Adolescent Male Perceptions of Leadership in a Sporting Context

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the sports context to understand better adolescent males' views of leadership. It employs methods to optimise adolescent voice while reducing the chances of imposing adult-centric perspectives on young people's views of leadership. Sixty-seven adolescent males who were members of Under 14 to Under 16 rugby teams in a Brisbane metropolitan club voluntarily participated in this study. Participants as a group reacted to videoed scenarios of seven sporting situations. Participants were asked about perceived risks associated with each situation, the level of admiration felt to accompany actions taken and perceptions of leadership, and they were encouraged to provide honest and frank responses. The results indicate that engagement with sport can expose adolescent males to situations that require leadership behaviours but perceptions of leadership behaviour seem to vary only marginally depending on each situation. It is suggested that future research should use further visual stimuli to initiate discussion about matters which have been shown to pose a 'risky' or an 'unwelcome' situation in which leadership actions in a sports context are depicted.

Introduction

In attempting to extend our knowledge of leadership as seen through the eyes of young people, this article explores the views of adolescent males involved with a sporting club. It does so as part of a suite of studies funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) into adolescent understandings of leadership and civic engagement. Both of these concepts lie at the heart of this research program, with the latter having been the subject of many studies, while the former has been the subject of few (see Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe this issue). Even fewer studies look to examine the connections between leadership and civic engagement in the young, particularly during adolescence when alienation tends to rise. The concern of the researchers involved has been to gather and use the subjective experiences of young people as the route into youth-centred understandings of leadership and the situations in which they see and experience it, good or bad.

In the suite of studies referred to above, young people's perceptions of leadership behaviours and situations have been documented in secondary schools and in community sporting organisations (Junior Rugby Union and Surf Lifesaving). Data have been collected using methods preferred by adolescents – methods which they say highlight their voices. With some of these methods, such as forum drama and photo-stimulated recall (see Lizzio, Andrews & Skinner and Keeffe & Andrews this issue), adolescents themselves played a significant leading role in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

To develop a justifiable method for eliciting adolescents' views, a preliminary study was designed to answer the question: What valid youth-centred processes can be used to identify understandings of leadership and citizenship situations? Panels of adolescents were engaged as co-researchers with the explicit aim of helping design processes that were both responsive to and effective in eliciting adolescent views of leadership. Four panels (6–8 members each) were convened to represent younger (male and female) and older (male and

female) adolescents' perspectives. The panels were guided by co-facilitators chosen from young adults who had been student or community group leaders. Descriptions of leadership situations were raised by young people through a participative process involving open discussion protocols. This process led to the development of a student-centred and situated account of adolescent leadership in a sports setting.

The findings from this preliminary work showed that young people were readily able to identify clusters of leadership attributes (Lizzio, Dempster, Keeffe, Skinner & Andrews, 2010). For young people, 'good' leadership amongst their peers is strongly related to prosocial attitudes and ethical behaviours. Thus, in the eyes of young people, their peers would be good leaders if they demonstrated care and consideration for colleagues by being inclusive, understanding, helpful, optimistic, selfless, patient and friendly. The adolescent leader who possessed such attributes would contribute to other young people feeling individually valued. This paper moves on from this preliminary work to identify how leadership in a sports context is understood.

Sporting clubs are organised settings where adolescents meet and interact with others for different purposes from those schools serve. Nevertheless, they are traditionally structured in hierarchical ways affording young people the opportunity to experience leadership as it is defined by adult club members. This is not surprising as adult views of leadership dominate the myriad leadership training and development programmes now available to sporting clubs. However, how young people themselves understand leadership and what they say about it in practice has not been explored extensively in a sports context. When it is studied, it is often from the point of view of adults interpreting what young sportspeople think. This paper focuses on that context to better describe how adolescent males believe leadership is understood.

A Brief Literature Review

In the largely adult oriented literature concerned with leadership in youth sport, the leadership influence of an adult, notably the coach, has been emphasised. Straub's (1978) work is typical explaining leadership as the influence coaches have on their athletes, Woodman (1993) supports this view highlighting the importance of the leadership influence of the coach on performance, while House (1971) proposes that the leadership of the coach is influential in augmenting the motivational level of the athlete. Coaches adopt a position of centrality in an athletic performance setting as well as providing an influence that can extend into other areas of a young person's life, such as the personal development of the athlete (Cratty, 1974; Kalinowski, 1985; Riemer, 2007).

