



# Exploring the processes of emergent leadership in a netball team: Providing empirical evidence through discourse analysis

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## Abstract

In line with recent developments in leadership research which conceptualise leadership as a discursive and collaborative process rather than a set of static attributes and characteristics displayed by individuals, this paper explores some of the discursive processes through which leadership emerges in a sports team. Drawing on over ten hours of naturally occurring interactions among the players of a women's netball team in the UK, and applying the concepts of deontic and epistemic status and stance, we identify and describe some of the specific processes through which leadership is claimed and assigned, as well as rejected, passed on, and eventually accepted by different team members at different points throughout an interaction. While the processes outlined in our analysis contribute to theoretical discussions regarding the notion of emergent leadership, this paper also demonstrates the benefits of taking a discourse analytical approach to leadership, and outlines how such an approach enables researchers to empirically capture emergent leadership in situ.

## Keywords

Deontic stance, deontic status, emergent leadership, epistemic stance, epistemic status, sports discourse

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## Introduction

In this paper, we explore the discursive processes through which leadership emerges in a women's netball team in the UK with the primary aim of providing empirical evidence of 'the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014: 53). This evidence is desperately needed to support (or challenge) what are currently largely theoretical debates around emergent leadership. By identifying the specific processes through which leadership emerges on the micro-level of an interaction, we thus contribute to research on discursive leadership and critical leadership studies which aim 'to denaturalize leadership by showing it to be the outcome of an ongoing process of social construction and negotiation' rather than the attribute or characteristic of an individual (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014: 43).

In conceptualising leadership in this way, we distance ourselves from earlier approaches which understand leadership as traits or characteristics of specific individuals (i.e. leaders) or as learnable or trainable behaviour. Rather, we follow recent research and view leadership as a discursive process through which meaning is constructed and negotiated, and through which sense making is enacted and influence exercised (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Fairhurst, 2008; Grisoni and Beeby, 2007; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013; Pye, 2005; Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Such a conceptualisation of leadership as discursive process enables us to acknowledge that leadership is in fact not the predicate of individuals, but is rather a collaborative process in which often people who are not the officially designated 'leader' take on a leadership role (e.g. Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Van de Mierop et al., 2020).

Recent studies have begun to explore the discursive processes through which leadership is shared among team members, and how different individuals (who are not the official leader) participate in and contribute to the performance of leadership, for example in solving disagreements (Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Schnurr and Chan, 2011), decision making (Clifton, 2017; Schnurr and Zayts, 2017), and the enactment of transformational and relational behaviours (e.g. Vine et al., 2008). But in spite of this growing interest in the discursive processes through which leadership is collaboratively performed, and questions around who takes on a leadership role and makes claims for leadership, there is to date little empirical research that specifically looks at *emergent* leadership. It is the aim of this paper to address this gap in current scholarship, and to identify and describe some of the specific (largely discursive) processes through which leadership emerges throughout an interaction.

Our study is grounded in the tradition of discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007), which takes the crucial role of language in the leadership process (see also Tourish and Jackson, 2008) as the starting point to investigate how leadership claims are made and how leadership is actually *done* in and through discourse. Thus, rather than establishing 'grand theories of leadership' (Clifton, 2006), discursive leadership focuses on identifying and describing the specific discursive processes through which leadership is claimed, enacted, and responded to on the micro-level of interaction (e.g. Schnurr and Chan, 2011). This approach is increasingly gaining popularity as it promises to bring fresh air into leadership research and to make important contributions to

otherwise rather stagnating debates (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019; Tourish, 2014).

However, most research on discursive leadership is conducted in business and organisational contexts, and only very little research focuses on leadership discourse in a sports context as we elaborate in more detail below. We aim to address this gap by exploring the discursive processes through which leadership emerges among the players of a competitive netball team. Also, as we will outline below, this sporting context simultaneously provided a serendipitous opportunity to examine emergent leadership.

## Emergent leadership

Emergent leadership is part of recent trends in leadership studies which challenge traditional, so-called heroic conceptualisations of leadership and which often link leadership to charismatic individuals and top-down processes of power and influence (Clifton et al., 2020; Pearce and Conger, 2003). This interest in emergent leadership came as a response to the call of various scholars to look beyond static top-down processes of power and influence and to acknowledge that leadership is a dynamic process which is often collaboratively performed by different people in a team. As a consequence, research has begun to explore alternative ways through which leadership is enacted (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018; Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019; Van de Mierop et al., 2020), which has resulted in a growing interest in post-heroic studies of leadership.

