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# ROLES' DYNAMICS INSIDE A TEAM: BETWEEN FACTS AND PERCEPTION

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**Abstract.** *Focusing on the teams' dynamics, the main aim of this study is to develop a multidimensional framework for analyzing the roles' dynamics inside teams by combining three complementary axes: task-social, perceptual-factual and attraction - rejection. Based on a complex sociometric analysis, this case study revealed the presence of a contamination effect between the social and the task evaluation of teammates' positions and a strong impact of the intra-group competition level upon how members' positions in the team are evaluated. Given the similarities between the sport and the business field, the results of this study can be extrapolated beyond sports' borders.*

**Keywords:** *contamination effect, intra-group competition, social dimension, task dimension, accuracy level, individual map of choices*

## 1. Introduction

The first step in analyzing the evolution of a team is to understand its dynamics as a social unit. Even if a team undertakes the characteristics of any other social group, thus being defined by common norms, values and a reciprocal influence between its members, as Lussier & Achua noticed, „although a team is a group, not every group is a team” (apud Preda, 2006: 64). The main aspects that make the difference are the common tasks and responsibility, as well as the complementarity of its members' abilities, which describe the type of interaction and interdependency relationships between the team's members.

Analysing the dynamics of a working group, Chantal Leclerc identified three main dimensions: the instrumental one, the relational one and the

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contextual one (apud Neculau, 2007: 44). While the first dimension refers to task achievement and the aspects involved by this type of activity, the relational one focuses on what many find as the “soft” component of a group’s activity: the social dynamics, in terms of the nature and the evolution of the relationships between members. Furthermore, the contextual dimension adds the concrete framework of the group, as it exists and performs in a specific environment that influences its activity. Therefore, while the first two dimensions tend to be interested in the endogenous forces of the group, the last one takes into consideration also the exogenous factors that contribute to the group’s dynamics.

If we narrow down the focus upon sports teams, besides the aspects that have already been mentioned, the importance of the competitive framework should be added as a main factor in explaining teams’ dynamics. Moreover, even the design of the particular sports’ area in which the team performs has a great impact upon its dynamics. Thus, based on this sport design dependency, Terry Orlick identified three dominant categories of behaviour responses: competitive, individual or cooperative one (apud Weinberg & Gould, 2007: 117). The matrix of combinations corresponding to what types of means and ends orientations are being involved influences the nature and intensity of the team’s structure and processes. That is why, in analysing a handball team, the cooperative means-competitive ends design acts as a very important contextual factor in understanding the team’s dynamics. As for the value of this study beyond the sport field, there are two main arguments that can be brought into discussion: first of all the competitive profile of today’s society and the consequences of this dominant contest framework that we now find in almost every social area of life and, secondly, the “cooperative means - competitive ends” profile of sport teams, which best fits the model of the majority of organizations acting in the business (non-sport) market, which, in turn, allows us to extend the model beyond the borders of sports.

As any other group structure, a sports team is defined by a particular set of roles, based on which its members interact. On a formal level, these roles can be easily associated with the players’ positions (i.e. goalkeeper, left wing, pivot, right back, playmaker etc.), which determine the game relationships inside the team. Moreover, these formal roles have a significant importance for the team’s performance and require a clear delimitation of each athlete’s sphere of action and responsibility associated to his contribution to the overall goal achievement of the team as a unit. That is why, when speaking about the formal roles inside the team the focus is mainly on the task dimension of the team’s dynamics. Nevertheless, besides this formal role structure of a team, there is also an informal dimension of the team’s dynamics generated by the social nature of the relationships between its members. Although different, the formal and the informal levels of roles’ dynamics inside the team can be defined in terms of

complementarity and one's evolution cannot be completely independent of the other and, more important, of the team's performance. That explains why there has been a great interest in phenomena like sports teams' cohesion (Carron, 1982; Mudrack, 1989; Carron et al., 2004; Carron, Shapcott & Burke, 2007) which involves both task and social dimensions of the group's dynamics and their impact on team's performance in terms of goal achievement process.

