

The Coach-Athlete Relationship: Role Relationship Identity and Typology in Sports Teams

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This study explores and conceptualizes the multi-faceted nature of relational identity between coaches and athletes. In the context of sports teams, relationships between coaches and athletes have been found to strongly influence athletes' performance. How relational identity forms and evolves is key to determining the substance and characteristics of such relationships. Focusing on experienced coaches and elite tennis players, the present research comprised two parts. Study 1 was based on the critical incident principle. A semi-open questionnaire was used to obtain data on critical incidents related to relational identity and its typology. The analysis revealed four types of relationship: learning, family, interaction, and task-based. Building on the findings of Study 1, Study 2 revealed various types of relational identity embedded in such relationships, as well as perceptual overlaps and differences between coaches and athletes. Our findings enable us to elaborate on and conceptualize the multiplicity of relational identity, its typology, and the perceptual similarities and differences between coaches and athletes. The findings can serve as a springboard for future research on relational identity, specifically in the context of sports teams.

Keywords: *coach-athlete relationship, role identity, relational identity*

Extended Abstract

Coaches and players are two core stakeholder groups in any sports team and they interact closely and frequently during training, competition, and in many cases regular day-to-day activities. The dynamism of a sports team consists of and is influenced by three distinctive yet interrelated elements, namely the relationships formed between coaches and players, the way in which coaches lead the players, and how these two interact both within and outside the sports context. Thus, how relational identity between coaches and players is formed and how various types of relational identity are constructed have become two important research foci, which are explored in this study.

Prior studies have examined the relationship between coaches and players predominantly based on how the coaches lead the players (Chelladurai, 1990; Kao et al.,

2020; Lin & Lien, 2016). For instance, during matches, coaches provide game strategies and on-the-spot pointers for players to help them win matches. In this context, leadership is characterized as a vertical top-down relationship in which leaders instruct followers. To acquire know-how from experienced coaches, players are willing to take on and try out various suggestions made by the coaches, both during matches and in training. As a result, a mentor-protégé relationship is formed. In the context of paternalistic leadership theory (e.g., Lin et al., 2014; Lin & Lien, 2016), the relationships formed between coaches and players are often comparable to those between parents and children, siblings, friends, and partners. These relationships are far more diverse than simply the relationship between leader and follower (Lien et al., 2018). Furthermore, regular interactions between coaches

and players are integral to the formation and continuous re-shaping of relational identity. How this process works can largely be explained by deciphering these interactions. For instance, coaches provide systematic and rigorous training for players so that players can perform well during matches. In addition to performing functions that directly contribute to the players' performance, some coaches feel obliged to look after the players in their daily lives, as well as providing general care that is essential to the players' well-being. Close and frequent interactions between coaches and players therefore contribute to the formation of multi-faceted and intertwined relationships. The various relational identities that are formed range from leader and follower to mentor and protégé, parent and child, brotherhood, and friendship. Interestingly, these different types of role identity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and can be largely context-dependent. Although the underlying complexity is clearly evident, prior studies (see, for example, Brewer et al., 1993; Pope et al., 2014) have paid little attention to it. Thus, our understanding of the multi-faceted nature of relational identity remains limited.

"Identity" refers to the definition of self. Identity can include various elements, namely an individual's beliefs, core values, self consciousness, behaviors and a mixture of all or some of these elements (Gioia et al., 2000). During the life course, individuals gain different experiences through various process of trial and error that contribute to the forming and reshaping of identity. Core to the field of identity theory is the question of "who am I?", or "who are we?" when the context is an organization. Building on the essence of identity theory, role identity theory focuses on how individuals identify with different roles, meanings, and norms that are associated with these roles, as well as the behavioral and interaction mechanisms that are prescribed for each role (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to role identity theory, the self is formed based on the identification of multiple roles and each role represents one aspect of life that each individual embraces (Innes & Innes, 1984; Pope et al., 2014).

According to Andersen and Chen (2002), role relations focus on the substance upon which inter-

dependence and interaction between individuals can be characterized and evaluated. Through interaction, individuals are able to explore the possibility of developing a closer mutual relationship. In this context, the development of self, reflecting variation in and diverse meanings of identity, is also closely related to the individuals with whom such close relations are formed. Taken one step further, "relational identity" in the organizational context refers to how individuals within an organization form their identities in response to the relationships that they develop with other individuals. Without taking into account the relationships with and roles of others, it is virtually impossible to fully comprehend the notion of identity (Flynn, 2005). Applying this concept to the examination of relational identity in the context of coaches and players, therefore, it is vital to consider the contextual conditions under which interaction between them occurs, whether competition-related or not. Specifically, it is important to question how coaches identify themselves in relation to the players with whom they have regular interactions. It is also important to unravel how players construct their own identities in relation to the coaches that they work with. Considering the multiple factors that can affect the formation of relational identity, we can also question the fact that the varieties of relationships that are formed and changed have yet to be fully explored. Our goal for this research was therefore to qualitatively examine the multi-faceted nature of relational identity, specifically between coaches and players.

