

Abstract

Guided by the emerging literature on relational leadership this paper discusses how leadership is socially constructed in the context of a professional sporting organization. An in-depth exploratory case study with a championship winning professional team was conducted for the duration of the championship season. Data was collected through interviews with various members of the organization as well as through observations of training and game sessions. The findings highlight that leadership is practiced through interactions between individuals, informed by established and ongoing relationships. Specifically, leadership is found to be practiced through verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and social processes of meaning making. The outlined relational approach is concerned with the collective performance of leadership through social action, revealing insights that can inform leadership practice, development, and recruitment in professional sporting organizations. The paper concludes by suggesting potential directions for research on leadership in professional sport based on conceptualizing leadership as a relational phenomenon.

Keywords: Relational Leadership, Leadership Practice, Leadership Development, Professional Teams

Highlights:

- Leadership is collectively performed through social action
- Relational leadership recognizes and promotes mutual influence
- Leadership is practiced through interactions and meaning making
- Experience and intuition influence leadership practice
- Shared understandings enhance collective performance

1.0 We are a Team of Leaders: Practicing Leadership in Professional Sport

The purpose of this paper is to explore the social processes through which leadership is constructed in a professional sporting organization. Recently, sport management scholars have begun to embrace social constructivism as an approach to leadership studies (Arnold, Fletcher, & Hobson, 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018; Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010). Reflecting mainstream leadership studies, sport management scholars have acknowledged that the social constructionist paradigm broadens perspectives on leadership. Since Welty Peachey, Zhou, Damon, and Burton's (2015) review of 40 years of sport leadership research, scholars have increasingly advocated the recognition of leadership as a shared and collective phenomenon (Ferkins, Shilbury, & O'Boyle, 2018; Jones, Wegner, Bunds, Edwards, & Bocarro, 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019; Kerwin & Bopp, 2014; Svensson, Kang, & Ha, 2019) and have studied leadership from multiple perspectives, including followers (Arnold et al., 2018; Takos, Murray, & O'Boyle, 2018). This body of research has highlighted the interdependence of leadership processes, suggesting that effective leadership can be constructed by multiple individuals and should be studied from the perspective of those who are led, not just from the perspective of designated leaders.

Previous studies provide valuable insights into how leadership is constructed through exploring the experience of individuals (Frawley, Favaloro, & Schulenkorf, 2018), perceived expertise (Swanson & Kent, 2014), and aspects of identity, including gender (Burton, 2015). This research demonstrates a shift in thinking about leadership in sport management, away from studying individual leaders (leader-centric) to studying the perceptions of individuals (follower-centric, or observer-centric). However, socially constructed relational leadership, which involves studying the social interactions through which leadership is constructed, is still under explored. Conceptualizing leadership as socially constructed has many potential contributions to sport management practice and scholarship. Practical implications include

how to foster leadership practice through everyday interactions, and the role of leadership development, recruitment, and retention in supporting such practice. Scholarly contributions extend conceptualizations of leadership as a mutual influence process by outlining the key practices that enable collective leadership. In addition, we outline the potential of in-situ methods, including observation, as a suitable strategy for researching leadership interactions.

Uhl-Bien (2006) differentiates socially constructed relational leadership from entity-based approaches to leadership. Entity-based approaches study individual entities including leaders and followers, or the fixed dyadic relationships between them. On the other hand, taking a socially constructed relational leadership perspective involves exploring the social processes that advance the social order of a collective (Robinson, 2001).

Mainstream leadership scholars have explored interrelated concepts including relational leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), leadership-as-practice (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008), and collective leadership (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012). Studies have shown that despite often being glamorized, leadership is constructed through regular mundane interactions that managers and others often overlook (Alvesson, Blom, & Sveningsson, 2016; Cunliffe & Erickson, 2011). These ordinary interactions may be of greater significance for sport management professionals than previously realized as a focus on fostering productive interactions could lead to a range of better outcomes for sporting organizations, both on and off the field. For example, Crevani (2019) suggests that an important part of leadership work is “to be able to be in conversation, to recognise how conversations are developing, and to handle such developments by being sensibly responsive” (p. 236). Thus, relational leadership researchers have advocated for and conducted studies that explore the ‘mundane’ social processes by observing leadership in-situ (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä & Satama, 2019). These studies have demonstrated that by researching the

social process of leadership, we can gain deeper insights into how teams operate in different contexts, and into the role of those not privileged as leaders (Raelin, 2016).

In this paper, we study socially constructed relational leadership in-situ and thus consider leadership to be a continuous process of interaction, meaning making, and remaking (Sutherland, 2017). We build on the body of literature that argues leadership is practiced in conversation, dialogically (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), through embodiment (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), and through the meanings people construct (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking, 2011). The study contributes to the growing body of constructionist leadership research in sport management, providing an exploratory case to expand the concept of relational leadership. We are concerned with social action, exploring the minutia of social processes involved in constructing leadership. The unit of analysis therefore is not leaders, followers, or relationships between them but rather the interactions involved in constructing leadership through developing shared understandings. As such, the research was designed to capture the continuous processes of co-constructed meaning making unfolding through action and interaction between self and others (Carroll et al., 2008; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995). We argue that leadership in the case organization was collectively constructed through three key aggregate practices: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making. These practices were interdependent and embedded intersubjectively within interactions, demonstrating the multiple ways participants constructed and re-constructed meanings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). By taking a relational leadership approach to study how leadership takes place in the case of a professional sporting organization we aim to provide deeper insight into the micro level social processes that construct leadership in professional sport, thereby informing leadership practice and proposing further directions for research within the context of professional sport.

