Perceived inclusion in youth soccer teams: The role of societal status and perceived motivational goal climate

Nico W. Van Yperen a, *, Silke Dankers a, Anne-Marie Elbe b, Xavier Sanchez c, Sabine Otten a

a Department of Psychology, University of Groningen, the Netherlands
b Faculty of Sport Science, Leipzig University, Germany
c Department of Health and Sport, Halmstad University, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Achievement motivation
Intra-team competition
Diversity
Sport
Football

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Our aim was to investigate the link between youth soccer players' perceptions of the coach-initiated motivational goal climate within their team and their perceptions of inclusion as a function of societal status. Societal status refers to one's national background which numerically forms the majority or a minority in a particular society.

Design and methods: Survey data was collected among 245 male youth soccer players (M = 12.9 years, SD = 1.60), who all played in culturally diverse teams in the Netherlands. The societal status of 94 players (38.4%) was majority, and 151 players (61.6%) were classified as minority. To test our main hypothesis, perceived inclusion as the dependent variable was hierarchically regressed on coach-initiated mastery goal climate perceptions, performance goal climate perceptions, societal status, and their interactions.

Results: Overall, mastery goal perceptions and performance goal perceptions of intra-team competition were positively and negatively related, respectively, to perceived team inclusion. As hypothesized, only among players with a societal minority status, perceptions of inclusion were higher when mastery goal climate perceptions were higher and performance goal climate perceptions were lower.

Discussion and conclusion: Our findings suggest that a coach-initiated mastery-oriented team climate may enhance an inclusive soccer environment in culturally and nationally diverse teams. For societal minority players, intra-team competition should be de-emphasized by the coach in order to strengthen the experience of inclusion.

Cultural inclusion, integration, and acculturation of transnational migrants continues to be an issue of great social and political concern. One of the main challenges of culturally and nationally diverse societies is to create, maintain, and enhance feelings of inclusion among individuals from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Regular contact between individuals from different cultural backgrounds is likely to improve intercultural relations (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Particularly in childhood and early adolescence, positive intercultural contact experiences tend to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes in adulthood (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Killen et al., 2007). Hence, diversity in youth team sports such as soccer are assumed to promote intercultural acceptance and the inclusion of societal minorities (Elbe et al., 2018; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Morela et al., 2013).

Indeed, soccer is increasingly promoted as a means for social and cultural inclusion, integration, and acculturation, particularly in youth (Parnell & Richardson, 2014; Walseth & Fasting, 2004). Taking part in cooperative sporting activities such as soccer is said to facilitate feelings of belonging, to bridge cultural differences, and to promote positive intercultural relationships and a transnational lifestyle (Coalter, 2007; Elbe et al., 2018; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Jakubowska, 2018; Morela et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2019). Remarkably, to the best of our knowledge, theory and research on feelings of inclusion in (youth) team sports is lacking.

Filling this research gap is important because team sports are not necessarily inclusive (e.g., Bailey, 2008; Coalter, 2007; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Krouwel et al., 2006). With respect to soccer, youth players from cultural and national minority backgrounds report experiences of inferior treatment, prejudice, and discrimination (see European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010). Such findings challenge soccer organizations and coaches to create sporting environments that ensure positive experiences of inclusion, regardless of players’ cultural backgrounds. The purpose of the present research was...
to investigate whether youth soccer players’ perceptions of inclusion are related to how they perceive the coach-initiated motivational goal climate within their team. We argue and demonstrate that this link may be dependent on players’ societal status. Specifically, we anticipated that motivational goal climate perceptions relate differently to perceived team inclusion for players from a societal minority group than for players from the societal majority.

1. Inclusion

Since the publication of a review on research on inclusion by Shore et al. (2011), there is increasing consensus that inclusion is a two-dimensional concept consisting of perceptions of belonging and authenticity. Building upon Shore’s et al. (2011) conceptualization, Jansen et al. (2014) defined inclusion as “…the degree to which an individual perceives that the group provides him or her with a sense of belonging and authenticity” (p.383). From this perspective, it is the extent to which a team can satisfy players’ fundamental psychological needs for belonging and authenticity that determine their perceptions of inclusion. The need for belonging reflects an individual’s desire for interpersonal attachment, that is, positive interactions and relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In soccer teams, such a need to belong can be satisfied when players feel accepted and positively evaluated as members of their team. Relatedly, the need for authenticity implies “…the need to feel and act in accordance with one’s true self” (Jansen et al., 2014, p. 372). Satisfaction of this need within a soccer team would require players to perceive that teammates allow and encourage them to express both similarities and differences. Following Jansen et al. (2014, 2017), we conceptualize perceived inclusion as the extent to which both the need for belonging and the need for authenticity are satisfied.

