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4   **A grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership**

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25   **Abstract**

26   The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of the process of inspirational

27   coach-leadership in sport. A Straussian grounded theory methodology was used. Semi-

28   structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with athletes (n = 22) and coaches (n

29   = 15). Data were analysed through a process of open and axial coding, and theoretical

30   integration. Through the process of analysis, data were broken down into smaller units

31   (concepts), relationships between concepts were identified, and a substantive grounded

32   theory was developed. The grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership was built

33   around the core category of 'athlete(s) inspired through changed awareness of their

34   capabilities.' The core category was underpinned by three categories: (a) Establishment of

35   mutual trust and respect with athletes, whereby coaches need to establish trust with athletes in

36   order to inspire athletes; (b) conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur,

37   which highlighted that athletes are inspired in situations where they are vulnerable or

38   ignorant regarding their potential; and (c) coach acts to change athlete's awareness of their

39   capabilities, which denotes the specific behaviours coaches should display to inspire athletes

40   in such conditions. The theory also highlights that a range of contextual factors relating to the

41   coach, athletes, and performance-environment interact to impact upon the process. The

42   theory predicts that consistency between coach behaviour and the conditions in which

43   inspiration can occur will lead to athlete-inspiration, but only if the coach has established a

44   foundation of trust and respect with the athlete.

45   **Key Words:** Leadership, inspiration, awareness, trust, connection, coaching

1. Introduction

Inspiration is a motivational state that raises an individual's intentions regarding something of high intrinsic value (e.g., a vision of an ideal self) and motivates the individual to engage in efforts to achieve these intentions.[1] An episode of inspiration is characterised by evocation, where we attribute the experience of inspiration to an external stimuli (eg, somebody else); transcendence, whereby we gain awareness of new or better possibilities; and approach motivation, where we are compelled to invest effort to bring this new idea into fruition.[2] Put simply, inspiration is posited to serve as a mediator whereby intrinsically valued qualities evoked by an external stimuli (eg, people, ideas) induce inspiration, which, subsequently, motivates the individual to extend these qualities into a personally relevant context.[3] Research in social psychology has shown inspiration to be associated with performance-related variables (eg, enhanced efficiency and productivity),[3] improved well-being,[4] and positive emotions.[2] Given that this conceptualisation of inspiration is proposed to be applicable to any context[1], and that anecdotal examples exist of teams being inspired to extraordinary achievements,[5] researchers have extended the construct of inspiration to sport, finding inspiration to be related to feelings of dominance and decreases in amotivation,[6] and higher levels of mental toughness.[7] As inspiration leads to such positive outcomes and is an experience that we cannot consciously control or evoke for ourselves,[1] understanding the sources of inspiration is important. However, limited research has explicitly explored the sources of inspiration.

One theoretical framework that has relevance for the concept of inspiration and sources of inspiration in a sporting context is transformational leadership (TFL) theory. Transformational leaders are proposed to *inspire* followers to achieve exceptional outcomes.[8] To achieve this, transformational leaders are proposed to engage in four behaviours: idealised

70   influence, where leaders enthuse pride in followers, set a good example for followers, and

71   earn followers' respect by behaving in ways that maximise values; individualised

72   consideration, where leaders display consideration for the unique needs and desires of each

73   individual; intellectual stimulation, where leaders actively encourage followers to challenge

74   commonly held assumptions about their work and be creative in producing solutions to

75   problems; and inspirational motivation, where leaders develop, articulate and inspire others

76   with their vision for the future.[8] Based upon this conceptualisation, intuitive links can be

77   made between TFL and inspiration theory. For example, inspirational motivation would

78   satisfy the transcendence characteristic of inspiration because leaders articulating an exciting

79   vision of the future may make followers aware of better possibilities. Research in sport by

80   Turnnidge and Côté[9,10] has further highlighted how coaches can show TFL behaviours to

81   inspire followers (eg, by discussing goals and expectations). However, while TFL provides

82   useful suggestions into how inspiration can be evoked by leaders, there are several theoretical

83   issues with TFL that have been identified in contemporary reviews within organisational[11]

84   and sport[12] literature. Specifically, these reviews propose that transformational leadership is a

85   fuzzy construct that lacks a clear and consistent definition and underpinning theory that

86   explains what transformational leadership is and how transformational leadership impacts on

87   outcomes.[11,12]

88   The theoretical problems are highlighted by measurement issues, whereby research

89   often finds consistently high intercorrelations between the proposed distinct dimensions of

90   TFL, which does not support the proposed multidimensionality of TFL.[11] To explain this,

91   Arthur, Bastardoz, and Eklund[12] highlight that TFL uses tautological definitions, where

92   transformational leaders are described based upon their impacts on followers, which prohibits

93   transformational leadership being used as an independent variable in quantitative research.

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94   An example of this tautology is inspirational motivation. Specifically, inspiration is proposed

95   to be a behaviour of transformational leadership. This is problematic because inspiration is a

96   response not a stimulus (i.e., an outcome not a behaviour; cf.[1]). Consequently, Arthur et al.

97   propose that transformational leadership theory is vague and does not outline how leaders are

98   able to effect followers. Thus, van Knippenberg and Sitkin propose that research should use

99   the central facets of transformational leadership theory to further our understanding of

100   leadership. Given how central inspiration is to transformational leadership theory, and the

101   positive influence inspiration has been shown to have on a range of outcomes (e.g.,

102   motivation, goal attainment, productivity, and wellbeing), research could use inspiration as its

103   central focus to explore leadership in sport.

104   In light of the above critique, it is worth considering research that has explicitly

105   examined inspirational leadership. Searle and Hanrahan[13] used semi-structured interviews to

106   explore the practices of seven inspiring leaders from a range of contexts (eg, business). The

107   findings suggested that leaders believed they could consciously inspire followers at the

108   opportune moment, but in order for inspiration to happen there must be connection between

109   the leaders and follower, and followers must be highly motivated towards the organisational

110   cause. However, the findings provide limited detail surrounding the specific actions leaders

111   engage in to inspire followers and the situations (ie, "opportune moments") where leaders can

112   inspire. Also, while the leaders were proposed to be inspiring, leaders may not understand

113   how they inspired followers. Further, this research was not specifically conducted in sport.

