

SPORT MOTIVATION – A COMPARISON BETWEEN ADULT FOOTBALL PLAYERS COMPETING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the achievement goal, self-determination and beliefs about the nature and determinants of sportive competence in function of competitive level in 3 groups of adult football players: Professionals (n=105), Semi-Professionals (n=156) and Amateurs (n=78). There were no significant differences in motivational orientations as a function of a competitive level. Amateur players, when compared with Professionals, presented significantly higher levels of amotivation and strongly believed that their sports competence was stable; nevertheless, they reported lower levels of identified regulation. On the other hand, Professionals and Semi-Professionals when compared with Amateurs revealed significantly higher levels of introjected regulation and strongly believed that their competence for the practice of football was due to learning and able to be improved.

Key words: *achievement goals, self-determination, competitive sport*

Introduction

In the context of football, the motivation is one of the concepts most referred amongst the reasons that justify the success and very often, the failure of players and of teams. Frequently coaches, players and audience associate the collective and individual performance to different motivational states. There have been a considerable number of studies that investigated the application of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and achievement goals theory (Nicholls, 1989) to sport and exercise settings; however, there has been little investigation in what concerns athletes' beliefs relative to sport competence.

In accordance with achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1989), there are two goal states of involvement that are adopted by individuals in achievement contexts, namely task and ego. When an athlete is task involved, the perception of success is self-determined. These individuals worry especially in improving or learning new ways of doing it. Conversely, an athlete ego involved is characterized by his way of defining success in a prescriptive or socially comparative way, essentially trying to show his capacity up before others.

On the other hand, the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) mainly proposes that human motivation varies in function of the autonomy (self-determination) or of the controlled form that individuals reveal when they are involved in activities. Behaviors and actions that are autonomous are initiated freely and emanate from within oneself. In contrast, when behavior is controlled, it is regulated by an external force. On the basis of these distinctions, the central aspect of the theory of self-determination proposes that the different forms of motivation vary in a continuum in accordance with different levels of self-determination. The cognitive evaluation theory predicts that in the context of elite sports, characterized especially by focusing in winning and in great financial incentives, leads to the promotion of lower levels of self-determination and, consequently, lower levels of intrinsic motivation. On the other side, it is also expected that the athletes who compete in more elevated levels, present higher values for ego orientation (Mallet & Hanrahan, 2004). In spite of the numerous studies which prove these hypotheses with children and individuals in school age, the same does not happen with the adults' participation in sports teams, where the investigation is still very scarce (Etnier et al., 2004).

Using another perspective, a French-English group of investigators (Sarrazin et al., 1995) developed an instrument to evaluate the beliefs of individuals relatively to the nature and determinants of the perceived competence. Taking into account this investigation, we can keep the existence of several dimensions next to the nature and determinants of sports competence. In this way, whenever we speak in beliefs we will allude particularly to the conceptions of the individuals who refer to it: to the possibilities to develop the skill along time (subject to improvement or stable); to their determinants (has genetic predisposition, or if it needs to be learned); to its relative generality (as a general skill, or as a specific skill to a situation). So far, we do not know of any study that analyses the beliefs of athletic competence in function of the competitive level of athletes.

As such, and considering the limited number of studies that approach these motivational constructs in teams of high competitive levels and especially in teams of adults, with this work we wish to contribute to a better understanding of

some aspects referring to the motivation in Portuguese football players, namely in what concerns their achievement goals, perceived autonomy and beliefs about the nature and determinants of sport competence. It is also our goal to analyze these motivational determinants regarding the competitive level of these athletes.

Methods

Sample

The participants were 339 senior football players (≥ 19 years old, $M=25.23$, $SD=5.26$) from 21 football teams. Six teams competed in the professional championships (P) of 1st and 2nd League ($N=105$), nine teams competed in the national championships of the second and third division (SP) ($N=156$), and in the regional championships (A) competed six teams ($n=78$).

