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Social Identity Leadership in Sport and Exercise: Current Status and Future Directions

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Abstract

The social identity approach is fast becoming a prominent framework for understanding effective leadership in sport and exercise contexts. The last five years, in particular, has seen a proliferation of research informed by the identity leadership approach, with a focus on two broad outcomes: performance and health. Using these two key outcomes as an organising framework, we provide a critical narrative review of research that has examined the presence, role, and benefits of identity leadership in sport and exercise contexts, and identify fruitful avenues for future research. Applying a broader lens, we then make five key recommendations for future identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts. Specifically, we highlight the need for research (a) using more rigorous and varied research designs, (b) using stronger measures, (c) comparing the effects of identity leadership to the effects of other types of leadership, (d) assessing further potential mediators of relationships between identity leadership and key outcomes, and (e) exploring the possible dark side of identity leadership.

Key words: Identity Leadership; Social Identification; Narrative Review; Physical Activity; Performance; Health

Highlights

- There is growing evidence that sport and exercise group members experience performance and health-related benefits when their leaders engage in identity leadership.
- Performance-related benefits of identity leadership include greater task performance, self-efficacy, team confidence, and team resilience.
- Health-related benefits of identity leadership include greater self-rated health and reduced burnout, and are partly attributable to identity leadership's positive impact on group members' participation and effort.
- Further studies using stronger measures and designs that assess causality are needed to more rigorously test both the performance and health-related benefits of identity leadership.

Social Identity Leadership in Sport and Exercise: Current Status and Future Directions

Despite several decades of research, interest in understanding the key to effective leadership in sport and exercise contexts is unwavering. Attempts to abstract lessons from successful sporting teams and leaders remain common (e.g., see Elberse, 2013; Haslam & Reicher, 2016), while empirical research examining the factors associated with sport and exercise leaders' success continues to proliferate. Although sport- and exercise-specific models of leadership have been developed in an attempt to guide these efforts (e.g., see Chelladurai, 1990; Smoll & Smith, 1989), recent research in sport and exercise contexts has primarily drawn on models and frameworks developed in organisational psychology. For example, research has examined the benefits of sport and exercise leaders acting in accordance with the principles of authentic leadership theory (e.g., see Bandura & Kavussanu, 2018), servant leadership theory (e.g., see Worley et al., 2020), and transformational leadership theory (e.g., see Arthur et al., 2017; Turnnidge & Côté, 2018).

Of particular relevance to the present article, and against the backdrop of critiques of other theories (e.g., see van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), there has also been growing interest in the applicability of the *social identity* approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020; Hogg, 2001) to sport and exercise contexts (as evidenced, not least, by this special issue). More specifically, there has been a recent proliferation in identity leadership research in these contexts focused on two broad outcomes for group members: *performance* and *health*. In this paper, our goals are (a) to assess current understanding of the presence, role, and benefits of identity leadership in sport and exercise contexts, and (b) to provide an agenda for future identity leadership research in these contexts. To achieve this, we provide a critical narrative review of identity leadership research that has focused on performance and health outcomes, and identify opportunities for further development in these areas. We then discuss the overlap between these areas, before outlining five broader priorities and considerations for identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts. First, though, we provide a brief outline of the identity leadership approach (noting that more detailed

descriptions, and overviews of how the theory applies to sport and exercise, are available elsewhere; Haslam et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2015; Slater et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2017).

The Social Identity Approach to Leadership

The social identity approach starts by recognising people's capacity to define themselves in terms of both their personal identity (as 'I' and 'me') and their various social identities (as members of the various groups to which they belong; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This framework further describes how, when individuals categorise themselves in terms of a social identity that they share with others, this lays the foundation for all forms of group behaviour, including social influence (Turner, 1991). Following on from this, the social identity approach to leadership argues that leadership is a *process of social influence*, and proposes that a leader's capacity to exert influence rests on the extent to which they are perceived to (a) *represent* the group's identity, (b) *advance* the group's identity and interests, (c) play an active role in *creating*, and shaping the content of, the group's identity, and (d) help *embed* the group's identity in reality by providing practical activities that enable members to 'live out' their shared identity (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014b).

More broadly, the theory further proposes that, by engaging in these four principles (termed identity prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship), leaders can enhance the strength of group members' social identification (e.g., as a member of their sports team or exercise group), and thus help facilitate various positive outcomes. In particular, research has consistently suggested (a) that groups with more strongly identified members are more productive and perform better (Ellemers et al., 2004; Rees et al., 2015), and (b) that strongly-held social identities can protect and promote people's health (Haslam et al., 2018). In the remainder of this paper, we use the term 'identification' when referring to strength of social identification. Like most leadership theories, identity leadership was originally developed in the organisational context. However, in recent years it has been regularly applied in sport and exercise contexts, as we will see below.

Identity Leadership and Performance

Early Reflective Analyses and Qualitative Research

Shortly after the first full articulation of the four principles of identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2011), researchers began considering the extent to which these principles applied to sporting leaders, and how sporting leaders may fruitfully engage with them. A theoretical article by Slater et al. (2014) focused on these goals, while two further early articles examined the actions and media communications of prominent sporting leaders.

In the first of these articles—a reflective piece—Slater et al. (2013) used Team Great Britain (GB)'s cycling performance director as a case example to demonstrate how sporting leaders can support the development of social identities in elite sport environments and the way this can translate into benefits for team members. For example, Slater et al. (2013) suggested that, by highlighting that the GB cyclists are “not multi-million pound athletes you can't get close to” (p.672), the leader helped to create a sense of positive distinctiveness among group members—that is, a sense that they are different from, and better than, outgroup members (e.g., professional footballers). According to the social identity approach, such perceptions are central to people's self-esteem (Haslam, 2004).

