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THE RELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL COMPARISON AND COACHES' ORIENTATION TOWARDS COMPETITIVE SITUATION

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ABSTRACT:
How coaches behave depends on the representation they have towards their role and towards the competitive situation itself. The aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between the coaches' orientation towards the competitive situation and the way they define their relation with the competitors. Based on combining conceptual elements from social dramaturgy, achievement goal theory and social comparison theory, the study focuses on coaches' social representations upon sport context and actors. The results of the qualitative research show that the differences between self-improvement and domination type of goal orientation are determined by the nature of social comparison the coaches' use towards their competitors. When faced with a downward or lateral comparison, coaches tend to use an orientation to domination, while in case of upward comparison they prefer a self-improvement goal orientation to minimize the impact of the competition result on the level of self-esteem.

Keywords*: social comparison, goal orientation, domination, self-improvement, competitive situation, sports*

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social role and practices that have been institutionalized inside the sports' field means that nowadays sports represents more than recreation, competition or healthier lifestyle. Due to its autonomy and complexity of structural and dynamic aspects, sports can be approached as a social field per se, in bourdieusian terms [1].

This study is focus on the relationship between the representational sphere and the corollary sphere of action. Based on a general framework of social representation [2], it can be said that the social actors' representations upon the social field of sports is determinant in understanding their attitudes and behaviors inside this micro-universe of sports. Moreover, when speaking of competitive situations, there is an important distinction between the objective competitive situation

and the subjective competitive situation [3]. If the first one is defined by evaluation criteria known by a least one person who can evaluate the performance (i.e. standards of performance, the level of performance in the past, etc.), the second one refers to the way people perceive, accept and redefine the objective competitive situation. This last dimension of the sports' competitive situation will be the central component of the present study.

Starting with the fifties, Stone [4] understood the dual dimension of sports as performance and competition. These two major frameworks of sports' field representation can be associated with the dichotomy between the dramaturgical model of sports as spectacle [5] and the belligerent model of sport as confrontation of opponent parties. Each perspective implies a different logic of redefining the roles of the actors

inside the sports field, different expectations, attitudes and behaviors.

The aim of this study is to analyze how coaches, as central actors in the dynamics of sports' social field, define the competitive situation, taken into consideration the way they refer to the competitive context, but also the way they refer to the opponent teams.

2. ORIENTATION TOWARDS ACTION

Engaging in a sport competition, like in any other human activity, raises the question of the reason behind. The answers to "Why?" questions are correlated to the discussions about goals as fuel for every action inside and beyond the sport field. Thus, according to Burton and Naylor [6], the notion of goals can be approached in two fundamental ways. First, goals can be considered as a direct motivational strategy, closely associated with motivational aspects. Therefore, they work as specific standards of performance that have impact on a person's behavior in terms of attention and effort. The second way in which goals can be studied is based on considering goals as cognitive drivers for involvement in activities.

In this second case, achievement goal theory [7] considers that goals are strongly related to the personal meaning of ability and success, which, in turn, influences cognitions, behaviors and affective responses of a person. Moreover, the main differences between social actors are determined by the way in which they perceive and define things and the criteria they use in evaluating the relevance of any information in reaching their goals.

According to Nicholls, there are two complementary perspectives in dealing with goal achievement: task involvement and ego involvement [7]. While the first one is concerned with the felling of fulfillment and the improvement of self-performance, the second one is concerned with demonstrating superiority over others. Re-contextualizing the two perspectives for the sports' field, we can speak about the differences between focusing on your own performance and its improvement compared with your previous levels and focusing on winning against your opponent, regardless of the level of performance implied. Each approach is based on different aspects of the Self [8]: if task involvement means self-fulfillment, using your own performance as a referential point, ego involvement means focusing on being better than others, who become the reference point in evaluating your competence. That is why, when athletes are task involved, the probability to help each other in trying to improve their own performance is bigger and they tend to appreciate and easily adopt respectful attitudes and fairness [9] in competing with an opponent. On the other hand, when faced with an ego involvement orientation, the athletes may be so interested in showing their superiority towards the opponent that they might go for less moral means in reaching that goal. However, although the achievement goal model is a dichotomist one, as Duda notices [10], in reality, most of the athletes' goal orientation covers both aspects: task and ego involvement. So, it is better to speak in terms of dominant and secondary orientation in analyzing the relationship between the two and the dynamics of this relationship.

The main critic of this achievement goal approach is that it neglects the social aspects of activities. That is way a complementary concept was proposed to balance the goal orientation one: *social orientation* [11]. Competence is therefore discussed in terms of relationships with the others, implying aspects like: social recognition, cooperation, feedback, interdependency, social support, etc. Besides goals regarding performance, people can be interested solely or at the same time in these aspects regarding the social dynamics of the relationships.

