

Comparative study of coach-athlete interactions in mixed traditional Japanese martial arts, female amateur track and field and male professional basketball

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Abstract

This study compared the interactions of coaches and athletes in three highly different contexts. Coaches and athletes' strategies were explored through observation and qualitative interviews, then processed regarding what was at stake in their interactions and the resources they respectively possessed. Qualitative data analysis showed that strategies respectively adopted by coaches and athletes in the three contexts were similar to the collective activity labelled "tacit cooperation" in organizational psychology. Financial, political and symbolic stakes were proposed as arguments explaining these similarities.

Key words : coach, athlete, interactions, strategies

Résumé

Cette étude a comparé les modalités interactives entraîneur-sportifs dans trois contextes très différents. Les stratégies des entraîneurs et des sportifs ont été explorées à partir d'observations et d'entretiens qualitatifs, puis interprétés au regard des enjeux qu'ils poursuivaient et des ressources qu'ils possédaient respectivement. L'analyse qualitative des données a montré que les stratégies respectivement adoptées par les entraîneurs et les sportifs dans les trois contextes s'apparentaient à une activité collective dénommée "coopération tacite" dans le champ de la psychologie des organisations. Des enjeux financiers, politiques et symboliques ont été proposés comme des éléments explicatifs de ces similitudes.

Mots clés : entraîneur, sportif, interactions, stratégies

During the last two decades, studies focusing on coach-athlete relationship mainly came within the framework of the multidimensional model of leadership for sports (Chelladurai & Carron, 1978). According to this model, athlete satisfaction and performance depend on three types of leader behavior: (1) required; (2) preferred; and (3) actual. The situation, leader and members lead to these three kinds of behavior, so they are called antecedents. The Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS) was developed to measure leadership behaviors, including athletes' preferences for specific behaviors, athletes' perceptions of their coaches' behaviors and coaches' perceptions of their own behavior (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978). These model and instrument generated many studies which brought a better understanding of coach-athlete interpersonal compatibility (Chelladurai, 1990). Several variables have been shown to affect athletes' expectations in leader behavior, including the nature of the sport athletes were involved in, their gender and their age (Chelladurai & Arnott, 1985; Chelladurai, Haggerty & Baxter, 1989; Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Terry, 1984; Terry & Howe, 1984). Thus, according to these results, leader behavior should be adjusted to the situational and member characteristics. Previous studies also evidenced that there were differences concerning athletes' perceptions of their coach's actual behavior, according to athletes' status, skills and the nature of the sport they play (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Garland & Barry, 1988; Robinson & Carron, 1982; Terry, 1984; Terry & Howe, 1984).

However, athletes' perceptions may not reflect the behaviors the leader exhibits, because of causal attribution (Heider, 1958) or any other reasons. Information about coaches' actual behavior can be obtained only by observational methods (Salminen & Liukkonen, 1996). On the other hand, all these studies did not take much into account the dynamic and bilateral nature of interactions between coaches and athletes. Nevertheless, according to the recommendations formulated by several authors (Carron & Bennett, 1977; Gordon, 1988), it

seems that athletes have to be considered in the same way as coaches as “influencers” (Mintzberg, 1983).

More recently, researchers studying coach-athlete relationship met more this concern by investigating participants’ strategies (Arripe-Longueville, Saury, Fournier & Durand, 2001; Petit & Durny, 2000; Sedgwick, Côté & Dowd, 1997). Arripe-Longueville and Fournier (1998) examined the interactions of coaches and elite athletes in men’s archery and women’s judo by analogy with a cooperative activity focused on a collective job. Their results showed that in archery, the form of collective work (1) corresponded to a “deliberate cooperation”, similar to what was observed in rowing (Sedgwick et al., 1997) and gymnastics (Côté, Salmela & Russell, 1995), and (2) was close to the “collaboration” identified in sailing (Saury & Durand, 1995). In such a form of cooperation, decisions are based on a “common referential” (Terssac, 1992). Athletes’ autonomy results from shared representations and voluntary negotiation, in a democratic and pleasant climate. However, in judo, the respective strategies adopted by coaches and athletes were similar to the collective activity labelled “tacit cooperation” (Lacoste, 1991) in organizational psychology. Based on a battle of wills, such a form of cooperation allows to regulate the system. Athletes’ autonomy emerges from individual strategies, in a rather autocratic and unpleasant climate.

