Improving Identity Leadership Through a Novel Targeted Reflective Practice

Intervention

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of a novel identity leadership-framed reflective practice intervention for developing sport coach leadership skills. We adopted an 8-week randomized control intervention design, including 5 experimental group coaches and their associated athletes ($n = 47$) and 4 control group coaches and their athletes ($n = 32$). Athletes' perceptions of their coach engaging in identity leadership behaviours were measured at Weeks 0 and 8 for both groups. The experimental group coaches completed three specifically designed social identity-framed reflective practice tasks in Weeks 1, 3 and 5. Results showed that when controlling for baseline scores and compared to the control condition, the experimental condition reported significantly greater *advancement*, *entrepreneurship*, and *impresarioship*, but not *prototypicality* at post-intervention. The results provide support for the use of tailored reflective practice interventions to elicit desirable identity leadership behaviours as perceived by athletes.

Keywords: reflective practice, social identity, leadership, coaching, team sports, performance

Lay Summary: Leadership is a key aspect of team sport performance. Reflective practice is a core component of coach development. The present study shows the potential to develop leadership through social identity-framed reflective practice activities.

Implications for Practice:

- Investigation of new ways for developing leadership
- In-direct development of Identity Leadership
- Multi-faceted and innovative approach to reflective practice

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Intervention

From an organizational perspective, (in)effective leadership is one of the most crucial influential processes in sport team success. As a result, scholarly interest in successful leadership has continued to grow apace in sport settings. Across a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g., transformational; for a review see Arthur et al. 2017), empirical evidence has supported the notion that effective leadership is indeed key for a range of outcomes known to be pertinent for performance and wellbeing, including motivation (Arthur et al., 2011) and cohesion (Smith et al., 2013). Within the context of various theoretical approaches, one framework growing in attention from researchers, and fast becoming a prominent leadership framework in sport and exercise (Stevens et al., 2021), is the social identity approach, also known as identity leadership (Slater et al., 2014).

Identity Leadership

In the identity leadership framework, it is outlined that (in)effective leadership is bound up within social identity processes (Haslam et al., 2020). Specifically, leaders' influence on group members is proposed to be reliant upon the level to which they generate a sense of "us" within the collective, through four behaviours: (1) *prototypicality*; (2) *advancement*; (3) *entrepreneurship*; and (4) *impresarioship* (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014a). In particular, *prototypicality* refers the degree to which a leader embodies the qualities and values recognized by the group (i.e., "this leader is a model member of the group"), *advancement* captures the promotion of group interests over that of the individual (i.e., "this leader acts as a champion for the group"), *entrepreneurship* reflects the ability of a leader to create or define in-group characteristics or social norms (i.e., "this leader creates a sense of cohesion within the group"), and *impresarioship* is the embedding of identity through leadership, allowing group members to live out and engage with meaningful

activities that promote group values (i.e., "this leader creates structures that are useful for group members").

Generally, in organizational literature, positive outcomes flow from leaders engaging in the four identity leadership behaviours (for a review see Haslam et al., 2020). For instance, ratings of *prototypicality* have been positively related to leader endorsement (Platow et al., 2015), perceptions of leader charisma (Steffens et al., 2015), as well as better job satisfaction and social identity of group members (Steffens et al., 2014a). *Advancement* has been positively associated with trust and negatively related to burnout (van Dick et al., 2018), as well as greater authenticity (Steffens et al., 2016). *Entrepreneurship* has been found to be associated with lower burnout rate, group member turnover, and better overall well-being (Steffens et al., 2017). Finally, ratings of *impresarioship* promote a greater sense of "us" (i.e., social identity; Steffens et al., 2014a) and innovation (van Dick et al., 2018).

Identity Leadership Research in Sport and Exercise

Over the last decade, the growth of research evidence examining identity leadership in sport has been exponential (see Steffens et al., 2020). Generally, the resultant evidence, across methodologies, cultures, and sports, has demonstrated the positive influence of sport leaders engaging in identity leadership behaviours. In one of the first examinations in sport, reporting that identity leadership processes are indeed at play in elite sport, Slater et al. (2015) found that leaders at the London 2012 Olympic Games, including TeamGB performance directors, aimed to communicate and create a sense of team identity, along with specific team values, in their media communication. Following this evidence, researchers have begun to investigate identity leadership in both sport and exercise settings.