Professional sport offers an excellent context to observe these social processes given the highly interdependent nature of teams, the regularity of team interactions, and the fact that professional teams mirror other traditional organizations (Day, Gordon, & Fink, 2012). Professional sporting organizations are becoming increasingly complex, employing many people in a number of departments, coordinated to pursue on-field performance and off-field commercial success (Forster, 2006; Shilbury, 2012). Thus, this study offers a timely contribution to understand how leadership emerges in professional sporting organizations. It provides insight into the complex realities of practice; it highlights that leadership is a collective accomplishment. Based on the results of the research we also outline practical contributions to leadership practice, recruitment, retention, and leadership development in professional sporting organizations.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Relational Leadership

Relational leadership is a developing concept in mainstream leadership studies. It gained attention in the 1990s (Dachler & Hosking, 1995), was further popularised by Uhl-Bien (2006) and has been used as a valuable perspective from which to study leadership across team contexts such as; academia (Reitz, 2015), national security (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and ice hockey and ballet (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Relational approaches to leadership argue that leadership is co-constructed through interactions between people in context, the meanings people associate with these interactions, and the subsequent actions taken (Crevani, 2019). Socially constructed relational leadership is most often positioned in contrast to entity-based approaches to leadership in which the focus is on individuals as leaders and/or followers and their behaviors, characteristics, and traits (Uhl-Bien, 2006). While offering valuable insights, entity-based approaches have a number of deficiencies: they exaggerate the importance of individuals, neglect the importance of context, and do not

recognize the role of those not privileged as leaders (Raelin, 2016; Shaw & Hoerber, 2016). In contrast, relational approaches view leadership as based on the iterative process of interactions between people who struggle for and arrive at shared meanings. While the entitative approach focuses on monologue (direction provided by the leader to follower/s), relational leadership emphasizes dialogue; leadership is practiced in conversation with others (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011). The importance of discourse in the construction of leadership has been increasingly recognized and used in research (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

2.1.1 Practicing Relational Leadership

Practicing relational leadership involves the acceptance that others co-construct the social order through mutual influence (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Dachler and Hosking (1995) argue, “relating is a constructive, ongoing process of meaning making” (p. 4). Crevani (2019) outlines the work of relational leadership as movement between frames, positioning, and resonating which are accomplished collectively. Frames allow teams to capture meaning in a particular moment/context; movement between frames leads to the emergence and creation of new meanings (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Positioning involves building on previous conversation while paying attention to the content of what is being said, as well as the consequences of action, and being aware of the moment, informed by the past and future (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). Resonating is paying attention to and adapting to subtle nuances, such as emerging patterns, emotions, and changes in tone (Crevani, 2019). Therefore, relational leadership is concerned with meaning making in relation to ongoing social interactions.

Scholars have also investigated the use of the body in leadership interactions. Küpers (2013) makes the conceptual argument that it is through various bodily senses that leadership is experienced, including through touch, sight, smell, and sound. Biehl (2019) contributed to relational leadership theory by exploring the interactions between techno DJs and dancers,

describing them as co-constructors of what was happening, through their bodies-in-movement in relation to each other. They argue that leaders not only have, but are their bodies, who perceive and respond based on kinaesthetic empathy. Thus, relational leadership is constructed through verbal and embodied interactions. This view is particularly relevant to sporting teams where movement and bodily interactions are critical elements of the functioning of the team.

2.2 Leadership Studies in Professional and High-Performance Sport

Definitions of elite, high-performance, and professional sport emphasize its key elements: representation at a superior level, significant training commitment, and high level of professionalism (e.g., training and performance standards akin to other professional fields) (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015). The context of professional and high-performance sport is subject to regular scrutiny from governing bodies, the public, and sponsors representing stakeholder groups that are financially and/or emotionally invested in the team or individual's success (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Thelwell, Weston, Greenlees, & Hutchings, 2008). The emphasis on on-field performance distinguishes leadership in professional and high-performance sport from leadership from other contexts in the field of sport management, such as sport for development and governance. Leadership studies in professional and high-performance sport have been conducted in the fields of sport management, sport psychology, and sport science. In each of these fields entitative approaches to leadership are prevalent, focusing on individuals with a specific role (e.g., captains, coaches, managers), or on dyads (e.g., coaches – players, captains – players) (Arnold, Fletcher, & Molyneux, 2012; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014; Kellett, 1999; Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

Previous studies have revealed that effective leadership in professional sporting teams is related to; positive athlete leadership (Fransen et al., 2017), positive coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), perceived expertise (Swanson & Kent, 2014),

experience (Frawley et al., 2018), and leadership development programs (Banu-Lawrence, Frawley, & Hoerber, 2020). Conflict and power struggles between the coach and athletes reduce effectiveness (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). This research has focused on singular, or dual levels of leadership. Such a focus is problematic, because as, Welty Peachey and colleagues (2015) point out, leadership in professional sporting organizations is constructed across multiple levels including athletes, coaches, managers, and their staff. Thus, sport management scholarship and practice will benefit from leadership research that takes a wholistic organizational approach.

Recent studies have started to pay attention to relational aspects of sport leadership including developing relationships (Frawley et al., 2018) and seeing leadership roles as distributed amongst multiple individuals (Fransen et al., 2014), with coaches perceiving captains as leaders rather than themselves (Kellett, 1999). This literature focuses on leadership as a mutual accomplishment through shared leadership roles.

Others study sporting teams in in-situ (e.g., Ronglan, 2007; Wilson, 2013). Although not explicitly researching leadership, Ronglan (2007) found that teams build collective efficacy through an interpersonal process of perceiving performance and preparation. Wilson (2013) explores how rugby coaches construct leadership through discourse, identifying the coach's addressing of players as interactional performance. Performances are designed to manage the players' perceptions rather than to merely communicate content. These studies highlight intersubjectivity, demonstrating that perceptions of experience and performance are important in constructing shared understanding in teams. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the construction of leadership in-situ, they focus on individual practices of leadership construction with Ronglan (2007) exploring efficacy and Wilson (2013) discourse. Thus, calls have been made for more research that explores how leadership in sporting organizations is socially constructed (Billsberry et al., 2018; Ferkins, Skinner, &

Swanson, 2018). In professional sport, this approach would explore the practice of leadership across the entire organization, including: managers, coaches, staff, and players.