1.1. Motivational climate

Previous studies have shown that situational factors are relevant to athletes’ perceptions and behavior in sport settings (e.g., Ames, 1992; Appleton & Duda, 2016; Mack et al., 2016; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999), including athletes’ perception of inclusion (Bailey, 2008; Donnelly & Oakley, 2002; Rutten et al., 2008). Specifically, a sport climate in which the importance of social relationships and learning are salient may be associated with positive social experiences in athletes (cf., Sandford et al., 2006; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Hence, in sport psychological research, much attention has been given to players’ perceived motivational goal climate (e.g., Ames, 1992; Harwood et al., 2015; Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). Although there are several potential sources of youth athletes’ perceptions of the motivational goal climate (e.g., dispositions, parents, peers, teachers, e.g., Keegan et al., 2009), in this research, we focus on athletes’ perceptions of the coach-initiated motivational goal climate (Smith et al., 2008). Coaches play a vital role in youth athletes’ sport experience, and accordingly, have been found to have substantial impact how youth athletes perceive their sport environment (McLaren et al., 2015). For example, athletes’ perceptions of the motivational goal climate are likely to differ when their coach emphasizes effort, growth, and improvement rather than competition, social comparison, and outperforming others (e.g., Harwood & Beauchamp, 2007; McLaren et al., 2015).

Indeed, in the influential achievement goal approach to achievement motivation (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Harlaman, 2017), two types of motivational goal climate, or achievement goals, are typically distinguished: A mastery and a performance goal climate (Ames, 1992). At either level (individual or team), coaches who pursue mastery goals focus on self-based (i.e., doing better or avoiding doing worse than one did before) and task-based standards (i.e., doing the task well, or avoiding doing bad), whereas performance goals are grounded in other-based standards (doing better than others, or avoiding doing worse than others; Elliot, 2005; Van Yperen, 2006). Hence, a perceived mastery goal climate is likely to be a function of coaches’ emphasis on self-based learning and task mastery. In contrast, players’ perceptions of a performance goal climate may be stronger when a coach emphasizes and promotes competition against other teams (inter-team competition) and competition against teammates (intra-team competition). As we will discuss in more detail later, in the present study, we focused on this latter aspect of a performance goal climate.

Previous research has demonstrated that athletes’ perceptions of a mastery or a performance goal climate, or both, depends – among other things – on the achievement goals which coaches endorse and communicate to players during training sessions and/or competitions (e.g., McArdle & Duda, 2002; Vazou et al., 2006). In the sport context, however, the majority of studies on athletes’ perceptions of motivational climates have focused on intrapersonal, achievement-related correlates, including perceived competence, performance, self-esteem, affect, and moral decision-making (e.g., Balaguï et al., 1999; Boixadós et al., 2004; Kavussanu, 2006; Reinboth & Duda, 2016; Ring & Kavussanu, 2017; Van Yperen et al., 2011). In a systematic review of intrapersonal correlates of motivational climate perceptions within sport and physical activity domains, Harwood et al. (2015) concluded that mastery goal climates are consistently linked to adaptive intrapersonal factors while performance goal climate perceptions tend to show either no relationship or a negative relationship with these adaptive motivational outcomes, which include perceived competence, self-esteem, the experience of flow, and moral attitudes.

In the present research, we extend these findings by focusing on how coaches may create, maintain, and enhance feelings of inclusion among individuals from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. We thereby contribute to knowledge on how to promote culturally competent coaching behavior for coaches working with culturally diverse teams, which is a main aim of this special issue. Since soccer is a team sport, soccer players’ perceptions of the motivational goal climate are likely to be related interpersonal factors such as the quality of the relationships within the team, the ways in which team players act towards each other, and how they deal with interpersonal conflicts within the team (e.g., Kavussanu, 2006; Ommundsen et al., 2005; Smith, 2003; Stanger et al., 2018; Van Yperen, 1995). Specifically, when a coach enhances the pursuit of mastery goals, players’ focus during exercises and drills is more likely to be directed towards personal improvement and effort (Ames, 1992). As such, in mastery goal climates, players may use collaboration and interactions with teammates as a strategy for the attainment of self-improvement, and accordingly, build and maintain positive relations with their teammates (e.g., Poortvliet et al., 2007). Indeed, mastery goal climate perceptions have been shown to be positively related to self-reported friendship quality and perceived peer acceptance within the team (e.g., Cheon et al., 2019; Ommundsen et al., 2005). In addition, mastery goal climates have been found to be positively related to sportsmanship, social and moral functioning, team cohesion, and desirable perceptions of team norms (Eys et al., 2013; Gano-Overway et al., 2005; McLaren et al., 2015; Ommundsen et al., 2003; Stanger et al., 2018). Similar patterns have been observed in other domains (e.g., the workplace) and in experimental research, where perceptions of mastery goals relative to performance goals were positively related to collaboration, trust and respect, and willingness to exchange opinions and viewpoints (for a review, see Van Yperen, 2017).