To redress the undue emphasis on the nature of coach leadership, Loughead and Hardy (2004) designed a study to determine the nature of peer leadership in sport, comparing the leader behaviours exhibited by coaches and peer leaders. Adopting two theoretical perspectives on peer leadership – formal and informal – researchers were required to investigate a range of factors including the number of leaders within a sporting team (mean age = 20.39 years) using the 40-item inventory Leadership Scale for Sports Coaches, and a modified version of the instrument to measure the behaviour of peer leaders. Determining the formal peer leaders was a straightforward task because an organisation typically appoints and limits the number of these. However, the task proved more difficult when identifying the number of informal peer leaders. Results from this research found that the two sources of leadership, the coach and the peer leader, serve two very different functions within team dynamics and they also differed in leadership behaviours. Specifically, the coach as the leader displayed high frequency in training instruction and autocratic behaviour, whereas peer leaders demonstrated social support, positive feedback and democratic decision-making behaviour.

The influence of peers in sport, perhaps even more so than in other domains, is acknowledged in the literature. Children and adolescents involved in sport and physical activity cannot disengage from their peers; consequently, peer leadership and interactions have a significant effect on athlete enjoyment and involvement. Various research studies on friendship and popularity have endeavoured to provide insights into the effect of interaction in different contexts. Weiss and Stuntz (2004) highlighted the importance of effective peer leadership as a dimension of peer relations. Effective team leadership is described in Chelladurai's (1984) terms as, 'individuals who are primarily responsible for defining team goals and for developing and structuring the team to accomplish these missions' (Zaccaro, Rittman & Marks, 2001, p. 452). Laursen (1996), whose research focused on peer relations in a youth sporting context, believes that due to the increased influence that peers have on each other during adolescent development, it is probable that a peer who takes on a leadership role will play an important function in the lives of others, which in turn may affect the success of the group (Horn, 2002). It has also been suggested that young people who are categorised as popular, possess identifiable attributes including sensitivity, the ability to interact positively with others, friendliness and the ability to display leadership behaviours. Further studies have proposed that adolescents prefer leaders who exhibit high level interpersonal skills, possess superior sporting ability and are able to achieve goals (Horn, 2002). The extent to which these studies speak with the voices of young sporting club members, however, is not apparent.

Acknowledging that leadership plays a significant role in sport, and recognising that the body of literature on leadership in sport is predominantly coach focused, it is important to identify literature related to leadership in the youth sporting domain to see to what extent the views of young people are openly on display.

In the work of Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox and Mandigo (2008) referred to by Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe (in this issue), specific questions about leadership were addressed (*Who are the leaders on your team? What makes this person [or you] a good leader?*). Five categories of responses emerged from the coded data. Two of these in particular related to leadership – the first identified groups as important in providing the structure for leadership, encouraging players to work together; the second showed that leadership was evident in 'task behaviours' (taking charge) and interpersonal behaviours (offering feedback and emotional support).

Hall, Forrester and Borsz (2008) examined the leadership development of undergraduate students in campus recreational sports and Logue, Hutchens and Hector (2005) explored the personal structure of sporting leadership experiences (again with college students), both studies employing interviews. Logue at al., illustrating the emerging themes with quotations from open-ended interviews, identified three interlacing themes of people, action and organisation, finding that the organisation in which participants were active proved to be an integral part of the leadership experience, an emergent focus of which was giving to others in a benevolent manner.

Research conducted by Eley and Kirk (2002) and Kay and Bradbury (2009) focused on youth sport volunteering and its connections with leadership. In the former study, where perceptions of leadership skills were measured using two inventories with male and female sports leaders (mean age 16.6 years), the conclusion was drawn that sport and volunteering encourage pro-social behaviour. Kay and Bradbury's study, concerned as it was with the development of social capital, came no closer than most studies in sport to speaking with the voice of the participants (17-20-year-olds). Reliance on the use of survey and interview data gave considerable primacy to the researchers' purposes and questions rather than young people's personal understandings.

