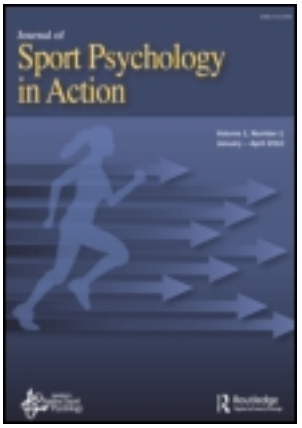

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The Development of Empathic Accuracy in Sports Coaches

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In sports coaching, the capacity of the coach to understand their athlete is viewed as a vital factor for evaluating that athlete and for achieving an appropriate working partnership. This understanding can be conceptualized as empathic accuracy, which is the ability to accurately infer the psychological state of an athlete. This article discusses the practical implications and guidelines for coaches that have emerged from the body of research examining empathic accuracy. Ways in which coaches can refine and develop their empathic accuracy are examined in four areas; gathering information, avoiding biases, maintaining appropriate levels of empathy, and being reflexive.

KEYWORDS empathy, athlete-centered, social intelligence, interpersonal, coaching

UNDERSTANDING ATHLETES IN SPORTS COACHING

In their definition of coaching excellence, Côté and Gilbert (2009) emphasized the need for coaches to understand and be responsive to their athletes, and Galipeau and Trudel (2006) have also emphasized the importance of coaches and athletes understanding each other to effectively coordinate their efforts and goals, stating the need for "ensuring [the] understanding of each other . . . " (p. 90). It can be argued then that the capacity of a coach to accurately understand their athlete is a vital factor in achieving a working partnership; allowing the coach to accurately evaluate their athletes and to respond appropriately to their ever-changing needs (Jones, Bowes, & Kingston, 2010).

It has been suggested that a coach's primary role is to develop the skills and abilities of their athletes in order produce higher levels of performance

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and personal satisfaction (Jowett, 2007). As part of this role, Solomon and Lobinger (2011) have theorized that coaches proceed through an expectancy cycle. Coaches form an initial impression of their athletes using a variety of sources of information sources called *impression cues*, which can include performance, appearance, attitude, behaviors and the like. Coaches then form an expectancy of those athletes based on these inferences. This expectancy then shapes the way in which coaches interact with their athletes, with athletes with high expectancy receiving more feedback and assistance. The athletes' reactions to the coach and their progression then inform a new set of expectancies and the cycle repeats itself. Given that this cycle begins with the evaluation of the athlete which then informs the coaches' actions, Solomon and Lobinger have argued that the ability to make accurate inferences informs a coach's evaluation of their athletes and provides the foundation of appropriate instruction, and helps create an environment where athletes are most likely to reach their full potential.

As a coach, picture yourself instructing an athlete in a new drill. You have them repeat the movements of the skill several times. You know that they must master this drill before they can move on. However, you realize that if it was you being forced to repeat something with little success you would become bored and distracted. You can see the athlete is fidgeting and no longer seems to be trying as hard. You decide to switch the training routine and come back to that drill later. What you have just done is take on the situational perspective of the athlete, you have "*seen the world through another's eyes*" and "*walked in their shoes,*" using this information to evaluate their needs and respond appropriately to the situation.

A coach must therefore monitor and correctly interpret an athlete's thoughts and feelings as they are expressed through their words, expressions, and actions, and interpret them appropriately. In the broader social psychology literature this ability to use information to form inferences about the internal world of others is often referred to as empathic accuracy (Ickes, 2003). This article discusses the practical implications and guidelines for coaches that have emerged from the body of research examining empathic accuracy and discusses how they can be applied assist in appropriately interacting with athletes.

What is Empathic Accuracy?

Psychologists have been interested in how people understand each other almost as long as psychology has existed as a discipline and the concept of empathy is seen as a highly desirable and valued ability that is a key factor in social relations (see Hall & Bernieri, 2001). It can be used to avoid or manage interpersonal conflict and allows individuals to more effectively work together, unifying their goals and objectives (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000).

Empathy can be defined as a cognitive process. It is the skill of perceiving and interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues and information and then using these to decode others' thoughts, feelings, and intentions. More specifically, empathy can be defined as empathic accuracy, which is the capacity to *accurately* perceive, from moment-to-moment, the psychological condition of another, such as their motivations and the reasoning behind their behaviors (Ickes, 2003). Hence, it is not enough for a coach to simply attempt to work out what their athlete is thinking or feeling; they must be correct in these perceptions (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009a)

It has been argued that knowing someone like facts in a book is not enough and that coaches need to identify with their athletes in order to truly understand their needs (cf. Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001). However, it is also easy to confuse empathy with emotional responses such as sympathy and people often use these words interchangeably. Coaches should be aware that the two concepts are not the same and that sympathy is not empathy. Sympathy is an altruistic response most normally shown through compassion or feelings of concern (Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001).

