A Qualitative Investigation Into Experiences of the Role Episode in Soccer

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This study explored the phenomenon of the role episode in sport. Performance profiles and interviews were conducted with 11 male collegiate soccer players to identify the factors that contributed to the formation of positive perceptions of role states and the consequences for the individual and team. Role clarity developed via a combination of learning through implicit experiences in the sport and explicit instruction from role senders. Role acceptance formed through the focal person’s perceptions of the assigned performance role and the role sender. Positive perceptions of role states were suggested to improve performance by enhancing individual and group-related variables, including role satisfaction, group cohesion, and collective efficacy. The findings highlight the significance of understanding the factors that contribute to a positive role episode in sport and present implications for future team-building interventions.

One group dynamics factor that has been proposed as an important influence upon team performance is that of the role state of the individual (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001; Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002; Eys, Carron, Beauchamp, & Bray, 2003). Roles have been defined as a set of expectations about behaviors for a position in a particular social context (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and are viewed as an integral component contributing to the structure of all groups whose purpose is to strive toward effective performance (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998).

The notion of role states emanates from a large body of empirical research in organizational psychology (for a review see Abrams, 1994; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Prominent among this literature is the role episode model proposed by Kahn and colleagues as a conceptual base for the study of role states within organizations (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In the model, an individual (the focal person) and his or her superiors (the role senders) interact cyclically within a context influenced by organizational factors (e.g., role requirements, size and structure of the organization), personal factors (e.g., ability, motives, values), and interpersonal

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factors, such as the level of communication, feedback, and dependence among persons (cf. King & King, 1990). The model suggests that the role senders’ expectations form role pressures based on their perceptions and evaluations of the focal person’s behavior that result in a degree of objective role conflict and ambiguity. Role conflict relates to the simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that compliance with one makes compliance with the other more difficult (Kahn et al., 1964), while role ambiguity refers to a lack of clear information associated with a particular role (Beauchamp et al., 2002; Kahn et al., 1964). The impact of these role pressures upon the focal person is suggested to be mediated by personality and interpersonal factors and results in a subjective-psychological experience reflected in cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that further modify the role sender’s expectations. These experiences include the amount of subjective role ambiguity, role conflict, and role acceptance, whereby role acceptance describes the extent to which the focal person’s expectations of the role requirements are congruent with those set out by the role sender (Biddle, 1979).

Within sport psychology initial investigations focused upon role states as a principal source of cohesion with moderate to strong correlations reported between role clarity (the opposite of role ambiguity), role acceptance, role performance, and task cohesion, respectively (e.g., Bray & Brawley, 2000; Grand & Carron, 1982). More recently, however, the understanding of the role episode and role ambiguity in particular has been advanced through a multidimensional conceptualization of the construct. This suggests athletes can perceive ambiguity to arise with regard to four dimensions within the context of offensive and defensive responsibilities in interactive sports such as soccer and hockey (cf. Beauchamp et al., 2002). These include the scope of responsibilities, the behaviors necessary to fulfill the role, how the role will be evaluated, and the consequences of a failure to achieve the role (Beauchamp et al., 2002). The presence of role ambiguity has subsequently been reported to be related to a number of individual and group variables including the following: increased cognitive and somatic anxiety (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2003), decreased role-related efficacy (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001; Beauchamp et al., 2002; Bray & Brawley, 2002; Eys & Carron, 2001), reduced cohesion (Eys & Carron, 2001), and greater athlete satisfaction (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2005; Eys, Carron, Bray, & Beauchamp, 2003).

Despite these recent investigations, our understanding of the role episode in sport is still relatively limited. Although relationships have been identified between specific variables (e.g., Beauchamp et al., 2003), there has been no examination of the nature of these processes in the context of the broader role episode. One way to consider these processes may be through the adoption of in-depth methods of inquiry. Indeed, recent advances in the understanding of group dynamics in sport have been achieved through such procedures. Holt and Sparkes (2001), for example, conducted an ethnographic study of a collegiate soccer team over the duration of a competitive season and identified relationships concerning the nature and development of team cohesion. The authors also reported that the role episode developed across a significant temporal period. Specifically, players formed an understanding of the importance of their role within the team’s wider task later in the season, which helped to integrate the team and led to improved task cohesion.
In light of the relative infancy of the literature examining roles in an athletic context, the purpose of the present study was to build on the recent work of Beauchamp and colleagues and examine the development and consequences of a positive role episode in an interdependent sports team. Consistent with recent studies in group dynamics that have employed alternative approaches to establish detailed information (e.g., Holt & Sparkes, 2001), a qualitative approach to understanding the role episode was used to allow the study of the issue of concern in great depth and detail (Patton, 2002). Specifically, we adopted a phenomenological perspective whereby in-depth interviews were used to probe athletes’ lived experiences of the development of positive perceptions of role states, namely role clarity (or a lack of role ambiguity) and role acceptance, and their perceived impact upon individual and team effectiveness.

For the present investigation, in line with the existing role literature in sport psychology, we focused only on the subjective component of the role episode, or the perception of the role state held by a particular individual. Further, although roles can be both formal and informal (Mabry & Barnes, 1980), only formal roles were examined as they dictate the task-related responsibilities that are directly associated with task performance (cf. Beauchamp et al., 2001). Finally, as each individual may possess different types of such formal roles (leadership, offensive, defensive, etc.) only individuals’ specific performance roles were considered. Roles associated with group-related constructs, including leadership and social organizations, were not considered (e.g., team captain).

