Variability of Athletes' Perception of Their Coaches and the Importance of This Image in Their Relations

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Abstract: The aim of this study is characterizing the variability of the athletes' perceptions of their coaches and understand how this image could affect their relations in the field. The study involved 228 athletes (171 males, 57 females), aged between 13 and 28 years old, provided from individual sports and team sports. We used the Portuguese version of Player Coach Interaction Inventory (Inventário da Interacção Treinador-Atleta). Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics, T-Student, ANOVA and Bonferroni test. The results showed that, globally, athletes had a very positive image of coaches and the factor with a high value was the personal qualities (sincerity, honesty, intelligence…) following by leadership. Several factors were significantly influenced by athlete's gender, competitive level and type of sport practiced.
Keywords: Athlete's perceptions, Coach, Competitive level, Type of sport.

I.   Introduction

The coach-athlete interaction has been an area of interests and research in the field of Sport Pedagogy. This interaction is made of behaviors assumed by coach and athletes, being important to know which of these aspects are most valued during the interaction.

Smith, Smoll and Curtis (1978, 1979), developed studies, considered as pioneers in this field (Piéron, 1988; Trudel, Côté & Donohue, 1993) where intended to understand the relationship between the coach and Baseball Players of the American league, and, the influence of the leader coach's behavior. Authors concluded that the individual characteristics of coaches, as leaders, influenced the perception of players about their coach, determining, often, the subsequent behavior.

The research, in that specify area, had focus several aspects as: understand how variables like gender, type of sport practiced, and age could affect the perception that athletes had about coach (Elmore, 1987); athletes' satisfaction about their coach (Bertoli, Malignaggi & Robazza, 1995; Curtner-Smith, Wallace & Wang, 1999; Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995); coach's leadership behavior perceived by the athletes (Hampson & Jowett, 2012; Saborowski, Alfermann & Würth, 1999).

Rolla (1988), using a Portuguese version of *Coach Player Interaction Inventory* (Medford & Thorp, 1986) developed by Leitão, Serpa and Bartolo (1995), named *Inventário da Interacção Treinador-Atleta (IITA),* studied the image that basketball players had about their coach and conclude that significant differences was found considering their practices level (cadets, juniors, seniors and League).

More recently, using the IITA, too, Rosado, Palma, Mesquita and Perla Moreno (2007), characterized the image of football players about their coaches, according to their level of practice, and verified that the image of the coaches was similar according to their level of practice and are clearly positive.

II.   Purpose

Is important to understand the differences of image presented by the athletes from their coach. How varies the perception between them? This insight will contribute to a different performance by the athlete? It will determine aspects such as motivation, resilience, commitment, responsibility and so many more?

The aim of present work is characterizing the image that athletes have on their coaches, and more specifically we intend to:

(1) identify the characteristics of coaches, most and least valued by athletes;

(2) characterize the athletes' perceptions of their coaches considering athletes gender, school level, competitive level and type of sport practiced.

III.   Method

We used a design quantitative nonexperimental descriptive study. Participants include 228 athletes. We used the Portuguese version of *Player Coach Interaction Inventory* (Medford & Thorpe, 1986, developed to portuguese by Leitão, Serpa and Bártolo, 1995 – the *Inventário de Interacção Treinador–Atleta (I.I.T.A).* Data was collected, and a data analysis was done using. the Statistical Package for Social Sciences Software (IBM SPSS Statistics 21). The level of significance was p≤0.05.

Participants. The study involved 228 athletes (171 males, 57 females), aged between 13 and 28 years old. The athletes' school levels were the following: 30 from middle school; 163 from high school and 36 from university. Considering the type of sports, 120 provided from individual sports and 108 from the team sports. The athletes' years of practice range between one and 18 years.

Instrument. We used the Portuguese version of *Player Coach Interaction Inventory* (Medford & Thorpe, 1986) developed by Leitão, Serpa and Bártolo, 1995 – the Inventário de Interacção Treinador–Atleta (I.I.T.A) The questionnaire is composed by 23 adjectives and intend to characterize the coach interaction, on a Likert seven points scale. The score on the questionnaire is obtained by the sum of items, ranging between 23 and 161.

We used the factorial structure referenced by Rosado et al. (2007), examined with exploratory factor analysis. Results from analyses established the existence of three factors that the authors designated as *communication resources and interpersonal relationships* (factor 1), *leadership* (factor 2) and *personal qualities* (factor 3). Each one of these factors presents high internal consistency (F1 = 0.90; F2 = 0.89; F3 = 0.89).

Procedures. After explaining the study aims and receiving the athletes or parents informed, the questionnaires were applied by the research team, at the beginning of training, in order to avoid situations of inattention provided by tiredness. Was requesting to answer sincerely, stating that there are no right or wrong answers, and also the confidentiality of responses was guaranteed. After this, were read the instructions and athletes started fill out the questionnaire. Athletes who have questions may call the applicator. Data was collected, and a data analysis was done using a descriptive statistic (means, standard-deviations, minimal and maximal values) and we used the T-Student, One-Way ANOVA and Bonferroni tests, to compare the different groups. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 and the level of significance was p≤0.05.

