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Referents and Expectations: A Qualitative Case Study of Student-Athletes' Psychological Contracts

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Prior research indicated student-athletes develop perceived exchange agreements with their coaches, known as psychological contracts. Although scholarship has established that these perceived agreements influence student-athletes' attitudes toward their coach, team, and university, little is known about the perceived obligations that compose student-athletes' psychological contracts. A case study was conducted using fifteen student-athletes from a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I university. Student-athletes were interviewed using guidelines of the consensual qualitative research protocol. A thematic analysis revealed student-athletes' develop expectations regarding athletic and student experiences, including prospects for their athletic and academic development, university policies, and life balance. Thematic analysis also indicated student-athletes' expectations are influenced by a number of individuals both within and outside the campus community. Recommendations for future scholarship, including the need for a student-athlete psychological contract questionnaire are discussed.

Keywords: student-athletes; psychological contracts; coaches

Psychological contracts are defined as, “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). Much of the psychological contract literature comes from employee/employer relationships, however, scholars attempting to better understand relations between coaches and intercollegiate student-athletes have adopted the theory as framework for their explorations (Antunes de Campos, 1994; Barnhill, Czekanski, & Turner, 2013; Barnhill & Turner, 2013, 2014, 2015; Rezaia & Gurney, 2016). These studies have demonstrated that student-athletes do form psychological contracts with their coaches (Antunes de Campos, 1994). Furthermore, they demonstrated that outcomes related to student-athletes’ perceptions of their coaches’ fulfillment or breach of the psychological contract impact important attitudes and behaviors including team commitment, trust, and transfer intentions (Barnhill et al., 2013; Barnhill & Turner, 2013, 2014; Rezaia & Gurney, 2016).

Although psychological contracts are a factor influencing student-athletes’ relations with their coaches, it remains unclear what terms are contained within the exchange agreement or how they are formed (Rezaia & Gurney, 2016). Research exploring psychological contracts between student-athletes and coaches has relied on scales developed for populations that are substantially different from the target population. This has raised issues for scholars and prompted consistent recognition as a significant limitation within the literature (Barnhill & Turner, 2013; Rezaia & Gurney, 2016).

Psychological contract terms are often related to factors unique to the organizational setting in which they are formed (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Building on foundational literature and empirical studies from other organizational settings, it can be assumed student-athletes’ psychological contracts begin forming during the recruitment process, but remain fluid throughout the term of the relationship (De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003; Eilam-Shamir & Yaakobi, 2014; Rousseau, 1995, 2001; Scholarios, Lockyer, & Johnson, 2003). For student-athletes, this indicates the psychological contract formation process begins while still enrolled in high school as coaches from multiple schools may attempt to influence their commitment decision. After the student-athlete enrolls, faculty, athletic personnel, and others may influence psychological contract formation as more information is provided to the individual.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) GOALS study found that the presence of certain head coaches can influence student-athletes in their school choice decision (Paskus & Bell, 2016). However, the GOALS study may be misleading as assistant coaches may be the lead recruiter capable of influencing student-athletes’ expectations regarding athletic and academic opportunities at their institution. Seifried (2009) proposed that the student-athlete school choice decision is a multi-step process where coaches have numerous opportunities to influence decisions, arguing effective recruiters develop better relationships with recruits. Effective recruiters use political skill to read student-athletes and adjust their approach, insuring their efforts are influential on the decision-making process (Magnusen, Mondello, Kim, & Ferris, 2011). Coaches’ reputations also play a critical role in their ability to influence decisions. Coaches who are deemed by recruits to have good reputations with respect to character and integrity are more influential than others (Magnusen, McAllister, Kim, Perrew, & Ferris, 2017).

For a majority of the student-athletes in the GOALS study, other athletic and academic factors were also noted as more influential than the head coach (Paskus & Bell, 2016). For

instance, expectations, especially those related to academics and social experiences can affect commitment decisions (Klenosky, Templin, & Troutman, 2001). More specifically, studies have found factors including degree programs, career opportunities, school location, future teammates, and academic reputation of faculty to also be significant (Andrew, Martinez, & Flavell, 2016; Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015; Gabert, Hale, & Montalvo, 1999; Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan, 2006). These studies lend support to the notion that student-athletes may have psychological contracts that are broader in scope than what has been previously researched. Furthermore, the student-athlete school choice decision and experience afterward are a product of all referents that affected school choice or maintain interactions on-campus after enrollment.

Theoretical and empirical scholarship supports psychological contracts as broad based implied social exchange relationships between an individual and an organization, with some actors responsible for transmitting organizational messages (Rousseau, 1995, 2004; Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011). Intercollegiate athletic teams function as organizations (Chelladurai, 2009), but they are a sub-organization of the larger athletic department and school. Coaches serve as a primary agent on the school's behalf, but the aforementioned studies on student-athletes' school choice decisions imply other referent sources may be influential. This would be congruent with the broader range of academic, athletic, and social reasons that influence student-athletes, possibly indicating a comprehensive psychological contract with the university.

The purpose of this case study was to explore gaps in knowledge regarding student-athletes' psychological contracts. Using qualitative methods recommended for under-researched populations (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998) and guided by psychological contract dimensions outlined by Freese, Schalk, and Croon (2008), this case study explores expectations that may become part of student-athletes' psychological contracts with their academic institution. In addition, this study examined the role of referents, both within and outside of the school's control, on student-athletes' expectations.