Researchers have found that coaches engaging in identity leadership is associated with greater effort levels, better individual and team performance, and lower intentions to leave the team (Krug et al., 2021). Krug and colleagues found that these cross-sectional

associations were mediated by social identity, yet this study adopted the short-form of the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI-SF; Steffens et al., 2014b) meaning that examination across identity leadership behaviours was not possible. Identity leadership has also been found to be associated with sport and exercise attendance (Stevens et al., 2018) and performance (e.g., power output; Stevens et al., 2019). Further, in a prospective design, Steffens et al. (2019) demonstrated that perceptions of exercise class instructors engaging in identity leadership to be positively related to social identity and comfort in the environment four weeks later. In turn, social identity and comfort were associated with exercisers' greater effort and attendance within the 4-week interval. Despite these findings, as with Krug and colleagues' study, Steffens et al. (2019) used the ILI-SF rather than the full ILI that would have provided the opportunity for examination of the four behaviours.

Building on these shortcomings, Stevens et al. (2020) recruited university (amateur-level) sport teams to participate in a two-wave study (8 weeks apart), adopting the full ILI. Results indicated that identity leadership (with the exception of *impresarioship*) at time one predicted social identity at time two (controlling for social identity at time one), which then predicted attendance at time two (controlling for attendance at time one). Stevens et al's examination of the four identity leadership behaviours contributed to our understanding in that *prototypicality*, *advancement*, and *entrepreneurship* did glean benefits, but *impresarioship* did not. Differences may exist across the four identity leadership dimensions. The two-wave design over 8 weeks is a notable progression, but may not reflect longitudinal research per se. The need for longitudinal research was taken up by Miller et al. (2020) who, from a stress appraisal perspective, examined the cross-sectional and temporal influence of sport coaches leading in-line with identity leadership on athletes' resource appraisals ahead of competition.

Miller et al. (2020) found that, cross-sectionally, athletes report greater levels of resource appraisals (e.g., self-efficacy, social support) that aided their management of competition demands when led by a coach displaying high levels of identity leadership. Further, these associations were explained in part by social identity processes. Next, over the duration of a sporting season, identity leadership was associated with self-efficacy, but no other resource appraisal, and this was explained in part by social identity processes. Moreover, experimental evidence that has moved beyond the four identity leadership behaviours has reported that compared to low relational identification, perceptions of high relational identification led to greater self-reported effort (Slater et al., 2018). Similarly, the establishment of shared (vs. non-shared) social identity content between leader and team members led to greater behavioural effort (Slater et al., 2019). In addition to the coach, the leadership displayed by athletes can have positive and unique consequences if it is in-line with identity leadership. For instance, in a study of handball athletes, Fransen et al. (2020a) found that the leadership of coaches, captains, and informal athlete leaders each contributed additional variance in explaining athletes' strength of social identity.

Accordingly, and as articulated by Stevens and colleagues (2021), the recent examination of identity leadership in sport and exercise settings has significantly progressed our understanding, but there remains more to do. One-way scholars are advancing this promising but not comprehensive conceptual and experimental research-base is by creating identity leadership-based development interventions and evaluating both utility and efficacy (e.g., 3Rs: Slater & Barker, 2019; and 5R^S: Fransen et al., 2020b). First, the 3R model involves the development on social identity leadership in three phases: *Reflecting*, *Representing*, and *Realising*. Slater and Barker (2019) developed, implemented, and evaluated the 3Rs in international disability sport over two years. In the study, the authors created a senior leadership team involving members of staff and athletes. The senior

leadership team were trained by the authors and the athletes were empowered to then work with the remaining members of the squad. The results suggested that, in the first and second year, the 3Rs led to a medium to large effect size increases in the athletes' reported social identity, social identity leadership of the staff group, efforts levels, and the number of practice hours completed away from training camps.

