

Conformity of athletes: roles of type of sports, gender and competition experience

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Abstract

The subject of the present research was conformity as athletes' behavioural manner toward coach and club management. The aim of study was to establish differences in the conformity degree between groups of athletes, categorized under 3 criteria: type of sports, gender and athletes' competition experience. Sample of examinees was consisted of 160 athletes. The research instrument was conformity scale (The Conformity Scale, Mehrabian, & Stefi, 1995), used and confirmed in 2 earlier researches of Vučković et al. (2009, 2010). Data were analysed by non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. Upon analysis, it's been confirmed that: a) athletes are bigger conformists toward coach than club management, b) team sport athletes are bigger conformists toward coach, c) there no differences between male and female athletes in conformity toward coach and club management, d) there is no statistically significant differences between experienced and less experienced athletes in their conformity degree toward coach and e) less experienced athletes expressed bigger conformity toward club management in all examined statements .

Key words: **conformity, athletes, coaches, club management**

Introduction

Sport coaches and sport sociologists think that every sport team must have clearly defined social relations between athletes, coaches and club management. The most common attachment of socialization process is conformity (Koković, 2000, 82). Conformity is one's adjustment to attitudes, opinions and behavioural forms and to a certain group standards. Conformists easily adapt themselves to a sport team and club discipline. They are favourite players of authoritarian and tenacious coaches. Uncertain, intellectually unformed, frustrated, authoritarian persons with lower group social status are more susceptible to conformity. Marjanović (1995) has researched conformity of 40 girls and 40 boys, students of Belgrade high schools utilizing Asch's technique. Analysis of variance has shown that degree of conformity is significantly higher in gender homogenous groups than heterogeneous ones. The highest degree of conformity was noted among males in regard to instructed male subjects, followed by girls in regard to instructed female subjects, after those girls in regard to instructed male subjects and the least degree of conformity was present at males in regard to instructed female subjects. Atkinson (2002) has investigated for three years reasons why Canadian women undergo tattooing. He concluded that one of the main reasons for that was pressure from social environment. Conducting a research on 149 students, Niemand (2006), based on 11 items Lickert scale, found that women were bigger conformists than men in terms of life and racial prejudices. He stated that majority of authors came to the conclusion that women were bigger conformists. Joksimović and Matic (2006), were examining value orientations among 628 adolescents, and they mea-

sured degree of conformity by scale that contained statements of inevitability to accept opinions of majority, importance of group fitting and adjustment to demands and expectations made by others. Positive relationship between conformity and altruistic value orientation was explained by student-conformists' desire to be popular and accepted. Conformity was more evident among students whose parents had lower educational level. Such parents insisted on respect for authority and adoption of conformity values. Researches of athletes' conformity indicate that players- newcomers quickly adjust their behaviour to older players and the team leader (In: Carron, 1980). Younger adolescents and their parents have great expectations from coaches (Martin et al., 1999). They think that coaches should be educated, competent, ambitious, hard working, etc. Authors conclude that young players have low level of conformity because: a) their relatively short sport experience and b) parents' involvement in sport activities. Sherman et al. (2000) explored attitudes of Australian athletes about "coach's preferable behaviour". Amongst other things, authors concluded that female athletes had more tolerance for coach's autocracy, in other words they were bigger conformists than male athletes. After talks he had with doped athletes, Mendoza (2002) claimed that certain percentage of athletes used doping because they have seen other athletes used it too. Jowett and Cockerill (2003) made analysis of relationships between Olympic medal winners and their coaches, and they consider athletes' readiness for complete concordance with coach's training rules and principles indicator of "positive conformity", because such relationship had led to success. Vučković and Gadžić (2009) not-

