Athletes’ Perceptions of Role Acceptance in Interdependent Sport Teams

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Roles are structural components of groups and represent the patterns of behavior expected of an individual within a specific social context (Biddle, 1979). Literature in sport as well as organizational domains has emphasized the importance of roles in groups characterized by a high degree of task interdependence (Carron & Eys, 2012; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In other words, in interdependent groups where performance is the main goal, the differentiation and specialization of role responsibilities is crucial to team effectiveness (Wageman, Fisher, & Hackman, 2009).

Kahn et al. (1964) developed a theoretical framework to examine the nature of how role expectations are transmitted in a group setting. Underscoring the importance of roles in sport, researchers have embraced this framework to examine a number of aspects related to the generation, communication, and execution of role responsibilities in interdependent teams. For example, how well an athlete understands his/her role responsibilities (i.e., role clarity) is positively linked with perceptions of group cohesion, leadership behaviors, and individual role performance outcomes (e.g., Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002; Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2005; Bosselut, McLaren, Eys, & Heuzé, 2012). However, though ensuring athletes understand their role responsibilities is important, athletes who choose not to subsequently accept the responsibilities/expectations defined for them will likely erode any positive outcomes of clear role communication processes (Benson, Surya, & Eys). As such, scholars have posited that accepting one’s role is a fundamental process related to the performance of role responsibilities and, ultimately, the group (Carron & Eys, 2012)—a sentiment that is echoed in the popular media as the following quote illustrates:

When you’re talking about winning at the highest level, individual needs for minutes and touches, if that stuff comes into the equation, then you got guys who aren’t about the right things...Anybody who presents themselves with that kind of selfishness isn’t deserving of being in a Mavericks’ uniform. This isn’t going to be about role definition. It’s going to be about role acceptance. (Rick Carlisle, head coach for the National Basketball Association’s Dallas Mavericks; Sefko, 2010, para. 5).

Despite anecdotal and academic commentary regarding the potential importance of role acceptance, a review of the available literature identified that there are no existing theoretical frameworks that provide a strong conceptual basis to examine role acceptance. In fact, it is necessary to examine several divergent areas of research to provide some insight into the cognitive processes that may be occurring when individuals appraise the expectations others hold for them in a small group environment. Early examinations of attitude change elucidated how individuals conform to the expectations of others, and how these processes are affected by social influences. Gerard and Deutsch’s (1955) work concerning normative social influences suggested that group membership could enhance the degree to which individuals conform to the expectations of others. Kelman (1958) explained that this phenomenon could be attributed to an individual’s motivation to maintain social relationships with group members and adhere to the collective interests of the group. In a team sport environment, it is likely that group membership results in the application of numerous social pressures that can serve to influence an individual’s acceptance of a role.

It is also important to highlight an individual’s own perspective with respect to accepting responsibilities. In a study focused on the processes of accepting responsibilities associated with citizenship, Doheny (2007) summarized earlier work by Habermas (1990) to provide four possible perspectives. First, an egoist perspective is one in which individuals accept their responsibilities to receive rewards or avoid punishments. Second, a conformer perspective pertains to individuals who accept a responsibility because of desires to match societal norms and/or perceptions that the expectation is reasonable. Third, individuals who accept a responsibility out of a sense of personal obligation are termed reformers. Finally, a reflector perspective is one in which individuals assess expectations and judge their acceptance of them based on whether the expectations are principled and coincide with personal values.
A third example of related literature pertains to the degree to which individuals will be acceptant of others’ expectations. Eagly and Telaak (1972) empirically demonstrated that people differ on the degree by which they are influenced by a suggestion or judgment, resulting in a “latitude of acceptance.” Further, several other variables influence the consideration of others’ expectations including the ability (e.g., concentration of an individual) and motivation (e.g., importance of situation) of an individual to process the appropriate information of a situation, as well as more subtle factors such as the time of day, mood, and setting (Wood, 2000). Taken together, it is apparent that an individual’s evaluation of expectations and demands can be influenced by a number of personal, situational, and environmental factors.

While the previous literature focused on the evaluation of expectations from an attitudinal or societal perspective, Biddle’s (1979) work concerning role theory offered the earliest explicit discussion of expectations as they specifically pertain to role acceptance in small groups. A primary focus of role theory was to examine how normative expectations are transmitted in a social setting. Accordingly, Biddle (1979) suggested that role acceptance was predicated on the comparison of role expectations between individuals. This provided a basis for the present working definition that refers to role acceptance as “a dynamic, covert process that reflects the degree to which an athlete perceives his or her own expectations for role responsibilities as similar to, and agreeable with, the expectations determined by his or her role senders” (Eys, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2006, p. 246).

Within a sport context, researchers have only tangentially focused on athlete role acceptance. For instance, Grand and Carron (1982) included general items pertaining to the concept within the Team Climate Questionnaire; however, these were assessed in conjunction with items specifically assessing role satisfaction. As a point of clarification, Eys, Schinke, and Jeffery (2007) more recently differentiated that the concept of role satisfaction refers to the emotions one can experience in regard to a role, whereas acceptance refers to a cognitive appraisal of a role. As a second sport example, Bray (1998) assessed role acceptance and role satisfaction as distinct concepts, although they were of secondary concern to his main focus of role efficacy (i.e., an athlete’s beliefs in his/her abilities to execute interdependent role functions).

