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Surfacing Implicit Leadership Theories in a Professional Sporting Context: A Comparison of Four Research Techniques in a Bundesliga Handball Club

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Implicit leadership theories (ILTs) are people's mental models of the characteristics that they believe leaders should possess (Foti et al., 2017; Lord, 1985; Tavares et al., 2018). People implicitly compare actual leaders to their mental model to determine whether they perceive them as leaders or not (Alipour et al., 2017; Lord et al., 1984). From these assessments, followership and other behaviour follows, which is particularly important in a sport context given the significance of coach-athlete relationships (Billsberry et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015; Jowett, 2002).

Various techniques to analyse ILTs have emerged over the years, including but not limited to, quantitative questionnaires (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Offermann & Coats, 2017), interviews (Den Hartog et al., 1999), drawings (Schyns et al., 2012), and focus groups (Curtis et al., 2013). While those measures do have some overlap, they also vary in important ways (Schneider, 1973). These different techniques have not been tested in a professional sporting setting. To this end, the goal of our study is to compare these different methods in a professional sport context to assess their varied success and usability to research leadership in sport contexts.

This research trials four different methods for surfacing ILTs (in-depth interviews, focus group, drawings, and questionnaires) with the on-field and off-field staff of a professional German handball club. Members of the club were randomly allocated to the various methods. Each participant experienced one qualitative method and all participants were invited to fill out the quantitative survey at the second stage of data collection. In total, 23 people comprising 13 on-field, and 10 off-field participated in the first phase of the study.

Two of the methods did not provide a rich picture of the participants' ILTs. A projective technique in the initial part of the focus group presented the biggest challenge. We showed the participants (4 on-field; 4 off-field) four photos each of leading handball coaches (2 male; 2 female), and in the second round of the process, photos of leading handball players. The participants responded by saying that their perception of these individuals was predominantly formed by the media, and they could therefore not make an accurate assessment of their leadership characteristics. Even re-directing them on their own impressions of these people did not remove this problem. Further, the focus group did not deliver a rich understanding of ILTs, primarily because the group process prohibited personal expression of anything sensitive and because the focus on a group ILT diverted away from the content of personal ILTs; the participants were seeking common themes.

We considered the drawings to be of limited success as they lacked complexity. Moreover, some participants did not engage with the task seriously. However, the discussions leading up to the drawings exercise contained some meaningful information regarding individuals ILTs. Individual interviews were successful, on average they lasted 45 minutes, and produced an idiosyncratic picture of each person's ILTs. The questionnaire has yet to be sent to the participants at the time of abstract submission. In reviewing the approaches tested so far, interviews were shown to be the best practical option in this environment.

Keywords: Implicit leadership theory, research methods, focus groups, interviews