant coach within the organization due to his performance in the program. The third interviewee, Craig, was 18 years old and had just received confirmation that he had been accepted to study sport coaching at a local college. The main purpose of the interviews was to supplement the first author’s observations, therefore, providing an opportunity to clarify and further discuss the participants’ reactions to the coaching. The interviewees were purposively selected based on critical incidents that were observed during the coaching sessions (Patton, 2002). Such careful selection of participants is in accordance with a number of qualitative perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and emphasizes our commitment to interpretivism by permitting the participants to convey meaning behind the human action under investigation (Schwandt, 2000). Following a brief overview of the purpose of the interview, the interviews covered such topics as participants’ perceptions of their coaches’ behaviors, their reactions to these behaviors, and how the coaching helped teach skills that they could transfer into education or employment. Combining interviews with observations represents a worthy empirical coupling (Lofland, 1971), as they provided an opportunity to gather first hand participant responses regarding opinions, feelings and experiences concerning key incidents and
allowed the interviewer to clarify preliminary speculations (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted between 25 to 40 minutes. The triangulation of the data yielded from interviews, field notes and video footage provided a comprehensive insight into the existing issues and permitted meaningful interpretations to emerge (Patton, 2002).

When interpreting the data, we followed common interpretivist approaches to analyzing interview and observation data by moving through three phases of analysis (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The first and second authors independently created loose annotations representing what we perceived as incidents of interest arising from the data. Second, these preliminary notes were then aggregated into a set of superordinate themes relevant to the research questions. Finally, the first and second authors collaboratively moved from description to our research goal by couching these themes within the SDT-framework. The first and second authors encouraged reflexivity throughout this stage by challenging the participants and each others’ acquisition of knowledge (Patton, 2002). During the data collection and analysis, the first author was embarking on a psychology-based PhD on the broad topic of coaching soccer to disadvantaged youth. In addition, he had six years of experience in coaching soccer and two years within the specific program under study. The second author was the PhD supervisor and had published extensively on the topic of SDT (the third and fourth authors were not involved in analyzing the data). These positions clearly shaped our interpretations and how our knowledge was acquired, thus, they should be kept in mind when reading our analysis. For example, selected coach behaviors were interpreted as autonomy-supportive if they were in accordance with SDT definitions (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Rather than viewing these pre-determined biases as a weakness, however, they enabled the complex interactions between coach, participant, and context to be compared to previous SDT-based research. Hence, our overall
approach may be described as abductive in nature as the classification of data into themes served as a dialogue between our interpretations and theory, which enabled us to achieve our research aim (Levin-Rozalis, 2004). The discussions between the first and second author helped achieve what Angen (2000) calls ‘substantive and ethical validation’ by embracing and acknowledging our own and the participants’ subjective bias, and accepting moral responsibility for the topics we explore.

Results and Discussion

A Lack of Decisional Autonomy Support

Over the course of the 13 week program, participants were very rarely provided with the opportunity to choose the activity that they took part in, or involved in any decisions regarding the design of the sessions and how to solve game-related problems. What little choice the participants did receive was minor, such as occasionally selecting their own teams and deciding what foot to strike the ball with. The following scenario, in which John stopped a game-related activity, was typical of the coach-led environment.

To the group: “Freeze. Freeze there. Put the ball back. Stay where you are, stay where you are. Put the ball back, put the ball back. OK, wait there.”

To Andrew: “Go back (John points where he wants Andrew to move to).”

To Derek and Tim: “Move in, move in (John ushers them to move towards the goal).”

To Kevin: “Here (John points to where he wants Kevin to stand).”

To Barry: “Come across a bit. Now there’s an option down the line.”

To the group: “Now, the ball gets played in to Kevin.”

To Nigel: “Cover (John points to the area that Nigel should be covering).”
Within this scenario, John had several opportunities to involve the participants in deciding how to alter and improve their strategy and positioning but did not take them. Similarly, the coaches did not involve participants in the design of the sessions. For example:

“We’re going to do a warm up which we must do, so, I’ve set two lines of cones out. That’s a line. Set another four cones out here. You’re just going to be working back and forward between the two lines, doing the movements that I’m showing you.” (John).

