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LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLE AMBIGUITY PERCEPTIONS IN TEAM SPORTS

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The relationships between leadership behaviors and athletes' perceptions of role ambiguity were investigated within interdependent team sports. Early to midway through their respective seasons, the degree to which coaches engaged in training and instruction and positive feedback behaviors was investigated in relation to athletes' subsequent perceptions of multidimensional role ambiguity. For nonstarters, coaches' training and instruction accounted for significant variation in offensive and defensive role consequences ambiguity as well as offensive role evaluation ambiguity. However, for starters, neither of the leadership dimensions assessed in this study could explain significant variance in any of the role ambiguity dimensions. Results are discussed in terms of theory development and further research investigating possible antecedents of multidimensional role ambiguity.

Keywords: coaching; teams; role stress; starting status

Within interdependent groups such as sport teams, military units, and medical teams, members undertake various role responsibilities that are inextricably linked with other members of the

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group (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). If members experience *role ambiguity*—a lack of clear information associated with one's role (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964)—it is likely that both individual and collective functioning will suffer (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). Although the study of role ambiguity has been extensive across various fields of psychology, it is surprising that few studies have considered role ambiguity within the specific context of small groups or teams.

Recently, Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, and Carron (2002) developed a conceptual model for the study of role ambiguity within sport teams and, consistent with theorizing by Kahn et al. (1964), considered role ambiguity perceptions to be multidimensional in nature. The model presented by Beauchamp et al. (2002) describes four manifestations of role ambiguity (cf. Eys & Carron, 2001; Kahn et al., 1964) that may exist within the context of interdependent sport teams. These pertain to a lack of clarity associated with (a) the scope of one's responsibilities, (b) the behaviors associated with one's role, (c) how one's role performance is evaluated, and (d) the consequences of failing to fulfill one's role responsibilities. This model also considers these perceptions within the major behavioral contexts in which sport team athletes have formal roles, namely offense and defense.

Beauchamp et al. (2002) operationalized their conceptual model in the form of the Role Ambiguity Scale (RAS). Evidence for the construct validity of this measure was initially provided through confirmatory factor analysis, supporting the a priori four-factor model (for offense and defense), as well as acceptable internal consistencies for the separate subscales. From a between-network perspective (cf. Marsh, 1997), Beauchamp et al. also found that multiple forms of role ambiguity were able to explain unique variance in role efficacy and role performance. Recent studies also have found different role ambiguity dimensions to be associated with specific theorized consequences, including athlete satisfaction (Eys, Carron, Bray, & Beauchamp, 2003a), precompetition anxiety (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2003), as well as team members' intentions to retain group membership in the future (Eys, Carron, Bray, & Beauchamp, 2003b).

Although there is a growing body of evidence showing support for some of the theorized consequences of role ambiguity, an equally important issue that should be addressed relates to potential antecedents of different types of role ambiguity within sport teams. It seems logical to predict *a priori* that if different types of ambiguity have differential outcomes, they may also have different causes (King & King, 1990). Indeed, if researchers can identify factors that contribute to various manifestations of role ambiguity, drawing from medical terminology, one can then focus on prevention rather than cure as a primary means of intervention.

In this study, we set out to examine leadership behaviors as factors that may contribute to role ambiguity. In their role episode model, Kahn et al. (1964) theorized that the experience of role ambiguity would likely arise from the expectations and subsequent communications emanating from a role sender. Although expectations for a particular role incumbent may derive from other group members, the primary source of role-related expectations in sport teams is typically the coach. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between coaching behaviors and athletes' experiences of multidimensional role ambiguity in sport teams.

Chelladurai's (1978, 1990) conceptual model of leadership is perhaps the most extensively employed framework for studying coaching behaviors in sport (cf. Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Chelladurai & Riemer, 1998). Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) operationalized their conceptual model in the form of the Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS), which was designed to assess five dimensions of sport leader behavior: (a) autocratic behavior, (b) democratic behavior, (c) training and instruction, (d) positive feedback, and (e) social support. In their conceptual model, Chelladurai and Saleh noted that "the dimensions of Democratic and Autocratic Behavior refer to the decision style adopted by the leader whereas the other dimensions refer to the substance of the behavior" (p. 42). From the perspective of role ambiguity, we were more interested in the substance of leaders' decisions and communications (i.e., what is communicated) rather than how information is communicated

(i.e., style). Thus, for this study, only the behavioral dimensions of the LSS were assessed.