IV.   Results and Discussion

The perception of athletes about their coaches, considering the totality of the sample. Globally, athletes' perceptions of their coaches were very high (*M*=5.68; *SD*=0.66), meaning that athletes present a positive image of their coaches. The results show that most valued characteristics are sincere *(M*=6.18; *SD*=0.99), self-assured *(M*=6.04; *SD*=1.00) and honest *(M*=6.00; *SD*=0.88). On the other side, the less referenced characteristics were to be a good sportsman *(M*=4.78; *SD*=1.47) and be careful *(M*=5.25; *SD*=1.17).

The results of the present study corroborate the idea presented by Rosado et al. [14], that the most valued characteristics were sincere, self-assured and honest, and the less referenced characteristics were had other varied capacities and be a good sportsman. Zhang and Surujlal (2015), refer that the most valued characteristics were a righteous and honest.

Considering the factorial structure referenced by Rosado et al. (2007), with three factors (*communication resources and interpersonal relationships* - factor 1; *leadership* - factor 2 and *personal qualities* - factor 3), the results shows that the most referenced factor was the personal qualities (M=5.89; SD=0.75) followed by the leadership (M=5.70; SD=0.77) and finally the communication resources and interpersonal relationships (M=5.59; SD=0.75).

The Table 1 shows the average value and standard deviation for the three factors studied, considering gender, school level, competitive level and type of sport practiced.

Table 1: Factors of coach-athletes' relationship *(n, M, SD)* considering gender, school level, competitive level and type of sport practiced

Factor	*n*	Communication resources and interpersonal relationship		Leadership		Personal qualities	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Gender							
Male	171	3.96	0.66	4.04	0.68	3.98	0.58
Female	57	3.97	0.82	3.86	0.84	3.56	0.88
School level							

Middle school	30	5.40	0.80	5.83	0.86	6.03	0.59
High school	163	5.63	0.78	5.66	0.64	5.84	0.78
University	36	5.60	0.83	5.77	1.11	6.00	0.70
Competitive level							
National	159	5.59	0.82	5.61	0.73	5.85	0.78
International	69	5.60	0.58	5.92	.0.81	5.99	0.66
Type of sport							
Individual	120	5,40	0.75	5.88	0.70	5,91	0.70
Team	108	5.80	0.70	5.50	0.79	5.87	0.81

The comparative study shows that some factors were significantly influenced by athlete's gender, competitive level and type of sport practiced. On the other side, the perception of athletes about their coaches was not significantly differenced considering the athletes school level. The personal qualities factor was not differentiated by any of the independent variables.

The perception of athletes about their coaches, considering gender. Significant differences were found in *leadership* considering gender, [$t(226) = 4.095$, p≤0.001], having the female group presented a high average value. The other two factors (communication resources and interpersonal relationships and personal qualities) had no significant differences considering this variable. Different result was found in other study (Dittmore, Li & Park, 2015), when the authors refer that female athlete presents a high value for communication aspects.

The perception of athletes about their coaches, considering competitive level. Comparing the international group with the national group, significant differences were found in leadership factor [$t(226) = 2.847$, p=0.05], presenting the international group a high value. Similar results (Rolla, 2008) was found in Basketball players, having the group with high practice level a better perception of coaches; but different results were found in another study (Rosado et al, 2007), were the authors concluded that the perception of coaches was not differenced considering the practice level.

The perception of athletes about their coaches, considering the type of sport. Considering the type of sport, two factors had significant differences; communication resources and interpersonal relationships [$t(226) = 4.179$, p≤0.001] and personal qualities [$t(226)=3.830$, p≤0.001]. The athletes of individual sports referenced more the leadership factor than the athletes of team sports. The communication resources and interpersonal relationships factor was more indicated by athletes of team sports. The athletes of individual sports referenced more the proximity with coach than the athletes of team sports (Lorimer and Jowett, 2009). On the other side, the athletes of team sports referenced more the perception of efficacy, trust and respect.

Some authors like Zhang and Chelladurai (2013), refer the importance of coach-athletes' relationship and the perception of athletes about their coaches; authors concluded that athletes were more motivated when they considered that their coaches had a high level of integrity and honesty.

V. Conclusions

Considering the aim of present work and the results founded we would like to highlight the following aspects:
(1) Globally, athletes present a very positive image of their coaches;
(2) Several factors were significantly influenced by athlete's gender, competitive level and type of sport practiced;
(3) The perception of athletes about their coaches was not significantly differenced considering the athletes school level;
(4) The personal qualities factor was not differentiated by any of the independent variables.
(5) The leadership factor was differentiated considering athletes gender, competitive level and type of sport practiced;
(6) The communication resources and interpersonal relationships factor was differentiated considering the type of sport practiced.

VI. Recommendations for Future Research

The effectiveness of coach-athletes relationship results of complex and dynamic process between the coaches and athletes, influenced by several variables where athletes' perceptions and evaluation must be considered as a main resource to better coaching.

As suggest, research in this specific area, qualitative studies should be conducted in addition to quantitative studies to ensure a deep understanding of coach-athletes' relationship.

Future studies should continue to examine other factors that may affect the effectiveness of coach-athletes' relationship, namely, contextual, socio-cognitive and emotional determinants, being also considered as a key element.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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