**Self Determination Theory Analysis**

**Social Agents and youth sports**

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Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a highly used theory in explaining and presenting the elements of youth athletes’ motivation, focusing on three basic human needs that are Autonomy- or the need of feeling free in the decision making process - Competence – or feeling trained to the adequate level for a task execution - and Relatedness – which is the connection with others, finding and understanding ones role while feeling cared and appreciated by the others (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020). Also when considering the set up of most possible daily athletic activities and more precisely the structures of most organized sport, the ecosystem of performance and motivation relies on a healthy balance and positive dynamics between athletes and support group or so called social agents such a family, parents, agents, coaches, consultants and programs staff (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020 ; Chu et al., 2020 ; Lemelin et al., 2022 ; DeClerck et al., 2022). SDT gives the opportunity to connect these different actors and what are they contribution in the needed motivation for attaining the final product of performance excellence and flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Indeed within the same theoretical background of SDT, understanding the impact of a positive or negative interaction between the main social agents that are family and coaching staff with the performer becomes a critical element when seeking performance excellence and provides key directions to work with that relational triad when trying to elicit the most profitable working environment where psychological safety, open communication, autonomous-support and strengths development are the desired standards (Biswas-Diener, 2010 ; Orlick, 2016 ; Lemelin et al., 2022 ; Chu et al., 2020).

Very often we expect from an athlete to present repeatedly flawless performances without considering the surroundings of how, when, why and what contexts he or she is getting taught, supported and trained, this being even more salient when it comes to youth sports (Williams & Krane, 2021 ; Sommerfield & Chu, 2020). As well in youth sports, taking the time to establish one’s athletic identity with its underlying complexity and the focus on a task related environment is often relegated to a secondary concept while a perceived control over skills through winning and competitive outcome results become the main focus for both parents and coaches and the main measurement of success, happiness and of supposedly and expected retention in sports activities, confirming again a possible ego-centered / outcome approach that usually are synonymous of higher anxiety, irratational beliefs and burnout (Williams & Krane, 2021 ; Sommerfield & Chu, 2020 ; Lemelin et al., 2022 ; Matosic et al., 2018 ; Chu et al., 2020 ; Langdon et al., 2021). Researches show that by the age of 12-14 years old period is when athletes are moving from multisport and multiple motor skills development into the early specialization period where two or three preferred activities will become the focus (LTAD, 2022) and that at this very same period, the natural cognitive, emotional and behavioral development of a human being focuses on socializing and peers activities and occupations, being as well one of the reasons of the pre pubescence and teenage years as the drop out of sport point, where some 70% of the athletes decide to quit, a number even higher by gender (Visek et al., 2015 ; Vitt et al., 2018 ; Bengoechea et al., 2004). As well, the fun in youth sport is correlated with individual and situational factors such as perceived personal skills, feeling of control and quality of feedback received while performing (Bengochea et al., 2004), in other words the triad of SDT, with on top the notions of personal enjoyment structured around hedonic and eudemonic perspective with different long term outcomes when it comes to mastery and therefore performance (Bengochea et al., 2004, Leonard, 1999 ; Orlick, 2016).

In that context, it is important to understand that Parents and Coaches have a clear role in promoting autonomy, competence and relatedness in the following ways; Coaches that provide positive, reassuring and encouraging feedbacks, create a task-involving work climate to satisfy competence and autonomy, stressing learning over winning, that use opened questions and caring explanation to guide the athletes towards solutions and praise independent decision making is proven to ameliorate and increase the performance levels of athletes (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020 ; Lemelin et al., 2022 ; Matosic et al., 2018 ; Shannon et al., 2020) to the opposite of for instance coaches having narcissistic traits with a “by any means” behavior in treating both own athletes and opponents, which leads to letting the athletes to buy into the moral disengagement as the figure of authority allows it (by example and by fear of not being conform to the perceived demanded standard) and where such narcissistic biases forces the athletes to accept those new norms as the only way to proceed and therefore them to rely on the relatively malignity an maladaptive relatedness towards others, instead of being autonomous and getting support from the leadership and peers (Matosic et al., 2018).

Regarding parents, a warm supportive environment that promotes learning and pride in the efforts, encouragement despite an apparent “deaf ears” athlete, that allows their child to think about the coaches decisions to understand for instance the larger picture of a group dynamic or others feelings rather than harshly criticizing or blaming something or someone and living the sport experience through their child rather than witnessing and experiencing the performance with their child is what allows for growth, resilience and mental toughness (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020 ; Lemelin et al., 2022).

Often the relationship is being seen as parents to athletes and coaches to athletes in a parallel and interactive way, both equally or unequally feeding the athlete at an emotional, cognitive and behavioral level, while putting aside the parents to coaches connection on the background, while it has an equal impact on the overall ecosystem and can be a great source of positive or negative outcomes (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020 ; Lemelin et al., 2022). And if coaches have a larger influence over the performance per se and could compensate for a less positive or supportive tendency from the parents and the parents have a unique impact on the subjective well-being of the athlete regarding a better physical health, coping skills and mostly higher self-esteem and higher pro-social behaviours (Lamelin et al., 2022) and is proven that the effect of a parents’ adaptive involvement in their child performance and its impact on reducing anxiety is above and beyond what coaches could provide (Sommerfield & Chu, 2020), the connection and partnership between these social agents is a source of reinforcement of relatedness and boosts the unique effect of each over the athletes as mentioned earlier (Lemelin et al., 2022).

Finally it seems like a clear outcome of this review that as much as happiness or mastery, performance excellence is a an item that is being permanently worked on and never is truly attained as a final fixed and determined state, and that as long as every stakeholder into the performance creates the right environment, fosters the right attitude and satisfies the basic needs of Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness of every performer and social agent, a very positive and desirable outcome becomes a very tangible though momentary reality.

*Chart 1 - The relationship and areas of major influence between roles (based on Lemelin et al., 2022 ; Chu et al., 2020).*

References

Well Being

Self-Esteem

Autonomy

Performance

Competence

Role

ATHLETE

Partnership

Relatedness

SOCIAL AGENT

COACH

SOCIAL AGENT

FAMILY

**Autonomy**

**Competence**

**Relatedness**

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