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**Valued Insight or Act of Insubordination? How Context Shapes Coaches'
Perceptions of Challenge-oriented Followership**

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5                          Challenge-oriented Followership

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**Abstract**

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31  Effective leadership is a collaborative effort, requiring a degree of complementarity in how

32  people enact roles of leadership and followership. Using a novel online vignette methodology,

33  we experimentally tested how three contextual factors influenced coaches' responses to

34  challenge-oriented acts of followership as well as investigated two potential mechanisms.

35  Coaches ($N$ = 232) watched videos of an athlete provided unsolicited challenge-oriented

36  feedback to a coach. Videos varied by the (a) athlete's status, (b) presence of third-party

37  observers, and (c) stage of the decision-making process.  Following the video, we assessed

38  coaches' evaluations of the athlete. Challenge-oriented followership was perceived more

39  favorably when enacted by an athlete in one-on-one (versus in a group) and before a decision

40  has been reached (versus after a decision is reached). Coaches may appreciate proactivity from

41  athletes in positions of followership, but challenge-oriented followership behaviors enacted at

42  the wrong time and place can elicit negative reactions.

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44  Keywords: Follower; Leader; Leadership; Proactive, Role Perceptions

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48    Valued Insight or Act of Insubordination? How Context Shapes Coaches' Perceptions of

49    Challenge-oriented Followership

50    Society disproportionately recognizes leaders for their efforts in motivating individuals

51 toward a collective purpose (i.e., a romanticism of leadership; Meindl et al., 1985). Leadership,

52 however, cannot exist in the absence of followership (van Vugt et al., 2008). As described within

53 the *leadership process framework*, effective leadership is the result of a collaborative effort

54 between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Rather than exclusively focusing on the

55 social influence of a single individual (and the behaviors that underpin such influence), this

56 framework emphasizes that leadership is a process of social influence that arises from how two

57 or more individuals engage in acts of leading and following (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). As

58 individuals can flexibly navigate between roles of leading and following to accommodate the

59 situational demands a group is currently facing, complementary patterns of leading and

60 following are essential to group coordination and the pursuit of instrumental group objectives

61 (Eys et al., 2020). Although conventional wisdom implies that coaches and athletes need each

62 other to succeed—a point supported by abundant empirical evidence and theorizing specific to

63 coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Jowett, 2017) —research on how specific acts

64 of followership shape the leadership process in sport settings remains scarce.

65    Followership is defined as "the characteristics, behaviors, and processes of individuals

66 acting in relation to leaders" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96). This definition is value-neutral;

67 followership is not inherently positive or negative, nor does the term imply a static role of

68 subordination. Indeed, research in workplace settings has explored the various beliefs leaders

69 hold about followers, revealing that *prototypical followership* entails the facets of good

70 citizenship, enthusiasm, and industriousness, whereas *antiprototypical followership* entails the

71 facets of insubordination, incompetence, and conformity (Sy, 2010). Another important element

72 emphasized within Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2014) definition is the interdependent nature of leading

73 and following. Interdependence between leaders (e.g., coaches) and followers (e.g., athletes) is

74  especially apparent in sport, making the athletic context a fertile ground to study leader-follower

75  interactions (Benson et al. 2014; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). Notably, high quality coach-

76  athlete relationships are necessary for effective and purposeful coaching (Jowett, 2017) and

77  fruitful interactions between these two parties predict favorable outcomes (Nicholls et al., 2017).

78      To gain insight into the nature of followership in sport, Benson et al. (2016) interviewed

79  highly accomplished university sport coaches. These coaches described ideal followers as

80  individuals who are accountable and committed to supporting team efforts, while also being

81  proactive and willing to challenge ideas and offer alternative perspectives. A caveat echoed by

82  the coaches, however, was that followers had to understand when and where it was appropriate

83  to engage in such challenge-oriented behaviors. These findings advanced earlier work in the

84  organizational domain demonstrating that leaders preferred followers who were proactive in

85  their role and voiced their opinions (Sy, 2010), but that leaders' reactions to this proactive

86  followership was contingent on the situation in which they were enacted and the way such

87  behaviors were expressed (Sun & van Emmerik, 2014; Whiting et al., 2012). In sport team

88  settings, acts of challenge-oriented followership can be a double-edged sword due to the mixed

89  reactions they can evoke from leaders, and how they may enhance or undermine planning and

90  coordination among team members (Benson et al., 2016). These findings suggest that similar to

91  leadership, followership is a process of social influence that requires situational awareness of

92  how context shapes the appropriateness of behaviors. As such, there is a need to better

93  understand how context affects coaches' perceptions of challenge-oriented followership

94  behaviors.

95      According to organizational literature, an important feature of challenge-oriented

96  followership is that it is a proactive and self-initiated behavior, meaning it is enacted without

97  prior instruction or permission from a leader (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Grant et al., 2009).