114   To build on Searle and Hanrahan's work, Figgins, Smith, Sellars, Greenlees and

115   Knight[14] investigated follower perceptions of inspirational leadership in sport, by

116   interviewing 17 athletes' about their experiences of being inspired by coaches. The findings

117   demonstrated that athletes were inspired in situations including those accompanied by

118 negative cognitions and emotions (eg, following poor performance). In such situations,

119 athletes reported being inspired by coaches' demonstrations of belief (eg, outlining their

120 potential), showing the way forward (eg, providing technical information that enabled them

121 to overcome a performance plateau), and exhibiting emotional support (eg, empathising with

122 athletes). Further, Smith, Figgins, Jewiss and Kearney[15] used real-life footage (from the 1997

123 British and Irish Lions tour to South Africa) to explore how leaders communicate to inspire

124 athletes. Amateur athletes viewed clips of leaders delivering speeches in different scenarios

125 (eg, at half-time) and reported being inspired by leaders creating and enhancing belief and

126 showing how the team can be successful, embracing and reinforcing the underdog status,

127 creating feelings of pride in the team, empowering athletes to take responsibility, and

128 expressing the challenges and rewards of success.

129   While such research enhances our understanding of how leaders inspire athletes, little

130 is known about the factors (eg, personal and contextual factors) that impact upon a leader's

131 ability to inspire athletes. Furthermore, although existing theories (ie, Transformational

132 Leadership)[8] mention inspiration, researchers have yet to provide a theory that *explains* the

133 process of inspirational leadership in sport.[5] Given that research has demonstrated inspiration

134 to be positively related to performance-related variables and wellbeing, research is warranted

135 to develop a theory of inspirational leadership in sport. Consequently, the aim of this study

136 was to use a grounded theory methodology to explore the process through which coaches

137 inspire athletes. Aligned with the critique of TFL, there are three specific reasons grounded

138 theory is particularly useful for studying inspirational leadership. First, grounded theory is

139 used to explore social processes involving interactions between participants and their social

140 context, and theories of leadership consider the interactions between individuals (eg, leaders

141 and followers) and the context in which these happen (for examples see ref. 6, 14). Second,

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142   grounded theory is useful when studying phenomenon where adequate theories do not exist

143   for a specific population and to date a theory of leadership that explains the inspirational

144   impact of leaders in sport does not yet exist.[5] Third, grounded theory can be used where

145   existing theories are underdeveloped,[17,18] which is the case within this area as current theories

146   of leadership cited in contemporary sport psychology research have yet to propose a valid

147   model of the process of inspirational leadership.

148   **2.   Method**

149   **2.1   Grounded Theory Methodology**

150   Consistent with Corbin and Strauss'[19] variant of grounded theory, this study was underpinned

151   by a pragmatic philosophical perspective. Pragmatists assume that knowledge is developed

152   and meaningful through our actions and interactions and is shaped by the social

153   environment[20] and developed with other people in this environment.[21] Therefore, the

154   knowledge developed in this research is a product of the participants' and researchers' beliefs

155   and experiences.

156   **2.2   Sampling and Participants**

157   Initially, purposeful sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants. Athletes who

158   had experience of being inspired by a coach were sampled. As data collection progressed,

159   theoretical sampling was used to further explore concepts identified within the initial data

160   collection and analysis.[19] Phases of theoretical sampling included interviewing: (a) coaches

161   (at grass roots, county and regional level) to identify athlete characteristics which impact

162   upon the potential for athletes to be inspired; (b) high-level coaches (eg, coaches who had

163   experience of coaching at national and international level) to explore how group factors

164   influence trust in the coach; and (c) participants who had experiences of a coach who did not

165   inspire them (ie, negative cases) to further challenge and refine the theory. In addition to the

166 specific negative cases that were sought, participants who detailed inspirational cases

167 compared these experiences with coaches who had not inspired them.

168   Thirty-seven participants (22 athletes and 15 coaches) took part in this study (see

169 Table 1 for details). Participants were British (n = 34), Irish (n = 1), Australian (n = 1), and

170 German (n = 1) and competed or coached in a range of sports (eg, Netball, Football, Rugby

171 Union, Cycling, Goalball, Swimming, Badminton). The competitive levels of participants

172 ranged from recreational (eg, local clubs) to international level (eg, competing or coaching at

173 the Olympics). In addition, the coaches had a range of qualifications with the lowest being

174 the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) level 2 or equivalent (eg, Rugby Football

175 Union level 2) and the highest being UKCC level 4 or equivalent (eg, UEFA A).

176   [INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

177 **2.3   Data collection**

178 Following institutional ethical approval, athletes fulfilling the initial sampling criteria were

179 approached, via email or face-to-face, to take part in the study. In order to participate in the

180 initial phase of data collection, participants had to be able to identify and recall a coach who

181 they perceived had inspired them during their sporting career. Consistent with grounded

182 theory methodology[19] negative cases (eg, participants who perceived they had not been

183 inspired by a coach) were used to gain a deeper understanding of inspirational coach-

184 leadership (ie, to understand what was lacking from their experiences). Prior to interviews

185 and focus groups, participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, informed

186 about the voluntary nature of their participation, and also reminded that all information

187 shared would be confidential. All participants provided written informed consent. We

188 conducted 28 individual interviews (18 athletes and 10 coaches) ranging between 34 and 97

189 minutes (M = 61.84, SD = 16.27).

