

From West to East: Perspective Shift of Coach Demanding Behaviors

Wan-Ju Chou¹, Yu-Hung Cheng²

Department of Psychology, Chung Yuan Christian University¹

Department of Psychology, National Taiwan University²

Due to the highly competitive nature of sports, coaches tend to adopt strict, controlling behaviors to ensure that athletes apply themselves to their training. Such behavior is thus an important and frequent research topic. Studies in Western contexts mostly adopt self-determination theory and find that demanding behavior by coaches negatively affects athletes' motivation and well-being. However, scholars in East Asian contexts take a different perspective. Specifically, claiming that the coach-athlete relationship reflects the hierarchical and relational principles of Confucianism, these scholars argue that as coaches are responsible for developing athletes' potential, instructing athletes, and honing athletes' skills, East Asian athletes regard demanding behaviors by their coach, such as demanding that athletes achieve high goals, as confirmation of their coach's belief in their potential and ability. To integrate these different theoretical perspectives from different cultural contexts and contribute to the literature on demanding behaviors by coaches, this study reviews recent research in both Western and Eastern contexts to illustrate the differences and similarities. The results provide directions for future research. It is hoped that follow-up research will further examine demanding behavior by coaches to enhance academic understanding and identify practical implications.

Keywords: *coaches' demanding behaviors, confirmation theory, dual model of authoritarian leadership, self-determination theory*

Extended Abstract

Most sports involve frequent and intense competition. Therefore, coaches tend to adopt strict controlling behaviors, such as punitive, confirmative, and authoritarian behaviors, to ensure that athletes apply themselves to their training. The controlling and demanding behaviors of coaches are important to sports teams and are frequently discussed by researchers. However, further research regarding this phenomenon is required. In this study, we define coaches' demanding behavior as the adoption of strict requirements and training to continually refine and hone athletes' physical and mental skills to achieve peak performance in their athletic physical and mental coordination (c.f., Bartholomew et al., 2010; Battaglia et al., 2017). Most Western studies of this phenomenon have adopted self-

determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and emphasized that coaches' demanding behaviors have a negative effect on athletes' motivation and well-being. However, scholars in East Asia have claimed that the coach-athlete relationship reflects the hierarchism and relationalism of Confucianism and that coaches are responsible for developing athletes' potential, instructing them, and honing their skills to perfection. In addition, East Asian athletes regard tough coaching, such as demands that they achieve high standards, as coaches' affirmation of the athletes' potential and ability, which is different from the SDT perspective (Wu, 2016). To integrate the different theoretical perspectives of different cultural contexts and contribute to research in this area, this study reviews recent Western and East Asian studies

on these controlling and demanding behaviors of coaches, illustrates their differences and similarities, and suggests directions for future research.

The Western View

According to Western researchers, coaches' behaviors profoundly influence athletes' experiences, motivation, and feelings when they participate in sports competitions (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Coaches are increasingly behaving abusively toward athletes, and Western researchers have noted the widespread nature of such behavior. Given the highly competitive nature of most sports, any mistakes can lead to failure, motivating coaches to engage in demanding behaviors to ensure that athletes achieve perfect performance (Morbée et al., 2020). The double-edged nature of coaches' demanding behavior has attracted the interest of scholars.

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptualization of Coaches' Demanding Behavior

Western researchers often draw on SDT to elaborate on the content of coaches' demanding behavior and its impact on athletic performance. SDT states that the motivation behind a behavior is related to the satisfaction of individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In line with this theory, Bartholomew et al. (2010) proposed that coaches' demanding behaviors should be characterized as undermining the satisfaction of athletes' basic psychological needs. Bartholomew et al. (2009) conducted a systematic review and summarized coaches' demanding behaviors in six categories: tangible rewards, controlling feedback, excessive personal control, intimidation, promoting ego involvement, and conditional regard. Subsequently, researchers adopted SDT to investigate the antecedents and consequences of coaches' demanding behavior.