Role acceptance has also emerged in qualitative examinations of team dynamics. An ethnographic study of one intercollegiate soccer team suggested that the development of group cohesion and the clarity of role expectations were positively associated with the acceptance of roles (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). Most recently, an examination focused on the formation of positive role states offered additional insight into factors that serve to influence role acceptance within an intercollegiate soccer team (Mellalieu & Juniper, 2006). First, perceived effectiveness and personal importance of an assigned role were suggested to be important contributors to the acceptance process. Second, athletes’ perceptions of the credibility of their coach and the exhibited leadership style served to influence the overall degree of role acceptance within the team (Mellalieu & Juniper, 2006).

In sum, it is apparent that role acceptance (a) is a practical concern of coaches and athletes as evidenced by anecdotal reports in popular media, (b) represents a complex construct that potentially has important relationships with other group (e.g., conformity) and individual variables/theories (e.g., attitude change), but (c) has yet to receive the focus of a systematic investigation. As such, three specific objectives were pursued in the current study through interviews with intercollegiate sport team athletes. First, a greater understanding of how the concept of role acceptance was viewed from athletes’ perspectives was desired. Following from this objective, athletes’ perceptions of the potential antecedents (second objective) and consequences (third objective) of role acceptance were also explored. To accomplish these objectives, a qualitative exploratory approach was employed with descriptive phenomenology as its guiding theoretical orientation. The strength of this method lies in the theoretical articulation of vaguely defined concepts, allowing for one to better understand the phenomenon under study (Giorgi, 2009).

**Methods**

**Participants**

The sample included 15 intercollegiate male (n = 8) and female (n = 7) athletes (M<sub>age</sub> = 21.33, SD = 1.29). Participants were members of an intercollegiate sport team during the 2010–2011 academic school year who competed in an interdependent sport (i.e., basketball, football, soccer, lacrosse, and rugby). Interviews were conducted after the conclusion of the season. The sample included starters (n = 10), nonstarters (n = 4), and a practice player (n = 1). The athletes had an average team tenure of 3.26 years (SD = 1.33).

An additional four intercollegiate athletes were recruited for verification interviews once the data analysis of the original interviews was completed. These participants (2 females and 2 males) were similar to the initial participants in terms of age (M = 22.50, SD = 0.57 years), sport type (i.e., basketball, football, and rugby), and average team tenure (M = 2.75, SD = 1.50 years).

**Semistructured Interviews**

The primary means of data collection was through the use of semistructured phenomenological interviews. The development of the key questions pertaining to role acceptance was informed by two theoretical frameworks. In consideration of Biddle’s (1979) proposition that role responsibilities are contextually specific and are unique to the individual who holds them, initial questions aimed to elicit the unique and salient features of each athlete’s role. In addition, questions were also developed on the basis of recent research utilizing the role episode model.
in the sport environment to acknowledge the dynamic nature of roles as well as the potential factors that can influence an athlete’s perception of his or her role (e.g., role sender related factors, focal person related factors, situational related factors; Eys, Carron, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2005). Particular attention was paid to the sequencing of questions, as well as to the use of probes to enhance the richness of participant responses (Patton, 2002). The participants were asked to provide personal detailed accounts of their experiences in relation to the circumstances of accepting or rejecting a role on their sport team. This also included the participants’ experiences that have served as antecedents to role acceptance, as well as the consequences related to accepting or rejecting a role. The questions were developed based on the presupposition that the athletes held a degree of knowledge concerning the general concept of role acceptance in a sport team, and that they had experiences related to the acceptance or rejection of those role responsibilities. A copy of the interview guide can be obtained by contacting the lead author.

Each interview was digitally audio-recorded and then subsequently transcribed verbatim in its entirety. In addition, the interview data were supplemented by the use of background demographic questionnaires and a reflexive journal. The background demographic questionnaire provided the researcher with pertinent information regarding each participant’s prior athletic experiences to foster a conversational style within the interview. The reflexive journal was comprised of field notes that provided concrete descriptions of any significant observations made in relation to each interview including the environment and any notable interactions between the researcher and participants (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

In regard to the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry, data collection and data analysis were performed concurrently, whereby the researcher constantly compared each additional interview to previously collected information. This enabled the interviewer to adjust the focus and types of probing questions used within each subsequent interview to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Data collection ceased once the researcher began to see redundancies in subsequent interviews and felt substantive significance was achieved (Patton, 2002). Analytical procedures followed the basic tenets of descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009; Patton, 2002), while also taking into account several considerations specific to the sport environment based on the work of Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993). The initial coding stage concluded when all the raw data were organized into meaning units (i.e., a “segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information;” Tesch, 1990, p. 116) and categorized into subthemes (Côté et al., 1993).