Hence, mastery goal climate perceptions are likely to satisfy players’ fundamental needs for belonging and authenticity; therefore, we hypothesized a positive relationship between players’ mastery goal climate perceptions and perceived team inclusion (Hypothesis 1).

With regard to performance goal climate perceptions, it is important to disentangle intra-team and inter-team competition. Previous studies among both humans and primates suggest that inter-team competition may enhance rather than undermine feelings of inclusion and in-group affiliation (e.g., Samuni et al., 2019). Hence, in the present research, we focus on intra-team competition. Soccer coaches who pay most attention to the best players of the team and tell their players to try to be better than teammates, reinforce a performance goal climate within their
team. Based on the extant achievement goal literature, such a coaching style was expected to be detrimental rather than beneficial to within-team relationships, and accordingly, players’ feelings of inclusion. When coaches emphasize intra-team competition, athletes’ focus during training practice is more likely to be directed towards the self (Shields & Breidemeier, 1995). Hence, teammates may be seen as competitors who pose a threat to one’s goal of outperforming others, a perception which may result in reduced collaboration and task-related interaction with teammates. Achievement goal research has shown that performance goal climate perceptions, including perceptions of intra-team competition, are positively related to peer conflict, aggressive behavior, and unsportsmanlike behavior, and negatively related to team cohesion, social acceptance by teammates, and perceptions of relatedness (Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Eys et al., 2013; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Ommundsen et al., 2005; Stanger et al., 2018). These results are consistent with findings in other achievement domains and in experimental research, which have shown that the aim of performing better than others, including peers, colleagues, and teammates, is negatively associated with helping behaviors, willingness to exchange information and knowledge with others, and constructive conflict regulation (e.g., Darron et al., 2006; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Poortvliet et al., 2007; Porter, 2005). Moreover, relative to mastery goals, performance goals increase the likelihood of cheating and thwarting others’ performance on tasks both inside and outside sports (e.g., Palou et al., 2013; Poortvliet et al., 2012; Van Yperen et al., 2011; Wagnsson et al., 2016). Accordingly, we hypothesized a negative relationship between players’ performance goal climate perceptions and perceived team inclusion (Hypothesis 2).

1.2. Perceived Motivational Climate and societal status

Mastery and performance goal climate dimensions have been found to be orthogonal (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Duda, 2001). This implies that players can simultaneously perceive a strong (or weak) mastery and a strong (or weak) performance goal climate within their team. Hence, it can be assumed that the expected positive relationship between mastery goal climate perceptions and perceived inclusion (see Hypothesis 1) is weakened when performance goal climate perceptions (see Hypothesis 2) are strong as well. However, as we will argue below, this may only be true for players with a minority status in society.

When individuals and their parents have the nationality of a particular country which is numerically larger than the rest of the population (e.g., Dutch players in the Netherlands, Brazilian players in Brazil), we refer to them as having majority status. In contrast, when the player himself or at least one parent was born in a country that is numerically smaller than the rest of the population (e.g., Moroccans in the Netherlands, Mexicans in the United States), we refer to them as having minority status. Psychological research on intergroup contact has revealed that individuals with majority or minority status might interpret their social environments in distinct ways, also because societal numerical status is often associated with access to power and resources (Lee et al., 2019; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). In contrast to individuals with societal majority status who tend to have more access to power and resources, individuals with minority status often experience intergroup contact as less pleasant and less positive (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). These experiences are mainly due to expectations of becoming the target of unequal treatment, devaluation, and prejudice (Crocker et al., 1998; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Shelton et al., 2005; Swim et al., 2003). That is, minority status individuals are usually aware of their group status and possible negative evaluations of their group membership by individuals with majority status. Accordingly, relative to individuals with majority status in society, individuals with minority status tend to be more sensitive to cues of unequal treatment by members of the opposite status group (Plant, 2004; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005).