In outline, we may thus consider that coach-athlete interactions are allocated on a continuum including, from the more autocratic one to the more democratic one: (1) tacit cooperation; (2) deliberate cooperation; and (3) collaboration. The specific culture of each sport has been presented as an argument to explain these differences. There is no denying that culture may exert an influence on coach-athlete relationship. However, constructivist sociologists (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977; Kutry, 1998) consider that this factor carries less weight in a decision than the opportunities offered to the decision makers. In order to explain why coach-athlete interactions assume such a form in such a context and such another form in

such another context, researchers should investigate individual interests of the different actors (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977).

What can be at stake in coach-athlete relationship? Money is becoming a substantial attraction in professional sport (Delpy, 1998; Humphreys, 2000; Mason & Slack, 2001). To get more power within sport organizations may also represent a significant goal which can be labelled political (Kleiber, 1980). Examining the degree of organizational power that coaches hold in athletic departments, Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing and Forrest (1990) revealed that the lack of power or resource dependency was more a function of sport or position than of gender relations. However, men have more opportunities than women for coaching revenue producing sports, and thus more opportunities to access to positions of power. Pitter's (1990) case study in a small community-based track and field club showed that its hierarchical and centralized power structure favoured coaches and the most successful athletes and led to a differential access to resources and control over the organization. Finally, a "symbolic" stake is at any moment liable to determine the actors' strategies. Competitive sport provides titles, medals and honour to winning athletes, while as a reward for their job, coaches often receive gratitude and recognition (Lévêque, 1983). Moreover, influence of self-esteem and perceived competences on participants' behaviors in organized sport settings is generally admitted (Deman & Blais, 1982; Romar, 1994).

We supposed that the relative importance of such financial, "political" and "symbolic" stakes depends both on the actors and the contexts they move in. Consequently, the purpose of this study was triple: (1) to describe and compare coach-athlete interactions in three different contexts (mixed traditional Japanese martial arts, female amateur track and field and male professional basketball); (2) to propose hypothesis explaining why they assume such a form in each context; and (3) to lay the foundations for a theory of strategic coach-athlete interactions.

Method

Design

The design of the present study was a multiple-case study (Yin, 1990). Each site constituted a “reasoned sample” (Friedberg, 1994), in which we tried to plan crosschecks and comparisons as far as possible by multiplying the variables and situations present in a same environment.

Sample

The first site was a martial arts school which existed for 25 years. It joined no official federation and endeavoured to teach martial arts not with a competitive goal but as a way of life and a means of personal achievement. The programme consisted of three traditional Japanese martial arts respectively labelled “aikido”, “aiki-karate-do” and “ninjutsu”. Seventy two adult members took part in one or two martial arts. The sessions were mixed and taught by an experienced teacher called “Sensei”. The latter had trained about 50 black belts and some of them assisted him. Besides the Sensei, nine participants agreed to participate to the study. Their characteristics are listed on table 1.

Table 1

The second case study focused on a male track and field coach and two of his female athletes. The coach had a large experience as athlete. He was physical education teacher and was certified for track and field coaching. The two athletes were studying physical education. The first one (A₁) trained with the coach for nine years. She competed in pentathlon and won the junior Belgian championship one year before the beginning of the study. The second one (A₂) trained with the coach since the beginning of the season. She went back to competition after a long interruption due to an injury.

Finally, the first team of a professional basketball club was the object of the third case study. It was the oldest member of the first Belgian league. Made up of 13 professional players of several nationalities, the team underwent many changes during the focused season. For two years, an experienced Croatian head coach managed it. One Croatian and one Belgian assistant coaches worked with him. The head coach and six players agreed to take part in this study. Players' characteristics are presented on table 2.

Table 2

Instruments and procedure

According to the qualitative research questions we intended to answer, data was collected through at least three of the following sources: (1) open-ended interviews; (2) observations; (3) video recording of sessions; (4) "explicitation interviews" (Vermersch, 1994); and (5) secondary documents. Two researchers collaborated to collect data and informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Due to the main exploratory nature of our approach, we did not use a formal interview guide to lead open-ended interviews in the three sites. We were rather guided by the concepts coming from the "strategic analysis" (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977) and associated works (Bourgeois & Nizet, 1995; March & Simon, 1958; Pfeffer, 1981). Questions focused on "concrete problems" (Kuty, 1998) indicative of coach-athlete interactions, i.e. problems occurring daily within a sport organization. They aimed to obtain actors' representations about the strategies they used, stake they had in the situation and resources available to satisfy it. This relative freedom of the interviewers allowed them to go thoroughly into the investigation in the most appropriate direction.

As observation plans produce poor results about cognitive questions (Shulman, 1986), we did not use such instruments to process the observational data collected in each site. We rather recorded the fruits of our observations in memos (Huberman & Miles, 1991).

