



Original Research

“I will change the world”: The Intersection of Social Change and Male College Athletes’ Leadership Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

International Journal of Exercise Science **10(6): 845-856, 2017**. Historically, men have been characterized as task-oriented leaders who are motivated by desires for autonomy, wealth, and power (17, 33). However, these “masculine” views of leadership might not accurately capture the leadership motivations of Millennial males as the views were developed in previous generations (4). Given the commitment of many Millennials towards socially responsible attitudes and behaviors (18, 25), we utilized a qualitative research design to examine the influence of social change on the leadership motivations of Millennial male intercollegiate athletes. In doing so, we found participants were motivated to lead in order to affect social change within their communities and within society. Our findings indicate a new perspective, one which includes a commitment to social change, is potentially needed when discussing “masculine” views of leadership.

KEY WORDS: Leadership, Millennials, social change, college athletics, student-athletes

INTRODUCTION

Studies on leadership have frequently compared the leadership capacity of males and females (17). Historically, men have been characterized as task-oriented leaders (e.g., transactional), whereas females have been viewed as being interpersonally-oriented leaders (e.g., transformational) (5, 17). For example, in Eagly et al.’s (17) meta-analysis on gender and leadership style, women were found to adopt a more democratic and participatory leadership style as opposed to the directive and autocratic style that is more often found to be adopted by men. Similarly, men are said to be motivated to lead by the desires for autonomy, wealth, and

power, whereas the factors that motivate women to lead include the opportunity to help others and the opportunity to produce meaningful change within their communities (2, 31). Within the realm of sport, leadership is frequently described as a masculine construct characterized by power and influence (12). However, a new generation of leaders in the sport industry are entering the workforce, and the masculine leadership theories developed from older generations are not necessarily applicable to this new generation (4). This generation of leaders, often referred to as Millennials, are those born in the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s (25). The significance of Millennials cannot be understated. With a population numbering 75.4 million, Millennials (ages 18 to 34) have now surpassed the 74.9 million Baby Boomers (ages 51 to 69) and 66 million Generation X'ers (ages 35 to 50) as the United States' largest living population (32). Accordingly, Millennials account for one in three workers in the American workforce (34).

Millennials are further differentiated from previous generations due to several distinct core traits (25). First, Millennials have been protected and nurtured by older generations such that they are sheltered and believe they are special (25). Next, they are optimistic about the future to a degree that surpasses previous generations and they are team-oriented such that they desire consensus and stronger relationships (25). For example, Millennials have a seemingly unwavering optimism that their collective efforts can bring about positive social change (19, 25). This is in stark contrast to the generations that came before them in which a collective commitment to positive social change was largely absent. Finally, Millennials hold high aspirations (25). For instance, more Millennials have enrolled in college than any other generation (11).

As is quite evident, Millennials are a generation like no other (11, 25). Undoubtedly, their core traits will influence their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to leadership, particularly corporate and sport leadership. Consequently, the accepted conception of male leaders as task-oriented, autocratic, and directive (17) might not be entirely accurate of Millennial males. Instead, Millennial males might also be motivated to lead by their optimism about social change, which is a disposition generally ascribed to females (33). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to understand how social change impacted the development of leadership traits among Millennial males. Given the supposition that leadership in sport is symptomatically masculine (12), we utilized a male college athlete population. Accordingly, our study has implications for leadership research and practitioners who work with male college athletes.

To examine male college athletes' perceptions of leadership as it relates to social change, we used tenets of the Social Change Model of Leadership (SCM) (see Figure 1) (26). In contrast to corporate leadership models, the SCM describes leadership as a collaborative and values-based process that produces positive social change" (26). While other leadership models define leadership using terms such as "collective" and "purposeful," the SCM extends the scope of leadership to include socially responsible actors pursuing social change for the common good. Accordingly, the SCM appears keenly appropriate for examining leadership within Millennial male collegiate student-athletes. This is particularly so as research indicates that the "desire to

help others” and the “focus on helping others” are primary reasons why Millennials want to become leaders (18).

The SCM posits that a student’s development as a socially responsible leader occurs across seven values: (1) consciousness of self; (2) congruence; (3) commitment; (4) collaboration; (5) common purpose; (6) controversy with civility; and (7) citizenship. First, consciousness of self is the awareness of beliefs, values and attitudes that motivation a student to act (26). These motivators can be intrinsic or extrinsic to the student. Congruence refers to whether a student’s actions are consistent with his or her beliefs and values. Likewise, commitment is when a student is invested in an idea or person such that he or she takes action (26). These three values represent individual-level values (35).