98  Leaders may respond negatively to challenge-oriented followership if they perceive the behavior

99  as threatening or insubordinate (Falbe & Yukl, 1992), a dishonest ingratiation attempt (Bolino,

100    1999), or an overstepping of boundaries (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Nevertheless, challenge-

101    oriented followership may help to curtail selfish decisions made by some leaders (Oc &

102    Bashshur, 2013), and aid in team decision-making processes (Benson et al., 2016). Thus, how

103    challenge-oriented followership is perceived by a leader may ultimately depend on the context in

104    which such behaviors occur (Carsten et al., 2018). In sport, there may be situations when a

105    coach (often the formal team-leader) requires immediate deference and compliance from the

106    athletes on their team (the followers) to move forward with a strategy or task (e.g., the time

107    pressure situation of a basketball timeout). In contrast, there are times when leaders desire

108    followers who are proactive in their role and willing to challenge their ideas and strategies (e.g.,

109    in a pre-season team goal setting session). In the current research, we conducted the first

110    experimental test of how three specific contextual factors (i.e., presence of third-parties, stage of

111    the decision-making process, and status of follower)—previously identified through interviews

112    with coaches (Benson et al., 2016)—influenced leaders' responses to challenge-oriented acts of

113    followership. Specifically, we examined how the context in which the acts occurred influenced

114    coaches' appraisals of the behaviour by assessing (a) perceived effectiveness of the athlete's

115    communication, (b) leader receptivity to the feedback, and (c) general evaluations of the

116    athlete's followership. As it pertains to the latter, on the basis of research on implicit

117    followership theory, we evaluated whether coaches perceived the athlete as having traits

118    associated with prototypical followership and insubordinate followership (Sy, 2010), which is

119    the only component of antiprototypical followership that predicts whether followers will refuse

120    their leaders' instructions (Knoll et al., 2017).

121         According to qualitative work exploring coaches' intepretations of followership in sport

122    (Benson et al., 2016), one contextual factor that may affect how challenge-oriented behaviors are

123    interpreted is the presence of third-party observers. DeRue and Ashford (2010) posited that

124    successful leadership efforts are based upon mutual understanding between leaders and

125    followers; when one person lays claim to leadership in a situation, others must grant this

126     person's claims by actively assuming a follower identity. Whereas visible displays of deference

127     are critical to ensuring group members collectively endorse the same central leader, followers

128     who challenge their leaders in front of other group members may create ambiguity over who is

129     leading who. From the perspective of a formally appointed leader like a coach, such challenging

130     behaviors may be perceived as acts of insubordination. In contrast, followers who publicly

131     support their leader and/or wait for one-on-one interactions to challenge are less likely to

132     disrupt the central leadership structure within the group. As such, our first hypothesis was as

133     follows:

134         **Hypothesis 1:** Coaches will rate challenge-oriented acts of followership more positively

135         in terms of (a) perceived effectiveness, (b) receptivity, and (c) general evaluations of the

136         follower (i.e., higher levels of prototypical followership, lower levels of insubordinate

137         followership)—when they occur in a one-on-one setting than in a group setting.

138         Coaches also identified that the timing of challenge-oriented acts of followership may

139     affect their perceptions (Benson et al., 2016). Leaders tend to view feedback negatively when it is

140     given too close to when a decision must be made (Whiting et al., 2012). Once the deliberation

141     phase for a given decision has passed, any further input may obstruct rather than assist

142     decision-making processes (Marks et al., 2001). Following this rationale, we hypothesized the

143     following:

144         **Hypothesis 2:** Coaches will rate challenge-oriented acts of followership more positively

145         in terms of (a) perceived effectiveness, (b) receptivity, and (c) general evaluations of the

146         follower (i.e., higher levels of prototypical followership, lower levels of insubordinate

147         followership)—when they occur before closure on a decision is signaled (i.e., before a

148         decision is made) than after a decision is signaled (i.e., after a decision is made).

149         The status of the follower is another contextual factor coaches reported as relevant to

150     their understanding of challenge-oriented behaviors (Benson et al., 2016). Oc and Bashshur

151     (2013) proposed that followers are more likely to influence their leaders when they occupy a

152     higher status position within the group. Individuals with higher status (i.e., respect and

153     admiration) tend to receive more opportunities and have greater access to resources within

154     groups (Anderson et al., 2015). As status is conferred to individuals based on their perceived

155     instrumental value to a group (Anderson et al., 2015), coaches may be more receptive to

156     feedback from higher status group members. Nevertheless, challenge-oriented followership

157     behaviors from high-status followers enacted at the wrong time (i.e., in the presence of third-

158     party observers; Benson et al., 2016) may pose a threat to leaders by undermining their

159     authority and disrupting the leadership hierarchy (van Vugt et al., 2008). As such, we

160     hypothesized the following:

161         **Hypothesis 3:** Coaches will rate challenge-oriented acts of followership more positively

162         in terms of (a) perceived effectiveness, (b) receptivity, and (c) general evaluations of the

163         follower (i.e., higher levels of prototypical followership, lower levels of insubordinate

164         followership)—when they are enacted from a higher status than lower status teammate,

165         as long as no other contextual boundaries are violated (i.e., one-on-one setting, before a

166         decision is reached).

167         Complementing our primary purpose regarding the direct effect of context on coaches'

168     evaluations of challenge-oriented followership, the secondary purpose was to investigate

169     potential mechanisms of *why* coaches sometimes viewed challenge-oriented behaviors less

170     positively (i.e., indirect effects). Understanding why coaches arrived at certain evaluations

171     would help to guide efforts to improve leader-follower communication patterns in sport. We

172     tested two candidate mechanisms in the current study. Given the lack of direct evidence in this

173     domain, we briefly highlight rationale for considering these particular mediators.