In the first and second sites, we respectively video recorded two martial art sessions (aikido and ninjutsu) and one track and field training session, in a way to support later “explicitation interviews”. This original interviewing technique aims to produce an a posteriori detailed introspective verbalization of a specific lived experience.

Finally, for each site, we consulted secondary documents such as televised interviews of some participants, works published by some actors, press cuttings relative to the sites and participants, etc.

Data processing was coherent with the qualitative nature of the data. Open-ended interviews were processed according to Huberman and Miles’ (1991) double level coding process. We classified the different units of the verbatim of the interviews into categories according to their meaning. Then, we gathered these categories together into meta-categories considering their common properties. Inter-observer reliability coefficients ranged from 83% to 92% according to the sites and the level of coding.

“Explicitation interviews” were processed according to the status of the obtained verbalizations. We mainly took into account the “procedural information” (Vermersch, 1994), i.e. the chronological description of interviewees’ actual behaviors.

Finally, data coming from other sources was processed in a more deductive way, to confirm or infirm the interpretation of the previous data.

Validity

We used two well-known methods to guarantee the validity of our data and their interpretation: (1) triangulation and (2) source-checking. According to Griffin and Templin (1989), the first method consists in using at least two different means to collect data, in

observing and interviewing several participants about the same situation, and in mobilizing several interviewers or researchers on the same site. Previous description of our procedure testifies that we respected this principle of triangulation. The second method consists in confronting the participants with the results of the investigation (Locke, 1989). We applied source-checking in the form of collective meetings at the end of the data collection in the three sites.

Results and discussion

Case 1

Three “concrete problems” caught our attention: (1) confrontation with the partners; (2) development of teaching contents; and (3) attribution of belts and status. Strategies respectively adopted by teachers and learners to resolve these problems are presented on table 3.

Table 3

They seemed to express a collective activity labelled “tacit cooperation”, similar to what was observed in competitive judo (Arripe-Longueville, Fournier & Dubois, 1998). Learners’ strategies may be seen as reactions to the autocratic decision-making style of the Senseï and his assistants. Gender exerted a visible influence on the nature of the strategies used by learners during confrontation with their partners. When they feared for their physical integrity, women tried to negotiate openly with their rough male partners, as the following meaning unit illustrates it:

“I say to them that I’m a delicate and frail thing. Well, it goes well.” (A₂)

On the contrary, in the same situation, men (1) tried to short-circuit partners turnover during duels and (2) joined one group in preference to the other one just before the randori, in a way

to avoid the strongest opponents. A meaning unit representative of this fear feeling is the following:

“I noticed something for a while. A lot of members don’t want to work with me and even with A₁. Is it because our technique is effective?” (A₃)

It is obvious that some teachers physically provoked learners to make them conscious of their mistakes, as the following meaning unit illustrates it:

“And then, when I started to drop as A₁ wanted, he stopped to hurl me so strongly to the ground.” (P₇)

Case 2

Studying coach-athlete relationship in the case of a track and field coach and two female athletes, we considered the three following “concrete problems”: (1) goal setting; (2) development of the content of the training sessions; and (3) coach/personal trainer and athlete/student role conflicts. Strategies respectively used by the actors in relation with these problems are listed on table 4.

Table 4

Again, athletes’ strategies seemed to constitute reactions to the coach’s initiatives and behaviors. Thus, coach-athlete interactions may also be labelled “tacit cooperation”, with athletes’ tacit strategies allowing to regulate the system. More than her counterpart who trained with the coach for nine years and shared most of his beliefs and principles, A₂ adopted such tacit strategies. The following is an example of a meaning unit which illustrates the compromise that she adopted to feel comfortable when she ran despite instructions from the coach:

“I thought to myself that I should do 50/50, do my own way to feel good and in the same time better than I did before to improve myself.” (A₂)

The following meaning unit shows how A₂ selected the competences she needed among her coach and the head coach of her club, similar to what was observed in judo (Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998):

“For the warm-up, I don’t like especially what the coach proposes, so I do it with the technical director. The programme the coach gives, I think it’s good; so I go with him.” (A₂)

Case 3

We studied coach-athlete interactions within a professional basketball team as regards three initial “concrete problems” and a fourth one which appeared during the investigation: (1) building of the team before the season; (2) management of players substitution during the matches; (3) development of the content of the training sessions and tactics for the matches; and (4) management of players selected in the national team. Qualitative data analysis pointed out coach and players’ strategies presented on table 5.