A second researcher then critically examined the initial meaning units to ensure the subthemes depicted were truly data driven. The researchers discussed any issues raised as a result of the review process until agreement was reached concerning the appropriateness of each established subtheme. The next stage of analysis focused on identifying and removing nonessential subthemes and redundancies in the coding scheme. The subthemes were compared and contrasted with each other to unearth the core consistencies of the obtained descriptions (Giorgi, 2009). As a result of this process several major themes emerged from the data. Each theme consisted of data that belonged together in a meaningful way (i.e., internal homogeneity), yet were sufficiently distinct from information contained in other themes (i.e., external heterogeneity; Patton, 2002).

Finally, an expert audit review (i.e., to assess the quality of the thematic analysis; Patton, 2002) was conducted by a coresearcher who has an extensive background in role perceptions research. The analysis process concluded when a consensus among the researchers was achieved regarding the themes.

Verification Interviews

Patton (2002) stressed the importance of verifying what has emerged from the data, so one can examine the extent to which the analysis explains the phenomenon under study. An additional four semistructured interviews were conducted once the data analysis of the original interviews was completed. Participants were given an executive summary of the results and were asked to provide honest feedback regarding the themes and subthemes agreed upon by the researchers, and to provide any additional insights. In general, the findings resonated with all the athletes interviewed and no major issues surfaced that led the researcher to reconsider the findings. The athletes’ agreeableness with the themes was conveyed in two main ways. The first was through general confirmatory statements. For example, one athlete stated, “I agree with that… those directly apply to me” (V1). Second, athletes also provided descriptions on how the findings reflected their own experiences: “The type of coaching style used and how he communicates was huge in my experience…” (V4). Overall, the verification interviews provided ample support for the initial thematic analysis and enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2002). Since the data from the verification interviews were prompted by the information provided in the executive summary, the results section will focus exclusively on the descriptions obtained from the initial interviews.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

A number of strategies were employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness within the study. First, a bracketing interview was performed before conducting any of the interviews whereby the lead researcher was queried about his own experiences pertaining to role acceptance as a former intercollegiate athlete (Dale, 1996). As a result of this bracketing interview, the lead researcher documented any existing preconceptions he
held in relation to the topic to become self-aware of how these biases may serve to influence the collection and analysis of the data (Giorgi, 2009). Second, triangulation of data was achieved through the use of semistructured interviews, background demographic questionnaires, and field notes—all of which served to corroborate the findings (Patton, 2002). Third, member checks were performed with each participant as a means to provide them with the opportunity to omit any statements they felt did not accurately capture their personal experience, and to add any additional information they felt was omitted during the initial interview. Finally, with respect to the analytical procedures, a critical review of the meaning units and an expert audit review were performed as a means of analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002).

**Results**

The following sections are organized to reflect the specific objectives pursued within the current study. The first section highlights athletes’ general perceptions of role acceptance. The second section encompasses the potential antecedents of role acceptance in which five primary themes emerged (See Table 1 for a complete list of themes and subthemes). The third section encompasses the potential consequences of role acceptance in which two primary themes emerged (See Table 2 for a complete list of the themes and subthemes).

### Defining Role Acceptance

Athletes were asked to provide their own definition of role acceptance in relation to being a member on an interdependent sport team. It was found that athletes came to accept their role when they were willing to fulfill the role responsibilities determined by their primary role sender, who was predominantly their coach. Thirteen athletes articulated this viewpoint clearly, with the remaining athletes having inferred this perspective over the course of the interview. One athlete eloquently summarized role acceptance as the following:

You’re given a role, and there’s the role you perceive yourself to be in. So the main thing is to get those two roles to coincide, so the coaches may expect you to do one thing whereas your thoughts on what you’re supposed to do are completely different. So the hardest part when you first come in and start playing a varsity sport is to bring those two roles together and to make sure you’re meeting not only the coaches’ expectations, but your teammate’s expectations; and that your teammates’ and the coaches’ [expectations] are meeting yours. (P14, male, football)

A second athlete shared a similar perspective: “It’s a team game, one person doesn’t have to do everything, so when you accept your role you just, you know where you sit, and you do your part well” (P7, female, basket-

### Table 1 Summary of Themes and Subthemes Pertaining to Potential Antecedents of Role Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes (Meaning Units)</th>
<th>Subcategories (Meaning Units)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significance of athlete roles (97)</td>
<td>Importance of role within the context of the group (53)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Status the role provides within the team (27)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coaches acknowledging the importance of a role (8)</td>
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<td>Teammates acknowledging the importance of a role (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team cohesion (38)</td>
<td>Individual attractions to the group—social (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual attractions to the group—task (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group integration—social (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group integration—task (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletes’ perceptions of the coach (37)</td>
<td>Perceptions of the coach’s competency (17)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Congruency of coaching style with personal expectations (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature of communication (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related role perceptions (56)</td>
<td>Similarity of expectations (7)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role clarity (16)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role satisfaction (20)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Degree of person-role conflict (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenure moderating athletes’ expectations (37)</td>
<td>Intrateam communication (9)</td>
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</table>
The following themes reflect responses to questions pertaining to perceived factors that might influence role acceptance. The themes that arose included significance of athlete roles, team cohesion, athletes’ perceptions of the coach, related role perceptions, tenure moderating athletes’ expectations, and intrateam communication. See Table 1 for an overview of findings.