In contrast to this environment, the autonomy support literature suggests that involving athletes and participants in decision making processes is crucial for maintaining adaptive motivation and positive consequences (e.g., Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). For example, Mallett (2005) detailed how providing choice in a number of circumstances played a significant role in the success of two men’s relay teams competing at the Athens Olympic Games. However, this body of research is grounded on the assumption that participants have the necessary competencies and confidence to make the appropriate decisions. The realities of coaching soccer to disadvantaged youth may be somewhat different. Indeed, PE teachers have shown to believe that the provision of choice is somewhat dependent on the characteristics of the student (Xiang, Gao, & McBride, 2011). Many of the participants in this program were soccer novices who lacked confidence and self esteem, a common characteristic in disadvantaged youth. On the isolated occasions that participants were encouraged to be autonomous, employing these types of strategies seemed to be counterproductive because participants lacked the belief and knowledge to seize opportunities to take leadership roles, responsibility and make appropriate choices. The following interaction, taken from field notes, is an example of such an event:
Jonny was asked to take the role of the coach by communicating to the group who was to enter the practice area during a goal scoring exercise. Jonny’s insecure body language suggested that he was not comfortable with having to address the group as a whole and lacked the confidence to continue with this role. After two minutes, in which Jonny tentatively issued instructions to the group, John resumed control of issuing instructions to the group.

In addition to the competencies of the participants, the logistics of the program, which was typical of many soccer coaching sessions, also presented a barrier to giving participants choice during the session. At both program venues there was only ever one lead coach, and between 12 and 18 participants attended the program each day. The coaches delivered a pre-planned curriculum in a limited time period which reduced the opportunities for participant involvement in the decision making process. For example, common coaching tasks, such as session organization, instructing and explaining drills, providing demonstrations and feedback can be time consuming for a coach, and make the provision of choice a difficult strategy to implement, especially in a limited time period with large participant numbers.

**Providing a Rationale**

Of course, there are other coaching strategies that can be used to support participants’ autonomy than those detailed above. Indeed, giving students choice has been the subject of much debate in the educational literature and may be more relevant for some individuals than others (Xiang et al., 2011). For example, Katz and Assor (2007) proposed that choice is only motivating when the choices are in line with students’ goals and values and are not too complex.

A prevalent strategy that was observed in the program was the provision of a rationale for activities. This motivational strategy has consistently received empirical support (e.g., Deci,
Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994) and may be particularly useful when coaching disadvantaged youth by allowing participants to build a link between the soccer program and their life goals.

Specifically, the aim for participants in the program was to develop the necessary skills to transfer into employment, education or training. Throughout the observation period, John regularly reminded participants of this aim by providing an appropriate rationale for activities within the program. In the following example the theme of the session was focused on passing, communication and teamwork and John is summarizing the session.

“During the possession drill, it was important that when possession of the ball was lost, that everyone in the team worked hard for each other to win the ball back. If somebody makes a mistake in an office, and you need to help them catch up with work, just go and work hard and put the effort in. This is teamwork.”

During a subsequent interview Billy, who was a participant and became an assistant coach with the organization after the program, discussed how this coaching increased his confidence in pursuing training for employment.

“It’s opened my eyes, at the start of the course I would never have thought of becoming a coach, but now I’m thinking about finishing this coach assistant job then going over to America, getting my coaching badges…I now wouldn’t have a problem taking charge of a group I didn’t know.”

Although providing choice seemed to be a difficult autonomy-supportive strategy to employ and even maladaptive in some contexts, the provision of a meaningful rationale seems to be somewhat easier to implement and beneficial to participants. Communicating the benefits of participation in activities may allow attendees to identify with the task which, in turn, may lead to increased participant effort (Reeve, Jang, Hardre & Omura, 2002).
To summarize the role of autonomy support in this context, some strategies such as the provision of choice appear to be uncommon, and when promoted in this context may lead to maladaptive consequences due to the competencies of the participants. Further, program logistics present a barrier to the implementation of autonomy support, however, the provision of rationale seems a particularly suitable strategy to implement when coaching soccer to disadvantaged youth.

The Importance of Humor with Controlling Coaching

Dan’s sense of humor played a significant role in his coaching style over the 13-week program. For instance, he would frequently issue public fun forfeits to participants during his sessions as outlined from field notes below:

11 participants are moving freely around an area in close proximity to the coach. Dan shouts out the number five, signaling the group to get into groups of five. Two groups of five are created, leaving one participant (Steve) without a group. As a forfeit for not finding a group, the coach asks Steve to perform a ‘mushroom’ in front of the group; however, it is evident from Steve’s reaction he is unsure what is meant by this. To demonstrate, Dan performs the movement (crouched down into a ball, hands on ankles bounding around anti-clockwise whilst chanting in a high-pitched voice, “I’m a mushroom, I’m a mushroom”). Steve then performs the ‘mushroom’ to applause and laughter from the group.

