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Identity orientation affects rugby players' performance and decision making

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Introduction

Recent work has shown that players in team sports can identify with their team or their personal identity, which influences their emotions and performance (Campo et al., 2018, 2019). The aim of this study is to examine the impact of self-oriented and group-oriented identities on rugby players' performance with a particular focus on individual players' decision making. We expected that identity processes would influence players' perceptions and actions, and that this effect would increase when players perform in complex situations (i.e., situations with many action possibilities).

Methods

102 rugby players (aged 16-20) trained at elite training centres participated in the study, forming 34 teams of 3 players. Each team completed a total of 24 trials of a small-sided game in 2 identity conditions (personal and collective identity, PI and CI respectively) and in 2 situations (a low and a high complexity situation, LC and HC respectively). The game consisted of 3 attackers against 3 defenders. The identity orientation of the attackers was manipulated by priming either an individual or a collective motivational goal. Game complexity was manipulated by the initial position of the 3 defenders.

Identity orientation was assessed using a 10-cm visual analogue scale (VAS) after priming the motivational goal. All the trials were filmed with a 50Hz camera, and the players' positions were recorded with a 10Hz wearable GPS system. Performance was assessed by the longitudinal distance covered by the attacking team and the number of tries scored. The decision making of the first attacker was assessed by the decision made (pass, skip pass or cross), the time of possession of the ball, the length of the passes, and the distance to the closest defender at the time of passing.

Results

Individual and collective motivational goals decreased and increased VAS scores, respectively (mean difference of 1.4 points, $p < .001$). Performance was better in PI than in CI in terms of distance covered (+1.3m, $p = .043$) and performance was better in LC than in HC in terms of the distance covered (+2.9m, $p < .001$) and the number of tries scored (+9.8% of success, $p = .005$).

The decision of the first attacker was affected by the situation ($p < .001$), but not by the motivational goal ($p = .441$). However, in PI, the first attacker kept the ball longer in HC than in LC (+0.3s, $p < .001$), whereas in CI this time was not affected by the situation ($p = 1$). The length of passes tended to be shorter in PI than in CI (-0.3m, $p = .099$). The distance to the closest defender was not affected by either identity condition or situation ($ps > .214$).

Conclusion

Young elite rugby players appear to have a strong group-oriented identity. In contrast to previous studies, decreasing this group-oriented identity with personal goals improved collective performance. As expected, the effect of identity orientation on players' decision making appears to be more salient in complex situations.

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