Skille (2007), using field theory from Bourdieu, examined the meaning and educational opportunities derived from two sports contexts in the Sports City Program in Norway. This research focuses squarely on the social context from the perspective of adolescent participants, using a case study design and qualitative methods; one area of focus was the informants' concerns about being an adolescent, and how sport fits into their lives. One context examined was a girls' football club, the other an open sports hall used on a drop in basis. It is argued that adolescents are socialised differently into the two different sporting contexts: in the football club the players were already 'inside' the context because of family socialisation and were therefore encouraged to be part of the socialisation and motivation for younger players, whereas the voluntary nature of the open sports hall meant that there, meanings were developed by adolescents themselves. Skille concludes, 'the football context generates experiences which are related to commitment and obligations, and educates reproduction of the sports club's values, while, on the contrary, the open sports hall generates experiences of self-governance and emancipation, and educates the adolescents to value the expressivity of an "adolescent lifestyle" (p. 375).

The overall conclusion from a study into peer leadership in sport by Moran and Weiss (2006) carries a compelling message for the kind of work we believe is needed if young people's views are to be taken seriously. Moran and Weiss's study used self and team mate ratings of leadership, uncovering interesting gender differences (i.e., self-ratings of peer leadership were closely aligned for male athletes, and team mate and coach ratings were highly correlated, whereas for females, self-ratings of leadership were highly affected by social variables rather than ability. Finally, for males, team mate and coach ratings were only related to ability, identifying the most highly skilled players as the team leaders).

What stands out from this brief discussion of literature from sport is that while leadership is considered integral to the way sporting teams operate, it is positions which are

emphasised, particularly those of coaches and formally appointed leaders. Moreover, the leadership views of the coach are uncontested, leaving understandings of leadership amongst youthful team members largely untapped. The study we now report is one attempt to seek the views of the members of teams themselves.

The Study

Our study sought to understand adolescent males' understanding of leadership in sporting contexts. We particularly sought to optimise adolescent voice while reducing the chances of imposing adult-centric perspectives. To this end, we incorporated several features into our design: using stimulus situations of leadership that were identified by young people themselves, establishing norms in the conduct of the study that empowered young people to be open and frank in their views, and providing opportunities for them to make private and anonymous judgements of behaviour, rather than having to disclose or justify these to adult authority figures. We also employed videoed scenarios of sporting situations in an effort to be optimally engaging, and asked young people for their ratings of enacted responses using simply worded scales. It is proposed that this methodology is likely to be more engaging than traditional pencil and paper surveys, and better controls for the demand characteristics of 'saying the right thing' that may be more likely with interview methods conducted by adults.

Method

Participants

Sixty-seven adolescent males who were members of Under 14 to Under 16 rugby teams in a Brisbane metropolitan club voluntarily participated in this study.

Materials

Discussions with young people and staff with experience of coaching identified potentially challenging situations that may be encountered by young people in sporting contexts. Seven

of these were selected to represent a range of different types of adolescent behavioural or leadership challenges. Two situations involved providing help or support to one's peers or team members (helping someone who is new to the team learn the ropes; encouraging other team members not to give up when faced with a poor score line); two situations involved challenging or disagreeing with one's peers (trying to convince a team member not to party the night before a game by reminding them of the consequences for the team overall; standing up to spectators who are 'sledging' players by appealing for a 'fair go'); two situations involved a team member stepping up and taking charge in a situation (managing the team when the coach is late for training; stepping in and taking control of rough play and insisting that 'that's not how we play around here'); and one situation involved a team member supporting an authority figure with one's peers (supporting the referee when a teammate starts to get abusive about a penalty). Interestingly, the range of behaviours depicted in these vignettes parallels the task and interpersonal peer leadership behaviours identified by Holt et al (2008) in sporting contexts.

The situations were enacted by university drama students (age range 18 to 21 years). The process of production involved each situation being discussed by the actors and the research team in terms of its goals and dynamics. The situation was rehearsed and further discussed for realism and clarity. The situation was then enacted and recorded. Video vignettes ranged from 15 to 45 seconds in length.

A video was produced containing an initial practice situation which provided participants with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the format and rating scales, followed by the seven experimental situations in random order. Participants viewed each video situation and then were given 30 seconds to provide their response on three 7-point scales (1 *not at all* to 7 *very much*) for perceived risk (How risky is it for team members to get involved in these types of situations?), admiration of the adolescent protagonist (To what

extent do you admire this team member for trying to respond to this situation?) and perceptions of leadership (To what extent do you think that this team member demonstrated leadership?).

Procedure

Participants as a group viewed the video of the seven sporting situations prior to a regular training session. Participants were instructed to be honest and frank in their responses and to provide their opinions and not what they thought adults might want to hear.

