Examining the Change in Leadership Process Through a Social Construction of Leadership Lens among Intercollegiate Athletes

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Introduction and Relevant Literature

Much research has been done on leadership in sport, spanning numerous theories, processes, and contexts (Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou, & Burton, 2015). Despite the historical presence of leadership in sport management research (Welty Peachey et al., 2015), little research has examined the nature of changes in leadership and the accompanying processes during the change. Researchers have mainly focused on turnover intentions among employees (Wells & Welty Peachey, 2011), intercollegiate athletic department personnel (Welty Peachey, Burton, & Wells, 2014), and gender differences among leaders (Wells, Welty Peachey, & Walker, 2014). However, leadership succession (Hargreaves, 2008) remains an area in need of further exploration in order to determine best practices for changing leadership (Gill, 2010) and selecting a new, effective leader. Otherwise, teams and organizations risk choosing someone unfit for a leadership position (Kotter, 2008).

To aid in examining the leadership succession process, we believe the social construction of leadership to be a viable lens to inform the process. The social construction of leadership relates to the perception of others as potential leaders (Billsberry et al., 2018). A key population, which can possess leadership positions on intercollegiate athletic teams are the student-athletes (Staurowsky, 2014), particularly those who obtain a formal leadership position as a team captain. However, besides a team vote or a coach appointing the team captains, little is known about how or why student-athletes perceive certain teammates over others to be leaders. Particularly during the offseason for a team when the previous captains are no longer on the team. With no formal team captains, the players are open to perceiving others as potential leaders (Billsberry et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to examine how student-athletes perceive themselves and their teammates as leaders, and how such perceptions affect who becomes a team captain. The following research questions guided our study:

RQ1: How do student-athletes perceive themselves or their teammates as leaders during their offseason?

RQ2: How do such perceptions affect who student-athletes choose to be their team captains?

Method

To address the above research questions, a time series questionnaire approach (Bauer, Erdogan, Liden, & Wayne, 2006) will be employed in Spring of 2020, during an intercollegiate women’s soccer team’s offseason. The questionnaire will consist of open-ended questions related to the social construction of leadership, and ask participants to rate their own leadership capabilities and those of their teammates. Three time points of data collection will occur, in adherence to previous time series research (Bauer et al., 2006): one week before we conduct a leadership seminar for the team; at the end of the seminar; and time three will be collected approximately three weeks after the seminar when the new team captains will be identified.

Implications

We expect results to yield that student-athletes who are perceived the most by their teammates as leaders will become the new team captains. We believe the results will also enhance our understanding of the leadership succession process through the social construction of leadership.