Second, the premise of the 5R Shared Leadership Program (5R^S; Fransen et al., 2020b) identifies the best athlete leaders on the team for each leadership role (i.e., task, social, motivational, external). Next, the intervention involves training each identified leader in social identity leadership via five phases: *Readying*, *Reflecting*, *Representing*, *Realising*, and *Reporting*. The positive effects of the 5R^S on team functioning (e.g., social identity) and individual-level outcomes (e.g., motivation) have been documented in two studies (Mertens et al., 2020; 2021). To illustrate, Mertens and colleagues (2021) applied the intervention with basketball teams in a randomized trial and demonstrated that compared to the control condition those athletes involved in the 5R^S reported greater levels of social identity as well as individual outcomes such as confidence, but no changes in self-reported performance.

Overall, these studies applying the 3Rs/5R^S have shown promise in terms of practical utility and efficacy, which paves the way for novel alternative interventions that may also develop identity leadership. Currently, to the best of the authors knowledge, there is no existing evidence working with coaches directly and independently. This is an important gap to address because existing coach education programmes are delivered in a way that is directly and independently with coaches (Maclean & Lorimer, 2016). In other words, we have limited knowledge of the effectiveness of alternative methods for developing identity leadership specifically with coaches. Given that the initial phases of the 3Rs and 5R^S are *Reflecting*, we propose that a specifically designed reflective practice approach may elicit leadership development in coaches. Put another way, through social identity-informed

reflective practice it may be possible to develop the identity leadership skills of sport coaches. Reflective practice has consistently shown to be a popular topic of study within sporting literature, namely for its proposed importance or even explanation of, how coaches actually learn (Kuklick et al., 2015). If the goal is to develop not just the overall group dynamics of a team from a social identity perspective, but to also develop the skill set of leadership in the coach, then reflective practice may play a significant role in that development.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has been identified as a skill that requires development and is indicative of coaching competency (Anderson et al., 2004; Knowles et al., 2001). This could suggest that reflective practice should be at the heart of any proposed development of coaching practice, including leadership (Cushion, 2016). Evidence has also suggested that taking part in a structured process is crucial for effective reflective practice, but is limited by the individual's level of knowledge (Partington et al., 2015). Partington and colleagues suggested that for reflective practice to be effective, it must be longitudinal in nature and not an independent act. Within coaching and leadership, development is achieved through the progression of skill sets, behaviour and further learning, with reflective practice identified as the most effective method (Anderson et al., 2004; Verpoorten et al., 2012). However, more needs to be understood regarding how to incur desired learning, rather than fruitless reflective practice activity.

Traditionally, reflective practice has centred around the seminal work by Schon, with regards to 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-for-action' (Cushion, 2016; Schon, 1992). Critics of this process have suggested that it prompts a natural gravitation toward what one lacks, or has done incorrectly, otherwise referred to as a 'deficit based' model (Ghaye, 2011). Reflective cycles and other more formal methods are also vulnerable in this way, providing a

need for improved methods that do not have a primary deficit focus. One such model is that of strengths based reflection, which is designed to focus on positive aspects of performance and has been found to create a more open-minded and dynamic practitioner (Dixon et al., 2015). Specifically, strengths based reflection has been reported to increase personal satisfaction and performance (Dixon et al., 2013).

Anderson et al. (2004) suggested that the act of reflection itself will incur a narrative story that can be interpreted. Sport is also thought to be inherently commensurate with personal narratives, suggesting a potential rationale for its inclusion within reflective practice (Rinehart, 2005). Reflexive narratives are thought to un-earth knowledge that was previously held tacitly, providing greater insight into the process of coaching and leadership (Peel et al., 2013). Suggestions have been made that the development of reflective practice should include a movement toward a unique epistemology, of which self-narratives are key (Knowles et al., 2007). While reflective narratives may be subject to criticism of academic merit (Anderson et al., 2004), given that more traditional approaches to reflective practice can fail to provide insight into complex cultural and behavioural issues, the use of reflective narratives may more accurately depict the inner workings of coaching practice and leadership, which has led to an increase in their usage in recent literature (Peel et al., 2013; Stoltz & Pill, 2016).