Motivational climate perceptions may, therefore, be differently related to perceived inclusion for players with societal minority status than for players with societal majority status. Specifically, since individuals with minority status are more sensitive to cues signaling negative evaluations and interpersonal behaviors by others (Plant, 2004; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), intra-team competition might be related to more negative perceptions of peer relations for this particular group of players. Hence, we hypothesized a three-way interaction between societal status and mastery and performance goal climate such that only among players with a minority status, perceived team inclusion is higher when mastery goal climate perceptions are higher and performance goal climate perceptions are lower (Hypothesis 3).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 245 male youth soccer players representing 23 teams from two large soccer clubs in the Netherlands. The societal status of 94 players (38.4%) was majority, that is, they and both parents were born in the Netherlands. A total of 151 players (61.6%) were classified as minority, that is, the player himself or at least one parent was born outside the Netherlands. The number of participants per team ranged from 8 to 13, and the number (percentage) of players on each of the teams who were minority status ranged from 1 (9%) to 12 (92%).

Participants’ ages ranged from 10 to 16 years, with a mean of 12.93 years (SD = 1.60). We focused on early (age 10–13) and middle adolescents (age 14–16) because particularly in these age groups, positive intercultural contact experiences tend to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes in adulthood (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Killen et al., 2007). Furthermore, meta-analytical research has shown that during late adolescence (age 17 and older), perceived discrimination of minority members is likely to decrease due to a larger array of social–cognitive resources (Benner et al., 2018). There were no differences in societal status and age between players from the two soccer clubs (ps > .23).

2.2. Procedure

The two soccer clubs were informed about the aim of the study via both regular mail and email. Meetings with interested coaches were then organized to provide further information about the content and procedure of the study. Parents of possible participants received information letters about the study from the researchers at least two months prior to data collection. In this letter, parents were informed about the objectives of the study, and were asked to inform the soccer club if they did not agree with their child’s participation in the study. Only those players whose parents did not object to their participation (only two parents objected) were included.

At the end of the playing season, 30 min before one of their weekly training sessions, the participants were gathered by their coaches in the club building (in the presence of the second author) and informed about the objectives of the study, and were asked to inform the soccer club if they did not agree with their child’s participation in the study. Only those players whose parents did not object to their participation (only two parents objected) were included.

At the end of the playing season, 30 min before one of their weekly training sessions, the participants were gathered by their coaches in the club building (in the presence of the second author) and informed about the objectives of the study, and were asked to inform the soccer club if they did not agree with their child’s participation in the study. Only those players whose parents did not object to their participation (only two parents objected) were included.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university’s Ethical Committee of Psychology, which ensures, among other things, that the coach was not aware who participated and that there was no pressure to participate. The informed consent form specifically stated that players’ participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Important to note is that according to the Dutch Personal Data Protection Act, registration of ethnicity is basically illegal, and is allowed only under very specific conditions. To obtain ethical approval for the study, we were allowed to ask players’ and their parents’ place of birth. No questions about players’ ethnicity or their perceived social status were permitted.
2.3. Measures

All items were answered on Likert-type scales with self-report options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The numerical scale was accompanied by a pictorial response system with five smiley faces expressing variations of (dis)agreement to facilitate answering of the questions for the young participants. Scale scores were obtained by averaging the scores on the individual items.

2.4. Perceived motivational goal climate

The scales used to assess players’ perceptions of the coach-initiated motivational goal climate are based on the Motivational Climate Scale for Youth Sports (MCSYS; Smith et al., 2006; cf., Newton et al., 2000). The first two authors, both fluent in Dutch and English, carefully and independently translated the items into Dutch, and next, backtranslated until “committee“ consensus existed, that is, both agreed on the equivalence of meaning of each item. The approach we used was actually a mixture of the translation-backtranslation procedure and the committee approach (see Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 1997, p. 266).

Because of our focus on intra-team competition, and for reasons of conceptual clarity and rigor, we used only the four items of the perceived performance goal climate subscale that exclusively refer to intra-team competition (see Table 1). That is, the two items of the original scale referring to inter-team competition were excluded (e.g., “Winning games is the most important thing for my coach”). For the same reasons, the original mastery goal climate item that referred to team’s success was replaced by a new item: “The most important thing for my coach is that I get better as a player.” Hence, all six items of the adapted mastery goal climate subscale exclusively refer to individual self-improvement.

Because we used (slightly) adapted, translated scales, we first tested whether both subscales are not only theoretically, but also empirically distinguishable. Assuming that both components were correlated, we conducted a principle component analysis (PCA) using oblimin rotation (Ford et al., 1986). The PCA revealed two components with eigenvalues >1.00. The two-component solution presented in Table 1 shows that both subscales are indeed empirically distinct. The correlation between both components is $r = -0.29$. Cronbach’s alpha was good for the mastery goal climate subscale (6 items, $\alpha = 0.79$) and acceptable for the performance goal climate subscale (4 items, $\alpha = 0.68$).

