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## Implicit leadership theories - A phenomenographic study within a sporting context

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**EASM PAPER PRESENTATION**  
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Presenter: Jacqueline Mueller  
Loughborough University London  
Institute for Sport Business

**IMPLICIT LEADERSHIP THEORIES –  
A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY WITHIN A SPORT  
MANAGEMENT CONTEXT**

Supervisor: Professor Dr James Skinner  
Loughborough University London

Co-Supervisor: Dr Steve Swanson  
Loughborough University London

External Supervisor: Professor Dr Jon Billsberry  
Deakin University, Australia

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## **I Abstract**

Generic leadership scholars have begun to analyse leadership from a perspective that focuses on the perceptions of observers and challenges the default position of leader-centric research. This observer-centric perspective is commonly referred to as the social construction of leadership; it is yet to be applied to a sport management context. By highlighting the role that followers' ideal leadership prototypes play in the leadership construction processes, this study will improve the understanding of leadership perceptions in a sport context and indicate opportunities for sport leaders to develop a leadership style that is better tailored to their followers' expectations.

## **II Introduction**

The subject of leadership has a long history, with roots going back to classical leadership approaches of Plato, Sun Tzu and Machiavelli (Grint, 1997). However, from a constructionist perspective on leadership, we are barely at the beginning (Gergen, 2015). The social construction (SC) of leadership theory has been introduced over 25 years ago and can be traced back to the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Since then the body of literature has grown significantly, contributing to an extensive collection of academic studies and recent theoretical developments best approached through the work of Burr (2003) and Gergen (2015). Despite its application to a leadership context in general, as demonstrated by Sjöstrand, Sandberg, and Tystrup (2001), over thirty years of research within the field of implicit leadership theories (ILTs; e.g., Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2014) and continuing interest in the perception of leadership (Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994; Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984), this approach remains undervalued within a sport context. Therefore, social constructionism provides a promising and less explored path for theory development within this context (Sjostrand & Tystrup, 2001).

Researchers worldwide have testified to the importance of the social construction research stream and its value has been recognized by academics and organisations alike (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011). Sport organisations acknowledge the value of effective leadership and seek further research within this area to provide a better understanding of its nuances (Boreland, Kane, & Burton, 2015; Scott, 2014). Currently, the majority of leadership research within a sport management context, barring a few exceptions

(Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015), is limited to leader-centric notions, and therefore lags behind recent advances in the generic leadership literature (Welty Peachey, Damon & Burton, 2015; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014).

### **A Social Constructionist Approach**

Social constructionists are more likely to state that leadership is a sense-making activity that is primarily in ‘in the eye of the beholder’ (Billsberry & Meisel, 2009; Eden & Levitian, 1975; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Schyns & Meindl, 2005). They further claim that it is not possible to create an objective description of reality, as our descriptions are always influenced by our individual understanding of reality (Sandberg, 2001). Therefore, one could assume that to some extent attributes and behaviours of leaders are a reflection of societal cultures (House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002).

Scholars who adopt a social constructionist approach towards leadership hold the view that leadership does not reside within a single person (e.g., trait theory), nor is it a “response to environments (e.g., situational theory), or a combination of both (e.g., contingency theory)” (Billsberry, 2009, p.1), but rather based in people’s perceptions. Congruently, Grint (1997), Eden and Leviatan (1975), and Bligh et al. (2011), argue that leadership factors are in the mind of the respondents. Those leadership factors are similar to stereotypes, in that they are rooted in the heads of the observers and become active when the perceiver is exposed to a potential leader (Schyns & Riggio, 2016). Within the context these leadership factors function as a benchmark for ideal/expected behaviour and are matched against the actual observed behaviour before attributing the ‘leader’ label.

## **III Background**

ILTs are everyday theories individuals hold in their heads which guide their sense making process when perceiving and reacting to leaders (Schyns & Meindl, 2005; Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011; Schyns & Riggio, 2016). The pioneering study of Eden and Leviatans (1975) introduced ILTs as conceptual factors which respondents bring with them to the measurement situation. In other words, conceptions and assumptions individuals already hold in their heads prior to being exposed to the measurement situation (evaluation of exhibited leadership traits) impact and bias responses to questionnaires regarding organizational variables, such as leadership traits. Applying this original concept, which is based on Schneider’s (1973) implicit personality theories, to a wider leadership context

Schyns and Meindl (2005) propose that “the image a person has of a leader in general” (p. 21) should drive the broader definition of ILTs. Or put differently, ILTs are “cognitive structures or everyday stereotypes about leaders that are activated when we are confronted with a “leader” (Schyns & Riggio, 2016, p. 6).