Method

Study 1

Participants

The main objective of Study 1 was to explore the roles that coaches play when coaching, developing and training players. In this specific context, the key question that we aimed to investigate is how coaches identify themselves. We selected 57 coaches, including 22 level A coaches and 35 level B coaches. These coaches all have substantial teaching and coaching experience and have been working with elite players over a long period

of time. We used open-ended questionnaires as the main tool to collect evidence that could inform us about how the coaches form their relational identity when interacting with players. We then analyzed these examples to derive our initial findings, which then served as the basis for Study 2.

Following the completion of data collection, we sorted and checked the returned questionnaires. Of the 57 returned questionnaires, 56 were valid. Using the technique of critical incident analysis, we then took the initial step to filter and cluster incidents. In total, 265 incidents were identified. Next, we further categorized these incidents according to their underlying meanings, characteristics, and similarities. Once this step was complete, we accounted for the frequency in which these incidents occurred based on matching the coaches and players.

Study 2

Participants

Study 2 had two main objectives. First, we aimed to unpack how interactions between coaches and players unfold during training, matches, and daily life from the perspective of players. Second, by unpacking the interactions, we aimed to examine how various types of relational identities are formed, which we used as a basis to compare the typologies observed in Study 1. Using participants in the 2021 National Intercollegiate Athletic Games tennis tournament as the main population, we designed a relational identity questionnaire based on the primary findings of Study 1. This questionnaire also included open-ended questions, as well as the option of “other.” The questionnaire was delivered online with the main purpose of collecting insights related to the interactions between coaches and players during training, matches, and day-to-day activities. Finally, we analyzed the frequency of different roles and relational identities. In total, we collected 137 completed questionnaires, 127 of which were valid. The participants who filled in the questionnaires represented 15 universities. Of the 127 participants, 88 (69.29%) were male players and 39 (30.71%) were female. The average age of the participants

was 22.37 years. They had played tennis for an average of 5.08 years and collaborated with their coaches for an average of 2.87 years.

Results

Study 1

We identified 265 incidents, which were then categorized into 65 types of role identity, among which 16 types were reported by more than 4 coaches. We then clustered the 16 types into four categories, namely learning, family, interaction, and task relationships. The learning category, accounting for 82 incidents (30.94%), included the following pairings: teacher–student, coach–player, senior–junior, instructor–learner, coach–student, mentor–mentee, and mentor–protégé. The family category, accounting for 53 incidents (20.00%), included the pairings of parent–child, sibling–sibling, and family–family. The interaction category, accounting for 47 incidents (17.74%), included the pairings of friend–friend, counselor–learner, and listener–speaker. The task relationship category, accounting for 18 incidents (6.77%), included the pairings of leader–follower, superior–subordinate, and subordinate–superior. Based on a ranking of coaches’ responses, the top 10 pairings were teacher–student (62.50%), parent–child (58.93%), friend–friend (53.57%), coach–player (30.36%), sibling–sibling (25.00%), counselor–learner (17.86%), senior–junior (17.86%), leader–follower (14.29%), instructor–learner (12.50%), and listener–speaker (12.50%).

Study 2

In the analysis of how players perceived the relational identity between themselves and their coaches, we uncovered 427 incidents. We analytically grouped these incidents into four categories, namely learning, family, interaction, and task relationships. The learning category contained 300 incidents (70.25%). The family category contained 92 incidents (21.55%). The interaction category contained 21 incidents (4.92%). The task relationship category contained 13 incidents (3.04%). The top-10 highest frequency pairings were teacher–

student (65.35%), coach–player (56.69%), instructor–learner (46.46%), coach–student (38.58%), friend–friend (33.86%), counselor–learner (26.77%), mentor–protégé (13.39%), listener–talker (11.81%), advisor–advisee (9.45%), and family–family (7.09%). None of the players put any additional pairing in the option of “other” in the questionnaire, indicating that the categories and pairings identified during Study 1 were comprehensive and sufficient.