Procedures and measures

Data were collected during the 2005/2006 season. The involvement of the participants was volunteer and to all who agreed to collaborate the secrecy of the answers was secured. The process was supervised by the author who, previously, explained to the athletes the main goal of the study and the way to answer the questionnaire. Data collection was carried out prior to the players' training session.

Participants completed the following tools: Task and Ego Orientation in Sports Questionnaire (TEOSQ), Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ), and Questionnaire relative to Beliefs about the Nature and Determinants of Sports Competency (QCNHS). The participants supplied relevant demographic information, including age, sex and competitive standard.

Descriptive data (*mean* \pm *SD*) were recorded for all variables. The internal consistency of the various subscales was determined by calculating Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the differences between the three groups; post hoc comparisons were done using the Tukey test ($p < .05$).

Results

Reliability of measures

Internal consistency reliability (Table I) was adequate for all subscales of the TEOSQ and RAI. Relatively to the QCNHS, the obtained Cronbach alphas for the stable (0.46) and specific (0.40) dimensions showed an internal low consistency like the study carried out by Sarrazin et al. (1995) where a value of 0.46 for the "specific" dimension was obtained. We tend to consider these two dimensions in our study, highlighting from the start that all the analyses carried out regarding these ones will have to be a target of a more close attention. As it is an instrument still little used in national context especially in football, we consider this as the most relevant solution, like did Sarrazin et al. (1995).

Differences between groups as a function of competitive level of play

There were no significant differences in task and ego orientations as a function of competitive level of play. Relatively to the values attributed to a continuum of self-determination, the professionals presented significantly lower levels of amotivation ($p=.04$) when compared with the amateurs, and significantly higher levels of introjected regulation ($p=.02$), and identified regulation ($p=.01$). Semi-professional football players showed significantly higher levels of introjected regulation when compared with the amateurs ($p=.01$).

In what concerns the beliefs about the nature and determinants of sport competence, the professionals and the semi-professionals, when compared with the amateurs, tended to show significantly higher beliefs that sport competence resulted from learning ($p=.03$ and $p=.00$, respectively) and is subject to improvement ($p=.04$ and $p=.00$, respectively). The amateurs, when compared with the professionals, showed higher levels on the belief that sport competence for the practice of football is stable ($p=.02$).

Table I. Descriptive Statistics, ANOVA (One-Way) and Internal Reliability for the Professionals (Prof.), Semi-Professionals (Semi-Prof.) and Amateurs (Amat.)

	Prof. (P)	Semi-Prof. (SP)	Amat. (A)	ANOVA	p	Alpha
Task	4.14 ± 0.59	4.19 ± 0.52	4.02 ± 0.60	F=2.18	0.12	0.87
Ego	2.58 ± 0.95	2.63 ± 0.83	2.65 ± 0.88	F=0.15	0.86	0.89
Amotivation	1.42 ± 0.60	1.46 ± 0.74	1.69 ± 0.93	F=3.24	0.04	*P/A
External R.	1.96 ± 0.74	1.85 ± 0.74	1.77 ± 0.75	F=1.32	0.27	0.75
Introjected R.	3.53 ± 0.82	3.52 ± 0.85	3.19 ± 0.76	F=5.03	0.00	*P/A – SP/A
Identified R.	4.38 ± 0.66	4.31 ± 0.62	4.10 ± 0.69	F=4.40	0.01	*P/A
Intrinsic M.	4.11 ± 0.72	4.19 ± 0.62	4.12 ± 0.75	F=0.54	0.59	0.73
Relative Autonomy Index (RAI)	0.85 ± 0.41	0.93 ± 0.39	0.93 ± 0.46	F=1.14	0.32	0.71
Learning	4.47 ± 0.57	4.56 ± 0.42	4.25 ± 0.71	F=7.71	0.00	*P/A – SP/A
Improvement	4.14 ± 0.68	4.25 ± 0.61	3.89 ± 0.85	F=6.66	0.00	*P/A – SP/A
Specific	3.80 ± 0.69	3.98 ± 0.68	3.87 ± 0.73	F=2.08	0.13	0.42
Gift	3.40 ± 0.81	3.34 ± 0.85	3.33 ± 0.92	F=0.20	0.82	0.78
Stable	2.39 ± 0.63	2.53 ± 0.65	2.66 ± 0.80	F=3.64	0.03	*P/A
General	2.07 ± 0.81	2.09 ± 0.81	2.11 ± 0.89	F=0.08	0.92	0.79