ed high degree of conformity in basketball players of Bosnia and Herzegovina toward coach, and moderately elevated toward club management. They found surprising (and disappointing!) disposition of players who approve club management interference with coaches' professional and educational expertise. Conducting further research of relations between basketball players' social characteristics and their conformity toward coach, Vučković et al. (2010) established non existence of significant relations between a majority of basketball players' social characteristics and their conformity toward coach and club management, which indicates that some other factors were responsible for high conformity of basketball players. Authors expressed surprise with such findings because a number of authors claimed that athletes' conformity was in a large proportion influenced by social factors. Finally, they conclude that primary determinant of tested basketball players' conformity could be coaches' quality (their managerial style, knowledge, experience, reputation, etc.). Group pressure should not be ignored either, which consequently results in individual conformity. Voelker et al. (2011) have analysed experiences of ex captains from high school basketball teams (7 male, 6 female). All examinees stated that they received little or no practical advices from coaches that could help them in performing captain duties. Their behaviour was based on previous life experiences, such are: a) observations of predecessor captain (conformity) and b) learning through trial and error. Steinfeldt et al. (2011), examined conformity among 143 females athletes and non athletes according to gender norms in sports, sport participation and own body perception. Results shown that female athletes and non athletes do not differ in conformity degree to "female norms", however, female athletes had higher level of conformity to "traditionally male norms", such are: high desire for winning, taking risks, aggressiveness, strength.

Definitely, considering coach-athlete relations, a number of researches have shown high degree of conformity among athletes, regardless individual or team sports (In: Wildman, 2006).

Study aim was to establish differences in the conformity degree between groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina athletes, categorized under 3 criteria: 1) type of sports (individual or team sport), 2) gender and 3) athletes' competition experience (less and more or equal to 10 years). Based on quantitative indicators, certain conclusions have been drawn. These conclusions, alongside few more future studies, should contribute in creation of theory of athletes' conformity as a final goal.

Method

Examinees

Sample of examinees was consisted of 160 athletes from 8 sports. Out of that number, 79 were female, and 81 were males. There were 81 athletes involved in individual sports (athletics, tennis, karate, and boxing) and 79 in team sports (basketball, football, handball, volleyball). Average age of athletes was 25 years and 2 months, and competition experience 9 years and 10 months.

Table 1. Differences between individual and team sport athletes in conformity degree

	Leader	Conspl	Coastr	Coaide	Manres	Manben	Manwor	Opman
Mann-Whitney U	3041.50	2699.50	2743.00	1979.50	2760.00	3105.50	1482.00	1754.50
Z	-.797	-2.297	-1.766	-4.537	-1.584	-.345	-6.080	-5.125
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.426	.022	.077	.000	.113	.730	.000	.000

Instruments

Modified Conformity Scale was used as the research instrument (*The Conformity Scale*, Mehrabian, & Steffl, 1995). Modification considered lingual adaptation of statements, without change of its essence. Internal reliability of modified conformity scale was $\alpha = .57$. In previous Vučković et al. (2009, 2010) researches, where same research instrument has been used, reliability was $\alpha = .74$.

Conformity related statements were: 1) "Coach is the team leader and therefore should be respected" (Leader); 2) "It is a good thing when coach consults athletes regarding certain questions" (Conspl); 3) "Coach is under a lot of stress, so even when he makes a mistake, he should be understood and forgiven" (Coastr); 4) "All coach's ideas should be obediently realized" (Coaide). Statements referring to conformity toward club management were: 1) "Club management runs the club and therefore should be respected" (Manres); 2) "Club management is benevolent, its only interest is the prosperity of the club" (Manben); 3) "Club management should have influence on coach's professional work (content of trainings, player's treatment by the coach, etc.)" (Manwor); 4) "Opinion of club management regarding professional issues (player's quality, player's competitive level form, etc.) must be respected" (Opman). Athletes have evaluated their agreement with provided statements on five point Likert scale, where point 1 stands for "strongly disagree", point 2 – "partially disagree", point 3 – "unsure", point 4 – "partially agree" and point 5 – "strongly agree" Dependant variables were: 1) type of sport (individual or team sport), 2) gender and 3) competition experience (less and more or equal to 10 years).

Procedure

Questionnaire procedure has been conducted in specially selected room within training hall. Apart from interviewer and athletes nobody else attended procedure.