The use of reflective practice interventions within sport research is largely minimal, with few notable examples (Cropley et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2011; Neil et al., 2013). Researchers in other fields have highlighted the positive effects of targeted reflective practice interventions on aspects such as values, behaviours, and overall transformation of learning (Branch, 2010). Meier et al. (2016) showed that without a focus, the effectiveness of reflective practice can be threatened and that positive approaches towards personal goals should be used. A targeted or 'framed' approach has been shown to elicit behaviour change

by initiating 'reflection for action' and channelling attention toward beneficial actions (Richards et al., 2012). Interestingly, other researchers have found difficulty in using reflective practice successfully, without the use of 'framing', with limited or no positive differences in values and behaviours (Verpoorten et al., 2012). Branch (2010) not only used narratives to maximise the reflective potential of the activity, but also asked participants to focus on their strengths. This further supports the concept of narrative and strengths based reflective combinations, in order to support higher level learning and behaviour change. Collectively, this body of evidence provides a rationale for a reflective practice intervention that focuses on identity leadership behaviours (Partington et al., 2015).

The Current Study

Reflective practice interventions have been designed through the combination of desired outcomes and a multitude reflective practice methodologies (Lutz et al., 2013). Sport psychologists have begun to implement identity leadership interventions (e.g., Slater & Barker, 2019), involving the establishment of a senior leadership team and a series of workshops, including 'group sharing' methods. In the current study, we aim to create a reflective practice intervention to elicit similar results by working more "hands-off" (i.e., not directly with the athletes) and with coaches independently. Such gains would create opportunities for sport governing bodies to craft coach education pathways that provide opportunities for learners to develop identity leadership, and would also lay the groundwork for designed and tailored reflective practice interventions that cultivate desirable behaviours without the need for direct intervention (Cushion et al., 2003).

Accordingly, in the current study we develop and pilot a reflective practice intervention that is tailored to elicit identity leadership behaviours in coaches. Formally, we investigate the following hypothesis: The reflective practice intervention will elicit a

significant increase in athletes' perception of their coach engaging in identity leadership behaviours from baseline to post-intervention (H1).

Method

Participants and Design

A 2 (condition: experimental vs control) X 2 (time: baseline vs post-intervention) randomized control design was adopted. Coaches were recruited first $(M_{age} = 32.6$ years, $SD_{age} = 6.9$ years) with their associated players thereafter $(M_{age} = 21.4$ years, $SD_{age} = 3.5$ years). An a priori power analysis was undertaken based on a medium to large effect size $(d = .76)$ from a similar study that has applied the 3Rs (Slater & Barker, 2019). Using the 'F tests' family of tests on G*Power (specifically MANOVA: repeated measures, within-between interaction due to lack of MANCOVA option), an alpha of $p = .05$, power = .8, groups and measurements = 2 each, a required a total sample size of 57 was determined to detect a medium to large effect size $(d = .76)$. Accordingly, we aimed to recruit a minimum of 28 athletes in both the experimental and control conditions. Fifteen coaches and their respective athletes were recruited. Coach and athlete participants were then randomly allocated into an experimental or control condition resulting in 8 experimental group coaches and 83 athletes vs. 7 control group coaches and 70 athletes. Due to drop out of both coaches and players across the intervention, the study was conducted with the remaining participants (experimental coaches $n = 5$ and athletes $n = 47$, control coaches $n = 4$ and athletes $n = 32$). Reasons for withdrawal were largely due to incompletion of intervention tasks in the experimental group and/or incompletion of the second Identity Leadership Inventory data collection. This was mainly down to human error or time constraints facing the coaches. Such issues removed the possibility of data collection within the agreed parameters of the study.

Coaches were selected on the following 4 criteria: (1) Coaches were currently coaching a team sport; (2) were qualified at a Level 2 minimum within that sport (fully

qualified coach as opposed to an assistant coach - providing some assurance as to leadership experience and education); (3) had a minimum contact of 3 sessions per week with their players (matches included); and (4) possessed at least 2 years of coaching experience (at least 3 months of this being in their current capacity). Please see Table 1 for coach participant information. Players were included based upon being at least 18 years of age, having been with the current group for at least three months.