In their development of the LSS, Chelladurai and Saleh (1978) considered training and instruction to be directly comparable to Fleishman's (1957) leadership initiating structure, which in the industrial and organizational literature has consistently been found to be a major predictor of role ambiguity (e.g., Lee & Schuler, 1980; Senatra, 1980). Leader-initiating structure refers to the degree to which a leader clearly defines team members' roles and lets each team member know what is expected of him or her (Fry, Kerr, & Lee, 1986). Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) also noted the similarities of this dimension with House and Dessler's (1974) instrumental leadership, which "essentially consists of role clarification, coaching, and coordination" (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980, p. 41). Given the task-related focus of the items composing the training and instruction scale (e.g., "My coach specifies in detail what is expected of each athlete"), higher scores on the training and instruction scale should be associated with lower levels of ambiguity concerning the scope of one's responsibilities as well as how to perform those responsibilities (i.e., role behavior ambiguity). However, it is likely that training and instruction would also be related to role evaluation and role consequences ambiguity. In their operational definition of training and instruction, Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) incorporated the provision of supervisory feedback (e.g., "My coach points out each athlete's strengths and weaknesses"), which in the organizational literature also has consistently been found to be related to lower levels of role ambiguity (e.g., Olk & Friedlander, 1992; Singh, 1993). Given that ambiguity concerning role evaluation and role consequences would typically arise through the provision (or lack) of effective role-related feedback (cf. Kahn et al., 1964), higher levels of training and instruction should also be related to lower levels of role evaluation and role consequences ambiguity.

The positive feedback dimension of the LSS differs somewhat from the role-related feedback described above. Positive feedback, as measured by the LSS, is considered to reflect the degree to which coaches "compliment the athletes for their performance and contri-

bution" (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980, p. 43) and, as such, describes feedback that is contingent on successful performance. For the organizational domain, Jackson and Schuler (1985) suggested that contingent feedback may clarify what is expected because employees are rewarded for successful role performance. In this regard, if athletes do not receive sufficient feedback, they are unlikely to understand the scope of their responsibilities, the behaviors required to fulfill those responsibilities, how they are evaluated, or the consequences of failing to fulfill those responsibilities. Thus, it was hypothesized that positive feedback would be negatively related to all four types of role ambiguity.

Social support behaviors, as considered by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980), refer to those that are provided outside of the athletic context, and as such there is no theoretical basis to suggest that this leadership dimension would be associated with any component of ambiguity involving formal role enactment. For this reason, the social support dimension of the LSS was not used in this study. Furthermore, although the RAS was designed to assess role ambiguity perceptions for offense and defense, there was no theoretical basis to suggest that differential relationships might exist for either context. Consequently, no hypotheses were made with regard to offensive and defensive play.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Early to midway through their respective seasons, 159 Canadian university athletes from a variety of interdependent varsity team sports participated in the study. Seventy-six athletes were male (M age = 21.14, SD = 2.01) and 83 were female (M age = 20.55, SD = 1.78); 85 were starters, 72 were nonstarters, and 2 did not indicate their starting status. Players were drawn from the sports of lacrosse (n = 25), rugby (n = 45), water polo (n = 28), soccer (n = 19), basketball (n = 18), volleyball (n = 12), and field hockey (n = 12). Participants had played an average of 4.35 (SD = 3.44) games prior to their involvement in the study.

MEASURES

Leadership behaviors. Coach leadership behaviors were assessed using the LSS (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). This is a 40-item instrument designed to measure five dimensions of leadership: democratic behaviors (9 items), autocratic behaviors (9 items), training and instruction (13 items), social support (8 items), and positive feedback (5 items). As outlined above, and consistent with the research question, only the subscales related to training and instruction (e.g., "My coach sees to it that efforts are coordinated") and positive feedback (e.g., "My coach gives credit when it is due") were employed in this study.

