A Sociogram Says a Thousand Words: An Examination of Leadership and Follower Development Among NCAA Athletes

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Introduction
Scholars have advanced that follower development remains an area of inquiry in need of further research (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Woolley, Caza, & Levy, 2011). In the sport management leadership literature, there is a similar knowledge gap, as researchers have focused mainly on leader behaviors, leadership theories, and decreasing unethical leader behaviors (Welty Peachey, Damon, Zhou, & Burton, 2015). Although follower development has been mostly missing in the literature, sport management scholars have recently acknowledged the need to investigate specific aspects of the leadership process that may impact follower development (Chelladurai & Kerwin, 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). With leadership defined as the dynamic leader-follower relationship within a context where both leaders and followers are invested in a shared goal (Yammarino, 2013), some of the leadership aspects needing further examination include: gender dynamics in sport leadership (Burton, 2015), athletes developing in the leadership process (Staurowsky, 2014), and one’s experience in sport (Gould & Carson, 2008). Yet, despite the term follower in the definition of leadership, sport management and leadership researchers have yet to adequately focus on follower development. In the leadership literature, follower development research has attempted to unearth aspects of the leadership process which may influence a follower to eventually become a leader (Dvir & Shamir, 2003). While follower development has received attention, most of the scholarship at this time remains conceptual (Woolley et al., 2011) or proffered as a future research recommendation (Yammarino, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to investigate how followers are developed into leaders within the intercollegiate athletic team environment, and how having a male or female leader may lead to differences in follower development.

Theoretical Framework
The current study is framed in follower development and leadership theory. Specifically, follower development research (Dvir & Shamir, 2003), leadership skill development (Lord & Hall, 2005), and leadership theories previously linked to follower development such as transformational (Dvir et al., 2002), servant (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), and authentic (Gardner et al., 2005) shape the study’s theoretical framework. Given the lack of conclusive research on the subject, follower development in any leadership context can be considered part of “the mystery of the fundamental underlying processes inside the black box of leadership” (Yammarino, 2013, p. 152). Leadership scholars have argued conceptually for authentic leadership to develop authentic followers (Gardner et al., 2005); however, work has yet to fully examine this claim. Dvir and Shamir (2003) found when indirect followers of a military leader possessed basic developmental needs, and self-efficacy, these characteristics positively influenced transformational leadership among indirect followers. Servant leadership has also been linked to follower development with its emphasis on developing followers into servant leaders and stewards (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). While there has been a dearth of follower development literature in sport management, leadership researchers have previously explored the coach (leader) to athlete (follower) dynamic (see Armstrong, 2001; Chelladurai, 1990).

When follower development is combined with the aforementioned leadership aspects (gender dynamics, athletes gaining power, and sport participation), a multifaceted line of inquiry or black box is developed. This line of inquiry includes the possibility to expand on gender leader dynamics in sport, specifically to examine how male or female leaders may develop followers more effectively. Also related is how athletes, precisely intercollegiate student-athletes, are developed into leaders as student-athletes continue to gain leadership influence (Staurowsky, 2014). Related to the intercollegiate sport context is determining what role the student-athlete’s and coach’s sport participation plays in the leader-follower development process, a point of interest similar to one raised by Welty Peachey and colleagues.
(2015). With limited work on follower development and these leadership aspects within sport management, the
current study aims to explore the above line of inquiry. In the current study followers are student-athletes and head
coaches are leaders. Drawn from the aforementioned literature and theory, the following research questions are
guiding the study:

RQ1: How are student-athletes developed into leaders? Specifically, what kinds of interactions do student-athletes
have with coaches that influence their development?

RQ2: How may gender of the leader result in different processes for follower development?

RQ3: How do followers perceive their sport participation as having a role in their follower development?

Method
Two intercollegiate athletic teams at one university are representing the sample. Specifically, two teams at the
National Intercollegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III level are being studied: a women’s soccer team
with a male head coach, and a women’s lacrosse team with a female head coach. Both teams were recruited through
a convenience sampling, and data are currently being collected throughout the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 seasons.
Each team has a leadership council comprised of the coaching staff and multiple team captains.

Given the leadership council structure of each team, a mixed methods approach is being employed. Specifically, the
use of a sociogram to quantify the interactions among the leadership council is being used. While the sociogram has
previously been utilized in sport management research to help trace social media participants and measure social
networks (Hambrick, 2012; Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008), the current study will make use of the sociogram as a
way to track and measure leader-follower interactions. Researchers in other disciplines have used the sociogram in
similar fashion (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Drahota & Dewey, 2008). The sociogram was chosen for the
current study given its utility in observing, measuring, and tracking interactions among people over time (Drahota
& Dewey, 2008). During the leadership council meetings, one of the researchers is present in order to sketch a
sociogram based on each meeting’s interactions among members. In conjunction with the sociogram, semi-
structured qualitative interviews will be conducted in order to gain further understanding about the leadership
processes. The qualitative interviews will involve three levels of data collection: regular players (followers not on the
leadership council), team captains, and coaches. Each sociogram will include the leadership council (soccer N=7,
lacrosse N=5), and a target of number of interviews are N=10 for soccer, and N= 8 for lacrosse (including athletes
and coaches). The interview guides are being derived from the above leadership literature.

The sociograms will be drawn out by hand initially and then recreated in Microsoft Word in order to more clearly
depict the interactions during the leadership council meetings. Frequency statistics on the interactions will be
performed and will be accompanied by the researcher’s observation notes from each meeting (Carson et al., 2007;
Drahota & Dewey, 2008). Qualitative interview data are to be analyzed through a deductive, thematic coding
procedure; allowing the data to speak for itself and key themes to emerge (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
The qualitative data will also be triangulated among the researchers in order to confirm themes, guard against bias,
and ensure credibility (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Preliminary Findings and Discussion
Expected results include uncovering how interactions during leadership council meetings will allow for followers to
develop into leaders and how sport participation will refine their leadership skills. Results are also expected to
support differences between a male and female head coach in how each encourages different leadership processes to
allow for follower development. The current study also represents an important contribution in regards to illustrating
the ability of the sociogram to be used in future sport leadership studies, an advancement not previously undertaken.
Further, the current study is expected to unveil greater understanding of the black box of follower development.