Measures

Athletes completed the Identity Leadership Inventory (Steffens et al., 2014b) to assess perceptions of their coach's identity leadership behaviours. The Identity Leadership Inventory has been validated to assess the four dimensions of identity leadership (*prototypicality*; *advancement*; *entrepreneurship*; and *impresarioship*) and has been validated to measure identity leadership in twenty countries (van Dick et al., 2018). The Identity Leadership Inventory includes 15-items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*). The internal consistency for the inventory was as follows: *prototypicality* = 0.81 (Week 0) and 0.82 (Week 8); *advancement* = 0.72 (Week 0) and 0.78 (Week 8); *entrepreneurship* = 0.81 (Week 0) and 0.81 (Week 8); and *impresarioship* = 0.84 (Week 0) and 0.78 (Week 8).

Procedure

An invitation to participate letter was sent to coaches and their group of athletes, along with informed consent forms. Only those that completed informed consent were included in the study. The right to withdraw was given to all participants at any time during the study. Professional contacts of the first author were used in order to recruit participants. Coaches in the experimental group received the Coach Information Sheet and the 'Stage 1 Intervention Sheet' in Week 1.

Stage 1 of the intervention was based on a combination of the strengths-based reflection and the four principles of identity leadership (Dixon et al., 2013; Slater et al., 2014). Participants were asked to reflect upon their leadership in respect of the four dimensions of identity leadership separately. For each dimension participants were required to answer the questions: (1) "what do I want to start doing?"; (2) "what do I want to stop doing?"; (3) "what do I want to do more of?"; and (4) "what do I want to do less of?" (Appendix A). These questions were supplemented with guidance to ensure correct understanding and completion.

In Week 3 coaches received the 'Stage 2 Intervention Sheet', combining a targeted reflective narrative with identity leadership behaviours (Peel et al., 2013; Stride et al., 2017; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The narrative required participants to reflect upon a specific instance within their coaching that they believed highlighted identity leadership components, using a format of identification, description, significance, and implications (Kennison, 2012). Participants were asked to identify a situation that fitted one or more of the identity leadership components, followed by a rich description of thoughts, feelings, and circumstances experienced. Participants were then required to consider the significance of this event in relation to the social identity of their sport team. Finally, participants were asked to discuss the implications of the situation and/or their actions, commenting on how they may have supported (or not) the identity of the group (Appendix A).

Coaches received the 'Stage 3 Intervention Sheet' in Week 5, combining a re-framing exercise through an identity leadership lens (Ashby, 2006; Ghaye, 2011). This required each coach to identify a new occurrence, considering the situation from the perspective of someone else in the group. Coaches would thus create a 'meta-reflection' in which they comment on their own actions in relation to each of the four identity leadership dimensions (Appendix A).

Coaches were asked to complete the tasks within 7 days of receipt, sending their reflections via email to the researcher. The athletes completed the ILI in Weeks 0 (baseline) and 8 (post-intervention). The control group completed the ILI only and did not complete any intervention tasks. All athletes completed the questionnaire without the presence of the coach, sealing the forms in an envelope provided to preserve anonymity and minimise any bias. Paper based copies of the inventory were used in order to ensure timely and accurate collection of data, at the place of practice (i.e., club house facilities).

Athlete participants were instructed to read the entire form, including the introductory guide, with any confusing terms clarified for understanding. They were then asked to complete the questionnaire individually in private while remaining as objective and critical as possible, in order to reduce bias and maximise data quality (Steffens et al., 2014b).

