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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The experience of captaincy in professional sport: The case of elite professional rugby

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Abstract

The captain is perceived to be an important member of the leadership structure within teams across many professional sports. However, while there is a general acceptance that this is the case, there is very little research exploring the role and associated demands at an elite level. As a result, the aim of this study was to explore the captaincy experiences of elite professional rugby union captains. The participants were eight male captains purposefully sampled for this study. Participants were interviewed individually to gain an understanding of each participant's captaincy experiences. The data were thematically analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Nine super-ordinate themes emerged in the study: role, skills, requirements, challenges, the coach, development, experience, context, and approach. Results suggest that the captaincy role is broader than previously highlighted, particularly at the elite level. Also, the study highlights inconsistencies in the selection of captains and a lack of formal developmental support for elite rugby captains. As a result, future research should explore the development of specific evidence-based approaches to captain selection and development.

Keywords: *Team sport, psychology, performance, coaching*

Effective leadership is a crucial ingredient for the functioning and performance of sports teams (Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012). While there has been much research exploring leadership from the perspective of the coach there has been much less research exploring leadership within the team (see Cotterill, 2013 for an overview of leadership in team sports). Athlete leadership defined by Loughhead, Hardy, and Eys (2006) as "an athlete occupying a formal or informal role within a team who influences a group of team members to achieve a common goal" (p. 144) focuses on the within-team leadership needs of the team, and crucially where this leadership originates from.

Leadership roles as highlighted in Loughhead et al.'s definition of athlete leadership within teams are often conceptualized as being either formal or informal in nature (Carron & Eys, 2012). Examples of formal leadership roles include the captain or vice captain. More informal leadership roles include those that emerge based on within-team interactions such as

social coordinator (Cotterill, 2013). In professional sport the position of captain is seen as an important role that is associated with achievement and recognition.

In many sports teams the captain is seen as fulfilling an important leadership function. Indeed, it has been suggested that good captaincy can have a marked impact upon performance (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). The captaincy role itself is something that has historically suffered from a lack of clarity. A number of different roles and responsibilities for team captains have been suggested. For example, Mosher (1979) outlined three main responsibilities: first, to act as a liaison between the coaching staff and the team; second, to be a leader during all team activities; and third, to represent the team at events, meetings, and press conferences. In addition to this, Mosher also highlighted specific duties that the captain might perform. These included: ensuring a constant flow of information between the coach and team; to lead by example; to help the coach in the

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planning stages for the team; and to conduct themselves in a professional manner before, during, and after the game. Dupuis, Bloom, and Loughhead (2006) highlighted some common functions between ice hockey captains in different teams including being effective communicators, remaining positive, and controlling their emotions. While many attempts have been made to describe the role of the captain a strong evidence base has been lacking, particularly in terms of the demands of the role and the challenges faced. This lack of understanding of the role and the function of the captain has led to question marks being raised regarding the role of the captain. For example, Fransen, Vanbese-laere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, and Boen (2014) highlighted four key leadership roles within teams. These include task, motivational, social, and external leaders. Specifically, the *task leader* gives teammates tactical advice and adjusts this when necessary; the *motivational leader* encourages teammates to perform and to do their best; the *social leader* develops a positive team atmosphere; and the *external leader* handles communication between the team and external (to the team) groups (Fransen et al., 2014; Loughhead et al., 2006). Crucially in Fransen et al.'s (2014) survey of 4451 team sport players drawn from 9 different sports, almost half of all participants felt the captain did not fulfil any of these fundamental leadership functions. This raises the question of whether the captain role is redundant, or possibly the wrong individuals are being selected to fulfil the captaincy role. An important first step to rectifying this issue is to better understand the demands of the captaincy role and the needs of the team, and then, to look at how to select and develop leaders who can meet these needs and challenges.

There is currently little broad consensus regarding the role of the captain. One of the reasons for this is that the role can vary significantly from sport to sport, and across levels of performance. For example, in soccer the captain is a formal leader on the pitch and a role model off it, but the way the team plays and major tactical decisions during the game are determined by the coach. In comparison, the sport of cricket adopts an enhanced role for its captains. The team is very much run by the captain; with the captain making all the decisions on the pitch and is also part of the formal leadership structure off the pitch (Cotterill, 2014). This does not suggest that the role of the captain is less important in soccer compared to cricket, but does highlight potentially significant differences in the role. While captains are consistently suggested to be an important aspect of team performance, to date there is currently limited research explicitly exploring the role and its development in sport (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016).