3. SOCIAL COMPARISON

Sports competitions are defined by their evaluative nature, the situation of putting face to face at least two opponent parts being defined by an explicit or implicit comparison process between the actors. A competitive situation means referring to the level of expectations, to the results achieved [12] and

to the other actors involved: opponents, teammates, coaches, referee or supporters.

The social comparison mechanism [13] is based on the fact that the social actors are continuously involved in a self-evaluation process in order to place themselves on a position according to a particular set of characteristics they value. *Alter* becomes the reference point in this bidirectional process of self-defining in reference to the other and of defining the other in reference to self.

It has been noticed that, when speaking of the social comparison process, there are two general tendencies: individuals frequently prefer to use inferior terms of comparison, as a protective mechanism for the self-image and, in most cases, they chose persons that are relevant for them [14]. Therefore we cannot speak of the social actor as a neutral observer of the reality, but as subject that is actively involved in redefining it. Moreover, even the two main orientations: goal and social orientation imply a type of social comparison, placing the individual in relations with the social actors inside their field of action. If we were to look at the dimensions of goal orientation, from the comparison perspective, we can correlate them with the distinction between temporal and social comparison [15]. Thus, the task involvement of a sportsman is a type of temporal comparison, focused on whether the performance of the individual improved or deteriorated over time. Similarly, ego involvement in reaching a goal is based on a social comparison towards the opponent you want to demonstrate your superiority over. That is why, in trying to understand the coaches' representation regarding competitive situations, the analysis of their general orientation should also take into considerations if and how the comparison process is involved.

4. METHODOLOGY

For understanding the way coaches' define competitive situations and the mechanism of representation behind this image, a qualitative study was chosen as research method. The theme of the representation of competitive situations and coaches' orientation towards sports' social field was just one of the three-part interview guide, in which the role of coaches' and the social imaginary of winning and losing were also approached.

The 12 semi-structured interviews were taken between November 2010 and February 2011. The participants were all handball coaches (A1 to A12), half from the First and the other half from the Second League of the Romanian Feminine Championship. Upon consent to participate in the study, each participant was interviewed separately and the interviews lasted, on average, around fifty minutes.

Before discussing the results of the research it is important to mention the reason for choosing this sport-area and the implications it has for the data analysis. Speaking of Romanian sports for teams, handball - especially the feminine teams - was the one that achieved the highest performance in the last years in international competitions. Moreover, the game design, using the criteria proposed by Orlick [3], is the most similar to the business organizational design: cooperative means and competitive ends, which means that some findings could be tasted and transposed into the business area too. When speaking of a handball match as a competitive situation, this dichotomy: cooperative means (inside the team) and competitive ends (winning against the opponent team) should be understood in terms of a game in which one team's win means the other team's defeat.

6. FINDINGS DISCUSSION

The way coaches define competitive situation was explored at three inter-correlated levels: the general frame of handball as sport domain, the contextual level of a typical

handball game and the aspirational level of a "good handball game".

Although the activity of a coach and its team has three main frames of action: the public competition context, the training one and the extra-sportive activity component, when explicitly ask to define the competitive situations mentioned earlier, coaches use a metonymic representation mechanism. When speaking of handball as general frame of action, coaches tend to refer strictly to the contextual unit of the competitive situation: the game itself. Moreover, they narrow down the discussion to the dramaturgical aspects of sport performance [5], the public scene of the game against the opponent team. In doing so, the way they reconstruct the competitive context depends on the social actors they focus on: the teams and their game-confrontation or the public and the impact that the competitive situation has upon it.

If the focus is on the game dynamics and the relation between teams, the dominant representation of the competitive situation is related to a goal orientation perspective, expressed either in terms of zero-sum game – *"It is a game between two teams that wish to win probably one as much as the other."* (A5)- or in belligerent terms, using the metaphor of sports as war substitute [16] – *"The power of a nation is decided on the battlefield, but in peace times it is transposed on the handball field. For me is a fight in which, in the end, the best one wins; like a real battle in which you protect your field and then you go and try to conquer your enemy's one."*(A1) Both approaches outline the existence of two opposite positions: the winner and the loser as a natural outcome of a symbolic process of overpowering the opponent.