In the second of these articles, Slater et al. (2015) conducted a thematic analysis of the media data (e.g., interviews and speeches) from six prominent leaders at the 2012 Olympic Games. These researchers not only provided examples of identity leadership in action, but also initial evidence that this approach to leadership distinguished more and less successful leaders. For example, they noted that less successful leaders (including a performance director who left his position following the Games) often referred to their team members as 'they', while more successful leaders used collective language (i.e., 'we' or 'us'). Collective language is often cited as a strategy leaders can use to help create a sense of shared identity (Haslam et al., 2020), and has been shown to be effective in a range of contexts (e.g., see Fladerer et al., 2020; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). However, while this study provided an important 'first step' for sports performance-focused identity leadership research, its design precludes assessments of the extent to which (a) the results are

generalisable, and (b) identity leadership impacts team member outcomes. Indeed, it is also noteworthy that, while their leader's media communications may have had some effect on team members, team members would likely have been equally (if not more) attentive to, and influenced by, communications from leaders that took place 'behind closed doors', where the way leaders communicated could have been different.

Testing Relationships—Quantitative Research

In the performance domain, early (and some more recent) quantitative research that claimed to test, and support, the identity leadership approach did not assess the identity leadership constructs directly. Instead, these studies focused on the role of greater social identification (a proposed focal outcome of identity leadership, see above) as a linchpin between (a) leadership quality (i.e., how well leaders were perceived to fulfil their leadership role), and (b) other types of leadership and performance-related outcomes.

Specifically, Fransen et al. (2014, 2016a) found that team identification (i.e., the strength of one's social identification as a member of a particular sports team) mediates the relationship between the perceived quality of coaches and informal athlete leaders (i.e., team members who do not hold a formal leadership position) and athletes' team confidence and cohesion. Studies have shown that team identification also mediates the relationship between (a) captains' perceived engagement in transformational leadership and athletes' social labouring (i.e., increased effort due to the group context; De Cuyper et al., 2016), and (b) athlete leaders' perceived engagement in servant leadership and athletes' perceived team cohesion (Worley et al., 2020). These latter findings (i.e., team identification underpinning the benefits of other types of leadership) reflect the overlap between different leadership theories, such that 'good' transformational or servant leadership can also be good identity leadership (and thus lead to the same outcomes). For example, putting the group's interests first aligns with the principles of both identity leadership and servant leadership. We return to this point later in the paper.

In short, the aforementioned studies indicate that both high-quality leadership and positively-toned leadership behaviours facilitate the development of stronger team

identification among group members and this, in turn, translates into positive outcomes. However, they did not explicitly test whether engaging in identity leadership impacts team identification and drives positive outcomes. Their results should also be interpreted cautiously because, in all instances, cross sectional designs were used to test relationships that are likely to be bi-directional (e.g., greater perceived leadership quality might be an outcome, as well as a predictor, of greater team identification).

Three recent studies have built on this research by using the Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI)—a validated tool to measure identity leadership (Steffens et al., 2014b)—to directly assess team members' perceptions of their own, and their leaders', identity leadership. First, across two studies, Fransen et al. (2020a) asked athletes to rate each of the players on their team with respect to their quality as a task, motivational, social, and external leader. Participants also completed measures that assessed their own personality traits and perceived engagement in various types of leadership (including identity leadership). Results showed that participants' self-rated engagement in identity leadership was consistently associated with other team members' perceptions of their leadership quality across the task, motivational, social, and external leadership roles. Participants' self-rated engagement in identity leadership was also generally more strongly associated with other team members' perceptions of their leadership quality than (a) their self-rated engagement in other types of leadership (e.g., transformational), and (b) the extent to which they possessed a range of personality traits. Through its direct measurement of identity leadership and focus on assessing the *relative* value of leaders engaging in identity leadership compared to engaging in other types of leadership or possessing particular individual traits, this study represented an important advancement on previous research. The focus on participants' self-rated identity leadership was, however, a key limitation, given the potential for self-evaluations to be biased (e.g., such that people typically rate themselves as above average; Alicke & Govorun, 2005), and diverge from others' perceptions.

Recent research has provided further evidence for a positive relationship between identity leadership and performance-related outcomes using designs in which athletes have rated the extent to which their leaders engage in identity leadership. Across two studies involving primarily amateur athletes from various sports, Miller et al. (2020) found evidence that coaches' perceived identity leadership was associated with athletes' self-efficacy, perceived control over their performance, perceived social support, and tendency to adopt approach goals (i.e., goals focused on achieving positive outcomes, rather than avoiding negative ones). Miller et al. (2020) also found some evidence that these relationships were mediated by athletes' team identification and relational identification with the coach (i.e., the value they attached to their relationship with, and their sense of connectedness to, this leader; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

Similarly, in a study involving 289 Belgian and Dutch national and regional level handball players, Fransen et al. (2020c) found that the extent to which coaches, captains, and informal athlete leaders were perceived to engage in identity leadership by team players was positively associated with those players' team identification. In a path model, players' team identification was, in turn, positively associated with their perceptions of a range of positive outcomes: psychological safety (i.e., the extent to which they perceived the team to be a safe environment for risk-taking, asking for help, and admitting errors), teamwork, team resilience, and satisfaction with performance. Interestingly, findings also showed (a) that engagement in identity leadership by informal leaders was more strongly associated with members' team identification than engagement in identity leadership by formal leaders (coaches and captains), and (b) that informal leaders' identity leadership was directly and positively associated with players' perceived teamwork. Given the cross sectional design used, these findings should be treated as preliminary evidence for the importance of informal leaders. Nevertheless, they suggest that it may be necessary to move beyond an exclusive focus on formal leaders in sports performance contexts (see also Fransen et al., 2020b; Leo et al., 2019).