Athletes' responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale, anchored by 1 (*never*) and 5 (*always*), with higher scores reflecting more frequent use of the given type of coaching behavior. Based on Nunnally's (1978) criterion for the psychological domain, acceptable Cronbach (1951) alphas (i.e., $> .70$) were recorded for both of the leadership behavior subscales (see Table 1).

Role ambiguity. Role ambiguity was measured using the RAS (Beauchamp et al., 2002). This theory-driven multidimensional 40-item scale (containing 20 items for offense plus 20 items for defense) was designed to assess four types of perceived (i.e., subjective) ambiguity with regard to sport team athletes' formal offensive and defensive interdependent role responsibilities. Each of the four ambiguity dimensions are assessed using 5-item subscales and correspond to an athlete's (a) scope of responsibilities (e.g., "I am clear about the different responsibilities that make up my *offensive* [*defensive*] role"), (b) role behaviors (e.g., "It is clear what behaviors I should perform to fulfill my *offensive* [*defensive*] role"), (c) role evaluation (e.g., "I understand how my *offensive* [*defensive*] role is evaluated"), and (d) role consequences (e.g., "I know what will happen if I don't perform my *offensive* [*defensive*] role responsibilities").

Items are rated by athletes on a 9-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting greater role clarity (i.e., less ambiguity).

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics for Leadership Behaviors and Role Ambiguity

	<i>Starters</i>		<i>Nonstarters</i>		<i>Alpha</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Leadership behaviors					
Training and instruction	3.89	.57	3.88	.68	.89
Positive feedback	4.04	.73	3.85	.85	.90
Role ambiguity—offense					
Scope of responsibilities	7.57	1.00	6.60	1.04***	.84
Role behavior	7.57	.95	6.79	1.14***	.86
Role evaluation	6.96	1.49	6.24	1.33**	.89
Role consequences	7.30	1.34	6.77	1.28*	.85
Role ambiguity—defense					
Scope of responsibilities	7.68	1.02	7.10	1.23**	.89
Role behavior	7.58	.93	7.10	1.09**	.82
Role evaluation	7.08	1.60	6.58	1.56****	.93
Role consequences	7.51	1.27	7.10	1.40*****	.88

NOTE: *N* starters = 81, *N* nonstarters = 71 (2 participants did not indicate starting status, explaining why the combined sample size for starters and nonstarters is 152 and not 154). Scores for leadership behaviors can range from 1 to 5. Scores for role ambiguity dimensions can range from 1 to 9.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. **** $p = .06$. ***** $p = .07$.

Cronbach (1951) alpha coefficients of greater than Nunnally's (1978) suggested criterion of .70 were recorded for each of the role ambiguity subscales (see Table 1).

PROCEDURES

Each team's coach was approached by the first author to request the involvement of his or her team in this study. Subsequently, early to midway through their respective seasons, athletes were convened before a midweek training session and recruited for the study. Voluntary participation and confidentiality was stressed to participants and their informed consent was obtained. Immediately afterward, a questionnaire containing the LSS as well as a number of demographic questions was administered. To minimize the possible influence of common method variance (cf. Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), the dependent variables (i.e., the scales of the RAS) were assessed during a similar team meeting 1 week later.

RESULTS

PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

One multivariate outlier was detected through Mahalanobis distance ($p < .001$) and was eliminated from the subsequent analyses. Four other cases were also deleted because their questionnaires had substantial sections of missing data, leaving 154 cases for analysis. Given that past research has found role ambiguity perceptions to differ according to gender (Beauchamp et al., 2003) and starting status (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001), a 2 (males, females) \times 2 (starters, nonstarters) MANOVA was conducted with the two leadership dimensions and eight role ambiguity dimensions as dependent variables. With the use of Wilks's criterion, a multivariate effect was found for starting status, $\lambda = .78$, $F(10, 139) = 3.90$, $p < .001$. No multivariate effect was found for gender or the status \times gender interaction. Further inspection of the univariate statistics revealed that although starters and nonstarters did not differ in their perceptions of their coach's leadership behaviors (i.e., nonsignificant differences for the two leadership dimensions), noteworthy differences existed with regard to role ambiguity. Nonstarters were found to experience significantly higher levels of each type of role ambiguity (see Table 1), with the exception of role evaluation ($p = .06$) and role consequences ($p = .07$) ambiguity for defense; both approached statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level. Given that starters and nonstarters were found to differ in their reported experience of role ambiguity, for the subsequent analyses, separate investigations were conducted according to starting status.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients are presented in Table 1. Bivariate correlations among the leadership and role ambiguity variables are presented in Table 2 for nonstarters, and Table 3 for starters.