Table 5

By analogy with Arripe-Longueville et al.’s (1998) results, the autocratic and unpleasant climate resulting in players’ tacit strategies shows again the existence of a collective work labelled “tacit cooperation”. Indeed, the coach assumed a lot of power in the club. The following meaning unit illustrates the establishment of a hierarchy within the team on his initiative:

“At the end of the season, we established the relationships. The players knew: ‘Well, okay, I’ll play during ten or twelve minutes and my job will be to do this, this, this and this.’ This is the rank specialization.” (coach)

The coach reinforced his power by contributing widely to the building of the team. The following is an example of a meaning unit which shows how the coach was looking for players whose values were compatible with his own:

“Now, if I stay for next season, I can completely say: ‘I can also select the mental attitude of the new players.’ ” (coach)

In this context, players’ tacit strategies proved to be more effective than explicit ones, for example in a way to get more freedom in the game. A meaning unit representative of the strategy which consisted in getting round the coach’s tactical systems is the following:

“I’ve learnt when I can break the system off and, you know, have a little bit more freedom. In my first year here, I didn’t know where I could change and go individually, you know, and play. But now, I think I have a better understanding.” (P₄)

On the contrary, the following meaning unit characterizes a fruitless explicit strategy:

“Well, at the beginning, it (tactics) was getting on my nerves. I expressed it once and I’ve been punished during one week.”

General discussion

Coach-athlete interactions identified in mixed traditional Japanese martial arts, female amateur track and field and male professional basketball are similar to the collective activity labelled “tacit cooperation” in organizational psychology. Thus, they have something in common with what was observed in judo (Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998), but differed from what was found in archery (Arripe-Longueville et al., 2001), sailing (Lévêque, 1983; Saury & Durand, 1995), rowing (Sedgwick et al., 1997) and gymnastics (Côté et al., 1995). Taking what is at stake in each site in consideration allows to advance hypothesis explaining why coach-athlete interactions assume this same form even though characteristics of the contexts are radically different.

In the martial arts school, tradition carries weight on the relationship between the participants. According to constructivist sociologist, it would result from a deliberate choice of the Senseï more than from cultural influences. Teaching traditional non competitive Japanese martial arts allows him to be distinguishable from his counterparts. As shown by

Mintzberg (1983), tradition contributes to reinforce the effects of an ideology within the school. Participants subscribe more or less to this ideology. Some did not at all and left the school, while others changed their mind, in accordance with Trabal and Augustini's (2000) results about karate enthusiasts' representations. Driven by power stakes, some black belts use strategies aiming to get the status of assistant. Due to the constraint of tradition implying respect and obedience, it appears that "loyalty" (Hirschman, 1970) is the most effective one among all the possible strategies. Gender plays a key role in the differentiation between participants' strategies aiming to protect their physical integrity. Anxious to preserve their male sexual status, men act more tacitly than women to prevent injuries due to rough partners from happening.

It appears that the track and field coach has also a tendency to initiate interaction. Strategies such as "not to set goal" and "to involve himself proportionally to athletes' motivation" show a need to be cleared in athletes' failure, in accordance with causal attribution (Heider, 1958). Strategies such as "to negotiate with the club" and "to set the athletes an hyper-qualitative training" show a will to receive recognition for his job (Lévêque, 1983). On the other hand, athletes' strategies may be seen as reactions more or less effective according to the resources the athletes respectively possess. Familiarization with the coach's way of coaching seems to be the most discriminative variable distinguishing both coach-athlete dyads.

The professional basketball club is probably the site where culture exerts the strongest influence on coach-athlete interactions. Indeed, the authoritarian decision-making style of the head coach may be considered as an heritage of his eastern background. Therefore, it explains that the coach takes care to the values of the players appointed by the direction, in accordance with Wright, Smart and McMahan's (1995) results. Examining the relationships between strategy, human resources and performance among NCAA basketball teams, these authors

indicated that coaches' preferred strategies influenced the characteristics that they looked for in recruits. The coach seems to act for getting a team able to submit to discipline, in a way to obtain convincing results and to justify his salary. Indeed, his words frequently express a financial stake characteristic of professional sport. Obviously, money is also at stake for the players. Thus, it is in their interest to act tacitly to be noticed by selectors without thwarting the coach and the organization of the team. Strategies such as "to show exceptional performances" and "to get round conventional rules" proved to be more effective than "voice" (Hirschman, 1970), i.e. explicit protest strategies.