Of the limited research that has focused on captaincy, some specific themes have emerged. First, captains are an important source of leadership within the team (Kozub & Pease, 2001; Loughhead & Hardy, 2005). Second, captains are “normally” selected based upon their level of performance (Yukelson, Weinberg, Richardson, & Jackson, 1983) or position of play (Lee & Partridge, 1983). For example, in a study conducted by Melnick and Loy (1996) exploring the recruitment of captains in New Zealand rugby union teams, results highlighted that the majority of team captains played in central positions (e.g. number eight and half-back).

At the current time there is lack of research exploring captaincy at many performance levels, but this is particularly true at the elite level. Indeed, there is some good captaincy-focused leadership development work with high school teams (Blanton, Sturges, & Gould, 2014; Gould & Voelker, 2010), but to date very little exploring the demands and challenges of captaincy at the highest level. This is particularly important in sports such as rugby union and cricket where the captain is a key decision-maker on the pitch during the game (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2015). This lack of clear evidence regarding the role and the associated challenges means that current attempts to foster captaincy development programmes at the elite level lack a coherent evidence base.

As a result, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of captaincy from the perspective of the team captain in elite professional rugby. In particular, to explore the characteristics of the role, the challenges faced, and the participants experience of executing their responsibilities.

Method

Design

The current study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA approach); that is a well-established approach to qualitative research in psychology (Palmer, Larkin, De Visser, & Fadden, 2010). The specific aim of this approach is to gain an understanding of the phenomena under investigation from the participant's perspective, in a specific context (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005). IPA as an approach is best suited to forms of data collection that invite participants to articulate stories, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences of specific phenomena (Smith, 2004). The approach is systematic in its procedures, while at the same time is not a prescriptive methodology and allows for individuality and flexibility in the approach adopted (Cope, 2011; Smith & Eatough, 2006). The approach offers a

detailed analysis of the personal accounts of participants followed by a presentation and discussion of the generic experiential themes that is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation.

Ethical approval for the study was gained via the University Ethics Committee at the Institution where both authors were resident at the time of the study. All of the participants opted to take part in the study by giving their informed consent.

Participants

A homogenous sample was purposively selected for this study. This specific approach was adopted in accordance with Smith and Osborn's (2003) guidelines for IPA. The participants were selected based upon their experience as elite (professional) rugby captains. Specifically participants were recruited from clubs in the English Premier League (elite national professional league), based in the UK through personal contact. There were 8 male participants (*Mage* = 31 years, age range: 27–38 years; *Mexperience* = 9 years playing professional rugby; experience as captain range: 1–4 years). Also, three of the eight participants had also captained their respective international teams. Of the eight participants in this study six were still playing rugby. Specifically, in terms of being described as "elite" these participants could be defined as "successful elite" on Swann, Moran, and Piggott's (2015) four-point classification of elite.

Procedure

The participants were interviewed to gain an insight into their experiences as a captain in professional rugby union. This study adopted a semi-structured interview approach as articulated by Smith and Osborn (2003) for conducting IPA research. The researcher developed a specific interview schedule for the study but this was used to guide rather than dictate the flow of the interviews. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological approach where the participants are considered the "experts" and it is the meanings that they associate with their experiences that is of interest to the researcher (Smith, 1996). The specific process for developing the interview schedule adhered to a four-step approach developed by Smith and Osborn (2003). This approach suggested that the researchers (a) think about a broad range of issues; (b) put these topics in the most appropriate sequence; (c) think of appropriate questions relating to these areas; and (d) think about possible probes and prompts. Examples of interview questions included as part of

the interview schedule are: "Tell us about captaincy responsibilities you've had previous to your current role?"; "What challenges have you faced when acting as captain for your team?"; and "What would be the most important advice you would give to an aspiring captain within rugby?" All the interviews, which lasted between 30 and 80 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim to produce an accurate record of the conversations that took place. The interview transcripts were then returned to the participants to check the accuracy of the transcription process, after which IPA was used to describe the issues and meanings that were apparent from the participants' interviews.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using IPA. Through this process the researchers engaged in an "interpretative relationship with the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 64). All transcripts were read a number of times so the researcher could become familiar with each participant's account. Initial notes were made in the left-hand margin annotating anything identified as interesting or significant. As this process continued the right-hand margin was used to document emerging theme titles. These initial notes were then transformed into concise phrases capturing the qualities of the points annotated. The next step involved the researchers making connections between the emergent themes and researcher interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As these connections were made a clustering of themes emerged. Checks were made with the original transcripts to make sure connections still worked with the primary source materials. This step led to the development of a coherent table of themes. Once the transcripts had been analysed by this interpretative process a final table of super-ordinate themes was constructed. These super-ordinate themes were then translated into a narrative account where the analysis subsequently became more expansive.