Experimental Research

Much like the other quantitative research described in the preceding section, experimental support for the performance-related benefits of identity leadership was initially provided by research that examined whether social identification and identity leadership *mediated* the relationship between leader behaviours and performance-related outcomes. That is, crucially, this research did not manipulate identity leadership with a view to providing causal evidence for its effect on performance outcomes. Instead, two studies experimentally manipulated the confidence in members of newly formed teams shown by a confederate leader, such that it was high, neutral, or low (Fransen et al., 2015, 2016b). In both cases, participants in the high confidence condition (compared to the low and neutral conditions) reported greater confidence in their team's success, and performed better: first on a basketball free throw task (Fransen et al., 2015), and second on two soccer tasks involving passing, and dribbling and shooting (Fransen et al., 2016b). Importantly, there was also evidence in both studies that team identification mediated the relationship between the team confidence expressed by the leader and participants' own confidence. Moreover, in Fransen et al.'s (2016b) study, both team identification and leaders' perceived identity leadership mediated the relationship between the team confidence expressed by the leader and participants' self-rated performance. The large samples and varied experimental tasks used across these two studies are key strengths; they increase confidence in the robustness and generalisability of the findings. However, given that neither study (a) manipulated identity leadership, nor (b) examined the role of social identification or identity leadership in models that included objectively assessed performance, they provide only distal evidence for the performance-related benefits of identity leadership.

No studies have manipulated the global construct of identity leadership. However, a recent study by Stevens et al. (2019b) did examine the effect of manipulating confederate leaders' engagement in one facet of identity leadership—their identity entrepreneurship—during a 5km cycling time trial in a laboratory setting. Importantly too, this study used objective indicators of participants' performance (i.e., time taken and power output). A pre-

post between-subjects design was used such that, following baseline trials in which all participants (72 recreationally active young adults) completed the task individually (and were asked to do so to the best of their ability), participants were randomly allocated to either a high or low identity entrepreneurship condition, and further divided into groups of five. These groups included a confederate leader, who, throughout the second test sessions—in which all team members attended the laboratory together—behaved in accordance with a script designed to convey either high or low levels of identity entrepreneurship (e.g., by repeatedly using collective language versus repeatedly using individual language, and emphasising versus de-emphasising the importance of the team). The performance of participants in the two conditions diverged in the second trial such that participants in the high identity entrepreneurship condition improved their power output during the first minute of the trial (i.e., immediately after the manipulation had been delivered) to a greater extent than those in the low identity entrepreneurship condition. There was also evidence that performance improvements were driven by participants in the high identity entrepreneurship condition investing greater effort, as evidenced by their greater increase in maximum heart rate during the second trial compared to participants in the low identity entrepreneurship condition.

By focusing on the value of leaders creating a strong sense of shared identity among group members, these findings speak to the potential for performance-related benefits to arise from identity leadership. It is also noteworthy, however, that two further programs of experimental research have indicated that developing a strong sense of shared identity among group members may not be the only identity-related goal leaders should attend to.

First, a series of studies by Slater et al. (2018) provided preliminary (but somewhat mixed) evidence that group members might invest more effort and perform better to the extent that they feel a strong sense of *relational* identification with their leader. Specifically, in a vignette-based study in which participants' relational identification with a sports team coach was experimentally manipulated, participants in the high relational identification condition indicated that they would be willing to spend more time on a task set by the coach than participants in the low relational identification condition. These results should, however,

be viewed with caution given that no measures of actual effort or performance were obtained. Indeed, in Slater et al.'s (2018) two subsequent (non-sport-based) studies, participants in the high relational identification conditions performed significantly better than participants in the neutral and low relational identification conditions on a cognitive task (Study 2), but not a memory task (Study 3).

Second, across two experimental studies, Slater et al. (2019) provided evidence that it may be important for leaders to attend to the meaning that group members attach to their social identity (i.e., to social identity *content*). For example, in Study 2, participants who experienced leaders who shared values with them spent more time practising a computer game driving task at the request of a leader, on average, compared to participants assigned to the non-shared values conditions. Here, Slater et al. (2019) also found that (a) participants in the shared values (i.e., shared identity content) conditions performed better on the final trial of the driving task than those in the non-shared values conditions, and (b) this was due, at least in part, to them spending more time practising the task (an effect that was demonstrated in a mediation analysis).

Identity Leadership Intervention Programs

Against the backdrop of growing empirical evidence for a positive relationship between identity leadership and group members' performance, researchers have recently turned their attention to the potential to develop leaders' capacity for identity leadership through training programs. Here, three studies have drawn on a framework that was developed in an organisational context, and which initial evidence suggests might be an effective way to develop organisational leaders' ability to engage in identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2017). This '5R' program begins with a 'readying' session in which leaders are informed of the importance of identity processes for leadership. A series of 'reflecting', 'representing', and 'realising' workshops follow, in which leaders are guided through activities for them to conduct with their team (giving them hands on experience of developing and managing identities). More specifically, these activities focus on helping leaders (a) identify the subgroup social identities that exist within their team, (b) understand what these

identities mean to team members, and (c) facilitate the process of subgroups, and the group or team as a whole, living out their identities and achieving their goals. The program ends with a 'reporting' session in which leaders are encouraged to obtain feedback about progress towards goals and given an opportunity to discuss their program-related experiences (for a complete description of the program, see Haslam et al., 2017).

The first attempt to implement a version of the 5R program in sport—an abridged '3R' version that omitted the readying and reporting phases—was conducted with an international disability soccer team. Across two consecutive years, Slater and Barker (2019) delivered the program to the team's senior leadership group (comprising three members of staff and four players) during team training camps. In both years, the program led to increases in players' team identification and perceptions of the staff leadership group's engagement in identity leadership, as well as in the number of hours that players spent practising away from team training camps. There was, however, no evidence that the intervention led to a change in players' willingness to dedicate effort to enhancing their development and reaching their playing potential, while the impact of the program on players' performance was not assessed.