This trend was also picked up by discourse analysts, who have started to explore team contexts where leadership roles and responsibilities are shared (e.g. Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Clifton, 2017; Holmes and Marra, 2004; Schnurr and Chan, 2011; Wilson, 2009). But most of these studies focus on shared, distributed, and co-leadership. By contrast, relatively little explicit attention is paid to the emergent nature of leadership and the (largely discursive) processes through which leadership is enacted and often quite literally talked into being in emergent rather than pre-determined ways (Denis et al., 2012; Holm and Fairhurst, 2018). These studies move beyond individualistic and heroic models of leadership towards an understanding of how leadership is constructed through social interactions as a dynamic and distributed process (Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Holm and Fairhurst, 2018; Van de Mierop et al., 2020).

However, the notion of emergent leadership is not new – in fact, Pearce and Conger (2003: 9) trace it back to research by Hollander published in the 1960s (e.g. Hollander, 1961, 1964). Nevertheless, what exactly emergent leadership is and how it occurs remains relatively elusive and surprisingly under-researched in discourse analytic studies. This is – at least partly – due to frequent conceptualisations of emergent leadership as ‘a tendency for leadership to pass from one individual to another as the situation changes’ (Gibb, 1954: 902). It is only relatively recently that research on emergent leadership has begun to conceptualise it as fluid rather than static, and to argue that it is often reflected in successful problem-solving rather than in a person’s status or position within a group (Gronn, 2000; Robinson, 2013). In this research, emergent leadership is seen as an emergent characteristic of the group in which expertise is distributed across members rather than residing in an individual (Bennett et al., 2003: 7; Lichtenstein et al., 2006).

In their attempt to conceptualise what constitutes leadership and how it emerges, Lichtenstein et al. (2006: 2) propose that leadership ‘emerges in interactive spaces between people and ideas’, and thus, it can be seen as the product of interaction, tension and exchange. Following a similar line of thought, Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) acknowledge the complex interactive dynamics through which leadership emerges. However, although these studies are aware of the fluid and dynamic processes through which leadership emerges, they tend to overlook the crucial role of discourse. Moreover, in spite of these largely theoretical developments, empirical research on emergent leadership remains relatively scarce. It is the aim of this paper to address this gap and to provide empirical evidence to identify and describe some of the discursive processes through which leadership emerges. A particular focus will be on identifying and describing some of the discursive processes through which claims for leadership are made and responded to.

## **Doing leadership: Analysing deontic and epistemic status and stance**

Aiming to better understand the discursive processes involved in the doing of leadership, scholars have recently started to draw on the concepts of deontic and epistemic status and stance when exploring leadership claims and legitimations (e.g. Clifton, 2019; Schnurr et al., 2015; Van De Mierop, 2019).

The concepts of epistemic and deontic status and stance have primarily been used in Conversation Analysis. Status here refers to ‘the relative position of authority and power that an interlocutor has regardless of what is publicly claimed’ (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015: 2) and often made relevant in relation to others (see also Heritage, 2012a), while stance ‘relates to public ways of displaying authority or power in relation to others’ (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015: 2). Applied to the sports context, this means that although the captain of a team may have specific rights associated with her superior position or role (thus reflecting her *status*) – such as deciding on the game strategy or who gets to play in what position – she may actually decide not to display or make use of these rights, and include other players in these decisions, thereby displaying a more collaborative *stance*.

As Van de Mierop (2019: 6) acknowledges, this ‘status–stance distinction’ is closely linked to potential tensions and controversies between a person’s official role or position (as reflected in their hierarchical standing) and their actual behaviour in an interaction. Roles and identities (such as those of leaders and followers) are thus not pre-determined but rather dynamically and collaboratively constructed and negotiated as the interaction unfolds (Heller and Van Til, 1982; Hollander, 1992). This tension is one that discursive leadership explicitly aims to address with its focus on the enactment of leadership ‘in situ’ rather than relying on official roles and positions to identify leaders.

So, what then are deontic and epistemic status, and deontic and epistemic stance? While the literature offers differing approaches towards these concepts, scholars appear to be in agreement about the epistemic order being concerned with knowledge, and the deontic order with power and authority (e.g. Heritage, 2012a, 2012b; Stevanovic and

Peräkylä, 2014; Stevanovic and Svenning, 2015). More explicitly, Clifton (2019: 6) defines deontic as ‘members’ rights and obligations to determine the future actions of self and others’. Epistemic then refers to the right to display such knowledge (Clifton, 2019; Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014; Stevanovic and Svenning, 2015). Deontic status refers to the power and authority associated with certain hierarchically superior positions (such as team captain) which enable the holder of that position to tell others what to do, while epistemic status ‘refers to the position that a participant has in a certain domain of knowledge’ (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014: 187) – such as being an experienced wing attack. Deontic stance, on the other hand, refers to the various ways in which participants publicly demonstrate their authority or power in their actions – irrespective of their official role or position (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014; Stevanovic and Svenning, 2015). Lastly, epistemic stance captures ‘the extent to which they are to be seen as knowledgeable in the matter at hand, in relation to their co-participants’ (Stevanovic and Svenning, 2015: 1) – regardless of their official standing within the group.