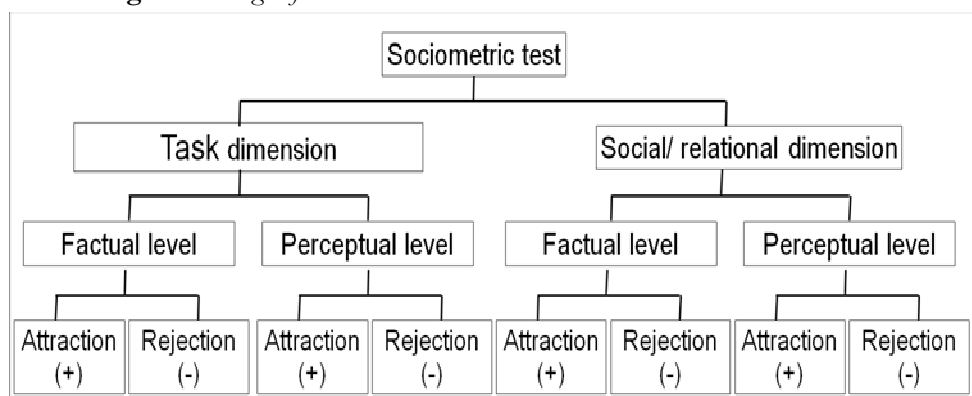
In speaking about the roles' dynamics inside a team, this study provides a framework of analysis based on an interactional approach. If most of the studies tend to focus on the facts and the processes inside the teams, outlining the players' roles "in action", the present one is interested in the backstage mechanism of representations upon these roles - that is on how players themselves perceive the role dynamics inside the team. The main premises that symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) rests on affirm that individuals act towards things or people on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to them and, moreover, these meanings themselves arise out of the social interaction that a person has with others. Re-contextualizing this continuous process of significances' social negotiation to the sports field, it can be said that the way an athlete acts inside a team depends on how he interprets and internalises his role and his teammates' roles inside the team. Furthermore, the *actual role performance* (Goffman, 1961) of an athlete is based on the way he perceives and re-defines the particular situation he experiences and thus his performance is subject to a permanent social construction. As earlier studies have already showed in discussing the problems raised by *role acceptance* or *role clarity* (Eys, Schinke & Jeffery, 2007), besides the descriptive level of analysing the role structure of a team or the discussion upon its impact on team's performance, it is important to understand the athletes' perceptions of the roles' dynamics inside the team.

Based on this relationship between athletes' sphere of social representations and their sphere of action, this study intends to provide both a research framework for the analysis of roles' dynamics inside a team, as well as a more concrete instrument that coaches or other members of the team's staff may be able to use for a better understanding of the team's evolution. In trying to identify the relation between the perceptual and the factual role configuration of the team, the study will explore both the social and the task dimension of roles' dynamics inside the team. Therefore the hypothesis that acts as the main guideline for this study follows the relations between the components of this dyad: the social representation of the role structure of the team influences the way athletes perceive the task configuration of role dynamics inside the team.

## 2. Methodological framework

The research perspective upon the roles' dynamics inside sports teams is based on a case study on a professional handball team from the Second League of the Romanian Feminine Championship. Moreover, the methodological design of the study rests on a mix-method approach that combines a sociometric analysis of group members' relationships, on both factual and perceptual level, with the observation method applied during training and competition contexts and in-depth interviews with the team's coach. The present research has a longitudinal dimension, as the study was conducted over a period of two competition seasons (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), in two waves. If we were to make a brief remark regarding the contextual aspects of the team's evolution, for a better understanding of the roles' dynamics inside the team, it is important to say that these were also the first two years of this team's existence. So, using Tuckman's model of small-group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) and adding to it the specificity of sports teams - that is the cyclicity of teams' membership from a competition season to another - the case study includes the storming and norming stages of the team in its first year of existence and competition activity, but also the first stages from its second competition year. As for the sociometric test, in order to be able to analyze the relationship between the perceptual and the factual dimensions of the roles' dynamics, the design of the research instrument was based on a two axis crossing (Figure 1): the perceptual-factual one and the attraction-rejection one.