Next, collaboration is when a student works together with others in a common effort. Common purpose is when a student works with shared values and a shared objective. As members in a group will often disagree, controversy with civility acknowledges that differences in opinions are inevitable, but there should be respect when differences emerge (26). These three values represent group-level values (35). Finally, citizenship, which is a societal-level value, refers to the interconnectedness of an individual and/or group to a larger community or society. This value operates on the societal-level (26, 35). Collectively, the seven values result in an eight value of leadership: change for the common good (26). Figure 1 depicts how the seven values of the SCM interact with one another, ultimately resulting in social change.

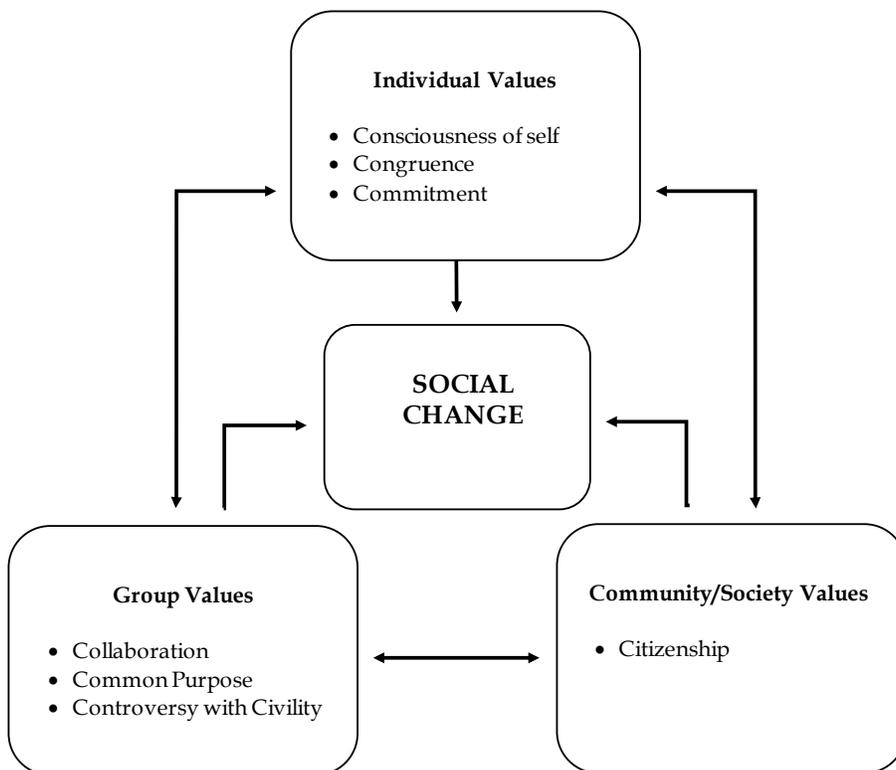


Figure 1. Social change model of leadership. Adapted from Komives S, Wagner W, Associated. Leadership for a better world: Understanding the social change model of leadership development. San Francisco: Jossey-Baas; 2009.

As a conceptual model, the SCM has been useful in examining gender differences in leadership philosophy between male and female college students. For example, Dugan (15) and Dugan et al. (16) used the SCM to examine college students' capacity for socially responsible leadership. They found that female students reported higher scores across the individual-, group-, and societal-level values of the SCM (15, 26). However, Fuller et al. (21) used the SCM to analyze how the high school setting developed leadership in African American male college athletes. They found that African American male college athletes purposefully engaged in non-athletic leadership activities that allowed them to make a positive impact on their respective campuses and local communities. These findings appear to contrast the notion that males are not motivated by and towards socially responsible leadership (16). Given these disparate views, the current study sought to further what is understood about the intersection of gender and socially responsible leadership. Our analysis was guided by the question: are the leadership traits among Millennial male intercollegiate athletes influenced by and towards social change?

METHODS

Participants

Participants for the current study were 284 NCAA Division I, II, and III male college student-athletes. Of the 284 participants, 116 were Division I student-athletes, 68 were Division II athletes, and 100 were Division III athletes. With respect to sport participation, 17 varsity sports were represented. The number of student-athletes representing these sports are in parentheses: football (60), basketball (45), soccer, (37), swimming and diving (21), tennis (19), baseball (18), cross country (17), track and field (16), golf (12), wrestling (10), lacrosse (9), ice hockey (9), volleyball (4), gymnastics (3), water polo (2), riflimg (1), and skiing (1).