Conclusions

Our findings point out that "tacit cooperation" results from coaches and athletes' antagonist stakes in the solving of "concrete problems" which mobilize them. Our results also suggest that the "humanistic coach" (Lombardo, 1987) is not yet a reality in contemporary sport. Previous studies revealed the existence of such a profile, certainly, but the context in which it occurred was usually characterized by spatial or organizational constraints forcing athletes into self-sufficiency and coaches to consult athletes. Thus it seems that coaches still have difficulties in sharing spontaneously power and responsibilities with their athletes, probably because it would go against their need for recognition of their contribution to athletes' success. It still has to be proved that "coaching humanistically" (Danziger, 1982) is the most effective way.

Anyway, our results admit that athletes are right to live in hope of getting by themselves more autonomy and freedom. On the other hand, coaches have to become conscious that athletes' tacit strategies allow to regulate the system and it would be a good idea if they did not suppress them. Of course, players being dismissed from the basketball club or unsatisfied learners leaving the martial art school give evidence that there are limits to the coexistence of antagonist stakes within sport organizations. Consequently, future research

should assess the compatibility of athletes' stakes with coaches' ones in various sport settings, in a way to predict viability of potential coach-athlete associations.

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Table 1

Characteristics of the participants (case 1)

Participants	Status	Gender	Age	Martial art	Belt
P ₁	Assistant	M	29	Aiki-karate-do	3 rd dan
				Aikido	2 nd dan
P ₂	Assistant	F	40	Aikido	2 nd dan
P ₃	Assistant	M	30	Aiki-karate-do	2 nd dan
P ₄	Member	M	46	Aikido	1 st dan
P ₅	Member	F	60	Aiki-karate-do	1 st dan
P ₆	Member	M	21	Ninjutsu	2 nd kyu
P ₇	Member	M	18	Aiki-karate-do	2 nd kyu
				Aikido	3 rd kyu
P ₈	Member	M	18	Aiki-karate-do	3 rd kyu
				Ninjutsu	4 th kyu
P ₉	Member	F	37	Aiki-karate-do	3 rd kyu
				Aikido	5 th kyu

Table 2

Characteristics of the participants (case 3)

Players	Nationality	Age	Size	Position
P ₁	Belgian	26	1.80 m	1
P ₂	Belgian	24	2.13 m	5
P ₃	Belgian	18	1.90 m	1
P ₄	American	24	1.95 m	3
P ₅	Belgian	18	2.04 m	3
P ₆	Belgian	20	1.99 m	4

Table 3

Participants' strategies (case 1)

Concrete problems	Teachers' strategies	Learners' strategies
(1) Confrontation with the partners	-To physically provoke the learners -To impose changes of partners -To control information	-To negotiate with rough partners (women) -To avoid rough partners (men) -To get round conventional rules (men)
(2) Development of teaching contents	-To establish dialogue with the members -To curb learners' claims -To integrate different martial techniques	-To show "loyalty" towards the teachers -To claim changes -To attend simultaneously a rival school -To leave the school
(3) Attribution of belts and status	-To select assistants according to the compatibility of their values -To threaten potential assistants with an examination	-To show exemplary behaviors -To leave the school

Table 4

Participants' strategies (case 2)

Concrete problems	Coach's strategies	Athletes' strategies
(1) Goal setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not to set goals -To negotiate with the club (A₁) -To show "loyalty" towards the club (A₂) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not to set goals (A₁) -To set goals by herself (A₂) -To bring the coach in the negotiation with the club (A₁) -To show "loyalty" towards the club (A₂)
(2) Development of the content of the training sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To set athletes an hyper-qualitative training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To provide her opinion - To select some competencies of the coach according to her own need (A₂) -To make a compromise between her practice and instructions from the coach (A₂)
(3) Coach/personal trainer and athlete/student role conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To establish dialogue with the athletes - To involve himself proportionally to athletes' motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To establish dialogue with the coach

Table 5

Participants' strategies (case 3)

Concrete problems	Coach's strategies	Players' strategies
(1) Building of the team before and during the season	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To make the club appoint players according to the compatibility of their values - To make some players sign long-term contracts - To substitute new players for players who fall short of his expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To use the system of apply and demand
(2) Management of players substitution during the matches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To establish a hierarchy within the team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To show exceptional performances - To avoid getting a rival noticed
(3) Development of the content of the training sessions and tactics for the matches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To set the players the tactical systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To show "loyalty" towards the coach - To get round conventional rules - To get himself noticed by the coach - To claim changes
(4) Management of players selected in the national team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To bring the club in the negotiation with the federation - To legitimate his decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To show "loyalty" towards the club and the coach