This study draws on Lord, Foti, and De Vader (1984), Meindl (1995), Lord and Brown (2004), Lord and Hall (2003) and in line with their work adopts an observer-centric perspective thus opposing the traditional leader-centric focus, which is still the default position held by the majority of leadership researchers (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Mueller & Schyns, 2005). By placing observers’ perceptions and consequent reactions to leadership behaviour at the centre of the research (e.g., Billsberry & Meisel, 2009; Lord & Brown, 2004; Meindl, 1995), this study assumes that leadership cannot occur without followers as “it is in following that leadership is created” (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2014, p. 90).

### III.I Research Problem

Due to various critiques of traditional leader-centric approaches, such as, conceptual problems, definitional ambiguities, and inappropriate focus (Bligh et al., 2011), several scholars have called for new and more follower-centered approaches to leadership (e.g., Meindl, 1990; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It can be argued that a social constructionist approach to leadership is well suited to offer this meaningful gateway for the development leadership theory (Sjoestrand & Tystrup, 2001). However, through a shift of focus to observers’ perceptions of leadership, researchers encounter the problem of idiosyncrasy. Idiosyncrasy in this context refers to the common assumption that there are as many different ways of looking at a phenomenon as there are observers, which would be congruent with the “endless numbers of realities” feature of interpretive phenomenology (Skinner, Edwards, & Corbett, 2015, p.212). This creates the pressing problem in observer-centric research: if everyone has their own individual perceptions of leadership and everyone is different, how can we make any progress?

Building on the findings of diverse scholars in the field of phenomenography (e.g., Åkerlind & Kayrooz, 2003; Sandberg, 1997) who contradict this assumption and go on to claim that in any given setting there are just a limited number of meaningful conceptions (Marton 1994; Ambrosini, Billsberry, Garrido-Lopez, & Stiles, 2017), this research makes the following proposition: *there are a restricted number of qualitatively different ways of perceiving a phenomenon such as leadership in a sporting context*. Such an approach enables

the identification of context-specific understandings of leadership, thereby aiding the development and leadership of teams, groups, and organisations.

### **III.II Research Aim**

The aim of this study is to improve the understanding of leadership perceptions in a sport context. In particular, this study seeks to introduce meaningfully different clusters of ILTs to group individuals into different categories and explore differences and similarities between contexts. The idiosyncratic bias, that is the assumption that there are as many different ideal leadership prototypes as there are observers, will be investigated. By conducting a phenomenographic study, a limited number of categories of ILTs will be introduced which are shared amongst team members in selected sporting contexts such as Premier League Football teams. Through identifying criteria for the assessment of similarities and differences of ILTs the understanding of the variability of ILTs within and between sport organisations will be significantly enhanced. This research aspires to provide practical and theoretical implications for future leadership training and research within a sporting context.

### **III.III Research Justification**

In 1984, Lord et al. observed that ILTs have gained the attention of researchers who aim to explain leadership attributions and perceptions. However, this growing attention did not result in increased acceptance of the approach as significant gaps were left within observer-centric research. As outlined by Bligh et al. (2011), theories which explore leaders' behaviour from a perspective that favours the personalities of followers remain absent to a great extent. Leadership journals widely neglected research focusing on ILTs, until *The Leadership Quarterly* published a special issue on *Dynamic Viewpoints on Implicit Leadership and Followership Theories* in 2017, finally narrowing this gap within the generic leadership literature (Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, & Coyle, 2017).

However, neither implicit leadership theories nor phenomenological research have been popular within sport-related publications (Kerry & Armour, 2000). None of the distinguished sport leadership key text books, such as, Boreland et al. (2015), or Scott (2014), elaborate on ILTs in a sport context. Except for Swanson and Kent (2014), who examine the complexity of leading in sport by assessing leader credibility and prototypicality, the realm of ILTs remains widely untouched in a sport context leaving a significant gap in the literature. As ILTs help to explain better when individuals are willing to follow a leader (Uhl-Bien et al.,

2014; Tyler, 1997; 2003), and a fit of perceived leadership with an ideal leadership prototype potentially could result in increased performance (Lord et al., 1984; Lord & Maher, 1991), it is therefore valuable to close this gap to improve the understanding of leadership in a sport context.