**Method**

**Participants**

A purposive sampling design was adopted whereby cases were selected because they were information rich and illuminative, offering useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Participants were 11 male soccer players aged 18 to 22 years ($M = 20.0$, $SD = 1.2$) who were all regular starters from a top five ranked men’s collegiate soccer program in the United States, with between 1 to 4 years playing experience of collegiate soccer. The program was selected as new coaching staff had been introduced six months prior to data collection. A new team of coaches brings new coaching philosophies reflected in a different application of performance roles, and it was deemed, therefore, that as regular starters on the team, the selected participants would all have salient information-rich memories of developing new performance roles and fulfill the selected criteria of having experienced the phenomenon of the study (cf. Creswell, 1998). Nonstarters were excluded as it became evident during the preliminary phase of the research that most, if not all, had received little or no match playing time and therefore had gained no experience of their teams’ positional performance roles. Prior to commencement, participants were informed of the nature of the study, invited to take part, and written informed consents were obtained.
Procedure

Identification of Primary Performance Role Responsibilities. In order to clarify the appropriate role terminology and identify the meaning of the role episode to the individual, each participant was first asked to produce a performance profile (Butler & Hardy, 1992), using elements of their primary interdependent performance role responsibilities as constructs. Performance profiling is a technique that facilitates the athlete’s self-awareness with regard to performance (Butler, 1989) and has been successfully adopted in a number of empirical and applied investigations (e.g., Butler & Hardy, 1992; Dale & Wrisberg, 1996). To begin the procedure, each participant was first familiarized with the notion of performance roles, asked to consider their own performance roles within the team, and list the elements that comprised their role. In order to facilitate this process, an extensive list of soccer-specific performance roles was presented to the participants. These were derived from the Union of European Football Associations (U.E.F.A.) coaching literature and included separate elements from offensive, defensive, and transition phases of play (cf. Beauchamp & Bray, 2001) in each respective third of the soccer playing field (i.e., defensive, middle, and attacking). Templates of the soccer field were also provided on which participants could sketch diagrams to clarify each role element. The second stage of the profiling invited participants to rate each role element on a score of 1–10 to represent the extent (a) of their understanding of what the role entailed and (b) to which they believed the roles were congruent with those set out by the role sender (e.g., their coaches). It was emphasized to the participants that these elements were a representation of the concepts of role clarity and role acceptance, and that it was the participants’ experiences and understanding of these roles that would be discussed in the subsequent interviews.

An individual performance role profile was subsequently created and presented to each of the participants to enable reflection and facilitate the ongoing process of rapport building with the researcher (the second author) prior to the follow-up interviews. The rapport building process also included the second author observing and interacting with the participants at practice sessions and competitive matches over a period of several weeks. Building a rapport with participants is an essential aspect of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research and helps to produce open and honest recall of experiences with increased familiarity and respect (Creswell, 1998). No interaction occurred between the second author and the participants before the commencement of the study.

Interviews and Interview Protocol. Following the performance profiling procedures, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants regarding their experiences of the role episode. To enable accurate recall of symptoms and experiences, minimize memory distortions, and ensure that concepts were still salient in the participants’ minds, the interviews were conducted within three days of the performance profiling exercise, with each interview lasting between 60-90 minutes. To aid retrospective recall and minimize bias, a standardized four-section interview guide was developed (available from the lead author). Section one contained introductory comments, the study aims and objectives, and a declaration of the individual’s rights. Section two of the guide focused on training regimes, competitive history, and personal reasons for competing in order to familiarize participants with self-reflection and encourage active involvement in providing descriptive information (cf. Patton, 1990, 2002).
The third and main section of the interview comprised open and closed sport-specific questions in relation to the participants’ individual performance role profiles. These were generated from empirical findings in sport and organizational psychology and included the concepts of role ambiguity, role clarity, role acceptance, and any relationships with individual and team psychological responses such as competitive anxiety, athlete satisfaction, and team cohesion (e.g., Beauchamp et al., 2002; Beauchamp et al., 2003; Eys & Carron, 2001; Eys et al., 2003; Kahn et al., 1964). Participants were asked to describe the processes that lead to (a) the development of positive perceptions of role states, such as role clarity (e.g., “How did you develop a clear understanding of the scope of your role responsibilities?”) and role acceptance (“What lead you to accept this role?”) and (b) the consequences of the formation of these positive perceptions for the individual (“Tell me about the effects that your degree of role clarity has upon how you feel when you perform?”) and their team (“How does this affect the functioning of your team?”). Participants were also questioned regarding the development and consequences of positive perceptions of their role states within the context of Kahn et al.’s (1964) role episode model. Specifically, how personal (dispositional traits, values), interpersonal (communication modes), and organizational factors (size of team rosters, amount of coaching staff) influenced these perceptions. To facilitate recall and orientate participants, each athlete was also presented with their individual performance role profiles. The closing section summarized the interview experience and invited the interviewee to discuss any issues that may have been overlooked by the researcher.

