

## **Advancing our understanding of leadership in sport and exercise: A social identity perspective**

Leadership is all around us. Individuals seek to influence, or, are influenced by, others day-to-day, hour-to-hour, moment-to-moment. Previously, leadership was thought to be only for the lucky few. Those individuals who were born with the qualities and traits to be a natural leader would rise to the top of the hierarchy (e.g., Weber, 1946). Now, the leadership field is awash with theoretical conceptualizations that have developed our understanding of effective and successful leadership. Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) is one stand out example that has received significant attention in sport, and researchers have enhanced our understanding on how leaders are able encourage others to perform to their potential (and beyond). As a result of these developments across a range of conceptual perspectives, it is now generally accepted that leadership is much more than to do with the qualities and traits of an individual, or the interplay between leader traits and the environment. Drawing on a range of definitions (e.g., Northouse, 2021), leadership is better understood as: (1) a process that can eb and flow — not a set of traits; (2) involving influence through, and with, a group — not power over the group; (3) a group process — rather than a focus on the leader as an individual; and (4) involving common goals — not achieving objectives simply for the leader’s self-interest.

The scientific examination of leadership has received considerable theoretical and research attention in sport and exercise contexts, but even more so in broader organisational and social psychological literatures. Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) attested that for far too long we have had an overly individualistic focus when examining key variables in sport and exercise. This “blind spot” (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 428) has not placed organisational and social factors at the analytical core. This shortcoming is despite the notion that attention to the multiple and dynamic relationships between individuals, groups, and organizations are perhaps where the greatest strides may be made in terms of developing original knowledge. This special issue focusses on one contemporary and prominent theoretical perspective that

does place organisational and social factors at the core: the social identity approach (Haslam et al., 2020a; Haslam et al., 2020b). Within the social identity paradigm scholars have suggested, and have evidenced, that successful leadership hinges on group dynamics, particularly the social identity-related dynamics at play, within a group (e.g., a sport team, an exercise group, a resident community group).

The social identity paradigm has a long tradition in social psychology (see Haslam 2004), and within it, it is established that the development and evolution of a *shared social identity* within a collective group is central to successful leadership (Haslam et al., 2020a; Hogg, 2001). Accordingly, a key contribution of social identity leadership, and the social identity approach more broadly (see Haslam et al., 2020b), is the notion that sport and exercise is very much a “we-thing” that is derived from being a member of a group. For the first time in leadership theory in sport and exercise, intra- and inter-group dynamics are placed at the analytical core of understanding and developing leadership. It is through such group dynamics that positive individual- and group-level outcomes flow.

In the social identity approach, four principles of effective leadership are proposed: (1) leaders as identity *prototypes* – “*being one of us*”; (2) leaders as identity *advancers* – “*Doing it for us*”; (3) leaders as identity *entrepreneurs* – “*crafting a sense of us*”; and (4) leaders as identity *impresarios* – “*making us matter*” (Haslam et al., 2020a; Slater et al., 2014; Steffens et al., 2014). There is also a reliable and cross-culturally validated measure of a person’s engagement in identity leadership — The Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI: Steffens et al., 2014) — that has played a large part in the expedited rise in published empirical studies in the field since 2014.

Initial research examinations focussed on a small number of leaders before, during, and after the London 2012 Olympic Games (Slater et al., 2015). Slater and colleague (2015) found that performance directors (e.g., of British Rowing) tended to portray positive, distinctive, and enduring sense of what it means to be “us” — their social identity — in media communication

(e.g., interviews, blogs, team squad announcements). Following these endeavours, there has been a marked increase in attention paid by researchers to coaches' and athletes' leadership from a social identity perspective. In sport, for example, athletes who perceive their leader to create a shared sense of us have been found to be more mobilised in terms of the effort they exert (Slater et al., 2018), feel a stronger sense of team confidence (Fransen et al., 2014; 2015), and are more cohesive (e.g., through identity impresarioship; Steffens et al., 2014). In exercise settings too, leaders that are perceived to enact identity leadership drive up attendance and engagement in activities through creating strong psychological connections with the group (Stevens et al., 2018).

As this brief snapshot of contemporary contributions attest, the application of the social identity approach to leadership to better understand, and help leaders to develop their skills, is beginning to be fruitful. In the context of these recent and growing advances in knowledge, the purpose of this special issue is to present readers with contemporary research and thinking on leadership in sport and exercise from a social identity perspective. In particular, within this issue, there is a drive to deepen our theoretical understanding of the social identity approach to leadership in sport and exercise, in tandem with demonstrating the application of the approach to develop leadership skills in sport and exercise practice.

### **Overview of Special Issue Articles**

Following the call for the special issue on *Advancing our understanding of leadership in sport and exercise: A social identity perspective*, 15 articles were submitted for consideration. Following the peer-review process, six manuscripts from authors working in the Australia, Belgium, France, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

This collection of manuscripts reflects the excellent progress made thus far in researchers' endeavours in the field of social identity leadership in sport and exercise. The issue includes four manuscripts of empirical investigations (including five studies in total),

through one applied intervention proposal and feasibility study, and concludes with a current status review of the literature.