Protocol

As part of a larger examination of leadership in intercollegiate student-athletes, our study adopted a qualitative research design. Specifically, an interpretive and naturalistic approach was utilized as this allows researchers to examine phenomena and their meaning in their natural setting (14). We utilized data from the NCAA National Student-Athlete Leadership Forum, a multi-day conference designed to assist student-athletes in examining their values, beliefs, and behavioral styles in relation to leadership, to analyze male collegiate athletes' perspectives on leadership (30). During one of the forum's sessions, participants were asked to write a response to the following two-part question:

What role has leadership played in terms of your student-athlete experience?

What lessons about leadership have you learned during your student-athlete experience and how will you use what you've learned to affect social change?

Responses to this multi-layered question ranged in length from a few sentences to multiple paragraphs. While both males and females attended this conference, we exclusively focused on the responses of males given our study's purpose.

Analysis

The written responses to the two-part question were typed by a graduate student to form one document for efficient data analysis. An investigative team was created, which included five individuals trained in qualitative methodology, two of which were the primary researchers. The investigative team was utilized throughout data analysis and all the members examined the data. Following transcription, each member read each of the participants' responses line-by-line in order to get a sense of the responses, which is called line-by-line coding (24). Next, the investigators used the process of "open coding" to identify potential themes by pinpointing examples from the text (1, 6). This process is also called identifying raw-data themes, which are quotes that capture an idea provided by the participant (28). Code notes were formulated by the researchers during the third reading of the data. Then the research team met to discuss the data and share their code notes. During this meeting researchers identified major themes. Disagreement about themes were discussed until consensus was reached. Themes were derived from all of the transcripts and attempts were made to interpret commonalities among the thoughts described in each of the transcripts (31).

Codes associated with each major theme were identified in each of the transcripts in order to determine the number of participants whose responses aligned with each theme (28). Data were entered into *ATLAS.ti* (www.atlasti.com), a qualitative data analysis and research software program, and it was utilized to verify and assist with the accuracy of determining the number and percentage of participants that responded within each of the major themes. The investigative teams' coding procedures were consistent with the *ATLAS.ti* (www.atlasti.com) data analysis.

RESULTS

In total, seven themes emerged from the data. With examples offered from the participants' experiences, each theme is contextualized within the SCM (i.e., individual-, group-, and community/societal-level values). While it is not possible to include all participants' responses, representative quotes are provided in this section. When quotes are provided, participants' NCAA division affiliation (i.e., DI, DII, or DIII) and sport (e.g., wrestling) are given.

Drive to Lead: First, participants (n=74) spoke about how they were driven to be leaders. Though extrinsic motivation was present, these individuals were intrinsically motivated to "positively influence (their) family and the people that surround them" (DI, Wrestling). Contextualized within the SCM, the drive they possess closely aligns with the value of *commitment* as our participants were invested in being socially responsible leaders. The following quotes exemplify this theme:

...I feel that I am more driven than most people to succeed. I am willing to put in the extra effort and will not stop trying until I accomplish my goal or task at hand. - DI, Golf

I am an extremely driven person and will not let anyone tell me I can't do something. - DIII, Baseball

Optimistic Attitude: Next, participants (n=46) spoke about the importance of an optimistic attitude. According to these participants, individuals who can remain positive, particularly when surrounded by profuse amounts of negativity, are the ones most likely to be effective leaders. When contextualized within the SCM, participants' optimistic attitudes are indicative of the value of *consciousness of self*. This is because they were cognizant of the values and attitudes (e.g., optimism) that motivated them to be leaders. The following comments typify this assertion:

I always look to encourage and build up anyone who is in a rut. Making someone's day brighter could lead to a new, fresh idea since that person's mind won't be reflecting on the bad but looking for something good." - DII, Volleyball
I bring a positive, upbeat attitude to every situation. I am able to read people well. I strive for excellence in everything I am involved in. I will continue to be the person God made me to be." - DIII, Ice Hockey

Self-Reflection: Self-reflection also greatly influenced participants' (n=35) perceptions and behaviors related to leadership. For these participants, considering who they were, what they valued, and what they believed were factors in their development as leaders. As with the optimistic attitude theme, participants' emphasis on self-reflection is also associated of the SCM value of *consciousness of self*. The following remarks embody this theme:

I have by no means perfected my leadership, but I believe that this realization is what will help me to continually grow towards reaching my potential as a leader. - DI, Soccer
I believe honest reflection on oneself will reveal virtuous aspirations, encourage positive action and fosters further societal change. - DI, Swimming & Diving

Role Models and Mentors: Role models and mentors were important in the leadership development of our participants. Many (n=64) were able to identify individuals, such as family members and coaches, who left indelible impacts on their lives. In turn, they endeavored to do the same for the generations that would follow them. When contextualized within the SCM, the prominence of role models and mentors on participants' leadership dispositions best reflects the value of *collaboration*. They realized the importance that collaboration with role models and mentors had on their lives, and they purposed to the same for others. The following statements epitomize this theme:

There aren't enough role models and leaders in the world. From my experiences and from what people say about me, I feel that I am a fine example of a role model and a leader. - DIII, Basketball
I plan to continue to advocate for equality in my community by becoming a mentor. - DI, Gymnastics

Intergroup Interactions: Furthermore, participants (n=25) in the study discussed the how interacting with dissimilar others and facilitating interactions with dissimilar others were central to their perceptions of leadership. For example, one participant expressed he could bring up "problems or issues" amongst the various groups he was in. He did this to identify

“ways to take care of them” (DI, Basketball). When contextualized within the SCM, our participants’ desire to interact with different groups, sometimes doing so to bridge chasms and divides, is suggestive of both *common purpose* and *controversy with civility*. They sought to work with others towards a common purpose (e.g., unity), but acknowledged there might be “problems or issues” they needed to work through when doing so. The following quotes represent this theme:

I can affect societal change by promoting diversity on campus and opening up communication lines between student-athletes and the general student population. – DI, Football

I’m involved in a variety of unrelated student groups and organizations have friends from just about every socioeconomic, religious, cultural, and ethnic background, etc. – DIII, Baseball

Community Involvement: Participants also discussed how they planned on using their leadership to change their communities. Specifically, participants (n=57) referenced their involvement in community service initiatives as having a positive impact on society. For example, one participant explained how he raised money for the Make-A-Wish® Foundation and participated in other community service activities (DII, Track & Field). This participant was not alone as others shared similar involvement in projects and initiatives geared towards bettering their communities. When contextualized within the SCM, participants’ community involvement is reflective of *citizenship*. These male college athletes realized they were members of communities beyond athletics and their respective campuses. Consequently, they sought to exact positive social change in these communities. The following remarks best characterize this theme:

I will continue to do and organize community service projects... – DI, Cross Country

The community service opportunities I have had in my years at college have impacted me and allowed me to do what I love most which is helping others. – DIII, Football

Social Change: Finally, participants (n=106) projected how their leadership would change society in the future, most notably within five years. Though these aspirations might seem lofty, these participants fully believed their leadership would have a significant impact on society. When contextualized within the SCM, participants’ desires to “change the world” is indicative of the *citizenship*, and ultimately *change for the common good*. The following comments exemplify this theme:

I think the biggest impact I can have on society...is to represent my generation of the world’s best and brightest. I believe that by making quality, ethical, moral decisions; I can set the precedent that success can be achieved and wonderful things can happen. – DI, Lacrosse

I will positively affect social change by encouraging people to get involved with those things that are going on around them...maybe attend a town hall meeting to hear and express concerns, as well as getting involved with making change on their college campus. – DIII, Basketball

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to examine whether Millennial male college athletes are influenced by and towards social change. In contrast to prior characterizations of masculine leadership traits (e.g., desire for autonomy, wealth, and power), our participants championed socially responsible leadership. That is, they sought to use their station in life, whatever that might be, to produce positive social change for the common good. Contextualized within the Social Change Model of Leadership (26), we found our participants exhibited tenets of individual-, group-, and community-level values. While some sought to change their immediate surroundings (e.g., social circles, neighborhoods, local communities, etc.), others sought to utilize their leadership for change on a much larger scale (e.g., societal, national, global, etc.). Irrespective of the object, the agent by which our participants sought to exact change was through socially responsible leadership. Rather than desiring wealth, power, and autonomy, our participants purposed to use their platforms for the betterment of others. These findings appear to signal a shift from the standard belief that males gravitate more towards transactional forms of leadership (17). While there are likely several explanations for these findings, we believe one can be found in the fact that our participants were Millennials.