190   Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the process of inspirational coach-

191   leadership in sport, as they capture rich and in-depth data.[19] An interview guide was created

192   to address the aims of the study, which covered: (a) what coaches did to inspire athletes (eg,

193   "Can you tell me about any instances where you have been inspired by your coach during

194   your sporting career?"); (b) when (ie, the situation) the athletes were inspired (eg, "What

195   happened before you were inspired?"); and (c) why they found that moment inspiring (eg,

196   "What is it about the [coach] that made you perceive this moment as inspirational?"). Probe

197   questions were used to develop a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (eg,

198   "What was the situation?"). Throughout data collection, the interview guide was consistently

199   revised to explore emerging concepts and categories.[19] For instance, when interviewing

200   experienced athletes, questions were added which focussed on their experiences of

201   inspirational coach-leadership later in their career (eg, "Are there any differences between the

202   ways you were inspired when you were less experienced to later in your career?"). Also,

203   during the later phases of data collection, the emerging theory was shown to participants to

204   evaluate its applicability to their experiences. Finally, two focus groups were conducted with

205   a total of 9 participants (4 athletes, 5 coaches). The purpose of these focus groups was to

206   examine the emerging grounded theory, as well as to provide additional data. Consistent with

207   previous research,[22] focus groups were used to gain insights into whether 'experts' (ie, those

208   with experience of inspirational coach-leadership) thought the emerging theory was

209   applicable to their experiences.[19]

210   **2.4   Data analysis**

211   Data analysis followed an iterative process whereby analysis followed each interview.[19] As

212   many individual interviews as possible (n = 24) were transcribed and coded during the data

213   collection phase. Where this was not possible, the lead researcher reflected upon the

214   interviews and listened to the interviews, writing memos to record his perceptions of

215   concepts reported by participants. These memos then informed refinement of the interview

216   guide for subsequent interviews.

217   Transcription produced 431 pages of single-spaced data, which were analysed using

218   open coding, axial coding, and theoretical integration.[19] Initially, during open coding, line-

219   by-line analysis of the transcript was conducted to identify concepts, their properties, and

220   dimensions related to inspirational coach-leadership. Open coding was used to fracture the

221   data into the smallest units (ie, concepts), which were given a code (eg, 'showing care for the

222   athletes'). Throughout this phase concepts were compared with one another to establish

223   similarities and differences. Once key concepts started to be identified, axial coding was used

224   to describe and establish relationships between concepts.[19] Through axial coding, concepts

225   identified during open coding were grouped into categories to specify a more holistic

226   explanation of the inspirational coach-leadership processes. For example, descriptive codes

227   relating to coaches' ability to demonstrate competence and coaches' ability to create a

228   connection with their athlete(s) were grouped under the category trust and respect.

229   The final stage of analysis was theoretical integration.[19] Theoretical integration was

230   used to identify the core category, establish links between categories and the core category,

231   and add density to categories. For instance, the concept of 'establishing mutual trust and

232   respect' was identified as important to the coach's ability to inspire athletes and was

233   integrated into the developing theory. During this stage, the emerging theory was presented to

234   participants who were asked to comment on the extent to which the theory represented their

235   experiences. This feedback enabled further refinement of the theoretical framework by

236   ensuring that findings were grounded in the data and reflected participants' experiences.[19]

237 **2.4.1.1   Delayed literature review.**

238 An initial review of inspiration and leadership literature (ie, transformational leadership) was

239 conducted to inform the rationale for this study. However, this served to ensure that the lead

240 researcher was thinking theoretically from the start of a grounded theory and, thus,

241 demonstrated theoretical sensitivity.[23] Importantly, however, concepts identified during

242 analysis were not compared with existing literature until the latter stages of data

243 analysis/collection. At this point, a delayed literature review[19] was undertaken to contrast,

244 compare, and integrate findings with relevant theories and constructs, to reduce conceptual

245 overlap and confusion.

246 **2.5   Methodological rigour.**

247 As well as the methods described previously (ie, the use of focus groups, theoretical

248 sampling, and the iterative process), further analytical tools were used to enhance the study.

249 First, the data were subjected to constant comparison whereby codes were compared with

250 each other for similarities and differences.[19,23] Fifty-three memos were written (ranging from

251 half a page and two pages long) during data collection/analysis to encourage reflexivity,

252 clarification, category saturation, and concept development.[19] Memos covered a range of

253 topics including the impact of perceived coach care, the complexity of influencing a group,

254 and how athlete experience effects the ways in which they are inspired. Diagramming was

255 used to visually represent the data with a focus on integrating concepts, checking whether

256 relationships between concepts and categories were logical, and to assist the lead researcher

257 in viewing the data at an abstract level.[19]

258   Two further methods were used to enhance the rigour of this study. Firstly, a reflexive

259 journal was written throughout the study, which allowed the researcher to record any

260 preconceived ideas or biases in relation to the data. Further, throughout the process two of the

261   research team acted as "critical friends" and a theoretical sounding board by challenging the

262   lead researcher on his interpretations of the data.[24] This process took place several times

263   during both formalised presentations of data, more informal discussions, and via comments

264   on the memos. Finally, the substantive grounded theory can be evaluated using the criteria of

265   fit, relevance, work, and modifiability.[19]

266   **3.   Results**

267   The resulting substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership in

268   sport is presented in Figure 1. Based upon the experiences of participants interviewed in this

269   study, inspirational coach-leadership changes athletes' perceptions of their capabilities (in

270   both the short- and/or long-term). The grounded theory is constructed around the core

271   category of 'athlete inspired through changed awareness of their capabilities'. The core

272   category is underpinned by three other categories: establishing mutual trust and respect with

273   the athlete/team; conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur; and coach acts

274   to change athlete(s) awareness of their capabilities. In addition, factors that impact the

275   process of inspirational coach-leadership are also discussed. The following sections present

276   an overview of the core category, the underpinning categories and the links between them. In

277   the quotes presented, acronyms are used to preserve participants' anonymity (eg, Athlete 1 =

278   A1; Coach 3 = C3).

279   **3.1   Core category: Athlete(s) inspired through changed awareness of their**

280   **capabilities.**

281   Coaches were proposed to inspire athletes by changing perceptions of their capabilities. For

282   example, one athlete discussed how being inspired by their coach altered their long-term

283   goals:

284   I thought my potential was a lot higher [after my coach inspired me]. My goal always

285   then was just to compete for GB one time, but once that was achieved I had to set

286   myself a new goal. So, rather than just compete for them, compete and do well. I set

287   more challenging goals in general (A8).

288 Athletes discussed how the change in their perception of their capabilities could also be

289 short-term in nature. For instance, one athlete discussed how a coach's half-time team-talk

290 inspired his team to perceive that they could turn the game around in the short-term (ie,

291 second half), stating that the coach "just made us all think that 'yeah, we can beat these guys.

