Interdependencies Between the Perceived and Self-Reported Goal Orientations of Young Athletes and Their Parents

Joan L. Duda and Harry L. Horn, Jr.

This study examined the interrelationships between young athletes’ and parents’ personal and perceived goal orientations in sport. Forty-three boys and 34 girls who were involved in a summer basketball camp completed the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ) with respect to their own dispositional goal perspective in basketball and their perceptions of the goal orientation of the parent who was most involved with their basketball participation. The parents (55 mothers and 21 fathers) responded to the TEOSQ in terms of their personal goal orientation and their perceptions of the goal orientation held by their child in basketball. Results revealed no significant correlations between children’s and parents’ self-reported task and ego orientation. Children’s goal orientation was significantly related to their views concerning the goal orientation adopted by their parents. The implications of these findings for understanding the socialization of sport goal orientations are discussed.

Research on educational achievement has focused on the socialization effects provided by parents in terms of children’s motivation in the classroom (2, 16, 20, 21). The potential social impact of parents on young people’s responses to sport has also been explored. Previous sport research has shown that parents influence their children’s level of competitive stress (22), degree of enjoyment experienced (3, 23), and perceptions of ability (15). Parental beliefs, values, expectations, and behaviors have also been found to have an impact on boys’ and girls’ socialization into the role of athlete (18) and their interest in sport activities (15). There is limited knowledge, however, concerning the link between parents’ attitudes and beliefs and children’s motivation related cognitive processes and individual differences (4). In particular, little is known in regard to possible parental influence on how children tend to define success, construe their level of competence, and generally interpret the sport experience.

One conceptual model that emphasizes the motivational implications of individual differences in how children or adults define success and judge their

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competence is goal perspective theory (1, 14, 19). In this theoretical framework, two independent goal perspectives are assumed to be operating: a task and an ego orientation. If a child possesses a strong task orientation, she/he tends to equate accomplishment and judge her/his ability with respect to personal improvement and hard work. When a pronounced ego orientation exists, perceptions of success and competence revolve around the display of superior ability. In this case, success means outdoing peers or performing as well as others with less effort.

Goal perspective theory has several attractive features in relation to the understanding and optimizing of children's motivation in athletic contexts. First, although not specifically addressed in the present study, the model has a strong developmental component that considers differences in children's level of cognitive maturity (7). Second, variations in goal orientations are presumed to lay the psychological bases for variability in achievement patterns. In essence, it is postulated that goal perspectives affect individuals' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses in achievement situations.

Past sport studies based on goal perspective theory have revealed conceptually consistent relationships between individual differences in goal perspectives and motivation related variables (9). Specifically, task orientation has been positively linked to the beliefs that effort and collaboration lead to sport success (11, 12, 17), intrinsic motives for sport involvement (27), the view that the purposes of sport include learning the importance of hard work and cooperation (8), and greater enjoyment in sport (12, 10). In contrast, higher ego orientation scores have corresponded to the beliefs that superior ability and deceptive tactics get one ahead in sport (11, 12, 17), the view that the functions of sport are to enhance one's social status and make people more competitive (8), and the perceived legitimacy of unsportsmanlike actions (13). Further, an emphasis on ego-oriented goals has been related to performance impairment following objective failure and the choosing of less difficult tasks (5).

Finally, attention is given in goal perspective theory to the influence of the social environment on the goal orientation assumed by children and their subsequent motivational processes (1). With respect to the socialization of goal orientations among young people, past research has primarily focused on the impact of the situational goal structure constituted by teachers on individual differences in goal perspectives and other motivation indices (1). Recent work has begun to investigate the role of the coach (24) in advocating particular goal perspectives in the sport context.

Only one study to date (26), however, has addressed this topic in terms of parental influences in the athletic realm. Weitzer determined the relationship between parental involvement in children's sport (which was defined with respect to the child's perceptions of her/his mother's and father's level of participation in and instruction during physical play) on the goal orientation held by young boys and girls. For girls, a greater level of perceived maternal involvement corresponded to a more pronounced task orientation. Perceived parental involvement was not related to goal orientations in boys. Although suggesting that parents do influence the goal perspectives held by, at the very least, their daughters, Weitzer's investigation did not assess the associations between parents' goal orientations and the degree of task or ego orientation assumed by their children.
The major purpose of this study was to further ascertain the potential socializing effect of parents on the goal orientations adopted by youngsters in the sport domain (4). Extending the work of Weitzer (26), the correspondence between children’s personal goal orientations and the self-reported goal orientations of parents was examined. Based on the mediational model of player/coach relationships proposed by Smoll et al. (25) and Eccles’ Expectancy-Value Model (15, 20), we also determined the interdependencies between children’s goal orientations and their perceptions of the goal orientations held by the parent deemed most involved in the child’s sport activity. Since it is commonly assumed that coaches and parents project an adult based perspective onto the world of children’s sport, the relationship between parents’ views concerning the goal orientation held by their children and the young athletes’ own self-reported task and ego orientation was investigated.

