Can Participative Coach Behavior be Perceived as Controlling? The Role of Athletes' Expectations

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Abstract

Coach-rated participative behavior has already been related to beneficial outcomes in athletes. Yet, research also indicates that allowing participation is not straightforward as it can sometimes be perceived as controlling or can even result in maladaptive outcomes. Building on implicit leadership theory, this study investigated the role of the alignment between coach-rated participation and athletes' expectations for participation in developing perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes, a specific type of controlling coach behavior. A secondary goal was to explore this relation in higher and lower level teams separately. Athletes' expectations for participative coach behavior, coach-rated participative behavior and athletes' perceptions of domineering coach behavior were measured in 61 team sport coaches and 654 athletes competing in football, volleyball, basketball, and handball competitions. Using polynomial regression with response surface analysis and controlling for athletes' sport experience, overall, results showed that a discrepancy between coach-rated participation and athletes' expectations for participation was related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes with more than 5 years of experience. However, in lower level teams, high amounts of participation seem optimal as only less coach-rated participation than expected predicted increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes with more than 15 years of experience. This in contrast with higher level teams where, independent of athletes' experience, both more and less coach-rated participation than expected were related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes. Current findings stress the need for a situation specific approach when offering participation to optimize its effectiveness.

Highlights

- A discrepancy between coach-rated participation and athletes' expectations for participation was related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in team sport athletes with more than 5 years of experience,
- In higher level teams, both more and less participation than expected were related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes,
- In lower level teams, only less participation than expected leads to increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes with more than 15 years of experience,
- Coaches should try to get informed about the expectations of their athletes and inform their athletes about the reasons of their behavior to manage athletes' expectations.

Keywords

Psychology, coaching, autonomy, team sport

Introduction

Sport coaches frequently adopt an autonomy-supportive coaching style to optimize athletes' motivation, motivational climate, and performance (5, 8, 24). A core aspect of this autonomy-supportive coaching style is involving athletes in decision-making processes and offering athletes meaningful choices. Recently these behaviors were classified as a participative approach, which is considered as a specific approach within the autonomy-supportive coaching style (7). Use of a participative approach has already been related to positive outcomes such as increased autonomous motivation, need satisfaction and involvement (1, 7).

However, despite frequently reported beneficial outcomes, some work demonstrated that providing participation is not always straightforward as participative behavior has been shown to be unrelated or even detrimental for autonomous motivation and performance-related outcomes in sport and educational settings (17, 22, 23). This might be explained by participation not necessarily feeding into autonomy satisfaction (23). For example, when people prefer others to make decisions for them, needing to choose by yourself will not result in experiencing a sense of volition, which reflects true autonomy (14). In this respect, not all contexts seem evenly suitable for participation. While individual sport settings are characterized by a one-on-one coach-athlete relationship, team sports are characterized by a complex coach-team-athlete relationship. Accordingly, team sport athletes will not only consider their own point of view when being offered choice but might also take the group norm into account. Research on conformism already stated that when choosers avert the existing group norm in their decision, they experience discomfort (30).

Furthermore, behavior that might be intended as participative by coaches is not always experienced accordingly by their athletes. Coaches tend to overestimate their amount of participative behavior as compared to their athletes' perceptions (7, 27). In addition, interest

in athletes' input and the provision of choice have even been related to increased perceptions of controlling coach behavior in athletes, thereby leading to increased anxiety (31). Yet, determinants that influence athletes' perceptions of coach-rated participative coach behavior are still underinvestigated in research on coaching and sport psychology.

An Expectancy-Match Perspective on Participative Coach Behavior

In business contexts, research grounded in implicit leadership theory (ILT: 10) already pointed towards the importance of followers' expectations when investigating followers' perceptions of leadership behavior and leader effectiveness (10). Based on ILT, followers create an implicit leadership scheme of their ideal leader (10, 11). This leadership scheme characterizes followers' expectations of the traits and abilities of an ideal leader and is based on socialization and past experiences with leaders. Building on ILT, Wong & Giessner (2018) recently showed that when leaders' empowerment behaviors are not aligned with followers' expectations for empowerment, followers evaluate these behaviors as laissez-faire.

While previous research in business contexts already pointed at the importance of followers' expectations, this perspective is currently lacking in research on coach behavior. Previous studies already showed that participative behavior might result in athletes perceiving their coach as controlling yet do not offer explanatory mechanisms for this relation (31). With controlling coach behavior being a multi-facetted concept, we will build upon an SDT-based circumplex model on coach behavior to define controlling coach behavior (7). Based on this model, we will focus on a domineering approach as a specific type of controlling coach behavior. A domineering approach encompasses coach behavior that involves the induction of guilt, personal attacks, and the exertion of power, which closely aligns with the reported maladaptive athletes' perceptions on participative coach behavior (17, 30, 31).

