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Power Play: Coach Power Use and Athletes' Communicative Evaluations and Responses

Gregory A. Cranmer & Alan K. Goodboy

Coaches, like instructors, must possess and use power effectively. Although power is important for coaching, research on the influence of coaches' power use remains understudied. This study examined 91 current Division I athletes' reports of coach power use and their subsequent communicative evaluations and responses. Results indicated that linear combinations of coach power use predicted athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry, orientations toward coach feedback, and communication satisfaction—after accounting for sport-related variables. Results support the use of prosocial power and the avoidance of antisocial power bases as effective, while recognizing the uniqueness of sport as an educational context.

Keywords: Coach Power Use; Communication Satisfaction; Communication Symmetry; Orientations to Feedback; Sport Communication

Heath and McLaughlin (1994) suggested that learning is not limited to classrooms, and that informal educational settings are important sources of information, socialization, and human development. Despite their assertions, instructional communication scholars have primarily examined communication within formal educational contexts (i.e., classrooms), rendering alternative sources of learning and instruction underexplored (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; Turman, 2003a, 2008). However, sport—one such informal educational context (Jones, 2006)—has garnered increased attention from instructional communication scholars (e.g., Jones, 2006; Martin,

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Rocca, Cayanus, & Weber, 2009; Turman, 2003a, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2004). These scholars recognize and frame the athlete–coach relationship as an instructional relationship and have identified effective coaching behaviors that improve athletes’ learning or communication with coaches (Kassing et al., 2004). However, to date, the importance of instructional communication in coaching is understudied because many of the teaching behaviors that are deemed effective in the classroom have yet to be investigated within the context of sport (Kassing et al., 2004; Turman, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2004).

One particular program of research that is especially salient within the classroom but has gone underexplored within sport is the use of power (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992). This dearth of research is surprising given that “coaching is an activity primarily based on social interaction and power” (Jones, 2006, p. 3). To date, the few studies examining coach power use have focused solely on athletes’ affective outcomes (Martin et al., 2009; Turman, 2006), leaving questions regarding how athletes evaluate and respond to coach power use. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to continue to explore athlete–coach relationships from an instructional perspective by specifically examining athletes’ communicative evaluations of and responses to coaches’ power use (i.e., perceptions of communication symmetry, orientations to coach feedback, and communication satisfaction).

The continued use of instructional frameworks to explore athlete–coach communication is appropriate because one of the central roles of coaching is to help “encourage affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning of a sport” (Rocca, Martin, & Toale, 1999, p. 445). Additionally, given the pervasive participation among American youth in sport (Kelley & Carchia, 2013) and its role as a socializing agent for athletes (Sage & Eitzen, 2013), increased understanding of athlete–coach communication could have heuristic and practical value for understanding learning in informal contexts (Turman, 2003a, 2008). However, although sport is an instructional setting, it is distinct from the traditional classroom for several reasons: (a) the prominence and centrality of collective goals (i.e., winning; Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2012; Turman, 2003a, 2008), (b) the required interdependence between athletes to accomplish these collective goals (Turman, 2001, 2003a, 2008), and (c) the explicit recognition of role specialization and differences in skill (e.g., starting status). These characteristics tend to influence the manner in which athletes and coaches communicate (Billings et al., 2012; Jones, 2006) and, arguably, the way in which coaches use power.

Coach Power Use

French and Raven’s (1959) social power bases—a foundational theory in instructional communication (Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2001)—was selected as the theoretical framework for understanding coach power use in this study. From this framework, power is conceptualized as “an individual’s capacity to influence another person to do something he/she would not have done had he/she not been

influenced” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 125). Thus, power is a social construction that is granted via communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Roach, Richmond, & Mottet, 2006). Given that power is ubiquitous to all social relationships and presumed to influence the development of athletes’ skill sets and knowledge of their respective sports (Jones, 2006; Turman, 2006), the extension of power to the context of sport is reasonable. French and Raven’s five bases of power were applied to understand how coaches may influence athletes and their subsequent evaluations.