When comparing how coaches and players perceived the top-6 rated pairings, we found a consensus on teacher–student, coach–player, and friend–friend, but disparity in parent–child, sibling–sibling, instructor–learner, and coach–student. The consensus and disparity identified in our analysis revealed the need to further trace and analyze how various relational identities are formed through the dynamism between coaches and players.

To enrich our findings, we collected additional data from a sports university based on focus group interviews. The interviewees were paired between coaches and players. The purpose for the additional data collection was to further examine the pairings of teacher–student, coach–player, and friend–friend, as well as how their interactions contribute to the formation of such relational identities. Our findings revealed that the pairings were ranked in the following order, from highest to lowest: teacher–student, coach–player, and friend–friend. In the teacher–student pairing, key activities between the two included organizing and scheduling the player’s study, sharing university-related information, and course-related learning. In the coach–player pairing, the key activities were predominantly tournament-related, and occurred prior to, during, and after matches and tournaments. In the friend–friend pairing, key activities included chatting about day-to-day life, although the frequency of its occurrence was lower than in the previous two pairings. Interestingly, during the focus group, the senior–junior pairing was frequently mentioned. This is understandable as coaches have normally gained experience as professional players. However, this pairing was mentioned less frequently than the teacher–student pairing, although more frequently than the coach–player pairing.

Discussion

Conclusions

Through the above two studies and supplementary data, this research addresses two questions of importance for sports teams, namely how coaches perceive role identities in relation to players and how players perceive these identities in relation to their coaches. Specifically, our findings reveal the typology of such identities and the contexts in which such identities are perceived. Study 1 deployed the critical incident technique and used semi-open questionnaires to collect incidents indicating how coaches perceived their role identities in relation to their players. Through our analysis of relative frequencies, we identified representative types of relational identities and elaborated on the breadth of this typology. The 16 categories generated from Study 1 not only provide a foundation to further examine how players perceive relational identities but also reinforce the span of players’ perspectives.

The findings of comparing players’ and coaches’ perspectives were insightful. The two groups’ perceptions of relational identities demonstrated some similarities as well as differences. Given that tennis coaches typically collaborate with players over a very long period of time for training and to some extent overseeing players’ day-to-day activities, it is understandable that the coaches developed a range of different types of identities. It is worth noting that how these identities are perceived can be influenced by various factors, including the stage of study, skill level, maturity, and the amount of time that coaches spend with the players.

Our research makes two main contributions. First, we examined the notion of identity in the context of a sports team by focusing on both coaches and players, and how they perceive their relational identities toward each other. Our findings are important for this field of research, as prior studies of this particular context are relatively scarce. Specifically, the typology generated by this study can provide a valuable theoretical foundation for future studies exploring the diversity and complexity of relational identity, including its formation and dynamism, in the context of sports teams and beyond. Second, we

provide empirical evidence to elaborate the four categories of relational identity, namely learning, family, interaction, and task relationships. This is an important supplement to prior studies, in particular those that are theory-based. Furthermore, due to the extensive opportunities for coaches and players to interact over time, we demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of relational identities, which can evolve and change. Future studies could enhance our understanding by examining relational identity in different contexts, and potentially evaluate how different types of identity affect performance.

Research limitations and future directions

In addition to the above contributions, we would like to highlight three limitations of our research. First, due to the nature of tennis, the pairings included only coaches and players. Therefore, our findings might not be generalizable to other sports without some careful adjustments. Nevertheless, our insights into the diversity and complexity of relational identities will be valuable for future conceptualizations of relational identity. Second, Study 2 targeted university players and therefore only represents one particular level of player. Its findings might have some limitations when applied to players at different levels. Third, we collected data on coach and player relational identities and typology separately. From

the current research design, we are unable to ascertain within each pairing if and how the coaches and players may differ conceptually regarding their role relational identities. This design limitation should be addressed in future research.

Our findings have several implications for future research. First, it is necessary to examine in more detail how relational identity is formed and changed based on factors such as the stage of study, skill level, maturity, and amount of time that coaches spend with players. Second, future studies could use a whole sports team as a unit of analysis and adopt data collection methods such as observation and interviews to qualitatively investigate the substance and underlying dynamism of relational identity and its changes. Third, the pairing of coach and player is a unique design feature, which reflects the nature of tennis. Further studies could examine how relational identity is formed in the context of team sports. This could be an intriguing context, as sports teams are highly structured and may thus introduce different factors to influence the construction of relational identity. Finally, although we identified an extensive typology, we were not able to provide empirical details to describe how each type is formed. Future studies could select and focus on just one type of relational identity, how it is formed, and how it evolves over time.