In sum, the purpose of this research was twofold: (a) to examine the relationship of a child’s goal orientation to his/her perceptions of the significant parent’s goal orientation, the parent’s self-reported goal orientation, and the parent’s perception of his/her child’s goal orientation in the sport of basketball, and (b) to examine the association between parents’ goal orientation and children’s perceptions of the goal orientation of their parents. It was hypothesized that children’s goal orientations in sport would be significantly associated with perceptions of their parents’ goal orientations.

Method

Subjects and Procedures

Participants in this study were 43 boys and 34 girls who were involved in a summer basketball camp, and 76 parents ($n = 55$ mothers and 21 fathers). One parent participated on the part of 2 children. The children ranged in age from 8 to 15 years ($M = 11.07 \pm 1.96$ years). The subjects were from a metropolitan area in the Midwest and were predominantly white and middle-class.

Informed consent to participate in this study was received from each participant and one of his or her parents. The children completed a multisection inventory in small groups around the basketball areas. The parent most involved in each child’s basketball activity (in terms of driving the child to and from the camp practices) was also administered a multisection inventory either at the beginning or end of one day of the basketball camp. The order of sections assessing goal orientations was counterbalanced such that subjects completed the personal goal orientation scales either before or after judgments about their parents/children.

Since the subjects were asked to write their names on the inventory (to allow for the matching of the child’s responses with those of his or her parent), confidentiality but not anonymity was ensured. Specifically, the children were informed that their responses were private and would not be shared with their parents, coaches, or peers. The parents were also assured that their answers would remain confidential. All subjects were told that their involvement in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

Goal Orientations. The young athletes were requested to complete the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire, or TEOSQ, with respect to their personal goal perspective in the sport of basketball and their perceptions
of the goal perspective of the parent who is most involved with their basketball participation. The parents also responded to the TEOSQ in terms of their personal goal orientation in sport and their perceptions of the goal orientation of their child in basketball.

Developed by Duda and colleagues (5, 13), the 13-item TEOSQ assesses individual differences in the endorsement of task-oriented (e.g., “I feel most successful when I work really hard”) and ego-oriented (e.g., “I feel most successful when others can’t do as well as me”) definitions of subjective success in sport contexts. The stems for each item were “I/my child/my parent who is most involved in and responsible for my basketball feel feels really successful in basketball when . . .” ; responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A mean score was calculated for both task and ego goal orientation subscales.

Results

**Internal Reliability and Descriptive Statistics**

Cronbach’s (6) coefficient alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the measures of goal orientations employed in this study. All assessments of self-reported and perceived goal orientations demonstrated acceptable internal reliability whether completed by the young athletes or their parents (range = .78–.87).

The means, standard deviations, and ranges were calculated for each goal orientation measure (see Table 1). In terms of personal goal orientations, both the children and parents were reportedly more task oriented than ego oriented. An examination of the mean scale scores for each assessment of task orientation indicated that responses to this scale were negatively skewed. That is, responses were in the range of 3–5 rather than the entire 1–5 scale options.

**Gender Differences**

A one-way MANOVA revealed no significant gender differences in the personal goal orientations among the present sample of young athletes, Wilks’ lambda = .982; F(2, 64) = .570, p>.05. Boys and girls did not differ significantly in ego orientation (M = 2.77 and 2.75, respectively) or task orientation (M = 4.42 and 4.27). The MANOVA, Wilks’ lambda = .996, F(2, 63) = .125, p>.05, also revealed no significant differences between mothers and fathers in ego orientation (M = 2.75 and 2.78, respectively) and task orientation (M = 4.33 and 4.41, respectively).

**Order of Presentation**

Subjects responded to items tapping perceptions of their parent’s/child’s goal orientation either before or after the assessment of their own goal orientation. One-way MANOVAs revealed no significant order effects in terms of the assessments of the young athletes’ goal orientations, Wilks’ lambda = .955; F(2, 54) = 1.26, p>.05; the parents’ goal orientations, Wilks’ lambda = .958; F(2, 29) = 1.06, p>.05; the children’s perceptions of their parents’ goal orientations, Wilks’ lambda = .964; F(2, 54) = 1.00, p>.05; and the parents’ perceptions of their children’s goal orientations, Wilks’ lambda = .999; F(2, 51) = .005, p>.05.
Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Child Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Parent Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal task orientation</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>2.67–5.00</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>2.74–5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal ego orientation</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>1.00–5.00</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>1.00–4.17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perc. task orientation of parent</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>2.86–5.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perc. ego orientation of parent</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>1.00–4.85</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>3.43–5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perc. ego orientation of child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>1.86–5.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships Among Child / Parent Goal Orientations

Pearson-product correlations revealed that the parents’ degree of self-reported task and ego orientation did not significantly relate to their child’s respective goal orientation ($r = .18$ and $r = -.05$, $p > .05$). Correlational analyses also indicated that children’s degree of task and ego orientation did not significantly relate to their parents’ perceptions of the child’s goal orientation ($r = .22$ and $r = .13$, $p > .05$, for task and ego orientation, respectively).