More recently, research has tested adapted versions of the 5R program focused on developing the identity leadership of team members. In this version—the 5R shared leadership program—the best task, motivational, social, and external leaders within the team are first identified based on team members' ratings. Then, in workshops facilitated by the researcher, these individuals are given responsibility for leading tasks designed to (a) encourage all team members to reflect on the team's identity and values, and (b) identify shared goals, and strategies for achieving these goals. Mertens et al. (2020) delivered this adapted program to four third-division basketball teams in Belgium. The study also included a comparison group of four further basketball teams (playing at the same level) who completed the study measures, but chose not to receive the intervention. Comparisons between the two groups revealed significant differences at follow up such that those in the intervention group (a) perceived that the 'leaders within their team' engaged in identity

leadership to a greater extent, and (b) reported greater team identification, intrinsic motivation, and commitment to team goals. However, there were no significant differences between the two groups with regard to players' team confidence or perceptions of their team's performance.

Fransen et al. (2020b) delivered this 5R shared leadership program to a volleyball team and a non-sporting organisational team. In this instance, the researchers' focus was on participants' perceptions of its value and success, and identifying ways it may be improved. To this end, the researchers gathered feedback by distributing surveys (with open ended questions) to participants, and interviewing the formal team leaders. Feedback from both participants and leaders was generally positive, with improvements in team functioning commonly noted. There was also evidence that, during the program, the teams created tangible mechanisms through which they could live out their shared identity. For example, they created team WhatsApp groups, providing a means through which team members could communicate when they were not physically together (e.g., to celebrate team successes). Suggested considerations for future programs included (a) an awareness that some team members may react negatively to not being rated as one of the best leaders on their team by their fellow team members, and (b) greater attention to the existing leadership structure of teams. With regard to the latter point, participants suggested that the benefits teams experience from creating a shared leadership structure are likely to be greater to the extent that the team has a more hierarchical structure before the program. Indeed, it seems possible that appointing new task, motivational, social, and external leaders from within a team that already has multiple informal leaders could 'muddy the waters' or even cause conflict. These may be important considerations for those implementing future programs.

Overall, the findings of these studies provide a promising indication of the potential of the 3R, 5R, and 5R shared leadership programs, particularly as the knowledge gained through these initial iterations should facilitate improvements to future interventions. Nevertheless, randomised controlled trials testing the effectiveness of these programs in

improving team performance (across various sports) are needed to better evaluate their value.

Future directions

As the preceding sections demonstrate, substantial efforts have been made in the last few years to understand the performance-related benefits of identity leadership. Nevertheless, there are several important avenues for future performance-focused research. First, further experimental research examining the causal effects of identity leadership is needed. The only attempt to experimentally manipulate identity leadership to date focused solely on manipulating one component of identity leadership (leaders' identity entrepreneurship) in the context of a physical task (a 5km cycling time trial; Stevens et al., 2019b). Research examining the effect of manipulating all four facets of identity leadership (both independently and collectively) on a wider range of performance outcomes (e.g., performance on group tasks drawn from team sports that require participants to work together effectively) will be important to rigorously test the theory's applicability to sports performance. Indeed, to address a limitation of Stevens et al.'s (2019b) study, it is also important that such studies compare high identity leadership conditions to low identity leadership conditions, control groups (e.g., where no confederate leader is used), and conditions where leaders engage in other types of leadership (e.g., transformational).

Along these lines, we also note that laboratory-based experiments that manipulate leader behaviours face a particular challenge to maintain ecological validity, given the need to create artificial groups, and thus leaders, within these designs (or otherwise, use existing groups and risk confounding factors impacting results). As such, we encourage researchers to adopt creative, varied, and multiple experimental approaches to address individual research questions. For instance, in addition to conducting further laboratory-based experiments, researchers could also use vignettes (e.g., see Slater et al., 2018) or recordings of 'real' leaders (e.g., see Steffens et al., 2014a). Here, participants could be asked to imagine their coach, or watch a video of a coach, delivering a pre-match team talk (that varies by condition) then indicate, for example, their expected effort and performance

during the match. Pre-match team talks may also be a fruitful setting for naturalistic experimental tests of the effects of identity leadership. For instance, coaches could be trained to increase their engagement in identity leadership during pre-match team talks in one condition but not in another. Independent raters (blind to group allocation) could then rate the players' and teams' effort and performance during the matches that follow.

Second, further research is needed with samples drawn from elite sport contexts. To date, evidence that the benefits of identity leadership extend to the highest levels of elite sport has been restricted to observational studies and anecdotal accounts. For instance, in addition to the evidence from the London 2012 Olympics provided by Slater et al. (2015) (see 'Early Reflective Analyses and Qualitative Research' above), the development of a 'we' culture was noted as part of a recent synthesis (Kerr, 2013; The Institute of Change Management, n.d.) of 'leadership lessons' from the All Blacks—one of the most successful sports teams in history who, at the time, were between consecutive Rugby World Cup wins. Empirical research with elite samples is sorely needed to robustly test whether the performance-related benefits of identity leadership that these accounts point to, and that have been demonstrated at lower levels, extend to the elite level. Along these lines, we of course recognise that a lack of empirical research with elite samples is not a limitation that only applies to identity leadership research. Gaining access to elite athlete samples is a perennial challenge and, as Walsh et al. (2017) noted, "Most papers in sports psychology do not access elite athletes, despite pointing their conclusions toward them" (p. xv). Nevertheless, research informed by other leadership approaches has been conducted with elite samples. Notably, Smith et al. (2017) examined professional cricketers' perceptions of their coaches' and captains' engagement in transformational leadership, and Cruickshank and Collins (2015) explored the use of 'dark side' behaviours (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, hubris, and social dominance) by elite sporting leaders from various sports. The identity leadership approach will only be able to truly 'make waves' in elite sport if empirical evidence demonstrates its utility in these contexts.