First, *reward power* refers to athletes’ perceptions that their coach is in a position to provide them with psychological, social, or tangible rewards or benefits (e.g., praise, recognition, playing time) or to take away punishments. Second, *referent power* reflects athletes’ desires to satisfy and identify with their coach (e.g., admiring the coach as a role model). Third, *expert power* relies on athletes’ perceptions of their coach’s competence and expertise in a particular subject (e.g., knowing proper technique, strategy, general knowledge of a sport). Fourth, *legitimate power* refers to athletes’ perceptions of the formal power or authority that innately comes with the position of coach (e.g., having the title of head coach). Fifth, *coercive power* includes athletes’ perceptions that their coach is in a position to punish them psychologically, socially, or tangibly (e.g., embarrass them, make them run laps, or take away playing time). These power bases are sometimes organized into prosocial power (i.e., reward, referent, and expert power) and antisocial power (i.e., legitimate and coercive power; Richmond & McCroskey, 1992).

Although this study applies power to the context of sport because coaching is a form of instruction (Jones, 2006), research investigating power within the classroom context also provides valuable insight into the importance of power within instructional settings. In general, research on power in the classroom indicates that instructors should attempt to cultivate and utilize prosocial power bases while also avoiding the use of antisocial power bases. Scholars have found that instructor power influences students’ learning (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984, 1985; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984), satisfaction (Teven & Herring, 2005), and feelings of empowerment (Schrodt et al., 2008).

Several instructional studies demonstrate that instructor power use is associated with students’ evaluations of instructors’ communication and students’ subsequent communicative responses. For example, prosocial power use is associated positively and antisocial power use is associated negatively with students’ evaluations of instructors’ effectiveness (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013; Schrodt et al., 2008; Schrodt, Witt, & Turman, 2007; Teven, 2007; Teven & Herring, 2005), instructor confirmation (Turman & Schrodt, 2006), perceived instructor understanding (Finn, 2012), and communication satisfaction with instructors (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy, Bolkan, Myers, & Zhao, 2011). Given the increased emphasis on and the recent calls for continued explorations of students’ evaluations and responses to instructor power use (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy et al., 2011), the extension of this research to the context of sport is appropriate.

Athletes' Evaluations and Responses

In this study, three outcome variables were selected to examine athletes' communicative reactions to their coaches' power use: (a) perceived communication symmetry, (b) orientations toward coach feedback, and (c) communication satisfaction. Each construct provides insight into different aspects of athletes' evaluations of and responses to coach power use. Communication symmetry provides a holistic overview of athletes' perceptions of the reciprocity of their communication with coaches (i.e., their ability to respond to a coach); orientations to coach feedback provide insight into athletes' processing and reception of coaches' corrective feedback; and communication satisfaction reveals athletes' affective evaluation of communicative interactions with coaches.

Communication Symmetry

Communication symmetry is useful for assessing the quality of athlete–coach communication because it encompasses the reciprocal, two-way nature of communication between entities separated by hierarchical structures (Grunig, 1992). When symmetrical communication is established between two individuals, each becomes an equal participant in discourse, shared interests are established, and mutual understanding is developed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Pearson, 1989). Although coaches are traditionally viewed as the sources of knowledge and may do the majority of speaking on the field (Jones, 2006), athletes' perceptions of their ability to express themselves is associated with increased relational outcomes. For example, symmetrical communication with a superior (i.e., a coach in this study) has been associated with increased leader–member exchanges (Cranmer & Myers, 2015), higher levels of commitment and satisfaction in groups (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), and decreased burnout, turnover, and intent to leave among subordinates (Richardson, Alexander, & Castleberry, 2008). Although the positive outcomes of communication symmetry are consistent, the degree to which a specific communicative behavior (e.g., power) can predict perceptions of symmetrical communication remains unknown—meaning that there is a lack of prescriptive insight regarding communication symmetry. Even though communication symmetry emphasizes athletes' perceptions that they can send messages to coaches, it provides little insight into how messages are received.

Athletes' Orientations Toward Feedback

A useful construct for assessing how instructional messages are received is learners' (i.e., athletes in this study) orientations to feedback. King, Schrodtt, and Weisal (2009) revealed that learners have four specific predispositions towards receiving feedback from instructors. First, *feedback utility* encompasses receivers' perceptions that feedback is useful or valuable for improving performance. Second, *feedback sensitivity* embodies receivers' feelings of intimidation or embarrassment toward corrective feedback. Third, *feedback confidentiality* refers to receivers' preferences

for obtaining corrective feedback privately. Fourth, *feedback retention* comprises receivers' abilities to recall feedback. To date, research on coach feedback has focused solely on athletes' perceptions of coaches as a result of how they delivered feedback (Mazer, Barnes, Greivous, & Boger, 2013; Turman, 2001). However, these studies fail to recognize the complexity and variety within athletes' orientations to feedback, factors which are important because learners' perceptions of feedback are just as important as feedback itself (King et al., 2009; Trees, Kerssen-Griep, & Hess, 2009).