A non-foundational approach to validity as advocated by Sparkes (1998), where relativism is not considered an issue, was adopted in this study, as a way to enhance the "trustworthiness" of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was achieved through the use of bracketing and member checking (Cotterill, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2005). Bracketing involved the researchers keeping a reflective diary to help "bracket" personal experiences and consider the influence of personal values. Member checking involved verbatim transcriptions of the interviews being returned to the participants to check for authenticity and accuracy. Once the analysis process

began, the participants were also contacted to clarify meaning where required.

Results and discussion

The IPA analysis of the data highlighted 9 super-ordinate themes, the majority of which have been used to

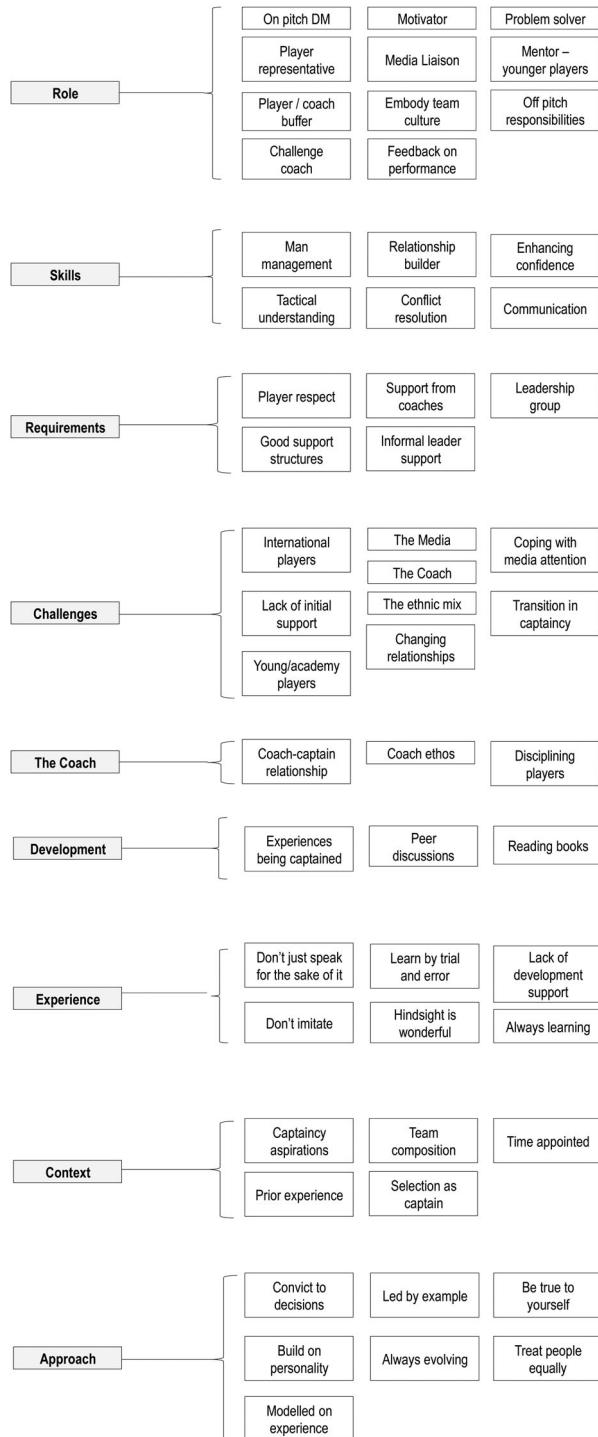


Figure 1. Super-ordinate and subordinate themes for the evaluation of the programme.

form the basis of the subsequent discussion, and 55 subordinate themes. These super-ordinate themes (Figure 1) include role, skills, requirements, challenges, the coach, development, experience, context, and approach.