Psychological Contracts

Psychological contracts allow parties to engage in complex, fluid relationships that expand beyond the constraints of a traditional contract (Rousseau, 1995). For the individual, the psychological contract provides a schema through which organizational actions can be analyzed and interpreted within the broader context of the relationship (Chaudhry, Coyle-Shapiro, & Wayne, 2010; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rousseau, 2001; Sherman & Morley, 2015). Although the construct has been reconceptualized and adapted by scholars to account for intricacies of modern relationships (i.e. Rousseau, 1995), psychological contract research can be traced to studies examining interactions between industrial workers and managers in the mid-20th (Argyris, 1960; Levinson, Price, Munden, & Solley, 1962).

The central tenet of psychological contract theory focuses on the balance of outcomes between the individual and organization (Rousseau, 1995). Grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), psychological contracts are based on an individual's beliefs the organization is seeking an equilibrium between what is given and received between the parties. If an individual perceives an imbalance, they will seek to reestablish equilibrium by altering their attitudinal and behavioral outputs in a positive or negative manner (Cassar & Briner, 2011; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). Additional psychological contract literature focuses heavily on outcomes of psychological contract breach. Psychological contract breach occurs when an individual perceives the organization has

delivered less than its obligations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Across organizational contexts, psychological contract breach has been indicated to negatively affective and behavioral outcomes of organizational members (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007).

Psychological Contracts of Student-Athletes

Antunes de Campos (1994) was the first to explore psychological contracts of student-athletes. Using a sample of women's soccer players and coaches from four NCAA Division I schools, the study established that student-athletes do form psychological contract expectations. Furthermore, the expectations of respondents were generally influenced by coaches, leading student-athletes at different schools to develop unique expectations. Despite the influence of coaches among study participants, coaches in the study had poor understanding of their student-athletes' psychological contracts, often downplaying expectations student-athletes believed were important. Antunes de Campos's (1994) study did not focus on expectations of experiences beyond athletics.

Barnhill and colleagues (2013) confirmed Antunes de Campos's (1994) study using a large sample of male and female student-athletes, participating across a number of non-revenue producing sports at one NCAA Division I university. The study indicated that student-athletes' formed psychological contracts that include relational and transactional expectations. More importantly, Barnhill et al. (2013) found perceptions of breach, such as beliefs that coaches were not providing the level of training promised during recruitment, which negatively altered student-athletes' affective commitment to their teams and trust in their coaches. Breach perceptions also increased intentions to transfer among the study participants.

Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) conducted larger studies across multiple NCAA Division I and Division II institutions. Using a global scale adapted from Robinson and Morrison (2000) to measure psychological contract breach, the studies found breach perceptions were negatively related to student-athletes' cognitive trust in their coaches, affective and normative commitment to their teams, and positively related to transfer intentions. Psychological contract breach was also a predictor of violation, a distressed emotional state commonly included in psychological contract models (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Feelings of violation among the student-athletes in Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) acted as a mediator between psychological contract breach and the other affective variables in the models.

The research of Antunes de Campos (1994), Barnhill et al. (2013), and Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) support psychological contract theory as a valid tool for examining relations between coaches and student-athletes, but their results also acknowledge and/or present gaps in the literature. For instance, Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) used a global scale adapted from Robinson and Morrison (2000). The scale has been deemed valid for psychological contract measurements (Freese & Schalk, 2008), but cannot be used to determine the content or outcomes based on specific exchange expectations. Barnhill et al. (2013) used a scaled adapted from Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2000) that classified items into relational or transactional-based expectations. Language in the scale is non-specific so that items may be applied across settings. However, Barnhill et al. (2013) noted reliability issues in their research as items related to training could not be classified as relational or transactional based on responses in the sample.

Scales specific to sample populations are recommended within psychological contract literature (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Yet, scholars using population specific scales have demonstrated that different expectations are related to unique outcomes (Bunderson, 2001). This

prompted Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) to note that the inability to measure specific content limited the usefulness of their findings. Scholars researching other populations also relied on the Tilburg Psychological Contract Questionnaire (TPCQ) (Freese & Schalk, 1997; Freese et al., 2008), which dissects expectations into six dimensions – job content (challenging, interesting work), career development (opportunity to develop new skills), social atmosphere (pleasant interaction with colleagues), organizational policy (fair and transparent policies), work-life balance (acknowledgement of life circumstances outside of the organization), and rewards (financial rewards and security based on performance). The TPCQ has proven to be a useful and valid when a population specific instrument is unavailable (see Freese & Schalk, 2008; Lub, Bal, Blomme, & Schalk, 2016; Sonnenberg & van Zijderveld, 2015; Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014). However, many of the TPCQ's items were designed for an employee/employer relationship and are not adaptable to the student-athlete population.