174         One potential mediator is the extent to which challenge-oriented followership is

175     perceived as an expression of dominance. Evolutionary research on leader-follower dynamics

176     suggests that dominant individuals may gain influence through forced compliance (instead of

177     persuasion) by relying on fear and intimidation tactics (Bastardoz & van Vugt, 2019; Cheng et

178 al., 2010). In research on nonhuman primates, expressions of dominance by subordinates

179 directly threaten the alpha individual and often elicit aggressive countermeasures (Sapolsky,

180 2005). As such, perceptions of *follower dominance* may mediate the effect of challenge-oriented

181 followership on how coaches evaluate and respond to such behavior in the presence of third-

182 party observers or after a decision is made. Another candidate mechanism is the extent to which

183 challenge-oriented followership is perceived as a *violation of role expectation*s. Coaches develop

184 and communicate specific and general role expectations to ensure athletes are positively

185 contributing to the direction of the team (Eys et al., 2020). Challenge-oriented followership may

186 contravene such expectations when enacted at the wrong moment, such as in the presence of

187 others or after a decision is made. Altogether, we explored the following research questions:

188     **Research Questions:** Is the effect of challenge-oriented followership, (a) in the

189     presence of third-party observers and (b) after a decision is made, on coaches'

190     evaluations mediated by either (1) follower dominance or (2) violation of role

191     expectations?

192 **Overview of the Current Research**

193     The objective of the proposed research was to experimentally test how specific contextual

194 factors influence leaders' (i.e., coaches') responses to challenge-oriented acts of followership. To

195 examine this question, we introduce a novel experimental vignette methodology in which we

196 filmed leader-follower interactions using paid actors. Such an approach enabled us to directly

197 manipulate three contexts (i.e., presence of third-party observers, stage of the decision-making

198 process, follower status) in which a follower delivered challenge-oriented feedback. Using this

199 methodology enhances the study design's internal validity and strengthens our confidence in

200 making causal inferences (Scandura & Williams, 2000). Moreover, instead of asking

201 participants to envision themselves in a scenario based on a written description, having

202 participants observe a video that depicts an actual leader-follower interaction creates a more

203    immersive and realistic vignette experience, and controls for other factors such as content of the

204    feedback (Pierce & Aguinis, 1998).

205    <div align="center">**Method**</div>

206    **Participants**

207         The final sample consisted of 232 coaches ($n_{females}$ = 67; $M_{age}$ = 37.90, $SD$ = 13.02)

208    who coached at either the collegiate ($n$ = 139), youth ($n$ = 40), club ($n$ = 32), or recreational

209    ($n$ = 21) level. Table 1 depicts how coaches' competition level varied by gender. We obtained

210    338 initial responses; however, many coaches ($n$ = 91) were not able to complete the

211    experiment due to technical difficulties (i.e., the video did not load properly due to software

212    compatibility issues or the audio was inadequate). An additional 15 coaches were excluded

213    for failing one of the manipulation checks (detailed below). The average number of years of

214    coaching experience in our sample was 13.34 ($SD$ = 10.36). More coaches self-identified as

215    head ($n$ = 163) than assistant ($n$ = 67) coaches (two coaches did not respond to this

216    question). There were slightly more coaches of male-only teams ($n$ = 96) than female-only

217    teams ($n$ = 94); some coaches ($n$ = 42) coached both male and female teams. The individuals

218    in our sample coached a variety of different sports, including basketball ($n$ = 50), volleyball

219    ($n$ = 41), hockey ($n$ = 30), soccer ($n$ = 27), football ($n$ = 15), rugby ($n$ = 10), baseball ($n$ = 8),

220    and other sports (e.g., track and field, swimming, curling, dance, field hockey, golf; $n$ = 51).

221    **Procedure and Materials**

222         After obtaining approval from two institutional ethics boards (i.e., Western

223    University and Wilfred Laurier University), coaches were recruited via the internet. As there

224    were no comparable experimental designs from which to inform our assumed effect size for

225    the power analysis, we targeted the smallest effect size of interest given the funding available

226    for recruitment (i.e., small-to-medium sized effect). An a priori power analysis (estimated

227    effect of $f$ = 0.175, $\alpha$ = .05) indicated that 259 coaches would be required to achieve a power

228    of .80. Thus, we sought to obtain 32 coaches per condition (i.e., 256 coaches total). Our

229 primary recruitment method was searching publicly available coaching databases to obtain

230 head and assistant coaches' email addresses—beginning with the collegiate level of

231 competition. We used this method to email over 500 coaches in Canada and the United

232 States to gauge interest in participation. As a secondary recruitment strategy after not

233 obtaining enough complete responses from university coaches, we broadened our sampling

234 criteria and information posts were distributed on social media. Coaching experience was

235 verified once initial contact was made in all cases; coaches were emailed a unique study link

236 to ensure experimenter control over who was included.

237 ***Experimental Vignettes***

238 Coaches who consented to participate first completed a demographic questionnaire.

239 They were then randomly assigned to view one of eight video vignettes (created for the

240 purposes of this study). The vignettes depicted an athlete speaking up and verbally

241 challenging a coach during a meeting—hereafter referred to as challenge-oriented

242 followership (COF). The individuals in the vignettes were paid male actors and the actor

243 portraying the coach was a professional coach at the collegiate level—none of whom were

244 part of the research team. Using a full-factorial 2 × 2 × 2 experimental design, three

245 contextual factors were manipulated. We manipulated the *status of the follower* (i.e., high

246 status vs. low status) via the following instructions given to participants immediately prior to

247 watching the video:

248 Once you click on the next page you will be taken to a short video (i.e., just over a

249 minute long) depicting an interaction between a coach and several athletes. In the

250 following video clip, please pay careful attention to the athlete wearing the black

251 shirt, who is a [*respected senior team member/newcomer to the team this year*].

