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Athletes' criticism of coaching behavior: Differences among gender, and type of sport

Abstract: Most athletes are subject to intense mental and physical pressure not only during competition but also during practice. An important variable which may influence athletes' performance is coaching behavior. The aim of the present study is to investigate if coaching behavior and its antecedents differentiate athletes according to their gender, type of sport, competition experience and weekly practice-time. The sample consisted of 367 male and female athletes who participated in both individual and team sports. They completed the Greek version of the "Coaching Behavior Questionnaire" (CBQ). Results indicated that coaching behavior differentiated athletes of individual sports, and athletes of team sports and experienced women with experienced men. Furthermore, coaches' behavior contributed to the differentiation on athletes who practice more than those who practice less. In conclusion, these results could help athletes, coaches and sport professionals become more familiar with psychological aspects that influence athletes' behavior.

Key words: positive behavior, negative behavior, weekly practice, athletic experience

1. Introduction

Anshel (1990) on his research made a distinction between successful and effective coach. By successful coach he meant the individual who seeks and manages to achieve victories, oblivious to meet the needs of players, while the average effective coach refers to the one who focuses on meeting the needs of the athletes. In the long term, the second approach usually enhances the motivation of athletes, their dedication to the team and the pleasure of their participation.

Over the past few decades, the majority of research in sport leadership has been directed toward identifying particular coaching styles that are most effective for successful performance and/or positive psychological athletic performance (Horn, 2002). Horn's model (2002) included three assumptions that influence these styles. These assumptions are: (a) the antecedent factors (i.e. sociocultural context, organizational climate, and personal characteristics of the coach) and athletes' personal characteristics (e.g. age, gender, etc.) exert influence on coaches' behavior indirectly through coaches' expectancies,

beliefs, and goals, (b) the effect of coaches' behavior on athletes' evaluation and on team's performance and, (c) the effectiveness of various coaching interventions who are influenced by situational factors and individual differences. According to another researcher (Jowett, 2005), the relationship between coach and athlete, can be described on two measurements: (1) prizewinning relationships (successful or unsuccessful), and (2) caring and helpful relationships (effective and ineffective).

A series of research in sport psychology, (Jowett & Cockermill, 2002; Poczwadowski, Henscen, & Barrot, 2002; Jowett, Paull, & Pensgraard, 2005), is focused on the study of coaching behavior of team and individual sports. Considering the importance of the coaching behavior where it has a main effect on the quality and the success of the athletic experience of an athlete, there is little research which identifies the best coaching behaviors and the factors that affect the effectiveness of specific athletes' behaviors (Patriksson & Eriksson, 1990).

Problematic situations which a coach may face and can affect his leadership, inevitably lead him to active

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solutions. Accordingly, coach's main responsibilities are (Crisfield, Cabral, & Carpenter, 2003):

- To identify and meet the needs of each athlete.
- To improve the performance of the athlete through a challenging and guided program for both practice-time and competition.
- Evaluate the success of the program based on the needs of each athlete.
- To create a sport based environment where athletes are motivated in order to continue trying to improve their performance levels.

In order for the coach to execute the previous responsibilities with success he is required to undertake a range of roles:

- 1) As a leader.
- 2) As a teacher.
- 3) As a driving force that creates a positive and decisive environment towards athlete's development.
- 4) As a friend who supports the athlete.
- 5) As a manager who organizes and plans.
- 6) As a social worker who provides advice.
- 7) As a scientist involved in the analysis, evaluation and resolution of problems.
- 8) As a student who listens, learns and develops coaching skills and knowledge.
- 9) As a guardian who protects the athletes from injury, promoting health and physical conditioning and protects sport values (Crisfield, Cabral, & Carpenter, 2003).

The differences identified in the effectiveness of coaching between individual and team sports are determined by the social structure of the two different types of sports. Team sports require the coach to focus on teamwork, whereas on individual sports – the behavior of the coach focuses on the athlete. Team sport athletes not only require the need of guidance and support of the coach, but also, the attention, assistance and confidence of their teammates. The coach should be able to create a sense of unity. This aspect is formed when group members feel, think and act like a person (Jowett, 2009). According to Olympiou, Jowett, and Duda (2008), athletes who participated in team sports identified their relationship with their coach as the main driving force for success. Their results proved that the intrinsic motivation climate that coaches created, directly reflected athletes' perceptions on team commitment which interacted in a complementary manner with their coach.