In the absence of a content specific scale, Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998) recommended qualitative methodologies until psychological contract dimensions of the target population can be established. The findings of Barnhill et al. (2013) and Barnhill and Turner (2013, 2014) that psychological contract breach negatively affected attitudinal outcomes of student-athletes were congruent with meta-analyses of the psychological contract literature (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van Der Velde, 2008; Zhao et al., 2007). However, other psychological contract studies utilizing student-athletes from the United States and abroad indicated less consistency in-terms of behavioral outcomes. Barnhill and Turner (2015) found perceptions of psychological contract breach did not impact NCAA student-athletes' perceptions of their own in-role and extra-role behaviors. Similar results were reported from a sample of collegiate athletes in South Africa (Deas & Linde, 2013). These results are inconsistent with the majority of psychological contract research, which support psychological contracts as predictors of behavioral outcomes (Zhao et al., 2007). Conversely, a sample of collegiate athletes in Canada indicated psychological contract fulfillment resulted in perceptions of better in-role performance and greater satisfaction (Rezania & Gurney, 2016). These inconsistencies indicate potential gaps in knowledge regarding psychological contract development and dimensions for student-athletes.

Funded by the NCAA, the GOALS study collected data from over 21,000 student-athletes across all NCAA divisions (Paskus & Bell, 2016). The study revealed that a majority of student-athletes were influenced by academics offered at their school of choice, and many were influenced by the school's location and social activities. The GOALS study also revealed that many student-athletes were frustrated by the amount of time they had to spend on sport compared to academic and social activities. These findings indicate possible psychological contract expectations or dimensions beyond those related to athletics.

Research exploring school choice factors of student-athletes also indicates expectations that support broad based, more comprehensive psychological contracts than previously included in the literature. Goss et al. (2006) studied a sample of student-athletes at small colleges and universities. Their results indicated the presence of degree programs were most important in the selection process. Pauline (2010) examined lacrosse players at Division I, II, and III found career opportunities afforded by a degree from the school and academic reputation were the most influential choice factors. Judson et al. (2004) examined student-athletes at two Division I universities participating across a number of sports. They found academic reputation, faculty quality, and university reputation were important for student-athletes. Andrew et al. (2016) surveyed student-athletes and a Division I institution finding academic reputation was a significant factor in school choice. Finally, Czekanski and Barnhill (2015) found school location

and comfort with teammates were vital factors for student-athletes at a mid-sized Division I university. Collectively, these studies support speculation that student-athletes may have psychological contract terms that are broader in scope than addressed in previous studies. Moreover, Research Question 1 (RQ1) was proposed.

RQ1: What are student-athlete's expectations for their collegiate experience?

Psychological Contract Development

Psychological contracts are developed during periods of sensemaking in which individuals seek to clarify vague, confusing, or unclear messages received from their organization (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012). Sensemaking is aided by mental models known as schemas allowing to interpret and organize information relevant to the organizational context (Stein, 1992). An individual's schema is based on their experiences, beliefs, biases, and cognitions that form their own unique view of their surroundings and inform decision-making (Rousseau, 2001; Stein, 1992). In established, stable relationships, psychological contracts serve as schemas through which new information is interpreted (Chaudhry et al., 2010; Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rousseau, 2001; Sherman & Morley, 2015).

Psychological contract formation begins during recruitment and continues throughout the early stages of the formal relationship (De Vos et al., 2003; De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2005; De Vos & Freese, 2011; Rousseau, 2001; Tomprou & Nikolaou, 2011). Individuals seek to associate with organizations aligned with their own ethics and ambitions. Information sought during early sensemaking periods often regards organizational culture and development opportunities (De Vos et al., 2005). Without a fully developed psychological contract schema, individuals rely on prior experiences and other referents to aid in interpreting information received from organizational sources (Lee, Liu, Rousseau, Hui, & Chen, 2011; Sherman & Morley, 2015). Psychological contracts may continue to evolve after the relationship is formalized if the individual acquires new information that is interpreted to alter the exchange agreement (Rousseau, 2004). For student-athletes, psychological contracts form during recruitment and continue to evolve throughout the life of their relationship with their school.

Research examining school-choice indicates coaches are important referents to student-athletes during the recruiting process. A qualitative study using a sample of Division I football players found coaches were effective in influencing expectations related to sport (i.e. improvement, playing time), however friends and academic reputation of the university related to expectations of enjoyment and career options (Klenosky et al., 2001). Similarly, Gabert et al. (1999) studied a sample of student-athletes from all NCAA levels of competition and found both female and student-athletes were most influenced in their school decision by the team head coach. Later Seifried (2009) and Magnusen et al. (2011) proposed coaches who possess political skill can read the desires of the student-athlete and adjust their tactics accordingly through the recruiting process. This may be easier for coaches that student-athletes perceive to have more integrity and better character than others with whom they are interacting (Magnusen et al., 2017).

Coaches do play an important role in forming student-athletes' expectations during recruitment and throughout their time on-campus (Paskus & Bell, 2016). However, the GOALS study noted that student-athletes form relationships with others in the campus community including faculty, athletic department administrators, and their teammates (Paskus & Bell, 2016).

This is congruent with other studies that have shown teammates (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015; Judson, Aurand, & Karlovsky, 2007) and faculty (Weiss & Robinson, 2013) are influential in student-athletes' perceptions of their experience. Psychological contract theory thus emphasizes that the perceived exchange relationship is between the individual and whole organization (Guest, 1998; Guest & Conway, 2002; Rousseau, 1995, 2004). Rousseau's (1995) seminal work emphasized some additional secondary referents, both within and outside the organization able to influence and aid the interpretation of information received from primary sources. Coaches may discuss and share information regarding team atmosphere, academics, and social atmosphere on campus, yet it is likely current and potential student-athletes will reach out to others to help interpret information received or get additional data from others. Information regarding coaching practices, team atmosphere, and campus culture may be seen as sensitive by some recruits. Individuals seeking information that is considered sensitive or to have high social costs is often sought from sources other than primary contract makers (Sias & Wyers, 2001; Teboul, 1995).