Communication Satisfaction

Communication satisfaction is a useful construct to assess athletes' overall evaluations of interactions with their coaches. Goodboy, Martin, and Bolkan (2009) claim that learners' perceptions of communication satisfaction are comprised of their affective evaluations of communication encounters with instructors. These appraisals are developed in reaction to the accomplishment of communicative goals or met expectations (Goodboy et al., 2009). To date, communication satisfaction has been associated positively with student learning outcomes and student–instructor relational quality (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2010; Goodboy, 2011; Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014; Murray & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2013). Despite the obvious communicative implications of this construct, sport communication scholars have yet to examine athletes' communication satisfaction with coaches; instead, satisfaction with playing for a coach (Kassing & Infante, 1999) and satisfaction with overall sport experiences (Turman, 2006, 2008) have been examined. This distinction is important because a coach's ability to communicate effectively with athletes is imperative to athletes' learning, athlete–coach relationship quality, and team performance (Becker, 2009; Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011).

Rationale

Instructional communication research clearly demonstrates that the cultivation of prosocial power bases and avoidance of antisocial power bases is beneficial for student–instructor communication and relationships—including students' subsequent evaluations and responses (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy et al., 2011; Turman & Schrodt, 2006). Although coaching and classroom contexts are somewhat distinct, their shared instructional nature is apparent (Jones, 2006; Turman, 2003a, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2004). Thus, it is argued that coach power use could be a significant predictor of athletes' communicative responses, even after taking the unique elements of sport not present in the classroom into empirical consideration. Thus, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: Coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) will predict athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry with a coach after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status).

H2: Coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) will predict athletes' orientations to coach feedback after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status).

H3: Coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) will predict athletes' communication satisfaction with a coach after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 91 (41 men and 50 women) current collegiate athletes whose ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. All participants were active Division I athletes who played 1 of 12 sports (see Table 1). Collegiate athletes were targeted because this sample has been neglected in previous coaching research in favor of high school athletes (e.g., Martin et al., 2009; Turman, 2003a, 2006, 2008). Additionally, the

Table 1 Participants' Demographics

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)	19.80	1.46
Winning %	58.32%	24.03
Sex		
Male	(<i>n</i> = 41, 45%)	
Female	(<i>n</i> = 50, 55%)	
Race		
White	(<i>n</i> = 59, 65%)	
Black	(<i>n</i> = 16, 17%)	
Other	(<i>n</i> = 15, 17%)	
Unreported	(<i>n</i> = 1, 1%)	
Sport reported on		
Football	(<i>n</i> = 24, 26.4%)	
Soccer	(<i>n</i> = 17, 18.7%)	
Swimming	(<i>n</i> = 13, 14.3%)	
Crew	(<i>n</i> = 9, 9.9%)	
Gymnastics	(<i>n</i> = 6, 6.6%)	
Baseball	(<i>n</i> = 5, 5.5%)	
Basketball	(<i>n</i> = 5, 5.5%)	
Rifle	(<i>n</i> = 5, 5.5%)	
Wrestling	(<i>n</i> = 2, 2.2%)	
Track	(<i>n</i> = 2, 2.2%)	
Cheerleading	(<i>n</i> = 2, 2.2%)	
Volleyball	(<i>n</i> = 1, 1.1%)	

Note. (*N* = 91).

use of active athletes reduced the reliance on retrospective data, which is common in coach communication research (e.g., Kassing & Anderson, 2014; Kassing & Infante, 1999; Martin et al., 2009; Rocca et al., 1999). See Table 1 for athletes' full demographic information.

Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, participants were solicited from 16 introductory communication courses at a large, mid-Atlantic university during the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters. Participants were recruited with an IRB approved script, and were provided with paper questionnaires to be completed during class time. Participants were instructed to report on a current coach of their choosing without revealing the exact position of this coach. This decision provided athletes with the opportunity to select a salient athlete-coach relationship rather than forcing them to report on a coach with whom they had little interaction. Further, this decision was made to avoid potential discomfort that could result from a lack of anonymity regarding the data on a reported coach (i.e., given the high profile nature of some of the coaching positions, it was possible participants would not have felt comfortable if the position [and by result identity] of their coach was revealed).

Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed coach power use and their perceptions of their communication symmetry, satisfaction, and orientations to feedback with that coach. All instructional measures were altered by replacing the words "teacher" or "instructor" with "coach," "students" with "athletes," and "class" with "team" respectively (cf. Turman, 2006, 2008). All measures demonstrated acceptable Cronbach's alphas. See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for each measure.

Coach power use

Coach power was operationalized with the adapted Teacher Power Use Scale (TPUS; Schrodtt et al., 2007). The TPUS consists of 30 items that assess participants' perceptions of a coach's use of the five types of relational power, including *reward power* (e.g., "When an athlete performs well in a game or practice, my coach gives him/her recognition"), *referent power* (e.g., "My coach demonstrates commitment to the team by being authentic and genuine when interacting with athletes"), *expert power* (e.g., "My coach communicates in ways that demonstrate advanced knowledge/expertise in this sport"), *legitimate power* (e.g., "My coach acts as though athletes ought never to disobey a coach or fail to comply with a coach's requests"), and *coercive power* (e.g., "When athletes do not perform at an acceptable level, my coach embarrasses them in front of the team"). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *never* (1) to *always* (7). Previous Cronbach alpha

Table 2 Measurement Statistics and Zero Order Correlation Matrix

Variables	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reward	5.08	1.04	.80	—									
Referent	4.23	1.53	.91	.43***	—								
Expert	5.07	1.48	.93	.42***	.75***	—							
Legitimate	4.11	1.36	.77	.04	-.24*	-.24*	—						
Coercive	3.55	1.75	.93	.08	-.54***	-.47***	.65***	—					
Comm Symmetry	3.43	.77	.83	.36**	.64***	.72***	-.45***	-.62***	—				
Utility	4.28	.66	.89	.35***	.47***	.62***	-.16	-.37***	.49***	—			
Sensitivity	2.14	.88	.85	.06	-.16	-.30**	.32**	.42***	-.46***	-.30**	—		
Confidentiality	2.87	.77	.73	-.01	-.26*	-.28**	.09	.22	-.48***	-.23*	.61***	—	
Retention	3.93	.97	.85	-.03	.20	.33**	-.33**	-.50***	.45***	.42***	-.67***	-.40***	—
Comm Satisfaction	4.77	1.45	.94	.36***	.84***	.73***	-.28*	-.55***	.82***	.53***	-.24*	-.34*	.29**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

reliability coefficients for the dimensions of this instrument have ranged from .59 to .91 (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013; Goodboy et al., 2011; Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012).

Communication symmetry

Communication symmetry was operationalized with the Communication Symmetry Scale (CSS; Grunig et al., 2002). The CSS consists of eight items that assess participants' perceptions of the degree to which their communication with their coach is reciprocal (e.g., "Most communication between my coach and players on this team can be said to be two-way communication"). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Richardson et al. (2008) reported a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .93.

Athletes' orientations to coach feedback

Athletes' orientations towards coach feedback was operationalized with the Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale (IFOS; King et al., 2009). This 27-item measure is comprised of four factors: (a) 10 items assessed *feedback utility* (e.g., "Feedback from my coach can be a valuable form of praise"), (b) 9 items assessed *feedback sensitivity* (e.g., "Corrective feedback hurts my feelings"), (c) 5 items assessed preferences for *feedback confidentiality* when getting corrective feedback (e.g., "I do not like to receive corrective feedback in front of other people"), and (d) 3 items assessed *feedback retention* (e.g., "I typically do not make note of my coach's corrective comments"). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Previous Cronbach alphas have ranged from .60 to .86 (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012; King et al., 2009; Malachowski, Martin, & Vallade, 2013).

Communication satisfaction with coach

Athlete communication satisfaction was operationalized with the abbreviated version of the Student Communication Satisfaction Scale (SCSS; Goodboy et al., 2009). This version of the SCSS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which athletes are satisfied with their conversations involving their coach (e.g., "When I talk to my coach, the conversations are rewarding"). Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Previous Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for this instrument have ranged from .83 to .98 (Goodboy et al., 2009; Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014; Murray & Kennedy-Lightsey, 2013).

Sport-related variables

Participants also completed questions regarding their team's winning percentage, the type of sport on which they reported (e.g., football, soccer—this was later collapsed into independent [dummy coded as 0] and interdependent [coded as 1] sport-types),

and their playing status on that team (i.e., starter [dummy coded as 1] or nonstarter [coded as 0]). These variables were included in the current study as they have been reported to be salient for athlete–coach communication (Cranmer & Myers, 2015).