252 Immediately following the video clip, we will be asking for your thoughts on how you,

253 as a coach, feel about the specific interaction with the [*senior athlete/newcomer*] in

254        the black shirt. We would like you to imagine yourself as the coach interacting with a

255            team member in the following clip….

256        We manipulated the *presence of third-party observers* by depicting the athlete

257   enacting the COF as either accompanied by four teammates (group condition) or alone (one-

258   on-one condition). Finally, we also manipulated *the stage of the decision-making process*:

259   The COF occurred either before the coach had announced his decision as final (before

260   condition) or after his announcement (after condition). The content of the follower's

261   feedback and the nature of the discussion led by the coach remained constant across the

262   scenarios. After viewing the vignette, participants completed questionnaires of their

263   perceptions of the follower and his feedback. See the supplementary material file for

264   additional information about the vignettes: https://osf.io/cwfhe/

265   ***Dependent Measures***

266        **Effectiveness of Follower Behavior.** We adapted Sauer's (2011) measure of

267   leader effectiveness to develop three items that evaluated the degree to which coaches

268   perceived the COF to be effective in the context of advancing team goals. These items related

269   to the perceived effectiveness of the COF ("To what extent was the athlete effective in his role

270   as a follower?"; "To what extent was the athlete's behavior characteristic of ideal

271   followership"; "To what extent did the athlete positively contribute to the team meeting in

272   this situation?"), with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*).

273        **Leader Receptivity to Feedback.** Coaches were asked to indicate the extent to

274   which they were receptive to the athlete's COF on three items, with response options ranging

275   from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*). The items were: "I would carefully consider the

276   athlete's feedback under these circumstances."; "I would pay close attention to the athlete's

277   suggestion in this situation."; "I would be receptive to the athlete's advice in this situation."

278        **Evaluations of the Follower.** We modified Sy's (2010) Implicit Followership

279   Scale to assess coaches' evaluation of the athlete depicted in the vignette. Specifically,

280    coaches were asked to rate "how characteristic each adjective is of the player [they] just

281    observed in the previous interaction" with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*

282    *characteristic*) to 10 (*extremely characteristic*). This scale captures both prototypical and

283    antiprototypical follower traits, but was initially designed as a trait measure in a workplace

284    context. In modifying the questionnaire for this experimental context, ten items (i.e.,

285    adjectives) were excluded from the original scale (i.e., hardworking, uneducated, easily

286    influenced, slow, excited, follows trends, outgoing, inexperienced, soft spoken, happy),

287    leaving five items reflecting *prototypical followership* (i.e., loyal, productive, reliable, goes

288    above and beyond, team player) and three items reflecting *insubordinate followership*—a

289    specific facet of antiprototypical followership (i.e., arrogant, rude, bad temper).[1]

290        **Dominance.** Four items were adapted from Cheng et al.'s (2010) Dominance and

291    Prestige scale to assess the extent to which coaches perceived the target athlete as dominant.

292    Coaches were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the four statements, with

293    response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The items

294    included were, "This athlete is concerned with demonstrating control over others"; "This

295    athlete is willing to use aggressive verbal tactics to get his way"; "This athlete has a forceful

296    personality"; "This athlete enjoys having authority over others."

297        **Role Violation.** To assess whether coaches perceived the athlete to be in violation

298    of his role, we created three items specifically for this study. Coaches were asked to rate the

299    extent to which they agreed with three items related to role violation, with response options

300    ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These items were, "This athlete

301    clearly violated his role under these circumstances"; "The athlete's behavior was

302    inappropriate in this situation"; "I would not encourage this type of behavior in my group."

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[1] A confirmatory factor analysis evaluating this two-factor structure demonstrated the following model fit, $\chi 2$ (19) = 41.13, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.08, 95% CI [0.05, 0.11], SRMR = 0.47, with factor loadings ranging from .68 to .85.

303    *Manipulation and Deception Checks*

304        Finally, coaches completed three multiple-choice manipulation check questions

305    to ensure coaches could recall the context surrounding the interaction (i.e., "How many

306    athletes were present during the interaction you observed?"; "Which of the following best

307    reflects the athlete you observed during the video?"; "Which of the following reflects the

308    athlete's behavior?"). To gauge coaches' naiveté regarding the study, coaches also responded

309    to an open-ended question about whether they developed their own ideas about the study's

310    purpose and hypotheses. Of the 247 coaches who completed the full experiment, 15 coaches

311    were excluded for incorrectly responding to one of the manipulation check questions.

312    **Analysis**

313        We used confirmatory factor analysis to model scores derived from each subscale as a

314    latent factor in Mplus 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The overall measurement model

315    yielded the following fit indices, $\chi^2$ (174) = 364.71, $p$ < .001, RMSEA = 0.07, CFI = 0.93, TLI

316    = 0.92, SRMR = .09. Although the RMSEA and SRMR values exceed the recommended

317    cutoff values by Hu and Bentler (1999), these indices should be interpreted in the context of

318    measurement quality, as the standardized factor loadings are strong and significant ranging

319    from .54 to .96, with an average factor loading of .80 (McNeish & Hancock, 2018).