Identity Leadership and Health

Participation and Effort

Compared to research focusing on performance, health-focused identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts is in a more nascent state. First, three studies have focused on the potential for leaders to promote group members' participation in, and effort during, sport and exercise group sessions.

Both of these outcomes have important health connotations. Greater physical activity participation has numerous physiological and psychological health benefits. For instance, it is associated with a reduced risk of contracting non-communicable diseases, greater self-esteem, and less depressive symptoms (e.g., see Biddle et al., 2015). Indeed, with physical activity participation rates low and stable (Guthold et al., 2018), identifying malleable correlates and determinants of physical activity remains a global health priority amid efforts to substantially reduce inactivity rates by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2018). Similarly, although effort has been more commonly studied as a precursor to performance (e.g., see Slater & Barker, 2019; Stevens et al., 2019b, described above), people's effort during physical activity bouts (e.g., exercise classes) also has important health implications. This is because the benefits of physical activity are determined both by how much people do (e.g., see Ekelund et al., 2020), and by what they do (such that they might derive benefits such as greater weight loss and greater improvements in cardiovascular fitness by exerting more effort within exercise sessions; e.g., see Carey, 2009).

In considering the potential for leaders to positively impact group members' participation through identity leadership, the starting point for researchers has been the central proposition of the social identity approach that, to the extent that a person defines themselves in terms of a particular social identity, they become motivated to align their personal behaviours with the behaviours of representative group members (i.e., with ingroup norms; Turner et al., 1987). Because regular participation is normative in many sport and exercise groups, it follows that, to the extent that a person possesses a strong social identity as a sport or exercise group member, their participation in group sessions will be greater.

Building on evidence supporting this hypothesis (e.g., Stevens et al., 2019a), researchers have examined whether sport and exercise leaders can promote members' group identification, and thus their greater participation in group sessions, by engaging in identity leadership (as measured using the ILI or ILI Short Form). These relationships were first observed in a large cross sectional study of 583 sports team and exercise group members (Stevens et al., 2018), and subsequently in more methodologically rigorous two time-point studies of sports team members (Stevens et al., 2020) and fitness class attendees (Steffens et al., 2019b).

Steffens et al.'s (2019b) study was also the first to focus on the relationship between identity leadership and effort in a context where group members' health (rather than their performance) was centre stage. In this regard, it provided initial evidence that identity leadership might facilitate greater group member effort because identity leadership is positively associated with group members' greater (a) group identification, and (b) perceived *comfort* in the group (fitness class) environment. This latter pathway is noteworthy both for its novelty, and because how people feel during exercise is likely to impact their future participation (Biddle, 2000).

Athlete Health and Burnout

A second strand of health-focused identity leadership research has begun to explore whether, and how, leaders might impact the holistic physical and mental health of group members by engaging in identity leadership. Three studies have been conducted to date, all concentrating on sports team members' self-rated health (assessed using a 3-item measure where participants rate their physical health, state of mind, and energy levels), and experience of sport-specific burnout.

First, in a sample of 120 Rugby and Australian Rules Football players, Fransen et al. (2019) found that players' greater team identification mediated relationships between their ratings of their captains' quality (as a task, motivational, social, and external leader) and their own greater self-rated health and lower sport-specific burnout. Second, in their sample of national and regional level handball players, Fransen et al. (2020c) found evidence for a

path model whereby the extent to which coaches, captains, and informal athlete leaders were each perceived (by team members) to engage in identity leadership was associated with members' greater group identification, greater perceived psychological safety, lower burnout, and greater self-rated health. Coaches' identity leadership was also directly associated with lower burnout among team members. Third, in their test of the 5R shared leadership program in basketball teams, Mertens et al. (2020) found that players who were part of teams who received the intervention felt significantly healthier, but not significantly less burnt out, than players in the comparison group (whose teams did not receive the intervention).

The largely consistent pattern of findings across the three aforementioned studies (from different contexts) provides initial evidence for a positive relationship between sports team leaders' engagement in identity leadership and athletes' perceived holistic health. Nevertheless, many of the limitations of early performance-focused research (see 'Testing Relationships—Quantitative Research' above) are also prevalent in these studies. For instance, their designs—particularly the cross sectional designs used by Fransen et al. (2019, 2020c)—prohibit conclusions related to the direction of the observed effects. The range of health outcomes assessed has also been limited.

Promisingly, however, research in organisational settings has provided evidence for similar relationships in the context of more robust research designs. For example, in a two-wave study, Steffens et al. (2017) found that Chinese workers' perceptions of their leader's identity entrepreneurship predicted their own reduced burnout 10 months later. Importantly, these researchers also found no evidence for the reverse path. Indeed, more broadly, social identification-building interventions (i.e., not just those focused on social identification development by leaders) have proved effective in various contexts, with a recent meta-analysis indicating that these interventions have, overall, shown a moderate to strong positive impact on participants' health (Hedges $g=0.66$; Steffens et al., 2019a). Of course, these findings do not rule out the possibility that the relationships observed in the sport-based studies summarised above are due to reverse causal pathways (e.g., less burnt out

participants rating their leader more highly on a positively-toned inventory). They do, however, strengthen the justification for further research testing the long-term health benefits of sporting leaders engaging in identity entrepreneurship (and identity leadership more broadly), particularly because, for professional athletes, their team is their 'workplace'.