Table 1: Summary of explanatory factor analysis results for the motivational goal climate measure using principle component analysis (n = 245).

| Component Loadings | Mastery Goal Climate | Perf. Goal Climate |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. The most important thing for my coach is that I get better as a player. | .77 | -.11 |
| 2. My coach tells us to help each other get better. | .74 | .14 |
| 3. My coach encourages us to learn new skills. | .71 | -.46 |
| 4. My coach says that teammates should help each other improve their skills. | .69 | -.24 |
| 5. My coach makes me feel good when I improve a skill. | .68 | -.26 |
| 6. My coach tells us that trying our best is the most important thing. | .60 | .16 |

Eigenvalue: 3.52 | 1.59
% of variance: 35.20 | 15.94

2.5. Perceived inclusion

The extent to which players perceived themselves to be included within their team was measured using the Dutch short version of the Perceived Group Inclusion Scale (Jansen et al., 2017). The eight items used to assess players’ feelings of belonging and perceived authenticity were: (1) My team gives me the feeling that I belong; (2) My team allows me to be who I am; (3) My team likes me; (4) My team encourages me to show my true me; (5) My team gives me the room to be myself; (6) My team gives me the feeling that I am really a part of it; (7) My team appreciates me; (8) My team encourages me to be who I am. Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = 0.82$).

3. Results

3.1. Check of the assumptions

By using SPSS throughout, we first checked the assumptions of (1) normality, (2) homoscedasticity, (3) linearity, and (4) absence of multicollinearity, and concluded that this was the case: (1) The normal P-P plot showed that the data followed the normality line. (2) The scatterplot of the residuals showed that the data was equally distributed above and below zero on both the X axis and the Y axis. (3) Because the residuals are normally distributed and homoscedastic, the assumption of linearity was met as well. (4) The maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) value was 1.34 (should be below 5.00), indicating that multicollinearity was absent. Furthermore, relying on the Mahalanobis distances for the combination of predictor variables, we did not find multivariate outliers (e.g., Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

3.2. Descriptive data

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 2. In line with existing research, mastery climate perceptions were moderately and negatively related to performance climate perceptions (e.g., Newton et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2008). An additional t-test revealed that mean mastery goal climate perceptions were higher than performance goal climate perceptions, $t(244) = 31.12, p < .001$.

Furthermore, there was a difference between both soccer clubs in perceived performance goal climate, $t(243) = 2.24, p = .03$. And because players’ age and perceived performance goal climate were positively related (see Table 2), both age and club (dummy coded) were included as control variables in the subsequent main analysis. The perceived mastery goal climate and perceived inclusion did not differ between the clubs ($p > .60$), nor were there differences between team members with majority and minority status in terms of age, number of training hours per week, perceived motivational goal climate and perceived inclusion ($p > .20$).

3.3. Hypotheses testing

As shown in Table 2, coach-initiated mastery and performance goal climate perceptions were positively and negatively correlated, respectively, with perceived inclusion. These correlations provided empirical evidence for existing research. For example, the correlation between perceived mastery and perceived inclusion was $r = -.24$, which is in line with the findings of Smith et al. (2008).
support for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, respectively.

Hypothesis 3 states that only among players with a minority status, perceived team inclusion is higher when mastery goal climate perceptions are higher and performance goal climate perceptions are lower. To test this hypothesis, perceived inclusion as the dependent variable was hierarchically regressed on coach-initiated mastery goal climate perceptions, performance goal climate perceptions, societal status, and their interactions. Age and club were included as covariates, and the status variable was dummy coded: national majority (+1) versus national minority (-1). As reported, multicollinearity was absent, but nevertheless, continuous predictor variables (i.e., goal climate perceptions) were mean-centered around zero before the formation of interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991).

In order to understand the unique contribution of the covariates, and the main and interaction effects, Table 3 shows the unstandardized coefficients for each separate step: (1) the covariates, (2) the main effects, (3) the two-way interactions, and (4) the three-way interaction. As expected, the three-way interaction between mastery goal perceptions, performance goal perceptions, and societal status was significant (B = 0.15, p < .05). To interpret this significant three-way interaction, we conducted additional simple slopes analyses (using PROCESS, a SPSS add-on; Hayes, 2017). Fig. 1 shows players’ levels of perceived inclusion within their team at different levels (±1 SD) of mastery and performance goal climates. As indicated in Fig. 1, all slopes were significant, but only among players with a societal majority status, and only when the perceived mastery goal climate was high, did the predicted value of the low performance climate slope differ significantly (p = .04) from the predicted value of the high performance climate slope. Among players with a societal majority status, this pattern was reversed, but not significant at any level of mastery goal climate (ps > .10). This pattern provides empirical support for Hypothesis 3.