As well as this positive group response, the participant Stewart had this to say about Dan:

“To begin with he was just another coach but when he brought out his funny side you felt he was getting personal to you. You felt if you needed someone he would be there for you.”
In addition, Dan engaged in humorous one-to-one interactions with the participants throughout the program. For example, on one occasion he made a public joke towards one of the participants regarding his hair color:

Dan: “...If you do well Billy, I’ll say well done, ginger.”

Billy: “cheers fat boy.”

Billy was later interviewed about this mutual teasing and his relationship with Dan:

“I wouldn’t have got away with calling Dan fat boy at the start of the program, but he wouldn’t have called me ginger either. It was because he got to know us as a group and as individuals he knew how we would take it...It brings us closer to him, instead of just your coach he becomes your friend as well. You can approach him, tell him anything, it brought us together.”

Taken out of context, both of the coaching examples described above may be categorized as theoretically maladaptive. For example, Bartholomew and colleagues (2009) highlighted public evaluation, normative comparison, the threat of physical punishment, and verbal abuse as coaching strategies that would undermine athletes’ psychological needs. However, judging from the participants’ response to the mushroom forfeit, as well as Billy’s and Stewart’s reflections, their psychological needs were satisfied rather than forestalled.

Despite Dan’s relatively controlling style, his use of humor helped to develop an emotionally involved relationship with the participants that satisfied their need for relatedness (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Research outside of SDT has similarly suggested that coaches’ use of humor can help foster a positive coach-athlete relationship (Burke, Peterson & Nix, 1995; Grisaffe, Blom & Burke, 2003) and create an appropriate working environment by developing
cohesion and integration within soccer teams (Cushion & Jones, 2001). Overall, these findings imply that a sense of humor may be a potent weapon in a coach’s repertoire that may satisfy participants’ need for relatedness, and buffer the potentially damaging effects of a controlling coaching style.

**When the Humor Disappears and Control and Ego-Involvement Remains**

Despite our proposal that controlling strategies can sometimes be offset by a humorous and emotionally-involved coaching style, the absence of such a positive interpersonal environment may have drastic consequences for the participants. Below is a scenario that took place during a session focused on speed and agility.

John (to Garry): “Garry, in you come to the front. I don’t want you to do anything, what I want you to do is listen. You’re just stepping up there like. ‘when’s lunchtime?’”, Honestly it’s like ‘when’s our next break’ What did I tell you to do the last time?”

Garry shrugs his shoulder.

John (to the group): “There you go, perfect example”

It is apparent that Garry cannot perform the speed ladder-based activity, and John explains that Garry must place two feet in each space of the ladder “... or you don’t get to play football for the rest of the week”. Garry subsequently fails in the challenge to the hilarity and dismay of both the coach and the on looking participants.

12 minutes later, Garry has stopped participating and is sat down on the edge of the pitch.

John (to Garry): “Garry, you should be taking part in this, unless you are unfit”
Garry murmurs something under his breath to which John responds “what do you mean no?”

Garry (to John): “No, I’m not taking part in this anymore”

In this particular example, John engages in a typical ego-involving coaching strategy that emphasizes public evaluation and normative comparison (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). Such environments have been associated with enhanced threat to one’s self-esteem because a positive sense of self is dependent on normative performance criteria (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sport-specific research has also linked ego-involving environments to negative consequences, such as lower autonomous motivation (Duda, Chi, Newton, Walling, & Catley, 1995), poor quality coach-athlete relationships (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008), and even depression (Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997). Within the scenario presented here, the observed consequences were only short-term and behavioral, yet it highlights the fragility and sporadic dropout patterns associated with young people (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Romi & Marom, 2007). In addition, the potentially damaging cognitive, affective and behavioral effects of these experiences in the long term should not be overlooked.

As well as ego-involving coaching environments, both coaches displayed highly authoritarian coaching styles throughout the program. Although Dan’s use of humor and his rapport with participants counteracted these theoretically maladaptive behaviors, John’s approach was somewhat different:

John (to Paul): “switch on, you’re standing against the wall day dreaming... this is for your benefit, not me. You need to start listening in.”
Shortly after, John is standing at the side of the practice area, arms crossed, vigorously chewing gum whilst shouting instructions to the group who are performing dynamic stretches.

John (to James): “James, it’s not a carry on, make sure you are doing this properly.”

The participants’ heads are down and they are performing the instructions with little enthusiasm. They have become bored of this particular environment.