320    Nonetheless, inspecting the modification indices revealed that fit markedly improves when

321    allowing the residual error term to correlate for items one and two of the follower

322    effectiveness subscale, $\chi^2$ (173) = 267.108, $p$ < .001, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96,

323    SRMR = .04. This suggested modification may reflect the fact that these items used the term

324    "follower/followership", whereas the third item did not. Most of the interfactor correlations

325    were moderate, but the correlation between insubordinate and dominance was strong at $r$ =

326    .80. All of the subscale scores demonstrated sufficient levels of reliability (effectiveness of

327    follower behavior, α = .76, leader receptivity to feedback, α = .87; prototypical followership,

328    α = .88; insubordinate followership, α = .83; dominance, α = .88; role violation, α = .92).

329       To evaluate the substantive hypotheses, full-factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA)

330    were conducted to test the main and interactive effects of the contextual variables on how

331    coaches evaluated the COF. Significant interaction effects were followed by pairwise

332    comparisons to evaluate differences among specific combinations of factors using the least

333    significant differences method.

334                     **Results**

335       As Little's MCAR was non-significant, $X^2$ (460) = 471.17, $p$ = .349, the expectation-

336    maximization algorithm was used to replace missing data from incomplete responses (Schafer &

337    Olsen, 1998). Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was also non-significant across all

338    variables ($p$s ≥ 0.322), fulfilling the assumption that variance between conditions was

339    approximately equal. Fisher's exact tests were used to compare responses for coaching level,

340    gender of the coach, and gender of the team coached across the three experimental conditions.

341    This analysis revealed no significant relations between these demographic variables and the

342    experimental conditions ($p$s ≥ .149). A one-way ANOVA also revealed that participant age did

343    not significantly differ between conditions, $F$s ≤ 1.10, $p$s ≥ .331.

344    **Coaches' Evaluations of Followership**

345       Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 2. As seen in the table, scores fell near the

346    midpoint of the scale for the majority of measures, suggesting that, on average, coaches deemed

347    the act of challenge-oriented feedback to be relatively neutral. In the following analyses, we

348    examined the degree to which contextual factors shifted coaches' evaluations of such behaviors.

349    *Effectiveness of Follower Behavior*

350       Although there were no significant main effects related to the status of follower,

351    $F$(1, 223) = .92, $p$ = .338, $\eta_p^2$ = .00, or the stage of the decision-making process, $F$(1, 223)

352    = 2.41, $p$ = .115, $\eta_p^2$ = .01, perceived effectiveness of the feedback differed based on the

353    presence of third-party observers, $F$(1, 223) = 4.07, $p$ = .045, $\eta_p^2$ = .02. Supporting

354    Hypothesis 1, coaches perceived the COF as more effective when it was delivered

355     individually ($M$ = 3.68, $SD$ = 1.32) than in a group context ($M$ = 3.33, $SD$ = 1.36). Of

356     note, there was a significant interaction between presence of third-party observers and

357     stage of the decision-making process, $F$(1, 223) = 5.40, $p$ = .021, $\eta_p^2$ = .02. The COF

358     delivered after a decision was reached was perceived as more effective when it occurred

359     individually ($M$ = 3.75; $SD$ = 1.37) than in a group ($M$ = 3.00; $SD$ = 1.24), $p$ = .003,

360     Hedges's g = 1.08. There was also a significant interaction between presence of third-

361     party observers and status of follower, $F$(1, 223) = 4.23, $p$ = .041, $\eta_p^2$ = .02. COF enacted

362     by a newcomer (i.e., lower status member) was perceived as more effective when enacted

363     individually ($M$ = 3.78; $SD$ = 1.29) than in a group ($M$ = 3.01; $SD$ = 1.26), $p$ = .005,

364     Hedges's g = 0.60. The two-way interaction between status of follower and stage of the

365     decision-making process, $F$(1, 223) = .000, $p$ = .990, $\eta_p^2$ = .00, and three-way

366     interaction, $F$(1, 223) = 0.11, $p$ = .740, $\eta_p^2$ = .00, were nonsignificant.

367     ***Leader Receptivity***

368         There were no significant main effects of any contextual variables on leader's

369     receptivity to the COF: status of follower, $F$(1, 224) = 1.709, $p$ = .192, $\eta_p^2$ = .01, presence

370     of third-party observers, $F$(1, 224) = 2.542, $p$ = .112, $\eta_p^2$ = .01, stage of the decision-

371     making process, $F$(1, 224) = 0.104, $p$ = .747, $\eta_p^2$ = .00. Nonetheless, a significant

372     interaction effect was found between stage of the decision-making process and presence

373     of third-party observers, $F$(1, 224) = 4.281, $p$ = .040, $\eta_p^2$ = .02. When COF was delivered

374     after a decision was reached, coaches were more receptive to the COF when it was

375     enacted individually ($M$ = 5.28; $SD$ = 1.08) than in a group setting ($M$ = 4.70; $SD$ = 1.37),

376     $p$ = .012, Hedges's g = 0.46. Despite this finding, there were no other interaction effects

377     detected, including between presence of third-party observers and status of follower, $F$(1,

378     224) = 0.223, $p$ = .637, $\eta_p^2$ = .00, or status of follower and stage of the decision-making

379     process, $F$(1, 224) = 3.283, $p$ = .071, $\eta_p^2$ = .01. The three-way interaction was also non-

380     significant, $F$(1, 224) = 0.30, $p$ = .864, $\eta_p^2$ = .00.

