

Coach-perpetrated psychological abuse: Beyond the bad apple

Rupert Hoop, Cleo Schyvinck, Annick Willem & Leen Haerens, Ghent University

Athlete wellbeing and safety is of central importance to the long term sustainability of sport. However, recent cases of coach-perpetrated psychological abuse raised questions about harmful coaching styles as well as organizational cultures that tolerate and normalize psychological abuse.

Empirical research on psychological abuse and neglect in sport mainly consists of qualitative studies including small samples of (former)adult athletes and focusses on the relational (coach-athlete) level. Nonetheless, Roberts et al. (2020) suggest that, in order to develop evidence-based initiatives to protect athletes from harm, we need to go beyond the “bad apple” and include “organizational factors” that enable violence (p. 9).

Taking a whole-of-system approach, we aim to study both relational and organizational factors influencing coach-perpetrated psychological abuse in youth competitive sport. Regarding relational factors, we draw from self-determination theory and investigate the role of a controlling coaching style (Bartholomew et al., 2011). The detrimental effects of a controlling coaching style on athletes' anxiety, motivation and self-esteem have been widely demonstrated. The link to psychological abuse is, however, less evident.

Concerning organizational determinants, we draw from normalization theory (Foucault, 1979) to examine whether normalization paves the way for psychological abuse by coaches. It is assumed that people in the sport club will be less likely to recognize, question or tackle abusive behaviors when such behaviors are considered normal and acceptable.

We will conduct quantitative (prospective) research and survey coaches, athletes, parents, and club leaders to assess the influence of a controlling coaching style and the normalization thereof on the prevalence of coach-perpetrated psychological abuse in sport clubs.

At the conference we will present the method and discuss challenges and potential risk factors with the audience.

References:

- Bartholomew, K. J., Ntoumanis, N., Ryan, R. M., Bosch, J. A., & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C. (2011). Self-determination theory and diminished functioning: The role of interpersonal control and psychological need thwarting. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(11), 1459-1473.
- Foucault, M. (1979). My body, this paper, this fire. *Oxford Literary Review*, 4(1), 9-28.
- Roberts, V., Sojo, V., & Grant, F. (2019). Organisational factors and non-accidental violence in sport: A systematic review. *Sport Management Review*, 23(1), 8-27.