Cushion and Jones (2006) similarly observed highly authoritarian and controlling coaching practices in professional academy soccer; a way of interacting that is deeply rooted in soccer culture (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). Although the participants under investigation here were not being trained to become professional soccer players, the coaches both worked in the professional game outside of the program. Thus, it seems that this authoritarian coaching culture also exists in a non-elite setting. Although we have proposed that controlling coaching behaviors do not always lead to negative consequences, it would be foolhardy to suggest that attempts to reduce these coaching practices should not be made. However, the prevalence of controlling and authoritarian coaching behaviors within this program and beyond intimate that a cultural shift is needed for change to occur.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

Using Gubrium and Holstein’s (1997) common threads of qualitative research as a benchmark, we feel the present study has several merits. First, we have made a commitment to close scrutiny by adopting an immediate proximity to the coaching context over a significant period of time. This scrutiny was further aided by the video footage enabling in-depth exploration of the world of the coaches by more than one researcher. By making this
commitment, we were able “to look closely at social phenomena to see that which other kinds of inquiry may have missed” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; p.11). Similarly, we have explored the qualities of SDT-advocated social phenomena without the assumptions that quantitative, positivist research is based upon. For example, the mixed consequences of a controlling interpersonal style was a common theme in the data, and goes beyond the proposal that controlling behavior leads to negative outcomes.

Gubrium and Holstein (1997) also proposed that qualitative research should concentrate on how actors construct and experience their lives with a complementary appreciation for the subjectivity of such experiences and the researchers’ interpretations. By collecting data by means of observations, field notes, video footage and participant interviews we attempted to build a comprehensive and plausible picture of the coaches and participants’ experiences. At the same time, our interpretations were framed within SDT and based on significant personal coaching experience; therefore, studies using different theoretical perspectives may interpret coaches’ behaviors differently.

Perhaps most importantly, we feel that the present study has a ‘tolerance for complexity’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) and the findings should be digested with similar broad-mindedness. For example, we provide examples where theoretically ego-involving coaching leads to negative consequences in one situation, such as the non-participation of Garry, yet laughter and enjoyment results when Steve was made to do a mushroom forfeit. We also suggest that some behaviors conceptualized as autonomy-supportive may be beneficial in this unique setting while others may be counterproductive. It is precisely these complex interactions between theory, coach, participant, and context that we aimed to describe in the hope of producing a meaningful dialogue between theory and practice.
As well as these perceived strengths of the study, several limitations exist that are worthy of mention. First, it is plausible that the coaches altered their interpersonal style in the presence of a researcher. The consistent manner in which the coaches approached the sessions appeared natural, which would suggest that the observed sessions were a true reflection of their actual coaching style. Further, both coaches were informed that the results of the study would not be reported back to the organization and that only the research team would have access to the data. Therefore, we suspect that the coaches felt no pressure to behave differently. Second, the coaches were not asked to provide reasons why they employed those coaching styles. Future research may wish to examine coaches’ justifications of their use of various coaching behaviors. Third, study participants were both male coaches delivering coaching sessions to young people not in education, employment or training in the west of Scotland. Future studies could widen the study sample by exploring the coaching behavior of those working in a program that targets youth from other disadvantaged backgrounds, such as homelessness or those with drug or alcohol addictions.

Conclusions

To summarize, the aim of this study was to examine, through the lens of SDT, the multifaceted relationships between coach, disadvantaged youth, and context in a soccer-based life skills development program. Much of the previous research has examined general autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching styles using athlete self-report methods, rather than specific situations and behaviors. In some circumstances, giving choice and responsibility may have been counterproductive because participants lacked the belief and knowledge to seize opportunities to take leadership roles, responsibility and make appropriate choices. Other autonomy-supportive strategies, such as providing a rationale, seemed somewhat easier to implement within this
context and benefitted attendees within the program. Further, coaches who were interpersonally involved with participants, in particular those who successfully built relationships through the use of humor, were able to offset some negative consequences of controlling and theoretically maladaptive coach behaviors. These findings add to the extant literature by offering an alternative and idiographic perspective of SDT-based coaching that contrasts with the generalizations offered by the dominant positivist body of evidence. In particular, researchers and practitioners should be mindful of situation-specific factors when broadly proposing the positive effects of autonomy support and admonishing controlling coaching. The descriptions contained in the study also show evidence of logistical, personal and cultural barriers that may impede the effective implementation of autonomy-supportive coaching in disadvantaged youth contexts. Overall, this study gives new insight into the complex relationships that exist between SDT-based coaching behaviors and the influence that the soccer context may have on these relationships.
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