Efforts were made to avoid an interview structure that was too rigid, which Dale (1996) suggests can reduce the chances that the interview will capture the participants’ experiences. Dale has also expressed concern that a rigid application of the interview guide assumes that each participant will have experienced each element of the study to the same degree. Throughout the interview, to further aid the recall and detail of information retrieval, questions were followed where appropriate by elaboration probes (Patton, 1990). Preliminary probes were prepared that could be used in combination with the structured questions to clarify and elaborate on participants’ experiences. The use of further unstructured probes was then determined by the participants’ answers to the structured questions.

To ensure consistency, the interviews were conducted in person away from the competition and practice environment. The interviewer (the second author) was trained in qualitative research methods to graduate level and possessed a background in soccer having played at semi-professional and collegiate level and obtained European and U.S. National coaching licenses. The knowledge associated with such experience was deemed to enhance the participant’s trust of the interviewer and ensure the comprehension of any potential idiosyncrasies and soccer-specific terminologies, further enabling the extraction of rich data (Eklund, 1994). Indeed, the ability to converse at a sport-specific level and empathize with the participant has been suggested to enhance the credibility and integrity of data collection and further contribute to the trustworthiness of a study (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chazisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The interview schedule was pilot tested on a sample of experienced soccer performers from a similar collegiate soccer program (n = 3) with feedback resulting in minor refinements to the question phrasing and narrative.
Data Analysis

Data regarding participants’ experiences and perceptions of the development of role states and the impact on individual and team effectiveness were analyzed using content analysis procedures (Patton, 1990). Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and read and reread by the second author until familiar with the content in order to gain an overall sense of the athletes’ experience. Raw data themes were then identified from quotes, characterizing each participant’s responses within each area of the interview, and appropriately coded by the second author to produce a set of concepts deemed to represent the information included in the interview transcripts. Statements within the transcription concerning the phenomenon were then listed in a process known as horizontalization (Creswell, 1998) whereby each statement was treated as having equal worth and ordered into a set of non-repetitive, non-overlapping raw data themes.

Based upon previous qualitative studies in sport psychology (e.g., Thelwell & Maynard, 2003), an inductive and deductive content analysis was conducted to identify common themes from the list of raw data obtained. Deductive analysis ensured that answers discussing specific content were related to the question being asked (i.e., content responses were matched to appropriate questions). Inductive analysis procedures were then conducted whereby “clusters of meanings” or first and second level themes were established and then grouped into higher order themes expressed as psychological and phenomenological concepts, with the highest themes giving a general description of the experience and labeled general dimensions. Next, for member checking purposes, the completed analysis and interview transcripts were presented to all the participants and comments regarding their accuracy were solicited. The participants all confirmed that a true representation of their experiences of the role episode had been portrayed.

Lastly, for purposes of verification, the completed findings, including interview transcripts, raw data themes, higher order themes, and general dimensions were presented to an independent researcher (first author), trained in qualitative methods and versed in the group dynamics literature, to act as a peer reviewer or “devil’s advocate” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher then read and reread the findings, critically evaluating the categorization, and where appropriate, questioning the credibility of the second author’s interpretations or inferences made throughout the analysis (Creswell, 1998). The independent researcher raised no major queries or concerns regarding the coding and analysis procedures. The second author also kept a reflexive journal throughout the duration of the project to log any opinions, thoughts, feelings, or experiences and to allow reflection and elaboration with regard to the research phenomenon and emerging theory (Patton, 1990). Such reflexivity allows for a description of the researcher’s experiences in order to assist in the interpretation of the essence of the experience for the participants (Creswell, 1998). For example, prior to the interviews, it was anticipated that in accordance with the existing empirical investigations, a large degree of the themes discussed by participants would focus on the multidimensional role ambiguity construct. However, participants actually favored the description of the role episode in terms of role clarity and role acceptance rather than role ambiguity per se. The findings and analyses were therefore compared and presented predominantly in relation to these factors in the development of a positive role episode.
Results

The results derived from the data analysis procedures represent the collated interview responses from all 11 participants. In total, 127 raw data themes arose from the transcripts representing the participants’ experiences of the role episode in soccer. These were abstracted in 14 higher order themes categorized under one of the following six general dimensions: (a) Development of Role Clarity: Learning Through Explicit Instruction by Role Senders; (b) Development of Role Clarity: Implicit Learning Experiences in Soccer; (c) Development of Role Acceptance: Perceptions of Performance Roles; (d) Development of Role Acceptance: Perceptions of the Coach; (e) Consequences of Positive Perceptions of Role States: Enhanced Individual Functioning; and (f) Consequences of Positive Perceptions of Role States: Enhanced Team Functioning. Elaboration of the six general dimensions will follow, supported by direct quotes from the interview transcripts to enable the reader to empathize with and immerse themselves in the participants’ perceptions, thereby better understanding the complexity of the issues being investigated.