Future Directions

Given that research examining the health-related benefits of identity leadership in sport and exercise contexts remains in its infancy, there are numerous potential avenues for future research in this area. First, there may be substantial benefit to (a) mirroring (or at least drawing on) the designs employed in performance-focused research, and (b) learning from the findings of these performance-focused studies. For instance, given initial evidence for the benefits of identity leadership training programs in sports contexts (Mertens et al., 2020; Slater & Barker, 2019), there is clear justification for adapting these programs such that they can be implemented in exercise contexts where health outcomes are more focal. For example, they could be integrated as part of programs delivered to leaders of exercise groups or classes, and evaluated on the basis of whether they (a) enhance these leaders' capacity to engage in identity leadership, and (b) lead to positive changes in group members' behaviours and experiences (e.g., greater participation in, and enjoyment of, group sessions). Indeed, in this regard it is noteworthy that group-based exercise programs that have sought to strengthen members' group identification have shown promising results (e.g., increased adherence to the program; Beauchamp et al., 2018).

Several other important avenues for health-focused identity leadership research also exist. Notably, there is scope for examinations of whether leaders can protect and enhance group members' mental health (e.g., their levels of depression) by engaging in identity leadership. Athletes' mental health is a growing concern (Reardon et al., 2019), with those competing at higher levels, in particular, demonstrating high rates of several clinical mental health conditions (that often exceed the rates observed in the general population; e.g., see Gouttebauge et al., 2019). Identifying risk and protective factors for mental health among elite (and non-elite) athletes thus represents an important research agenda. In the last

decade, considerable evidence has demonstrated the abundant mental health benefits (e.g., in relation to people's depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and life satisfaction) associated with people possessing strong social identities as members of various types of groups (see Haslam et al., 2018 for a review). Recent research has also indicated that this extends to sports group memberships, such that college sports team members experienced particular well-being benefits when their team identification strengthened across a school year (Graupensperger et al., 2020; see also Vella et al., 2020). Although these benefits might be attenuated at elite levels (because factors such as competition for places can place greater strain on group environments: Landkammer & Sassenberg, 2016; Landkammer et al., 2019), a focus on the potential mental health benefits of sporting leaders engaging in behaviours that help strengthen members' team identification might nevertheless be a fruitful avenue for research (see also Cruwys et al., 2020c).

Performance and Health: Two sides of the same coin

We have separately explored the potential for identity leadership to facilitate positive performance and health outcomes. This has historically been an important division. For example, sporting organisations, coaches, and indeed some sport psychologists have focused almost exclusively on optimising performance, with little attention paid to health (e.g., see Cruwys et al., 2020c; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Simultaneously, the literature on exercise (and physical activity more broadly) has largely developed outside of a focus on performance. However, there is growing interest in bringing these fields closer together. For example, there has been a recent emphasis on supporting elite athletes' mental health (e.g., see Reardon et al., 2019), and Sport England's mission to create a more active and healthier nation has at its heart a focus on developing, and increasing people's participation in, grassroots sport (see Sport England, 2016). The social identity perspective appears well placed to facilitate research on the considerable overlap between performance and health. First, this is because identity leadership seems to affect both performance and health outcomes through the same pathways. Specifically, identity leadership seems to facilitate (a) strong social identities among group members (e.g., Stevens et al., 2020), (b) enhanced

commitment from group members (e.g., Slater & Barker, 2019), and (c) a more positive group environment for group members (e.g., Fransen et al., 2020c). Relatedly, second, it is noteworthy that many of the outcomes (e.g., greater effort and reduced burnout) that evidence suggests flow from identity leadership and through these mechanisms are relevant to researchers and practitioners interested in enhancing both performance *and* health. Indeed, in sports contexts in particular, evidence suggests that health and performance often go hand-in-hand, such that athletes typically perform better when they are in better mental health (Schinke et al., 2018). By embracing an identity leadership approach, it may well prove possible to simultaneously improve both performance and health outcomes.

Advancing the Field: Directions, Priorities, and Considerations for Future Research

In the preceding sections, we have sought to summarise the current state of identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts, and pinpoint specific opportunities for future research to progress the performance and health agendas this research has pursued. In this final section, our goal is to provide five key broader recommendations for identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts in light of the research reviewed above.

The Need for Stronger and More Varied Research Designs

First, research using more rigorous and varied research designs is needed. In particular, research using designs that allow causality to be established is required to confirm that group member outcomes are affected by identity leadership rather (or to a greater extent) than the other way around. The use of such designs is particularly important in performance contexts, where the ‘performance-cue’ effect might be particularly powerful and cause group members (i.e., participants) to rate their leader differently as a function of their team’s performance and results (see Arthur et al., 2017). That is, group members may rate their leader higher on stereotypically positive dimensions (e.g., as captured by the ILI) if the team is performing well, compared to if the team is performing poorly.

From a research design perspective, it is also noteworthy that the nature of leadership research is such that it often confers nested data structures. That is, participants who are asked to appraise a sport or exercise leader will almost always be nested within

teams (e.g., sports teams) or groups (e.g., fitness classes), which themselves will be nested within different sports (e.g., football, cricket) or settings (e.g., fitness centres). It is thus important that future research follows the example set by recent work (Fransen et al., 2020c; Mertens et al., 2020) and uses multilevel analytical approaches to account for nested data structures of these forms, and the shared variance they confer (e.g., due to multiple participants within a single study evaluating the same leader). Indeed, multilevel analyses are not only something researchers should use for the sake of statistical rigour. They also offer opportunities to explore novel research questions. For example, multilevel modelling could be used to examine agreement across members of teams around perceptions of identity leadership. Studies have provided evidence for a broad association between identity leadership perceptions and group functioning (e.g., Fransen et al., 2020c), yet none have examined whether the level of agreement in a team about identity leadership (i.e., at a team level) or the difference between a group member and their team's mean (i.e., at an individual level) predict group functioning or team performance. Similarly, multilevel modelling could be leveraged to examine patterns that unfold over time, with group members 'nested' within both their groups and their own repeated responses over time (e.g., see Stevens & Cruwys, 2020). Such an approach would increase the power that researchers have to test research questions, and provide greater precision when examining questions around identity leadership and how it might emerge uniquely in groups over time.