However, although epistemic stance and status often converge in the sense that ‘the epistemic stance encoded in an utterance is aligned to the epistemic status of the speaker’ (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014: 189, see also Heritage, 2012a), this is not necessarily always the case, and people may downplay or exaggerate their knowledge (see also Heritage, 2012b). The same applies to deontic stance and status in that people do not necessarily behave in line with their official status or role. Especially in the context of a sports team, there is ample evidence of people other than the official team leader (or captain) telling others what to do and providing encouragement during a match (e.g. Cotterill and Fransen, 2016; Fransen et al., 2014, 2015; Stavridou, in preparation) thereby displaying a deontic and also epistemic stance associated with leadership.

As we illustrate and elaborate in more detail in our analyses below, the concepts of deontic and epistemic status and stance are particularly useful for understanding how leadership emerges in a team irrespective of the official leader or team captain. In applying these concepts to leadership research, recent studies have provided important insights into leadership processes – both in organisational, as well as political contexts. For example, in a study of the interactions between members of a fundraising team in the UK, Clifton (2019) explores how leadership is claimed and legitimised discursively by focusing on how criticism between colleagues of different seniority levels is delivered through a moderated epistemic stance in an attempt to avoid directly criticising subordinates’ work. Similarly, in an analysis of meetings in the Belgian healthcare context, Van de Mierop (2019) analyses questions of leadership from a deontic perspective. Exploring how different deontic rights are enacted and how they construct leader and follower identities, she demonstrates that leadership is collaboratively accomplished with all participants contributing to this process (Van de Mierop, 2019).

In another study which aims at identifying and describing some of the discursive processes of legitimising claims for crisis leadership, Schnurr et al. (2015) demonstrate that both epistemic and deontic claims for legitimation play an important role in the doing of crisis leadership in the context of the nuclear proliferation crisis. However, to

the best of our knowledge, there is no study that has applied these concepts to a discourse analytical study of leadership in sports teams. We aim to do exactly this in our analyses below as we believe these concepts will enable us not only to capture the collaborative nature of leadership, but also to provide insights into the specific discursive processes through which leadership claims emerge, are made, and legitimised or rejected as an interaction unfolds.

## **Leadership discourse in sports**

Although discourse analytical research in the sports domain is still scarce (Wilson, 2009), an interest in the relevance and importance of talk in sports teams is increasing, with leadership being one aspect that has received some attention (e.g. File and Wilson, 2017). In contrast to psychological studies on leadership in sports teams, discourse analytical research is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and is not necessarily interested in measuring factors related to the effectiveness of a coach's leadership style (Shields et al., 1995; Weiss and Friedrichs, 1986). Rather, discourse analytical studies explore the linguistic processes through which leadership is enacted and responded to.

Many studies on leadership in sports tend to focus on issues of gender (e.g. Burke and Hallinan, 2006; Harris, 2007; Hovden, 2010), race (e.g. Buffington and Fraley, 2011), and identity (e.g. File and Wilson, 2017; Meân, 2001; Wilson, 2017), and only a few studies discuss the phenomenon of leadership using discourse analytical tools. Harris (2007), for instance, explores notions of hegemonic masculinity in the context of female football players, and Hovden (2010) investigates gender and leadership discourse in some of the biggest Norwegian sports federations. In their study of basketball coaches, Burke and Hallinan (2006) use Foucauldian theory and take a feminist lens on discourse to investigate leadership issues for women in junior girls' basketball teams.

However, most of the aforementioned studies focus on big-D Discourses of leadership (c.f. Foucault, 1972, 1980) and largely overlook the discursive processes through which leadership practices are enacted in and through everyday interactions (i.e. little-d discourse). Notable exceptions are File and Wilson (2017), and Wilson (2011), who explore the discursive processes involved in the identity construction of New Zealand rugby coaches and players in different interactional contexts.

This paper aims to address this dearth of little-d discourse analytical studies on leadership in the sports domain by conducting a study on the discursive processes through which leadership emerges among the players of a women's netball team in the UK. In the next section we outline the context of this study and the data set on which our subsequent analysis draws.

## **Methodology: Context and data set: Emergent leadership in a women's netball team**

The data that we draw on for our analysis of emergent leadership comes from a larger project exploring the communication practices of a UK women's netball team. The team we analyse below is a competitive netball team from within a wider club structure that

accommodates players who want to play in either competitive or casual leagues. There is competition for places on the team and progression up the team hierarchies including opportunities to represent regional teams above the club's immediate team structure.