Results and Discussion

Adolescent males' responses were analysed by three separate one-way analyses of variance for their ratings of perceived risk, admiration and leadership across the seven situations.

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

How do team members understand these situations?

Correlations of ratings of the level of risk of getting involved in each situation revealed that team members' grouped the situations in terms of two primary clusters. Team members significantly associated (correlations ranging from .23 to .40, p = .01) a cluster of situations (stopping rough play, standing up to sledging, and speaking up for the referee) which appear to be concerned with maintaining civility and fair play and supporting the authority of those responsible for enforcing the rules of the game. This appears to be leadership concerned with asserting and maintaining group standards and culture. Team members also significantly

associated (correlations ranging from .33 to .48, p = .01) another cluster of situations (encouraging other team members, stepping up in the coach's absence, helping a new team member, stopping sledging) which appear to be concerned with fostering and maintaining positive team spirit. Consistent with this, team members also clearly distinguished (with negative or low correlations -.04 to .08) prosocial and helping-related situations (encouraging team members, helping new team members) and challenging or conflictual (stopping rough play or sledging) situations. Clearly, the pervasive distinction reported in the literature between positive and negative assertive behaviour (Wilson & Gallois, 1993) is also present in the situational understandings of these young players.

How risky is it to get involved in these situations?

An analysis of variance revealed significant differences in team members' perceptions of the level of risk in the seven situations (F (6, 53) = 10.23, p = .0001, partial eta² = .537). Pairwise comparisons revealed that team members perceived helpful (helping a new team member (2.81)) and prosocial (encouraging team members (3.22)) behaviours to be the least risky, and situations that involved potential or actual conflict (stopping sledging (4.49) or rough play (4.80) or convincing a team member not to party the night before a game (4.46)) to involve significantly (p = .0001) more risk. However, it is important to note that team members did not rate any situation as 'high risk', and most situations were rated as either involving low (below 3) or moderately low risk (below 5 on a 7-point scale).

How do team members view the people who responded to these situations?

An analysis of variance revealed significant differences in team members' level of admiration of those responding to the various types of situations (F (6, 53) 3.97, p = .0001, partial eta² = .397). Responding to situations which contributed to team spirit or loyalty were generally

rated as more admirable, but overall, these behaviours were not admired significantly more than the responses to other situations. However, the singular exception was that encouraging other team members 'not to give up' (5.73) was admired significantly more than all other behaviours. It may be that in a sporting context, responses which are strongly aligned with the overarching team purpose of winning the game are more likely to be positively evaluated. The ethos of 'digging deep' and 'making the extra effort' are likely to be particularly valued.

This pattern of findings is consistent with the argument that in sporting contexts adolescents particularly value and attribute leadership to peers who enable the achievement of team goals (Horn, 2002). In some respects this is consistent with the proposition from social identity theory that leadership can be a group constructed process, with groups investing members who represent the group ideal or prototype with leadership status and qualities (Hogg, 2001). Players who 'do not give up' represent a team ideal in a competitive sporting context and can earn these team members enhanced status and influence. This process is likely to be amplified in sporting teams which place a premium on team loyalty and team spirit, as the more strongly people identify with a group the more likely they are to regard members who match group prototypes as leaders (Fielding & Hogg, 1997).

To what extent do team members regard these types of behaviours as leadership?

An analysis of variance revealed significant differences in the extent to which team members perceived the enacted responses to these situations to constitute leadership (F (6, 53) 8.93, p = .0001, partial eta² = .507). Once again, encouraging other team members not to give up was rated highest for leadership (5.97) and significantly higher than the enacted responses to all other situations. In comparison, trying to convince a team member not to party before a game was rated lowest for leadership (4.47) and significantly lower than other responses. It may be that challenging other team members' private behaviour (partying hard) may be seen as less

directly related to team success, and perhaps as stretching the boundaries of 'team leadership'. While, as Skille (2007) argues, football sporting teams may encourage a culture of commitment and obligations, it is evident from present findings that adolescent males place limits on this in the context of their competing life domains. Overall, participants rated all responses as at least 'moderate demonstrations' (4 on a 7-point scale) of leadership. This finding supports the validity of the peer leadership approaches used across these challenging situations.

What are team members' underlying conceptions of leadership?