Data Analysis

To assess H1, in-line with our design, we planned to run a 2 (condition: experimental vs control) X 2 (time: baseline vs post-intervention) multivariate analysis of variance. As seen in Table 2, visual inspection of descriptive data demonstrated participants in the control condition reported higher levels of all identity leadership principles (all p's < .05) compared to the experimental condition at baseline. Therefore, we opted for a one-way (condition: experimental vs control) multivariate analysis of variance on post-intervention identity leadership scores, controlling for baseline identity leadership scores (MANCOVA). We adopted MANCOVA as this covariance approach provides the optimum statistical estimation in pre- to post-test randomized control trial designs, particularly when baseline scores are different (Zhang et al., 2014). Planned post-hoc tests were conducted in the form of a series of Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons.

Results

Identity leadership. Consistent with our hypothesis, a one-way (condition: experimental vs. control) MANCOVA suggested a significant difference between conditions on identity leadership principles at post-intervention, Wilks' $\Lambda = .72$, $F(4, 70) = 6.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. As displayed in Table 3, Bonferoni-adjusted follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that post-intervention, compared to the control condition, participants in the experimental condition reported higher levels of *advancement* ($M = 5.89$ vs. 5.52, $p = .046$, CIs: .07, .68, $d = .51$), *entrepreneurship* ($M = 5.71$ vs. 5.18, $p = .005$, CIs: .17, .90, $d = .66$), and *impresarioship* ($M = 5.67$ vs. 4.72, $p < .001$, CIs: .59, 1.31, $d = 1.23$), and there were no differences in *prototypicality* ($M = 5.75$ vs. 5.61, $p = .347$, CIs: -.16, .43, $d = .23$).

In sum, taking both conditions at an unbiased baseline, compared to the control condition, post-intervention the experimental condition reported significantly greater *advancement* (moderate effect), *entrepreneurship* (moderate-large effect), and *impresarioship* (large effect), but not *prototypicality* (small effect).

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to develop and explore a novel social identity-framed reflective practice intervention, and to assess any associated changes in athletes' perception of their coach's identity leadership. Broadly, in-line with our hypothesis, controlling for baseline levels and compared to the control condition, the athletes in the experimental group reported that their coach was engaging in significantly higher levels of *advancement*, *entrepreneurship*, and *impresarioship*, but not *prototypicality* post-intervention. In other words, compared to a control condition, the intervention increased athletes' perceptions of their coach's engagement in identity leadership, and the improvements reflected a range from moderate to large effect sizes. These findings offer initial support for the adoption of a social identity-framed reflective practice intervention to assist sport coaches to develop their identity leadership.

Recent advancements by researchers in sport have demonstrated leaders' engagement in identity leadership is associated with positive outcomes including attendance (Stevens et al., 2018; 2020), effort (Krug et al., 2021), and managing stress (Miller et al., 2020). As a consequence, applied researchers have developed and evaluated bespoke identity leadership-based leadership development programmes – the 3Rs (Slater & Barker, 2019) and the 5R^S (Fransen et al., 2020b; Martens et al., 2021), with promising results. The contribution in our study reflects the randomized control design that is the gold standard approach to test intervention effectiveness, and the innovative development of an identity leadership-informed reflective practice intervention delivered to sport coaches directly. Given that the identity-based intervention in the current study has elicited behaviour change and leadership skill development that is recognisable to the respective group members (for *advancement*, *entrepreneurship*, and *impresarioship*, but not *prototypicality*), it is important to consider the possible mechanisms behind this change (Carey et al., 2019). We propose that the intervention uses two main potential mechanisms: (1) identity leadership knowledge development; and (2) effective reflective strategies.

Behaviour change literature regularly uses knowledge development as a means of initiating new behaviour traits (Michie et al., 2011). The nature of the current intervention is such that participants are provided with information as to the structure of identity leadership (thereby informing them of identity leadership from a 'new knowledge' perspective). This act could be suggested to incur an organic behavioural change, merely through increased awareness of different or possibly more favourable leadership behaviours. A new knowledge base may alter the individual's understanding of identity leadership and perception of their own leadership, leading to new and recognisable 'intelligent action' (Bengson, 2016). For example, in the current study we found the largest differences between experimental and control group in *impresarioship*. This may in part be due to the more malleable nature of