4. Discussion

One of the main challenges of diverse societies is to create, maintain, and enhance feelings of inclusion among individuals from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Particularly in childhood and early adolescence, positive intercultural contact experiences tend to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes in adulthood (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Killen et al., 2007). Hence, team sports such as soccer are increasingly promoted as a means for social and cultural inclusion, integration, and acculturation, particularly in youth (Parnell & Richardson, 2014; Walseth & Fasting, 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, theory and research on feelings of inclusion in (youth) team sports is lacking. Drawing on the influential achievement goal approach to achievement motivation (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & Hulleman, 2017), the present study was conducted to extend our understanding of the motivation and perceptions of inclusiveness of young transnational migrants in a soccer context. Specifically, we examined how youth soccer players’ perceptions of the coach-initiated motivational goal climate and their societal status (majority versus minority) relate to their perceptions of inclusion in culturally and nationally diverse youth soccer teams.

As expected, we observed a positive relationship between mastery goal climate perceptions and players’ perceptions of inclusion in their team. The most likely explanation is that mastery goals are grounded in an internal standard (i.e., the task or the self) that may be used privately and at one’s own discretion (Elliot et al., 2011). Combined with approach motivation, that is, a focus on the possibility of success, mastery goals tend to evoke and sustain hope, eagerness, and excitement, and accordingly, direct individuals to view the task as a challenge and to persist longer (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot; 2005; Kaplan & Middleton, 2002; Pintrich, 2000). Coaches who emphasize task mastery, learning something new, self-improvement by working together with others (among other things), mastery goals tend to direct the individual’s attention to the task itself rather than possible outcomes or comparisons with others. Because of the robust positive link between mastery goals and desirable outcomes, mastery goals are generally considered as the ideal type of competence-based regulation (Elliot, 2005; Pintrich, 2000). The observed positive link between mastery goal climate and feelings of inclusion comply with these general tenets in achievement goal research (e.g., Van Yperen et al., 2014; 2015). In particular, this result confirms existing findings that mastery goal climates are conducive to positive social relationships, for example, with respect to sportmanship, social and moral functioning, desirable perceptions of team norms, self-reported friendship quality, and perceived peer acceptance within teams (e.g., Boixadó et al., 2004; Cheon et al., 2019; Darnon et al., 2006; Gano-Overway et al., 2005; Ommundsen et al., 2005, 2003; Stanger et al., 2018). Research in other achievement domains and experimental research also shows that mastery goals are positively related to interpersonal outcomes, for example, social support, collaboration, mutual trust, and respect (for a review, see Van Yperen, 2017).

Furthermore, we observed the expected negative correlation between performance goal climate perceptions and perceived team inclusion. When pursuing performance goals, the evaluation standard is external (e.g., others or norm scores). Such a focus on external targets may interfere with attention to the task, inhibit task engagement and task performance, generate an exploitation orientation, and reduce the willingness to cooperate (e.g., Poortvliet et al., 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). Again, this finding is in line with previous studies that reported negative effects of performance goals on interpersonal outcomes such as conflict, aggressive behavior, exploitation orientation, non-constructive conflict resolution, and cheating (e.g., Darnon et al., 2006; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; Kavussanu & Roberts, 2001; Ommundsen et al., 2005; Poortvliet et al., 2012, 2007; Stanger et al., 2018; Van Yperen et al., 2011).

Consistent with group research that has shown that particularly members of a societal minority are concerned with becoming targets of stigmatization, discrimination, and prejudice (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), we found empirical support for our prediction that the link between perceived motivational goal climate and perceived inclusion is a function of societal status. This novel finding contributes to the existing literature by showing that relatively strong performance goal climates in culturally and nationally diverse groups may strengthen asymmetric
experiences of social relations between individuals with majority and minority status. Only among societal minority members, a motivational goal climate that provides salient environmental cues for intra-team competition may undermine feelings of inclusion and possibly other favorable intra- and interpersonal outcomes. Among players with a societal majority status, we did not find any evidence for an undermining effect of performance goal climate perceptions on the positive link between a perceived mastery goal climate and perceived inclusion. In contrast, as shown in Fig. 1, there was a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction among societal majority members. Players with societal majority status typically have more access to power and resources, and accordingly, lower or no expectations of becoming the target of unequal treatment, devaluation, and prejudice (Crocker et al., 1998; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Shelton et al., 2005; Swim et al., 2003). Consequently, they may be less sensitive to cues signaling negative evaluations and interpersonal behaviors by others (Plant, 2004; Tropp &
Several limitations of the present research have to be mentioned. First, in this study, we distinguished between players from the societal majority and minority without making a distinction between minority players with different cultural identifiers such as race, ethnicity, or religion (Godfrey et al., 2019). These distinctions may be important, however, because research indicates that early adolescents from certain cultural groups are more likely to experience unequal treatment, prejudice, and discrimination than adolescents from other groups (e.g., Verkuyten & Thijss, 2002). Relatedly, societal minority players were not necessarily a minority within their team. The value of the current findings, however, is that they provide preliminary evidence that societal majority and minority groups may differ in their perceptions of inclusion as a function of their perceptions of the motivational goal climate within their team. These possible consequences of cultural and national diversity should be explored in more detail in future research.