Role

The first super-ordinate theme related to the specific role of the captain within the elite professional rugby context. A number of clear aspects to the role emerged including: on-pitch decision-maker, motivator, problem-solver, player representative, media liaison, mentor to young players, a player-coach buffer, embodiment of the team’s culture, to challenge the coach, provide feedback on performance, and a number of off-pitch responsibilities. In particular, leading by example was an important attribute that was highlighted. For example, participant eight highlighted the following:

It’s not necessarily what you say, because anyone can talk XXXXXX, it’s about turning up early, it’s about turning up on time, doing the right thing at the right time, and then that transfers always to performance on the pitch.

This ability to “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk” has previously been highlighted as an important leadership characteristic across a range of leadership domains (Bucci et al., 2012; Holmes, McNeil, & Adorna, 2010).

The importance of the relationship with the coach and the pivotal role the captain plays in-between the coach and team was also highlighted by participant three:

The captain needs to know exactly what the coach wants. I think whether they believe that, deep down or not, you know ... you have to portray what the coach wants you know, and that’s really difficult as captain.

This communication with the coach reflects one of the functions of the captain highlighted by Dupuis et al. (2006), and Janssen (2003). It also further supports one of the key functions for the captain outlined by Mosher (1979), and reflects Loughead et al.’s (2006) external leadership role. However, it must also be noted that the range of roles and functions assigned to the captaincy position in the current study were broader than in previous studies exploring captaincy in sport.

Skills

The participants in the current study discussed six key skills that successful captains in the sport of

rugby at this level displayed. These included: player management, relationship building, tactical understanding, conflict resolution, communication, and confidence enhancer. The need for an individualized approach was highlighted by participant three who reflected:

You try and help people in different ways. There are players there who need an arm around their shoulder, there're other players that need a kick every now and then, and it's all about identifying which players need what, and a little bit is kind of about management, that player management, and how to get the best out of each player.

Supporting this view parallels in the importance of "player management" can also be drawn with the captain's role in cricket (Brearley, 2001; Cotterill & Barker, 2013).

The captain's ability to communicate effectively in different contexts to different groups was also highlighted as an important skill. For example, participant six reported that:

You earn that sort of respect to be listened to and then once you've got that there's specific skills like being able to talk to people, being able to talk to large crowds, being able to get your point across, get your message across. I think they're all important in being a good leader and a good captain.

Effective communication and interpersonal skills have also previously been highlighted as important for captains and informal athlete leaders (Dupuis et al., 2006; Holmes et al., 2010; Price & Weiss, 2013). This point of supportive athlete leaders has previously been highlighted by Loughead and Hardy (2005) and Fransen et al. (2014) as an important factor influencing team functioning.

Requirements

All of the participants discussed a number of key requirements that needed to be in place in order for them to be able to execute their duties effectively. These included: player respect, support from the coaches, good support structures, and for some participants the presence of a leadership group. Support structures were highlighted by participant five as a key factor underpinning effective captaincy:

It's nice to share the workload, it's not that I'd shy away from it, but you know it is nice to mix it up and let somebody else take it, and support and be a good lieutenant, in many ways. Bring your leadership qualities without having the pressure of being captain if you like.

This notion of shared leadership has been increasingly highlighted in the literature as an important characteristic of successful teams (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016). Though to date there are limited examples of how this can be developed at a team (rather than an individual) level.

Challenges

A wide range of challenges that the captain has to deal with were highlighted in this study. These included working with international players; the coach; coping with the intense media scrutiny; a lack of initial support; the ethnic mix of the squad; their transition into captaincy; changing relationships over time; and developing youth players. Something that was consistently highlighted as being impactful at this elite level was media scrutiny. In support of this point participant two reflected that:

I think the biggish one is, is feeling the full force of the media attention. As an international captain it's probably not something that, or as a player, you had perceived or possibly understood. Of course you see other people going through it, but it's still kind of the full force gale really. It's tough doing it.

The media is particularly interesting as, while it is part of the sport, it should not be a key factor on the pitch. Increasingly though professional sports performers are required to interact with the media and receive training to that effect.

Development

All of the participants highlighted the impact that captains they had played for had on their approach to captaincy. For example, participant six when reflecting on what he thought was a poor role model stated that:

He was very eloquent, his work ethic was unbelievable, but the one thing he used to say, under the sticks or when he was making decisions, I need this and I want this and I, and I was like we, we need this, we want this, we have to do this, not I, I, I, it's not about you it's about us!