381 *Prototypical Followership*

382      Ratings of prototypical followership varied according to the stage of the decision-

383 making process, $F(1, 220) = 4.37$, $p = .038$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Supporting Hypothesis 2, coaches

384 rated the athlete higher on prototypical followership characteristics when the COF was

385 enacted before a decision was made ($M = 5.88$; $SD = 1.15$) than after ($M = 5.62$, $SD =$

386 1.30) a decision was made. Conversely, there were no main effects of follower status, $F(1,$

387 $220) = 1.51$, $p = .221$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$, or presence of third-party observers, $F(1, 224) = 0.05$, $p$

388 $= .921$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, on prototypical followership. There were also no significant

389 interaction effects between the presence of third-party observers and status of follower,

390 $F(1, 220) = 0.32$, $p = .570$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, status of follower and stage of the decision-making

391 process, $F(1, 220) = 0.14$, $p = .707$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, or stage of the decision-making process and

392 presence of third-party observers, $F(1, 220) = 2.45$, $p = .119$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The three-way

393 interaction was also nonsignificant, $F(1, 220) = 1.75$, $p = .187$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

394 *Insubordinate Followership*

395      Counter to predictions, there were no significant main or interactive effects

396 related to insubordinate followership (see supplementary file for complete statistics).

397 **Potential Mediators**

398      Similarly, analyses revealed that neither of the potential mediators (i.e.,

399 perceptions of follower dominance, perceived role violation) exhibited differences across

400 conditions (i.e., first linkage in the mediation pathway) that merited proceeding to

401 evaluating them as potential mediators linking COF to coaches' evaluations of such

402 behavior (see supplementary file for complete statistics).

403           **Discussion**

404      Followership is a process of social influence that is tightly intertwined with the

405 process of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In sports, positive relationships between

406 leaders (e.g., coaches) and followers (e.g., athletes) are a key component of successful

407    team performance (Davis et al., 2019), yet there is a scarcity of systematic research on

408    the nature of followership and its consequences in sport. The present study is the first to

409    use an experimental vignette methodology to examine whether contextual factors

410    previously identified by coaches (i.e., presence of third-parties, stage of the decision-

411    making process, and status of follower; Benson et al., 2016) impacted coaches'

412    evaluations of both COF and the athlete enacting the challenging behavior. Analyses

413    revealed the presence of higher-order interaction effects of context on leaders'

414    interpretations of follower behavior. As commonly observed in research examining

415    interpersonal exchanges, the setting, complexity, breadth, and nuance of social

416    interactions means that several contextual factors ought to be accounted for in a given

417    analysis (Kenny, 1996).

418            Nonetheless, of the factors manipulated, the presence of third-party observers

419    (i.e., teammates) appeared to be the most salient factor influencing coaches' evaluations.

420    Coaches perceived COF to be more effective in a one-on-one setting than in the presence

421    of others. The timing of the COF was also relevant to coaches' evaluations; a preference

422    for COF enacted before (rather than after) a decision emerged. Generally, coaches'

423    evaluations of the COF were relatively neutral (mean responses clustered around the

424    midpoint of the measures), suggesting that the behavior itself was not deemed inherently

425    positive or negative. As the context the COF occurred within appeared to skew coaches'

426    appraisals away from the midpoint of the scales (i.e., positively or negatively), this

427    underscores the notion that COF is indeed a double-edged sword (e.g., Benson et al.,

428    2016; Carsten et al., 2018).

429    **Theoretical Implications**

430            A major contribution of this study was that the presence of third-party observers affected

431    how coaches evaluated COF. Providing support for our first hypothesis, coaches rated the COF

432    as more effective when enacted by the athlete one-on-one than in the presence of teammates.

433    Moreover, the presence of interaction effects indicated that delivering COF in a one-on-one

434    setting (instead of in front on teammates) may have actually buffered against the costs of

435    violating other norms—namely, speaking up after a decision was made or as a low status group

436    member. In such situations, coaches responded more favourably to the COF in terms of

437    perceived effectiveness and receptivity when enacted individually. Altogether, the pattern of

438    findings suggests that when other contextual conditions are violated (i.e., speaking up after a

439    final decision is made, speaking up as a new group member), the mere presence of others may

440    play a role in how such behaviors are interpreted by coaches. This aligns with research spanning

441    several populations (e.g., elementary school students, Archer-Kath et al., 1994; medical

442    students, Camp et al., 2010) whereby feedback is received more positively when delivered one-

443    on-one compared to in a group. Indeed, publicly disagreeing with a leader or offering an

444    alternative solution could be construed as threatening to the leader (Camp et al., 2010; Oc &

445    Bashshur, 2013). In the context of sport, the coach-athlete relationship is highly interdependent

446    and thrives due to the presence of complementarity, commitment, closeness, and co-orientation

447    (see Jowett, 2017). When an athlete challenges in front of teammates, it may signal a mismatch

448    (or absence) in these values, leading to the coach perceiving such behavior as threatening to

449    their standing.

