

Motivational Parallels in Sport Coaching and Addiction Recovery

Matthew Brady

Michigan State University

Abstract

How motivation works in athletes is a complex topic; it can wax and wane during a competition, a season or a career. Many motivation theories exist to explain different elements of why athletes perform. These include: self-determination theory; motivator/hygiene theory; attribution theory; achievement theory; and flow theory. Although they have different names, underlying each is the question of ‘what drives the athlete.’ While the motivational parallels in the realms of sports/athlete coaching and addiction recovery may not be immediately apparent, the major threads evident in motivational theory apply in both situations. Intrinsic motivation is an important determinant of success – however that is defined – in both situations. Likewise, an individual whose motivation is externally oriented, and refuses to take responsibility for his/her own behavior and performance, will struggle in both environments. As a coach or individual working with people in both realms, our role and responsibility is to provide a supportive and compassionate environment, working to enhance these internal capabilities, while at the same time not abdicating the responsibility to hold others accountable. Ultimately, however, motivation is an individual course, and its manifestation is seen in outcomes and observable behaviors.

Key words: Self-determination theory; achievement theory; motivator/hygiene theory; motivation; addiction; recovery.

Introduction

Motivation is an important and complex element of athletic performance.

Understandably, motivation is also a vital part in an athlete's performance (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003, p.884); there can be a great many sources of motivation at different stages of a practice, a season, or a career, and understanding these is key for a coach. (Driska, 2016, Motivational Climate) Motivation theories generally view motivation as occurring along the spectrum of intrinsic/extrinsic sources. Self-determination theory, and the closely related motivator/hygiene theory, focuses on intrinsic motivation and the factors that bring it about – opportunities for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Attribution theory focuses on the loci of a person's responsibility – is it based inside oneself, or are external factors responsible for performance?

In the same way that an athlete's motivation moves along the spectrum of intrinsic and extrinsic orientation, individuals dealing with substance or process addictions confront similar challenges. At times, both will be highly motivated by external forces – the athlete by extra practice or sprints; an addict will face comparable dangers - loss of job, family, or even life. Yet for both, external sources of motivation lose their power after a time, and if any long-term success is hoped for, motivation must become come from within. In order to achieve this motivational orientation, where an athlete/addict takes responsibility for success/failure and changes how these external elements are measured, a change in outlook is required. Accomplishing such a change is difficult, and it requires a complete change in priorities and lifestyle. This paper will look specifically at self-determination, motivator/hygiene, and attribution theories.

Self-determination Theory and Motivator/Hygiene Theory

Self-determination theory focuses on the social factors that influence motivation through their influence on perceptions of self-determination (autonomy), competence, and relatedness. (Mallett, 2005, p.418) Persons who feel a high degree of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are seen to be highly intrinsically motivated. This is important because it has been shown that people with a high degree of intrinsic motivation generally perform at higher levels, work harder, are more persistent and use positive coping mechanisms in stressful situations. (Mallett, 2005, p.418) In sum, they have adopted a 'positive psychology.' Positive psychology is the study of positive human attributes such as "...well-being, optimism, forgiveness, self-esteem, fascination/flow, creativity, resilience, savoring, wisdom, and spirituality." (Sachau, 2007, p.378) In practical terms, it means addressing situations through the application of effort and not simply avoidance or negation of the negative. In other words, that "...happiness is more than the absence of unhappiness." (Sachau, 2007, p.378)

Herzberg's 1959 motivator/hygiene theory originally looked at the factors that caused satisfaction or dissatisfaction in job situations. He coined the term 'motivator' for those elements that led to personal growth, and 'hygiene' for those elements that simply avoided dissatisfaction. In sum,

Motivation is based on growth needs. It is an internal engine, and its benefits show up over a long period of time. Because the ultimate reward in motivation is personal growth, people don't need to be rewarded incrementally. (Herzberg, 1987, p.14)

Herzberg also related that external motivations would, after a time, lose their luster. It was termed the "escalating zero point." That is, the minimum amount it takes for make one feel

good about hygiene factors (albeit for a short time) escalates, or the level of motivation required will become so far out of reach that no amount of reward will be able to satisfy a disaffected individual. (as cited in Sachau, 2007, p.386)

To an athlete, an outlook where autonomy, competence and relatedness take priority means that internally measured goals and objectives take precedence; hard work, improvement, and increasing skill are valued; belonging and contributing are seen as important; and an understanding is reached that outcomes are not under my control, but how I perform is. Personal growth, not winning and losing, provide motivation.