Hypothesis development

Following ILT, we propose that the previously reported controlling perceptions might be the result of unexpected amounts of participation, which in turn are misperceived as controlling behavior. As receiving choice is not always experienced as autonomy-supportive (23), choices can be subdivided into autonomy-supportive and controlling types (20). Autonomy-supportive types of choice offer choosers unrestricted options (e.g., no indication which option to choose) and support athletes' needs for autonomy by offering athletes the opportunity to adapt the environment towards their own preferences and experience a sense of volition (6). In contrast, controlling types of choices are marked by a sense of restriction or preference (e.g., subtle indications which option to choose). Thereby, controlling types of choice will primarily thwart athletes' needs for autonomy by inducing a feeling of obligation (6, 16).

We argue that athletes will perceive opportunities to choose as autonomy-supportive or controlling based on their expectations to choose. When coaches offer more participative behavior than expected, choosing might be perceived as an obligation rather than a true opportunity to express preferences because athletes must choose an option in a situation where they prefer not to choose (2). In this case, athletes will not perceive receiving actual autonomy as they will not experience a sense of volition. Furthermore, when athletes expect choice but are not provided the possibility to choose, athletes might also interpret this perceptual lack of choice as controlling coach behavior since their coach prevents them from expressing their own preferences (6).

Present Study

The present study will investigate the role of athletes' expectations in developing perceptions of domineering coach behavior among team sport coaches and athletes. As they function as active group members within a team, their behavior is inextricably influenced by

the team context (30). Consequently, as there is a high possibility for a discrepancy between coach-rated participative behavior and athletes' expectations for participation, since team athletes might have different or even conflicting expectations, team sports offer a valuable arena to test this hypothesis. We hypothesize that *a discrepancy between coach-rated participative behaviors and athletes' expectations for participation is related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes*. Given that implicit leadership schemes are constructed based on past experiences and socialization, implicit leadership schemes might become more rigid and important over time (10). That is, the more experienced athletes become, the more likely it might become that a deviation from their expectations leads to domineering coach perceptions. Therefore, we controlled for athletes' sport experience.

As a supplementary aim we performed exploratory analyses to investigate whether there are differences in expectations and responses between higher (international & national) and lower level (regional) sports. While the primary interest in higher level sports is on performance optimization, lower level sports primarily emphasize enjoyment (28). Previous research involving medal-winning athletes and coaches already showed that high-performance athletes stress the importance of the role of the coach as principal decision maker as this decision-making role might be crucial to maintain decision quality (19, 33). Consequently, athletes in higher level teams might expect lower amounts of participation while lower level teams primary benefit from a participative climate (7). As higher level team athletes expect their coaches to take more responsibilities and, in addition, coaches are being considered more crucial agents in determining team performance (32), we will also investigate whether a discrepancy between coach-rated participation and athletes' expectations for participation is equally related to perceptions of domineering coach behavior in higher and lower level teams.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature in various ways. Regarding the current inconsistent results on participative behavior, gaining insight in the role of athletes' expectations can clearly create an added value in literature on participative coach behavior by identifying boundary conditions for the effective use of participation. In addition, the study acted as a first step to test ILT in sport settings. This study also has practical implications. While athletes' perceptions of domineering coach behavior are negatively related to athletes' need-satisfaction and coach evaluations, athletes' perceptions of participative coach behavior are positively related to such outcomes (7). Providing coaches with specific boundary conditions for the usage of participation might reduce the risk that a well-intended participative approach can lead to maladaptive outcomes due to the induction of unwanted perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes.

Materials & Methods

Participants

A total of 61 coaches and 654 athletes participated in this study, with most coaches and athletes being male (coaches: 95.1%; athletes: 66.8%). From the 61 teams, a total of 77.3% of the athletes participated in the research. Coaches were on average 42.11 (*SD* = 8.32) years old and had 11,38 (*SD* = 6.86) years of experience in coaching. Athletes were on average 22.62 (*SD* = 5.08) years old and had 14,46 (*SD* = 5.58) years of experience in their sport. The sample consisted of volleyball (37.7%), football (34.4%), handball (14.8%) and basketball (13.1%) teams. Of the 61 teams, 29 teams competed at the highest or second highest division of their sport and were marked as higher level. 32 teams competed at lower national or regional competitions and were marked as lower level teams.