Our data set for this project contains over 10 hours of audio-visual recordings of team interactions, including two training sessions (about 4 hours) and three match days (about 6 hours). These interactions were recorded by attaching a GoPro camera and audio recorder to the head coach (when she was present) or onto the researcher (when the head coach was not present). From this data, we were able to record the way the coach and players interact with each other as they go about their various activities.

At the time of recording the coaching staff of this team were all female; the head coach (Emma) was an experienced and well-respected coach who had worked within the wider UK netball context, and an assistant coach (Melanie) who was transitioning into coaching but still playing for the team at the same time. In addition to Emma and Melanie, two other members of the club who are also important to the descriptions and arguments we present below are Angela, an experienced player and a dominant personality in the team, and Crystal who is an experienced coach but usually coaches the club's teams which play in lower divisions and competitions (all names used are pseudonyms).

The data we focus on in this paper come from training sessions that are run on a weekly basis on an evening after work, and involve players from several of the club's teams coming together to take part in training drills. This subset of training session data from the wider project is of particular interest for the purposes of this paper as we, somewhat serendipitously, recorded a training session where the head coach (Emma) was not present due to other commitments. In this training session she left the team to their own devices although she did provide (via email) instructions and a schedule to guide the players through the training session. Nevertheless, as our analyses below illustrate, not being physically present during the training left the team in a position where they found themselves without an officially designated leader, and as a consequence they had to negotiate who would be in charge of running the training session and also what exactly the team should do during training. In this space, as we show below, leadership emerged.

### *Analytical procedures and focus*

In order to explore the discursive processes through which leadership emerges in this specific context, we take a discourse analytical approach to analyse the interactional data. As argued above in the literature review, discourse analysis is a particularly useful approach for such an endeavour as it provides us with the theoretical tools to construe leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon and the analytical tools to explore how it is constituted in and through interaction.

### **Analysis: Identifying the discursive processes through which leadership emerges**

In our analyses of the interactional data we pay particular attention to the micro-level discursive strategies speakers draw on as they are organising themselves at the beginning



of their training session. We have selected four extracts from the early stages of the training session where team members are particularly engaged in the negotiation of who is in charge of the training and its content. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of deontic and epistemic status and stance, we illustrate how leadership emerges in the ongoing interaction. We pay particular attention to the players' attempts at claiming and assigning leadership roles and responsibilities to each other, and the responses this generates: sometimes these attempts are contested and rejected, while at other times they are accepted and legitimised. We describe these processes in a chronological order as they played out in the training session being analysed.

### Extract 1

*Context: This extract occurred at the very beginning of the training sessions. Players have started to gather at the side of the pitch, and some late comers are still arriving. Some players are standing by the side-line in smaller groups. Melanie walks into the picture and puts down a bag of balls when Angela, who is standing a couple of steps behind her, addresses her (line 1). In line 2 of the interaction Melanie walks over to Angela and stands beside her facing the rest of the team.*

1. Angela: um Melanie + is Emma here tonight
2. Melanie: no {walking towards Angela}
3. Angela: oh okay who's training us
4. Melanie: I don't know
5. Angela: this lady is here (unclear)
6. I didn't really know what's going on cos there's no Emma
7. because there's no Tina there's no Vicky
8. well they're not here now
9. there's no Tammy
10. so at the moment you're the only qualified coach here
11. Melanie: oh (unclear)
12. Angela: {laughs} to lead the session
13. Melanie: is no one here

In this extract, we see evidence of leadership as a complex phenomenon, one that can involve multiple leadership claims and rejections as group members, in this context, struggle to arrive at a decision as to who will run the training session. In line 1, Angela, a senior player on the team, initiates an interaction with Melanie (another senior player) by asking whether Emma (the team's head coach) is present at the training session tonight. As the interaction progresses, and Melanie indicates Emma is not present, Angela engages in an exchange that aims to identify someone else who is appropriate to lead the training session.

In this extract, there are a range of complex attempts at doing and assigning leadership that are being negotiated by Angela and Melanie, in Emma's absence. By speaking to Melanie and asking her about whether the head coach is attending the training session (lines 1–3), Angela both orients to Melanie's epistemic status as someone who knows who will be running the training session while simultaneously adopting a heightened deontic stance herself as a member of the team who has the right to initiate such talk on



the training ground (Clifton, 2019). In line 1, Angela assigns a leadership identity to Melanie, by implying she knows the schedule and order of play for the training session. Angela then asks who – if not Emma – is training the team (line 3), a move that could be interpreted as further assigning leadership status to Melanie. As the search continues and a list of potential leaders in exhausted, Angela concludes that Melanie is the ‘only qualified coach here’ (line 10) thereby assigning her deontic status. The use of the adjective ‘qualified’ in this utterance seems to further construct and strengthen Melanie’s rights to lead the session by appealing to any deontic and epistemic authority wrapped up in official titles or qualifications.