Chiu, Mahat, Hua, and Radzuwan (2013), mentioned that team sport coaches who are greater as athletes' motivators, are better on strategy decisions, use the appropriate coaching techniques in order to build successful athletic personalities, in comparison with individual sport coaches. According to the same researchers, such findings may explain the fact that team sport coaches have greater management skills. Finally, the same research reported that team sport athletes preferred coaches with an autocratic behavior, who are concerned with training, giving instructions and provide positive feedback, compared with athletes of individual sports.

In individual sports athletes' skills are more instructional oriented rather than social focused. Furthermore, in individual sports athletes' skills are developed when the athletes themselves perceive that their greater effort is rewarded by the coach and that the coach behaves respectfully to all athletes (Boen, Cuyper, & Opdenacker, 2006).

According to a study conducted in young swimmers Alfermann, Lee, and Wuerth (2005), found out that the athletes improved over time, when they received greater attention from their coach. Moreover, it was found that positive feedback contributed to skill development. It was also established that the creation of a positive reinforcement climate by the coach has a positive effect on athletes' skill development. Therefore, coaches should spend more time instructing and guiding each athlete personally and have the opportunity to give – each of them separately detailed feedback on their performance. Finally, the results of the study focused on the aspect that good individual sport coaching is focused on constructive instruction and positive feedback while the same time coaches are interested in creating a climate towards the development of such behaviors. Nicolas, Gaudreau, and Franche (2011) results indicated the fact that supportive coaching behaviors can act as a catalyst for the use of problem solving strategies which in turn have a directly positive effect on athlete-coach relationship in individual sports.

Gosselin (2002) notes that successful men coaches usually have strong personalities that drive athletes with a strong presence and will. Gosselin also mentioned that male athletes do not need to have a personal relationship with their coach, they just need his respect. Guiding males usually involves the use of intimacy, which – is demonstrated by the bosses and coaches through the use of power, force and authoritarian style (Singh, Nadim, & Ezzedein, 2012).

According to Navarre (2011), because men athletes are more performance oriented, they are focused on a more centralized leadership style in relation with their coach than women athletes. According to coaches, male athletes pay more attention and respect to the understanding of the team hierarchy in relation to female athletes. Moreover, despite the fact that women athletes can make a greater effort to interact with their coach, that does not mean that men athletes give less attention to their relationship with their coach. Finally, the research illustrated the fact that men athletes need to receive more personal and harsh criticism, in relation to women athletes.

On the other hand, female athletes may be adversely affected by excessive coach's obsession with competitiveness. Therefore, coaching behaviors that are traditionally accepted by male athletes may be considered harsh, rude, unfair and not sufficiently supportive of today's female athletes (Stewart & Taylor, 2000). Horn and Carron (1985) in a study carried out in Canadian Universities female athletes and their relationships with their coaches, found out that only when athletes perceive that their coach demonstrated a desirable behavior which included positive feedback, their relationship is likely to be evaluated as compatible (by the athlete). On the contrary, if

the athlete perceive that the feedback provided by the coach is minimal, then the relationship is likely to be evaluated as incompatible (by the athlete). Female athletes want to know that there is a “connection” with their coach and that the coach cares for them personally. Hence, coaches should be aware that female athletes want to develop personal relationships with them, and they place great value on personal improvement (Gosselin, 2002).

According to bibliography different assessment tools were developed in order to obtain coaching behavior such as “PBS” by Smith, Smoll, and Curtis (1978) which was developed in order to explore athletes’ perceptions of coaching behavior, and Chelladurai and Riemer’s (1998) “AS” measuring athletes’ satisfaction. Additionally, Williams and his co-researchers (2003) developed the Coaching Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ), a more comprehensive instrument for the assessment of several aspects of coaching behaviors such as positive and negative behavior. This tool was introduced in the Greek sport society by Zourbanos and his colleagues in 2010.

Thus, because research is minimal on the interaction of gender, type of sport and coaching behavior in Greece, the aim of this study was addressed in that direction. More specifically, the research tries to shed some light on the effect of coaching behavior on the elements of gender, type of sport, athletic experience and weekly practice-time.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Participants consisted of 367 athletes, 200 males (54.5%) and 167 females (45.5%), between the ages of 15 to 39 years of age ($M = 20.05$, $SD = 3.82$) (Table 1).

2.2. Instrumentation

To assess coaches’ behavior, the Greek version (Zourbanos et al., 2010) of “Coaching Behavior Questionnaire” (CBQ) (Williams et al., 2003) was administered in order to investigate its two dimensions:

(a) positive behavior (8 items, e.g., My coach displays confidence in me as a player) and (b) negative behavior (7 items, e.g., My coach’s behavior during a game makes me worry about my performance). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly disagree (1) and Strongly agree (4) and were asked to indicate their perceptions of their coaches’ behavior during training and competition. Athletes also indicated their gender, type of sport (i.e. individual or team), competition experience and weekly practice-time (Bebetos & Konstantoulas, 2006) (Table 1).

