Role Conflict, Psychological Distress, and College Athletes: An Application of Conservation of Resources Theory.

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The challenge of balancing academics and athletics has been an issue the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and athletic departments have repeatedly attempted to solve (Comeaux, 2013). Because being an athlete is not always compatible with being a student, student–athletes may feel stressed and conflicted about performing in the classroom and on the field. The time spent practicing, traveling, and competing can make it difficult for student–athletes to pursue a quality education and save time for personal activities. By trying to manage and balance multiple roles while in college, student–athletes face unique issues other students may not necessarily encounter (Jolly, 2008). The need to address such issues has been widely demonstrated in the literature (Ferrante, 1996; Gatson Gayles, 2009; Jolly 2008; Parham, 1993).

This conceptual study presents the first application of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to the student–athlete role conflict literature. Studies that examined this area of inquiry mostly relied on role theory (Adler & Adler 1991; Mahoney 2011; Killeya, 1999). However, this theory does not posit moderating variables that can help alleviate stress (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Although COR theory has been applied in the work–family context, it could be proven useful to understanding student–athlete role conflict by providing key recommendations on how to cope with stress when dealing with multiple roles. Aside from analyzing the direct effects academic–athletic role stressors may have on psychological distress, this study continues to build on the theory by examining cross-role and within-role mediations, and the moderating effects of personal characteristics on the link between role conflict and psychological outcomes.

The demands of being a student and an athlete may interfere with each other, and the burden of incompatible obligations from athletic and academic roles may cause psychological distress. Recognizing that such distress is enhanced whenever student–athletes attach importance to both roles, the literature has demonstrated that most student–athletes desire to perform well in both roles (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Lance, 1987; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997; Settles et al., 2002). Thus, student–athletes’ involvement in both academics and athletics demands a significant amount of time and energy that may cause psychological strain and affect their well-being (Simons & Van Rheenen, 2000). Therefore, the impact of academic–athletic role conflict on student–athletes’ mental health warrants an investigation of a stress model (i.e., COR theory).

Theoretical Framework

Based on several stress theories, COR theory is a comprehensive theoretical framework proposing that people seek to acquire, retain, and protect resources such as objects (e.g., cars, house), conditions (e.g., academic eligibility), personal characteristics (e.g., conscientiousness, self-esteem), and energies (e.g., time, money, knowledge) (Hobfoll, 1989). Stress will result in threatening situations in which the potential or actual loss of valued resources will be likely to occur. Multiple role conflicts can drain resources over time causing an accumulation of stress in which resources may be so depleted that the feeling of burnout is highly likely to result (Alarcon, Edwards, & Menke, 2011; Braunstein-Bercovitz, 2014; Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993; Jensen & Rundmo, 2014; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

While resource loss may cause psychological distress, resource gains may lead to improved psychological well-being and may even help people to better withstand resource losses (Hobfoll, Vinokur, Pierce, & Lewandowski-Romps, 2012). Indeed, acquiring support is viewed as a coping strategy for individuals attempting to balance their multiple role conflicts and to protect the loss of resources. In a COR theory context, support is a condition resource in which student–athletes believe that their coach, teammates, academic advisors, parents, friends, and professors care for them, respect them, and express a sense of belonging and mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976; Hobfoll, 1989). If student–
athletes do not perceive such support from any of these actors, they may feel more stressed about fulfilling their academic and athletic duties.

The construct “resources” is usually related to personal characteristics (i.e., learned traits and skills) such as conscientiousness and self-esteem (Alarcon et al., 2011). These resources may serve as a buffer against stress. All student–athletes will be challenged at one point or another throughout their athletic eligibility, and some will better cope with stress than others. Those who can manage to balance these competing demands may have personal characteristics that help them adjust to time constraints and role interference. Personal characteristics are important resources because they enable people to be more resilient against strain caused by role conflicts (Hobfoll, 1989). A conscientious student–athlete with high self-esteem may be less affected by a potential loss of resources because she or he has the ability to minimize resource depletion.

On the contrary, demands represent a potential threat of depleting valued resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Demands are linked to energy resources such as time, money, and knowledge. Student–athletes may acquire resources such as knowledge and money through their involvement in college athletics but may risk losing these resources due to time conflicts associated with the completion of both roles, which may cause stress. Thus, COR theory permits the investigation of the impact of demands placed on student–athletes and how they use resources to cope with their demands and resource loss. People with more resources to start with may be better able to protect their resources and may perceive demands as less taxing than people with less resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993).

Discussion and Conclusion

Participation in intercollegiate athletics is physically and mentally taxing, as student–athletes must manage complex and competing demands of their multiple role involvement. Living in stressful environments, student–athletes may be faced with serious mental health issues such as burnout, emotional exhaustion, physical and psychological health issues, and life distress. These challenges may seriously affect their college experience; thus in seeking to help a vulnerable population in one of the most critical times of their lives, the topic of academic–athletic role conflict warrants further investigation.

Recognizing the underlying mechanisms contributing to the psychological distress may assist student–athletes to better manage the competing time and energy demands of the athletic and academic roles and to better cope with stress. It may also provide university administrators and the NCAA with key recommendations to better balance academics, athletics, and personal life. Thus, by focusing on addressing student–athletes’ challenges in managing intricate college careers, this conceptual study serves a critical purpose by initiating the conversation about academic–athletic role conflict within a COR theoretical framework.