Sympathy is generally seen as a response to the expectancy of an other's needs due to distress, such as a coach feeling sorry for an athlete because they believe that the athletes is frustrated at his/her inability to progress. Sympathy and other emotional responses proceed expectancy and depend only on the belief that another is feeling a certain way (Batsom, 1991). Empathic accuracy acts as a source of information about what an athlete is thinking and feeling (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009a). This is a resource that you as a coach can draw upon to form accurate inferences and expectancies of athletes and to correctly respond to individual athletes. Hence, empathic accuracy can be seen to precede sympathy and other emotional responses. High levels of accuracy will improve your ability to *appropriately* use sympathy, verbal encouragement, instruction, or make other changes in your approach and behavior as a coach.

IMPROVING YOUR EMPATHIC ACCURACY

Understanding how empathic accuracy works can help coaches evaluate their athletes, connect with them personally, and respond to their needs. While relatively small, the empirical research investigating empathic accuracy in sport has been steadily growing in the last few years (see Lorimer & Jowett, 2011). Examining this work reveals a variety of factors and potential practical recommendations for influencing empathic accuracy. The following section summarizes this work and discusses how coaches can be taught to refine their skills and increase the accuracy of their evaluations and the inferences they make about their athletes. These have been divided into four loose areas that coaches can focus on improving, these are; gathering

information, avoiding biases, maintaining appropriate levels of empathy, and being reflexive.

Gathering Information

A key aspect of empathic accuracy is the application of knowledge. This knowledge can be separated into three levels ranging from general to specific: (a) knowledge of athletes or sport in general (e.g., "I know when athletes raise their voice they are generally angry"), (b) knowledge about a particular type of athlete or type of sport (e.g., "I know when athletes raise their voice in competition they are generally excited"), and, (c) knowledge about a specific athlete or situation (e.g., "I know when John raises his voice in training he is generally worried or upset"). The more specific the knowledge that a coach can apply the more accurate his/her inference of the athletes current mental state (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010a), and the more accurate their evaluation of their athlete (Solomon & Lobinger, 2011).

A coach needs to think about ways in which he/she can increase their knowledge and also keep that knowledge up-to-date. Solomon and Lobinger (2011) describe a range of sources of information that can be drawn upon including physical, psychological, and performance impression cues. However, perhaps the best source of information comes from questioning the athlete themselves. Lorimer and Jowett (2009a) have suggested that empathic accuracy can be improved if time is taken outside of training sessions, sessions lengthened, or less attempted within the allotted time, to allow for conversation and social interaction. They argue that additional information sources are essential in accurately understanding an athlete, and that coaches need understand more about their athlete than simply their performance in training and competitions.

One method of improving the information gained from athletes is described by Lynch (2002) as reflective listening; he states the need to "ask yourself, what it this athlete feeling right now? Try to understand and empathize with her position" (p. 35). As a coach you should encourage feedback from your athletes to check your own understanding and that of the athlete. This needs to go beyond merely clarifying an athlete's understanding of the instruction they are given and needs to include information regarding what the athlete thinks and how they feel. Coaches should sincerely listen to the athletes and take their opinions seriously. Coaches should be actively encouraging athletes to both ask questions and to honestly answer coaches' queries (Kidman, 2005)

Avoiding Biases

A bias is a tendency to emphasize factors that are irrelevant to the situation or athlete with whom you are working (Solomon, Golden, Ciaponni, &

Martin, 1998). It has been shown that coaches' expectations of athletes are inflexible and that coaches' assessments of athletes made at the beginning of a season are not likely to change (Solomon et al., 1998). Additionally it has been shown that coaches who are very experienced will often believe that they "have seen it all" and this confidence may lead them to making wrong assumptions about athletes simply because they do not pay the attention to the available information (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010a).

Many coaches fall back on stereotypes, or generalized information such as "Male athletes are tougher than females," when evaluating athletes (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010b). Although a coach may have a degree of insight into an athlete or situation (gained through education or personal experience), this insight may not generalize to other athletes or even the same athlete in different situations. Hence, while a coach may have greater experience this knowledge may not be directly transferable without careful consideration of the specifics of the current situation.