2.3. Measurement Procedure

The method chosen to conduct the research was that of self-completed questionnaire. Researcher informed all subjects that their participation was completely voluntary and the individual responses would be held in strict confidence. Athletes completed their perceptions of coaches’ behavior under the supervision of the author, without the presence of the coach, in practice sessions before the warm-up period.

2.4. Statistical Analyses

Initially, descriptive statistics were performed. Additionally, Univariate Anova Analyses were also introduced in order to examine any possible sample differences.

3. Results

3.1. Psychometric characteristics

Using the Cronbach coefficient α , internal consistency ranged for Positive Behavior .78 and for Negative Behavior .75. It must be mentioned that relatively low consistency might occur due to few number of items in the factors (Kim & Mueller, 1978). It should be noted that the factors in this study showed similar loadings and internal consistency with those reported by Williams et al. (2003) and Zourbanos et al. (2010).

Table 1. Participants’ descriptive statistics

| Male | | Female | | | |
|------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| 200 (54.5%) | | 167 (45.5%) | | | |
| Team Sport | | Individual Sport | | | |
| 250 (68.1%) | | 117 (31.9%) | | | |
| Competition Experience | | | | | |
| 1–7 | | 8–11 | | 12–> | |
| 132 (36.2%) | | 107 (29.2%) | | 126 (34.5%) | |
| Weekly Practice | | | | | |
| 1 st (1–3) | | 2 nd (4–5) | | 3 rd (6–>) | |
| 110 (30%) | | 166 (45.2%) | | 91 (24.8%) | |

3.2. Univariate Anova Analyses

3.2.1. Gender and Competition Experience

3.2.1.1.

Univariate analyses were conducted in order to find any type of gender and/or athletic experience related differences. The analyses revealed significant differences in both gender and athletic experience variables (Table 2):

- (1) For the factor "Positive Behavior" ($F_{2,362} = 5.19$; $p < .05$). More specifically, the post hoc multiple comparisons Bonferonni test indicated the differences only between the most experienced (3rd) women's group ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .074$), with the most (3rd) experienced men's group ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .047$).
- (2) For the factor "Negative Behavior" ($F_{2,362} = 3.64$; $p < .05$). More specifically, the post hoc multiple comparisons Bonferonni test indicated the differences only between the most experienced (3rd) women's group ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .088$), with the most experienced (3rd) men's group ($M = 2.18$, $SD = .052$).

3.2.1.2. Gender and Type of Sport

Univariate analyses were conducted in order to find any type of gender and/or type of sport related differences. The analyses revealed significant differences in both gender and type of sport variables. More specifically (Table 3):

- (1) For the factor "Negative Behavior" ($F_{1,365} = 6.31$; $p < .05$). More specifically, the post hoc multiple comparisons Bonferonni test indicated the differences only among athletes of individual sports, were women ($M = 2.49$, $SD = .072$) had higher scores than men ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .061$).

3.2.2. Weekly practice-time and Type of Sport

Univariate analyses were conducted in order to find any type of weekly practice-time and/or type of sport related differences. The analyses revealed significant differences in both weekly practice-time and type of sport variables. More specifically (Table 3):

- (1) For the factor "Positive Behavior" ($F_{1,365} = 3.91$; $p < .05$). More specifically, the post hoc multiple comparisons Bonferonni test indicated the differences only between the weekly practice time, were athletes with the most frequent weekly practice time (3rd group) had higher score ($M = 2.81$, $SD = .042$) than athletes with the least frequent (1st group) ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .027$).
- (2) For the factor "Negative Behavior" ($F_{1,365} = 4.53$; $p < .05$). More specifically, the post hoc multiple comparisons Bonferonni test indicated the differences only between the weekly practice time, were athletes with the least frequent practice time (1st group) ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .051$) had higher score than athletes with the most ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .033$).

4. Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate any possible relation between coaching behavior and gender, type of sport, competition experience and weekly practice time. To our knowledge, no similar studies have been conducted on the specific topic – in sport psychology in Greece. Therefore, discussion and conclusions from the present study reflect a first attempt to interpret the relation of

Table 2. Univariate Anova Analyses for gender, competition experience and type of sport

| Competition Experience | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Factors | Men | Women |
| Positive Behavior | $M = 2.64$, $SD = .047$ | $M = 2.94$, $SD = .074$ |
| Negative Behavior | $M = 2.18$, $SD = .052$ | $M = 2.38$, $SD = .088$ |
| Type of Sport | | |
| Factor | Men (Individual Sports) | Women (Individual Sports) |
| Negative Behavior | $M = 2.28$, $SD = .061$ | $M = 2.49$, $SD = .072$ |

Table 3. Univariate Anova Analyses for weekly practice-time and type of sport

| Type of Sport | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Individual Sports | Team Sports |
| Positive Behavior | $M = 2.81$, $SD = .042$ | $M = 2.71$, $SD = .027$ |
| Negative Behavior | $M = 2.39$, $SD = .051$ | $M = 2.26$, $SD = .033$ |

coaching behavior on gender with relation to sport specific topics such as type of sport, competition experience, and weekly practice-time.

With regard to the first question and second question of the study results proved that coaching behavior differentiated participants according to gender in relation to the competition experience and type of sport. In both analyses, women had higher scores than men. According to the results even on experienced athletes' level, women show greater "attachment" to emotional aspects of coaching behavior, so they are characterized as more sentimental and emotional (Harrell, 1980; Rayburn, Goetz, & Osman, 2001; Thon et al., 2012). As a result, stronger negative and/or positive coaching behaviors have greater impact in their psychological profile. On the contrary, past research indicated that male athletes are less affected by negative sport outcomes such as anxiety, negative coaching behavior, negative comments, e.t.c. (Mahoney, 1989; Goudas, Theodorakis, & Karamousalidis, 1998; Karamousalidis et al., 2010). Studies of Riemer and Chelladurai (2001), and Papadopoulou et al. (2006), underlined the importance of indicators such as external agents, strategy, training and instructions, ethics, and coaching behavior, to play a major role of athletes' personal outcome.

As for the third study question (type of sport), results demonstrated that athletes of individual sports are more affected by coaching behavior. As Sandstrom (2012) in his research stated, when the athlete's practices grew harder, he received greater attention, especially technically, by the coach. The athlete felt that he was the center of the relationship and that the coach believed in him. Individual sports give the opportunity for deeper relationships to develop. Baker, Yerdley and Cote (2003), reported that individual sport athletes indicated that coach leadership was less affected by measures such as mental preparation, personal support, technical skills and goal setting. The authors concluded that is of major importance to take into account sport type when investigating the relation among antecedent coaching behaviors in relation to athletes' perceptions.

Alfermann and her colleagues (2005) pointed out that positive feedback and mastery climate played an additional positive role for athletes' skill development in individual sports. Furthermore, other studies pointed out the relation of these factors with satisfaction (Horn, 2002), and motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Duda & Hall, 2001; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Comprehending the essentials of what increases athletes' skill development and satisfaction can provide better management insights into developing effective strategies that will allow coaches to create new opportunities and value for their athletes (Kioumourtoglou, Tzetzis, Derri, & Mihalopoulou, 1997; Zetou et al., 2011). Similar to Alfermann's et al. (2005) study, also results of this study might occur due to the fact that the number of athletes practicing in the same team is smaller in individual sports than in team sports. Thus, with regard to the forth question (weekly-practice time) coaches can spend more time in instructing and teaching each athlete individually, and they can give detailed feedback

in the form of positive reinforcement on each individual athlete's performance (Vernadakis, Zetou, Antoniou, & Kioumourtoglou, 2002; Vernadakis, Zetou, Avgerinos, Giannousi, & Kioumourtoglou, 2006). Consequently, athletes benefit from the intensive attention/support of their coaches, particularly, when coaches provide a positive climate that emphasizes individual progress. On the contrary, research identified that the less weekly practice time leads to greater negative inter-relation between athlete and coach. Athletes feel as a foreign body in the team and do not show confidence indicators on within their relation with their coach (Zetou et al., 2008).

One limitation of the current investigation was the self-report methodology that was employed, which might have not shown some other potential coaching behaviors.

5. Conclusion

Smoll and Smith in 1989 stated that the effectiveness of the leadership appears into the behavior of the leader and in the eyes of the observer. Also, sport type is a major moderator in coaching behavior analyses. Overall, the present findings suggest that coaches perceived behavior is directly related to athletes' perceptions according to the gender, type of sport and weekly practice time that they are involved in.

6. Future Research

Having shed some light on the nature of this relationship between coaches' behavior and athletes' perceptions, the results of this study may facilitate a better understanding of the differentiation among the nature of sports, and guide further research.

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