The Psychological Contract and Individual Effectiveness of Student-Athletes

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During their enrollment, the most important relationships student-athletes will form are those with their coaches and teammates (Coskley, 2004). There is evidence that these relationships can impact student-athlete attitudes and effectiveness. Donahue et al. (2007) and Lanning (1979) found that poor relationships between student-athletes and their coaches can have a detrimental impact on perceived performance. Coaches and student-athletes are important members of their campus community and vital components to their athletic department’s success. Cumulatively, grant-in-aid to student-athletes and compensation to coaches represents 34 percent of athletic department operating expenses for NCAA institutions at the Division I FBS level (Fulks, 2010). Athletic departments dedicate a substantial portion of their resources to insure success of their teams. Unfortunately, the body of literature examining the impact of student-athlete relationships on their affective outcomes remains limited. Jubenville et al. (2007) suggest that improving relationships between student-athletes and their coaching staffs may be a critical factor in the success of intercollegiate athletic programs. The purpose of this study is to examine student-athletes’ relationships with their coaches and teammates using psychological contract theory.

Psychological contract theory has gained wide acceptance among organizational behavior researchers as an important tool for examining relationships between individuals and organizations (Taylor & Tekleab, 2004; Zhao et al., 2007). Intercollegiate athletic teams are organizations (Ball, 1975, Chelladurai, 2009). Student-athletes form relationships with multiple coaches which can be influenced by messages received from teammates. Barnhill et al. (2010) established that student-athletes do form psychological contracts with their coaches. Their study was the first to examine psychological contracts in student-athletes and therefore largely exploratory. The impact of the psychological contract on student-athlete effectiveness has not been examined. Psychological contracts are defined as “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995). The subjective nature of the psychological contract often leads to the perception, by the individual, that the organization has breached the terms of the exchange agreement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The affective emotional state that frequently accompanies perceptions of breach is referred as psychological contract violation by researchers (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Psychological contract violation has been indicated to be a reliable predictor of critical employee attitudes such as trust in the organization (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), commitment (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), satisfaction (Kickul et al., 2002) and intention to leave (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Psychological contract violation is also a reliable predictor of individual effectiveness measures such as in-role performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Turnley et al., 2003).

The current study aims to identify a working model of psychological contract breach in student-athletes. Our model, which is based on the model of Zhao et al. (2007), proposes that a breach of the psychological contract will have a significant, positive relationship on the development of psychological contract violation, as well as significant, negative relationships with student-athletes’ trust in their coaches, attitudes toward their team, and individual effectiveness. We also propose that the development of psychological contract violation partially mediates the relationships between a breach and the other affective outcomes. Breach, psychological contract violation, trust in coaches, attitude toward team, and individual effectiveness are latent variables which must be inferred through the measurement of observable variables. Breach will be inferred by the measurement of perceived breach (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Psychological contract violation will be inferred by the measurement of interactional justice (Niehoff and Moorman, 1993), perceived cause of breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Turnley et al. 2003), and emotional effects of perceived breach (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Trust will be inferred by measuring affective and cognitive trust (McAllister, 1995). Attitude will be inferred by the measurement of affective and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), athlete satisfaction (Riemer & Chelladurai, 1998), and intentions to leave. Individual effectiveness will be inferred by the measurement of perceived performance, organizational citizenship behaviors towards individuals, and organizational citizenship behaviors toward the team (Williams & Anderson, 1991). A questionnaire was developed and will be administered to student-athletes at five NCAA Division I universities in the eastern United States. The questionnaire will be distributed by selected athletic department personnel at each university. Completed surveys will be returned to the athletic department in sealed envelopes and collected by researchers.

The collected data will be analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Confirmatory factor analysis will be conducted to establish the overall fit of the measurement model. Observed variables will be allowed to cross load, or load on multiple latent variables, if they are significantly related. The overall fit of the proposed structural model will be analyzed using root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the
goodness of fit index (GFI). Chi-square will also be analyzed. Alternative models will also be examined based on the results of the structural analysis.

We anticipate that the results of this study will illustrate the negative impact that breaches of the psychological contract can have on student-athletes’ trust in their coaches, attitudes toward their team, and individual effectiveness. The results of this study will also provide valuable information to intercollegiate athletic administrators and coaches highlighting importance of clear and effective communication with student-athletes. From a scholarly perspective, this study will add to the literature pertaining to psychological contract theory by contributing a working model of psychological contract breach. The model can be used in the further examination of relationships between athletes and sport organizations. Additional avenues for research, as well as implications for coaches and administrators, based on the results of this study, will be discussed during the presentation.