impresarioship behaviour that could occur through simply being aware of its necessity for effective leadership (Steffens et al., 2014a). To illustrate, arranging a small number of organised events that embed the team's identity may be enough to instigate positive change for leaders and be the necessary stimulus for an increased athlete perception score. Likewise, greater knowledge of the other identity leadership dimensions may have primed participants to further relative 'intelligent action' commensurate with those behaviours. Understanding what being an entrepreneur of identity is and its importance may have been enough of an impetus for a coach to place a premium on displaying those characteristics in their actions. Interestingly, control group athletes potentially primed to consider the *impresarioship* of their coach (through completion of the identity inventories) may have become aware of their coach's lack of said behaviour, possibly explaining the low scores in *impresarioship*. Notwithstanding the improvements noted for *impresarioship* in the experimental condition, it should be noted that, in tandem, we found reductions in the control condition from baseline to post-intervention, which may be exacerbating this effect.

Our study does not rely on knowledge development through the provision of information, but initiates targeted reflection on that information in relation to the individual's own actions. Criticisms of knowledge alone being a primary causal factor for behaviour change suggest that it is this utilisation of various reflective strategies in the reflective practice intervention that would likely explain the reported changes (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2018; Michie et al., 2011; Ptakauskaite et al., 2018). A specifically targeted reflective practice intervention may facilitate a more contextually-focused reflective process, rather than the potentially aimless or generic processes experienced with other types of reflection (Kuklick et al., 2015). As such, our intervention may be tailoring reflection towards specific content that is more likely to result in a cognitive leap, epistemological shift or change in belief (Partington et al., 2015). The design of the intervention also places the individual at the

heart of the activity, enabling internal inquiry-based learning which is thought to accelerate knowledge acquisition (Pedaste et al., 2015). Furthermore, the framework may provide deeper or more focused grounds for reflection on, in and for action (Cushion, 2016).

In our study, the intervention may have elicited leadership behaviour change specifically through reframing the internal thought process and decision making of the coach in relation to identity leadership, and through the meta-cognitive process of taking the athletes' perspective into consideration (Knowles et al., 2001). In addition, researcher reflections on the completed intervention activities were surprisingly less 'deficit based' than may have been expected, given that participants were reflecting against a new framework of identity leadership information. This may be attributed to the use of the strengths-based activity, moving away from negative habitual tendencies towards a more positive and action-oriented approach to behaviour change (Dixon et al., 2013).

Prototypicality was the only identity leadership behaviour to not differ between experimental and control conditions at post-intervention. This may be in part due to the relatively high baseline scores within that dimension, reflecting a potential ceiling effect. Indeed, the pattern of the results are in the expected direction and, despite not statistically significant, do reflect a small effect size difference that could have practical meaning in favour of the experimental condition. That said, the lack of effect could be due to other factors. First, researcher reflections on intervention task completion suggest an element of focus toward the other three domains of identity leadership. *Prototypicality* may in that sense be viewed as a 'given' for effective leadership and coaching by the coaches, potentially reducing cognitive effort by participants in making improvements. Second, the followers' perception of *prototypicality* may have been impacted by the potentially 'socially constructed' nature of leadership (Billsberry et al., 2018). In that, followers' existing beliefs as to effective sport leadership may have impacted their perceptions of *prototypicality* in the

first instance (perceived as naturally higher) and its relative change thereafter (maintenance of high score in a 'good leader'; Billsberry et al., 2018; Swanson & Kent, 2014). Consequently, followers were potentially less sensitive to changes in that domain. Finally, differences in each identity leadership principle we found became larger — from non-significant and small for *prototypicality* to significant and large for *impresarioship* — thereby perhaps pointing to the culminative impact of the intervention over the 8-week period.

Applications and Reflections

Currently, sport researchers are looking for innovative ways to foster critical thinking, while trying to identify appropriate techniques that practicing coaches can use (Hughes et al., 2009). This exploratory study could provide one such an innovation, with the potential for governing bodies to include similar approaches in their coach education frameworks. This is a positive finding given the previously held notion of dominant, preferred, or even entrenched methods of reflective practice from which coaches may find it difficult to escape (Knowles et al, 2001).