Significance of Athlete Roles. A prevalent finding resulting from the participants’ comments was that athletes might be more likely to accept role responsibilities that have some degree of meaning or importance. The subthemes that emerged—importance of the role within the context of the group, status the role provides within the team, coaches acknowledging the importance of a role, and teammates acknowledging the importance of a role—represented specific ways that athletes attributed meaning/importance to their role.

Importance of the Role Within the Context of the Group. All the athletes (15) stressed the importance of understanding their role in relation to team needs. A common issue that surfaced was that athletes often have to fulfill role expectations that may be undesirable from an individual perspective. However, when rationalized within the context of the group, this perception may change. One athlete described the importance of her role as a mentor to younger players: “Eventually I was able to figure out that I’m not starting, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t help the team. There were certain things that I could do that this freshman couldn’t do.” (P1, Female, Soccer)

Status the Role Provides Within the Team. Adequate playing time was suggested to be an influential determinant in whether athletes accepted their role. In fact, athletes predominantly began describing their role in terms of status on the team before discussing specific role responsibilities. Fourteen participants emphasized the importance of playing time in relation to accepting a given role. For example, one athlete highlighted this notion as she discussed how her role perceptions changed over the course of the prior competitive season:

My on-the-court contributions started to decline a bit and I got less and less playing time, until playoffs when there were some games where I didn’t play at all. So I had a bit of a roller coaster of a season... It was very difficult second semester to accept that role. (P8, Female, Basketball)

It was also apparent that occupying a nonstarting role was less desirable than those roles typically held by starting players. Despite this finding, many athletes still indicated that they found importance in their contributions by occupying niche roles (e.g., situational three-point shooter) that accentuated their specific skill set.

Coaches Acknowledging the Importance of a Role. Seven athletes emphasized that the degree of role acceptance was enhanced when a coach openly recognized specific roles as being instrumental to team success. In one instance, a coach emphasized a defensive oriented team philosophy: “Every game the coach would put a five on the board, because it’s all five people that have to be playing defense” (P6, Female, Basketball). The athlete explained that this fostered a team-wide acceptance of defensive oriented roles. Athletes also stated that a lack of recognition from a coach negatively impacted their acceptance of a role:

Within a team, in order for you to accept your role you have to have a coach that kind of appreciates all the roles. So, if you have a coach that sees your 11 starters, puts them on a pedestal and kind of forgets everybody else, then it’s going to be a lot harder for those people who aren’t playing, who are just doing the grunt work, and being practice players to accept their positions. (P1, Female, Soccer)

Teammates Acknowledging the Importance of a Role. Six athletes described the importance of teammates acknowledging their contributions within the team. This subcategory seemed particularly salient for some of the less recognized and less formalized roles found within a sport team. For example, one athlete spoke to his experience with teammates who occupied the role of a team “spark plug,” and the importance of recognizing such a role:

There are role guys who just grind in the corners... [The] crowd really doesn’t notice that, they notice the guy who scores the goal or the goalie that makes the big save. But when you have guys like that, the team notices, the coaches notice, and other guys on the team notice, and that’s really what should matter. (P4, Male, Lacrosse)

Team Cohesion. Athletes discussed how individual perceptions of group cohesion might influence role acceptance in a multitude of ways. The subthemes that arose coincide with the multidimensional conceptualization of cohesion in sport (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985)—including comments highlighting, individual
attractions to the group pertaining to both task and social aspects, and group integration pertaining to both task and social aspects. Athletes’ responses indicated that their perceptions of a role were enhanced when they were part of a cohesive team.

**Individual Attractions to the Group.** Ten athletes discussed how individual attractions to the group were contributing factors in accepting a given role. One athlete conveyed an experience where a strong social affiliation promoted a group level acceptance of roles within her team: “Everyone is friends, and they like being on the team because it’s a great group of girls…it’s fun to be a part of all that too.” (P12, female, rugby)

**Group Integration.** Six athletes described how individual perceptions of closeness, similarity, and bonding within the group positively influenced the extent to which athletes accepted their roles. These responses reflected perceptions concerned with both task and social oriented matters. One athlete conveyed the general importance of being united as a team:

> Closeness of a team not only affects athletes accepting their roles it also affects you know, how successful your team is going to be as a whole. If you guys can come together as a family and you’re constantly on the same page, you’re always together, you’re going to mesh easier and a lot faster than a lot of the other teams, and you know you’re going to be more comfortable… So closeness of a team, yeah, for sure it affects how you accept roles, and if roles are rejected. (P14, male, football)

**Athletes’ Perceptions of the Coach.** Another theme that emerged was how athletes’ perceptions of their coach might influence the acceptance of prescribed roles. The subthemes identified were (a) perception of the coach’s competency, (b) congruency of leadership style with personal expectations, and (c) nature of communication used by the coach.