These calls also have a methodological implication for research in the context of sport. The use of surveys and retrospective interview accounts in sport leadership studies is pervasive and the empirical focus is typically on individuals designated as leaders. Such methodological choices have led to a lack of exploration into the social processes of leadership that include the nuance of daily, often mundane interactions, interdependencies between people, and the significance of context. Consequently, we lack an understanding of how leadership evolves bottom-up and the interactions through which it takes place in teams. The inclusion of in-situ and insider research methods in high-performance sport management can build upon theoretical and practical understanding of leadership practice, leadership development, and inform recruitment and retention practices.

2.3 Positioning the Research

Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff (2010) argue that leadership is often conceptualized as an overly simplified phenomenon. Taking a constructionist perspective, this study aligns with Schwandt who argues, “contrary to the emphasis in radical constructivism, the focus here is not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by the conventions of language and other social processes” (1998, p. 240). The aim of this study is to explore the social processes through which leadership in sport teams is constructed. We argue that research in sport management will benefit from supplementing previous studies that have recognized the perceptions of individuals as pertinent to leadership (e.g., Arnold et al., 2018; Billsberry et al., 2018), which are situated towards the subjectivist end of the constructionist continuum, with studies such as this one that are inspired by constructionist views as developed by Berger and Luckmann

(1967), Crotty (1998), and Silverman (2015) who are concerned with the ongoing construction of meaning through social action.

We propose that relational leadership is a suitable lens to study leadership in professional sporting organizations. The relational lens can provide valuable insights into the nature of leadership and the mechanisms through which leadership emerges and is co-constructed. Relational leadership is inherently multilevel as leadership is constructed across all levels of the organization; hence we situate the research in the field of sport management. Despite emphasizing emergence between people, relational leadership is enhanced by those with formal authority (e.g., sport managers, directors, and coaches) encouraging multiple sources of leadership. The ontological approach is based on Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) who conceptualize leadership as ‘being-in-relation-to-others’ through effort and struggles to construct and reconstruct relationships through conversations. Leadership research from the perspective of socially constructed relational leadership can provide important practical implications for professional sporting organizations by exploring practices that can contribute to more effective leadership (e.g., social processes, hiring, training, and development).

3.0 Methodology

We use an exploratory case to shed light into relational leadership in one high-performance sporting organization. Building theory from a single case offers the opportunity for deep insights into an underexplored phenomenon by gaining concrete, practical, and context dependent knowledge; in other words, there is value in researching ‘particulars’ in addition to ‘universals’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3.1 Data Collection

3.1.1 Case Organization and Participants

The case organization studied was selected from a short-list of team-based professional sporting organizations that competed in professional domestic competitions and offered practical opportunity for collecting data during a season. We contacted 17 and met with three short-listed organizations. From this list, the case at hand was selected because of; their enthusiasm for the project, access to observe and interview research participants, and time frame deemed appropriate for the research. The participants' enthusiasm for the project was an early indication of critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004), demonstrating potential for an information rich case.

The selected organization is a professional netball team competing in Australia. Netball is traditionally a female dominated team sport with seven players on the court per team. It is very popular in Australia, New Zealand, and England. These countries have set up professional and semi-professional associations organizing competitions in and between their countries. The team trains full time and therefore players and performance staff have team commitments most days during the week. The professional sporting organization is an operational unit of the state sporting organization (SSO).

The team researched experienced recent transition of senior roles including general manager, head coach, and captain however much of the playing group had remained the same for the two previous seasons and the season researched. All players (excluding the two injury replacement players) and all but one staff member had been with the team prior to the season studied. Therefore, all but one of the initial participants involved in the study had worked together before the research commenced. Over the three-year period of relative stability, the team achieved three wins in the first year, six wins in the second, and in the third (the season studied) won the championship, demonstrating significant improvement. Winning the

championship in the year studied, provided a unique opportunity to see how successful leadership unfolded.

None of the authors had an existing relationship with the case organization. The first author who was responsible for all data gathering commenced as an outsider with a privileged position to study the team interactions, due to the support by the organization's management established in the prior meeting. However, due to the chosen data gathering methods, the first author became increasingly familiar with the research participants. It could be argued that he eventually became an insider (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The other authors did not have such access and remained 'outsiders', which counterbalanced the possibility of 'going native' (Ahuja, Nikolova, & Clegg, 2017). The first author discussed the data with the co-authors throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

A multi-level unit of analysis was employed according to the suggestion of Welty Peachey and colleagues (2015). Interview participants were selected based on gaining a variety of perspectives (with and without formal leadership positions). A total of 37 participants were included in the study; players (19), coaches (5), support staff (2), contractors (7), and managers (4). Observations and informal, contextual interviews were conducted with most members of the organization. Field notes from observations were skewed towards players and performance staff as they are more numerous in the case organization.

3.1.2 Data Gathering

In-line with the objective to study leadership interactions in-situ, fieldwork included observations, informal interviews, and semi-structured interviews (Sutherland, 2017) as summarised in Table 1. Fieldwork was completed by the first author over a period of nine months, including pre-season, in-season, and post-season. The season long study enabled patterns and routines in the data to emerge, thus achieving data saturation.

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Observations. Direct observations were conducted with the intention of being as unobtrusive as possible (Skinner, Edwards, & Corbett, 2014), with notes taken during training sessions, team meetings, and at the competition venue during game day. The contexts selected to be observed were determined prior to commencing research, based on their potential for interaction amongst participants. Between one to three sessions per week were observed. The observation protocol was based on the orienting statement of leadership in interaction provided by Robinson: leadership as “express[ing] ideas in talk or action that are recognised as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them [team members]” (2001, p. 93). According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) such an orienting statement is appropriate in recording events in an exploratory case such as this. Field notes collected from observations could not be recorded verbatim due to multiple conversations occurring at the same time.

Informal Interviews. Once rapport and trust were built, participants regularly sat and talked with the first author, providing him with the opportunity to ask about their interpretations of what was taking place at the time. Informal interviews were held in-situ, posed little structure, and enabled the researcher to get closer to understanding the world of the research participants (Skinner, 2013). Notes from informal interviews were incorporated in the research journal along with observational notes. Informal interviews also served the purpose of following up on specific observed events while allowing the participant to direct the discussion according to their accounts (Skinner, 2013).