292 Yeah, they are better than us, but what is to say we can't go and score two and not concede

293 one.' So, he gave us the belief to go and do it" (A4).

3.2   Category 1: Establishment of mutual trust and respect with athlete(s).

295 Trust was proposed to be the foundation of coaches' ability to inspire. That is, without trust,

296 participants suggested that it would be very unlikely for athletes to be inspired by their

297 coaches. This was illustrated by one athlete who said:

298   That's [trust and respect] kind of like the core isn't it, it does boil down to . . . having

299   that trust and having that respect between the coach and the athletes, because if you

300   don't have that then you're not going to feel inspired, are you, by them (A16).

301   Trust was proposed to facilitate belief and buy-in in the coach's methods as well as

302 enhance communication between coaches and athletes. For instance, one athlete said trust

303 made them, "more likely to listen to [the coach] . . . you are more likely to tell them like if

304 you have a specific goal you want to aim for . . . you are more likely to speak to them if you

305 trust them" (A10).

306   The establishment of mutual trust and respect was based around: athletes' perception of

307 coach competence; the level of personal connection between coaches and athlete(s); and the

308 extent to which coaches were perceived to demonstrate trust in athletes.

309   **Coach Competence.** Coach competence was suggested to be an important factor in

310 athletes trusting, and thus being open to being inspired by, the coach. Such trust informed

311 athletes' expectations of the coach and lead athletes to be more open-minded. Athletes'

312 perception of coach competence was informed by coach reputation. As one athlete said:

313   I had a coach two years ago who . . . was one of the best coaches I've ever had . . . and

314   he'd coached a swimmer to 3 Olympic gold-medals . . . and that actually greatly

315   influenced my decision to come to University, because . . . I'd be able to be coached by

316   . . . this legend . . . So, yeah that had a massive influence on feeling inspired . . .

317   because you feel as if "ah, if they did it under that coach then why can't I?" (A16).

318 Coach-attributed improvements also resulted in inspiration. For example, one athlete asserted

319 that coach-driven improvement "leaves you open to being inspired . . . For example, if they . .

320 . change things and . . . you see your times improving. I suppose you can see it is actually

321 having an effect" (A8).

322   The content and tone of communication was also proposed to impact on athlete

323 perceptions of coaches' competence and inspirational capability. Inspirational coaches were

324 perceived as passionate and outgoing. Indeed, when discussing factors that influence

325 coaches' ability to inspire them, said they needed to be "someone with a bit of what I would

326 say is charisma" (A15). Coaches' charisma and personality was proposed to impact on

327 coaches' ability to inspire by increasing the potential that an athlete would listen to them.

328 This was illustrated by one athlete who said that if a coach "turns up with a personality of a

329   wet dish rag, then you don't particularly want to listen to them . . . I need someone bubbly,

330   somebody than can get through to me and be energetic about it" (A3).

331   **Creating a personal connection with athlete(s).** Coach-athlete connection appeared

332   pivotal to perceptions of a coach's inspirational capabilities. Athletes and coaches agreed that

333   personal connection was at least as important as coaching competence. This was highlighted

334   by one athlete who said:

335   I think football knowledge is not as influential as someone who can talk to people and

336   understand people . . . respect every member of the team and make you feel valued.

337   Umm, I think it's personal qualities . . . which are more influential than any football

338   specific [knowledge], no matter what level they play there football . . . so it's not

339   necessarily where they've played, it's more about their ethos and the way they deal and

340   communicate with people, which is more inspiring to me (A15).

341   To connect with athletes, coaches were proposed to demonstrate interest in athletes both in

342   (eg, providing personalised performance-related support) and outside of sport (eg, providing

343   social support, protecting athletes in public). For example, one athlete described how her

344   coach demonstrated care by doing "simple things, like I had to take my car to the garage for a

345   MOT, and he followed me there and took me home, because obviously I couldn't get home"

346   (A16). To connect with, and inspire, athletes it appeared important for coaches to be

347   perceived as authentic and altruistic. This perception was fuelled by honest communication.

348   With regards to selection, one athlete said:

349   Even if it is not what a player wants to hear, I think that honesty is more beneficial . . .

350   for instance, I've been dropped or something like that and they [the coach] tell me

351   exactly why . . . So, actually, players will respect coaches more if they give them

352   feedback. And also . . . I learned with things like selection it is that it is not personal it

353   is just a matter of opinions . . . but players will take it more personally if there is no

354   communication (A11).

355   The extent to which the coach represented, and embedded group values was also

356 proposed to impact upon a coach's ability to connect with, and inspire, athletes. For instance,

357 one athlete outlined the importance of his coach embedding team values stating, "Another big

358 thing for him was that, I suppose it was inspirational, he made sure that players bought in to

359 what the club was about" (A11). In accord with this, one coach discussed the importance of

360 translating club values to his team in order to enhance connection:

361   So, when [the old coach] left I thought it was my duty to, yes win, but look after the

362   soul of the club to what it means . . . I also think . . . I get the club; I get what it stands

363   for and what it believes in, what its point of difference is. I think I have been very good

364   at translating that (C3).

365   **Coach demonstrating trust in their athlete(s).** Athletes and coaches agreed that trust

366 needed to be reciprocated in order for athletes to be inspired by the coach. For example, a

367 Paralympic athlete discussed how his coach inspire him through demonstrating trust in him:

368   He [the coach] was all about giving visually impaired people that independence and

369   doing things for themselves and . . . I've passed it on to others. So, I know he has

370   inspired me because things he has done, I am passing on to others (A9).

371 Coaches providing athletes with choice and autonomy, and then acting on athlete feedback,

372 was proposed to demonstrate trust in athletes. For example, one athlete perceived her coach

373 to trust her because, "he used to ask us things like if we enjoyed the session, what we'd prefer

374 to do, what we liked doing" (A5).

375   Providing leadership responsibility was posited to demonstrate trust in athletes, but

376 also served to reinforce coach influence over, and thus ability to inspire, athletes. For

377 instance, one coach described the importance of having a "core group" of players onside:

378   You do need . . . some really senior, influential core people who live and drive by the

379   values of the organisation . . . you are not going to get 12 or 13, but you have to get

380   the majority . . . of the influential ones to be driving and then that allows you to

381   absorb your maverick (C3).