**Figure1.** *Design of the sociometric test*



### 3. Results and discussion

There are three main dimensions that we can refer to in discussing the results of the research: the evaluation of the role's distribution on task and social level, the visibility of roles inside the team and the degree of athletes' accuracy in evaluating their own position inside the team. This balance between the two complementary perspectives: the manner in which each athlete perceives that he is seen by his colleagues and the way he himself evaluates other members' positions inside the team is, in fact, a re-contextualised form of the principles behind the classical looking glass self model (Cooley, 1902). So, what this study is focus on is the comparison between alternative perceptions of team's members on their own role and on the roles of their teammates, trying to identify convergent and divergent perspectives which, in fact, constitute the real basis of the roles' dynamics inside the team as a social construct per se.

On a descriptive level of analysis, the results of the sociometric test showed a quite different situation between the task and the social dimension in terms of the team's structure of roles on these criteria. While the task roles' structure is a centralised one, on both the positive (attraction), as well as the negative (rejection) levels of professional recognition, the team's sociogram reveals a high level of fragmentation and the lack of a relational leader inside the team. As the team's coach pointed out when discussing the climate inside the team: *"What this team lacks of is the presence of a hen that could gather its chickens around it."* However, these micro-groups that emerge on the social dimension of the team's dynamics are strongly correlated with the previous team's structures that the athletes came from. Thus, based on the existence of previous common experiences as teammates in other teams, the tendency is to build the social structure of the new team around these pre-existing ones. The main implication of this fact are strongly correlated with the selection/recruiting criteria of team members, as their professional history becomes relevant not only on the individual level, but, more important, on the relational level of the team. Despite the nature of their previous relationship with former teammates, in the first stages of their integration in a new team, athletes tend to rest upon people they already knew and shared experiences with.

Besides this macro-level of team's structure on the task and social dimension, there is the micro-level of dyads of choices that outlines another interesting psychosocial phenomenon of "contamination". This contamination effect between the social preferences and the task evaluations of the team's members seems to be stronger on the perceptual level, where the likes and dislikes perceived by a player tend to be extrapolated on the task performance evaluation too and, so, 1 of 2 choices from the social and task dimensions' registers mirror each other (Table 1). The contamination effect index was

calculated as the ratio between how many mentions on social dimension are the same as the ones on task dimension and the maximum number of identical choices that could have been made on both dimensions.

**Table 1.** *Contamination effect index*

Correlation between attraction and rejection registers		Factual level			Perceptual level			Integrated results
		Attraction (+)	Rejection (-)	Factual total	Attraction (+)	Rejection (-)	Perceptual total	Sum factual & perceptual
Wave 1: 2008-2009	Team index	0.28	0.44	0.36	0.67	0.51	0.59	0.47
Wave 2: 2009-2010	Team index	0.25	0.46	0.35	0.71	0.42	0.56	0.46

The lower degree of choices reflection on the positive register on the factual level of choices (1 out of 4) can be explained by the fact that on the positive level of the task dimension there are two undeniable task leaders that concentrate most of their teammates choices. This situation is based on their known competition track record as their performances and experience is far better than the rest of their teammates and leaves little room for subjective evaluation. We can thus conclude that, if there are not clear performance indicators to sustain a significant difference of professional value between the members of a team, a contamination effect between the social and the task evaluation of the roles' dynamics inside the team could arise. So, the hypothesis that affirmed the existence of a strong correlation between the social representation and the task configuration of roles' dynamics inside a team has been confirmed. As many other studies, both from psychological as well as from sociological perspective, had already shown, the social component of a team tends to be more important in understanding the roles' dynamics than the formal task dimension of the group.

Another important aspect regarding the relation between the task and the social preferences is related to the degree of internal competition between athletes playing the same position/role. Hence, when the differences of value between athletes that have the same playing position in the team (i.e. 2 or 3 left wings) are smaller, there is a tendency of athletes to underestimate their teammates' positions on the task dimension and to place them on the rejection list on the social one. The intra-group competition is one of the most frequent causes of interpersonal conflict in a working group (Cismaru, 2008: 67) as the teammate relation is redefined in terms of internal competition for the same symbolic resources and status recognition. So, when athletes find themselves in a position of intra-group competition, the teammate he competes against

becomes the opponent he dislikes and, furthermore, the social comparison process focuses first of all upon his opponent weaknesses on the task dimension. This social comparison mechanism (Festinger, 1954) is based on the fact that the individuals 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. 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 (Strahan, Wilson, Cressman & Buote, 2006). 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. That is why, if we were to look at the roles' dynamics inside the team in this context of tight intra-group competition for athletes' status recognition, teammates playing the same position become the relevant terms of social comparison and the tendency to underestimate their value on task dimension acts as a way of building this inferiority frame of the comparison in order for the athletes to maintain their self-image, sustaining the conclusions of previous studies regarding the social comparison process.

