Coaching Environments And Student Athletes’ Perceptions of Support

Mark Vermillion, Wichita State University
Jeff Noble, Wichita State University

Abstract 2012-249

Saturday, May 26, 2012
20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(NG)

The purpose of the research was to measure student athletes’ perceptions of coaching environments as related to autonomy-supportive motivational climates. Division I AAA student athletes were surveyed (n=143) as part of a larger data collection process by the athletic department. Statistical results indicate overall positive perceptions of coaching environments by student athletes, but regression analyses indicate only 28% of the variance is explained by current variables/questions on athletic department survey instrument. Recommendations are provided.

Sport research centering on socio-cultural dimensions has become increasingly important to sport managers (Woods, 2007). With such a large number of sport management practitioners either interacting with coaches and athletes, or serving as coaches themselves, the more our discipline and industry understand the coach-athlete dynamic the better prepared sport manager practitioners can be to organize, execute, and influence sport dynamics in public/private settings. Additionally, the coach-athlete dynamic shares many similarities between the employer-subordinate dynamic within organizational settings based upon the “climate” of the work, organizational, or coaching environment. The knowledge generated by researching the coach-athlete dynamic provides useful information for sport managers attempting to better understand their own organizational dynamics, which share similar characteristics with coaching environments, such as power, status/authority, and unique emotional relationships. Finding ways to research complex sport-related organizations is a responsibility incumbent upon future sport managers. Indeed, social dynamics often overlooked within the sport community should be addressed by sport managers in an effort to evolve, change, or ameliorate negative impacts or inequities (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2003).

With the immense scrutiny the institution of sport receives from media outlets, a wide variety of groups (e.g. media, general public, organizational administrators, parents, boosters, etc.) has recognized the role of the “coach” in the lives of athletes, especially student athletes (Jones, Potrac, Cushion, & Ronglan, 2011). It can be posited that coaches exert on enormous influence and amount of power regarding not only in the development of athletic skills in student athletes’ lives, but also for developing an environment that aids in student, athlete, and individual development of young men and women (Josephson Institute: Center for Sport Ethics, 2011. The perceived quality of social interactions within the coach-designed social environment relates to the holistic development of collegiate student athletes (Coakley, 2009). Recent research has shown that exercise/physical activity participation is motivated and mitigated by supportive structures, such as peers or authority figures (Marcia, Roman, Galindo, Alonzso, and Gonzalez-Cutre, 2008). It could by hypothesized that coaches’ support of an “autonomous” environment where student athletes feel comfortable expressing their sport-related views to the coach—or coaching staff—may impact the quality of social interaction within a sport program. Indeed, coaching-specific research has previously identified the role of power in coaching contexts (Potrac & Jones, 2011), and the role of the coach in impacting social interaction with athletes (Ronglan, 2011). As a result, athletes pursue self-determined goals, which are set in place or influenced by those exogenous to athletes, such as coaches, in order to satisfy social-psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2007). Structural factors (e.g. type of sport, gender) may impact autonomous coaching environments, as well.

The purpose of this research is to examine Division I student athletes’ perceptions of coaching environments regarding how well the coach promotes an atmosphere where student athletes feel there is an autonomy-supportive motivational climate. Specifically, what impact does type of sport, gender of participant, and student classification have upon student athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ support of an autonomous, healthy coaching environment?

Using the sport climate questionnaire (SCQ) (SDT, Sport Climate Questionnaire, n.d.), student athletes from a public, urban serving university were surveyed during the fall of 2010. The SCQ is a validated and reliable instrument for measuring the athlete’s perception of coach-provided autonomy support (Balaguer, Castillo, Duda, & Tomas, 2009) and within this research the Cronbach’s alpha was .933, which is well above the accepted level within the social
sciences for a reliable scale. The university is a Division I AAA athletic department (i.e. no football program), which results in a slightly smaller athletic department. Nonetheless, student athlete responses were gathered from representatives of 94% of athletic program supported by the athletic department. After data collection 143 complete surveys were collected (n=143). Surveys were administered by the athletic department for internally collected, but NCAA mandated, data management. The SCQ was added to the already standing survey instrument. The sample was composed of more male than female athletes (51.7% vs. 48.3%) and of freshmen (34.3%), sophomores (22.4%), juniors (20.3%), seniors (15.4%), and 5th year seniors (7.7%). Race/ethnicity, age, and residency (i.e. foreign vs. domestic student athletes) were not included on the athletic department’s survey, and therefore not included in the results. Initial statistical results indicate an overall favorable view of coaches’ ability to provide autonomy within coaching environments, as measured by relatively high mean scores on the SCQ, which ranged from a possible score of 6 (low) to 49 (high). The mean score on the SCQ for student athletes in this sample was 31.24 (SD=8.526). However, regression analyses revealed the type of sport, gender, and academic classification explained only 28% of the variance in dependent variable (i.e. SCQ), thereby indicating that several other factors influence student athletes’ perceptions of coach-provided and autonomy-supportive motivational climates.

Findings indicate that over 70% of the variance regarding autonomous coaching environments is explained by factors other than gender, type of sport, and academic classification of student athletes, which were measured on the athletic department's survey. Additional questions such as race/ethnicity, age, and residency (foreign vs. domestic) should be included on subsequent data collection attempts in order to develop a more holistic picture of what influences student athletes’ perceptions of autonomous coaching environments. Understanding that an athletic department’s coaches are producing coaching environments that allow student athletes the opportunity to express themselves is extremely useful to many collegiate athletic administrators because it helps to develop an organizational culture where student athletes feel comfortable expressing their opinions and views. A clearer picture of what better explains student athletes perceptions of coaching environments will help not only coaches (and athletic administrators evaluating these coaches), but also assist other athletic department subunits charged with the task of student athlete development, such as student services. Additional recommendations are provided in an effort to inform departmental programs, policy development, or resource allocations within collegiate athletics.