However, in the process, Angela arguably, makes leadership claims for herself by taking over a central role in the decision-making and problem-solving processes (Choi and Schnurr, 2014). This deontic stance is reinforced by Angela explicitly listing names of absent teammates and coaches who she assesses to have appropriate authority and are potential candidates for taking over leadership (lines 5–9). Through the presentation of hierarchical knowledge specific to the team Angela adopts a heightened epistemic stance and thus claims to ‘know’ who does and does not qualify for the leadership role. With this reasoning she selects Melanie and attempts to make a decision of who should lead, or, at the very least, indicates who has the right to lead the team in the training session. The argument can be made that this represents the doing of leadership through the act of assigning leadership. These moves could also be read as an attempt to get the training session started, a process that is typically initiated by a ranking leader.

However, rather than accepting the assigned leadership role, Melanie instead asks ‘is no one here’ (line 13), a move that arguably functions simultaneously to reject the leadership role and responsibility assigned to her by Angela and join in the search for the leader. By joining this search for a suitable leader, Melanie – although ruling herself out as a possible candidate – now involves herself in the decision-making and problem-solving activities initiated by Angela. By rejecting Angela’s decision, Melanie may also be resisting Angela’s claims to lead more generally by sending the message that Angela does not have the appropriate deontic rights to make the decision about who should run the training session on behalf of the team. Hence, Melanie’s own reasserted deontic stance, through rejection of her own rights to lead the training session, indirectly contributes to the performance of leadership.

The push and pull dynamics evidenced in the above extract are one aspect of the complex nature of emergent leadership in our data. In this specific extract, in the absence of a designated leader, and in the process of searching for one with the appropriate title or qualifications, the two participants make, assign and reject leadership status themselves as they negotiate and, arguably, attempt to influence the decision of who will lead the training session. At this point in the interaction it seems that on the surface, Melanie and Angela do not want to take on the leadership role and responsibility of leading the team, but they do take part in the discursive enactment of leadership. In the end, at least at this point in the interaction, however, Melanie seems to be successful as she resists Angela’s attempts of influencing and steering the search for a suitable leader. This struggle over leadership, which constitutes an important aspect of the emergence of leadership, continues in the next example, which occurred shortly after the first one.

**Extract 2**

*Context: Angela and Melanie are still standing next to each other both facing the rest of the team. Some players are walking past them while others are facing them.*

14. Melanie: hi {to some players as they walk past}  
 15.           okay Crystal's here Crystal can do it {5.5}  
 16.           they must have a plan  
 17. Angela: yeah they do.  
 18.           I had a little thought in my mind that Emma wasn't here because she  
 19.           said we needed to do lots of match play  
 20.           and I was like yeah match play yeah yeah  
 21.           {laughs}

This extract follows on from the first one and sees Angela and Melanie continue their search for a qualified person to take on the leadership role for the training session. Interestingly, for our purposes here, as this search continues, we see further negotiation of leadership rights, responsibilities to involve what could be seen as leadership claims and the rejection of claims by both Melanie and Angela as both continue to assert and resist their own and each other's claims to a leadership identity.

Extract 2 begins by showing Melanie greeting passing players and looking around the court (line 14). She then appears to spot a relevant person in the distance, 'Crystal', who is also the coach of the junior teams (line 15). In asserting that 'Crystal can do it' (line 15), Melanie may be drawing on Crystal's deontic and epistemic status (Van De Mierop et al., 2020) bestowed upon her through her notional role as coach, even though this is for the club's junior team. With Angela still in close proximity and after a relatively long pause of five seconds, Melanie turns to Angela and states that 'they must have a plan' (line 16). The use of 'they' is interesting here in light of our discussion of leadership. With her choice of the third person plural pronoun, Melanie may be constructing a collective identity for the coaching staff as a whole, while at the same time distancing herself and possibly Angela from that group. This move could be read as an attempt by Melanie to resist any notion that she or Angela have the deontic status to be able to influence the behaviour of the team.

In lines 18 to 20, Angela in a mock serious tone of voice recalls an interaction in which the head coach told her that the team needed 'to do lots of match play' (lines 18 and 19). These utterances could be interpreted as an indirect attempt to influence the team's training agenda, either by directly putting them 'on record' as an option or as an attempt by Angela to influence Melanie that match play should be the order of the training session, in case Melanie should end up leading the training session. In either case, the use of the head coach's voice by Angela could be seen to give epistemic authority to these utterances and to attempt to influence the future actions of the team (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015).

