

# Do Athletes Perceive Themselves to be Role Models for Youngsters? A Multilevel Analysis

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## Aim

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not elite athletes perceive themselves as role models and to explore what individual and country-level variables are associated with this perception.

## Theoretical Background and Literature Review

This manuscript builds upon the role modelling concept and theories. In short, among governments and public it is taken for granted that elite athletes are role models and that they have a correspondingly positive impact upon youngsters to activate them towards frequent sport participation (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). However, there is little academic evidence to support this causal link (Payne, Reynolds, Brown, & Fleming, 2003). The available studies confirm that under certain conditions elite athletes can have a motivational effect on already active sport participants (e.g., Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014). Additionally, Lines (2001) found that the strength and scope of the motivational effect are also determined by the athletes' interpretation of being a role model. Surprisingly, there is little insight into if athletes perceive they are a role model and what individual and country-level variables are associated with this perception.

## Research Design and Data Analysis

Data were collected from elite athletes in 14 countries by a local research partner in each country in 2012 (n=3,142). The data were collected during the Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) 2.0 study in 2012 (De Bosscher et al., 2015). Athletes were asked if they perceive themselves as an inspiring role model; if, and in what ways, personal sporting heroes were influential in their sporting career. Multi-level modelling was applied as hierarchical structured data at the individual level (attitudes of athletes and their socio-demographics) and the country level (total number of medals or culture) was prevalent. The binary item 'Do you see yourself as a role model that inspires young sports people?' served as dependent variable. The underlying assumption is that structural level effects can influence the individual's perception.

## Results and Discussion

Eighty-five percent of the athletes perceive themselves as a role model. Moreover, 70% of the athletes stated that, as a young talent, they have been inspired by elite athletes themselves. Using multi-level modeling, initially an intercept-only (or null) model (a model without any independent variables) is estimated. This is compared to a null, single-level model to test the significance of event effects by means of a likelihood ratio (LR) test. The LR test is significant and reveals that the country level variables are associated with an athlete's perception of being a role model. The results of the full model ( $\chi^2=51.16$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ) suggest that at the individual level, perceived recognition ( $\beta=.135$ ), financial support ( $\beta=.503$ ), practicing individual sports ( $\beta=1.075$ ), having reached top 3 in the world in their discipline ( $\beta=.504$ ), having been inspired by other elite athletes as a young talent ( $\beta=.547$ ) and being a fulltime athlete ( $\beta=.501$ ) have a significant positive association with an athletes' perception of being a role model. At the country level, the total number of medals ( $\beta=-.013$ ) and uncertainty

avoidance ( $\beta = -.088$ ) have a significant negative association with being a role model, while power distance ( $\beta = .134$ ) was positively correlated. Accordingly, if sport policy makers want to capitalize on the motivational effects of athletes as role models, they need to consider if their policies can address these variables.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Several theories on sport participation are built upon the concept that athletes are role models (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Surprisingly, without consideration whether or not athletes recognise this role for themselves. This paper thereby contributes to the literature on athletes as role models—both theoretically and empirically. Namely, it was addressed whether athletes perceive they are a role model and examines what individual and country-level variables are associated with this perception. The analysis indicates that most elite athletes indeed perceive themselves as an inspiring role model for today's youngsters. A theoretical contribution of this paper lies in the application of both individual and country characteristics of the responding athletes. The methodological contribution is the use of adequate data and sophisticated statistical methods for the analysis of the trickle-down effect as requested by Lyle (2009). Based on the study results, it could be argued that nations could benefit from becoming more strategic in leveraging athletes as role models within talent development programmes.

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