Semi-Structured Interviews. The first author conducted 14 semi-structured interviews which lasted approximately 45 minutes each and followed a consistent structure informed by a protocol based on relational leadership literature developed prior to research

commencing (Skinner, 2013). Each interview followed a similar format: first asking about the participant's experience in joining the team, what experience they have had with the team, and then asking about recent and specific examples of events and interactions in the team. The questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experience, and how it has shaped their understanding of leadership (Alvesson, Blom, & Sveningsson, 2016). Field notes and interview transcripts were typed, corrected, and entered into NVivo for continued analysis.

3.2 Data Condensation and Analysis

We followed the three stages for analyzing qualitative data described by Miles and colleagues (2020): data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions, achieved through an abductive process.

Data condensation is the process of determining from the data what is significant to the study, therefore strengthening the data corpus (Miles et al., 2020). The first level of data condensation involved the researcher selecting which field notes to take (Emerson et al., 2011). Because recording field notes requires the researcher to select the most relevant details, writing field notes serves as an implicit first analysis and is subject to researcher bias (Emerson et al., 2011). To minimise bias in recording field notes the first author avoided explicit judgements of effective or ineffective leadership and focused on the content and context of interactions (Silverman, 2015). Field notes evolved throughout the season; early notes were extensive and general, whereas later field notes were more specific and descriptive. This is a natural progression in observations as the researcher becomes aware of typical patterns (Emerson et al., 2011). In these field notes the first author aimed to record interactions between people that influence the social order (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Reflections made in the research notebook began to identify potential patterns, which often evolved into themes and provided the opportunity to search for cases that went against earlier observations.

We began initial coding during the nine months of data collection, thus the recording of field notes was informed by the ongoing analysis of the data (Silverman, 2015). The data corpus was analyzed concurrently commencing by assigning descriptive codes to identify the topic of the data being analysed (Miles et al., 2020). During this phase basic codes were assigned to describe the type and nature of interactions. For example, types of interaction included; players high-five after goal, coach instructs team, positional groups discuss plan, player questions player. The nature of interaction was coded as; positive reinforcement, critical feedback, encouragement, and tactical talk.

During the second coding cycle we identified patterns in leadership practice, and variations to the patterns (Miles et al., 2020). By reviewing the literature and the data contained within our initial codes, the basic codes we collapsed into patterns, such as, positional groups discuss plan, collaboration, planning, talking about past, talking about future, talking about process, talking about other teams were collapsed into the pattern ‘discussions.’ Based on further iteration between data and literature, we identified eight patterns (practices); discussions, questioning, instruction, encouraging, reflection, projection, physical interactions, and emotions and body language. Through continuous abduction, (i.e., moving back and forth between data and literature), these practices were then abstracted into three categories, verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making (see Figure 1). We observed leadership as the skilful performance of these interdependent practices.

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4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Verbal Interactions

We observed almost continuous verbal interactions in the team. Verbal interactions describe the use of language between people in efforts to lead. In the relational leadership

literature, verbal interactions have been conceptualised as the primarily studied relational practice of leadership (Crevani, 2019; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Most studies have emphasized the importance of talking-with (dialogue) rather than talking-to (monologue) for relational leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The mutuality of dialogue and the ability to respond to statements allows participants to contribute to and arrive at shared meaning. However, in the case at hand, monologic interactions involving talking-to others were also observed. For example, there was a certain preference for monologic (direct) interactions in high-pressure situations, such as during games, as expressed by Interviewee Four (player):

So during the game give it to me direct. If I am in a huddle, direct. I just want as few words in my head as possible when I'm out there. But other places where I can practice things, so like at training. I don't want someone just to be direct... in that situation for me, I need 'Okay, what do you think about this?'

The data showed that monologue still contributes to developing shared meanings as it is part of an ongoing conversation and building shared understanding. Monologue and dialogue are not mutually exclusive in relationally oriented organizations, as the context may not always be appropriate for dialogue. An important part of leadership work is to understand conversations and be responsive to how they are unfolding (Crevani, 2019). Accordingly, effective leadership work requires understanding whether dialogic or monologic interactions are more appropriate in a context. In the following, the specific leadership practices based on verbal interactions are discussed, including dialogic practices (discussions and questioning), and monologic practices (encouraging and instruction).

4.1.1 Discussions

Discussions describe dialogic interactions where participants mutually contributed to establish shared meanings. Discussions mostly took place when there was time, for example, during training sessions when players and coaches could pause, slow down, and discuss activities. Availability of time allowed talking-with, rather than talking to, hence, discussions were regularly practiced throughout meetings and training, while on game days discussions were limited to pre-game, post-game, and during breaks. For example, during planning meetings, players worked in positional groups to create a game plan for the upcoming opposition, rather than relying on unilateral direction provided by the coaches and performance analyst. Based on reviewing video footage, each group cooperatively completed allocated activities through iterative discussion and formed a game plan in collaboration with the coaches and performance analyst.

Discussions were also evident during on-court training sessions where positional groups could practice the strategies they had developed during team meetings. In one example players formed three positional groups to practice their strategy for the upcoming game. Each group role-played the strategy using the court space, initially discussing, then walking through the plan, before practicing at a higher pace and intensity. Coaches observed and sometimes provided feedback and guidance during these discussions and enactments of play. Following the training session, players continued to discuss tactics, their performance, playing preferences, and what others do well. In this way, insights on strategy and game formation were developed collectively during formal training sessions and afterwards. In other words, the role of the coach was to provide an external view and facilitate these group discussions thus creating space for players to demonstrate responsibility for the development of game strategy and activity formations.

Interviewee One (player) highlighted the importance of the process of creating and practicing the strategies together in constructing shared understanding. When referring to the game plan, they stressed: “we all wrote it together... so there is no excuses to not know what to do.” Interviewee Seven (staff) indicated the importance of these team-based discussions; “it is a group setting, no one is afraid to talk... they’re not going to get shut down... but previously we had a bit of a hierarchy.” Discussions allowed players and coaches to contribute to problem solving and strategy development by constructing shared meaning. Through discussions team members were able to express their ideas and discuss those of others, ideas carried forward into action became shared understandings.