*= stands for $p \leq 0.05$

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the different motivation determinants in function of the competitive level provided some interesting results. Importantly, there were no significant differences in the motivational orientations regarding the level in which the football players were competing, as previously found by Etnier *et al.* (2004). Our results disagree with the available (White & Duda, 1994), which shows that football players who compete in the higher levels are more ego orientated than those who compete at lower levels; in our sample of adult footballers competitive level was not a determinant of task/ego scores.

Also surprising was the fact that amateur football players had reported higher levels of amotivation when compared with the professionals. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that athletes who compete in higher levels, characterized especially by focusing on winning, probably will be less self-determined and will present superior levels of amotivation and introjected regulation when compared with athletes who practice this sport at lower competitive levels. Our study however, does not confirm this premise, since those who presented superior levels of amotivation were amateur football players. Considering the relations that have been established between amotivation and persistence in sport practice, these footballers would be at higher risk to drop out from this competitive sport.

Taking into account the results related to the introjected regulation in the different groups and what self-determination theory suggests (Deci & Ryan, 1985), we think that the athletes who were competing at higher levels had a tendency to report more the external contingencies (such as, being obliged to practice this kind of game or the will to please the others) like primary fountains of motivation when compared with the athletes with less success. Considering the social context in which these athletes were in, this seems reasonable to happen, since those athletes who were depending on the practice of the sport to survive would probably feel more intensely the popularity that the leading sport in Portugal was giving them. On the other hand, these data suggest that the perception of eventually obtaining undesirable results or of being defeated by an adversary could influence in a certain way the performance of the football players.

An interesting fact that could lead to a better understanding of the results obtained in our study, concerns the results from the investigation carried out by Wilson *et al.* (2004). These authors concluded that in the female gender, introjected regulation was an important motivational force, because it appeared to strongly predict behaviours such as persistence, importance and effort put on a physical activity. Besides having concluded that a more autonomous regulation predicted more positive motivational consequences, the authors also suggested that the quality of external motivation is important and valuable for a better understanding of the behaviours in a sports context.

An interesting result is related to the fact that professional athletes had attributed significant higher levels of identified regulation when compared with the amateur players. Based on past research and cognitive evaluation theory, we expected that the professional players would exhibit a less self-determined motivational profile than amateur players. More specifically, when compared to amateurs, we expected professional players to demonstrate lower levels of self-determined forms of motivation, that is, less intrinsic motivation and less identified regulation. However, it seems to us natural that the professional athletes consider this kind of sport important for them, considering they identify themselves

with it, and they value it more than the amateurs. Besides the above-mentioned, the fact that the football players who participate in higher competitive levels probably have more objectives in the long term should also be considered (e.g., to compete in superior levels).

As suggested by the literature (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004), professional players were characterized by multiple motivations and, in particular, self-determination. Participation in an elite sport does not always undermine self-determined motivation. One explanation may be that after a period of time, financial rewards for elite athletes will make them lose their controlling influence, and the pursuit of becoming someone special in the sport being a more powerful motivator.

In relation to the beliefs of sport competence, the fact that professional and semi-professional players strongly believe that their competence is a result of learning and is subject to improvement when compared with the amateurs seems to be a desirable tendency. That is, as soon as they detain a perception of bigger control of development of their sport competence than those who compete in the amateur championships. The fact that amateur football players consider their own sports competence more stable than professional players suggests that the former are less likely to engage in specific work to change this construct.

The differences found concerning the several motivation determinants in function of the competitive level, underline the existence of a complex relation between the competitive level and motivation. If the indicated differences concerning the several motivational determinants reflect specific characteristics of the football players with more success, it becomes important to ascertain which athletes intend to reach a higher step of performance, so that more developmental programs of intervention are applied on the basis of this specificity.

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