In discussing the visibility of an athlete inside the team, there are two main observation to be made, base on the visibility index (as the ratio between the maximum number of possible choices and the total number of actual mentions of a person on all dimensions and levels): the players with the highest visibility inside the team are also the ones with the highest rejection level on task or social dimension and newcomers in the team (as the results of the second research wave show) tend to have a lower visibility rate inside the team. Therefore, it could be said that the rejection orientation towards a person and the time dimension of a player's participation in the team's activity have a strong influence in determining one's visibility inside the team. On a more general level, the visibility of a person inside a work group, despite the activity area, seems to be correlated with the intensity of colleagues' attitude towards him. That is why, the rejection frame and the time frame, as working history, two indicators for the intensity of the interpersonal relationship, can be used as predictors for one's visibility level inside a team.

The most relevant indicator for the analysis of the relation between the factual and the perceptual level of roles' dynamics is probably the accuracy level of players' evaluation of their own position inside the team. In exploring this aspect, the accuracy index was built on the comparison of the athlete's perception regarding his teammates' evaluations of his position and the actual choices of his team's members.



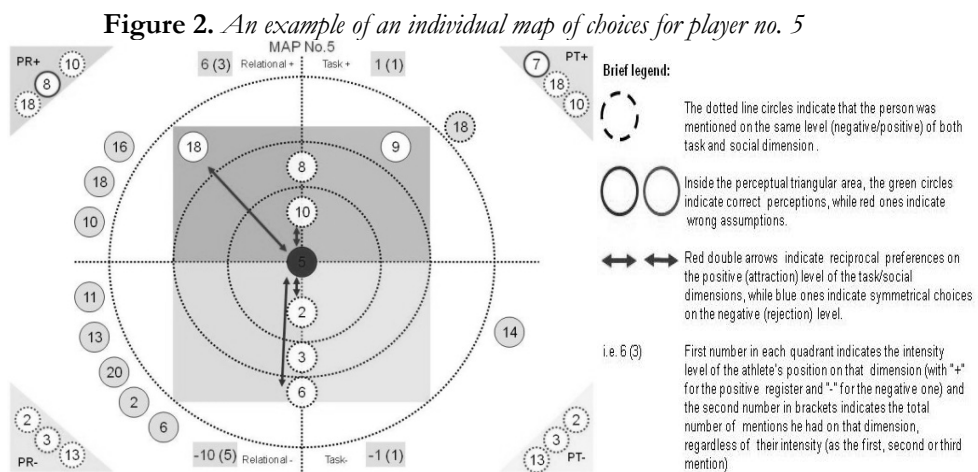
**Table 2.** *Accuracy index of self-position inside the team*

Accuracy of self-position inside the team		Task dimension			Social dimension			Integrated results
		Attraction (+)	Rejection (-)	Task total	Attraction (+)	Rejection (-)	Social total	Sum task & social
Wave 1: 2008-2009	Team index	0.26	0.19	0.23	0.67	0.21	0.44	0.33
Wave 2: 2009-2010	Team index	0.33	0.23	0.28	0.56	0.21	0.39	0.33