Data Analysis

The three hypotheses were examined via six ordinary least squares hierarchical regression analyses. For each hierarchical regression, sport-related demographics (i.e., winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status) were entered as the first block of predictor variables, and coach power bases (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) were entered as the second block predictor variables. The sport-related variables were entered in the first block because these variables are known to influence athlete–coach relationships and communication (Billings et al., 2012). Therefore, by first accounting for the variance explained by these contextual factors, it is possible to better understand the importance of coach power use regarding athletes' communicative responses after controlling for these known predictors. Communication symmetry, the four types of orientations toward feedback (i.e., utility, sensitivity, confidentiality, and retention), and communication satisfaction served as the criterion variables for each of the hypotheses respectively.

Results

Intercorrelations among variables, along with composite means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for each measure are presented in Table 2. Hierarchical regression results are presented in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1 posited that coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) would predict athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry with a coach after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status). Results of a hierarchical regression provided support for this hypothesis as a significant model was obtained for *communication symmetry* ($F(8, 73) = 26.04, R^2 = .74, p < .001$). In block one ($R^2 = .27$), winning percentage ($\beta = .41, p < .001$) and sport-type ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$) were significant predictors. In block two ($\Delta R^2 = .47, R^2 = .74$) none of the sport-related variables remained significant predictors, but reward ($\beta = .19, p < .05$), referent ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), expert ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), and coercive power ($\beta = -.24, p < .001$) bases were significant predictors, after controlling for the variance explained by sport-related variables in block one.

Hypothesis 2 posited that coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) would predict athletes' orientations to coach feedback after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status). Results of four hierarchical regressions provided partial support for this hypothesis. A significant model was obtained for *feedback utility* ($F(8, 73) = 10.76, R^2 = .52, p < .001$). In block one ($R^2 = .17$), winning percentage ($\beta = .23, p < .05$) and starting status ($\beta = .35, p < .01$) were significant predictors.

Table 3 Six Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Variables Entered	Comm Symmetry		Feedback Utility		Feedback Sensitivity		Feedback Confidentiality		Feedback Retention		Comm Satisfaction	
	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Block One (Sport-Related Variables)		($R^2 = .27$)		($R^2 = .17$)		($R^2 = .12$)		($R^2 = .11$)		($R^2 = .10$)		($R^2 = .24$)
Winning Percentage	.41	4.26***	.23	2.26*	-.26	-2.45*	-.10	-.95	.21	1.94	.31	3.21**
Sport-Type	-.22	-2.11*	.05	.43	.17	1.49	.08	.70	-.23	-1.96	-.18	-1.65
Starting Status	.16	1.55	.35	3.18**	-.09	-.77	-.28	-2.41*	.00	.01	.28	2.61*
Block Two (Coaches' Power Use)		($\Delta R^2 = .47$)		($\Delta R^2 = .35$)		($\Delta R^2 = .15$)		($\Delta R^2 = .11$)		($\Delta R^2 = .23$)		($\Delta R^2 = .50$)
Reward	.19	2.52*	.29	2.90**	.01	.05	.04	.30	.07	.58	.07	.90
Referent	.30	2.98**	-.22	-1.61	.28	1.65	-.05	-.76	-.36	-2.23*	.54	5.56***
Expert	.24	2.60*	.56	4.48***	-.36	-1.99	-.26	-1.65	.32	2.20*	.22	2.50*
Legitimate	-.16	-1.84	.07	-.64	.00	-.01	-.16	-1.05	-.04	-.30	-.01	-1.12
Coercive	-.24	-2.06*	-.31	-1.95	.42	2.11*	.24	1.18	-.55	-2.88**	-.12	-1.07

Note. OLS Regressions. Variables reported at entry.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

In block two ($\Delta R^2 = .35$, $R^2 = .52$), starting status remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), and reward ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$) and expert power ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$) bases were significant predictors, after controlling for the variance explained by sport-related variables in block one. A significant model was obtained for *feedback sensitivity* ($F(8, 73) = 2.93$, $R^2 = .27$, $p < .001$). In block one ($R^2 = .12$), winning percentage ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .05$) served as a significant predictor. In block two ($\Delta R^2 = .15$, $R^2 = .27$), none of the sport-related variables remained significant predictors and only coercive power ($\beta = .42$, $p < .05$) served as a significant power base. A significant model was obtained for *feedback retention* ($F(8, 73) = 5.00$, $R^2 = .33$, $p < .001$). In block one ($R^2 = .10$), none of the sports-related variables served as significant predictors (although sport-type and winning percentage were at $p = .05$ and approached significance). In block two ($\Delta R^2 = .23$, $R^2 = .33$), none of the sport-related variables were significant predictors but referent ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .05$), expert ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$), and coercive power ($\beta = -.55$, $p < .01$) were significant power bases. However, the hierarchical regression for *feedback confidentiality* was not significant ($F(8, 73) = 2.12$, $p > .05$).