**Perceptions of the Coach’s Competency.** Eight athletes highlighted that an influential determinant of role acceptance is whether they perceived their coach as a competent and effective leadership figure. This included both their ability to coach effectively, as well as their general ability as leaders. One athlete emphasized the influence his coach had within the team given the revered status he held:

> His ability to make any situation comfortable, he prepares everything—he’s ready for anything, and just his confidence, he’s always right and he tells you why he’s right and he lets you know how it is without sugar coating anything. He finds a way to control emotions and make players want to play for him. And I think that’s the most important thing...do you want to go out on Saturday and destroy your body for like a loser or someone you don’t respect, or do you want to go out there and, almost like you’re playing for your dad, you want to just go all out. And that’s what he does, he gets players to dedicate their lives and just go all out. (P11, male, football)

**Congruency of Coaching Style With Personal Expectations.** Five athletes described that having their preferred style of leadership influenced their perception of a given role, and in turn, the acceptance of that role. One athlete described how he rather enjoyed the disciplinary style of his coach, whereas other teammates did not share this sentiment: “Drawing off that negative feedback that really hit home for me. Whereas some guys they needed to be babied a bit more.” (P3, male, soccer)

**Nature of Communication.** Third area of consideration was how each coach communicated his/her expectations and feedback regarding individually assigned roles. Six players noted that specific methods of communication, such as positive feedback, had a positive impact on role acceptance. For instance, one athlete described a situation where he received welcome feedback:

> Last year I got a text message from the coach saying ‘Listen, you’ve been playing phenomenal for the last three weeks and we need to put you on the field more.’ Just out of the blue, stuff like that, that’s extremely motivating... you sometimes feel like you’re forgotten about or shuffled to the side, or you’re not playing a crucial role in the team. (P14, male, football)

**Related Role Perceptions.** The following subthemes represent specific aspects of an athlete’s role that were identified as potentially crucial to acceptance: (a) similarity of role expectations between the athlete and the coach, (b) role clarity, (c) role satisfaction, and (d) degree of person-role conflict.

**Similarity of Role Expectations Between the Athlete and Coach.** Nine athletes discussed that role acceptance was positively influenced in situations where personal expectations for a role were congruent to those expectations determined by the coach. One athlete noted the importance of having similar perceptions as your coach in relation to your abilities on the playing field:

> When we go in our individual meetings, he asks us to write down three strengths, three weaknesses, things that we want to work on over the summer, and he kind of gives us ours. So we kind of match them up; for the most part, we were thinking along the same lines, and I’ve been really trying to focus on those things. (P8, female, basketball)

**Role Clarity.** Nine athletes spoke to the issue of communication regarding role responsibilities. Specifically, having clear and consistent information regarding role responsibilities was suggested to lead to greater acceptance of those responsibilities. One athlete described what her team did to ensure role clarity:
Maybe twice a month we’d have [meetings] with our team and the sport psychologist… So we kind of would break down what everyone’s role is, and in that she would help us and stuff. We had people who were responsible for this, and for that, and every other thing. (P10, female, basketball)

Not surprisingly, those athletes who suffered from role ambiguity also had difficulty accepting their role: “I have the utmost respect for my coach, but he’s very hard to read and he doesn’t necessarily give you direct feedback, like you kind of have to go to him for feedback.” (P8, female, basketball)

**Role Satisfaction.** Eight athletes noted that their satisfaction with a role was closely related to their willingness to accept that role. One athlete succinctly characterized this relationship “I think it’s easier to accept your role when you’re in the position you want to be, when you have a role that you want.” (P1, female, soccer)

However, nine athletes discussed how they were still able to accept the role despite being dissatisfied. A veteran athlete conveyed this while reflecting upon how the perception of his role changed over the course of his career: “I started as a scout player and I wasn’t happy with that, but I understood that was best for the team.” (P5, male, football)

**Degree of Person-Role Conflict.** Seven athletes brought up instances whereby the degree to which they accepted their role was influenced by whether that role was compatible with their personality characteristics. Typically these responses reflected roles that were socially oriented in nature:

I’m not very social in that I don’t go out with the guys type of thing… I guess it’s an implied responsibility that as a leader, you’re a leader on the field and then off the field. The fact that I wasn’t there, kind of means I wasn’t accepting that responsibility either… I accepted it on the field, and in the locker room leadership, but not a lot...off the field. (P5, male, football)

**Tenure Moderating Athletes’ Expectations.** Another theme that arose was the notion that team tenure moderated athletes’ expectations for specific roles, and in turn influenced acceptance of those roles. Fourteen players discussed how their personal expectations regarding their role tended to increase in importance over time. For example, freshman athletes were typically more receptive to the idea of minimized playing time, whereas veterans tended to be less pliable to the idea of reduced playing time. One veteran athlete commented on his transition into university athletics:

I didn’t have very high expectations at all, I was 155lbs, still 18 years old, and there were so many older guys, a lot more experienced guys. I came in not expecting very much, and I think that helped me accept my position on the scout team, and not as a starter, because I didn’t come in thinking I was going to play. (P5, male, football)

This was a sentiment echoed by both veteran and freshman players alike as they reflected back upon their first season as a university athlete.