Prior psychological contract research on student-athletes has been narrowly focused on the team and coach (Barnhill et al., 2013; Barnhill & Turner, 2013, 2014, 2015; Rezanian & Gurney, 2016), potentially missing critical data regarding the role of other referents on the exchange relationship. Based on the literature, research question two (RQ2) was developed.

RQ2: Who or what serve as referents for student-athletes' psychological contracts?

Method

Research Setting

Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998) advocated for qualitative methods when existing scales are not applicable to the sample population. Although the TPCQ (Freese et al., 2008) is frequently used to explore psychological contract expectations, it was designed to examine employee/employer relationships. Many of the items and several of the domains lack validity in the student-athlete/university setting. To address this issue, this study used a collective case study design to gather multiple perspectives from student-athletes on their psychological contract expectations and associated referents. Collective case study designs use multiple data points (i.e. respondents) to collect narratives espousing perspectives of a phenomenon or occurrence within a bounded setting (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007; Yin, 2003). Case study methods are preferred to other qualitative methods when multiple perspectives will aid in the understanding of a specified theory (Creswell et al., 2007).

As the goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of psychological contract expectations of student-athletes, as well as influential referent information sources during and after recruitment, participants were sought who had experienced recruiting and life as a student-athlete at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institution. Data collection was conducted at large, public, NCAA Division I institution. The institution was chosen because of its similarities to institutions examined in prior student-athlete psychological contract studies (i.e. Barnhill et al., 2013; Barnhill & Turner 2013, 2014).

Choosing students at a single institution created a bounded setting as recommended by Yin (2003) and Creswell et al. (2007). Although participants would have different perspectives and experiences based on sport, coaches, and teammates, the bounded setting insured consistencies related to institutional factors. Following guidelines approved by the governing

institutional review board, emails were sent to student-athletes who had been recruited to the university. Emails were only sent to student-athletes who had completed at least one academic year on campus. This control further bounded the sample, insuring participants had adequate experience to answer questions from the researchers. The institutional review prohibited collection of academic major and sport of the student-athlete due to concerns over anonymity of participants. It can be reported that respondents participated in both revenue and non-revenue sports. Demographics of the sample are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics

Variable	N
Gender	
Female	8
Male	7
Athletic Experience	
Senior	9
Junior	5
Sophomore	1
Sport Type	
Revenue Producing	4
Non-Revenue	11

Framework

Interviews were conducted in a private, casual setting on campus following the Consensual Qualitative Research Protocol (CQR) (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The CQR advocates for conducting open-ended interviews with ten to 15 subjects, using less than eight scripted, open-ended questions. This format allows subjects freedom to share their experiences without being fatigued with questions. To create clarity in the narrative, researchers are encouraged to ask follow-up questions (Hill et al., 2005). Only the interviewee and the interviewers were present in the room. Each interview was recorded for later transcription.

To maintain coherence with the CQR protocol, the number of participants was limited to 15. Four scripted questions were drafted. Participants were asked what their expectations for their collegiate experiences were prior to their first day on campus and how those expectations developed. Participants were then asked if new expectations developed after arriving on campus and how those expectations developed. The term “expectation” was utilized instead of promise or obligation to allow participants more leeway to discuss their experiences (Dadi, 2012). Per the CQR protocol, interviewers asked probing follow-up questions to gain elaboration of clarification when needed (Hill et al., 2005, 1997). For example, if an interviewee stated that they expected life as a college athlete would be difficult, interviewers follow up with, “What did you think would be difficult about the experience? Why did you think it would be difficult?”

Probing questions were asked until the interviewer believed all relevant details had been addressed. The range of interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a graduate student compensated for their assistance. To insure accuracy of the transcription, an independent faculty member reviewed the transcription. Three researchers participated in coding via a multi-step process. Prior to the first round of coding, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and then met to discuss uniformity of procedures. During the meeting, general coding categories were established for the initial round. For expectations, it was decided content would be categorized as athletically related, academically related, or “other” related (e.g., social) for expectations that did not fit the defined groups. Mentions of referent information sources were to be sorted into four broad groups; coaches, family and friends, teammates, and other.

Researchers met for a second time after the initial round of coding. Following guidelines of the CQR protocol, disagreements over content were discussed until consensus was reached (Hill et al., 2005, 1997). Contextual statements within the transcripts were reviewed to aid in categorization. Next, general dimensions, outlined in the results section were defined. Dimensions were defined based on the initial analysis with guidance from Freese et al. (2008). Similarly, it was determined that categorizations of referents was prohibitive as discrepancies in respondent backgrounds and experiences at the university made classification difficult. It was decided that specific referents would be reported. Following the second meeting, another round of independent coding was conducted using QDA Data Miner software for thematic analysis.