Second, because of our focus on intra-team competition as well as for reasons of conceptual clarity and rigor, we relied on an adapted version of the MCSYS (Smith et al., 2008), a measure that is based on the content of the Perceived Motivational Climate in Sport Questionnaire-2 (PMCSQ-2; Newton et al., 2000; cf., McLaren et al., 2015). Both slightly adapted subscales were internally consistent and empirically distinguishable, but equivocal comparisons with findings in studies that relied on Smith et al.’s (2008) original version is an obvious limitation. However, we think that it is particularly important to conceptually disentangle, both theoretically and empirically, intra-team and inter-team competition in the present research, we observed a negative link between perceptions of intra-team competition and feelings of inclusion (cf., Eys et al., 2013), but previous studies among both humans and primates suggest that inter-team competition may enhance rather than undermine feelings of inclusion and in-group affiliation (e.g., Samuni et al., 2019). Our findings call for future research aiming at the differential effects of intra- and inter-team competition on perceptions of inclusion as a function of societal status.

Third, this cross-sectional study does not allow for causal interferences. We can only conclude that relationships exist between players’ motivational goal climate perceptions, their societal status, and perceived team inclusion. However, in other studies, it has been shown that (1) experimentally induced achievement goal states have an impact on interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Poortvliet et al., 2007, 2012) and achievement outcomes (for meta-analyses, see Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999; Van Yperen et al., 2015), (2) motivational goal climates inform players about ways in which they should treat, and are treated by, teammates (Ommundsen et al., 2005; Sage & Kavussanu, 2008), and (3) individuals’ societal group status influences their experiences during interpersonal interactions (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). All together, we consider it plausible that motivational goal climate perceptions and societal status interact to shape players’ interpersonal experiences (i.e., perceived inclusion) in culturally and nationally diverse soccer teams.

Fourth, we hypothesized (and found) that only among players with a minority status, perceived team inclusion is higher when mastery goal climate perceptions are higher and performance goal climate perceptions are lower. For that purpose, we relied on the most basic and traditional achievement goal framework (i.e., mastery versus performance goals, both approach-oriented; Elliot, 2005). In the past years, more sophisticated frameworks have been developed in which the valence dimension (approach versus avoidance) was added, and three standards of competence are distinguished, yielding a 3 (others vs. self vs. task) × 2 (approach vs. avoidance) achievement goal model (Elliot et al., 2011). Specifically, performance goal individuals focus on doing better than others (other-based, approach) or not doing worse than others (other-based, avoidance). In contrast, mastery goal individuals focus on doing better than before (self-based, approach), not doing worse than before (self-based, avoidance), doing the task correctly (task-based, approach), or not doing the task incorrectly (task-based, avoidance). Mascet et al. (2015) extended this 3 × 2 achievement goal model to the sport domain, which may be applied in future studies on perceived inclusion in sport settings as well. Relatedly, in future research, the “sporting context” may be specified. That is, athletes may be asked about their experiences during actual games, training practice, and off-field.

Fifth, in this study, we relied on players’ individual perceptions of the motivational climate within their team, and our analyses of motivational climate were conducted at the individual level rather than at the team level. The main and obvious reason is that we were interested in players’ perceptions of the motivational goal climate within their team, and how these are related to their feelings of inclusion as a function of their societal status. Future research may focus on the shared perception of the motivational climate within a team, and whether, and how, this team level variable is related to outcome variables of interest. For example, Van Mierlo and Van Hooff (2020) recently found that team-level approach goals and avoidance goals (either mastery goal or performance goal oriented) were positively and negatively related to team-level performance indices. To reliably conduct this type of analyses, a large sample of teams is needed, which was unfortunately not the case in the present research.