Tools

Participative and domineering coach behavior. Coach-rated participative behavior and athletes' domineering coach perceptions were measured using the Situations in Sports

Questionnaire (SIS-Q: 7). Spread over 15 vignette-based situations, 6 items (α = .60) rated the participative approach of the coach, and 5 items (α = .64) rated athletes' perceptions of domineering coach behavior. The internal consistency of the participative approach was in line with the original SIS-Q paper, while the domineering approach scored slightly lower. Coaches and athletes scaled each item based on the likelihood they/their coach would express the behavior in the specified vignette-based situation on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me/my coach at all*) to 7 (*describes me/my coach extremely well*).

Athletes' expectations for participation. Athletes' expectations for participation were measured using a one-item survey ("I expect that my coach gives us (the team) the opportunity to provide input"). The item was measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Procedure

Data collection was performed in [redacted]. Teams were contacted verbally or using e-mail when publicly available. The principal researchers contacted the coaches of the teams in collaboration with undergraduate movement science students from the host institution. Guidelines for standardized data collection were provided prior to the data collection. When the coaches agreed to participate in the research, athletes were contacted and fully informed of the research goals and methods. Each participant signed an active informed consent prior to the completion of the questionnaire and was free to participate and quit the research at any time. Due to COVID restrictions, data were collected using both pencil and paper and digital questionnaires. Participants were not rewarded for their participation. Hence, general conclusions of the research were shared with the participants at the end of the study.

Data analysis

Comparisons of scores between coach and athlete perspectives or higher and lower level teams were conducted by means of independent samples T-tests for all variables of

interest. The main hypothesis was tested using Polynomial Regression with Response Surface Analysis (PNR-RSA). This technique has been frequently used in dyadic research concerning self-other ratings and showed to be superior to the calculation of Euclidean difference scores as this technique allows a more detailed interpretation of the surface area (see: 9, 13, 21, 25, 26). To conduct the PNR-RSA, we followed the analytical steps from Nestler et al. (2019). As a first analytical step, participative coach behavior (X), athletes' expectations for participation (Y), athletes' perceptions of domineering coach behavior (Z) and athletes' experience (G) scores were centered around the scale midpoint, and three new variables were created: X^2 and Y^2, the squared value of the centered X and Y score, and XY, the product of the centered X and Y score. Final PNR RSA analysis were performed in R-Studio (Version 4.0.3 – Apple 64-bit) using the multilevel RSA statistical suite and PNR-RSA script from Nestler et al. (2019). Because athletes were nested within teams, a random intercept was added to the model. This enabled to estimate effects that are solely due to between-person differences (see: 32). Athletes' experience (G) was added to the regression model as a control variable. The script and regression model are available on Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/f68u9/?view_only=889bab77a50c4fcf89f74bced6be1a56.

Final PNR RSA interpretation is based on five parameters, namely a_1, a_2, a_3, a_4 and a_5. Significance levels for each parameter were set at $\alpha < 0{,}05$. Parameter a_1 and a_2 indicated the shape of the graph above the line of congruence (LOC; X = Y). A significant a_1 indicates a descending ($a_1 < 0$) or ascending ($a_1 > 0$) course of the graph from the minimum value in agreement (-3, -3) to the maximum value in agreement (3, 3). Parameter a_2 indicates the curvature of the graph above the line of congruence. A non-significant a_2 indicates a linear shape of the graph above the line of congruence. A significant positive a_2 indicates a convex curvature (U-shape), while a significant negative a_2 indicates a concave curvature (inverted U-shape). We expected a non-significant a_1 and a_2 parameter. A visual representation is shown

in Figure 1. Parameter a_3 and a_4 indicate the shape of the graph above the line of incongruence (LOIC; X = -Y). A significant a_3 indicates a descending ($a_3 < 0$) or ascending ($a_3 > 0$) course of the graph from incongruence value (3, -3) to (-3, 3). Parameter a_4 indicates the curvature of the graph above the line of incongruence. A non-significant a_4 indicates a linear shape of the graph above the line of incongruence. A significant positive a_4 indicates a convex curvature (U-shape), while a significant negative a_4 indicates a concave curvature (inverted U-shape). We expected a non-significant a_3 and significant positive a_4 parameter. A visual representation can be found in Figure 1. Finally, parameter a_5 compares the positioning of the first principal axis (FPA) with the line of congruence. When previous hypothesized conditions are met, a non-significant a_5 indicates an alignment of the FPA and LOC. When a_5 is significant this indicates a difference in position or course between the FPA and the LOC. We expected a non-significant a_5 parameter. The model controlled for athletes' experience and calculated the regions of positive significance, negative significance, and non-significance for each a-parameter.