As the results showed (Table 2), the accuracy level of knowing their own position inside the team is greatest on the attraction level of the social dimension. One of the factors that contribute to this symmetry of relational dyads is the explicit recognition of relational preferences between athletes, as it is well known that people tend to easily express and admit their positive attitudes and feeling towards others compared with the more implicit dimension of the negative ones. Looking at the evolution of the accuracy levels from a season to another, the increase in accuracy on the task dimension can be explained by the increase in knowledge about the other team's members and the crystallization of a team history and role structure. Athletes had time to demonstrate and evaluate each other's abilities and contributions to the team's performance in a comparative way and that is why their evaluations tend to be more convergent. On the other hand, the decrease in accuracy on the attraction level of the social dimension may be related to the weakening of the pre-team relational structures between the athletes. If during the first research wave the mentions on the social dimension were made based on a minimum common activity of the athletes as a team, which made the choices be oriented mainly to the teammates that shared a previous team experience, in the second research wave the relationships developed inside the team diminished the predictability of "we have known each other before" principle applied in the first wave. So, time, as the main factor that influences the level of interpersonal knowledge, from the perspective of common history and shared experiences, is strongly correlated with the accuracy level of individuals' representation upon their own position inside the team.

As it was mentioned earlier, besides these aspects regarding the analysis of the team on the two axes of task and social, factual and perceptual roles' dynamics, a second aim of this case study was to develop a concrete framework that coaches themselves could use for a better understanding of their teams' evolution. The main criteria that were taken into account in this process were a friendly visual representation, which had to respond to coaches' need for simple and little time consuming tool, and, secondly, an outcome that could integrate all the components of this multidimensional level. Moreover, this besides its

theoretical value, this had to be a practical tool that could work on both individual as well as group level, reflecting the relational framework of roles' dynamics and allowing comparison between team's members positions and attitudes. This is how, following the theoretical guidelines of the multidimensional model of group dynamics, but also the practical requirements of a useful tool for practitioners (coaches or teams' managers in general) a graphic representation of athletes' position inside the team was developed. What can be called the "individual map of choices" (Figure 2) allows a visual representation of the relation between the factual and perceptual aspects of a player position inside the team, on both positive and negative levels of task and social dimensions.



Graphic elements (colour codes, line types, arrows and position) and numeric ones are used to represent both the type of representation and attitude that individuals express as well as their intensity and correlation with his teammates representation and attitude. Using the individual as the centre of this "map of choices", we can get an image of the role's dynamics inside a team by putting together three complementary perspectives: the individual representation of his teammates' positions, the individual representation of his own position and the individual position from his teammates' point of view. Moreover, the perceptual corners of choices, on both task and social dimension, as strong indicators of the accuracy level of individuals knowing their position inside a team can also be used as a sign of possible conflict sources and a complementary element that can be integrated in the study of *role clarity* (Eys, Schinke & Jeffery, 2007). However, as it was already mentioned, the value and applicability of this tool goes beyond the sport area and can be used as managerial tool for all sorts of working groups in the organizational field.

#### 4. Conclusions

Focusing on the roles' dynamics inside a new formed professional handball team, this case study confirms the hypothesis that there is a strong correlation between the factual and the perceptual levels of task and social group's dimensions. The results revealed the emergence of a contamination effect between the social evaluation of the members' positions inside the team and the task evaluation of their positions at the group level, based on an extrapolation process of the relational preferences to the task level. Another key finding is that, if the differences between athletes' individual performance are not significant - in terms of objective indicators of performance, the level of intra-group competition has a direct impact on how other group members' positions in the team are evaluated. Moreover, in comparing the manner in which each athlete perceives that he is seen by his colleagues and the way he actually is evaluated by his teammates, it can be said that the accuracy level of perception is higher on the positive (attraction) dimension and gradually increases from a competition season to another as the common experience of the team's members and their familiarity with each other increases in time.

Understanding the cycle of a team's evolution from the perspective of its roles' dynamics is an important resource for a coach who is trying to cope with the permanent balance between individual and group performance. Moreover, the multidimensional model of roles' dynamics that had been developed for this study, which, integrates three levels of analysis: task versus social, factual versus perceptual, attraction (positive attitude) versus rejection (negative attitude) and its corollary tool – the “individual map of choices” – can be extended beyond the sport framework, due to the similarity between the “cooperative means - competitive ends” profile of sport teams and business organization and the competitive profile of both sport and business field. Thus, identifying the key-roles inside a team and their dynamics can facilitate both communication and task achievement for the group's members, which strengthens the need and value of developing this research area through other similar studies.

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