First, Worley et al. (2020) investigated the novel application of servant leadership in sport contexts from an athlete leadership perspective, the relationship with cohesion, and tested whether social identity mediated the relationship. After recruiting two hundred and eighty-eight NCAA intercollegiate athletes, Worley et al applied a structural equation modelling approach and found that servant leadership, where leaders put their followers first, was positively related to cohesion. This relationship between servant leadership by athlete leaders and sport team's cohesion was mediated by social identity.

In a study of male rugby union players in France, Campo et al. (2022) investigated the multidimensional nature of social identity (cognitive centrality, ingroup ties, ingroup affect) as predictors of coach-created empowering and disempowering climate. Through the application of group actor-partner interdependence modelling, Campo and colleagues highlight that an empowering climate was a function of high ingroup ties, particularly when teammates' ingroup ties were low. They also indicate that lower perceptions of an empowering climate were a result of team ingroup affect and cognitive centrality. Finally, when player's ingroup affect fitted into the group, this decreased the player's perception of a disempowering motivational climate.

Next, Fransen et al. (2020) conducted a study of handball athletes and invited them to rate their coach, captain, and informal leaders on the ILI. Fransen and colleagues were interested in both team functioning and athlete health outcomes, and what role psychological safety would play in these relationships. The results indicate that athletes who rated their coach, captain, and informal athlete leaders as engaging in identity leadership was associated with greater psychological safety that, in turn, produced better team functioning and athlete health. Of particular interest is how Fransen et al. provide further evidence of the importance of

both formal and informal leaders in sport teams, with, for instance, athlete leaders being more influential in the performance pathway.

In a two-study manuscript, Miller et al. (2020) examined the influence of coach identity leadership on their athletes' resources appraisals (e.g., athletes' sense of control over their performance, and whether they had an approach/avoidance focus), and perceptions of performance. In Study 1, the four principles of identity leadership were positively associated with athletes' believing that they had greater psychological resources to perform in their upcoming sport competition, and these relationships were explained through social and relational identification. In Study 2, over the course of a season, coaches engaging in identity leadership was related to one resource – self-efficacy – only, and this was mediated by relational but not social identification. There was no evidence that coach identity leadership behaviours were temporally related to athletes' other psychological resources.

In the next manuscript in the special issue, Fransen et al. (2020) turn our attention to the applied perspective by offering a social identity-informed intervention to enhance group functioning and leadership in sport teams. The 5R Shared Leadership Programme (5R<sup>S</sup>) aims to identify the most suitable athlete leaders in the sport team through social network analysis, and, then, educate these athletes on identity leadership to improve their leadership skills in five stages: Readyng, Reflecting, Representing, Realising, and Reporting. Fransen et al. (2020) propose the 5R<sup>S</sup> intervention as a novel and feasible programme that can be applied in sport settings and beyond.

Finally, Stevens et al. (2021) provide an overview of the current state of play in the social identity leadership literature in sport and exercise. This review paper concludes the special issue perfectly by critically outlining the benefits for their group members of sport and exercise leaders engaging in social identity leadership. Stevens et al. (2021) detail two themes of research in this field: one centred upon performance and one centred on a health. Overall, the authors provide a strong synthesis and critique of current research and outline important

avenues for future researchers to work on. Indeed, Stevens and colleagues pose as many questions to be examined for the field to tackle, as questions answered.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The vision for this special issue was to advance our understanding of social identity leadership research in sport and exercise. This has been achieved through an excellent collection of manuscripts from five countries, embracing different methodologies, and sophisticated analyses procedures. This collection of articles has highlighted how social identity may act as both a predictor and a mediator in key relationships of leadership and group-level outcomes such as cohesion and motivational climate. There is also a tip of the hat to the important consideration of social identity as a multidimensional construct. It is clear, too, that coaches engaging in identity leadership may be helpful for the psychological resources of their athletes, although the temporal impact across a competitive sport season was not established. It is also clear, building on previous work of Fransen and colleagues, that social identity leadership is not, and should not, only be confined to formal leaders (e.g., the coach), as a shared approach encompassing formal and informal leadership roles may bring about the most benefits. To achieve this, the 5R<sup>S</sup> programme outlined in this issue provides an excellent range of activities to create the shared sense of social identity evidence points to being important. Finally, in concluding the special issue, Stevens and colleagues do what all good reviews articles should do, through an analytical lens, they provide answers and pose further questions to us to tackle in future research agendas. In sum, it is clear that there has been an exceptional growth in social identity-related research in recent times, and this trend appears to be here to stay.

Finally, thank you to all the manuscript authors for your excellent contributions, and this includes those that were not accepted for the special issue, as you are all endeavouring to move our understanding on the social identity approach to leadership in sport and exercise

forward. Thank you also to editors-in-chief Nikos Ntoumanis and Bernd Strauss for your counsel and support, and the Elsevier staff involved.

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