Hypothesis 3 posited that coach power use (i.e., reward, referent, expert, legitimate, and coercive) would predict athletes' communication satisfaction with a coach after accounting for sport-related variables (i.e., team winning percentage, sport-type, and starting status). A significant model was obtained for *communication satisfaction* ($F(8, 73) = 27.31$, $R^2 = .74$, $p < .001$). In block one ($R^2 = .24$), winning percentage ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$) and starting status ($\beta = .28$, $p < .05$) served as significant predictors. In block two ($\Delta R^2 = .50$, $R^2 = .74$), starting status ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$) remained a significant predictor and referent ($\beta = .54$, $p < .001$) and expert power bases ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$) served as a significant predictors.

Discussion

To date, a salient gap within instructional communication literature is that "scant research has explored how students communicatively react to their instructors' use of power" (Goodboy et al., 2011, p. 192). Although studies have begun to examine students' communication responses to instructor power (e.g., Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy et al., 2011), little is also known about learners' reactions to power use in informal learning contexts (e.g., sport). The current findings provide insight into athletes' evaluations and responses to coach power use within the informal instructional context of sport. Results indicate that the linear combination of coach power use as well as specific bases of coach power predicted athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry, orientations to feedback (i.e., utility, sensitivity, and retention), and communication satisfaction with a coach. Overall, these findings provide empirical support for Jones's (2006) suggestion that power is a central component of the athlete-coach relationship.

Coach power use accounted for an additional 47% of the variance in athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry after accounting for contextual factors. In particular, reward power, referent power, and expert power positivity predicted

communication symmetry, and coercive power negatively predicted communication symmetry. Thus, when athletes perceive that coaches have the ability to reward them, the knowledge to help them succeed, or athletes desire to satisfy or identify with coaches, their perceptions of their ability to establish reciprocal lines of communication increase. However, when athletes perceive that their coaches are likely to use punishments, their perceptions of their ability to reciprocate communication with those coaches decrease. These results are consistent with previous findings that suggest students are more likely to communicate in a prosocial manner with instructors who use reward, referent, and expert power (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy et al., 2011), and reported lower levels of functional motive to communicate with instructors when instructors use coercive power (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011).

In addition to exploring athletes' perceptions of their abilities to send messages to coaches, this study also evaluated how athletes received their coaches' feedback as a function of power. Results indicate that coach power use accounted for an additional 35% of variance in athletes' perceptions of the utility of coach feedback, 15% of the variance in their sensitivity to coach feedback, and 23% of the variance in their retention of coach feedback, all after accounting for sports-related variables. In particular, coaches' use of reward and expert power positively predicted athletes' perceptions of feedback utility. A possible explanation for this strong predictive relationship is that when athletes feel like they can acquire a reward or knowledge from a coach, that coach's feedback is deemed more relevant and, thus, useful. Instructional scholars suggest that receivers perceive information as more relevant when information is deemed useful for future endeavors (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Keller, 1987). Although feedback is future-oriented because it is meant to correct past mistakes in an effort to improve future performances (Jones, 2006; King et al., 2009), the source and the manner in which feedback is communicated appear to be important predictors of whether or not athletes perceive feedback as useful.

Additionally, coaches' use of coercive power uniquely predicted athletes' sensitivity to feedback. It appears that coercive power may increase athletes' sensitivity to feedback because athletes may foresee the potential to experience increased face threats (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012) or a need to be defensive (Trees et al., 2009) when receiving feedback from an antisocial coach. The increased sensitivity to feedback could potentially impede athletes' learning because it increases the chances that athletes will experience negative emotions that interfere with the learning process (Titsworth, Quinlan, & Mazer, 2010). This assertion is consistent with previous athlete-coach communication research suggesting that antisocial communication decreases athletes' affective learning or motivation (Kassing & Infante, 1999; Martin et al., 2009; Mazer et al., 2013), which are traditional learning outcomes (Myers, 2010).