382 **3.3   Category 2: Conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur.**

383 When recalling instances of being inspired, athletes discussed the situation prior to being

384 inspired by their coach. Overall, athletes seemed to lack knowledge relating to their

385 capabilities and or their future potential prior to being inspired

386   **Athlete uncertain regarding potential or ways to improve.** Athletes discussed how

387 they were inspired by coaches when they lacked direction (eg, uncertain of their next goal,

388 transitioning to a new context). This was illustrated by one ex-international coach who

389 discussed how his athletes were often oblivious to their potential:

390   . . . uncertainty regarding potential is again what I said to you that "I want to convince

391   you, you can do what you think you are unable to do", right . . . it's rather lack of

392   knowledge . . . you just don't know what you are capable of (C9).

393   Further, athletes were inspired in scenarios where they lacked knowledge regarding

394 how to improve their own performance. This was illustrated by one athlete who said:

395   So, umm, I kick a lot and especially like when I wasn't the most effective swimmer

396   like last year, I kicked more and he [the coach] went behind me for one length and

397   then we finished, and I was quite out of breath. . . I didn't really understand that we

398   weren't meant to be going that hard, and . . . basically he was telling me to pull more

399   and to kick less and relax when I swim (A2).

400   In addition, experienced athletes discussed how a lack of awareness of what they

401 could achieve following a high-level of personal achievement (eg, having had a successful

402 international career) could precede inspiration. This was highlighted by one international

403 athlete who discussed how towards the end of his career he was uncertain of what his next

404 goal could be:

405   For me personally when I gave up the captaincy and stopped playing for England I

406   struggled . . . because I didn't know what the kind of next goal was . . . I think that is

407   very dangerous for a coach because they can think they can stop inspiring those older

408   guys because they feel that they know everything and they feel that they should know

409   everything themselves (A11).

410   **Athlete lacks knowledge or belief regarding ability to overcome challenging**

411 **circumstances.** Athletes were inspired in situations where they lacked belief or experience

412 (eg, following poor performance, in novel situations). For instance, prior to being inspired,

413 one athlete recalled how her team was feeling pressure as they did not have experience of

414 competing at that level recalling, "I think, the main issue with that is we hadn't had the

415 previous experience of medal racing, so whatever [the coach] said or did, I think there was

416 going to be an element of we didn't know how to deal with the pressure" (A1).

417   Athletes reported lacking belief in their ability prior to being inspired by their coach.

418 This was illustrated by one athlete when describing how she felt prior to being inspired

419 stating, "I got into this other club. Umm, and I didn't know that I was [good enough] . . . so

420 when I got there, I didn't think that I was actually worthy of being there" (A21). Inspiration

421   was needed when athletes were at extreme lows, as illustrated by one coach who described

422   how his athlete was in a desperate state prior to being inspired:

423   A little bit earlier in the year I had one athlete that was really struggling with burnout

424   and she is one of the girls that, using this next gen programme, I'm working with

425   now. She had about 4 to 6 weeks sort of in March and April this year where she was

426   just close to saying "that's it, I've had enough. I'm not going to do this anymore"

427   (C2).

428   **3.4   Category 3: Coach acts to change athlete's awareness of their capabilities.**

429   To inspire athletes, coaches need to change athletes' perceptions of their capabilities.

430   Coaches are proposed to inspire athletes by demonstrating and instilling belief in their ability;

431   and outlining what and how an athlete can achieve in the future.

432   **Demonstrating and instilling belief.** Athletes discussed being inspired when they

433   perceived that their coaches demonstrated belief in them. This was illustrated by one athlete

434   who discussed:

435   He's [the coach] always said to me "I'm watching your results. I'm watching what

436   you're doing. Why are you going to Uni? Why are you not going full-time sailing?

437   Why are you still at college? I want you to be full-time sailing." And I think it was

438   somebody else having that full belief in me that I found inspirational . . . He always just

439   said "this is what you should be doing. You can get to the Olympics. Why are you not

440   going for it?" (A1).

441   Coaches agreed that athletes were inspired by demonstrations of belief (eg, providing

442   encouragement and reassurance). For instance, one coach discussed how she perceived she

443   inspired an athlete struggling for confidence:

444   When I met her [the athlete] she was English Universities, [University] student, I only

445   had her for one year . . . and she was trying to get into England . . . but at the time her

446   face wasn't fitting. . . and I just said to her "look, as far as I'm concerned I've seen a

447   lot of players through here." I said "you are the most athletic, capable player I have

448   ever seen come through the door. You need to keep knocking until the door is open." .

449   . . The first time I saw her since she'd made it into England (C6).

450   As well as directly demonstrating belief (eg, outlining athlete potential), coach

451 behaviour was also proposed to display belief. For example, coaches making sacrifices for

452 athletes (eg, giving up their own time to provide extra support) was deemed inspiring. For

453 instance, one athlete recalled how she was inspired by her coach's support:

454   She'll [the coach] always take us to the competitions that allow us to progress . . .

455   fitness sessions or extra sessions at another club when we haven't got the hall, just to

456   make it the maximum opportunity to be what we can (A10).

457   Coaches also instilled belief in athletes by having a strengths-based approach to

458 coaching. For instance, one athlete discussed being inspired when his coach "emphasised my

459 strengths, and kind of suppress any weaknesses that I might have" (A15). As well as

460 highlighting strengths, coaches inspired athletes, by playing to these strengths. This was

461 highlighted by a retired former-professional athlete who described how his coach inspired

462 them despite being physically inferior to their opponents:

463   Liam [the coach], obviously, masterminded this way of play . . . we had the handling

464   skills, we had the fitness and the speed and ultimately, we'd wear them down . . . he

465   gave us confidence in our ability, our handling skills and certainly confidence in our

466   fitness and physical preparation because you know we were fitter than them and he

467   built the whole game plan around that, so that was inspirational because it made you

468   feel good about yourself (A18).