We might read this in several ways. While making the comment, Angela is physically slightly moving away from Melanie, looking down to the floor and pointing to her head thereby arguably reiterating that she is telling from memory. In line 20, her tone of voice changes, and she smilingly adds 'I was like yeah match play yeah yeah'

while laughingly shaking her fists in triumph. Although the comment appears to be delivered tongue-in-cheek, Angela directly draws on the voice of the team coach (Emma). Positioning herself as merely a conduit of Emma's epistemic and deontic authority she is adopting a heightened deontic stance as manifested through the indirect attempt to direct or influence future actions (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015). Overall, Angela's utterances here can be framed as an attempt at legitimising her claims and right to know how training should unfold through legitimate but absent authority (Schnurr et al., 2015).

At this point, it is important to note that match play seems to be the players' preferred activity as it is arguably more fun, more engaging, and less technical and repetitive than the other aspects of training. By suggesting this option and accompanying her utterances with utterance final laughter (line 21), Angela may actually be undermining any claims to lead. On the one hand she may be outing herself as a 'follower' by wishing to pursue a more fun-oriented and less imposing training schedule, a preference that is often anecdotally associated with players. The laughter at the end of what could be seen as an attempt to shape the training session agenda may also function as a mitigation strategy (Glenn, 2002) downplaying her claims for an epistemic stance (i.e. knowing what they should do during training) and deontic status (i.e. her position within the team which would enable her to push an agenda onto the team). By referring to a person of deontic and epistemic status (i.e. the team's usual coach) to give her attempt to influence the team's training agenda more authority, Angela makes (an implicit and tongue-in-cheek) claim for leadership.

Interestingly, Melanie does not join Angela's laughter and instead has a serious look on her face, perhaps indicating her disapproval of Angela's suggestion or maybe her humour attempt to engage solely in match play during training. Melanie's response with 'unlaughter' (Marsh, 2014: 135) here can then be understood as her seeing through Angela's strategy and rejecting her suggestion. It is noteworthy that at this point in the interaction none of these two interlocutors makes a move to take over the coaching role. Rather, while both inadvertently take on a leadership role in identifying the person of epistemic and deontic status responsible for leading the training session, they both at the same time reject this role and responsibility for themselves.

Hereafter, Melanie and Angela briefly talk about the playing position they share before Angela turns away from Melanie and walks a few steps in the opposite direction. We pick up the interaction again after a brief interaction between Melanie and the researcher.

### Extract 3

*Context: Melanie turns away from the researcher again and looks at the team gathered by the side of the pitch as well as in the distance. In line 46 she appears to address no one in particular when she utters the following.*

- 46. Melanie: umm {1.0} could someone
- 47. Angela: {walking over towards Melanie} um as it's half past
- 48. Melanie: did someone say they'd seen Crystal
- 49. Angela: yeah Crystal's apparently here somewhere

50.                   shall we do the gather and the ++ well done everyone played really well on  
the weekend shit so /we can\ actually start training
51.  Melanie:   no:: /um\ no let's just + well
52.                   if we just go into warm ups
53.                   um
54.  Angela:    /but ah\

In this excerpt, leadership claims by Angela and Melanie are arguably more direct but there is still reticence and tension evident in the acceptance of leadership responsibility. Excerpt 3 begins with Melanie addressing no one in particular uttering the interrogative construction 'could someone. . .' (line 46) when she is cut short by Angela who directly addresses Melanie with a time update 'as it's half past. . .' (line 47). This move can be read as a renewed attempt to influence the actions of the team *through* Melanie. From this evidence, we might ask whether Angela is or has been constructing herself in a co-leadership role, demarcating both herself and Melanie from the rest of the team as a leadership group, albeit in a hierarchical order that positions Melanie as the more powerful of the two. Melanie reads Angela's utterance in line 47 as an attempt to get the training session going and appears to renew her search for a qualified coach (line 48) by implying that Crystal is in charge and that locating her is going to be necessary in order to begin.

Angela's contribution can be seen as an example of the interplay between the epistemic and deontic orders (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014). Although unfinished, Angela's utterance carries an epistemic claim to knowledge of the team's training ritual which simultaneously functions as a renewed attempt to direct future actions (Ekberg and LeCouteur, 2015; Heritage, 2012b; Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015). Again, these moves position Melanie as primary decision maker and construct her deontic status as the person needed to officially call the team together and initiate the training session. However, Melanie does not act on this authority bestowed upon her by Angela, and instead reverts back to her search for Crystal.