Finally, it is important that, as well as using more rigorous quantitative methods, researchers consider the utility of qualitative methods for exploring novel research questions. For instance, rather than measuring the extent to which leaders are perceived to engage in identity leadership (e.g., using the ILI), interviews or focus groups could explore the behaviours that sport and exercise group members (and leaders themselves) associate with identity leadership. This would help shed light on what identity leadership 'looks like' in different contexts. Such knowledge is crucial. First, this could be translated into practical recommendations for how leaders may fruitfully adapt their behaviours such that they are perceived to be engaging in identity leadership. Second, this could inform experimental

manipulations of identity leadership (see Stevens et al., 2019b), and efforts to develop identity leadership through intervention (see Fransen et al., 2020b). Indeed, we argue that greater knowledge of how identity leadership can be experimentally manipulated and developed is vital to enable its effects to be rigorously tested. Without such knowledge to inform the design of experimental manipulations and interventions there is a danger that the theory will fail the test of falsifiability (see Bacharach, 1989). That is, researchers will have limited capacity to test whether identity leadership causes positive team and group member outcomes.

The Need for Stronger Measurement

Research is required that addresses some of the limitations of existing approaches to measuring identity leadership, and the outcomes that it is proposed to impact. First, although the ILI will remain a key tool for identity leadership researchers moving forward, there are limitations associated with relying on followers' subjective ratings. Specifically, these can be affected by factors such as selective recall, halo effects, and sympathy for one's leader (e.g., see Arthur et al., 2017; Turnnidge & Côté, 2019). To overcome these limitations, one option is to enlist independent observers to code leaders' behaviours. A tool to facilitate this process—the coach leadership assessment system—has recently been developed (Turnnidge & Côté, 2019). However, this primarily focuses on transformational leadership behaviours; no such tool for identity leadership behaviours currently exists. Given the identity leadership approach's fundamental proposition that effective leadership behaviours are group-specific (Haslam et al., 2020), developing such a tool for identity leadership would not be straightforward. However, some behaviours have become synonymous with particular facets of identity leadership (e.g., collective language and identity entrepreneurship; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Along the lines of our arguments related to the need for the identity leadership approach to be falsifiable in the preceding section, we encourage researchers to tackle the challenge of identifying concrete forms of identity leadership, rather than 'hiding behind' notions that (a) effective identity leadership behaviours vary across groups, and (b) what constitutes identity leadership is, to some extent, in the 'eye of the beholder'. Although

these points may both be true, they do not preclude attempts to identify some behaviours or strategies that are consistent with identity leadership in most (if not all) instances.

Second, with regard to the assessment of proposed outcomes of identity leadership, there is a need for further research using objective measures. This would help establish whether the benefits of identity leadership that have been observed in self-report studies—and which indicate that identity leadership *might* help promote performance and health (e.g., greater psychological safety, perceived teamwork, team confidence, and participation)—translate into *actual* performance and health benefits.

To assess sports performance, it may be tempting to draw on team or individual results. However, in real world contexts this would confer limitations. Numerous factors impact results (e.g., tactics, skill execution, and fitness levels; Rees et al., 2000), which would make it difficult to identify the extent to which any benefits observed (e.g., a better win-loss ratio) are due to the effects of (or differences in) identity leadership. While potentially less ecologically valid, controlled experimental studies focusing on more specific performance indicators (e.g., time taken to complete a distance-based exercise task or scores on a skill-related task; see Fransen et al., 2016b; Stevens et al., 2019b) represent one good alternative. Novel and more nuanced approaches to objectively assessing performance (e.g., using notation or motion analysis; Grehaigne et al., 1997; Reilly, 2001) and wearable technologies (such as the global positioning system; Coutts & Duffield, 2010) could also be used.

Wearable technology also offers a way to objectively assess behaviours linked to health outcomes. For example, accelerometers and heart rate monitors provide good options for the assessment of physical activity behaviours, offering greater accuracy than self-report measures (e.g., see Steene-Johannessen et al., 2016). Indeed, the data that such devices yield could also be harnessed to appraise the impact of leaders engaging in identity leadership in performance contexts. Given that training time and commitment represent key predictors of sports performance, a key goal for leaders (e.g., coaches) in performance contexts may be to mobilise their players to dedicate greater time and effort to

training outside group sessions (e.g., see Slater & Barker, 2019). Accelerometers and heart rate monitors would offer a means to objectively record such behaviours.

The Need to Compare the Effects of Identity Leadership to the Effects of Other Types of Leadership

As noted above, alongside the recent proliferation of identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts, there has also been interest in the explanatory power of other leadership theories in these contexts. For example, the benefits of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership have all been the focus of recent research (e.g., see Arthur et al., 2017; Bandura & Kavussanu, 2018; Worley et al., 2020). One way that researchers outside of sport and exercise contexts have sought to advance the field (and help researchers, practitioners, and leaders themselves navigate an increasingly congested literature) is through testing the comparative effects of leaders adopting different approaches (e.g., see Hoch et al., 2018; Shatzer et al., 2014). In the only attempt to compare the identity leadership approach to other leadership theories in a sport or exercise context to date, Fransen et al. (2020a) asked team members to report on their own engagement in different types of leadership and examined associations between these ratings and other team members' perceptions of their leadership quality (see 'Testing Relationships—Quantitative Research' above). Although this is a useful starting point, we encourage researchers to capitalise on research methods that afford more rigorous comparisons of the effects of different types of leadership.