TABLE 2: Intercorrelations Between Leadership Behaviors and Role Ambiguity for Nonstarters

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Training and instruction	—	.69**	.27*	.38**	.39**	.30*	.28*	.22	.33**	.29*
2. Positive feedback		—	.22	.36**	.31**	.13	.22	.17	.28*	.18
Offense										
3. Scope			—	.79**	.58**	.64**	.63**	.64**	.32**	.46**
4. Behavior				—	.66**	.57**	.60**	.65**	.46**	.46*
5. Evaluation					—	.49**	.47**	.48**	.64**	.36**
6. Consequences						—	.51**	.49**	.27**	.65**
Defense										
7. Scope							—	.88**	.60**	.76**
8. Behavior								—	.54**	.61**
9. Evaluation									—	.65**
10. Consequences										—

NOTE: $N = 71$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND ROLE AMBIGUITY

For nonstarters, both training and instruction and positive feedback behaviors were significantly correlated with both offensive and defensive role ambiguity perceptions (see Table 2). Standard multiple regression analyses were then performed (cf. Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) with both training and instruction and positive feedback entered together as predictor variables.

The analyses of the leadership and offensive role data showed that training and instruction was the only significant predictor of offensive role evaluation ambiguity ($\beta = .33, p < .05$), explaining 13% of the variance, $\text{adj. } R^2 = .13, F(2, 68) = 6.30, p < .01$. Training and instruction was also the only significant predictor of offensive role consequences ambiguity ($\beta = .33, p < .05$) accounting for 8%, $\text{adj. } R^2 = .08, F(2, 68) = 3.91, p < .05$. For defense, training and instruction was the only significant predictor of role consequences ambiguity ($\beta = .32, p = .05$) accounting for 6% of the variance, $\text{adj. } R^2 = .06, F(2, 68) = 3.22, p < .05$. The positive feedback dimension of the LSS did not explain significant variation in any of the role ambiguity dimensions for nonstarters.

For starters, none of the role ambiguity dimensions were significantly correlated with either training and instruction or positive feedback. Consequently, no regression analyses were performed.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between coaching behaviors and athletes' experiences of multidimensional role ambiguity in sport teams. The results of this study showed that for starters, neither training and instruction or positive feedback were associated with any of the role ambiguity dimensions. However, for nonstarters, higher levels of training and instruction were associated with lower levels of offensive and defensive role consequences ambiguity as well as offensive role evaluation ambiguity. One possible explanation for these starting status differences relates to previous research by Bray, Brawley,

TABLE 3: Intercorrelations Between Leadership Behaviors and Role Ambiguity Dimensions for Starters

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Training and instruction	—	.65**	.03	.13	.18	.12	.21	.09	.17	.04
2. Positive feedback		—	.02	.10	.15	.21	.09	.03	.21	.06
Offense										
3. Scope			—	.85**	.53**	.61**	.36**	.43**	.27*	.35**
4. Behavior				—	.53**	.56**	.44**	.51**	.34**	.35**
5. Evaluation					—	.74**	.46**	.49**	.84**	.56**
6. Consequences						—	.43**	.44**	.62**	.76**
Defense										
7. Scope							—	.81**	.59**	.57**
8. Behavior								—	.52**	.50**
9. Evaluation									—	.65**
10. Consequences										—

NOTE: $N = 81$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

and Carron (2002); they found that coaches typically provide starters with greater opportunities to practice their various role responsibilities in comparison to nonstarters. Given that, in practice, this is often the case, it is possible that nonstarters may be more likely to attribute their experience of role ambiguity to their coach's leadership behaviors (or lack thereof) rather than to other potential causes. In the organizational literature, those on the boundary of organizations (i.e., boundary spanners) have been found to be more likely to be susceptible to role ambiguity (e.g., Singh, 1993), as a result of their psychological distance from those responsible for sending role-related messages. In a similar regard, it is possible that those in the out-group or periphery of the core sport group (i.e., nonstarters) may tend to experience greater levels of role ambiguity due to coaches' greater preference or necessity to deal more often and more directly with those members they perceive to be central to the effective execution of specific team systems (i.e., starters).