4.1.2 Questioning

Questioning was a practice to open and sustain dialogue. The use of a question rather than known statement sought affirmation while encouraging a democratic process of co-creating the game plan through further discussion with other team members (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). For example, during a team meeting, one positional group was presenting a game strategy they had developed for their group to the rest of the team and coaches. One player from the group was presenting their work, another was drawing what the speaker was saying on the whiteboard, while a third group member communicated with the rest of the team through eye-contact and gestures. A player from outside of the positional group asked for clarification and more detail on multiple points as they were presented. These questions encouraged the presenting group to add more detail. Another player from outside the group contributed a point to help build on the strategy, and this process was repeated as other players added their questions. Through questioning, the presentation of the strategy became interactive as multiple group members helped to facilitate it and all participants in the room came to share an understanding of the strategy.

Participants engaging in questioning demonstrated relational responsibility by actively seeking the perspective of others (Crevani, 2019). Initiating verbal interactions through questioning decreased the attention on those with formal roles; seeking the perspective of others perpetuated the inclusive nature of the team encouraging contributions from many actors. For example, during a break in a game the coach asked a positional group: “What is [opponents name] good at?”, then followed up the answer by asking “so what are we going to do?” This encouraged the group to formulate a plan rather than be told how to respond. Asking questions empowered others and constructing the solution mutually created a shared understanding (Seers & Chopin, 2012).

4.1.3 Encouraging

Encouraging describes the monologic process in which one person verbally rewards the actions of others. Encouraging usually did not enable a response but did build on previous conversations as participants were rewarded (verbally) for behaviors considered desirable by the team. For example, the coach addressed the team at a break in the game: “Good job keep it up, great job in isolating in attack, [while looking at one player] just change direction, [player name] get involved, [looking at another player] you got this.” Through encouragement participants were able to understand actions that other team members and coaches considered desirable thus recognising what they should continue doing for the benefit of the team. In a team meeting held prior to the season, players revisited their ‘one percenters’ (small actions they had written down as commitments for how they could improve). Collectively players took this as an opportunity to recognize the actions of others. For example, one player encouraged another as they noted their food choices had improved. A second noted that a team member had improved their recovery allowing them to be on court for training more consistently. A third encouraged another team member for holding the group accountable and giving ‘difficult’ feedback. Through encouragement within the social context of the team

participants could see the behaviors that were desirable, informing them how they should act in the social setting. Thus, encouraging is an example of how monologue contributes to larger conversations as its meaning is related to specific prior actions or conversations. In this way, encouragement facilitates future collective practice and shared meanings. Dachler and Hosking (1995) describe this as multilogue: “participants in multiloguing are engaging in ongoing processes in which they take for granted some shared agreement” (p. 5).

4.1.4 Instruction

Instructions are distinctly monologic as they were directive from one person to others. They gave future action or direction for others or the group as a whole to take. Instructions were mostly evident when time was limited. This was particularly evident during games. For example, a defensive player shouted at a fellow defender, “two hands,” instructing them to defend with two hands. Then when the other team was taking a shot they shouted: “rebounds, rebounds, rebounds”, reminding the defenders to position themselves for the rebound. Attacking enabled even shorter instructions, with players calling “yep” to other players to seek a pass, or even making a loud noise to call for the ball. Additionally, players used their own codenames to call set plays: a one- or two-word phrase was called out, usually the responsibility of a player in a particular position, and other players would know what to do based on previous discussions and practice. This demonstrates a commitment to performing as a team in highly time sensitive situations.

Instructions follow up or build upon previous conversations, and in this way, they help construct meaning. Additionally, they help participants understand actions that are desirable or not desirable, improving shared understandings. Given the requirement of the team to adapt under strict time pressure in games, instruction provides an efficient practice to collectively respond to emerging challenges.

4.2 Non-verbal Interactions

Our findings support Ryömä and Satama (2019) who argue leadership is relationally constructed through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal interactions. Non-verbal interactions typically support verbal interactions. They include the display of emotions (body language) and physical interactions. Thus, leadership may be constructed through dialogue and supported by the appropriate emotional response, physical interaction, and bodily positioning. As Küpers (2013) argues, “bodily gestures and postures, facial mimic, tones of voice, and other forms of expression are part of an embodied practice of leadership” (p. 336). The construction of shared understandings through non-verbal interactions is indicative of relational leadership.

4.2.1 Emotions and Body Language

This practice refers to participants consciously and subconsciously expressing emotion through body language, which has an effect on others. Subconsciously expressed emotion is intuitive in response to what is happening; for example, the coaches, staff, and players cheering from the bench following a good play. Consciously expressed emotions consider the response of others, for example when someone makes a mistake during training, the body language of other participants turns positive to encourage the person who made the mistake to move on.

Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue that “the masking of strong emotions in favour of the community” is critical in constructing relational leadership (p. 713). In one instance, one of the players received the news that they have been badly injured and would not be able to play for several weeks. The news was devastating for this player. However, instead of focusing on their negative emotions, the injured player (Interviewee Three) described their perceived responsibility to be positive for the sake of the team, despite being consumed by the bad news of a long-term injury:

The day I found out it was like ten to twelve weeks [period of injury] I was really distraught. [The physiotherapist] told me, then we went up to training and I was like, right we're training now. You've got to like switch off, you need to support. Because the first game was in six days.

In this case it was evident that the conscious display of positive emotion and masking of negative feelings evoked a positive response from the group. Interviewee Two (player) reflected on the attitude of the injured player: “[They] haven't been playing, but [they've] had a really big influence on the team I think, [they] are the one who is injured, but [they] are just so positive.” Thus, displaying, or masking, emotions can contribute to the social bonding of the team and the construction of shared meanings, in this case, a sense that we are in this together, no matter what happens to individual players.

