

Conformity and the Lack of Initiative: An Exploration of the Social Construction of Followership

This study utilized a qualitative approach to deconstruct the meaning of followership in the team sport context. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with college student-athletes (N = 75) in various sports at eight colleges and universities. Conversations lasted 30 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted primarily when the athlete was “in season.” The purpose of the study was to examine how individuals socially construct their role (team sport) as followers and to explore followership schemas and contextual influences that relate to these constructions. The guiding question for this research was: How do college student-athletes construct an understanding of the concept of followership in the team sport context?

Results suggest that most participants socially construct the definition of followership around the concepts of passivity, deference and conformity; however, some student-athletes did emphasize the importance of constructively questioning and challenging their peers and coaches. With regard to personal dispositions that are thought to make followers effective, major themes such as conformity, interpersonal apathy, agreeableness, non-expressing of opinions, and discouragement of the taking of initiative were found to be most similar across the groups of participants.

Previous organizational research (Kellerman, 2008) suggests that “Followers are subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors, and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall in to line.” This study was open to the potential of finding the sport team environment less restrictive in its construct than Kellerman’s findings. Unfortunately, the findings were aligned with Kellerman’s consideration that followers “fall in to line” to some authoritative figure.

Results revealed that contextual factors such as team norms, athletic department resources, coaches’ beliefs and practices, may act as constraints on following and affect both the social construction of followership and behavior in the follower role. A unique feature emerged from the data. Two programs (specific college teams) emerged from the data to have created a culture of leadership in which the student-athletes strongly identified their followership experience as promoting the more active social construction of followership. The participants on these two teams (one a college track and field team, the other a women’s college basketball team) overwhelmingly crafted positive and active constructions of followership. The context and its influence of these two teams is the subject of further research in a follow-up study. Generally, these findings have important implications regarding a need to examine the construct of followership in leadership research, as well as raise interesting possibilities for advancing an “expanded” view of leadership in organization