This resistance to lead by Melanie continues further in this interaction. In lines 49 to 50 Angela answers Melanie's question but then further attempts to influence proceedings by suggesting that they begin to go through the team rituals in order to 'actually start training'. Although she uses a modal of suggestion ('shall') which indicates orientation to her own limited deontic authority (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015), the overall construction can again be seen as more direct and forward in comparison to earlier extracts. Moreover, Angela's specific lexical choice such as use of the word 'shit' to classify the team's pre-training rituals and 'actually' (used as an emphasiser) could indicate growing frustration that her attempts to lead are not receiving any support and could be read as a stronger attempt to influence proceedings.

In response to this stronger attempt by Angela to force a start to the training session, Melanie also reacts more strongly and more directly constructs her leadership identity in relation to Angela. In line 51 Melanie directly rejects Angela's suggestion with a heavily intonated disagreement particle 'Nooo', followed by a further 'No. . .' and a counter suggestion to begin warmups instead of the more interactive rituals (described by Angela as the 'everyone did well on the weekend shit' that are typically led by the head coach).

However, while her dismissal of Angela's suggestions is emphatic, her own claims to a leadership identity are still heavily modified. The choice to go into warm up drills is an activity that players can do individually or as a group and does not shine the spotlight on any one person in particular. In the weekend review conversations that the team have at the beginning of the first training session of the week, the interaction typically flows through a single leader. The resistance to running the team's weekend review may thus reflect Melanie's attempt to further distance herself from a leadership position. There is also a significant amount of linguistic evidence to support this claim. In line 52 we see Melanie's counter suggestion mitigated, for example, 'if we *just* go into warm-ups' (our emphasis). Here, as well as employing a conditional clause structure, the use of the pragmatic particle 'just' serves to reduce the illocutionary force of Melanie's suggestion and attempt to direct others (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015). In this respect, Melanie follows her unequivocal rejection of Angela's leadership attempt, a leadership action in its own right, with further attempts to downgrade her own deontic status.

#### Excerpt 4

*Context: This excerpt immediately follows on from the preceding one with Melanie looking in the distance spotting Crystal, who has been identified as a certified coach and would therefore be suitable to lead the training session of the team under investigation.*

59. Melanie: oh there's Crystal  
 60. Angela: would it be worth warming up then doing the blab or should we do the /blab\  
 61. Melanie: Crystal's here Crystal's here  
 62. {Angela nods and slightly turns away from Melanie and the researcher}  
 63. {16.0}  
 64. Angela: {to herself, counting players present} one two three four five six seven eight  
 65. {2.0}  
 66. five teams  
 67. {players continue having their own conversations}  
 68. {Crystal walks over towards the centre of the court, assumes a position she can speak at the players where they are mostly gathered}  
 69. {to the researcher} hi  
 70. Researcher: hiya  
 71. Crystal: {blows the whistle}  
 72. come on in + you brave few

This excerpt brings to a close the search for a leader but involves further examples of contested and resisted leadership claims in the absence of a formally assigned leader. In line 60, Angela builds on Melanie's previous comment 'if we just go into warm ups' (line 52), but also restates her earlier suggestion (line 50) that the team gather and 'do the blab'. This could be read as another attempt by Angela to control the floor, position herself as a decision maker and ultimately, influence the overall trajectory of the training session, all of which are arguably behaviours indexing a leadership identity (Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Schnurr and Chan, 2011). However, it is notable that Angela's re-attempt

at directing the training session is delivered with a downgraded deontic stance. Specifically, in line 60, Angela's utterance suggesting future action includes the modals 'would' and 'should' and thus a softer request for agreement. In addition, the phrase 'would it be worth' may also be seen as evidence of a downgraded epistemic stance as Angela is seeking clarification on whether her suggestions are appropriate courses of action.

However, Melanie takes control of the floor via interruption stating 'Crystal's here Crystal's here' (line 61). For Melanie, it would appear that the search for a leader to take the reins of the team has now concluded. This can be seen as an acknowledgment of Crystal's deontic status that is implicitly drawn on as Melanie assigns Crystal with the leadership role and associated responsibilities. Similar to the previous excerpt, Melanie interrupts Angela's attempt to contribute by cutting her off offering an alternative in the form of Crystal. At this point, she perhaps gives further evidence as to the particular leadership role she has been performing in this episode of talk: doing leadership by rejecting Angela's own leadership claims.