469   As well as something that the coach physically said or did, coaches could indirectly

470 instil belief in, and inspire, athletes based on their past accomplishments (eg, their

471 achievements with other athletes). For example, one athlete described:

472   . . . if I know that I could be coached by someone who, umm, has coached an athlete

473   to five Olympic gold-medals then I would . . . if I was to start being coached by them

474   then I would think that I could do that . . . yeah, definitely that would kind of motivate

475   me to think that "why can't I do that if I'm under this certain coach that's coached this

476   girl to five Olympic gold-medals?" and it builds your confidence, as well. I think

477   that's . . . a massive thing because when I was being coached by this certain coach I

478   felt as if no one was going to stop me because, umm, he was such a renowned coach

479   and his training was so renowned (A16).

480   **Showing the way forward.** Athletes were also inspired when coaches provided them

481 with information that would allow them to reach goals or overcome challenges. Athletes

482 proposed that having long-term goals to work towards was inspirational, but for them to be

483 truly inspiring they needed to understand how to reach those goals. For example, one athlete

484 stated, "I think inspiration is seeing the goal that you want, umm, and . . . seeing the goal that

485 you want to get to and being able to highlight the steps that you want to get there" (A12).

486 Alongside understanding the path towards their goals, it was proposed that in order to

487 maintain inspiration athletes needed to understand the link between their current actions (eg,

488 in practice) and their long-term goals. This was highlighted by an international coach who

489 discussed how he continued to inspire athletes on a day-to-day basis:

490   It's reminding them [athletes] why we do it sometimes, what is at stake. You know, you

491   are doing the first one day game in May and you talk about road to Wembley, "you

492   know, this finishes at [the final]. It's May today but it finishes in August at [the final] . .

493   . So, this game today counts just as much as that one" . . . because if we don't deal with

494   that day in May we are not going to get to that day in August (C3).

495   As well as being inspired towards long-term goals, athletes were also inspired when

496   coaches were able to provide them with information that would allow them to overcome

497   short-term obstacles. For example, one athlete described how the coach provided specific

498   instructions to inspire her and her teammate:

499   He didn't speak to us about racing before the race and we'd never had that before,

500   before a race. The coaches would usually say to us the shifts are doing this, the breeze

501   is at this angle, this is where the course is, constantly thinking about it. What I think he

502   was doing is he knew we already knew that. We had already been racing there for a

503   week. . . Then when we set off to do the race he gave us three bullet points, like "this is

504   what you're going to do, that is what is going to happen, and here you go" . . . he

505   would tell us "start under this group because you know they are going to be quick" so

506   we'd do that and execute that, and we knew we put ourselves in a good position to start

507   the whole race. So, I think that was pretty inspiring because he took our mind off and

508   then said "focus on that, that's all you have to do. Now go and do it" (A1).

509   Experienced athletes reported being less likely to be inspired by coaches outlining a

510   long-term goal. In this instance, providing athletes with responsibility was proposed to

511   inspire them. For instance, one athlete discussed, following deselection from international

512   level, he was inspired when his coach presented him the opportunity to mentor junior players:

513   [The coach said] "We've got a young player here, a really good player; we need you

514   to work with him." You know actually take the focus off the big goal and get some

515   energy in here, yes to help the other player but to give you another goal (A11).

516 **3.5   Factors that impact on the process of inspirational leadership.**

517 Athletes and coaches proposed that a range of factors (related to the coach, athlete, and

518 context) impact upon the process of inspirational coach-leadership. These factors were seen

519 to impact upon the other categories identified within the grounded theory and, consequently,

520 the potential for athletes to be inspired by coaches. The experience level of coaches had an

521 impact on the process of inspirational coach-leadership. Coach experience was proposed to

522 impact on coaches' decision making, reflective practice, self-awareness, and ability to

523 establish trust and respect with athletes. Coaches having a positive outlook (eg, in their

524 general demeanour, their communication with and thoughts about their athletes) was

525 proposed to impact upon athletes' perceptions of, and potential to be inspired by, the coach.

526 This was illustrated by one athlete who said that their coach was "always positive about the

527 team, even if we were losing every week, he'd still be like next week we will win. If he did

528 have any negative thoughts we wouldn't have known about it" (A7).

529   Athletes' experience, level of self-awareness, and desire to learn and improve were

530 seen to impact the extent to which they were open to being inspired. For instance, athletes'

531 previous sporting experiences were proposed to impact upon the way they perceive and

532 interact with their coach. The general consensus was that less experienced athletes were more

533 open to being inspired, whereas experienced athletes were less open (because of higher self-

534 awareness) and more likely to challenge the coach. Indeed, one athlete discussed:

535   I think the biggest thing when you are older in your career, you kind of know more. I

536   would argue to a certain extent, someone can't keep selling you a dream. So, it's like

537   when you are 19, 20, 21, 22 . . . you are kind of a little bit wet behind the ears and

538   you'll believe anything and think I can achieve that. Whereas, I think sometimes when

539   you get later on in your career it is difficult to kind of keep selling those dreams

540   because in a bad way you've got those experiences and had those knocks that make you

541   think "actually it doesn't kind of work out like this" (A11).

542 A commonality among athletes was that they appeared to have motivation to develop. For

543 example, one coach described athletes who he perceived to have inspired as being,

544 "motivated, they are committed, they do have . . . desire and have, umm, aspirations" (C5).

545   In addition, the context was proposed to impact on the process of inspirational

546 leadership. Participants suggested that the performance-level at which they were operating

547 and contact time with the coach impacts upon the potential for athletes to be inspired. For

548 example, when asked about what impacts on her potential to inspire athletes, one coach

549 responded, "whether you've got enough time with them; that is probably the biggest thing [in

550 terms of inspiration]" (C6). Athletes suggested that contact time impacted their perception of

551 their coach's dedicated to their development. For instance, one athlete said, "I think time, as

552 well, I think that's crucial. I think if they dedicate a lot of time to you . . . I think that would

553 inspire me more because they are putting so much time into me" (A14).

554 **3.6   A substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership**

555   **in sport.**

556 The proposed grounded theory (see figure 1) suggests that athletes are inspired when coaches

557 are able to change their awareness of their short- or long-term capabilities (see core

558 category). In order to change athletes' awareness, and thus inspire them, coaches need to

559 establish trust and respect with their athletes (see category 1) by demonstrating competence

560 (eg, showing they have the ability to have a positive impact on athletes), creating a

561 connection with their athletes on a personal level (eg, showing interest in their athletes'

562 welfare), and showing trust in their athletes (eg, empowering athletes to take responsibility).