Because each researcher conducted their analysis independently, interrater reliability was calculated for the final round of coding. Guetzkow’s U (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984) was used to examine differences between coders in terms of coded units in a body of data. Values below 0.1 are considered very high agreement. Very high agreement was indicated amongst all coders (Coders 1 and 2 = .06; Coders 1 and 3 = .05; Coders 2 and 3 = .09). Cohen’s kappa was conducted to examine interrater reliability with regards to identifying content into the defined dimensions (Howell, 1992). Values above 0.75 are considered very high agreement (Fleiss, 1981). Cohen’s kappa values indicated very high agreement among all researchers (Coders 1 and 2, $\kappa = .83$; Coders 1 and 3, $\kappa = .89$; Coders 2 and 3, $\kappa = .78$).

Results

Thematic analysis revealed eight expectations dimensions within responses from the participants (see Table 2). Intercollegiate athletic eligibility is limited to four seasons, limiting long-term advancement opportunities beyond improving one’s role on the team. However, two unique themes were identified related to skill development.

Athletic Development

Athletic development was defined as comments related to desires to receive training or to improve one’s athletic skills. Athletic development was discussed by eight ($n = 8$, 53.3%) participants. Many statements made by participants were similar to that of SA 2 who said, “My expectations were to get better [at my sport]. I was going to be stronger and faster.” No student-athletes in our sample discussed opportunities to play sports after college. Instead, comments were focused on intrinsic mastery of one’s sport.

Academic Development

Academic development was defined as comments related to expectations of the institution to aid in the achievement of academic goals. Eleven ($n = 11$, 73.3%) participants discussed academic development expectations. Some had expectations for what they wanted out of their education before they entered college. SA 6 stated, "I wanted to go to PT school after I graduate. [Student's major] is supposed to prepare you for PT school. I expected my classes to prepare me, but I am not sure they have." Others indicated that they had little focus initially on academic development expectations, but expectations grew once on campus. SA 2 stated, "My academic goals are now more important than my athletic goals. Sport is no longer my whole life. I expect my classes to prepare me for what comes after athletics. My major is my future." Unlike athletic development, academic development statements were future focused, related to the school's duty to prepare one for life after college.

Athlete Role Content

Student-athletes participating in the study discussed expectations related to their role as an athlete on their team. Expectations relating structure and content of team participation were classified as athlete role content. Many expressed expectations that being a collegiate athlete would include more practice and training than to which they were previously accustomed. SA 11 stated, "Compared to high school, I expected college athletics to be more professional. The amount of work to be more similar to that of professional athletes." Others indicated they had expectations that there would more work but were unclear on what that entailed when they arrived. SA 1 stated, "I knew it was going to be hard work in practice. I talked to college athletes when I was in high school. They told me practices were more serious than in high school. I was still unprepared for how hard we had to practice." Some student-athletes in the sample discussed expectations that actual competition would be more challenging. SA 4 said, "I had heard the game would be faster at the college level. It was still faster than I expected. At first it was hard for me to adjust, but I am glad I had that expectation. They helped me comprehend my initial struggles." Expectations related to athletic content were discussed by 80% ($n = 12$) of the respondents.

Academic Structure

Expectations related to structure and content of academic courses were classified under the academic structure theme. Academic structure was discussed by 13 (86.7%) of study participants. Some expressed excitement over expectations that college would allow them to study topics they found interesting. SA 1 stated, "I expected to do well in school. I was excited to study a broad range of topics that were interesting to me." SA 6 said, "I thought, especially for my major, that I was going to get a lot of hands on experience." Others were less specific in their responses but expressed expectations courses would be harder or easier than their high school classes. Some also discussed expectations related to class structure. SA 5 said, "I chose [the university] because it advertises that it feels smaller than its size. I knew classes would be larger, but they were not supposed to feel large. I went to a small high school. That made a big difference to me."

Policy Fairness

Expectations related to fairness and transparency of team, school, or athletic department policies were classified under the policy fairness theme. A majority of students expressed expectations that team, school, and athletic department rules would be clear ($n = 8, 53.3\%$). SA 7 stated, "I knew the school would expect more of athletes than other students. I knew athletes would be held to higher standards, but I thought all teams would be treated equally. That is not the case, some athletes are viewed as trouble makers because they are on the [team]. Others have more freedom. Men get away with more than women here. I did not think it would be that way." SA 5 stated, "I thought position coaches would be more supportive and vocal. My head coach has final say on everything and does not allow others to speak. I thought my other coaches would be more assertive in support of my teammates." Some referred to fairness of resource allocation. "I thought all teams were fully funded. That is how it is at my brother's school. [SA 3's sport] has to travel and compete on the same day to save money. I wish the athletic director treated us like some of the other teams," stated SA 3.

Social Experience

Many student-athletes' in the sample referred to expectations of interactions with teammates and classmates outside of athletic and academic settings. These expectations were categorized under a dimension termed social experience, which was discussed by seven ($n = 7, 46.7\%$) respondents. Some respondents discussed their expectations that teammates would be close friends. SA 3 said, "I knew it would be fun. I'm from Virginia so I had no friends here, but I felt comfortable because I was going to be on a team. I would already have a group of people that I would have something in common with. I knew it would be fun." Others expected athletics to enhance their social lives with non-athletes at the school. SA 10 stated, "When I first got here, I lived with my non-athlete friends. I thought being an athlete would make me popular and earn praise from the other students."