Results

Descriptives

Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies and intercorrelations between the main study variables are listed in Table 1. Based on the independent samples T-tests, athletes had significant higher expectations for participation than coach-rated participation ($t(653) = 16.285$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, athletes' perceptions of participative behavior were lower than coach-rated participation ($t(60) = -2.988$, $p < 0.01$). Comparing the scores of both higher (N = 29) and lower-level (N = 32) teams, higher level athletes scored significantly lower on expectations for participation ($t(652) = 2.051$; $p < 0.05$) and lower on participative perceptions ($t(652) = 5.159$; $p < 0.001$). In contrast, coaches reported similar amounts of participative

behavior ($t(59) = .771$; $p = 0.44$). Higher level athletes scored significantly higher on perceived domineering coach behavior ($t(652) = -1{,}985$; $p < 0.05$).

Participative Expectancy-match & Perceived Domineering Behavior

Table 2 represents the significant regions of the a-parameters of the PNR RSA. Results for average experience are graphically presented in Figure 2a. Parameter a_1 and a_2 were not significant, indicating a constant linear shape of the graph above the LOC. Parameter a_3 was not significant and parameter a_4 was significant and positive for athletes with more than 5 years of experience, indicating a convex shape of the graph above the LOIC with no difference between incongruence value (3, -3) and (-3, 3). Finally, parameter a_5 was not significant, which indicated the FPA of the graph was in line with the LOC. These results partially confirmed the study's hypothesis as a discrepancy between athletes' expectations for participation and coach-rated participation was related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior for athletes with more than 5 years of experience.

Higher- vs Lower-Level Polynomial Regression with Response Surface Analysis

Table 2 represents the significant regions of the a-parameters of the PNR RSA. Results for average experience are graphically presented in Figure 2b and 2c. In higher level teams, PNR RSA parameter a_1 and a_2 were not significant, indicating a constant linear shape of the graph above the LOC. Parameter a_3 was not significant and parameter a_4 was significant and positive, indicating a convex shape of the graph above the LOIC with no difference between incongruence value (3, -3) and (-3, 3). Finally, Parameter a_5 was not significant, which indicated that the FPA of the graph was in line with the LOC. These results are fully in line with the study's hypothesis.

No congruence effect was found for lower level athletes as parameter a_1, a_2 and a_4 were not significant. These results contradict our hypotheses. Hence, parameter a_3 was significant and negative for athletes with more than 15 years of experience which indicated a

descending ($a_3 < 0$) course of the graph from incongruence value (3, -3) to (-3, 3). Consequently, providing less participation than expected was related with elevated perceptions of domineering coach behavior for athletes with more than 15 years of experience.

Discussion

Our study confirmed that coach-rated participative behavior deviates from athlete-rated participative behavior (7, 27) and that the provision of choice, besides frequently reported beneficial outcomes, can also lead to perceptions of controlling coach behavior in athletes (31). Building on ILT, our study moved beyond these findings and revealed that a discrepancy between athletes' expectations for participation and coach-rated participation can be related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in athletes. Gaining insight on such determinants is important as athletes' perceptions predict numerous outcomes such as athletes' well-being (4) and performance (12).

While our results were in congruence with the study's hypothesis in higher level teams, the hypothesis was rejected in lower level teams. Also, lower level athletes expected higher amounts of choice. This difference could possibly be explained by the fact that athletes in higher level teams, where performance is a primary goal, grant their coaches with decision power to guide them towards the desired performance (19). As complex decisions require detailed knowledge, athletes might also feel insufficiently competent to choose and therefore, expect their coach to make the decision. Having to choose when not expected might ultimately lead to feelings of obligation instead of experiencing a sense of volition for athletes in higher level teams. These findings correspond with other studies that have shown that receiving choice is not always experienced as autonomy-supportive (23). Also, when people deliberately choose for others to decide, this still can feed their sense of volition and lead to autonomy satisfaction as it is their own preference (14).

In lower level teams, athletes primarily emphasize enjoyment which requires sufficient autonomy-supportive coaching (7). This is also indicated by the higher average expected participation in lower level athletes. When athletes with extensive experience receive less choice than expected, they will experience their coach as controlling, which actively thwarts athletes' autonomy. This relation was not found among athletes with less experience which could be explained by ILT as implicit leadership schemes of less experienced athletes are still preliminary, while such schemes might become more rigid when athletes' experience increases. As opposed to the findings among higher level athletes, providing more participation than expected was unrelated to athletes' perceptions of domineering coach behavior. As the overall level of expected participation was relatively high among athletes in lower level teams, a potential ceiling-effect might have prevented coaches to provide more participation than expected. Given the absence of maladaptive perceptions when providing more participation than expected and considering the importance of autonomy-supportive coaching for motivational outcomes, high amounts of autonomy-supportive coaching can be recommended in lower level contexts. However, current results should be interpreted with caution as the explorative comparisons were conducted on limited sample sizes.