Development of Role Clarity: Learning Through Explicit Instruction by Role Senders

The first general dimension to emerge from the data was that role clarity developed through explicit teaching and instruction from role senders in the participants’ environment. Within this dimension there were three themes that represented these sources of explicit instruction and feedback, including the coach, fellow teammates, and significant others (family members, peers, etc.). In the first theme, performance role clarity was reported to be assigned and developed through interaction with and feedback from the coaches. This was reported to occur during both practice and competition. For example, in relation to practice one of the participants noted,

He (coach) worked specifically with me playing in the middle of the field and (teammate) playing up front. We would do a lot more technical work in practice, like role understanding, shadow play, role-rehearsals, and walk-throughs . . . and set the whole defense so that everyone would know what I’m expected to do as a wide-midfielder, the person behind me, the person beside me etc. (P2)

Another participant discussed how roles were clarified via tactical discussions in the practice environment:

I learnt a lot from our tactical sessions away from the field. The classroom chalk talks, the one-to-ones . . . and the video sessions where we’d watch tapes of games and the coach would say, “What do we do here?” “You need to do this,” or “Think about these things.” (P8)

Feedback and instruction on the development of performance role clarity and refinement was also reported to be provided by coaching staff during competition. This included “a holler from the coach” (P1) or “immediate feedback to say what he thinks we should do until you’re doing what Coach wants” (P3).
In the second theme, relating to the provision of explicit teaching and instruction, participants reported that the clarity of their performance roles were adjusted and refined via immediate feedback during matches from teammates with similar or common elements of an individual’s role. For example, participant 4 noted the following:

During a match at a given point, it comes more from the people . . . and the defenders beside you. If I was playing right midfield, I would hear it from my right-back or the other guys on the back four would tell me where I should have been and what I should have been doing.

The third and final source of the development of performance role clarity was reported to occur via instruction and feedback from significant others outside of the participants’ performance environment, such as family members, relations, or close friends. One of the participants suggested,

My Dad was probably one of my biggest influences and helped me in developing my understanding of my role. He had been a coach, so he would preach the fundamentals to me all the time. We’d get home from after the game and talk about the way I played, things that I could have done better in that role. I remember last season when I wouldn’t balance up. The right back would be really high and, I’d just bomb on, and drift with the two centre backs, that was one thing in particular my dad told me I needed to work on. (P10)

**Development of Role Clarity: Implicit Learning Experiences in Soccer**

The second general dimension suggested to enhance the development of performance role clarity was personal learning experiences or situations implicit in the sport of soccer. Within this dimension three themes were identified: structured and unstructured practice, rotation of performance roles, and observational learning and modeling. For the first theme, role clarity was suggested to be developed through participation in both competition and structured and unstructured practice sessions. One of the participants commented,

I just learned what my role was from generally playing the game, in practice and in matches. . . . From repetition and repetition. You’d just learn when you did something right or wrong and develop an understanding and that would enhance your learning. (P2)

Another participant compared the development of the understanding of their performance role to learning languages in school:

. . . it’s sort of like this . . . you can only do so much in a classroom to learn Spanish. If you really truly want to speak it, you have to be there and live it, you know, assimilate. It’s the same thing with soccer . . . you just have to get out there and cut your teeth! (P5)
The second theme reported to contribute to the enhancement of role clarity was via players’ rotating their performance roles (i.e., playing positions) in practice sessions and training matches. For example, one participant suggested,

We’d play a lot of small-sided games in practice, six versus six, we’d rotate. . . . You’d play in the back midfield . . . up front . . . and then in goal. I was between forward and defender . . . so I got to see and understand pretty clearly about the different roles and how you play in the midfield. You learn a lot about strikers being a defender as well, so just trying to outsmart and outplay the opposing strikers, so you know what they’re looking for. That’s where I first learned to appreciate the different roles and it just kept becoming more defined. (P11)

A final theme to emerge from the analysis was that role clarity developed through participants utilizing observational learning and modeling techniques. Within this theme, four subthemes were identified. The first of these related to descriptions of how watching other live matches raised participants’ awareness of their own performance role. For example, one individual noted the following:

I was always watching live matches. . . . I watched more college soccer. By watching the game you learn more about the game itself. I knew who was playing in my position, and I just ended up watching, talking to them, and seeing what they do in different positions. I’m at the stage where I’m watching a game . . . watching the centre-back and pretty much what they’re doing. I also watch the whole picture and when a player or the team does something new, I’ll make a mental note. (P7)

In the second sub-theme, participants referred to the importance of learning performance roles by modeling their behavior on elite performers and teams in the sport. Participant 5 suggested,

. . . watching English Premier League highlights . . . Man United, Arsenal, Chelsea, you know, the best teams that have been consistently at the top. What Manchester United was doing and how that would fit into my game and my role . . . watching players in my position . . . you see them and you want to emulate them . . . the likes of Keane, Giggs, and Beckham in the midfield.