Life Balance

Life balance was defined as student-athletes' expectations for personal time outside of athletic and academic requirements. Life balance was identified as an expectation for 11 (73.3%) participants in the study. Some expected time constraints and felt prepared. "I expected to have no free time. All my time would be practicing or studying if I wanted to make it" (SA 15). Most expressed that they had to adjust their time expectations once on campus. "I expected practice and weight-lifting. I learned quickly about meetings, community service, and other requirements that are not discussed during recruiting. If you want to do well in school, the rest of your time must be focused on studying" (SA 8).

Performance Rewards

Student-athletes cannot receive financial rewards based on performance. Non-financial rewards may be earned through performance (i.e. playing time, recognition). Five student-athletes in the sample ($n = 33.3\%$) discussed rewards based on athletic efforts. However, the total six mentions were the least of any theme accounting for only 4.3% of the discussion. Table 2

illustrates all identified themes including count of mentions of themes within transcripts. Table 3 (see appendix) provides additional examples of statements within each dimension.

Table 2

Student-athletes' expectations

Expectation Dimension	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Mentions	Percentage
Athletic Development	8	53.3%	11	7.9%
Academic Development	11	73.3%	23	16.4%
Athletic Role Content	12	80.0%	18	12.9%
Academic Structure	13	86.7%	25	17.9%
Policy Fairness	8	53.3%	16	11.4%
Social Experience	7	46.7%	15	10.7%
Life Balance	11	73.3%	26	18.6%
Performance Rewards	5	33.3%	6	4.3%

Table 4 illustrates referents identified by student-athletes in the sample as influencers of their expectations. College coach was only identified by six respondents ($n = 6$, 40%) as a referent who influenced their expectations. Family ($n = 8$, 53.3%) and friends ($n = 7$, 46.7%) were the most recognized influencers, along with high school teachers/college professors ($n = 8$, 53.3%).

Table 4

Referents

Referent	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Mentions	Percentage
Athletic Department Personnel	5	33.3%	6	8.7%
College Coach	6	40.0%	8	11.6%
Current Teammates	2	13.3%	3	4.3%
Family	7	46.7%	9	13.0%
Club & High School Coaches	5	33.3%	6	8.7%
Former Teammates	4	26.7%	4	5.8%
Friends	8	53.3%	8	11.6%
Media	6	40.0%	6	8.7%
Personal Experience	6	40.0%	10	14.5%
Teachers / Professors	8	53.3%	9	13.0%

Discussion

Expectations are the building blocks of psychological contracts (Dadi, 2012; Rousseau, 1995, 2001). The purpose of this case study was to explore expectations student-athletes develop for their experience at their chosen university. These expectations may develop into psychological contract terms if student-athletes believe they are part of their exchange agreement with the school. Thematic analysis of interviews conducted with student-athletes in the sample revealed themes related to athletic participation, academic experiences, and social life.

Research question one asked what dimension of expectations might be present in a student-athletes' psychological contract. In total eight dimensions were identified through thematic analysis, including; athletic development, athletic role content, performance rewards, policy fairness, academic development, academic structure, and social experience. Although these dimensions share many similarities with the six psychological contract dimensions identified in the TPCQ (Freese & Schalk, 1997; Freese et al., 2008), significant differences exist.

The career development dimension of the TPCQ relates to employees' desires for skill development and career advancement opportunity. Athletic development was defined as desires to improve athletic skills and improve in one's sport, but there were no mentions of future opportunity. One possible explanation relates to the nature of NCAA rules. Limiting eligibility to four years may prevent a future perspective that is present in psychological contracts in other settings (Rousseau, 2001). This may also be a function of the sample, if participants had little possibility or lacked skill sets to play their sport professionally, they likely would not adopt a future mindset. On the other hand, most student-athletes in the sample are focused on a career or graduate school following graduation. These goals included expectations that the higher educational institution they were attending prepared them to succeed after graduation. This dimension, termed academic development, was more closely related to the career development dimension of psychological contract theory (Freese & Schalk, 1997; Freese et al., 2008).

Athletic role content was a narrowly focused expectation set, generally limited to perceptions of what practice or game difficulty would entail. Athletic role content is similar to the job content dimension of the TPCQ (Freese et al., 2008), but more limited in scope. Other themes similar to dimensions in the TPCQ include social experience, policy fairness, life balance, and performance rewards. However, these were also much narrower in scope than outlined in the psychological contract literature (e.g. Freese & Schalk, 1997; Freese et al., 2008; Lub, et al., 2016; van der Smissen et al., 2013).

The social experience and life balance dimensions were somewhat reference dependent, as student-athletes discussed expectations relative to non-athlete students. In contrast, social atmosphere (Freese et al., 2008) is more generally related to working with colleagues and work-life balance is related to circumstances related to life away from the organization. The student-athletes' focus remained interconnected to their role in the university (i.e. relationships with teammates outside of team functions, time to socialize with other students). Similarly, policy fairness was related to decision fairness and transparency of rules but was not focused on expectations to be included in policy development as employees often do (Freese & Schalk, 1997; Freese et al., 2008). Performance rewards were limited to expectations that good performance would be met with more opportunity. NCAA rules and the nature of college athletics likely play a role in the limited scope of these themes. Student-athletes are not viewed as employees of their team or school, thus, the NCAA and member schools have limited opportunities for the group to participate in policy creation.