The current study provides potential grounds for specifically designed or framed reflective practice activities to elicit desirable leadership behaviours perceptible to athletes. Current coach education pathways in the United Kingdom provide little structure for either reflective practice or leadership skills. Instead, there is typically a focus on more technical and tactical elements of coaching knowledge and application, with generic reflective practice content (Kuklick et al., 2015). The advancement of leadership and thus team performance could be targeted with the inclusion of such reflective practice interventions within coach education programmes. Rather than intervene at a late stage to redirect leadership tendencies, National Governing Bodies could encourage the development of qualities supported within literature at the beginning of the coaches' journey. The existing reflective practice activities could be improved by incorporating the activities within our intervention. Interestingly, the

researcher noted while conducting the study that the written language in the tasks became more identity leadership-based simply by reflecting in a framed way. This possibly suggests an opportunity for organisations / teams to create changes to leadership, culture, and group dynamics via simple adjustments to reflective practice strategies. More needs to be understood about the performance advantages of this form of leadership development via reflective practice through longitudinal studies.

In addition to leadership training development at the governing body-level, our study provides new knowledge for sport psychology practitioners who wish to focus on leadership development. In the context of few evidence-based leadership development interventions that sport psychologists can employ with formal and informal leaders in the sport teams they work with, the current intervention shows promise in terms of enhancing the identity leadership skills of coaches directly. Alongside, the team- and organisational-level approaches of the 3Rs (Slater & Barker, 2019) and 5R^{S} (e.g., Mertens et al., 2020; 2021), our study shows the value of working directly with head coaches. Further, we openly provide the activities the first author undertook with the coaches on a one-to-one basis (see Supplementary File) so that others may benefit, too.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations that require further investigation. First, a distinction between the introduction of a new subject matter (identity leadership) and the reflective tasks employed as causal factors for the observed results is not possible. This could suggest a causal or semantic debate between whether the observed changes were the result of reflective practice or the education of identity leadership as a dominant discourse (Cushion, 2016). Future research is required to unpack the psychological mechanisms by which advances in coach identity leadership has been made. These mechanisms underlying behaviour change are poorly understood and may require different methodological

approaches, such as qualitative investigation in order to advance our understanding (Carey et al., 2019). In conjunction, future research may benefit from the analysis of process oriented qualitative data such as interviews with the coaches and / or athletes to glean their experiences and perceptions.

The experience level of the coaches recruited is also of note. While the coaches met the inclusion criteria, two of the coaches were minimally qualified and experienced. Researchers have suggested that in this situation positive results may be observed by these coaches trying to mimic an ideal model, rather than developing more organically (Nash & Sproule, 2011). Combining this with individuals' potential preferences for certain types of reflective practice activities and the present data may become less generalisable (Knowles et al., 2001). Future researchers may need to compare results across coaches with differing experiences levels and cultures in order to assess the effect of other potentially mediating variables. In addition, assessing reflective ability and preference prior to intervention may also be a noteworthy development (Rogers et al., 2019).

While the data showed that identity leadership behaviours were higher in the experimental condition compared to the control at Week 8, this is relatively short-term. Longitudinal investigations are required to gain a more detailed assessment of social identity-informed reflective practice. This need may be increased due to the reliance on and potential fluctuation of athlete perception as a data collection method (Lutz et al., 2013; Steffens et al., 2014b; Verpoorten et al., 2012). Finally, while identity leadership reflects the primary proximal variable in our study, we did not assess additional variables, such as social identity, which are known to be pertinent for team performance. Hence, in the future, researchers could adopt measures to capture broader group dynamics, together with exploring the experiences of coaches involved in the intervention.

Conclusion

The present study has highlighted the potential for a specifically targeted reflective practice intervention to encourage identity leadership development in sport coaches. In-line with our expectations, compared to pre-intervention and the control condition, the athletes of the coaches who received the social identity-informed reflective practice intervention reported significantly greater identity leadership behaviours (except *prototypicality*) at post intervention. Accordingly, for those seeking to develop their identity leadership skills or guiding others to do so, the social identity-informed reflective practice intervention may provide a useful starting point.

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