Excerpt 4 ends with the arrival of Crystal, an experienced coach who is assigned high deontic status by both Melanie and Angela (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015), due to her formal position as coach of the junior teams. Crystal then announces her arrival, walks to a position where she can face the full team, and immediately takes over by blowing her whistle (line 71). This physical activity could be interpreted as an enactment of leadership in which the whistle functions as a leadership artefact (Halverson, 2005; Mailhot et al., 2016; Sergi, 2016; Van De Mierop et al., 2020). From a materiality angle, by blowing the whistle, Crystal intentionally uses an artefact to signal an activity of leadership (Halverson, 2005; Sergi, 2016). She hence authoritatively brings an end to the 'leaderless team' (Choi and Schnurr, 2014: 2), successfully marking the official start of training. The whistle and her directive 'come on in you brave few' (line 72) is oriented to by the rest of the team who, in the process, accept Crystal's claim to lead.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have identified and described some of the specific discursive processes through which leadership emerges in a context where the officially designated leader is absent. Using discourse analysis as an analytic approach and drawing on the concepts of deontic and epistemic status and stance, we were able to identify and describe some of the discursive processes employed by different members of our netball team when negotiating questions around leadership. This approach enabled us to make the relatively abstract notion of emergent leadership more tangible and actually visible, capturing its complexities and dynamics. With our analyses we thus address Alvesson and Spicer's (2014: 53) call for more research that explores 'the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership'. More specifically, by showing how leadership emerges, we provide empirical evidence to feed into otherwise largely theoretical debates around emergent leadership.

Doing leadership is not a straightforward process, and different people may take on leadership roles at different points during an interaction (e.g. Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Clifton, 2017; Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019; Vine et al., 2008). As we have shown,

leadership is not an a priori attribute or characteristic, but is dynamically constructed and negotiated, as well as sometimes contested among interlocutors. And while theoretically anyone can make a claim for leadership at any point in an interaction, the activity of doing leadership – when understood as sense making and exercising influence, as was established above – is only successful when these claims are being legitimised by others (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019). In other words, leadership only occurs in those instances where claims for epistemic and deontic status and stance are supported and hence legitimised by others.

These processes in our data appear to take place on different layers. On the first layer – namely the immediate interaction – leadership emerges throughout the process of finding somebody to be in charge of leading the training session. As we have argued above, this search for a suitable coach could be described as leadership as it is closely related to sense-making, organising, and getting things done, which are all activities associated with leadership (Schnurr, 2018). However, the specific discursive processes through which leadership emerges here are complex, and not all attempts to claim or assign leadership are successful.

On the second layer, leadership is not primarily concerned with sense-making and meaning negotiation activities in the on-going interaction, but rather emerges with regards to taking over responsibility for the training night. Unlike the first layer, on this second and more abstract layer, questions of leadership are discussed and enacted more explicitly, and players orient more directly to their own and each others' deontic and epistemic stance and status. However, just like on the first layer, some attempts of claiming and assigning the deontic status and epistemic stance associated with leadership are not supported (and hence not legitimised) by others, and thus fail (e.g. Angela's unsuccessful attempt to assign Melanie the role of the coach based on her deontic status as 'the only qualified coach here' (Example 1)).

These two layers are, of course, not entirely distinct from each other, and what happens on one also affects the other. More specifically, negotiating leadership on the first layer, at the same time contributes to the emergence of leadership on the second layer. For example, while Angela and Melanie make several leadership claims on the first layer – that is, claiming to have the epistemic status and stance to lead the search for a coach – they nevertheless both reject taking on a leadership role on the second layer by making it clear that they do not possess the relevant deontic or epistemic status and stance to lead the training session. Thus, for leadership to emerge – irrespective on which layer – claims for and attempts to assign deontic or epistemic status and stance have to be responded to positively and need to be supported by others. It is precisely through these interactional negotiations of claims for and attempts to assign leadership that leadership eventually emerges.

Issues of emergent leadership are perhaps particularly visible and more easily identifiable when looking at instances where leadership is contested, as in the extracts above. In such instances, the processes through which leadership is negotiated and responded to are thrust into focus and hence more easily identifiable than in more harmonious moments of interaction. It is precisely in those instances where the normal, everyday practices of a team are disrupted that we can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of leadership and in particular, how leadership emerges. In such contexts the processes involved in



sense making and exercising influence – which otherwise tend to remain hidden – come to the fore and are often more explicit as interlocutors orient and respond to them more directly and vehemently (see also Choi and Schnurr, 2014).

Although we have focused on a relatively short interaction in this paper, we hope that the analytical processes and theoretical arguments presented here demonstrate some of the benefits of taking a discourse analytical approach to empirically capturing the dynamics of emergent leadership. Clearly, more research is necessary to better understand the complexities of emergent leadership, and we would like to encourage future research to pay more attention to the currently rather neglected sports context, where issues around leadership are particularly visible.

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