Results of the case study indicate student-athletes' psychological contracts are broader than previously examined. Prior research limited the scope to the coach-athlete relationship (e.g. Antunes de Campos, 1994; Barnhill et al., 2013; Barnhill & Turner, 2013, 2014; Rezaia & Gurney, 2016). Expectations related to policy, academics, and student-life support a student-athlete's psychological contract that is institutional in scope, highlighting possible limitations of the prior research. Future research regarding student-athletes' psychological contracts should take into account the broader psychological contract that possibly acts on affective and behavioral outcomes.

The broader range of expectations also provided additional explanation for non-sport related influence in the student-athlete school choice and recruiting literature. Expectations related to academic structure and development correspond to findings in some studies that student-athletes are influenced by academic reputation and educational offerings (Goss et al., 2006; Judson et al., 2004; Pauline, 2010). Similarly, expectations regarding life balance and social atmosphere on campus correspond to the NCAA's GOALS study (Paskus & Bell, 2016). Results of the present study indicate recruits may be actively searching for information regarding their academic and social experiences during the recruiting process. This information search appears to continue once student-athletes arrive on campus, possibly clarifying their understanding of the exchange agreement.

The scope and complexity of student-athletes' psychological contract is also revealed by the influence of referents in this study. Research question two asked who or what served as referents for student-athletes. Current coaches were listed as influential by many student-athletes in the study. This is similar to school choice research (Klenosky et al., 2001; Magnusen et al., 2011), and the NCAA's GOALS study (Paskus & Bell, 2016) indicating coaches are important referents in the decision-making process. However, other school related referents including teammates, athletic department personnel, and faculty also said to be influential by student-athletes in the case study. Factors outside of university control including former teammates, friends, family, media, and personal experience also directly or indirectly influenced student-athletes' expectations. This supports the importance of viewing student-athletes' psychological contracts as holistic in nature, not limited to the coach or team relationship.

Conclusions or recommendations from this study should be tempered by the case study format. However, coaches, athletic administrators, and university officials should note the wide range of expectations indicated in the results as they may become terms in student-athletes' psychological contracts. Additionally, coaches should be aware of the multitude of referents that may influence, bias, or inhibit interpretation of their messages before and after enrollment (Rousseau, 2001; Sias & Wyers, 2001; Teboul, 1995).

For scholars interested in psychological contracts of student-athletes, future research should focus on the holistic nature of the student-athlete/institution relationship. Results from this study may allow for development of a psychological contract scale for student-athletes, allowing scholars to examine how fulfillment or breach of various terms affects outcomes. Scale development would also allow researchers to examine the role of referents in psychological contract term development. A better understanding of psychological contract development and outcomes will allow psychological contract theory to become a useful tool for coaches and athletic administrators as they try to better comprehend student-athletes at their institution.

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Table 3

*Representative Quotes Underlying Expectation Dimensions*Dimension 1: Athletic Development

"I felt like I would improve once I got to college. I knew we would be doing weights, which I didn't really do in high school. Conditioning, more running that I did in high school and travel ball. They would make sure I got better every day." (SA 5)

"I want to be a professional [sport]. I expected to come here and train like a professional." (SA 13)

"Yeah my AAU coach, he said you know, college isn't easy, its not like high school. It's hard. So not for everyone. If you're going to do it, you have to be willing to put in a lot of work. That's what I wanted to hear. The work and competition was going to help become a better [sport] player." (SA 11)

Dimension 2: Academic Development

"When you go to college, you get to study what you want to study. You finally get to be who you want to be. That's what I expected. I could be that person if I wasn't a student-athlete, but you really don't to be who you want to be as a student-athlete. I don't have the freedom other students have to pick their classes or get the education I wanted. If you're a student-athlete you don't have time to get the education, you expected." (SA 7)

"There are a lot of people who work with you when you are here. I know I wanted a degree when I came to [The University], but I did not know about majors or choosing a path. It has been good in that way...very helpful. My advisors and professors talked to me and helped me find out what I want from this. I figured out that I really enjoy [academic major] and I want to do stuff with college athletics. I'm trying to find graduate assistant positions through other universities. It was cool how the people here guided me down my path." (SA 3)

"I didn't think about academics much when I arrived on campus. I was going to have fun and make it to the next level. I didn't do well in class my freshman year. I also realized that I'm not the main man for my coaches. It changed my focus a bit. Now I am all about that degree. That's what this is about. I tell the new freshman, hustle for that degree. It wasn't anyone that changed my mind. It was just experience and maturity, you know. I just saw all the resources on campus and changed my focus for my goals." (SA 8)

Dimension 3: Athlete Role Content

"I feel like a lot of people are just like I'm an athlete, but for me being an athlete is more of like yeah you're an athlete that's really awesome but what can you do to give back to make things better for other people who people don't really know your name or anything. The only reason the people know my name is because of [sport]. I saw teams did a lot in their communities. That is important to me. So that's what I expected coming in." (SA 6)

"I knew it was going to be more time dependent. I expected it to be more physical and mental preparation. Like I knew the study of the game was going to be like another class itself. I guess even though I expected it, I wasn't prepared. It's like another major, all of the study. (SA 15)