563 Having established a level of mutual trust and respect, coaches are then able to inspire

564 athletes when the athlete is in a situation where inspiration has the potential to occur (see

565 category 2). The theory suggests that these situations are characterised by athlete

566 vulnerability, whereby athletes are unsure or lacking in awareness regarding (a) their short-

567 or long-term potential or (b) how they can overcome challenges or reach their goals. In order

568 to change awareness (see category 3), coaches need to act in ways that demonstrate belief in

569 athletes (eg, outlining an athlete's long-term potential) and/or provide them with information

570 or resources that enables them to overcome challenges or reach their goals (eg, provide clear

571 solutions to problems). Also, the theory proposes that factors relating to the context, athlete,

572 and coach interact to impact upon: (1) the establishment of mutual trust and respect between

573 coaches and their athletes; (2) the conditions under which inspiration has the potential to

574 occur; and (3) the way a coach acts to change athlete(s) awareness of their capabilities.

575 The theory is also cyclical in that it proposes that the changed awareness associated

576 with becoming inspired impacts on the other categories within the process. More specifically,

577 being inspired has the potential to: (1) enhance the level of trust between coaches and athletes

578 (eg, an athlete's perception of their coach's competence is higher), (2) impact upon the

579 conditions under which inspiration may occur (eg, athletes are more aware of what they can

580 achieve, thus may not lack knowledge of their capabilities anymore), and thus make it less

581 likely for athletes to be inspired by coaches demonstrating belief in their ability; and (3)

582 change the factors that impact upon the process of inspirational coach-leadership (eg, athletes

583 have a changed level of self-awareness).

584 [INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

25

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a substantive grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership. In doing so, this study adds to the limited understanding regarding inspirational leadership by providing the first theory of inspirational leadership derived specifically in the sporting context. The grounded theory suggests that athletes are inspired when coaches act to change their awareness of what they can achieve (eg, by outlining their long-term potential) in situations characterised by uncertainty (eg, when an athlete is unsure how to overcome challenging performance circumstances) and ignorance (eg, when an athlete is unaware of their potential).

The grounded theory highlights the potential to integrate several existing theories to more fully understand the complex process of leadership. Several elements of other theories appear to be embedded within the proposed grounded theory. For instance, the coach demonstrating interest in athletes is consistent with the individual consideration element of TFL.[8] In relation to trust, the need for the coach to represent group values has consistently been identified as factor that affects the potential for leaders to influence groups within the social identity approach to leadership.[25] Providing choice to athletes relates to the autonomy concept of self-determination theory[26] which is central to the premise of the empowering coaching programme.[27] This theory also has elements from theories yet to be extensively explored within the sporting context. Indeed, the concepts of empowering followers, showing care for followers, and being authentic are elements of follower-orientated models of leadership such as self-sacrificial leadership[28] and servant leadership.[29] Further, that leaders who inspire demonstrate confidence and trust in athletes, appear passionate and show conviction when communicating has parallels with central facets of charismatic leadership.[30]

608   The current research provides information on leadership behaviours proposed to

609   inspire. These include demonstrations of belief (eg, outlining an athlete's long-term potential,

610   providing encouragement, making sacrifices, focussing on athlete strengths) and showing the

611   way forward (eg, providing tactical information that helps an athlete to reach their goals,

612   providing specific instructions to overcome challenges, providing responsibility, and setting

613   new goals). These behaviours resonate with previous leadership theories. For example,

614   outlining an athlete's potential and providing encouragement has links with the inspirational

615   motivation dimension of TFL.[10] In addition, making sacrifices for athletes appears to relate to

616   self-sacrificial leadership.[28]

617   Although the findings highlight ways in which coaches may inspire, a key proposition

618   of the grounded theory is that efforts to inspire will only be successful if an athlete trusts their

619   coach. By highlighting the importance of trust in the process of inspirational coach-

620   leadership, this study contributes to leadership theory more broadly by identifying

621   antecedents of trust (ie, why athletes trust their coach) and offering suggestions in relation to

622   the role that trust plays in leader effectiveness. Taking these in turn, factors that facilitate

623   trust in a leader identified in the grounded theory are similar to existing conceptualisations of

624   trust. For example, the concepts of 'perception of coach competence' and 'personal

625   connection between coach and athlete(s)' incorporate elements related to ability,

626   benevolence, and integrity (eg, demonstrating care for athletes, representing the values of the

627   group, demonstrating competence).[31] However, the findings of this study add to the literature

628   on trust—which has shown little consideration for the leader trusting their followers[32]—by

629   suggesting that athletes need to feel that trust is reciprocated in order for trust to be formed.

630   Thus, this theory identifies ways coaches demonstrate trust in athletes (ie, providing choice

631   and autonomy, and encouraging responsibility and leadership).

632　　　　The findings of this study also add to theory regarding the role of trust in leader

633　　effectiveness. Generally trust is proposed to mediate between leader behaviours and follower

634　　outcomes.[33] This study suggests that the relationship between trust and leadership is more

635　　dynamic, with participants in this study indicating that without trust coaches would be unable

636　　to inspire athletes. This would appear to be in line with the conceptualisation of trust as "the

637　　willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the

638　　expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor"[34(p712)].

639　　Consequently, the present findings suggest that trust may moderate the impact of leadership

640　　on followers. Specifically, leader behaviours and interactions with their athlete over time

641　　have the potential to establish trust, which, in turn, leaves an athlete more open to being

642　　inspired by their coach.