450    Our study also adds to the literature by showing how challenge-oriented behaviors can

451    be a component of prototypical followership. In partial support of the second hypothesis,

452    athletes engaging in COF before a decision was made (rather than after) tend to be perceived as

453    a prototypical follower (i.e., loyal, productive, reliable, goes above and beyond, and is a team

454    player). Research on workplace interactions have emphasized that timing is important to

455    determining how leaders evaluate follower feedback (e.g., Whiting et al., 2012), as it can signal

456    proactivity (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Leaders, however, do not always appreciate proactive

457    behavior (Grant et al., 2009; Grant & Ashford, 2008), despite the fact that it can contribute to

458    various positive work outcomes (see Parker et al., 2010). In sport, teams benefit from players

459     who proactively correct each other and voice suggestions to overcome obstacles (Van

460     Puyenbroeck et al., 2018). Prior to the present study, however, coaches' evaluations of this

461     proactive behavior had not been experimentally examined. Our findings suggest that coaches

462     prefer when athletes enact early proactive behaviors (i.e., enact COF before a decision is made).

463         Although the third hypothesis was not supported (i.e., follower status did not affect

464     coaches' evaluations), this may reflect the nature of the vignette design rather than the

465     importance of a follower's status. As status refers to the respect, admiration, and voluntary

466     deference afforded to an individual based on their instrumental social value (Anderson et al.,

467     2015), the status manipulation may have lacked experimental realism in contrast to the other

468     contextual factors that were varied across conditions (i.e., timing of feedback, presence of third-

469     party observers). According to social impact theory (Latané, 1981), followers of higher social

470     rank have a greater capacity to influence leaders because of their relative proximity to the leader

471     (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). Moving forward, research should consider differences between what

472     leaders prefer from their followers and what is beneficial for team outcomes (Fuller et al., 2012).

473     Whereas qualitative work described how coaches preferred feedback from higher-status

474     followers (Benson et al., 2016), research in organizational settings suggests that dissent from

475     lower-status followers is associated with improvements in group decision making processes (De

476     Dreu & West, 2001). Indeed, lower status followers may be the primary drivers of innovation

477     and change as they stimulate a broader range of ideas (Blair & Bligh, 2018). Despite the absence

478     of status-based effects in the current study, organizational scholars have drawn attention to the

479     consequential role of status in shaping individual, interpersonal, and group consequences

480     (Bendersky & Pai, 2018), and thus it is perhaps premature to rule out this important variable in

481     relation to leader-follower dynamics in sport teams.

482     **Practical Implications**

483         Speaking up and providing alternative points of view is an important aspect of being an

484     effective follower (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010), but it can also lead to ruptures in leader-

485    follower relationships (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Thus, it is perhaps

486    unsurprising that followers often fear retaliation when providing feedback to superiors (Kudisch

487    et al., 2006). In sport teams, open and honest communication between coaches and athletes is

488    vital to predicting team outcomes (see Davis et al., 2019). Coaches understand the importance of

489    feedback given from the athletes on their team, but recognize they are not always open to

490    receiving it (Mason et al., 2020). As such, athletes may benefit from understanding how to more

491    effectively voice their ideas when they differ from their coach. Our results suggest that athletes

492    should approach their coach one-on-one to maximize the likelihood of conflicting ideas being

493    regarded as effective. They should also do so before their coach reaches a decision to increase

494    the chance they are perceived as a good follower. Establishing team norms consistent with these

495    recommendations may facilitate optimal team functioning.

496    **Limitations and Future directions**

497        Like all research, the present study should be considered recognizing its limitations.

498    Experimental video vignettes have inherent trade-offs as a methodology. Vignettes afford

499    researchers a high degree of control by enabling manipulations of specific variables while

500    effectively controlling for extraneous factors, which make them a useful way to establish cause-

501    and-effect relationships (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Pierce & Aguinis, 1998). However, creating

502    and implementing immersive experimental vignettes (i.e., filmed interactions) is resource

503    intensive and both the external validity and realism can be diminished (Scandura & Williams,

504    2000). A few participants in the open-ended deception check, for example, noted that the

505    brevity of the coach-athlete interaction in the vignette did not provide enough information for

506    them to make an accurate assessment of the situation. Although minimal acquaintance

507    impressions are commonplace and consequential (Rule & Ambady, 2008), this may explain the

508    gap between the present findings and prior qualitative research that emphasized the nuanced

509    interplay among all three contextual factors manipulated in the experimental vignettes (Benson

510    et al., 2016). Future research could study proactive followership behaviors with actual coach-

511     athlete dyads to mitigate this limitation. Although such an approach would sacrifice

512     experimental control, studying the consequences of different types of followership behavior

513     (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) in actual sport teams would help bridge the gap between laboratory

514     and *in vivo* settings.

515          Another limitation pertains to statistical power. Our final sample consisted of 232

516     coaches, which fell slightly below our target sample. Moreover, due to the automatic

517     randomization technique used (the gold-standard when using experimental methodologies to

518     assess human behavior; Dugard, 2014) and failed attention checks in specific conditions, an

519     uneven distribution of participants emerged across conditions. Thus, the study is at risk of

520     committing a Type II error and results ought to be interpreted with some caution. Future

521     researchers should focus on strategic and creative ways to tackle participant recruitment to

522     mitigate this limitation. An empirically supported (e.g., McCullagh et al., 2014) way to

523     accomplish this is partnering with organizations who can distribute the study internally. As the

524     present study was not preregistered, it would be informative to replicate these findings with a

525     high-powered sample. An additional benefit of using larger samples would be to implement

526     structural equation modelling to account for measurement error and model multiple dependent

527     measures in a single model (Breitsohl, 2019).