Dimension 4: Academic Structure

"I knew it would be harder. That teachers would expect more of you. I didn't know about [name of campus building] hall. All of the study hall hours and people checking up on you. They know if I do bad on an exam before I can tell them, then I have to explain. The thing is, it's harder but I know studying is definitely much more important. Math and physics, you have to study a lot. Reading and English, you just read and memorize it and you're good to go. They (professors) expect a lot more of you than high school ever did." (SA 13)

"In a sense, it knew it would be hard, but I thought it would be easier because you don't necessarily have to go. I didn't know there was going to be class checks. Also like the whole decisions like figuring out your major. I thought was going to be easier only because people give you direction. Also, another thing is I thought that basically you don't have to do anything yourself. I was so wrong. Like athletics cares about you going to class because they need you eligible. Professors don't care who you are. They'll just fail you. They don't care." (SA 7)

"I freaked out because I was like this is going to be a ton of studying and \$300 books and just hours of reading and reading. That was my expectation but it's really not the case. I mean it can be if you're one of those students who studies like that, but I use Amazon for my books, so I get them cheaper that way. There's a lot more than just a midterm and final so it's not as much pressure. The school does kind of lie. They advertise that the school has a small feel but some classes big lecture classes. They're horrible, but we really are just another big state school." (SA 3)

Dimension 5: Policy Fairness

"And also on recruiting trips, if there's events arranged, and they're are expensive. We shouldn't have to go to them because not all of us have like 10 dollars lying around here or 20 dollars laying around there. The people that have the recruits are given the money, that money does not cover the weekend so there's a lot things I can complain about. Overall, if I just think about [sport], then I love it but if I add all the baggage that comes with it, then I don't like it. And I was going to quit last year." (SA 1)

"When you come in as a freshman and instantly you're told all of these rules that you have to follow like you can post certain pictures on Facebook and you cannot respond to certain things and you can't tell this or that you have to sign a bunch of paper work that says this person has permission to know this and this person doesn't. They just throw so much at you. You don't know what you're signing. I was just afraid if I questioned something my coach would punish me, or I'd lose my scholarship." (SA 2)

"There was a coach I had my freshman year, she was on the mindset that if she didn't want you on the team, she was going to run you off of it. She wouldn't tell you she was going to cut you. I spent a lot of time on the stairs during practice. I didn't really touch the ball. So that was her way of getting me off the team." (SA 9)

"I knew going into it, athletes are held to a high standard. You have to make certain GPA to be eligible and things like that. So, no, the standards are what I expected. I think the school is pretty open about what they expect. It is pretty fair." (SA 12)

Dimension 6: Social Experience

"I expected to be busy, but I would do a lot of activities with my team. I looked forward to being around my team a lot." (SA 12)

"I knew they would always expect more but I didn't know to the extent it would be. Like you just have to be extremely careful so partying and stuff. If you're on a team like [sport] or a small team like track or [sport] or [sport] you get grouped together so if there's only 20 of you and everyone knows who you and someone does something wrong, you are guilty. It is different for the female athletes. My friends on the [sport] team get away with everything. I wanted to have fun but now I am so careful." (SA 7)

"I felt like it was going to be a close-knit group of people. We would have so much in common. That's how it was on my high school team. In some ways its like that, but we all have different interests." (SA 6)

Dimension 7: Life Balance

"Like we have to do interview nights. We have to go to all these different events and there's now [university name] games. I wasn't expecting to do that, and I didn't realize how much time I was going to sacrifice doing a sport." (SA 1)

"So, coming in, I was expecting athletics to be my whole life, but there was a lot of things. There is so much more to being a college athlete than your sport. So many meetings and service outings. Like, it's kind of draining. So, I lean less on the enjoyment of being an athlete and more on what comes after athletics. Or what my future is going to be like." (SA 2)

"I was completely not ready for travel season, but I don't think anybody is coming out of high school. Like, you think okay, I have my time budget down, then the competition season comes around and you're missing class. You are on the road every weekend. There's no way to get ready for that, you just do it. It was not what I expected. I don't know how you can expect that." (SA 5)

"I was always told in college you won't have free time. You have to manage your time. Time management is the most important part of this. Everyone was right." (SA 12)

"I didn't realize there would be no free time. During high school, your standard day was 8 am to 5pm and now it's 5 'til 8 every day. The times just switched. So longer days but also not only do you have just the staying awake in class and doing practice longer, you also have studying you have to do. High school was insanely easy. You could sleep through the class and come out with an A. You come here and do that, and you come out with an F. That was definitely a wake-up call there. (SA 13).

Dimension 8: Performance Rewards

"I had high hopes for myself. I hoped that once I showed my coaches my skills I would become a starter. I figured I would be all-conference once I got in the line-up" (SA 16)

"Like every high school kid, I figured I would just get praise from everyone, including my coaches once I got my chance" (SA 10)

"Things would come your way if you earned it. If you're good enough that sort of thing." (SA 9)

Table 3 continued

"I knew I would have to prove myself. You're the lower end of the team I guess so I feel like just being a freshman in general is hard because you have to prove yourself right away like earn your spot on the team. Regardless of what scholarship you're on you still have to earn the sport on that specific team. I know it was like that so that's what I expected." (SA 3)