Even if the goal orientation is the dominant one in defining the competitive situation, coaches secondly refer to aspects regarding the competition as a spectacle. There are two ways in which this spectacle approach is build: a transitive one, focusing on the impact that the game has on the audience – *"When a viewer or a TV-viewer watches a game, he has to see moments which must convince him and attract them to come to the next game as*

well." (A3) or a reflexive one, focused on the way coaches live the sport performance – *"A handball game is an aggregation of feelings and emotions that you come across in live, probably, in the moment you fall in love."* (A4). These representations are both based on the emotional level of experiencing the competitive situation and highlight the intensity of these feelings.

At the other two levels of defining the competitive situation – contextual and aspirational ones - the goal orientation's domination is even greater, references to the spectacle dimension been ignored. There are two main frames of defining a handball mach: a strategic frame and a comparative one. The first one associates the game with the output of a strategic script and, therefore, the level of performance depends on the degree of following the instructions and keeping to the prepared script actions - *"A good match means following the prepared game-tactic or at least seeing that the athletes try to put in practice what the coach asked from them before the game, during the training period."(*A4). What is the most important task of the team in a competitive situation is to follow the tactical schemes that have been prepared for each game, the training activity acting as a rehearsal for the actual confrontation between the two teams.

The second frame is based on the comparison process. The design of a sport game has a comparative nature in itself. However, depending on how the coaches evaluate the opposite team and the winning chances their team has in the game, they chose the type of goal orientation they base their definition of the competitive situation upon.
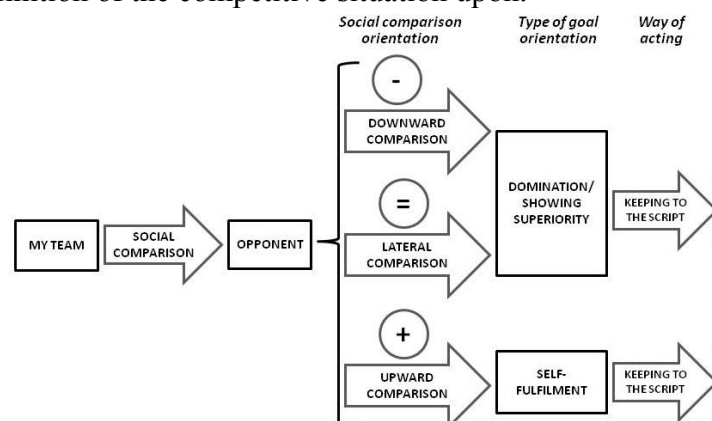
Fig. 1 Social comparison's impact on coaches' goal orientation

In speaking about a competitive context, coaches' implicitly refer to the perceived level o the two teams' value, evaluating the differences between them in terms of expected levels of performance. Thus, when faced with an equal or an inferior opponent, the coaches went for an ego involvement attitude, interested in demonstrating their team's superiority over the opponent team – *"A good game is the one during which you watch how your athletes try to put in practice what you have told them before the match and the result is a positive one."(*A6). Winning is a must-achieve outcome through which the team confirms the performance expectations and reaffirms its position within the overall hierarchy of the competition. However, in case of a better opponent, as it is perceived by the coach, the goal orientation is a task involvement one, centered on reaching the maximum potential of the team. Coaches are interested in the improvement of their team performance, compared with its past performances and its potential, although the team loses the game – *"The result is important, but depends on the opponent. If I consider that my team has engaged and did all they could to win, that is important for me in defining a game to be good or bad, not the result itself."* (A1) The poor chances of winning, based on the obvious superiority of the opponent – as it is perceived by the coach, move the focus from winning the game to team doing its best. This kind of redefinition of the goal orientation is, in fact, a protective strategy and it allows the coaches and the teams to maintain a good level of self-esteem, regardless of the final result of the game. Self-fulfillment orientation can be seen as a type of rationalisation coaches use to cope with expected defeat, a way of getting beyond the winner-loser frame and motivating the team to involve in the competitive situation of a game that is difficult or even impossible to win at a first glance.

Finally, it is important to mention that, at all levels of defining the competitive situation, even if coaches refer to social aspects of the team's dynamics, these are seen as instruments for achieving the coaches' goal, whether it is an ego or a task involvement one. The social dimension of a competitive situation is important if it serves the expected aim of the team and, therefore, is subordinated to the dominant goal orientation one.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The way coaches define the competitive situation is closely related to the type of comparison they use in evaluating their team in relation to the opponent one. In case of downward or lateral comparison, ego involvement is preferred in order to affirm their team superiority and performance. However, in case of upward comparison, the task involvement and the focused on the improvement of their own team, regardless of the game result, works as a protective strategy and a rationalizing mechanism coaches use for dealing with defeat and maintaining their self confidence. Thus, when speaking of goal orientation and coaches' attitude towards a specific competitive situation, it is important to analyze the way they perceive the performance balance between their team and the opponent one.

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