



## Transformational leadership and childrens' aggression in team settings: A short-term longitudinal study

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### ABSTRACT

Social learning theory posits that one crucial way individuals learn how to behave is by observing and modeling the behavior of salient others. We conducted a short-term longitudinal study using multisource data on 183 teenaged ice hockey players ( $M$  age = 13.39 years) in 16 hockey teams to test the effects of 3 potentially salient leadership influences (team coaches, team players, and parents) on players' on-ice aggression. We tested a cross-level mediated model in which player aggression (penalty minutes) as measured by referees was the criterion variable. After controlling for prior levels of player aggression, team-level aggression mediated the relationship between team-level coach transformational leadership and player aggression. Parents' transformational leadership did not influence player aggression when assessed simultaneously with team-level coach transformational leadership. Consistent with social learning theory, the findings suggest that transformational leaders model prosocial behavior for followers.

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How do role models such as leaders in organized settings influence others to “do good”? This question is of theoretical and practical importance in understanding the social determinants of interpersonal aggression in a variety of settings, including school (e.g., Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003), sports (e.g., Loughhead & Leith, 2001), the home (e.g., Brezina, 1999), and the workplace (e.g., Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

For decades, researchers have acknowledged that aggressive behavior can be learned from multiple sources simultaneously (Bandura, 1973; Kiesner & Kerr, 2004). In the current study, we investigated the extent to which the transformational leadership behaviors of amateur ice hockey coaches and players' parents exerted effects on player on-ice aggression, and the extent to which the effects of coaches' transformational leadership was mediated by the aggression exhibited by the team. Organized ice hockey is a particularly useful setting for studying the influence of different role models on aggression because of the diverse social influences across teams, the relatively high base rate of physical aggression, and the availability of reliable, other-source data of players' aggression.

The present study builds upon prior research on leadership and aggression in three important ways. First, there are currently no studies investigating aggression at the individual level of analysis while accounting for theoretically relevant group-level predictors. Past studies have focused on either individual- or group-level outcomes (Brown & Treviño, 2006a). Second, this study achieves greater ecological validity than studies that concentrate on a single social influence as it tests multiple influences on aggression. Third, this study uses a prospective design that systematically permits statistical control of prior levels of aggression. These conceptual and methodological strengths permit a robust test of multiple leadership influences on aggression.

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## 1. Social learning theory and aggression

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973, 1977) proposes that aggression is learned vicariously through observation of and interaction with role models. According to social learning theory, when young people witness role models (e.g., parents, peers, teachers) behaving in certain ways in social situations, they are likely to learn such behaviors. Whether they subsequently choose to enact them or not will depend on person and environmental cues. The relevance of social learning theory-based predictions has been supported in research on adolescent aggression (e.g., Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996), family violence (e.g., Brezina, 1999), workplace aggression (e.g., Glomb & Liao, 2003), and athlete aggression (e.g., Kreager, 2007). Aggression can include verbal behavior, non-verbal behavior (e.g., ostracizing), and physical behavior (e.g., physical assaults) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The current study focuses on how social learning theory explains the relationship between transformational leadership and physical aggression in the context of youth ice hockey.

## 2. Transformational leadership and aggression

Social learning theory is central to theorizing on transformational leadership and prosocial leadership more generally (Brown & Treviño, 2006b). Building on earlier work by Bass (1998) and colleagues (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), Brown, Treviño, & Harrison (2005) argued that “transformational leaders contribute to observational learning about ethical values and ethical conduct by demonstrating ethical behavior and communicating with [followers] about conduct standards and values” (p. 122).

Understanding the nature of the four behaviors comprising transformational leadership may help explain why leaders who consistently engage in these behaviors serve as role models for prosocial behavior (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) and minimize the likelihood of aggressive follower behavior. First, transformational leaders ‘do the right thing’ (i.e., idealized influence) by modeling prosocial behaviors (Avolio, 1999; Simola, Barling, & Turner, 2010; Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, & Milner, 2002). Second, these leaders set high expectations (i.e., inspirational motivation) for performance and non-aggressive behaviors. Third, transformational leaders challenge followers to think differently, which would include raising questions as to whether aggressive behavior is appropriate (i.e., intellectual stimulation). Finally, these leaders are mindful of individual needs of others (i.e., individualized consideration). In sum, transformational leaders adopt a prosocial orientation toward in-group and out-group members. When followers observe and mimic this other-orientation (rather than a self-orientation) they may be less likely to act aggressively and, with respect to a team sport context, aggress against teammates and opponents.

There is some empirical support among adult samples that having a transformational leader is associated with lower levels of follower aggression and more prosocial behavior (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). One study found that after controlling for trait aggression, employees who perceived their supervisor as more charismatic (similar to transformational leadership) used less verbal aggression (Hepworth & Towler, 2004). More recently, Brown and Treviño (2006a) found that socialized charismatic leadership (defined as charismatic leadership that models ethical conduct) was associated with lower levels of interpersonal and organizational deviance in work groups, and this relationship was mediated by value congruence among group members. Based on the nature of transformational leadership and existing empirical evidence, we predict that transformational leaders model non-aggressive behavior, and that in turn this is related to lower levels of follower aggression.

Leadership has been studied across a wide array of contexts, including organized team sport (Hopton, Phelan, & Barling, 2007; Wolfe et al., 2005). In ice hockey, where aggression is frequent, the behaviors of coaches, peers, and parents can influence player aggression. In the next sections, we develop hypotheses describing how the behavior of these different social influences may be related to player aggression.

### 2.1. Influence of coaches

Although transformational leadership has not been examined directly in the context of hockey, there are data showing that low levels of coach transformational leadership behaviors are associated with higher levels of aggression in sport. For example, Shields, Bredemeier, Gardner, and Bostrom (1995) found that when players thought their coaches supported the notion of winning at all costs – which is contrary to the core transformational leadership component of idealized influence – they were more likely to aggress against opponents.

In studying the effects of transformational leadership on aggression in hockey teams, a critical issue is the appropriate level of analysis at which leadership should be conceptualized and operationalized (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). In the current study, we assess transformational leadership as a collective activity at the team level of analysis. Studies of leadership in sports and work teams reveal a bias toward the values, attitudes, and behaviors of ‘the lone leader’. In many team-based organizations, it is a practical imperative to study leadership as a collective phenomenon, particularly when leadership is informally defined and executed by multiple leaders (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Our approach is consistent with calls for studying organizational phenomena with a greater sensitivity to the contexts in which they occur (Johns, 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

In organized sport, it is becoming increasingly common for coaching to be performed by a head coach and assistant coaches. In youth leagues, where coaches are volunteers, head coaches may sometimes have the greatest overall influence on team players (Côté, 2002), however head coaches sometimes miss games and practices and, furthermore, may have differential appeal to players for several reasons (e.g., likeability, perceived task competency). These situations provide opportunities for other coaches to develop and influence the team. Thus, providing leadership in this context is either deliberately shared or develops as a

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