In order for you as a coach to avoid this you must become aware of the possible biases and stereotypes that may influence you. As such, you must consciously move through the cognitive process of attempting to understand your athlete rather than falling back on unconscious inferences. You must effectively assess how applicable your past experiences are to the current situation and carefully consider the unique contextual factors. Lorimer and Jowett (2010a) have suggested that coaches need to seek to gain further information and clarification each time they form an assumption about an athlete. This feedback checking would allow you as a coach to adjust your understanding of each athlete as each situation (e.g., a training session) unfolds and thus allow you to become more accurate as time goes on (Lorimer & Jowett, 2010a).

Maintaining Appropriate Levels of Empathy

Coaches may identify with their athletes too much (Drewe, 2002). Coaches may become too involved in the athlete's situation; they lose objectivity and become unable to objectively form inferences or evaluations of their athletes (Drewe, 2002). This is a poor way of providing effective coaching as inaccurate perceptions can lead to coaches providing inappropriate levels of support (Solomon & Lobinger, 2011). A level of detachment is necessary so that a coach can make difficult decisions about the athlete's progress such as whether to drop them from a squad/team or to continue pushing them despite their physical discomfort. As a coach you should try to identify with the athlete's needs and feelings while still maintaining enough self-awareness to disentangle your own needs and feelings from those of the athlete. While identifying with your athlete is essential in working effectively with them it can also lead to your own emotional and physical burnout as well as a reduction in empathic accuracy (cf. Eisenberg, 2000).

The coach–athlete relationship is an interdependent one. The coach and athlete's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors mutually impact on each other and they can cause one another to experience both positive and negative outcomes (Jowett, 2007). However, empathic accuracy requires a strong sense of the coach as separate from the athlete to prevent emotional biases (cf. Losoya & Eisenberg, 2001). As a coach you need to be self-aware and monitor the links between perception of emotions in your athlete and experiencing those emotions yourself. You have to remain conscious of the fact that the athlete's struggles and effort, and even their goals, are not your own. Self-awareness allows you as a coach to disentangle your own sense of self from that of the athlete, preventing you from becoming too involved while still allowing you to understand the mental state and perspective of that athlete (cf. Decety & Lamm, 2006).

Being Reflexive

In order for a coach to gather information, avoid biases and maintain an appropriate level of empathy they must be reflexive. Reflexive awareness is the process through which you as a coach are aware of your own actions and psychological state (cf. More, 1996). Essentially a good coach can step back and examine themselves to determine if they are acting appropriately for any given situation. A reflexive coach evaluates the current situation and does not rely on stereotypes or biases or become too involved in the situation to be unable to maintain a professional distance (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012). Coaches who are unaware of their own actions and psychological state tend to have lower levels of empathic accuracy (cf. Lorimer & Jowett, 2011) and therefore may be surprised when an athlete reacts badly or in an unexpected way.

This self-analysis and awareness is not easy to achieve and requires you as a coach to be consistently questioning yourself and seeking feedback. A good coach should not make assumptions about how an athlete reacted to their behavior. Self-observation is a key element in being consciously aware of your behavior and exerting deliberate control over it (Mayer et al., 2000). This can be more easily accomplished by being conscious of the "here and now" and being in the moment. Some coaches during training will be too concerned with organising and directing their athletes to really focus on events and individuals (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012). You should also spend time after being with your athletes to try and make sense of events. Reflect on what actions were taken; why you did things that way; what the athlete's reactions were (verbal and non-verbal); and what did those reactions mean? Careful reflection can potentially increase your understanding and reduce the future influence of biases or poor decision making (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2012; More, 1996).

CONCLUSION

In sports coaching, the capacity of the coach to understand their athlete can be conceptualized as the ability to accurately infer the psychological state of that athlete, otherwise known as empathic accuracy (Ickes, 2003). Coaches with higher levels of empathy accuracy may potentially apply a more personalized, subjective approach to coaching consistent with what is known as "athlete-centered coaching" (Kidman, 2005). Additionally, high levels of empathic accuracy would allow a coach to develop the correct level of expectancy for each athlete (cf Solomon & Lobinger, 2011) and hence provide the appropriate amount of support and feedback required to see performance improvements. Essentially, empathic accuracy allows the coach to adapt to individual athletes and respond to their changing needs. This can ultimately lead to better quality coach–athlete relationships and perhaps improved performance (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009a). To maximize this, coaches must be reflexive, monitoring themselves for potential biases and over empathizing with an athlete, while constantly seeking new information about their athletes and their perspectives.

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