**Intrateam Communication.** The final point pertaining to how athletes accepted their individual role was the quality of communication among teammates. Six athletes described communications of consideration and appreciation between teammates. The following athlete recounted an anecdote outlining the degree of communication that goes on during a game:

A lot of communication goes on. I got to call whatever call we have. Then they [other teammates] will be like,—did he call to get the check-down—’Yeah I heard him call it’— and then Derrick will say ‘Oh well I didn’t hear him.’ — Well the other guys heard him so next time, just say it a little bit louder and that’s it, it’s done. (P13, male, football)

**Potential Consequences of Role Acceptance**

The following themes reflect responses to questions seeking to explore potential outcomes stemming from both athletes’ experiences of accepting their role, and instances where athletes failed to accept their role. The consequences of role acceptance manifested themselves within the group environment and in relation to the individual. See Table 2 for an overview of findings.

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<tr>
<th>Themes (Meaning Units)</th>
<th>Subcategories (Meaning Units)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group environment (65)</td>
<td>Violation of group norms (14)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group performance (12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal conflict (20)</td>
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<td>Team climate (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual outcomes (33)</td>
<td>Retention/attrition (23)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emotional state of the athlete (10)</td>
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Group Environment. The following subthemes represent various ways athletes perceived the group environment to be affected by athletes accepting or rejecting their roles: (a) violation of group norms, (b) group performance, (c) interpersonal conflict, and (d) team climate.

Violation of Group Norms. Ten athletes described instances where a teammate’s behavior was noticeably different from the expected norms within the group as a result of failing to accept his/her role. One athlete provided an apt example of one such teammate “Wouldn’t show up to practice, they’d get drunk before games, different things like that” (P3, male, soccer). None of the athletes brought to light situations where the acceptance of roles influenced group normative behavior.

Group Performance. Task-related role responsibilities within sport teams are largely interdependent on one another. Eight athletes acknowledged the importance of everyone on a team accepting their role responsibilities to have team success. The descriptions ranged from specific instances where an athlete failed to accept his or her role, to more general anecdotes stemming from past sporting experiences as summarized by the following athlete:

With rugby if you don’t do your role you let down the whole team because it’s such a team sport. There are 15 players, and there are 15 for a reason because we all have a job to do and they’re all necessary. (P12, female, rugby)

Interpersonal Conflict. Nine athletes made reference to situations where tension escalated to the point of causing a rift among teammates and, in some instances, the coaching staff as a result of individuals failing to accept their role responsibilities:

She would just be repeatedly disrespectful to our coaching staff and to our players. She has told me off before, she would flip me off, and I’d try to calm her down, she’s even told off our coaches. Slammed things, thrown things at the coaches, and that’s failing to accept a role of being a captain. You are an example; and obviously doing that is not an example. (P10, female, basketball)

Team Climate. Another consequence of role acceptance noted by athletes was a visible change in the team atmosphere. Eleven athletes described scenarios where an athlete either accepting or rejecting their role influenced morale within the group. One athlete summarized her thoughts in relation to both potential scenarios:

I think in a team sport environment, if you don’t accept your role it’s going to tear your team apart… If you’re going to spend your entire season complaining about how much playing time you’re getting, then obviously it’s going to affect the team climate. But at the same time, if you have the same player who isn’t playing and instead of spending that time complaining, they’re spending that time out on the field after practice doing extra conditioning, working to become a better player so next year she will see the field, then you have a positive impact. (P1, female, soccer)

Individual Outcomes. Two subthemes were identified pertaining to the individual consequences of role acceptance. These consequences consisted of (a) retention/attrition and (b) the emotional state of the athlete.

Retention/Attrition. One of the ultimate consequences stemming from when an athlete fails to accept his or her role is removal from, or abandonment of, the team. None of the athletes interviewed had personally experienced this; however, thirteen athletes explained situations where teammates had left their team. One athlete recounted:

I know on my team we started [with] twelve of us [as] freshmen, we graduated with four. And a lot of that was girls that were recruited on the premise that they were going to be superstars. Because that’s what they were in high school, they came in, they didn’t play their freshmen year, they all transferred to places where they would be superstars. So they didn’t accept that role, and they left. (P1, female, soccer)

Emotional State of the Athlete. Seven athletes described negative emotional outcomes that were often associated with players failing to accept their role. One athlete reflected on her own experience of struggling to accept her role:

Yeah, I’m not going to lie I was very upset by it. There were a lot of games in second semester that I’d hold it together in front of my teammates and coaches after the game, but if my parents brought me aside I would just ball my eyes out because I mean I’ve never really been through this. (P8, female, basketball)

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to gain insight into athletes’ perceptions of role acceptance. Toward this end, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 athletes to garner their perceptions of role acceptance as members of interdependent sport teams. The general findings suggested that role acceptance is a salient perception among intercollegiate athletes and reaffirmed its distinctiveness from other related role concepts (e.g., role satisfaction). In addition, the athletes’ experiences provided insight into the potential antecedents and consequences related to role acceptance. A number of issues pertaining to the present results warrant further discussion.