In the third subtheme, participants reported modeling their roles on performers in their own playing position from a similar cultural background. For example, one of the participants discussed how the presence of “home-grown” role models in their sport had benefited them:

We have Landon Donavan to be like and aspire to. Three times All-American . . . who was three years ahead of me. . . . I was always at his matches when I could be. He was like a cheeky left-footed centre midfielder, playing in my position, so he was someone to watch. Having people like him ahead of me . . . doing it . . . watching people three . . . four years ahead of me . . . from my area . . . it made me work that bit harder on my skills. (P2)
The final subtheme comprised the experiences of interviewees who recalled modeling behavior of players from their own team in order to shape role clarity: “When I am not on the pitch I am watching my team mates to see what they are doing” (P6). In particular, senior players were reported as key influences upon role development. “We had a really good player who was a senior who you could really learn about the game from” (P9). Another participant commented on their experiences of watching players in their position who had previously been starters on the team in past seasons:

It was a lot of watching the guys who were there at the time; you know, watching older guys who were starting and the guys, even the guys who were ahead of me. I knew who was playing in my position, and I just ended up watching, talking to them, and seeing what they’d do in different positions. And that was probably the best thing I could do, because they were on the field, because they were . . . the best they could be at that position, and they knew what they were doing. So, it was a lot of watching what they were doing. (P1)

**Development of Role Acceptance: Perceptions of Performance Roles**

From the factors that were suggested to contribute to role acceptance, the first general dimension that emerged was the individuals’ perception of their own performance role. Three themes were reported: the individuals’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the assigned performance roles, the degree of importance of the role to the individual, and the extent to which performance role acceptance was viewed by other team members as integral to the philosophy of the team.

In the first theme, the extent to which roles were accepted was suggested to depend upon the individual’s perceived effectiveness or relative success of their assigned performance roles. One interviewee (P11) indicated that “If something’s not working, then a lot of finger pointing will go on” and further noted, “If I don’t think its effective then I’m not going to buy into it. Why should I?” Another participant summarized a positive experience in relation to their perception of the effectiveness of their role:

If there’s a change made and it works . . . a couple of times, then people will gain confidence in it and accept it, and that’s a big part of it . . . and once the players have accepted it, then that’s a big part of . . . adding to the success. (P6)

The second theme from the general dimension described the degree of importance that the individuals placed upon their assigned role. For example, one participant described how role acceptance was enhanced when they believed their assigned role was important to the functioning and output of the team:

I just have to say to myself, “If I wasn’t the best guy for the job, I wouldn’t be here right now,” . . . when coach said, “You know, there’s not a lot of players on the field that I feel like I can put in four different positions.” He said, “You’re one of them . . . because you can do that, that’s an asset to the team,” so I would think . . . “Okay, I can help the team out in more than one way.” (P10)
In commenting on how they had accepted their role because it was important to them, one of the other participants highlighted how the coach had reinforced this:

I knew that there were certain things that I personally wanted to work on, and it was exactly what coach really wants me to do, and that’s being better with the ball at my feet . . . and I think him pressuring, like wanting me to step into midfield is going to, it’s going to force me to do that. I was ecstatic that he wanted me to do that, because that’s really what I wanted to work on. (P3)

Another performer suggested how their assigned performance role lacked importance as it did not include aspects of their best technical attributes, which subsequently lead to a lack of acceptance:

You could probably do that role, but you wouldn’t be happy with it because as an outside back, you want to get forward and you want to spring people free and you want to get in behind and you want to go up the touch line. I felt I had played well in our first game . . . and then I remember we were getting ready for the next and I was in a role where I was the utility guy . . . I felt like I wasn’t given a fair shot because I wasn’t able to stay in one position and develop my game. (P8)

For the final theme, interviewees described that the extent to which their performance role was accepted depended upon whether it was perceived by the players as important to the team philosophy or playing style. One individual suggested that the cohesive nature of their team was reflected in a strong sense of automatic acceptance of the coaches’ ideas:

It’s important, whatever system you’re playing, you kind of have to buy into it. I was unreceptive to the new coaches at first, a bit hard-headed, and one-track minded, thinking that the other system worked for us last year . . . I didn’t think something else might work. (P7)

Interviewees also recalled how their perceptions of senior players’ attitudes to new ideas influenced their own role acceptance. One interviewee (P2) described a situation when “Really knowledgeable, good players seem to be really into this . . . so I thought yeah, I should definitely be into this.” Another commented:

People I really respected seemed to enjoy it and buy into it . . . their opinions are valuable to me and when they have thought it has worked in the past so did we as well. So if they think this new system is going to work, it’s going to work. (P1)

**Development of Role Acceptance:**

**Perceptions of the Coach**

The second general dimension leading to a degree of role acceptance related to the perceptions of the role sender (i.e., coach, leader) by the participant (role occupant). The dimension comprised two themes: the individuals’ perceptions of the coach competencies and credibility (e.g., previous performance accomplishments), and the
perceptions of the congruency between the actual and preferred style of leadership or coaching. In the first theme, the credentials and competencies of a new coach were suggested to have an immediate influence on whether tactics and strategies, manifested in the performance roles assigned to the players, were accepted. For example, one of the interviewees described his thought process concerning the credentials of the coach:

. . . and then I look at the success that [coach] had in the past doing what he’s telling us to do and you think, like I mean with [coach], obviously he’s run a great program with [previous team] for a lot of the time. So, you know, obviously it works, so maybe we just need to do it better, and we keep practicing it, you know. So that helps me a lot to buy into whatever I’m being told to do. If the coach has had success in the past doing it, then, you know, I’ll say, “Hey, you know, they did it. We can do it.” (P4)

The second theme that emerged was that role acceptance was influenced by the extent to which the coaching style matched the preferred leadership style of the players. One of the interviewees described the positive elements of a democratic coaching style that helped to enhance his role acceptance:

During the games, in practice, if I have any questions, he’s never just given me, “Oh come on, you know, figure it yourself,” or anything like that. He’s always there to answer any questions . . . open to discuss things . . . once I’d had a conversation with him . . . and once I’d understood what he wanted, everything changed. . . . I started to accept the role. He’s so cool and calm and just doesn’t get frustrated when players aren’t changing the way they have played . . . not because they don’t want to, but because it takes time . . . not just getting frustrated and yelling and screaming . . . making matters worse. (P11)

Another interviewee described the negative elements of a coaching style that hindered role acceptance:

When a coach is really set in his ways, I think sometimes, guys can start to feel like they don’t have any say, and they can be annoyed at them. When I see coaches yelling and getting frustrated all the time, it doesn’t really seem to me that they really have it together. I feel it’s harder for me as a player if I have a coach just yelling at me and giving the “I’m right, you’re wrong no matter what!” Sometimes I just need reasoning . . . if he says “this is better because that long ball can come and you can get to it quicker” . . . it’s that simple, but if he just yells . . . it makes it a lot harder to accept your job. (P5)

Consequences of Positive Perceptions of Role States:
Enhanced Individual Functioning

The final section of the interview produced themes regarding participants’ views on the consequences of the development of positive perceptions of the role episode (i.e., enhanced clarity and acceptance). The first general dimension to emerge was an improvement in the psychological functioning of the individual, comprising two themes: increases in cognitive functioning and changes in affective states. In
the first theme, participants suggested that positive perceptions of role states led to enhanced changes in their cognitive states. Specifically, a greater understanding and acceptance of assigned performance roles were reported to lead to a greater sense of awareness and enhanced decision making during competition. For example, one of the participants noted the following:

Once you understand your role, you can start focusing on other things such as the opposition tactics and strategies . . . it becomes more of a second nature. It almost makes the game seem like it slows down when it comes to you . . . it’s a lot easier . . . you know exactly when to play the ball and where to play the ball. If you know what people are going to do in general, it helps you out to make your decisions. I feel a lot more free and just kind of go with the game . . . but if I don’t know and have to think about it too much I’m hesitant here and there. (P9)

Another participant discussed how they had experienced greater task focus because of their enhanced role clarity:

As soon as I was clear on my role in the team, my jobs, what was required of me, I definitely noticed I was more in tune with what was happening on the field. You are zoned into the opposition and what they are trying to do, and towards the actions of your teammates. There’s no effort to concentrate . . . its more of a rhythm . . . a natural focus. (P10)

The second theme described how increases in the positive role episode lead to changes in participants’ affective states. These included reductions in anxieties and concerns regarding performing their roles and enhanced perceptions of their task-efficacy. One individual (P4) suggested, “You don’t worry about what you should have . . . or need to do in your job (role) as much because it’s that clear.” Another commented,

I definitely found myself more confident in the positions where I knew what my role was. If you put me on the right rather than the left I am far more confident that I can get by someone and swing a good ball in. I feel a lot more confident when I know exactly what I’m supposed to be doing. (P7)

Other participants highlighted increased satisfaction with their role responsibilities. For example, participant 2 suggested, “. . . if I am clear and understand what my roles are . . . then . . . I feel happier and satisfied with my role and ultimately my place in the team.”

Consequences of Positive Perceptions of Role States: Enhanced Team Functioning

The second and final general dimension to emerge regarding the consequences of positive perceptions of the role episode was described by several interviewees as an increase in the overall “health” and functioning of the team. Five themes were identified within this dimension: enhanced perceptions of team cohesion, increased efficacy expectations, changes in communication, reduced conflict among members,
and increases in team performance. In the first theme, responses were focused on how the positive role episode brought the participants closer together on the soccer field in terms of unity and cohesion. For example, one of the participants suggested,

I think that when players know their role on the pitch . . . it creates a bonding in the team . . . I think it creates a stronger team . . . that adds to team unity and everyone feels close as a team . . . I think it brings the unit closer together; everyone works towards their collective aims and targets. (P4)

The second theme described changes in members’ expectations in relation to how the team’s ability to succeed was enhanced. Specifically, comments included, “it creates a more confident team . . . you feel more prepared, you all understand what you have to do and why . . . you are more confident going into the game” (P6). Another participant (P1) suggested, “When we are clear on our jobs and every one is happy with their role in the team you can sense the feeling amongst the players . . . its positive . . . its good . . . everyone expects to do well, we are all confident.” For the third theme participants noted that increases in role clarity resulted in communication changes. Clarity regarding roles was reported to allow improved levels of communication between players and staff, thereby fostering improved interpersonal relationships. As one participant suggested,

If I am clear about my role, and who . . . which coach . . . I need to speak with to get feedback on what I should be doing and how well I’ve done it, then I feel more comfortable about approaching them to discuss matters. It makes it a lot easier to do and it builds the working relationship between you and coach. (P11)

The fourth theme comprised descriptions of how a positive role episode contributed toward reduced conflict among team members and between team members and the coaching staff. Here, one of the participants described how, following the coaching changes, less conflict in the team had arisen due to knowledge that other players were happy with and had accepted their own roles:

Since the coaching change, I think everyone knows what they should be doing and are comfortable with that. The effect on the team? I guess there is definitely less arguing and disagreement around. Say before, two or three of the players would maybe bust up in practice sessions regularly because they’d want to take free kicks, on in my case, in the defense, it would be which one of us would push up for attacking corners . . . yeah that would always kick it off. (P3)

The final theme reflected participants’ responses regarding how enhanced perceptions of the role episode lead to a more productive unit. Ultimately this was perceived to lead to increases in overall team functioning and to subsequent performance. One of the participants (P5) summarized the effects of a positive role episode upon the team by suggesting, “It creates a stronger team. It’s a lot more effective if you’re not second-guessing yourself because you understand what everyone is supposed to be doing. The team performs better . . . the whole team is firing on all those four cylinders.”
Roles in Soccer  413

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the role episode in a collegiate soccer team by describing the factors that contributed to the formation of positive perceptions of role states and the subsequent impact for the individual and team. The findings provide preliminary support for the application of Kahn et al.’s (1964) role episode model to a sports context. Specifically, it emerged that the expectations and behavior of the role sender, together with a number of organizational and interpersonal factors, influenced the focal person or role occupants’ subjective experiences of the role episode and the functioning of the individual and team.

The finding that role clarity developed via learning through explicit instruction from the coach, fellow peers, and significant others suggest the importance of the role sender in shaping the individuals’ role experiences. It also highlights the contribution of the various interpersonal factors in the formation of a positive role episode. For example, these include the mode and frequency of interaction between the role sender and the role occupant, and the quality and content of any feedback provided. Although no studies have examined the influence of interpersonal factors upon the role episode in sport, findings from the organizational psychology literature suggest the nature of the communication between the role occupant and sender, particularly supportive behavior from the role sender, has a direct influence upon the focal person’s perceptions of conflict and ambiguity (cf. Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981).

The role sender also emerged as a determinant of the degree of role acceptance held by the members of the soccer team. Specifically, positive perceptions of the coach and their competencies and credibility were suggested to contribute to the extent of the athletes’ role acceptance. The findings agree with the organizational psychology literature that suggests one of the elements of role acceptance is the credibility or attractiveness of the role sender (Biddle, 1979). The high degree of congruency reported between the actual and preferred style of leadership or coaching in our study is also consistent with existing conceptualizations of leadership that indicate coaching styles are most effective in influencing role acceptance when they reflect the characteristics of the team (cf. Chelladurai & Reimer, 1998). A second element of role acceptance identified in the organizational psychology literature is the comparison between the individuals’ perceptions of the role and those of the role sender. Individuals are more likely to comply with, or accept, an assigned role if they believe it fits in with the leaders’ desires or wishes and there is benefit to be accrued from accepting them (cf. Biddle, 1979). This notion was supported in the current study whereby athletes reported that role acceptance was associated with perceptions that their assigned performance role would be effective and that it was of importance to them and to their team’s strategy or philosophy.

In addition to the importance of the role sender in the role episode model the influence of organizational factors was also observed in the current study. Kahn et al. (1964) suggested that the nature, structure, and requirements of practice, and the opportunity for practice itself, all contribute to developing an enhanced understanding of an individuals’ role in an organization. In our study, one aspect of this implicit experience in forming a positive role episode, and role clarity in particular, occurred through athletes modeling their behaviors on the team’s senior players and those of elite performers from the sport. While social learning theory
(Bandura, 1986) suggests that modeling process are a powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes, and patterns of thoughts or behaviors, there is some debate concerning the most appropriate criteria for the selection of effective role models. Indeed, McCullagh and Weiss (2001) suggest that observing learning models at similar developmental stages to the individual, combined with appropriate instruction, may be more effective than attending solely to the perfect practice of elite performers. In the organizational psychology literature, Gilson, Pratt, Roberts, and Weymes (2001) have discussed the broader effects of role models on the development of effective teams. They suggest that effective organizations inspire their members by using “ideal” role models as they provide a benchmark for others to emulate and exceed. Based upon these suggestions and the findings from our study, it would appear that in addition to modeling the behavior of expert performers the most effective use of models for developing a positive role episode would involve athletes modeling themselves on individuals with similar physical, positional, or even cultural characteristics.

The final part of the study explored the perceived consequences of the development of a positive role episode upon the individual and team. Positive perceptions of role clarity and role acceptance were reported to lead to increases in the overall psychological health of the individual and their team through enhanced task efficacy, lower levels of competitive anxiety, and increased perceptions of the team’s group dynamics such as task cohesion. These findings compare favorably with the existing investigations conducted in sport psychology by Beauchamp and colleagues (Beauchamp et al., 2003; Beauchamp & Bray, 2001; Beauchamp et al., 2002; Bray & Brawley, 2002; Eys & Carron, 2001; Eys, Carron, Beauchamp et al., 2003; Eys, Carron, Bray et al., 2003). Additionally, unique to our study, participants also reported improvements in other individual and group-related variables. These included enhanced awareness, decision making, increased perceptions of efficacy expectations regarding team performance, and reduced interpersonal conflict due to enhanced communication processes. Although these proposed effects were context-specific, and therefore limited in their generalizability, they do suggest that individuals’ perceptions of their performance roles influence a broader range of cognitive and affective states than the current empirical knowledge base in sport psychology.