643　　　　　As well as the importance of developing trust, in line with other theories of leadership

644　　(eg, multidimensional model of leadership)[16], the proposed grounded theory suggests that

645　　contextual factors (relating to the athlete, the coach, and performance-level) impact on the

646　　process of inspirational coach-leadership. Taking these in turn, athletes who had a desire to

647　　improve were deemed to be more open to being inspired. This supports previous research that

648　　has shown intrinsic motivation to moderate the extent to which an individual experiences

649　　inspiration.[2] In addition, athlete's experience and level of self-awareness was proposed to

650　　influence the extent to which they could be inspired, with experienced athletes proposed to be

651　　more difficult to inspire. This may be because their awareness of their actual- or best-self

652　　hinders the appreciation of a potential future-self.[35] Specifically, experienced athletes'

653　　knowledge of their limitations may hinder their appreciation of a better future-self because it

654　　is inconsistent with the limits of their previous best-self.[35] Coach experience and level of

655　　motivation was also posited to impact upon the process of inspiring athletes by impacting

656 upon a coach's confidence, decision making, and their ability to establish trust and respect.

657 This finding aligns with research into coaching practice which has shown that a coach's

658 previous experience and motivation can impact upon their behaviour and subsequently

659 athlete's perceptions of the coach.[36] With regards to performance level, it was proposed that

660 greater levels of contact time allow for increased interaction between the coach and athlete,

661 which enhanced the level of trust between coaches and athletes (eg, suggesting that coaches

662 were dedicating increased time to athletes). Indeed, this supports Shamir's[37] proposition that

663 "it takes time for the majority of leadership inputs to produce the outcomes and the likelihood

664 that the inputs, the outcomes, and relationships between them may change over time" (p.

665 307). Therefore, the theory suggests that coaches need to consider contextual factors when

666 considering how to inspire athletes.

667 **4.1   Applied implications**

668 The proposed grounded theory provides several applied suggestions for coaches and

669 practitioners working with coaches. First, this grounded theory suggests situations in which

670 coaches might be able to inspire athletes (eg, following poor performance). Second, the

671 grounded theory highlights how coaches might inspire athletes (eg, by outlining an athlete's

672 long-term potential). In addition, the grounded theory suggests that coaches need to be

673 cognisant of contextual factors that might impact on whether coaches can inspire. For

674 example, the findings suggest that athletes' experience, level of self-awareness, and the

675 performance-level at which they compete, impact upon the process (eg, what an athlete can

676 be inspired by, the level of trust and respect between coaches and athletes). Crucially, it

677 appears that athletes are only inspired if they trust the coach on both a personal and

678 professional level. Thus, coaches and practitioners are encouraged to target the antecedents of

679   trust identified within the grounded theory to enhance a coach's ability to inspire athletes in

680   suitable conditions.

681   **4.2   Strengths, limitations and future research directions**

682   Considering the limitations of previous literature outlined in the introduction, this study has

683   several strengths. First, this study provides the first theory of inspirational coach-leadership

684   derived specifically in the sporting context. Second, this study outlines several mechanisms

685   that may explain the inspirational influence of the inspiring behaviours identified. Third, our

686   findings go some way to addressing criticisms of previous leadership theory and research

687   which fail to take into account factors that may impact on leaders' decision making.[38] Indeed,

688   this study outlines not only *what* leaders do to inspire, but also outlines *when* and *why* leaders

689   might engage in behaviours proposed to inspire athletes. Finally, this study has been

690   conducted in a rigorous manner using a range of methods to enhance methodological

691   coherence and rigour (writing memos, and theoretical sampling) which is in line with Weed's

692   suggestions of what is considered quality grounded theory.

693   While this study provides a framework to guide coaches' attempts to inspire athletes,

694   the application of the proposed theory needs to be considered in light of the study's

695   limitations. For instance, the current study relied on retrospective accounts of participants'

696   experiences. Thus, the current findings may be limited by hindsight biases. However, it is

697   important to consider that inspiration is not something that you can necessarily observe as it

698   happens in the "natural context of everyday life" and is usually "not the result of deliberate

699   effort of one party . . . to inspire another";[1(p506)] indeed, coaches in this study suggested that

700   they did not intentionally aim to inspire. That is not to say that observational methods would

701   not be useful to enhance our understanding of this process, rather that they could compliment

702   other qualitative methods. Thus, future research may use observational methods to enhance

703   our understanding of coaches' (identified as inspirational by athletes) practices that may

704   inspire athletes. In addition, exploring experiences of high-profile coaches identified as

705   inspiring may be fruitful. However, as access to such coaches is limited, using available

706   media sources (eg, autobiographies)—as used in previous sport-leadership research (eg,

707   Smith, Arnold, & Thelwell)[39]—may be useful in extending our understanding of inspirational

708   leadership. Such methods work to refine and extend our understanding of this process.

709   In addition, while this is a useful first step to developing a theory of inspirational

710   leadership in sport, to extend our understanding, it may be beneficial to explore how others in

711   leadership positions (both formal and informal) inspire athletes and peers. Further, this study

712   relied on experiences of participants from western (primarily British) cultures. Thus,

713   exploring experiences of participants from other cultures is important, and could enable

714   researchers to develop a formal theory of inspirational coach-leadership in sport.[18] Further,

715   this study could provide the foundation for research exploring how leaders inspire followers

716   in other contexts (eg, in educational, organisational, and healthcare contexts). Finally, future

717   research could explore the feasibility and efficacy of leadership development programs based

718   upon these findings. To do so, an action-research approach—successfully adopted by

719   researchers who have developed programs based upon the proposals of grounded theory

720   studies (eg, Thrower, Harwood, & Spray)[40]—could be used. Such an approach would also

721   provide the opportunity for the central proposals of the theory to be refined and, thus, further

722   our understanding of the process of inspirational coach-leadership.

723   **5.   Perspectives**

724   This study offers a substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-

725   leadership in sport, and highlights the complex and nuanced process the coach engages with

726   in order to inspire athletes. As well as behaving in a manner to change athletes' awareness,

31

727   when athletes are lacking in knowledge or having a crisis in confidence, the developed theory

728   highlights that athletes' level of trust and respect for the coach has the potential to make or

729   break the potential for a coach to inspire athletes. Thus, in order to have an inspirational

730   influence coaches should engage in practices aimed at establishing trust and respect with their

731   athletes. Moreover, this theory provides coaches and coach developers with

732   recommendations on which to develop their own or others' ability to inspire. Given that this

733   is the first sport-specific theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership, these results

734   offer an important theoretical foundation for future research and a theoretical framework on

735   which applied practice can be based.

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