Finally, athletes' perceptions of feedback retention were positively predicted by expert power and negatively predicted by coercive and referent power. This finding is consistent with previous research which has demonstrated a positive association between expert power and cognitive learning and a negative association between coercive power and cognitive learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Curiously, coaches' referent power was found to negatively predict athletes' retention of feedback.

At face value, this finding may seem counterintuitive. However, it is possible that athletes' desire to satisfy and appease coaches that have referent power actually distracts from their retention of coach feedback. Similar curvilinear patterns regarding learning have been found for instructor immediacy, as too much immediacy may detract from students' learning outcomes (Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1995). Further, these findings could be a result of the task-oriented and highly competitive nature of Division I athletics as previous research on college athletes demonstrates that these athletes wish to keep professional boundaries (Becker, 2009) and find a balance between prosocial and antisocial communication to be effective (Turman, 2003b).

Another interesting finding was that neither the linear combination of power bases or individual power bases predicted athletes' preferences for confidentiality of feedback. Thus, it appears that athletes' desire to receive feedback in private is not dependent upon coach communication—at least power use. This finding is puzzling because it was expected that coaches' coercive power would be related positively with athletes' preferences for receiving feedback in private. However, this lack of relationship could be explained by Turman's (2006) findings that coaches have more leeway to use antisocial power, in comparison to instructors in classrooms, because of athletes' colloquial understandings and acceptance of antisocial coaching within sport (Jones, 2006). Simply put, collegiate athletes may expect to be embarrassed or yelled at in front of teammates and, therefore, do not feel the desire to hide these interactions from teammates.

Finally, results indicate that coach power use accounted for an additional 50% of the variance in athletes' communication satisfaction with a coach after accounting for sports-related variables. In particular, coaches' use of reward and expert power accounted for unique variance in athletes' communication satisfaction. The strong predicted relationship between referent power and athletes' communication satisfaction is consistent with findings from Goodboy et al. (2011). This continued relationship suggests that when learners feel like an instructor meets their communicative goals and needs, they also begin to identify with this individual. However, within the context of sport, expert power also emerged as a significant unique predictor of athletes' communication satisfaction with a coach. This addition could be a product of the current sample (i.e., Division I collegiate athletes). This level of athletics emphasizes winning and produces heightened levels of competition (Billings et al., 2012), meaning that when coaches have task-related knowledge that could aid in athletes' development, those athletes likely feel more satisfaction in their communication with coaches because their task-related goals are being addressed.

Implications

This study has practical and theoretical implications. First, this study has pedagogical implications for coaches because it provides empirical insight regarding the importance of power use in sport. Jones (2006) noted that coaches have been encouraged to take control of their teams by using their position (i.e., legitimate

power) and punitive interactions (i.e., coercive power), if need be, to influence athletes. Despite these colloquial prescriptions, the current results indicate that coaches should attempt to avoid relying on their position or ability to punish athletes, as these power bases decrease athletes' perceptions of communication symmetry, communication satisfaction, and perceptions of feedback retention and utility, and increase athletes' feedback sensitivity. Instead, coaches should attempt to use more prosocial power bases. If coaches successfully cultivate the right combination of these power bases athletes experience positive relational (i.e., increased symmetry and satisfaction) and task outcomes (i.e., utility and retention of feedback), indicating that the proper use of power can increase coaching effectiveness (Becker, 2009; Vella et al., 2011) and accomplish the goals of sport movements like the Positive Coaching Alliance (Billings et al., 2012).

Second, this study has instructional communication implications because it continues to expand upon scholarly understanding of instruction across contexts through the exploration of athlete-coach relationships. This exploration answers the calls from several scholars to continue the examination of instructional communication within sport (Kassing et al., 2004; Turman, 2003a, 2006, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2004) and provides further insight into informal learning environments (Turman, 2008). Further, it continues to provide support for the notion that the unique contextual elements of sport, which significantly predicted several of athletes' communicative evaluations and responses in this study, may have a role in the learning experiences of athletes within the context of sport. Thus, the continued exploration of power, and other instructional behaviors, within sport could yield unique findings regarding those constructs and their roles in instruction outside of classrooms. Indeed, the findings in this study reinforce the fact that coaches are perceived by their athletes to be effective or ineffective instructors.