Consequences and Antecedents of Coaches' Demanding Behavior

Researchers have found that coaches' demanding behavior is negatively related to athletes' mental toughness (Mahoney et al., 2014) and psychological well-being (Balaguer et al., 2012), and that perfectionism may mediate the negative effect of this behavior. Furthermore, coaches' demanding behavior is positively related to athletes' anti-social behavior (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011). Matosic et al. (2020) and Benish et al. (2020) found that coaches' narcissism and tenure were positively related to coaches' demanding behavior. Kim et al. (2019) found that coaches' obsessive and harmonious passion for coaching had opposite effects to coaches' demanding behavior.

However, these behaviors do not necessarily have negative consequences. In some cases, coaches' demanding behavior can provide motivation. Indeed, confirmation theory, discussed below, suggests that setting high standards is a means of affirming athletes' self-worth (Cranmer & Brann, 2015).

The East Asian View

An understanding of coaches' demanding behaviors can be obtained from the organizational leadership literature, which is closely connected to the development of sports leadership theory (Kao & Chen, 2006). For example, authoritarian leadership (AL) is a representative coaching behavior in East Asia. AL is "a paternalistic-like leadership behavior that asserts strict discipline and manipulative dominant control over subordinates to shape personal role authority and further demanding their unquestioned obedience (Chou et al., 2014, p. 170)". An authoritarian leader's method of control and dominance includes asserting authority and control, underestimating subordinate competence, building an image of superiority, and acting in a didactic way (Cheng, 1995). Although AL is salient and prevalent in sports teams, the organizational leadership literature on AL has reported inconsistent results. The two-dimensional model of AL proposed by Chou et al. (2010) has been applied to study coaches'

demanding behavior, including in recent research (Cheng et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2021; Chou et al., 2023), which has clarified the differential effects of this behavior.

Chou et al. (2010) divided AL into two authority types: tight control and strict discipline. Dominance-focused AL (tight control) emphasizes manipulative tactics through which a leader emphasizes personal authority and maintains tight control to invoke compliance, obedience, and fear from subordinates. Discipline-focused AL (strict discipline) stresses discipline and work rules. Authoritarian leaders emphasize task monitoring and instructing, high performance standards, and organizational regulations, which can drive subordinates' accomplishment of tasks and performance goals and promote their continuous improvement (Chou et al., 2014). Applying the two-dimensional model of AL to the sports context, Cheng et al. (2019) found that dominance-focused AL was negatively related to an athlete's effort only if the player had a low performance-proving goal orientation. However, discipline-focused AL was positively related to an athlete's effort, and the relationship became nonsignificant when the athlete had a high performance-avoiding goal orientation or a high performance-proving goal orientation. Cheng et al. (2012) found that different types of AL had varying effects on sports performance, and these effects were mediated serially by the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (i.e., leader-member exchange) and self-worth (i.e., team-based self-esteem). Recently, Chou et al. (2023) found that dominance-focused AL reduced job engagement through the depletion of mental toughness, and this negative indirect effect was weaker when athletes were high in distress tolerance. However, discipline-focused AL had a significant indirect effect on athletes' job engagement via mental toughness regardless of the athlete's degree of distress tolerance. These results indicate that the two-dimensional model of AL can provide new insights into coaches' demanding behavior.

The Intersection of West and East

As noted above, Western scholars have long paid attention to coaches' demanding behavior. According

to SDT, such behavior diminishes athletes' motivation and enjoyment and harms them physically and mentally. However, it is not clear whether a coach's tough demands and pursuit of excellence in goal-setting behavior will inevitably lead to harmful outcomes. Confirmation theory provides a fresh insight.

