Effects of Abusive Leader Behaviors on Athletes’ Satisfaction and Commitment: Cross-National Differences between Hong Kong and Korean Student-Athletes

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Sport is interwoven into the fabric of life in societies throughout the world. Around 90% of youth in the United States, for example, participate in at least one organized sport before they graduate from high school (Salva, 2004). Parents often encourage their children to experience organized sports because sport participation can play a pivotal role in the social, psychological, and physical development of youth sport participants (Turman, 2006). In particular, the coaches involved with sport, from the youth level to even the professional level, play a significant role in how athletes develop. In collegiate sports, for example, student-athletes often spend more time with their coaches than with their parents (Donnelly, 1993). Thus, as athletes mature, the coach-athlete relationship may be more influential in the development of athletes' physical and psychological well-being than the relationship between athletes and their parents because the coach can become a primary caregiver and guardian of sorts to the student-athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Interestingly, although numerous studies have explored positive outcomes in sport, such as how coaching behaviors influence athlete well-being, comparatively fewer studies have examined negative elements of coaching, such as how abusive coaching behavior influence athlete well-being. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of abusive leader behaviors on collegiate athletes’ levels of satisfaction and commitment.

The study of abusive leader (coach) behaviors is important because of the harmful effects such behaviors can have on physical and psychological outcomes as well as organizational (team) outcomes. Emotional abuse represents “a pattern of deliberate non-contact behaviors within a critical relationship between an individual and caregiver that has the potential to be harmful” (Stirling & Kerr, 2013, p. 87). Abusive supervision in organizations can have harmful effects on individuals’ psychological outcomes (e.g. distress, depression, work–family conflict, job satisfaction, and commitment) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., job performance, counterproductive behaviors, organizational citizenship behaviors, and turnover) (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Ogunfowora, 2013). In the context of sport, Gervis and Dunn (2004) found that shouting, belittling, threats, and humiliation are the most common forms of emotional abuse that elite athletes receive from their coaches. Athletes who experience emotional abuse, no differently than individuals experiencing abusive supervision in non-sport contexts, often display a general sense of unhappiness, social withdrawal, and even depression (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

The present study on abusive leadership in the context of sport explores student-athletes’ perceptions of coaches’ behaviors and attitudes in Hong Kong and Korea. This is a cross-cultural exploration of the topic because student-athletes in the two countries are expected to differ in their perceptions and attitudes of abusive leadership. In Hong Kong, the University Sports Federation of Hong Kong (USFHK) creates programs for students to compete annually in collegiate sports among eleven institutions, whereas the Korea University Sport Federation (KUSF)'s role is limited to that of an advisory organization for various university competitions. Sport participation at the collegiate level in Hong Kong is competitive but not to the extent found in Korea. Collegiate sports in Korea are focused on elite sport development, and less than 0.5% of college students in Korea participate in organized sports. According to the USFHK, in the academic year of 2014 to 2015, around 3,700 (2,050 male and 1,650 female) students-athletes from 16 different sports participated in the USFHK competitions, which accounts for around 4% of university students in Hong Kong. In sum, Korea’s elite sport-oriented policies place a strong emphasis on winning and international competitiveness, which is not the case with collegiate sport in Hong Kong (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012).
A total of 289 Korean (55.5%) and 232 Hong Kong (45.5%) student-athletes completed the survey from twenty-one different sports, including track and field (13.2%), volleyball (9.0%), taekwondo (8.3%), judo (8.3%), and handball (7.9%). The questionnaire for this study consisted of 40 items, including demographics and five variables: (a) abusive leadership (AL), (b) supportive leadership (SL), (c) interpersonal justice (ITJ), (d) athletic satisfaction (AS), and (e) team commitment (TC). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Abusive leadership in the current study represents athletes’ perceptions of coaches’ hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Supportive leadership was included in the model to gauge the respective contributions of both leadership styles to athlete attitudinal outcomes.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to investigate the relationships among the five variables. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model. The maximum likelihood method estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) was employed to address the potential violation of multivariate normality frequently identified in the use of Likert scale items. To evaluate the overall fit of the measurement model, the chi-square per degree of freedom ratio ($\chi^2$/df), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) were used. Second, SEM was used to test the proposed structural model using both samples of groups. Third, for group comparisons, an independent-sample t-test was employed to compare AL, CSL, TC, and AS between two countries (Korea and Hong Kong).

The CFA revealed that the overall fit of the measurement model is adequate ($S-B \chi^2$/df = 898.27/265 = 3.46; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .05). Cronbach’s Alphas ranged from .82 to .94. The AVE values were greater than the squared correlation between the constructs, demonstrating acceptable discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All of the standardized factor loadings ranged from .54 to .93. The overall fit of the hypothesized structural model indicated the structural model provided acceptable values for all indices ($S-B \chi^2$/df = 941.30/267 = 3.53; CFI = .94; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .05). The direct paths from AL to TC and from AL to AS were significant and negative. The direct paths from SL to TC and from SL to AS were significant and positive. Meanwhile, the results of the structural model for each group showed no difference in terms of the directions and significance of the relationships. The results from the Sobel z-test indicated ITJ partially mediated the relationship between AL and AC, AL and AS, SL and AC, and SL and AS. However, the results from the t-tests yield significant differences in all of the constructs (AL, SL, TC, AS) for Hong Kong and Korean student-athletes (AL: $t(518)=-2.99$, p < .001; SL: $t(518)=2.99$, p < .001; TC: $t(519)=-6.41$, p < .001; AS: $t(519)=6.41$, p < .001). Namely, student-athletes in Korea perceived high level of AL and low levels of SL, TC, ITJ, AS, and TC. Key points from these results are that abusive leadership led to negative consequences and supportive leadership led to positive consequences. Additionally, with the Korean sample, a small number of student-athletes who reported high pressure for winning showed lower levels of supportive leadership, satisfaction, and commitment as well as high levels of abusive leadership.