The final set of analyses focused on understanding team members' ideas about leadership. Correlations of the three variables of perceived risk, admiration and perceptions of demonstrated leadership were inspected for associations (see Table 2). There was, for the most part, no association between the perceived level of risk in a situation and either the level of admiration or perceived leadership. This group of adolescent males did not appear to subscribe to a bravado-based conception of leadership, where the higher the risk, the greater the admiration. There was however, a strong positive association between behaviour they admired and behaviour they considered to be leadership across all situations. Once again, providing support for a prototypical conception of leadership with this group of young males (Hogg, 2001). The situation involving stopping rough play was the one clear exception to the general pattern. There was a strong positive association between perceived risk and perceived leadership. One might speculate that 'intervening with rough play' may be a unique situation among those presented in this study, in that it involves the potential for physical risk and retaliation. Notions of leadership involving personal courage and putting oneself in harm's way for a higher principle may be relevant here.

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Insert Table 2 about here

Concluding Comments

In the past, leadership studies of young people in sporting clubs have used questionnaires or structured interviews as preferred methods of data collection (see, for example, Eley & Kirk, 2002; Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Moran & Weiss, 2006; Ricketts, Bruce & Ewing, 2008; and Walker, 2009). Although these methods yield useful and valid insights and are recognised as effective approaches to collecting data, they do little to draw out tacit or unconscious leadership understandings from young people. Much less common are methods which take as their starting point, the identification of processes which may better enable young people to 'voice' their views about leadership. This paper has done just that by employing a datagathering process designed to optimise adolescent 'voice' while reducing the chances of imposing adult-centric perspectives on young people's views of leadership in a sports context.

In this article, we have presented data on adolescent male views about leadership and the situations in sporting clubs where they see it as important. These situations were based on scenarios where participants were asked about perceived risk, levels of admiration and perceptions of leadership. The results indicate that engagement with sport can expose adolescent males to situations that require leadership behaviour but perceptions of leadership behaviour only seem to vary marginally depending on the situation. For example, team members did not rate any situation as 'high risk', and most situations were rated as either involving low or moderate risk. Similarly, responding to situations which contributed to team spirit or loyalty were generally rated as more admirable, but overall, these behaviours were

not admired significantly more than responses to other situations. The singular exception was that encouraging other team members not to give up was admired more so than all other behaviours. We reiterate that in a sporting context, responses which are strongly aligned with the overarching team purpose of winning the game are likely to be positively evaluated.

Given the above, future research should be directed to raising the prominence of the voice of the young by using helpful visual stimuli to initiate discussion about matters such as those which have been shown to pose 'risky' or 'unwelcome' situations in which leadership actions in sport are depicted. The intent would be to get as close as possible, not only to what young people say they 'should do' (perhaps to please others or to say 'the right thing'), but also to what they 'would do' (perhaps to please or appease themselves and their peers). The outcomes of this kind of work would go part way to establishing a conceptual framework for a situated understanding of adolescent leadership in sport.

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TABLE 1: ADOLESCENT MALE TEAM MEMBERS' RATINGS OF LEADERSHIP SITUATIONS

Situations		Risk		Admiration		Leadership	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Helping someone who is new to the team learn the ropes	2.81	2.06	5.23	1.53	5.69	1.11	
Encouraging other team members not to give up when faced with a poor score line	3.22	2.13	5.73	1.34	5.97	1.18	
Trying to convince a team member not to party the night before a game	4.46	1.69	4.90	1.76	4.47	1.73	
Standing up to spectators who are sledging players	4.49	1.78	4.73	1.87	5.16	1.63	
Managing the team when the coach is late for training	2.88	1.74	5.12	1.32	5.52	1.60	
Stepping in and taking control of rough play	4.80	1.61	5.23	1.29	5.53	1.17	
Supporting the referee	4.31	1.44	4.77	1.53	5.05	1.49	

TABLE 2: ADOLESCENT MALE TEAM MEMBERS' ASSOCIATIONS OF THE LEVEL OF RISK, ADMIRATION AND DEMONSTRATED LEADERSHIP

	Helping new member	Encouraging team members	Convincing team member not to party	Stopping sledging	Stepping in for coach	Stopping rough play	Supporting the referee
Perceived risk and admiration	.02	.13	.01	.17	.07	.36*	.21
Perceived risk and leadership	.08	.05	.12	.01	19	.50*	.19
Admiration and	.41*	.74*	.61*	.78*	.37*	.61*	.58*
leadership							
Note $*p = .0$	001						