Although one might expect differences between starters and nonstarters in terms of mean levels of role ambiguity (cf. Beauchamp & Bray, 2001), the finding that training and instruction and positive feedback were unrelated to role ambiguity for starters was not anticipated. One explanation for this finding has to do with the operational definition of leadership (LSS) used in this study. The LSS was designed to assess the amount of time spent providing various leadership behaviors rather than the content and quality of information-provision characteristics of leader-member interactions. For example, a coach could spend all of his or her time providing training and instruction, but if that training and instruction is ineffective or misguided, the role incumbent will still experience high levels of role ambiguity. This supposition is supported by research by Podsakoff, Todor, and Schuler (1983), who found that initiating structure from leaders (similar to training and instruction) was only negatively related to role ambiguity when subordinates perceived their leader to have a high level of expertise. This finding suggests that it is not the amount or intensity of training and instructional leadership that is important but rather the proficiency of leadership required to meet the needs of each role incumbent. Thus, starting players may have varying degrees of role ambiguity

regardless of the amount of time the coach spends working with them.

For further research on leadership and role ambiguity in the interdependent team sport context, we believe an alternative model of leadership that holds particular promise for understanding the relationship between these complex variables is Bass and Avolio's (1994) paradigm of "full-range leadership." In this model, Bass and Avolio consider the differential effects of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors. Laissez-faire leadership is characterized by delays of action, absence, and indifference. Transactional leadership occurs when one sets goals, clarifies performance outcomes, provides positive and negative feedback, and exchanges rewards and recognition for achievement. Finally, transformational leadership is characterized by charismatic behaviors, a consideration of individual needs, behaviors that are motivationally inspiring, and actions that stimulate individuals intellectually to think about old problems in new ways (Bass & Avolio, 1994, 1997).

Results from a number of studies (see Bass & Avolio, 1997, for review) indicate that transactional leadership provides a basis for effective leadership. However, greater effort, effectiveness, and satisfaction can be achieved through transformational methods. That is to say that transformational leadership augments transactional leadership in predicting outcomes such as satisfaction and follower effectiveness. Indeed, across a variety of settings, transformational leadership has consistently been associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001), self-efficacy (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), and commitment (Koh, Terborg, & Steers, 1991) than transactional and laissez-faire methods. Of particular relevance to this research, Shoemaker (1999) recently found that transformational leadership behaviors were associated with higher levels of role clarity and less role ambiguity. Although Shoemaker employed a unidimensional conceptualization of role clarity/ambiguity, it is likely that transformational leadership behaviors will also be negatively related to multiple forms of role ambiguity. Although, to date, limited research has employed Bass and Avolio's (1994) leadership paradigm in the context of

sport (cf. Charbonneau et al., 2001), this represents a promising framework for understanding how leaders might contribute to their subordinates' experiences of role ambiguity/clarity in sport.

This study focused exclusively on the relationship between leadership behaviors and role ambiguity. However, in the future, researchers are also encouraged to consider other factors that are conceptually antecedent to role ambiguity in sport. For example, in their role episode model, Kahn et al. (1964) suggested that organizational (e.g., group size, group climate), personal (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity, locus of control), and interpersonal (e.g., level of interdependence, group structure) factors may all contribute to the experience of role ambiguity. Disentangling the influence of these factors in relation to role ambiguity represents a necessary challenge for future sports psychology researchers.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between training and instruction and positive feedback behaviors in relation to multiple dimensions of role ambiguity in sport. The results showed that lower levels of training and instruction were related to higher levels of role ambiguity for nonstarters, although no relations were found to exist for starters. In the future, researchers are encouraged to consider Bass and Avolio's (1994) full range leadership paradigm as well as other organizational, personal, and interpersonal antecedents of role ambiguity in sport.

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