Practical implications

Our findings indicate that providing athletes with participative coach behavior is not straightforward in team sports. Where coaches primarily use a participative approach to involve athletes in the decision-making process, coaches should be aware of possible deflected perceptions and dangers of participation when their participative approach is not aligned with their athletes' expectations.

Based on current findings it seems important for coaches to gain insight in which situations athletes expect participation or not. This way, coaches can adapt their behavior towards these expectations. Yet, coaches will not always be capable to comply to athletes'

expectations due to group management reasons or athletes having conflicting or unrealistic expectations (e.g., 33, 34). For this reason, coaches should also try to manage athletes' expectations by providing a clear framework for their coaching approach. One potential strategy is therefore to proactively provide athletes with additional rationale for their approach and decisions, certainly when coaches cannot comply to their athletes' expectations. In this respect, previous research on choice already showed that additional rationale can reduce negative effects of option retaining (3, 29). In summary it currently seems important to facilitate an open dialogue culture where both coach and athlete actively contribute in a positive way. Coaches should therefore build a coach-athlete relation that stimulates proactivity and mutual information sharing. On the one hand, this helps coaches to get informed about the expectations of their athletes. On the other hand, athletes also get informed about the underlying reasons for their coaches' behavior, about the reasons why their coach might refrain from providing choice in particular situations (e.g., situations where coaches have more available knowledge or information or when decisions need to be made under time-pressure) or why they behave in a participative manner (e.g., situations where coaches want their athletes to learn to behave proactively).

Limitations & future research

As with all research, this study comes with its limitations. First, our research was cross-sectional and thereby based on predictive relationships. Future research might benefit from longitudinal and experimental research designs to ensure direction and causality of the current findings. Second, the scale used to investigate coach behavior showed moderate reliabilities (α = .60 to .64). Hence, these lower reliabilities are inherent to the SIS-Q as it disentangles coach behavior into different styles and approaches, but at the same time tries to capture a broad variety of behaviors within each style or approach which reduces alpha values. Still the current alpha value for the domineering approach was lower than the alpha

value within the study of Delrue et al. (2019). A potential explanation might reside within the sample composition as our sample only contained specific team sports, while the sample of Delrue et al. (2019) was based on data from both individual and team sports. This could indicate that the specific types of domineering behaviors (exert power, induce shame, or induce guilt) are less interrelated in the sport types within our study than in other sport types, although future work should further examine this assumption. Third, athletes' expectations for participation were measured using a one-item scale to reduce cognitive load. Future research could benefit from an adapted expectations scale where participative behavior and expectations for participation are matched item-wise instead of using a one-item scale (35).

Future research should also investigate the importance of athletes' expectations in individual sports. In addition, future research should focus on other behaviors and outcomes. For example, Lambert et al. (2012) already showed that unexpected amounts of structure, for example clarifying task responsibilities or providing direction, are related with unfavorable outcomes in business settings. Finally, as coaches will not always be capable to meet athletes' expectations, research is needed on how coaches can manage athletes' expectations as this can facilitate the alignment between coach-rated participative behavior and expected participative behavior.

Conclusions

Building on ILT, the current study showed that when participative coach behaviors are not aligned with athletes' expectations for participation, they are related to increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in team sport athletes with more than 5 years of experience. However, exploratory findings showed that a discrepancy between coach-rated participation and athletes' expectations for participation is related with increased perceptions of domineering coach behavior in all higher-level team sport athletes, while only less participation than expected is related with elevated domineering perceptions in lower level

athletes with more than 15 years of experience. Future research is needed to validate our findings within a broader range of sport types and investigate the importance of athletes' expectations for other coaching approaches.

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519 Table 1

520 *Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations and Cronbach's alphas for all Study Variables*

521

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Athletes' expectations						
1. Expect participation (A)	5.65	1.07	-			
Athletes' perceptions						
2. Participation (A)	4.44	0.66	.156**	(.67)		
3. Domineering (A)	3.31	1.06	.001	-.141**	(.64)	
Coach perceptions						
4. Participation (C)	4.81	0.92	.052	.161**	-.040	(.60)

Note. *$p < 0.05$; Figures between parentheses are Cronbach's alphas

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