Limitations and Future Research

As our study was exploratory, we note its limitations and provide some suggestions for future investigations into the role episode in sport. First, due to the type of study design, we only considered a small sample of athletes. By its very nature, such a design limits any generalizations that can be made. Future research should therefore build upon our exploratory findings and consider empirical examination of the role episode model with larger samples across a broader range of sport types (e.g., independent and co-acting). Second, to a certain extent, the selection of qualitative methods and the purposive sample in this study may have also precluded the investigation of the influence of personality upon the role episode. Kahn et al.’s (1964) model suggests that a number of personality characteristics mediate the role episode including needs, values, abilities, and age status. One recent example of the examination of personality and the role episode in sport has come from Bray et
Roles in Soccer  415

al. (2005), who studied the importance of an individual’s need to avoid ambiguity or need for clarity and found that the negative relationship between role ambiguity and satisfaction was greater for those with a high need for clarity. Further empirical investigation, such as Bray et al.’s, is therefore needed in order to identify other personality factors and potential group differences that may act as moderating or mediating influences upon the role episode.

Third, in relation to the organizational aspect of Kahn et al.’s (1964) model, we identified that a number of implicit experiences influenced performers’ perceptions of the role episode, such as the various practice and learning environments and role models available to the individual. Other organizational factors proposed by Kahn et al. are therefore also worthy of examination. These include the nature of the development of the team or group; the level of competitive success of the individual, coach, or team; and the composition of the group itself. Here, alternative methodologies, similar to the qualitative design adopted in our study, may be best suited to attempt to comprehend the phenomena of interest and capture the dynamic nature of the role episode and the associated group processes.

Fourth, to date, existing studies in sport psychology have only considered the subjective element of the role episode of the individual or role occupants. Little or no information exists on the role senders themselves (e.g., coaches, teammates, significant others) and how they communicate and develop expectations for the focal person. In our study, we identified that the role senders’ behaviors may affect perceptions of the role episode via the level of communication and feedback provided and the style of leadership adopted. Future research may therefore wish to examine the magnitude and relative contributions of role sender behavior and communication to the explicit instruction and learning processes and how these shape the focal person’s subsequent perceptions of role ambiguity or clarity and role acceptance.

Finally, while our study considered a number of elements of the subjective role experience (e.g., role clarity, role acceptance, and role satisfaction), it should be noted that the role episode constitutes many other cognitive and affective variables such as role overload and role efficacy (cf. Beauchamp & Bray, 2001). The behavioral factor of role performance in particular has received limited attention with existing studies employing coach and athlete self-rated measures of role performance (e.g., Beauchamp et al., 2002; Bray & Brawley, 2000, 2002). The development of objective assessment methods would seem therefore to be an important progression to complement the existing assessment of role performance.

Practical Implications

While it is not possible (nor intentional) to generalize from a sample such as ours, the findings do hold some application for practitioners with regard to facilitating a positive role episode. First, the contribution of explicit and implicit learning experiences to the development of a positive role episode highlights the importance of fostering an appropriate learning environment in order to reduce role pressures and conflicts among and within interdependent teams. The development of learning and experience is embedded within the reflective practice literature (Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004). Indeed, participating in a process of reflection is thought to empower the individual to become self-aware and implement change
Psychologists should therefore work to encourage athletes to obtain structured feedback and instruction regarding their role requirements and also to take advantage of opportunities to participate in unstructured practice, both supervised and unsupervised, alongside formal sessions. Of particular importance in this reflection process are the concepts of modeling and observational learning. Practitioners should therefore also encourage performers to engage in formal modeling practices that facilitate the development of a positive role episode (e.g., role clarity). This may include structured observational learning of suitable role models (peers, senior players, and elite performers) within the sport with similar physical, technical, positional, or even cultural characteristics (cf. McCullagh & Weiss, 2001).

From a methodological perspective, the performance profiling procedures utilized in our study provide an effective tool to enable practitioners to, directly or indirectly, conduct interventions to engage performers in reflective practice and facilitate their perceptions of the role episode. Specifically, the technique allows the psychologist to help the role sender (coach) and role occupant (athlete) work toward the elimination or reduction of any incongruence between assigned and perceived performance roles and to facilitate coach-athlete interactions in terms of interpersonal factors such as leadership style and modes of communication (cf. Jones, 1993). The method may also be appropriate to clarify any potential conflicts or ambiguities over assigned performance roles between athletes and coaches in a collective sense via team profiling (Dale & Wrisberg, 1996). This is particularly salient in interdependent teams as it appears that more than one role sender (coach, captain, senior player) can be responsible for shaping the occupant’s perceptions of the role.

Finally, the findings regarding the consequences of developing a positive role episode suggest that by reducing role ambiguity and enhancing role acceptance, a range of individual and team outcomes can be achieved that lead to enhanced psychological functioning of the team. With specific reference to role acceptance, the participants in our study suggested that when players perceived that their role was important to the team and they had a strong sense of a team philosophy, they more readily accepted their performance roles. Psychologists should therefore adopt team building practices, such as personal disclosure and mutual-sharing, that encourage a “team ethic” atmosphere and not only promote the notion of “buying into” the team philosophy, but also overtly recognize the importance of each individual player’s unique contribution to the team (cf. Dunn & Holt, 2004; Yukelson, 1997).

References


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