

Perceptions of Injustice among Intercollegiate Athletes: Effects of Response Type on Individual
Well-being and Perceived Team Cohesion

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Throughout an athlete's sports career they were likely under the impression that the more effort they put into their sport, the more they would get out of their sport. However, most athletes realize at some point in their athletic career that this is not always the case. When the level of effort an athlete puts into their sport does not result in what they perceive to be equal outcomes, they may feel as if the decision itself (distributive justice), the information given regarding the decision (informational justice), the process to arrive at that decision (procedural justice), or the way they were treated during the process (interpersonal justice), are unfair. Players may also evaluate their efforts and rewards in relation to another member on their team. If the effort that they are putting in is equal or greater than the effort of another player who receives a more favorable outcome, that player is likely to view the situation as unfair. When an individual perceives unfairness, they are motivated to rebalance the relationship through either behavioral reactions or cognitive changes. There are a variety of possible ways the individual might respond, such as attempting to increase outcomes, decreasing inputs, withdrawal, cognitive adjustments, and/or changing the comparative standard. These principles of evaluating perceived justice and developing a response have been captured by several foundational theories, including Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), Equity Theory (Adams, 1965), and Organizational Justice Theory (Colquitt, 2001). While these theories are often applied within an organizational context, there have been very few theory-based approaches to exploring perceptions of injustice within an athletic context.

Perceptions of injustice are important because they have certain implications at both the individual and team level. In collegiate athletics, the experience an athlete has as a member of their team plays an important role in the overall student-athlete experience. Players who perceive any aspect of their team experience to be unjust may experience additional levels of stress or decreases in wellbeing in addition to the already stressful experience of being a student-athlete (Francis and Barling, 2005). Perceptions of injustice by athletes may also affect a team's ability to win, such as by affecting levels of team cohesiveness (Turman, 2013).

The overall purpose of the study is to take a theoretical approach to identify the forms of injustice perceived by players on intercollegiate athletic teams and determine the behavioral and cognitive responses to those perceptions. Additionally, the study will explore the outcomes of perceptions of injustice in regard to individual psychological wellbeing and perceptions of team cohesion. Finally, the study will examine if the individual or team-related outcomes of perceived injustice are impacted by the type of athlete response.

Undergraduate student athletes participating in a team sport during the fall season (e.g. soccer, football) at local or regional intercollegiate institutions within the U.S. will be recruited (through communications with their coach or athletic director) to participate in an online survey. The survey will include measures of justice (Colquitt, 2001; Ambrose & Schminke, 2009), psychological wellbeing (Pejtensen, Kristensen, Borg, & Bjorner, 2010), and team cohesion (Carron et al., 1985). A survey of athlete responses to injustice will be created by the researcher because no current assessments have been found to exist. Demographic information will also be collected. Results will be analyzed and a summary will be provided to participating coaches at the level of the entire study.

The findings of this study should be beneficial in providing evidence of the practical use of theories of equity and justice within an athletic context. The results will also be beneficial for coaches in better understanding athlete perceptions of fairness and understanding the ways athletes respond to perceived unfairness. It is the hope that coaches can use this information to positively impact the athlete experience.

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