4.2.2 Physical Interactions

Physical interactions refer to interactions between people that involve physical gesture and bodily positioning. Examples include high fives, hugs, the pointing of a hand, and making eye contact. They are important as they can reinforce collective practices and shared meanings. Physical interactions are inherent in team sport, which requires participants to move in relation to each other, rather than independently (Landkammer, Winter, Thiel, & Sassenberg, 2019). Ryömä and Satama (2019) describe how players become aware of the “nuances of gesture, movement, proximity, and synchronisation” (p. 716) to empathise with others and respond in relation to them.

Physical interactions, such as high fives, were used to form routines, encourage others, and show support. High fives, for example, were significant due to their repetition and place in forming and sustaining routines. After a training drill or a quarter in the game, players and coaches usually high five each other as a form of encouragement and recognition that the

agreed strategy or game plan has worked. The omission of high fives would signify that something is not normal, or that a review is needed. This is because the routine is part of the team's shared understanding, and sustaining or breaking the routine has implicit consequences for participants. Similarly, high fives and hugs became a routinized practice at the conclusion of training drills, celebrating good performances, or consoling adverse outcomes. The importance of physical interactions was recognized during the video review of a particular match. The performance analyst identified a lack of enthusiasm, high fives, and celebrations when the team scored extending their lead in the game to eight goals. This lack of enthusiasm and physical interaction was then recognized by the coaches and players as a possible reason for the subsequent momentum change in the game, which eventuated in a two-goal loss for the team. This triggered a revision of the game strategy and the need for making sense of what had happened.

Similarly, bodily positioning supported verbal interactions in constructing leadership. For example, during a training session coaches and team members would move about the space to form specific interaction spaces. Working with other individuals would involve moving close to them. Coaches and a group of players working on a set of moves would create a shared physical space, sometimes using physical rehearsal to discuss what the group was meant to achieve. When addressing the entire team, individuals would gain a central position on the court for shorter messages and when more instruction was required would ask the group into a huddle. Küpers (2013) suggests, "gestures and postures, facial mime, and other forms of bodied expression such as tone, breath, body alignment, energetic presence, attuning, spacing, and timing and are used for enacting possibilities of co-ordination and collaboration in leadership" (p. 339). Aligned with Küpers (2013), Biehl (2019), and Ryömä and Satama (2019) we found that leadership is constructed through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal interactions.

4.3 Meaning Making

Finally, scholars have argued that leadership becomes significant based on intersubjective meaning creation (Billsberry et al., 2018; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Meindl, 1995). The category of meaning making accounts for the taken for granted agreements that result in shared understandings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Meaning making concerns how participants implicitly construct meaning through social processes. Hosking (2011) states, “in the spirit of relational leadership, actions are meaningful and purposeful only in relation to other actions” (p. 712). By observing interactions and speaking with the participants we found that experience and intuition play a significant role in determining how the participants perceive of themselves as a team and subsequently interpret interactions. In this section we explore the practice of reflection which is related to experience, and the practice of projection which is related to intuition.

Reflection is concerned with knowing the social order (Dachler & Hosking, 1995), relational achievement (Crevani, 2019), positioning (Hersted & Gergen, 2013), and bodily refinement (Ryömä & Satama, 2019). Projection is concerned with moral responsibility (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), associating meaning with interaction (Carroll & Simpson, 2012), and resonating (Crevani, 2019).

4.3.1 Reflection

Reflection is the practice of making sense of experience. Reflection can enhance leadership by considering both personal and collective experience (Carroll et al., 2008; Frawley et al., 2018). Reflecting on experience as a team helps team members to understand their interactions with others. For example, Interviewee Ten (staff) reflected on the collective experience of being part of the team and in doing so, recognized that even though differences between team players occur, they do not cause obstruction due to the mutual appreciation of relationships in the team: “even when the team has their differences in their opinions and

thoughts, it doesn't impact the actual relationships between people. I think everyone still gets along and genuinely likes each other and likes working with each other.” In this example reflecting on the quality of the relationships enabled participants to handle challenges collaboratively with others.

Reflecting on shared adversity enhanced positive experiences. Interviewee Five (coach) reflected on the excitement expressed after the team's round one win in the previous season: “we did stacks on and everything... when we won, there was just this feeling of relief that we can do it.” At the time a new staff member to the club asked Interviewee Five why there was such excitement, to which, Interviewee Five reflected that it was because of the “depth of feeling that had gone on... it was this relief of it's going to be ok, we're actually better.” In this case, the collective experience was understood by participants who had been with the team during previous adversity, while not completely grasped by those newer to the organization. The “depth of feeling” represented an appreciation of the relationship between organizational members that motivated them to overcome adversity. This is an example of relational achievement (Crevani, 2019); the actions of the team were given meaning by reflecting on shared experience.

When reflection was conducted socially through interaction it enabled team members to reach mutual understanding. Ryömä and Satama (2019) argue leadership practices are shaped by reflecting on “multiple and subtle experience between self and others” (p.4). Reflection was observed to be an individual and social process, highlighted during an early performance review session, facilitated by the head coach and assistant coach following a pre-season game. As the first author entered the session, players were quietly writing notes in their personal notebooks while sitting in a semi-circle formation arranged around a TV. These notes were based on their own performance from the game. Once the allocated reflection time was complete, players progressively spoke about their performance and what they had noted,

further prompted by the head coach and assistant coach for details. In this session players identified whether they won their position, what they did well, and what they could improve. During this part of the session players were very specific in reflecting on their own performance, or their “connection” with another position. However, when the session progressed to reviewing the games video, small group reflections emerged about team performance. The small group reflections were a pattern in team meetings throughout the season, formed either through positional groups or an intentional combination of positions to encourage collaboration. Group reflection enabled the team to discuss each other’s interpretation of the team’s performance and included how they worked together, communicated, and responded to challenges. These individual and group reflections facilitated the construction of relational leadership. By collectively evaluating performance, the group could arrive at shared meanings through interaction and struggle (Carroll & Simpson, 2012) to develop revised or new strategies and game plans.