Confirmation theory focuses on how two individuals in a relationship feel regarded during communication (Dailey, 2010). Its application helps explain how receiving confirmation and recognition messages in communication may influence individuals' attitudes, emotional states, and behaviors (Dailey et al., 2016). Cranmer and Brann (2015) argued that coaches are important authority figures in athletes' lives and can be vital sources of validation and recognition, demonstrating that confirmation theory can be extended to athlete-coach relationships. According to the framework of confirmation theory, the transmission of both "acceptance" and "challenge" confirmation messages can achieve beneficial outcomes. "Acceptance" refers to "behaviors showing positive regard, warmth, and attentiveness that denote that the individuals are valued, cared for, and not judged" (Dailey et al., 2016, p. 1482), whereas "challenge" refers to "behaviors that engage another in a competition or confrontation, call something into question, or test one's abilities in a demanding but stimulating manner" (Dailey, 2010, p. 595). Challenge confirmation manifests in coaches' attempts to improve athletes' performance and mirrors discipline-focused AL. Accordingly, we claim that confirmation theory can also help explain how discipline-focused AL functions in the sports context. However, there are cultural differences between the West and the East in terms of the connotations and actions of challenge confirmation.

The use of challenge in the West is an affirmation of "direct expression" to confirm individual self-growth, while challenge behavior in East Asia is more indirect and obscure. The East uses trials and tests as "indirect communication" (e.g., expressing expectations of excellent performance, recognizing competence potential, and asking athletes to challenge their personal limitations) to transmit confirmation messages and satisfy individual role positions. In general, the Western literature holds that coaches' demanding behavior is negative and can damage

athletes' autonomy, while the East Asian literature regards this behavior as "tough love" with positive outcomes. The challenge confirmation perspective of confirmation theory can be applied to explain the mechanisms of discipline-focused AL as well as providing a platform for dialogue between the Western and East Asian cultures. However, confirmation communication in coaches' demanding behavior has culture-specific connotations and differences in functions that cannot be ignored.

Prospects and Suggestions for Future Research

The previous section shows that Western and East Asian cultures provide unique insights into coaches' demanding behavior, deepening theoretical understanding of such behavior. However, due to the use of different conceptual frameworks in Western and East Asian research, there has been a lack of dialogue between them. Synthesizing the research findings from both perspectives could enrich theoretical understanding of coaches' demanding behavior and stimulate further discussion. Accordingly, in the following sections, we outline the potential prospects for understanding coaches' demanding behavior and obtaining practical insights.

Prospects for Western Research

From a Western perspective, a controlling coaching style focuses on actions detrimental to individual autonomy. However, individuals in East Asia value harmonious interactions among people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), suggesting that the controlling styles of coaches in East Asia may differ from those of Westerners. Indeed, organizational behavior research has found that East Asian subordinates perceive a higher degree of harm when supervisors prevent them from interacting with colleagues (Hu et al., 2011), indicating that there may be distinct forms of demanding behavior in East Asia that are worthy of further investigation.

To integrate understanding of coaches' demanding behaviors in Western and East Asian countries, it is

necessary to infer and test the impact of coaches' controlling styles in East Asian sports teams, using theoretical viewpoints with East Asian cultural characteristics (Whetten, 2009). For example, scholars can adopt a differential leadership theoretical perspective to investigate the different effects of coaches' controlling styles on athletes as insiders and as outsiders (Huang & Cheng, 2018).

Prospects for East Asian Research

Although studies in East Asia have used the two-dimensional model of AL to explore coaches' demanding behavior, they have not adopted a role obligations perspective, thereby overlooking the cultural foundations of dual AL. Future studies could adopt theories related to role obligation. For example, the paternalistic exchange model proposed by Wang et al. (2020) and the beliefs about parenting adopted by Chou et al. (2023) provide foundations for investigating the consequences and antecedents of coaches' demanding behaviors using the two-dimensional model of AL. Furthermore, future research could take a cross-cultural approach to examine the effectiveness of the dual AL framework for coaches in different cultural contexts, thereby clarifying its cross-cultural applicability.

Practical Applications

Generally, interactions between coaches and athletes are a dynamic process that evolves over time. Lien et al. (2018) found that coaches' paternalistic leadership behaviors changed and varied both in content and in frequency according to athletes' maturity, demonstrating that coaches' leadership behaviors undergo qualitative and quantitative changes in response to situational factors and athletes' characteristics. Considering the differences in athletes' maturity, training and competition goals, and the nature of sports teams, the manifestation of coaches' demanding behavior may undergo qualitative and quantitative changes. We recommend that researchers and coaches investigate the situational factors that lead to such changes in coaches' demanding behavior.