The concepts behind Herzberg's motivator-hygiene theory were not original when he presented it; similar ideas had been around for years. In the 1st edition publication of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the idea of 'positive psychology' was termed a 'psychic change' (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. xxix) and it was meant to describe the change in an individual from one who changes from being externally motivated (largely from avoidance of negative consequences – a hygiene based motivation) to one who is internally motivated (motivator) to take positive action to enhance his/her personal life. While hygiene factors may undoubtedly improve as a result of the change in orientation, this is not the ultimate objective; personal growth and self-fulfillment is. A recovered (and intrinsically motivated) person can experience periods of privation and hardship within the 'hygiene' sphere and yet remain motivated to grow otherwise.

Motivator/hygiene theory can also logically be tied to Abraham Maslow's 1943 Hierarchy of Needs (which was interestingly originally included in his paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation.") Basic needs, physiological and safety are at the bottom of the pyramid and

can be related to 'avoidance' or hygiene factors. However, as one moves up the pyramid, the need for 'self-actualization' becomes pre-eminent, and just meeting the basics simply is not sufficient. Moving from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation mirrors this; athletes who strive to improve reflect this; addicts who want to be more than just 'clean and sober' strive for this.

A second point is that while there are different stages of motivation between extrinsic to intrinsic, the only real motivation is that which comes from within. Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* was written to describe his experiences in a concentration camp. Even under the most demeaning situations, those who survived were those who retained the power of 'choice' in whatever fashion it manifested itself. Those who completely gave over were the ones who perished. His idea was that "...life is not primarily a quest for pleasure...or a quest for power...but a quest for meaning." (Frankl, 1959, p.x) Life can only really have meaning if we have that power of choice - a measure of autonomy in the decisions we make.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory focuses on the explanations that we give for events and it can influence our future expectancies, emotions, performance, and persistence. (Hanrahan & Biddle, 2008, p.100) This means essentially how a person views their situation: am I in control? Are my circumstances of my own making? Can actions I take help me be successful? Where attribution theory comes into play in both coaching and recovery is in the attitudes that athletes and addicts have toward their situation and where they perceive the causes of events ultimately lies. (Hanrahan & Biddle, 2008, p.100)

In sport, this means that an athlete who internalizes success and externalizes failure will continue to come back and try again, even after personal setbacks. This person is considered to

have an “optimistic attribution bias” (Driska, 2016, Attribution Theory (Part 2)) and as such does not view externally measured failures (losing a race, for example) as anything but an outcome that does not affect my internal self. If the effort has been there, then the result is really not as important. In addition, it is the same idea: it means taking responsibility for one’s own actions and failings. The opposite is also true: a pessimistic attribution bias will cause an athlete to blame external circumstances for their results, whether it is the conditions, the referees, or bad luck. In addition, people who have continued to fight their disease will reach the conclusion that they are ‘doomed.’ This idea is equivalent to ‘learned helplessness’ - the classic externalization of a situation and in reality an excuse to give up. (Driska, 2016, Attribution Theory (Part 2))

In recovery, I have seen countless experiences where a person blames everything outside him/herself for their situation: stressful job, misbehaving kids, and uncooperative spouse. In these situations, a person is not taking personal responsibility for their situation; all of those things are outside of their control, yet they are blamed for their inability to remain sober. The one thing an addict or alcoholic can control is themselves and whether they pick up the drink/drug, so blaming outside issues is a convenient way to avoid responsibility for the effort or its results – in essence, learned helplessness.

One area within 12 Step programs that may appear to be in conflict with the attribution theory idea of personal responsibility is the concept of ‘turning it over’ to something outside of oneself. This does not mean that a person is ‘helpless’ or a victim of circumstance (extrinsic attribution). It means is that the person still takes responsibility for his/her actions and doing the next right thing, but outcomes after that cannot be controlled. This is consistent with an optimistic attribution bias; these individuals internalize success and know that if they do continue

to take action and do the right thing, success will come their way. An athlete who has an optimistic attribution bias likewise is more likely to be positively motivated and believe that future results will be good. (Driska, 2016, Attribution Theory (Part 2)) The athlete may lose a race or strikeout with the bases loaded, but they know to keep practicing and success will come.