A positive and significant correlation did emerge between children’s task orientation scores and their perceptions of their parents’ degree of task orientation ($r = .59$, $p < .01$). Also, children who were high in ego orientation were likely to believe that their significant parent was also ego oriented ($r = .67$, $p < .001$). Finally, the parents’ degree of task orientation or ego orientation was not significantly related to their children’s perceptions of the parents’ goal orientations ($r = .11$ and .08, $p > .05$, respectively).

Discussion

Aligned with Brustad’s (4) position that “sport socialization and motivation research should go hand in hand” (p. 61), this study examined the relationships between young athletes’ and their parents’ goal perspectives. The results indicated that children who were higher in task orientation perceived their significant parent to be higher in task orientation. The same held for ego orientation. Thus, parents appear to play a role as a socializing agent in terms of children’s goal perspectives in sport. Consistent with the work of Eccles in the academic domain (15, 20), this potential influence seems to relate to the perceptions of the young athletes themselves. This finding is also in accord with research by Smoll et al. (25), who propose that the relationship of coaches’ behaviors to the self and sport
related attitudes of Little League players is mediated by the young athletes' perceptions of those behaviors.

Extending these results in future research, it will be interesting to determine the sources of young athletes’ views concerning their parents’ motivational perspective. That is, what parental behaviors, cognitive responses, and affective reactions do children use in interpreting how their mothers and fathers define success in the sport domain?

Recent work has begun to ascertain the components of the motivational climate created by parents with respect to the perceptions of young people (28). This research has demonstrated that the perceived parent-initiated goal structure is multidimensional. Specifically, when youth sport participants were asked to reflect on their fathers’ and mothers’ reactions and concerns when they (the children) are learning physical skills, three facets of the motivational environment emerged. The first related to the perception that one’s parents emphasize the learning of physical skills and personal improvement in the physical domain. The second dimension reflected the children’s perception that their parents responded adversely to mistakes. The third factor reflected the youngsters’ views that their mothers and fathers valued sport achievement attained with minimal effort. White et al. (28) have argued that the first characteristic of the environment created by parents would help foster children’s task orientation. In contrast, the latter two dimensions of the parental climate (i.e., being worried about making mistakes and believing that success attained without hard work is desirable) are expected to promote an ego orientation among young athletes.

In the present study, the personal goal orientation of parents did not correspond to the personal goal orientation of young sport participants. This lack of association, coupled with the significant correlations between children’s goals and the perceived goals of their parents, might indicate that there is a difference between parents’ own sport goal perspective and what they communicate to their children concerning the bases of sport success. Another explanation for this finding is the possibility that young people’s goal orientations are best predicted by a combined effect of the goal orientations assumed by their coaches, teachers, peers, siblings, and parents.

Children’s perceptions of their parents’ degree of task and ego orientation did not significantly correspond with their parents’ personal goal orientation. Similarly, parents’ views concerning how their children tend to define success in sport settings were not related to the young athletes’ goal orientation. Given these findings, it seems that neither parents nor children are particularly aware of how the other views personal accomplishment or judges competence in athletic contexts. If our major concern is with maximizing young athletes’ involvement in sport, however, it appears that there is a need for mothers and fathers to talk to their sons/daughters and attempt to understand how they construe success as well as failure in sport contexts. Children might also benefit by speaking with their parents about how their parents construe athletic achievement.

Based on the self-reported and perceived goal orientations of young athletes and their parents measured in this study, the world of youth sport could be characterized as highly task oriented. With respect to each assessment of goal orientation, task orientation scores were higher than ego orientation scores. Further, the range in task orientation values revealed that none of the present subjects disagreed with success defined in terms of learning and exerted effort. In terms
of the endorsement of ego-oriented definitions of success, the scores ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This suggests that the participants in youth sport and their mothers or fathers unanimously emphasize skill development and working hard in sport. Moreover, these findings imply that children and parents are much more variable in the importance they place (or perceive being placed) on the demonstration of superiority in sport situations.

Eccles and her colleagues (15, 20) argue that parents influence their children's perceptions by providing experience and interpreting that experience for their sons and daughters. In an attempt to further our understanding of young athletes’ sport motivation, the current investigation has provided preliminary information on the interdependencies between children’s and parents’ perceived and self-reported goal orientations. This study needs to be replicated with a larger sample that will allow us to examine possible developmental differences in the relationships between the goals of young athletes and their parents. It would also be desirable in subsequent research to tap individual differences in sport goal perspectives among both mothers and fathers as well as children’s perceptions of the same (15). Finally, there is a need for future studies that focus on the interplay between (a) parental goal orientations, (b) children’s own perspectives and their perceptions of the view held by their parents, and (c) the motivational patterns of young people over time (15).

References