Skinner et al. (2015) argue “that phenomenographic approaches are appropriate for research in the field of sport management; however, to date they have not been applied” (p. 182). This remaining gap within sport management research is rather surprising, considering that Whitson’s (1976) already stated that the phenomenological method would add value to sport-related research, and Bain (1995) likewise appealed to scholars to conduct “in-depth analysis of meaning as constructed by the participants” (p. 243).

Furthermore, Lord et al. (1984) state that studies are needed which use less limiting variables which enable the research subjects to describe stimuli (leadership perception/ideal leadership prototype) in their own words to conclude whether categories significant to the investigators are in fact brought up by the perceivers themselves. Therefore, this study provides the opportunity for original and comprehensive research that utilizes a phenomenographic design and method to analyse the variance of ILTs amongst and across different individuals in a sporting context.

## IV Methodology

### IV.I Research Questions

Based on the arguments introduced above, the general aim for this research is to ***understand the variability of implicit leadership theories within and between sport organizations.***

To achieve this aim the following research questions will be addressed:

*RQ1: Identify how to assess similarities and differences of ILTs*

*RQ2: To what extent are individuals within and between groups, and sport organizations likely to share ILTs?*

### IV.II Research Design and Methods

The research design for this study is a phenomenographic qualitative case study (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997). Some roots of phenomenography, introduced by Edmund Husserl (1931), have been traced to modern phenomenology (Bengtsson, 1993) and have since been

predominantly connected to the University of Göteborg in Sweden where this research design was developed by an educational research group in the early 1970s (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Marton, 1988). However, there are significant differences between phenomenologic and phenomenographic research (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Larsson and Holmström note that while phenomenological research investigates the phenomenon in acts of consciousness, a phenomenographic study analyses how individuals within a group view or understand the phenomenon (differently). Whereas the focus of this study is on how the phenomenon of ‘leadership’ with its different aspects is being observed by individuals, phenomenology would instead attempt to identify the essence of the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Or put differently it is “not about describing how reality (leadership) ‘is’, but how reality (leadership) is perceived by that person” (Skinner et al., p. 181).

Marton (1992) describes phenomenography as a “research designed to describe the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced, conceptualized, or understood, based on an analysis of accounts of experiences as they are formed in descriptions” (p.253). Results of previous research utilizing phenomenography (e.g., Marton, 1975) suggests that there is a possibility to group results in a limited number of categories, which is a goal of this study. This study ultimately aims to *understand the variability of implicit leadership theories within and between sport organizations?* This aim can be achieved by utilizing a phenomenographic study to identify the similarities and differences across ILTs. An overview of the research design can be seen below in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Open and deep interviews will be conducted with three football clubs in the English Premier League. In order to reduce the amount of potential confounding variables on observers’ perceptions, only clubs which are based in London will be considered for this study. A sample of ten players in each club, five male the other five female, will eliminate gender influences and will enable the study of gender similarities and differences in regard to leadership perceptions. Furthermore, managers and staff members of each club will be interviewed for a within- and between-club and organization comparisons.

All interviews will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim (Åkerlind, 2005). The analysis will focus on “identifying a small number of qualitatively distinct descriptive categories of ways in which the subjects understand the phenomena of interest” (Booth, 1997, p. 138). After repeatedly reading the produced transcripts, categories will emerge which can be



designated as meaning bearing in a particular way (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Åkerlind, 2005).

Statements made by the participants will be interpreted in two contexts: first, only within the interview from which it was taken, and second, the decontextualized ‘pool of meanings’ to which it belongs (Åkerlind, 2005). This part of the analysis in which smaller chunks are separated from the transcript and then combined for the analysis with the whole data set (‘pool of meaning’) is referred to as the second phase of phenomenographic analysis (Marton, 1986).

The final step of the analysis will be to return to the individual transcripts and repeatedly evaluate them in terms of the formed categories, and when encountering disparities either amend the categories or leave the mismatch remaining (Åkerlind, 2005).