First, as a result of the descriptive findings garnered in the current study, a new definition for role acceptance was proposed. This a slight departure from a preliminary definition within the sport domain that suggested role
acceptance refers to the degree to which an athlete’s expectations are similar to, and agreeable with, the expectations determined by his/her role sender (i.e., coach; Eys et al., 2006). In the current study, athletes conveyed that they might still be willing to accept a role despite having dissimilar expectations in relation to their coach. In light of this finding, it can be argued that perhaps the similarity of expectations is not an essential component of role acceptance, but rather serves as a potential antecedent that contributes in part to an athlete’s willingness to accept his or her role responsibilities. Investigations pertaining to attitudinal change offer support for this proposition in that an individual’s acceptance of expectations is influenced by several factors including the congruency of expectations (Wood, 2000). A further slight departure from the previously proposed definition (Eys et al., 2006) is the removal of the description of role acceptance as a ‘covert’ process. While it is maintained that the acceptance of one’s role responsibilities is a cognitive process, there was no evidence obtained within the current study to suggest that there is added value in using ‘covert’ within the definition.

A second definitional issue that arose was the comparison between role acceptance and role performance; in other words, to what degree is role performance a reliable indicator of role acceptance? The majority of athletes described that role acceptance almost always led to the performance of that role. However, a subset of athletes clarified that this was not always the case. They described situations in which they wanted to fulfill a role, but were assigned responsibilities that exceeded their current capabilities. The use of the term willingness was incorporated into the definition to address this distinction, as the importance of differentiating between cognitive and behavioral processes has been identified in several spheres of research across the social sciences, including the role of normative influences (Gerard & Deutsch, 1955), role theory (Biddle, 1979), and small group research (Gemmill & Kraus, 1988). From a sport perspective, it is important for coaches to be able to distinguish between athletes failing to accept their role responsibilities vs. whether they are being asked to perform role responsibilities that exceed their level of ability (Eys et al., 2006). A coach’s inability to differentiate between these scenarios may serve as an impetus toward creating interpersonal conflict between coach and player, which is consequential from a group as well as individual perspective (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004).

The definition incorporated the term dynamic to acknowledge that athletes’ perceptions of role acceptance were susceptible to change over time. This was implicit from the emphasis athletes placed on team tenure and variability of playing time in relation to their perceptions of a role. From a conceptual stand point, this aligns with the adapted role episode model that suggests athletes’ perceptions of their roles are an ongoing and cyclical process (Eys et al., 2005), while also supporting the symbolic interactionist tradition that contends individuals constantly interpret and evaluate social interactions according to the present situational demands (Mead, 1934).

A final conceptual issue concerns the interplay between role acceptance and role satisfaction as there has been considerable overlap in relation to previous measurement attempts (Grand & Carron, 1982) as well as proposed definitions of these constructs (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). Although individuals’ perceptions of roles can certainly influence the emotions they experience (Locke, 1976; Rail, 1987), the current study provided clarification pertaining to the distinctiveness of the concepts. It was common for athletes to indicate experiences with undesirable roles over the course of their careers and yet still describe their willingness to accept the responsibilities. The relationship between role acceptance and role satisfaction can be better understood by drawing from the theory of cognitive dissonance, which explains that through the use of dissonance strategies, individuals can accept conflicting viewpoints regardless of the emotional response they experience (Festinger, 1957). Evidently, although role acceptance is closely related to the emotional state of athletes, it is not wholly contingent upon role satisfaction.

A second objective was to explore athletes’ experiences that served as potential antecedents to role acceptance. The present findings suggested that role acceptance was perceived to be influenced by a myriad of individual and team factors (role significance, team cohesion, intrateam communication, role clarity, role satisfaction, and athletes’ perceptions of the coach). In general, the perceived antecedents of role acceptance make conceptual sense given prior examinations pertaining to role perceptions in the sport environment. For example, numerous links have been demonstrated between role clarity and group variables such as leadership behaviors (Beauchamp et al., 2005), task cohesion (Bosselot et al., 2012), and intrateam communication (Cunningham & Eys, 2007). Despite the variety of the perceived antecedents, one commonality apparent among the themes was that athletes sought to find meaningful ways to contribute within the context of the team.

Given the emphasis athletes seemed to place on the group environment, it is worthwhile to discuss the perceived impact of group cohesion as it relates to role acceptance. Athletes explained that when their team was united on both task and social matters it led to feelings of increased importance and satisfaction with their role, making it easier for athletes to understand and accept what was expected of them. This is in accordance with previous qualitative work that suggested cohesion was intimately related to the acceptance of role responsibilities (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). A potential explanation for this relationship can be inferred from the theory of interpersonal sensemaking, which argues that close interdependent relationships among group members are crucial to the perceived meaningfulness of a role because individuals constantly seek out and appraise interpersonal interactions to make sense of their role (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).
The results of the current study also suggested that a coach serves to influence role acceptance in several ways. First, athletes emphasized the importance of having clearly defined role expectations set by their coach (i.e., role clarity). This finding offers support to researchers within both the organizational and sport domains who posited that the acceptance of roles in a group setting is largely dependent on the presence of clear and consistent information individuals have regarding their responsibilities (e.g., Eys et al., 2006; Kahn et al., 1964). Second, coaches who encompassed positive leadership qualities were perceived to enhance the degree to which group members accepted their roles. Examinations of social influence within the organizational domain previously highlighted that a credible authority figure can positively influence whether an individual will be acceptant of another’s expectations (Kelman, 1958). A final coach-related antecedent was the use of individualized leadership styles to account for different personalities within a group, a theme that also emerged in Mellalieu and Juniper’s (2006) study. This finding also parallels an important component within Chelladurai and Reimer’s (1998) multidimensional model of leadership that suggests an optimal leadership style should be individualized and congruent with the expectations of the group.

