

Perceptions of Justice in High School Athletics: A Stakeholders Perspective

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Organizational theory

May 30, 2009

Poster

Abstract 2009-235

3:00 PM

(Lexington/Carolina Prefunction)

High school athletics engages over seven million students a year in organized sport (NFHS, 2007), and although a strong majority of these students end their competitive play at this level, a small number parlay their talents into collegiate scholarship offers. Perceived injustice regularly pervades the landscape of team sports, particularly at levels of competition involving amateurs. With the stakes high for prep athletes to receive financial rewards for education, the role and subsequent decisions of the coach are under increased scrutiny. With a coach making decisions related to playing time, choosing the starters for a contest, and investing one-on-one time with a particular student, the stakeholders (e.g. the student-athlete and the parental units) perception of equity may misalign with that of the head coach. By understanding the perceptions of justice of an athlete provides a unique perspective to coaches in optimizing their relationship with their team. The concept of justice and the fair and equitable treatment of individuals is a common concern for most people. Justice pervades numerous events in peoples' lives, including equity in the classroom, fair treatment in the marketplace, integrity in the workplace, and impartiality on sports teams. There is a plethora of studies on justice in the organizational setting (Adams, 1963; Greenberg, 1993; Leventhal, 1980; Thibault & Walker, 1975), however, justice in sports has been a topic that has not been fully examined. For the most part these studies have concentrated on issues regarding sport administrations allocating resources (Mahony & Pastore, 1998; Pack, Jordan, Turner, and Haines, 2007; Mahony, Riemer, Breeding, and Hums, 2006; Hums & Chelladurai, 1994) and little has been done linking organizational justice to the dynamics of sports teams.

The misapplication of justice in the context of sport teams not only could have a negative effect on the career of high caliber athletes (e.g., little chance to play and thus not get the needed exposure to advance his/her athletic career) but also in the case of younger inexperienced athletes, it could influence their pre-disposition to continuing in the sport (Whisenant, 2005). Understanding athletes's perceptions of justice provides a unique perspective to coaches in optimizing their relationship with their team. Also, by examining the potential disconnect between the parent and the student can also set in motion coaches to become proactive in communication and other responsibilities owed to the vested stakeholders. The purpose of this pilot study was to uncover the perceptions of organizational justice within high school sports programs between three key stakeholders: the student-athlete, the parental unit, and the head coach.

Data was collected using a convenience sampling that included six high schools located in a large, Midwestern city. A total of 126 individuals representing 56 comparison groups (56 student-athletes, 56 parents, and 14 head coaches) responded the paper-and-pencil survey on organizational justice. The instrument was a modification from Colquitt (2001) by Whisenant (2005) that asked respondents to express, in a scale 1 to 7, the level of agreement which each of the organizational justice items (procedural $n=4$; distributive $n=4$, and interpersonal $n=3$). Items in each category were slightly modified to fit the three groups of respondents. Results indicated that reliabilities for each of the justice variables were acceptable for student-athletes (distributive = .91; interactional = .88; procedural = .86) and their parents (distributive = .97; interactional = .95; procedural = .92). Since only fourteen coaches participated and their perceptions were only used to compute difference scores, reliabilities were not calculated for coaches' justice perceptions. Among student-athletes, significant differences were found between males and females in perceptions of procedural justice, $t(54) = 2.96, p = .005$, and interpersonal justice, $t(54) = 2.96, p = .005$. In both cases, male student athletes (procedural $M = 5.95, SD = .98$; interpersonal $M = 6.56, SD = .57$) were higher in their perceptions than female student athletes (procedural $M = 4.86, SD = 1.54$; interpersonal $M = 5.75, SD = 1.63$). There were no significant differences in parents perceptions of justice based on gender. To determine if differences existed between the three groups (student-athletes, their parents, and their coaches) in perceptions of justice, difference scores were calculated. One sample t-tests were used to determine differences, with the test value set as 0 (i.e., no difference between the groups).

There were no significant differences in perceptions of justice between student athletes and their coaches or between student athletes and their parents. However, there was a significant difference between parents and coaches on procedural justice, $t(55) = -2.22, p = .031$. Interestingly, coaches scored this item lower than parents. Two key findings from the data warrant discussion. First, the difference in justice perceptions between genders is interesting. Whisenant (2005) found gender differences regarding distributive and interpersonal justice; this study found differences with procedural and interpersonal. Additionally, females had a lower perception of interpersonal justice than males. This could be explained due to there only being one female coach that participated in the study. Males may feel they relate better to their male coaches more so than females could relate to male coaches. A second finding is that in comparing the three stakeholder groups, only the parents and coaches had different

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

perceptions regarding procedural justice. Parents may feel that the procedures set forth by the coach are not just, yet the data indicates that the coaches also agree that their rules may not be entirely fair. Perhaps this is a result of the coach acknowledging that he or she may not be perfect in developing team rules, or an insecurity or inflexibility in developing the regulations of an athletic team. This study adds a new element to the organizational justice research by analyzing all three stakeholder groups involved in interscholastic athletics.

While data was difficult to gather due to the sensitive issues that arise from measuring fairness in athletics, future studies must find methods to gather a larger sample to help further draw inferences. Therefore, some of the limitations in this study include sample size and sampling bias (data from only voluntary participants). The theoretical and practical implications of these results were also discussed.