## **V Conclusion and Expected Contribution**

Since phenomenography has not been widely acknowledged in the sport management field, this research makes a significant theoretical contribution. The sport environment provides an opportunity to apply this conceptual approach to a new context. By enhancing the understanding of complex phenomena such as ILTs and introducing potential categories of shared ILTs amongst team members, leadership training in a sport context can be improved. This study expects to provide pathways for sport leaders to develop a leadership style which is better tailored to their followers’ expectations and takes their specific context into account.

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## VIII Appendix

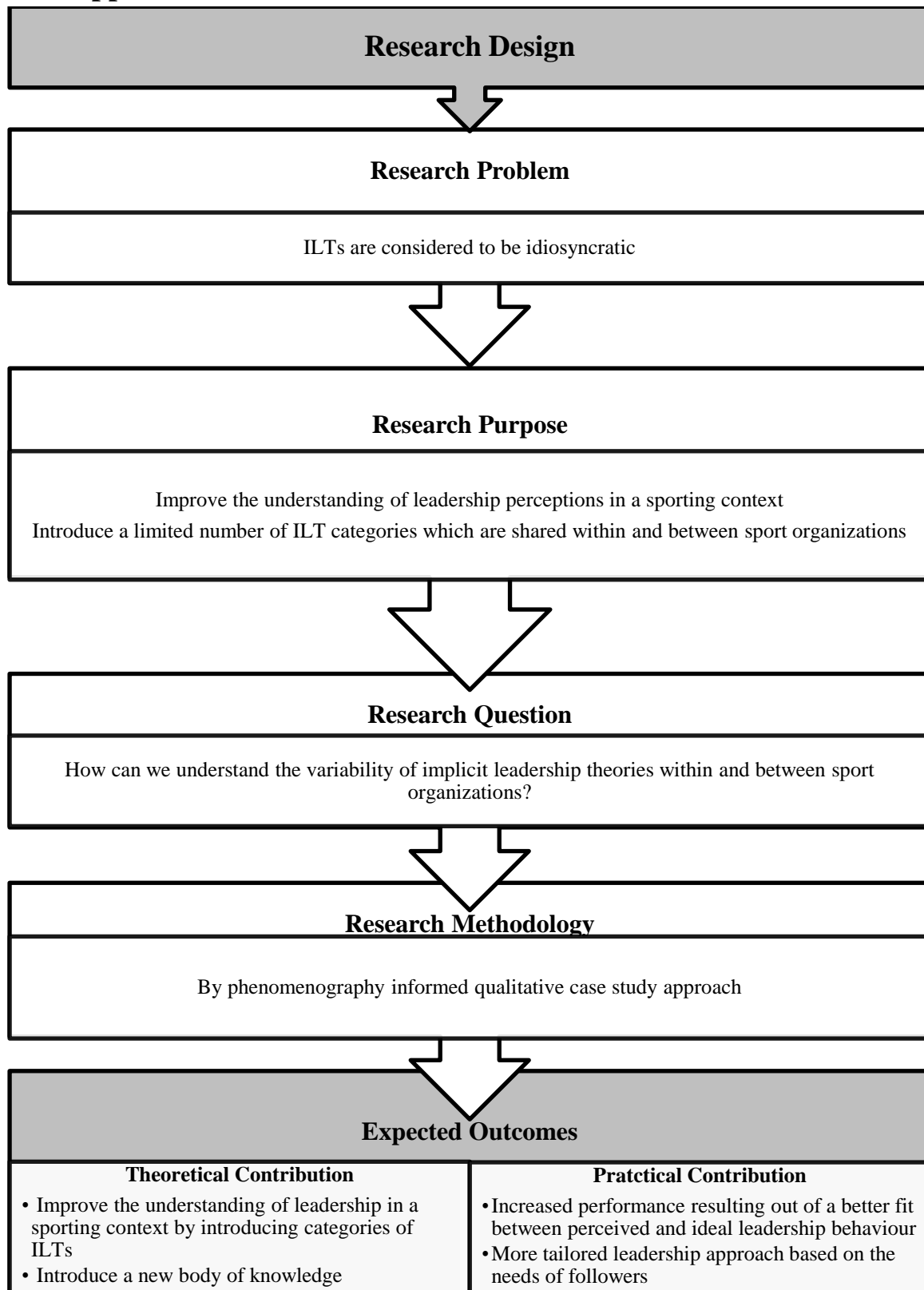


Figure 1: Research Design, own illustration