The present study also sought to identify the potential consequences of role acceptance as a third objective. From a group dynamics perspective there are three main issues that merit discussion. First, whether an athlete chooses to accept his/her responsibilities is often visible to other teammates and can influence the behaviors and perceptions of group members. This offers a reasonable explanation as to why athletes perceived role acceptance to influence the group atmosphere, group norms, and interpersonal relations, congruent with the findings of Mellalieu and Juniper’s (2006) examination of the role episode. Moreover, these findings fall in line with the suggestion that role related consequences are exacerbated in the context of a highly interdependent group, simply because role responsibilities are mutually facilitative or hindering of one another (Kahn et al., 1964).

Second, the group oriented consequences stemming from an athlete’s failure to accept a role parallels work pertaining to the presence of the negative informal role of the team ‘Cancer’ (Cope, Eys, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2010). Perhaps there is some degree of overlap between individuals who do not accept their role and players who engage in behaviors indicative of a team ‘Cancer’. One speculation is that an individual who perceives his or her formally prescribed role as unfulfilling may attempt to supplant this role by assuming other responsibilities within the group. However, it is possible that individuals will take on a role within the group that hinders, rather than helps, the group. As pointed out by Cope et al. (2010), individuals may not realize when or if these behaviors are deleterious to group functioning.

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, there are several limitations worth noting. For example, information was derived from a reasonably homogenous sample of athletes (i.e., Canadian intercollegiate participants in popular North American sports) restricting our ability to make generalizations of the findings beyond this group. Furthermore, the antecedents and consequences of role acceptance were derived from athletes’ perceptions and are not intended to reflect objective findings. For example, all retrospective interviews are susceptible to egocentric biases, whereby participants are more likely to remember past experiences in a “self-enhancing manner” (Schacter, Chiao, & Mitchell, 2003). In a related fashion, there is also a tendency for participants to recall experiences that are consistent with their present outcomes (Giorgi, 2009). As such, the proposed relationships between role acceptance and other group constructs represents athletes’ perceptions stemming from their personal experiences and, as such, are exposed to the subjective biases and contextual sensitivity inherent in any qualitative approach.

In light of the results of the current study and the aforementioned limitations, there are several suggestions for future research worth noting. First, because the current participants were limited to intercollegiate athletes, a reasonable next step would be to explore whether perceptions of role acceptance differ between sport types, competitive levels, and across the life span. For example, the introduction of salaries in a professional sport setting may alter the pressures placed on an athlete to accept his/her role. In contrast, athletes in a recreational youth sport setting may perceive alternative factors to be related to role acceptance if they are on a team solely for the purpose of social affiliation.

Another suggestion is to further investigate why athletes come to accept their role responsibilities. As previously highlighted, Doheny’s (2007) study of deliberative democratic citizenship offers insight into how individuals internally rationalize their acceptance of responsibilities in a broader societal context. It may be useful to explore this conceptual framework from a sport perspective to understand whether athletes undertake similar deliberations when contemplating their reasons and/or motivations for accepting a sport role.

Finally, a third area that requires further inquiry is the dimensionality of role acceptance. Athletes conveyed that role acceptance is reflective of their perceived willingness to perform the role responsibilities expected of them; suggesting that role acceptance may be unidimensional in nature. However, the conceptualization of a number of other role perceptions have taken into account the contextual specificity of role responsibilities (e.g., Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002; Bray, 1998). For instance, Bray’s (1998) conceptualization of role efficacy suggested that athletes’ belief in their ability to perform specific role functions differed across offensive and defensive contexts. As such, it may be useful to consider role acceptance in relation to the numerous contexts in which athletes perceive to hold role responsibilities (e.g., offense vs. defense; task vs. social contexts).

Resolving the dimensionality of role acceptance is a necessary first step toward the development of a measure...
to assess role acceptance; a third area for future research. Empirical assessments would enable researchers to examine the perceived links between role acceptance and other group processes. For example, given the present findings, one could examine the veridicality of the proposed links between role acceptance and the group environment (i.e., cohesion).

A final suggestion for future research is to examine the temporal dynamics of role acceptance. Assessing how athletes’ perceptions of role acceptance change over time would provide insight into whether certain factors become more prominent during a competitive season. This may provide further clarity from a practical perspective, as practitioners would have insight as to when problematic issues pertinent to role acceptance may arise, and accordingly target interventions to cope with those issues. It is reasonable to conclude that fostering role acceptance offers a viable avenue to enhance group functioning.

References