In comparison, participant two in reflecting on a positive role model described that:

The ultimate leader on and off the field, he knew everyone's wife's name, he knew all their kids, he knew the ins and outs of the club. He was very good with the media. And he was a good leader on the park as well.

These two quotes highlight the importance of the captain locating themselves (in terms of the language they use) as a part of the team ("we") rather than as a

separate entity (“I”). This in turn is an indicator of how well developed their “team identification” is. This concept represents the individual’s perceived sense of belonging to the team (Ruggieri, 2013), which has been suggested to impact upon a range of factors including effort and team work (Gundlach, Zivnuska, & Stoner, 2006).

In the absence of any “formal” development opportunities participants had been forced to take their development into their own hands and engage in discussions with their peers, or reading related books. The importance of developing your own approach was highlighted by participant three:

It does take a bit of time to try and understand where you’re coming from I think. But it’s hard. I mean people read books, and so it’s like I said, you can read books, you see them, you learn things, but you don’t always take it in until you’ve actually been out there and been through it!

The lack of developmental opportunities for captains highlighted by the participants is a particular concern. There are examples of leadership development programmes at sub-elite and non-professional levels (Blanton et al., 2014; Gould & Voelker, 2010) but nothing relating to leadership development with elite groups. As a result, there is little sharing of any pockets of good practice that might exist. More research is required to understand how best to support developing captains across all levels.

Experience

The captains interviewed in this study highlighted a number of “lessons learnt” during their time as captain. Consistent themes included: don’t speak for the sake of it; you will often learn by trial and error; there is a lack of development support; don’t imitate others; be true to yourself; hindsight is a wonderful thing; and you are always learning. An example of not speaking for the sake of it was participant five who reflected that:

Yeah, I mean that’s one of the biggest things I’ve kind of learned, make sure there’s a full stop, because I can get on a rant and a what for, but make sure that what you’re saying has got clarity, so it doesn’t become just noise.

There was also a view that there could be better dissemination of this accumulated knowledge to help to “fast track” new captains in the sport. This approach is similar to that suggested more generally for the “fast-tracking” of expertise in decision-making in sport (Cotterill, 2014).

Approach

Ultimately each of the participants demonstrated their own personal approach to captaincy. A number of prevalent influences were highlighted including: the need to commit to decisions; lead by example; be true to yourself; build upon your own personality; treat people equally; your approach is always evolving; and that the approach was modelled on their personal experience. The importance of being yourself and not imitating others was highlighted by participant one who reflected that:

Not everyone’s a ranter and raver or going to give you a Churchillian speech pre-game and not every club needs that. It’s just about finding what you’re good at and what you’re comfortable with and you know people have made you captain it’s because they’ve seen that already, and it’s not trying to fall into a stereotype, it’s about being what you are and then tailoring that maybe a little bit to certain situations, you know whether it’s a young team, old team, big game or small game, you just alter things a little bit and you’d probably get a better response than doing the same thing week in week out.

There was also broad agreement among the participants that you had never “made it”, but were always learning. For example, participant four stated that:

As a player you’re always learning stuff, and I think as a captain it’s exactly the same, it’s keeping yourself open. If you do make a mistake, learn how you would do it better in the future, don’t just ignore it.

This recognition of the need to continue to evolve and develop is particularly interesting against the previously highlighted absence of developmental support within the sport for current captains. This further highlights the view that strategies to help develop the leadership skills of captains in rugby and other professional sports need greater exploration (Cotterill & Cheetham, 2015; Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Voight, 2012).

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to explore perceptions and experiences of the role of captain in elite professional rugby. While the results supported some previous suggestions regarding the role of the captain it also highlighted a much broader range of responsibilities and functions. Importantly, at this high level of competition there still appears to be a lack of structured support in terms of the selection, transition, and continued support provided to captains at this level. This, coupled with a lack of clarity regarding the role and the skills requested to fulfil this role support the notion that the captain is not being

effectively supported to be the athlete leader that the team requires. This fact is further supported at lower levels in other sports (Fransen et al., 2014). Further research needs to further clarify the role of the captain, the skills required, the process of selection, and crucially how to support the development of both current and future captains in sport.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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