Hypotheses of difference between two means were tested by non-parametric Mann-Whitney test.

Results

It is notable from table 1 that statistically significant differences exist between individual and team sports in statements "It is a good thing when coach consults athletes regarding certain questions" (Conspl), "All coach's ideas should be obediently realized" (Coaide), "Club management should have influence on coach's professional work (content of trainings, player's treatment by the coach, etc.)" (Manwor) and "Opinion of club management regarding professional issues (player's quality, player's competitive level form, etc.) must be respected" (Opman). In statements: "Coach is the team leader and therefore should be respected" (Leader), "Coach is under a lot of stress, so even when he makes a mistake, he should be understood and forgiven" (Coastr), "Club management runs the club and therefore should be respected" (Manres) and "Club management is benevolent, its only interest is the prosperity of the club" (Manben) no significant differences were found.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics in regard of type of sport

	GROUP	N	M
Leader	1	81	4.79
	2	79	4.78
Conspl	1	81	4.68
	2	79	4.84
Coastr	1	81	4.11
	2	79	4.43
Coaide	1	81	4.00
	2	79	4.42
Manres	1	81	3.91
	2	79	3.65
Manben	1	81	3.49
	2	79	3.51
Manwor	1	81	3.27
	2	79	1.85
Opman	1	81	3.96
	2	79	2.97

Legend:

GROUP 1 – individual athletes

GROUP 2 – team sport athletes

N – Number of athletes by group

M – Arithmetic mean for answers on five point Likert scale

Table 2 reveals size and direction of differences between groups of athletes in proposed statements. Two facts are easy to notice: a) athletes of both groups are bigger conformists toward coach than to club management and b) team sport athletes are bigger conformists toward coach, and athletes from individual sports toward club management respectively.

Results from table 3 show existence of statistically significant differences between male and female athletes in statements: “Coach is the team leader and therefore should be respected” (Leader) and “Club management is benevolent, its only interest is the prosperity of the club” (Manben).

After analysis of tables 3 and 4, it could be learned that for majority of statements there are no significant differences in conformity degree between male and female athletes.

From table 5 it is obvious non existence of significant differences between less experienced and experienced athletes in conformity degree toward coach. On the other hand, significant differences do exist in all statements referring to conformity toward club management.

Although statistically insignificant, older athletes are somewhat bigger conformists toward coach (Table 6). Younger athletes are significantly bigger conformists toward club management.

Table 3. Differences between male and female athletes in conformity degree

	Leader	Conspl	Coastr	Coaide	Manres	Manben	Manwor	Opman
Mann-Whitney U	2695.50	2900.00	2760.50	3195.50	2760.00	2001.00	2788.00	3060.00
Z	-2.541	-1.374	-1.699	-.015	-1.586	-4.398	-1.457	-.495
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.169	.089	.988	.113	.000	.145	.621

Table 4. Descriptive statistics in regard to athletes' gender

	GROUP	N	M
Leader	1	81	4.89
	2	79	4.68
Conspl	1	81	4.80
	2	79	4.71
Coastr	1	81	4.20
	2	79	4.34
Coaide	1	81	4.19
	2	79	4.23
Manres	1	81	3.58
	2	79	3.99
Manben	1	81	3.12
	2	79	3.89
Manwor	1	81	2.43
	2	79	2.71
Opman	1	81	3.48
	2	79	3.47

Legend:

GROUP 1 - male

GROUP 2 - female

N - Number of athletes by group

M - Arithmetic mean for answers on five point Likert scale

Discussion

Analysing **individual and team sport athletes**, it could be said that both groups are to a great extent conformists toward coach. Team sport athletes are a little bit bigger conformists toward coach. These findings are very close to Vučković and Gadžić (2009) results. Examining conformity of senior basketball players, they noticed high level of confidence in coach and willingness to submit his psycho-physical demands. Moreover, this is in concordance with opinion of the most famous North American sport sociologist. In his numerous studies (Carron, A. et al., 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005), Carron claimed that for team success, among other things, it is essential to have athletes' conformity toward coach. Comparing successful and unsuccessful American teams at Atlanta Olympic Games, Gould et al (1999) investigated causes of failure for certain teams. Besides lack of team cohesion, experience and mental readiness, authors suggest that low level of conformity toward coach, additionally contributed to poor results. Athletes who were not ready to completely obey coach and his programme made poorer results. In their research of athletes' inclination to individuality or collectivism, McCutcheon and Ashe (1999) found that “individualists” - persons who devalue collective effort to success, underrate importance of relations within team and prefer high level of personal autonomy and self-sustaining. Despite the fact of somewhat lower level of individual athletes conformity toward coach noticed in this research, it is very clear that level is quite sufficient (on scale from 1 to 5, it equals \approx 4.4).

Table 5. Differences between less experienced and experienced athletes in conformity degree

	Leader	Conspl	Coastr	Coaide	Manres	Manben	Manwor	Opman
Mann-Whitney U	2921.50	2864.00	2925.00	2844.50	1932.50	2002.00	2073.50	2056.00
Z	-.074	-.343	-.042	-.353	-3.778	-3.576	-3.186	-3.257
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.941	.732	.966	.724	.000	.000	.001	.001

Table 6. Descriptive statistics in regard to athletes' competitive experience

	EXPERIENCE	N	M
Leader	1	103	4.78
	2	57	4.81
Conspl	1	103	4.75
	2	57	4.77
Coastr	1	103	4.22
	2	57	4.35
Coaide	1	103	4.18
	2	57	4.25
Manres	1	103	4.01
	2	57	3.37
Manben	1	103	3.71
	2	57	3.12
Manwor	1	103	2.84
	2	57	2.07
Opman	1	103	3.73
	2	57	3.02

Legend:

COMPETITIVE EXPERIENCE 1 - athletes < 10 years (less experienced)

COMPETITIVE EXPERIENCE 2 - athletes ≥ 10 years (experienced)

N - Number of athletes by group

M - Arithmetic mean for answers on five point Likert scale

Considering conformity of individual and team sport athletes toward club management, it could be surprising the opinion of individual athletes that club management should have influence on coach's professional and educational work. Probably, this is a case for athletes (particularly tennis players) whose parents are members of club managements.

Male and female athletes expressed higher conformity toward coach than to club management. In majority of statements there were no differences found between male and female athletes in conformity toward coach and club management. This result is inconsistent with findings of Niemand (2006) and Sherman et al. (2000) who concluded that women were bigger conformists than men.

Conformity degree toward coach has shown no differences between **less experienced** and **experienced** athletes. However, less experienced athletes expressed bigger conformity toward club management in all provided statements. It seems that less experienced athletes have weaker understanding of club management role. It is essential to be involved in sports for a number of years in order to clearly distinguish coach's role from club management one. Different authors have obtained diverse results. Martin et al. (1999) concluded that older players are bigger conformists. Earlier researches, summarised by Carron (1980) indicate that younger players are bigger conformists. Opposite to those findings, Vučković and Gadžić (2009) did not find statistically significant differences between older and younger basketball players in their level of conformity.

Conclusion

Conformity toward coach of tested athletes is at high level. Having in mind opinion of world leading sport sociologists, that is quite all right, because without athletes' readiness to accept coach's way of work there is no success. On the other hand, results obtained in present research indirectly speak about quality of coaches. Apparently coaches have high professional, educational, working and ethical qualities and therefore "deserve" conformity of athletes they have been coaching. To a certain extent, surprising is equal conformity of male and female athletes toward coach and club management, considering that results of majority of previous researches have shown female athletes to be bigger conformists than male athletes. (To) high level of conformity of less experienced athletes toward club management has been attributed to their poor knowledge about assignment of duties between coach and club management. Some future research should include open type questions, where athletes could explain their opinion about given statement. Moreover, it would be useful to compare conformity of Bosnia and Herzegovina athletes with conformity of world elite athletes (for example Olympic level athletes).

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