Athletes' Perceptions of Role Acceptance in Interdependent Sport Teams

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Roles are structural components of groups and represent the patterns of behavior expected of an individual within a specific social context (Biddle, 1979). Literature in sport as well as organizational domains has emphasized the importance of roles in groups characterized by a high degree of task interdependence (Carron & Eys, 2012; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In other words, in interdependent groups where performance is the main goal, the differentiation and specialization of role responsibilities is crucial to team effectiveness (Wageman, Fisher, & Hackman, 2009).

Kahn et al. (1964) developed a theoretical framework to examine the nature of how role expectations are transmitted in a group setting. Underscoring the importance of roles in sport, researchers have embraced this framework to examine a number of aspects related to the generation, communication, and execution of role responsibilities in interdependent teams. For example, how well an athlete understands his/her role responsibilities (i.e., role clarity) is positively linked with perceptions of group cohesion, leadership behaviors, and individual role performance outcomes (e.g., Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002; Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2005; Bosselut, McLaren, Eys, & Heuzé, 2012). However, though ensuring athletes understand their role responsibilities is important, athletes who choose not to subsequently accept the responsibilities/expectations defined for them will likely eradicate any positive outcomes of clear role communication processes (Benson, Surya, & Eys). As such, scholars have posited that accepting one's role is a fundamental process related to the performance of role responsibilities and, ultimately, the group (Carron & Eys, 2012)—a sentiment that is echoed in the popular media as the following quote illustrates:

> When you're talking about winning at the highest level, individual needs for minutes and touches, if that stuff comes into the equation, then you got guys who aren't about the right things...Anybody who presents themselves with that kind of selfishness isn't deserving of being in a Mavericks' uniform. This isn't going to be about role definition. It's going to be about role acceptance. (Rick Carlisle, head coach for the National Basketball Association's Dallas Mavericks; Sefko, 2010, para. 5).

Despite anecdotal and academic commentary regarding the potential importance of role acceptance, a review of the available literature identified that there are no existing theoretical frameworks that provide a strong conceptual basis to examine role acceptance. In fact, it is necessary to examine several divergent areas of research to provide some insight into the cognitive processes that may be occurring when individuals appraise the expectations others hold for them in a small group environment. Early examinations of attitude change elucidated how individuals conform to the expectations of others, and how these processes are affected by social influences. Gerard and Deutsch's (1955) work concerning normative social influences suggested that group membership could enhance the degree to which individuals conform to the expectations of others. Kelman (1958) explained that this phenomenon could be attributed to an individual's motivation to maintain social relationships with group members and adhere to the collective interests of the group. In a team sport environment, it is likely that group membership results in the application of numerous social pressures that can serve to influence an individual's acceptance of a role.

It is also important to highlight an individual's own perspective with respect to accepting responsibilities. In a study focused on the processes of accepting responsibilities associated with citizenship, Doheny (2007) summarized earlier work by Habermas (1990) to provide four possible perspectives. First, an *egoist* perspective is one in which individuals accept their responsibilities to receive rewards or avoid punishments. Second, a *conformer* perspective pertains to individuals who accept a responsibility because of desires to match societal norms and/or perceptions that the expectation is reasonable. Third, individuals who accept a responsibility out of a sense of personal obligation are termed *reformers*. Finally, a *reflector* perspective is one in which individuals assess expectations and judge their acceptance of them based on whether the expectations are principled and coincide with personal values.

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A third example of related literature pertains to the degree to which individuals will be acceptant of others' expectations. Eagly and Telaak (1972) empirically demonstrated that people differ on the degree by which they are influenced by a suggestion or judgment, resulting in a "latitude of acceptance." Further, several other variables influence the consideration of others' expectations including the ability (e.g., concentration of an individual) and motivation (e.g., importance of situation) of an individual to process the appropriate information of a situation, as well as more subtle factors such as the time of day, mood, and setting (Wood, 2000). Taken together, it is apparent that an individual's evaluation of expectations and demands can be influenced by a number of personal, situational, and environmental factors.