As was pointed out, with both athletes and addicts, there may be similar undeserved and unrealistic ideas of optimism, that things are going ok. This is the time when a coach and/or sponsor need to provide the athlete/addict with a reality check, that what they are doing is not going to be successful in the long-term. According to Driska (Attribution Theory, Video 3), its called 'letting them crap the nest.'" In recovery parlance, it's called 'not enabling.'

The motivation forum focused on autonomy and attribution theory, with the attribution debate more contentious. Attribution theory came under scrutiny for its perceived subjectivity, variability among athletes as to their motivational bases, and whether it was truly connected to motivation. For me, attribution theory is straightforward (although how and why athletes get, stay, and lose motivation is complex), and it fits in well with self-determination theory in explaining motivation. People with an optimistic attribution outlook will see their lives and their performances more under personal control (autonomy and competence.) As a coach (and a parent), my job is to provide opportunities and an environment where athletes/children can develop a greater sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, so that they take responsibility for their actions. For an athlete whose attribution focus is extrinsic, who feels that life or their results are outside their control, as a coach I can provide opportunities for the athlete to build his confidence through positive reinforcement, public praise, or being asked to demonstrate something at practice.

Feedback to the topic thread discussing the parallels in sport coaching and addiction recovery motivation was positive; several students who had friends in a recovery situation could relate strongly to the connection with intrinsic motivation. Research in the addiction field attests to intrinsic motivation being key in addiction recovery. According to findings chronicled by DiClemente, Bellino, and Neavins (1999),

People who received outpatient alcohol treatment, internal motivation (as assessed by a treatment motivation questionnaire) was related positively to both treatment involvement and retention...outpatients with low internal motivation had the worst treatment outcomes...Although internal motivation appears to be more effective for long-term success, external motivation seems to promote short-term abstinence from alcohol and other drugs. Relying solely on external pressure and incentives to influence a patient to modify his or her drinking behavior, however, can be difficult. (DiClemente, Bellino, & Neavins, 1999)

Conclusion

How motivation occurs, and why some athletes/persons get or lose motivation, is a broad, complex, and not well-understood process. While the theories discussed herein attempt to explain the bases of motivation, and there are quantifiable tools to measure motivation, in fact the only true measure of motivation is through observable action. This principle holds true whether it is in an athletic or recovery context; a person can talk about their motivation, talk about how hard they are going to work, yet when the time comes, not perform. The athlete quits in a race, or the addict relapses. This does not mean the person was lying or insincere, but there

was something missing. It is when success is achieved that one can truly say that the athlete or addict had sufficient motivation.

References

- Alcoholics Anonymous. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York: A.A. World Services.
- DiClemente, C., Bellino, L., Neavins, T. (1999). Motivation for change and alcoholism treatment. *Alcohol Research & Health*; 23 (2), 86-92.
- Driska, A. (2016). *Motivational climate (part 1)* (Online Video). Retrieved from:
https://cdnapisec.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/811482/uiconf_id/27554931/entry_id/1_bn959sp0/embed/dynamic.
- Driska, A. (2016). *Attribution theory (part 2)* (Online video). Retrieved from:
https://cdnapisec.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/811482/uiconf_id/27554931/entry_id/1_tfa1fjak/embed/dynamic.
- Driska, A. (2016). *Attribution theory (part 3)* (Online video). Retrieved from:
https://cdnapisec.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/811482/uiconf_id/27554931/entry_id/1_q4qukdnp/embed/dynamic.
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hanrahan, S., and Biddle, S. (2008). Attributions and perceived control. In Thelma S. Horn (Ed.) 3rd edition. *Advances in sport psychology* (pp. 100-113). Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.
- Herzberg, F. (1987). One more time: How do you motivate employees? *Harvard Business Review*, September/October 1987. 5-16. (Reprinted from *Harvard Business Review*, 1968, Reprint 87507).

Mageau, G., and Vallerand, R. (2003). The coach–athlete relationship: A motivational model.

Journal of Sports Sciences, 21, 883–904.

Mallett, C. (2005). Self-determination theory: A case study of evidence-based coaching. *The*

Sport Psychologist, 19, 417-429.

Sachau, D. (2007). Resurrecting the motivation-hygiene theory: Herzberg and the positive

psychology movement. *Human Resource Development Review, 6*(4), 377-393.