In time, a sufficiently large literature may develop in sport and exercise contexts to allow meta analytic techniques to be used to test the relative performance of different types of leadership in explaining key outcomes (see Hoch et al., 2018). In the shorter term, however, we encourage researchers to conduct individual studies that enable the effect of different types of leadership on performance and health outcomes to be compared. Randomised controlled trials would be the optimal design for such studies. Specifically, leaders and their groups or teams could be randomly assigned to take part in either an identity leadership intervention or an alternative leadership intervention, each designed by

researchers with expertise in the respective leadership domains. The content of these interventions may overlap (because, as noted above, good identity leadership may also be interpreted as good transformational, servant, or authentic leadership in certain contexts). However, this does not preclude the comparison of these approaches in well-powered experiments. Strong theoretical arguments have been made that the identity leadership approach provides a superior framework to other theories because it recognises that optimal leadership behaviours vary according to the content of the group's identity (Haslam et al., 2020). Empirical studies are now needed to test these claims and assess whether identity leadership actually translates into better outcomes in applied contexts.

The Need to Test Additional Mediators

Finally, it is important to test and establish the mechanisms through which identity leadership affects key outcomes. This will help maximise the utility of the identity leadership approach as a framework for intervention by allowing those implementing interventions to better evaluate why they have or have not been effective, and what might therefore be done to improve them. To date, group identification has been shown to mediate relationships between identity leadership and an array of outcomes (e.g., see Fransen et al., 2020c; Steffens et al., 2019b; Stevens et al., 2020). Aside from this, however, there is only preliminary (and somewhat inconsistent) evidence that identity leadership translates into positive outcomes via its positive impact on group members' relational identification with the leader (Miller et al., 2020), perceived psychological safety (Fransen et al., 2020c), and perceived comfort (Steffens et al., 2019b). Given that there are likely to be several psychological processes through which identity leadership gives rise to positive outcomes, we encourage researchers to assess multiple mediators within the same study (and test these systematically; e.g., see Greenaway et al., 2016).

A further variable that might merit consideration as part of such efforts is trust. Outside sport and exercise contexts, trust in the leader has been established as a key predictor of various outcomes including team performance and team member commitment and satisfaction (e.g., see Burke et al., 2007; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). It has also been shown

to mediate the relationship between leaders' perceived identity leadership and effectiveness (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). Moreover, a recent qualitative analysis of leadership in sport indicated that leaders (coaches) are only able to inspire athletes if they establish a foundation of trust with them (Figgins et al., 2019). Finally, recent research has also shown that social identification predicts trust in the context of online and laboratory experiments, as well as real world contexts such as mass gatherings (Cruwys et al., 2020a, 2020d; see also Cruwys et al., 2020b). This suggests that leaders' identity leadership may not only enhance group members' trust in them, but also their trust in other group members (i.e., due to the stronger sense of shared identity that group members tend to possess when the leader engages in identity leadership).

The Need to Explore the Possible Dark Side of Identity Leadership

To date, the focus of identity leadership research in sport and exercise contexts has been exclusively on its potential to promote positive outcomes. We therefore do not know whether the outcomes of identity leadership are exclusively positive, or if identity leadership could be dangerous in the 'wrong hands'.

Speaking to the first of these questions, it is noteworthy that several studies have indicated that, by engaging in identity leadership, sport and exercise leaders can facilitate more commitment from group members, including their greater effort (e.g., Steffens et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2019b). In the short term, this is likely to be adaptive (e.g., enhance group members' performance, or increase the health benefits they gain from an exercise session). In the longer term, however, it is possible that group members' greater commitment might heighten their risk of injury. Indeed, as research has indicated that one way in which greater effort may manifest itself is in increased practice time outside group sessions (Slater & Barker, 2019), injuries linked to overuse may be a particular risk. To examine this possibility, future research could examine the relationship between team members' perceptions of their leaders' identity leadership and the number of injuries they sustain, and the time they spend injured, over the course of a competitive sports season. Relatedly, research could also examine (a) whether higher identity leadership perceptions

predict an increased likelihood of sports team members 'playing through' injuries, or exercise class or group members exercising through injuries, and (b) whether identity leadership is implicated in team members decisions to report (or not report) symptoms of injuries that, to some extent at least, require them to do so for diagnostic purposes (e.g., concussion).

Regarding the question of whether identity leadership might be dangerous in the wrong hands, several researchers have analysed how some of history's most prominent and notorious political leaders have successfully engaged and influenced followers by deploying leadership styles or behaviours aligned with leadership theories (e.g., see Aswad, 2018; Roberts, 2010). Speaking specifically to identity leadership, in sports contexts analyses of this nature have, again, thus far focused on how leaders have engaged in identity leadership to the benefit of their team (e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2016; Slater et al., 2015). It would therefore be valuable for research to examine whether leaders can or do use identity leadership for negative purposes—for example to convince team members to cheat (e.g., engage in foul play), or even as a tactical tool to help them maintain power. Indeed, along these lines, recent research from outside sport found that more narcissistic leaders have more interest in learning about leadership theories (Steffens & Haslam, 2020).

Conclusion

In the short time since sport and exercise researchers first turned their attention to the potential of the identity leadership approach, it has become a popular framework for understanding leadership effectiveness. This review suggests that the proliferation in research related to, and drawing on, the approach has made significant progress in establishing its benefits for performance and health. Evidence suggests that, by engaging in identity leadership, formal and informal leaders can positively impact a variety of performance and health-related outcomes in group members. Nevertheless, despite the encouraging findings recorded to date, there are several areas in which further research is needed to corroborate initial evidence for particular effects (e.g., that of identity leadership on group members' physical task performance and holistic health). Alongside this, there are also several opportunities for researchers to expand the field by applying varied methods

and designs and focusing on novel research questions. Our hope is that this article provides a platform, and guide, for this research.

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