While the previous literature focused on the evaluation of expectations from an attitudinal or societal perspective, Biddle's (1979) work concerning role theory offered the earliest explicit discussion of expectations as they specifically pertain to role acceptance in small groups. A primary focus of role theory was to examine how normative expectations are transmitted in a social setting. Accordingly, Biddle (1979) suggested that role acceptance was predicated on the comparison of role expectations between individuals. This provided a basis for the present working definition that refers to role acceptance as "a dynamic, covert process that reflects the degree to which an athlete perceives his or her own expectations for role responsibilities as similar to, and agreeable with, the expectations determined by his or her role senders" (Eys, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2006, p. 246).

Within a sport context, researchers have only tangentially focused on athlete role acceptance. For instance, Grand and Carron (1982) included general items pertaining to the concept within the Team Climate Questionnaire; however, these were assessed in conjunction with items specifically assessing role satisfaction. As a point of clarification, Eys, Schinke, and Jeffery (2007) more recently differentiated that the concept of role satisfaction refers to the emotions one can experience in regard to a role, whereas acceptance refers to a cognitive appraisal of a role. As a second sport example, Bray (1998) assessed role acceptance and role satisfaction as distinct concepts, although they were of secondary concern to his main focus of role efficacy (i.e., an athlete's beliefs in his/her abilities to execute interdependent role functions).

Role acceptance has also emerged in qualitative examinations of team dynamics. An ethnographic study of one intercollegiate soccer team suggested that the development of group cohesion and the clarity of role expectations were positively associated with the acceptance of roles (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). Most recently, an examination focused on the formation of positive role states offered additional insight into factors that serve to influence role acceptance within an intercollegiate soccer team (Mellalieu & Juniper, 2006). First, perceived effectiveness and personal importance of an assigned role were suggested to be important contributors to the acceptance process. Second, athletes' perceptions of the credibility

of their coach and the exhibited leadership style served to influence the overall degree of role acceptance within the team (Mellalieu & Juniper, 2006).

In sum, it is apparent that role acceptance (a) is a practical concern of coaches and athletes as evidenced by anecdotal reports in popular media, (b) represents a complex construct that potentially has important relationships with other group (e.g., conformity) and individual variables/theories (e.g., attitude change), but (c) has yet to receive the focus of a systematic investigation. As such, three specific objectives were pursued in the current study through interviews with interdependent sport team athletes. First, a greater understanding of how the concept of role acceptance was viewed from athletes' perspectives was desired. Following from this objective, athletes' perceptions of the potential antecedents (second objective) and consequences (third objective) of role acceptance were also explored. To accomplish these objectives, a qualitative exploratory approach was employed with descriptive phenomenology as its guiding theoretical orientation. The strength of this method lies in the theoretical articulation of vaguely defined concepts, allowing for one to better understand the phenomenon under study (Giorgi, 2009).

Methods

Participants

The sample included 15 intercollegiate male ($n = 8$) and female ($n = 7$) athletes ($M_{age} = 21.33$, $SD = 1.29$). Participants were members of an intercollegiate sport team during the 2010–2011 academic school year who competed in an interdependent sport (i.e., basketball, football, soccer, lacrosse, and rugby). Interviews were conducted after the conclusion of the season. The sample included starters ($n = 10$), nonstarters ($n = 4$), and a practice player ($n = 1$). The athletes had an average team tenure of 3.26 years ($SD = 1.33$)

An additional four intercollegiate athletes were recruited for verification interviews once the data analysis of the original interviews was completed. These participants (2 females and 2 males) were similar to the initial participants in terms of age ($M = 22.50$, $SD = 0.57$ years), sport type (i.e., basketball, football, and rugby), and average team tenure ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.50$ years).

Semistructured Interviews

The primary means of data collection was through the use of semistructured phenomenological interviews. The development of the key questions pertaining to role acceptance was informed by two theoretical frameworks. In consideration of Biddle's (1979) proposition that role responsibilities are contextually specific and are unique to the individual who holds them, initial questions aimed to elicit the unique and salient features of each athlete's role. In addition, questions were also developed on the basis of recent research utilizing the role episode model