4.3.2 Projection

Projection is the practice of making sense of the future objectives participants and the team aim to achieve. Projection required planning and responding to emerging challenges. Hersted & Gergen (2013) stress that sometimes people require intuition to make meaning based on perceived consequences of their actions. For example, the team captain described the importance to not rely entirely on previous experience, to be ready to embrace the “natural flow of things,” in particular providing the opportunity for others in the team to contribute. The team captain explains that their decision to lead or be led by others often evolves naturally: “I’m trying to think of an example where I’ve had to follow, or I’ve had to lead... it all just sort of happens naturally, whatever way it happens” (Interviewee Six, team captain). In this example, the captain, by being aware of and responsive to the emerging social order, is intuitively conscious of the consequences of the unfolding interaction. By projecting a desired

future state where everyone contributes, they are able to participate without the compulsion to take control and lead others.

Projection is also used to socially construct a desired future state. This involves collectively talking about their objectives. For example, during the pre-season and early season participants spoke about wanting to be recognized as genuine title contenders by the media and other external stakeholders. In this example participants projected a desired future state, a common goal that they shared, but had not experienced. Through interaction participants socially constructed frames of reference, a process of selecting what is important (Crevani, 2019). The work of relational leadership requires interaction to move from one frame to another (Carroll & Simpson, 2012). This work began very early in the season as demonstrated in the pre-match talk in the moments prior to the round one game. The vice-captain of the team read out a story that had been written as a news article published at the end of the upcoming season. The story articulated the strategy the team had developed that would help them win the championship in a reflective manner, looking back on the season that had not happened yet. The story served as a reminder of what the team needed to do and how the strategy would help them achieve their goal. The mutual objective of winning the championship guided action when the team was faced with injuries and losses throughout the season. As a result of these conversations about how they could win, participants moved from a frame of reference as 'the young team with potential' to a new frame as the 'potential champions'. On the basis of this frame the conversations projected the desired future state of winning the championship and being 'world's best.' The sustained frame shared by the team of being 'world's best' despite significant injuries to key players provided a shared understanding to guide the team moving forward. Thus, the practices of reflection and projection enabled participants to make sense of interactions based on previous experience

and sharing a desired future state, both of which supported the construction of relational leadership.

4.4 Summary

We present leadership as a relational and collective performance of interactions and meaning making. Specifically, our empirical findings contribute in advancing leadership theory and providing recommendations that can be put into practice. Our key finding suggests leadership in the case organization was collectively constructed through three key practices: verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making. These practices did not occur in isolation, but were embedded intersubjectively within interactions, demonstrating the multiple ways participants constructed and re-constructed meanings (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Patterns and routines developed through interaction became collectively understood through shared meanings. Discussing ideas led to them being accepted by the team and then incorporated into action or acknowledged verbally through consensus. These social processes enabled the team to navigate challenges, including; the appointment of a new captain, long-term injuries (including that of the captain), the introduction of replacement players, and the pressure of performance and expectation. Ultimately, the organization was successful, winning the premiership. The challenges influenced the practice of leadership, which was dynamic and continuously under construction. This is consistent with an important premise of relational leadership that it is interdependent with its context (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

The findings corroborate and expand on existing relational leadership literature and provide a novel contribution to research in sport management. Leadership was observed to be constructed through mundane, everyday interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). By exploring how the three aggregated practices evolve in situ, we contribute to existing research on relational leadership that views leadership as constructed through discourse (Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), embodied interactions (Biehl, 2019; Küpers, 2013; Ryömä

& Satama, 2019), and involving meanings interpreted and reinforced through interactions (Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Dachler & Hosking, 1995). The eight identified practices, while distinct, are not performed in isolation; rather they complement each other. For example, through interactions participants make meaning collectively by verbally building upon and challenging contributions by others, while also engaging in the nuance of non-verbal interactions, as demonstrated by the example in Table 2.

--- INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

In this example players and coaches engage in the interdependent practices to collectively contribute to developing the game strategy, by building on previous conversations and consolidating shared understandings before completing the team meeting. We argue verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making interdependently construct ordinary and extraordinary interactions which are entangled in relational leadership. Hence, leadership is constructed through ongoing, seemingly mundane interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The example in Table 2 demonstrates a collective approach to leadership where many participants contribute to the social order. In this way leadership is practiced through interactions and sustained within relationships between people.

From a practical standpoint, our findings provide valuable advice for current and future practitioners in sport management and other management contexts. We highlight the practical contributions that have emerged from our findings for professional sporting organizations at three levels: organizations, operational sub-groups, and individuals.

Practical implications at the organizational level are related to leadership practice, leadership development, and recruitment and retention. As noted by Ferkins, Shilbury, and O'Boyle (2018) there is little evidence to suggest how collective leadership is developed. However, our findings reveal that developing leadership practice involves creating events

(e.g., meetings) that foster collaboration between operational sub-groups. We argue that such events should enhance interactions by allowing time and space to organizational members to co-construct ideas through the practices identified in our findings. According to our findings on meaning making, leadership development activities should involve interactions between all organizational members (e.g., off-field and on-field staff) to encourage multi-lateral and intersubjective leadership patterns to emerge. This is supported by Carroll and colleagues (2008) who argue that leadership development is interdependent between self, others, and context. Recruitment and retention are also organizational practices that can foster relational leadership. When recruiting it is important to consider the skill of the individual but also how they will fit in with and contribute to the current shared understandings of the team. This is the case for all roles; in our case, we found that non-playing staff can contribute perspectives players could not (e.g., life experiences). It will take time for new recruits to share understandings with others. Therefore, it should be a priority for others to get to know and work with new recruits. In our case shared understandings were developed within a relatively stable organizational structure over three years. The findings demonstrated that retention was a contributing factor to success of the team. However, this might not always be the optimal strategy. According to Arnold and colleagues (2018) leaders in professional sporting organizations can also have a negative influence on others. In that circumstance healthy attrition could assist in constructing new understandings if participants share common objectives and are guided by appropriate social support.