528          Having increased statistical power would also facilitate further sub-group comparisons.

529     It would be worthwhile, for instance, to determine whether the competition level of the coach or

530     the sport they coached affected how coaches evaluated the COF. Although there is scarce

531     research in this regard, qualitative evidence suggests that high-performance coaches (e.g.,

532     professional) across various sports welcome feedback from athletes on their team (Mason et al.,

533     2020). However, these findings have yet to be demonstrated quantitively; additional research is

534     needed to substantiate this relationship.

535          Coaches' individual differences were not accounted for and were not a focus of this study.

536     However, understanding how individual factors (e.g., personality composition) affected leaders'

537 evaluations of COF would advance the literature in a meaningful way by generating individually

538 tailored advice for followers. In the military, for example, leaders who are higher in openness to

539 experience are more likely to be receptive to feedback (Smither et al., 2005). This type of

540 research has yet to be conducted in sport settings, yet it could elucidate differences in coaches'

541 individual receptivity to COF.

542 The present investigation focused on coach-athlete interactions as a proxy for the leader-

543 follower relationship due to the inherent power imbalance that exists between these roles. In

544 sports teams, however, certain individuals switch between leading and following. A team

545 captain, for example, must lead junior players while being subservient to the coach (who in turn

546 defers to the General Manager). Indeed, coaches report that navigating dual leader-follower

547 roles is an issue for many team members (Benson et al., 2016).

**Conclusion**

548
549
550 To advance the current understanding of followership in sport teams, this was the first study to

551 experimentally evaluate how coaches responded to an important but potentially contentious

552 social behavior. That is, we tested how coaches' perceptions of being challenged on their strategy

553 and tactics varied based on the context surrounding the interaction. We found no support for

554 our mediation-oriented expectations; however, coaches perceived such challenge-oriented

555 behavior more favourably when enacted by an athlete (a) one-on-one (versus in a group), and

556 (b) before a decision has been reached (versus after a decision is reached). In addition to making

557 a unique contribution to the sport literature on coach-athlete interactions, our findings add to

558 the body of organizational literature that seeks to impact macro improvements in leader-

559 follower interactions. These results can be used by practitioners to guide athletes who want to

560 strategically provide oppositional feedback to their coach, which is important to team success.

561

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708

Table 1

*Coaches' Competition Level Breakdown by Gender*

|  | Demographic Category | | |
| Competition Level | Males | Females | Combined |
|  | *n* (%) | *n* (%) | *n* (%) |
| Recreational | 13 (7.9%) | 8 (11.8%) | 21 (9.1%) |
| Youth | 29 (17.6%) | 11 (16.2%) | 40 (17.2%) |
| Collegiate | 100 (60.1%) | 39 (57.4%) | 139 (59.9%) |
| Club | 23 (13.9%) | 9 (13.2) | 32 (13.8%) |

*Note.* Male coaches, *n* = 165; Female coaches, *n* = 67.

Table 2

*Coaches' Evaluations of Followership as a Function of Context*

| Condition | | Effectiveness M (SD) | Receptivity M (SD) | Prototypical M (SD) | Insubordination M (SD) | Dominance M (SD) | Role violation M (SD) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **High Status** | | | | | | | |
| After | Group | 3.23 (1.43) | 5.00 (1.30) | 5.43 (1.39) | 4.81 (1.99) | 3.79 (1.47) | 3.11 (1.69) |
| | Individual | 3.69 (1.39) | 5.45 (1.01) | 5.86 (1.48) | 4.12 (2.08) | 3.13 (1.27) | 2.81 (1.56) |
| Before | Group | 3.97 (1.35) | 4.95 (1.03) | 6.31 (1.17) | 4.13 (1.97) | 3.42 (1.41) | 2.87 (1.36) |
| | Individual | 3.50 (1.34) | 4.83 (0.94) | 5.60 (1.36) | 4.88 (1.83) | 3.91 (1.12) | 3.24 (1.35) |
| **Low Status** | | | | | | | |
| After | Group | 2.77 (0.98) | 4.41 (1.40) | 5.66 (1.14) | 5.01 (1.88) | 3.83 (1.62) | 3.34 (1.73) |
| | Individual | 3.83 (1.36) | 5.01 (1.15) | 5.54 (1.20) | 4.69 (1.62) | 3.59 (1.20) | 3.10 (1.40) |
| Before | Group | 3.39 (1.43) | 4.98 (1.21) | 5.88 (1.18) | 5.22 (1.98) | 3.84 (1.43) | 3.31 (1.57) |
| | Individual | 3.75 (1.25) | 4.96 (1.20) | 5.71 (0.89) | 4.53 (1.66) | 3.49 (1.36) | 2.90 (1.20) |

*Note.* Male coaches, $n = 165$; Female coaches, $n = 67$. High Status: the athlete engaging in the COF was described as a respected senior team member. Low Status: the athlete engaging in the COF was described as a newcomer to the team. After: the COF occurred after a decision was made. Before: the COF occurred before a decision was made. Group: The COF occurred in the presence of teammates. Individual: The COF occurred in a one-on-one setting with the coach. Scores on effectiveness and receptivity measures range from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*); prototypical and insubordination scores range from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 10 (*extremely characteristic*); dominance and role violation scores range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).