Using Social Cognitive Career Theory and Group Social Capital to Understand Student-Athletes’ Perceptions of the Coaching Profession

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Extant literature in sport management has long explored the racial and gender imbalances in the collegiate coaching profession (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Zgonec, 2010). Much of the research has been aimed directly at coaches themselves, thus, exploring for the existence of access discrimination (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005), treatment discrimination (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003), and perceived discrimination (Clopton & Sagas, 2008), among others. For gender differences, studies have looked at conflict in roles with friends or family (Pastore, 1992); with the coaching profession (Ogasawara & Chelladurai, 1998); and women exhibiting the desire to become a head coach (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1999). Moreover, gender differences were discovered among assistant coaches of women’s teams, with female coaches reporting lower scores of head coaching intentions, attitudes, and subjective norms than their male counterparts (Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006). Similarly, racial minority coaches report significantly more barriers to entering the coaching profession (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005) with fewer opportunities for professional advancement and are significantly more likely to leave the coaching profession earlier than White coaches (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006). Interestingly, though, scant research exists exploring these coaching perceptions among student-athletes, where the most viable pool of potential coaches exists (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). However, recently female student-athletes were found to be less likely to enter the coaching profession and perceived significantly more barriers to entry than did male student-athletes (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008). Further, Cunningham and Singer (2010) found that racial minority athletes expected more positive outcomes with coaching and reported greater intentions to pursue the profession, yet anticipated more barriers with the coaching profession than did White student-athletes. Thus, the purpose of this study became to explore perceptions of student-athletes regarding the coaching profession, but within the context of the team environment.

To assess the connection between perceptions of the coaching profession and the role of the team environment, group social capital was incorporated based upon its impact upon numerous salient group and individual outcomes, such as overall functioning (Bakker, van Emmerik, & Euwema, 2006), goal attainment (Ming-Huei, et al., 2008), and extra-role job performance (Bowler & Brass, 2006). The notion of group social capital is taken from the original social capital, where value is placed upon the quality of social networks among individuals (Burt, 2000) or within an organization (Leana & Van Buren, 1999) or community (Putnam, 2000). Researchers have discovered social capital as a solution to problems of coordination, high transaction costs, and problems of information communication between and among individuals (Lazega & Pattison, 2001). Here, though, group social capital is defined as the arrangement of group members’ social relationships within the social structure of the group itself, and delineated through the necessary resources for the group that can be generated (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004). Among the numerous physical, psychological, social, and organizational benefits from quality group social capital (Bakker et al., 2006), we anticipate that student-athletes on teams with higher levels of relative group social capital would be more likely to report more positive attitudes and perceptions regarding the coaching profession.

The use of group social capital and student-athletes’ perceptions was framed across the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), or the SCCT. This framework has been used in myriad settings to understand academic and career choices. SCCT posits that career development is constructed upon variables related to one’s self (person variables) and one’s environment (environmental variables). The three primary person variables are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals; while environmental variables mostly include various social barriers and supports. The interaction of these variables would, theoretically, influence the decision of student-athletes to pursue a specific major or to pursue the coaching profession, for example. The SCCT has been used in a similar context, being used to explain coaching intentions of racial minority student-athletes (Cunningham & Singer, 2010) and head coaching intentions of assistant coaches of women’s teams (Cunningham, Doherty, & Gregg, 2007).

Data were collected from randomly-selected undergraduate student-athletes across 23 colleges or universities at the Division I level of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Pre-notification letters for participation were sent electronically to the 1,600 randomly-selected students, while survey items were completed by 570 student-athletes for an overall response rate of 35.63%, a moderate and acceptable online response rate. To obtain a measure for group, or team, social capital, five items from the Social Capital Assessment Tool (Krisha & Shradler, 1999) were utilized and were based on social capital’s elements of trust and norms of reciprocity. The dependent variables were obtained through adapted items from measures in extant literature, including coaching efficacy (Doherty & Johnson, 2001), social supports and barriers (Lent et al., 2001), and positive and negative outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2001). To assess for the role of team social capital on the potential coaching intentions of

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student-athletes, five separate regressions were constructed for each of the dependent variables (coaching efficacy, perceived supports and barriers, and perceived positive and negative outcome expectations). For further control, individual demographic level variables were included in the initial step, while university and athletics-related control variables were included in step two. Interestingly, results confirm that team social capital does impact student-athletes' perceptions that are salient to the coaching profession. While no connection existed between team social capital and the personal self-efficacy for coaching, a slight but significant contribution did occur for the other four dependent variables of positive expectations for coaching ($R^2 \Delta = 0.02, \beta = 0.12, p < .05$), negative expectations for coaching ($R^2 \Delta = .06, \beta = -0.28, p < .001$), perceived potential social barriers to entering the coaching profession ($R^2 \Delta = 0.07, \beta = -0.30, p < .001$), and perceived potential social supports for entering the coaching profession ($R^2 \Delta = 0.02, \beta = 0.18, p < .01$). Notably, team social capital – or group social capital – contributed to these perceptions above and beyond the contributions of individual social capital.

Implications for these findings are numerous, as the current study was the first to delineate between individual and group-level social capital, and its potential impact upon student-athletes’ perceptions of entering the coaching profession. First, results suggest that coaches and coaching associations, in particular, should keep in mind the place of the quality of social networks maintained within teams. Not only is there a connection between group social capital and both group performance (Valentinov, 2004) and group effectiveness (van Emmerik & Brenninkmeijer, 2009), there now seems to be a connection to salient perceptions of entering the coaching profession. Coaching associations should be more proactive in assisting coaches in understanding and improving group social capital, as these student-athletes remain the most viable pool of candidates for the coaching profession. Second, future research is widely needed to test this potential relationship between the role of social networks (i.e. group social capital) and potential individual ramifications, such as professional or career intentions, but others such as life satisfaction and overall efficacy. While some outcomes have been measured against the college sport “experience,” scant research has operationalized this “experience” to a narrow, more-testable construct as social capital. It is recommended that future research include such an approach when examining potential outcomes related to student-athletes and coaches.