Sixth, although age and perceived inclusion were unrelated in the present sample (see Table 1), meta-analytical research has shown that perceived discrimination of minority members is likely to decrease in late adolescence (Benner et al., 2018). Hence, one may speculate that older adolescents (age 17 and older) with minority status have a larger array of social–cognitive resources, which may help to protect them against discriminatory treatment and help them to become less susceptible to performance goal climates. Future studies may replicate and elaborate on our findings by employing samples consisting of players across different stages of adolescence.

4.2. Practical implications

This study on the coach-initiated motivational goal climate within the team and players’ perceived inclusion has at least two practical implications for coaches of culturally and nationally diverse youth soccer teams. First, based on the result that mastery goal climates seem to favour experiences of inclusion for all players (irrespective of their societal status), it seems preferable to encourage self-improvement and task mastery, which tend to be accompanied by more effort, team work, and cooperation. Coaches might, therefore, actively look out for and positively evaluate players’ development, progress, and effort, as well as rewarding desired social behaviours, including cooperation, teamwork, and helping behaviours (e.g., Ames, 1992; McLaren et al., 2015; Van Yperen, 2021).

Second, as performance goal climate perceptions may undermine players’ experiences of inclusion, in particular for societal minority status players, achievement goal structures which direct players to outperform teammates should not be promoted and encouraged. Although positional competition with respect to starting roles or amount of playing time is inherent in soccer and difficult to eliminate, coaches may reduce players’ perceptions of intra-team competition by, among other things, providing individual, self-based feedback rather than comparative feedback, and avoiding negative public evaluation of players (e.g., Ames, 1992).

5. Conclusion

Our findings suggest that players’ perceptions of coach-initiated motivational goal climates are important for the inclusiveness of culturally and nationally diverse youth soccer teams, and accordingly, can contribute to promoting culturally competent coaching practices. Our results specifically underscore (a) the relevance of a mastery goal
climate for players’ experiences of inclusion, and (b) the importance of de-emphasizing performance goal climate elements to enhance minority status players’ feelings of inclusion. This may be particularly effective among young players because adolescence is an important stage for attitude development. Creating a mastery-oriented sport environment may ensure experiences of inclusion among them regardless of their societal status as cultural or national majority or minority members. Such a climate may be a key factor on the way to achieving soccer’s widely promoted socially inclusive potential, that is, to utilize soccer as a means for social inclusion, cultural integration, and acculturation of transnational migrants.

Author statement

Nico W. Van Yperen: Supervision, review, conceptualization, materials, methodology, data analyses, writing, Silke Dankers: Conceptualization, materials, methodology, data collection, data analyses, writing (initial draft), Anne-Marie Elbe: Funding acquisition, supervision, review, Xavier Sanchez: Funding acquisition, supervision, review, Sabine Otten: Funding acquisition, supervision, review, conceptualization.

Funding

In the context of a double degree PhD programme (PhD candidate: Silke Dankers), the research was funded by the University of Groningen, Department of Psychology, The Netherlands, and the University of Copenhagen, Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences, Denmark.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References

Aboud, F. E., & Levy, S. R. (2000). Interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination in children and adolescents. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), Reducing prejudice and discrimination (pp. 269-293). Erlbaum.

Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions. Sage.

Ames, C. (1992). Achievement goals, motivational climate, and motivational processes. In G. C. Roberts (Ed.), Motivation in sport and exercise (pp. 161-176). Human Kinetics.

Appleton, P. R., & Duda, J. L. (2016). Examining the interactive effects of coach-created empowering and disempowering climate dimensions on athletes’ health and functioning. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 26, 61–70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.06.002

Bailey, R. (2008). Youth sport and social inclusion. In N. Holt (Ed.), Handbook of social psychology of sport and recreation (pp. 269-293). Erlbaum.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497-529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Benner, A. D., Wang, Y., Shen, Y., Boyle, A. E., Polk, R., & Cheng, Y. P. (2018). Racial/ethnic climate for players. Journal of Sports Sciences, 36(6), 575–585. https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2018.1431598

Boixadó, M., Cruz, J., Torregrosa, M., & Valiente, L. (2004). Relationship among motivational climate, satisfaction, perceived ability and fair play attitudes in young soccer players. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 16(4), 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/104132004904273797

Cheon, S. H., Reeve, J., & Ntoumanis, N. (2019). An intervention to help teachers establish a prosocial peer climate in physical education. Learning and Instruction, 64 (x), Article xxx-xxx. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2019.101223

Crocker, J. (2007). A wider social role for sport: Who’s keeping the score? Routledge.

Cronin, D., & Smallwood, J. (2003). Acceptance of diversity in sport: A means of enhancing social inclusion. Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 27(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894399102243601

Donnelly, P., & Coakley, J. (2002). The role of recreation in promoting social inclusion. Laidlaw Foundation.