Many operational sub-groups exist in professional sporting organizations amongst performance staff, managers, coaches, and playing groups. These operational sub-groups work closely together to ensure the success of the team due to the value created by their functional unit. Collaboration should be greatest at this level to ensure shared understandings are created between those who work closely together. Our findings revealed that time spent

interacting supported the development of sub-group level shared understandings. Time should be made for regular sub-group interactions that involve reflection and projection, to discuss experiences and what sub-group members would like to achieve. This could take place during operational group meetings or before and after other events (e.g., games and practice).

Through increased opportunity for interaction participants can struggle for and create shared understandings to guide further action, rather than operating on independent assumptions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Doing so increases the likelihood that participants within sub-groups share the same understanding about how to achieve success and have the opportunity to contribute their ideas.

Individuals should think of leadership as the process of constructing meaning with others through interaction. Relational leadership does not suggest that hierarchy does not exist; for example in professional sport managers and coaches have significant formal authority (e.g., to hire, fire, and promote). Individuals can contribute to leadership practice by influencing what leadership means to others in the organization (Billsberry et al., 2018; Raelin, 2016). Our findings demonstrate that formal hierarchy can be softened by inclusive practices such as: questioning, discussions, physical interactions, and expressing emotions and using body language. Individuals with formal positions of power (e.g., general managers and coaches) should focus on creating consensus on strategy and problem solving through the use of these practices. The focus for individuals should be to ensure managers, coaches, staff, and players understand how to progress as a team. Furthermore, those with less power (e.g., junior staff and players) must take responsibility to share their perspective if they are to contribute to constructing meaning with others. The relational approach encourages collaboration and the emergence of multiple perspectives allowing sport managers to better understand others in the organization.

In presenting the findings we acknowledge that our selected case organization represents a relationally oriented organization. By sharing a view that ‘we are a team of leaders’, collective agency is promoted, and formal authority and hierarchy are softened. This may yield different results to an organization that promotes formal authority and discourages collective agency. We also note that being relationally oriented does not exclude the existence of formal authority or hierarchy. The case organization appoints formal leaders, and a hierarchical chain of authority and decision making exist amongst the team staff. However, instead of relying on the formally appointed leaders and formal chains of authority and decision making, the case shows that relational leadership is constructed collectively through three key practices, which enable and promote the contributions of multiple individuals who subsequently feel encouraged and capable of contributing collectively to leadership.

5.0 Conclusions

By exploring the construction of leadership in-situ for the duration of one season in a high performing sport organization, the continuous process of interactions and meaning making contributing to relational forms of leadership became evident. The team participants constructed meaning from verbal and non-verbal interactions, the constructed meanings were then expressed through interaction, forming ongoing practices of leadership. Verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making occurred simultaneously, interdependently, and repeatedly. Throughout the season participants negotiated interactions in the moment, reflecting on experience from the past and projecting a desired future position. Participants maintained the goal of winning the championship, whilst confronting challenges requiring adaptation in social processes. It is likely that part of their success was based on the congruence of leadership practice, as verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making aligned creating consistency that enabled participants to interpret unfolding situations based on shared understanding. However, we are not suggesting that the team’s

success was due to leadership alone, nor that success always requires effective leadership. Many other factors are required for success in professional sporting teams, including skill, game plan, management, and prevention of injuries to name a few.

Drawing upon relational approaches to leadership, and analysing naturalistic data, we argue that leadership is practiced through interactions and is sustained through relationships. This approach emphasises the contextuality of leadership. For practitioners in professional sporting organizations our findings may influence leadership practice, leadership development, recruitment, and retention. Viewing leadership as relationally constructed encourages organizational members to be aware of how they and others influence the social order, regardless of their formal position. The case demonstrates the importance of a relational approach to leadership in the context of professional sport, highlighting that leadership is always happening, through often mundane interactions and is mutually constructed by multiple organizational actors. We have demonstrated this by showing how the ongoing cycle of verbal interactions, non-verbal interactions, and meaning making lead to the co-construction of leadership. Leadership is not only about the extraordinary acts of leaders that we can easily recall; it is also about nuanced verbal and non-verbal interactions, collective experience and intuition in making sense of situations that call for leadership work. The processual nature of leadership sheds light on the collective, contextual, and temporal dimensions that require further exploration.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

The current study is based on the case of one professional sporting organization; hence we acknowledge the limited generalisability of our findings. Firstly, we acknowledge that our case organization like many professional sporting teams represents a homogenous group, similar in age, gender, culture, and occupation. This represents a strength and a weakness of

the study. As it is reflective of most sporting teams, the findings may provide generalisable practical understandings only to other homogenous teams. A contribution of this case is that it is centred on a female sporting team, supplementing a field of studies predominantly conducted with male participants (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). Future research might focus on comparisons between male and female teams in a similar type of sport context in order to offer insights on whether there are specific differences in terms of how relational leadership takes place in teams with female vs teams of male players (see for example, Uhl-Bien (2011)).

Second, a distinct lack of conflict between participants was observed throughout the study. Therefore, we could not explore conflict resolution. The lack of conflict may be due to the participants being aware of the first author's presence and wanting to represent themselves in a particular way, or it may be due to the success of the team in the period the study took place. When questioned in interviews participants spoke of differences being resolved collaboratively and issues being raised before they became significant, indicating that conflict did exist, but did not inhibit the team. Future research could focus on how relational leadership unfolds in less harmonious team contexts.

Third, future research could explore the relational practices of leading longitudinally to explore the historical paths that lead to or prevent relational leadership. Such studies could provide deeper insights into how the practices we observed interact over time and then compare different outcomes to different pathways.

This study focused on social processes through qualitative methods, however, mixed methods approaches, such as social network analysis, could be employed to map and locate leadership within complex professional sporting organizations to reveal the co-dependence of organizational members/units (Fransen et al., 2014). Greater understanding about the social processes of leadership in professional sporting organizations can be achieved through the

accumulation of cases exploring different contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This study discusses leadership practice from a relational perspective. A further prospect for sport management scholars is exploring the practical implications of a relational approach to leadership development. Scholars can build on the body of research by considering micro, meso, and macro levels of meaning making social processes, paying particular attention to temporality and contextuality.

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