As previously discussed, research on Millennials describe them as a generation like no other due to several differentiating factors, including (1) their belief that they are special, (2) their optimism, (3) their team-orientedness, and (4) their desire to achieve lofty goals (25). We found this to be true in our participants' responses. First, our participants believed they were uniquely qualified to produce meaningful change in the world (i.e., special) and were optimistic (i.e., confident) they could do so, as demonstrated by one of our participants who stated:

I believe I am unique to this world for several reasons. Because of the traits I possess, I feel I have a competitive advantage over anyone I come across in life, whether on the field, in the classroom, or in the workplace (DIII, Football).

In support of our assertion, other studies on Millennials and leadership have come to similar conclusions, namely that the defining characteristics of the Millennial generation influence their conceptions of leadership (4). For example, some scholars have suggested that external messages about the rewards and benefits of leadership will result in Millennials actively seeking such opportunities (4, 29). This notion was evident as our participants proactively sought leadership opportunities, seemingly due to their attitudes and beliefs about leadership.

In addition, our group-level findings elucidate our male college athlete participants' belief in the power of collaboration, which is reflective of the team-oriented Millennial core trait. This finding has empirical support in research that highlights the preference of Millennials to work in teams and groups (13, 29). In particular, our participants discussed the value of role modeling and mentorship. This too has been shown to be an important for the development of Millennials into leaders and productive members of society (22).

Finally, Millennials are achievers in that they actively pursue solutions when confronted with problems (25). Ferri-Reed (19) found that providing Millennials with how their efforts

contribute to organizational effectiveness is integral to their success. Participants in our study relayed how their efforts could change their communities and society. Similarly, Fuller et al. (21) found that male college athletes sought to leave a legacy on their campuses and communities. Whether it was working for Habitat for Humanity, Relay for Life, or at their local soup kitchen, our male college athletes believed their individual efforts could positively impact the lives of others, particularly those who were “marginalized.”

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings indicate a new perspective might be needed when discussing leadership with respect to the Millennial generation. Collectively, the core traits of Millennials seem to have instilled characteristics of socially responsible leadership into the male college athlete participants. Consequently, the widely-accepted characterizations of male leadership (e.g., task oriented, not relational, etc.) might not fully capture the attitudes, values, and actions of male Millennial leaders. Indeed, leadership research on the Millennial generation has proposed that theories developed in previous generations require “critical examination and adaption” as they are not “automatically applicable” to Millennials (4). While the SCM was instrumental in helping to understand the attitudes, values, and motivations of the participants, its scope is limited to the domain of higher education. Given that a commitment to social change is a disposition that many Millennials possess (18), future scholarship should examine the applicability of the SCM with post-college Millennials (e.g., Millennials in the workforce). The result of such research might be an extension or reconceptualization of the SCM (26).

Practically, the implications of our research are profound given former NCAA president Myles Brand’s contention that sport should be used as a vehicle for social change (7). Consistent with this study, research on student-athletes has found that they have intentions to engage in social change-related activities, yet their degree of involvement is significantly less than their non-athlete counterparts (23). Similarly, others have reported that while statements about community service and involvement are ubiquitous in the mission statements of college athletic departments, most do not follow through on such statements (3). One potential avenue to further engage college athletes in socially responsible leadership is enrollment in a service learning class (20). As credit-bearing courses (8), service learning courses have proven to be effective in utilizing sport to produce social change (9, 10). Given that they are funded and structured by academic units, service learning courses are a relatively simple way for athletic departments to engage their student-athletes in socially responsible leadership. Future research should examine the impact of service learning on college student-athletes’ commitment to social change.

Though our study expands the literature on sport leadership to include Millennial college male athletes’ perspectives, it is limited in a number of ways. First, the student-athletes were prompted to discuss social change in their responses on leadership. They might not have done so without being instructed otherwise. Additionally, the responses were gathered while students attended a forum on leadership. This leadership-centric setting could have biased their responses. Limitations notwithstanding, we found our participants were engaged in socially responsible leadership. These findings provide emerging perspectives on Millennials

and leadership (4), while reaffirming the “catalytic role in social change” that college athletics can play (7). Maguire (27) contends that not only are athlete champions in their sport, but they can also be champions for their communities and society. By engaging in socially responsible leadership, our male college athlete participants sought to do just that.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Tiffany Vann for her assistance with this manuscript.

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