These findings continue to support the positive influences of the prosocial power bases and the negative influence of the antisocial power bases (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). Specifically, the introduction of communication symmetry to instructional literature is important because the establishment of reciprocal lines of communication (i.e., learners' feelings that they can send communication to instructors at similar rates in which they receive communication) could have implications for several instructional concepts regarding student communication (e.g., self-disclosure, out of class communication, or motives to communicate). The current findings regarding athletes' feedback orientations also could be of use to instructional scholars because they demonstrate that the cultivation of coach power is predictive of how receivers evaluate and process messages. These results indicate that learners' feedback orientations are somewhat relationally derived. To date, scholars (King et al., 2009; Malachowski et al., 2013) have suggested that this construct is a trait-like predisposition, which by definition would require it to be stable and persistent over time and not particularly vulnerable to state-based environments or relationships (Guilford, 1959). However, the current data do not support such an assertion.

Third, this study has empirical implications for sport communication because it answers calls for "further empirical research that [examines] and critically [assesses]

the impact coach communication behaviors have on outcomes for young athletes” (Turman, 2008, p. 172). Although previous sport research has focused on how coach power use influences athletes’ affective outcomes (Martin et al., 2009; Turman, 2006), this study provides insight regarding the importance of coach power use for predicting athletes’ communicative responses to coach power. It appears that power predicts athletes’ perceptions of their ability to send communication to coaches, their orientations toward coach feedback, and their overall satisfaction regarding communication with coaches. This continued development of scholarly understanding of coach power is important given the prominent role of power in sport (Jones, 2006) and the lack of programs of research within sport communication. Further, the demonstration that communication accounts for large amounts of variance in athletes’ experiences after accounting for sport-related factors emphasizes the potential importance of communication within sport.

Limitations

Despite contributions, several limitations must be recognized. First, because of the design of this study it is impossible to determine which coach the athletes chose. Given what is known about different types of instructors and power use (Roach, 1995), it is possible that coach power use varies based on coaches’ specific positions (e.g., head coach versus assistant coach). Further, the focus on a single coach does not provide insight into how relationships with different coaches may interact to influence athletes’ outcomes. However, as previously stated, this decision was made intentionally and in the best interest of our participants. Second, the use of a sample of Division I athletes was difficult to obtain, which resulted in the current sample size being smaller than ideal with 91 athletes. However, the findings still explained a considerable amount of variance in athletes’ evaluations and responses, suggesting that null hypothesis/significance testing was not severely limited by the sample. Finally, the current study relied on self-report data regarding coach power use. Although this methodology is ideal for the assessment of athletes’ internal evaluations and perceptions of their own communication, the possibility that perceived coach power use may differ from the reality of coach power use remains a limitation. However, previous instructional studies have indicated that learner and instructor perceptions of instruction power use are similar (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983).

Future Research

Future research should continue to explore the role of power in athlete–coach communication and within the context of sport in general. First, given that the use of French and Raven’s (1959) social power bases has been validated as a framework for exploring athlete–coach power dynamics within this study and previous studies (Turman, 2006), future research should attempt to identify the specific behavior alteration techniques (BATs) coaches utilize to gain compliance with their athletes.

Martin et al. (2009) found that coaches use classroom-based BATs with their athletes, but it is likely that the specific techniques for compliance gaining vary between the classroom and sport settings. For example, a coach has more leeway to use coercive power than an instructor in a classroom (e.g., making athletes run laps, not allowing athletes to play, or using various physical punishments; Turman, 2006). Second, given that a prominent line of power research has explored students' use of power bases and BATs to influence instructors (Golish, 1999; Golish & Olson, 2000), future studies should attempt to identify which power bases or BATs athletes use to resist coach power use or gain compliance from coaches. Additionally, future studies should continue to investigate instructional behaviors that could be effective in the sport context. These studies should pay particular attention to how instructional behaviors may manifest or function differently within sport, which may require exploratory research using qualitative data rather than adapting existing quantitative measures from contexts outside of sport.

Conclusion

Jones (2006) indicated that there are “dynamic rings of invisible social contexts that surround the coach-athlete relationship” (p. 4). It appears that power is definitely one of the intangible and dynamic forces at work within the athlete–coach relationship. As revealed by this study, the utilization of traditional instructional frameworks can help provide understanding of the complexities of the athlete–coach relationship. Thus, the continued exploration of the nature of instruction within the context of sport is warranted. Coaches, then, would be well-advised to consider their role as instructors, and how they use power to influence their athletes.

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