

Abstract

This study aimed to determine if using the principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS) which promote Self-leadership to coach ability Emotional Intelligence (EI) in a sport/athletic context may be effective. This was a cross sectional study to determine if a correlation exists between EI and overall Self-leadership, and components of Self-leadership. Participants were 49 university level varsity rugby athletes. Ability Emotional Intelligence was measured by using the 33 item self-report ability Emotional Intelligence scale developed by Nicola Schutte, et als. (1998). Self-leadership was measured by the 20 item Brief Self-Leadership Scale developed by Steinhardt, et als. (2003). Linear regression analysis determined correlation. The correlation between Emotional Intelligence and Self Leadership Scores was found to be positive, significant ($p=0.0001$) and with a substantial effect size ($R^2=0.2749$). Based on the results, it can be concluded that enhancing Self-leadership as described by the IFS model could increase EI in a team sport context.

**The Correlation of Ability Emotional Intelligence and Self-Leadership (as defined by
Internal Family Systems) in a Team Sport Context**

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Introduction

Research has established that increased Emotional Intelligence (EI) is beneficial for athletes and sports teams, as it has a positive correlation with team cohesion in sports, athletic performance and the application of mental skills. (See Appendix 1.) Research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EI) in many different contexts, including sport, can be trained. It remains unclear how EI can best be trained in a sport context. The hypothesis which motivated this study is that using concepts of Internal Family Systems (IFS) would be a successful to enhance athletes' EI in a team sport context. IFS has been shown to be an effective tool to train EI in other contexts, such as in the reduction of depressive symptoms in female University students (Haddock, Weiler, Trump & Henry, 2017) and to enhance communications and effective work relationships in corporate employees (Dolbier, Soderstrom & Steinhardt, 2011). The objective of this study was to determine if using the principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS), which promotes Self-Leadership, may be an effective way to impart and train ability Emotional Intelligence in a sport/athletic context. To that end, this research determined if Ability Emotional Intelligence, as recognized by Salovey and Mayer (1990) correlates positively with Self-Leadership, as described by the Internal Family Systems model. This study asked the question do Emotional Intelligence and Self-leadership (as described by the IFS model) positively correlate in a team sport context? To measure Ability Emotional Intelligence, the 33 item self-report Emotional Intelligence scale based on the Peter Salovey and John Mayer model of Ability EI as developed by Nicola Schutte, et al (1998) was used to quantify EI. In IFS, Self-leadership is characterized by the "8 C's", Curiosity, Compassion, Creativity, Courage, Confidence, Calm (Composure), Connectedness (Cohesion), and Clarity. Self-leadership was measured by the 20

item Brief Self-Leadership Scale developed by Steinhardt, et al (2003.) Results confirmed a positive correlation between Ability Emotional Intelligence and total Self Leadership Scores, which were found to be significant and with a substantial Cohen's effect size.

Understanding Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a method by where a person is able to look within themselves, recognize that there are different parts within them, along with the core of the person (referred to as Self in IFS) and learn how they interact with each other. IFS is a toolbox which can empower a person to recognize parts (which manifest as emotions, thoughts or feelings) and learn to respond with actions and behaviors that will be productive and beneficial in order to result in a desired outcome (Schwartz, 2001). According to the Internal Family Systems website,

IFS is a transformative, evidence-based psychotherapy that helps people heal by accessing and loving their protective and wounded inner parts. ... Just like members of a family, inner parts are forced from their valuable states into extreme roles within us. We also all have a core Self. Self is in everyone. It can't be damaged. It knows how to heal. ...By helping people first access their Self and, from that core, come to understand and heal their parts, IFS creates inner and outer connectedness. (Schwartz, 2023).

IFS shows how parts are able to take over leading actions (as opposed to being lead by Self) often resulting in counterproductive outcomes. Through IFS counseling a person is given the tools, or taught the process, to enable their Self to be the leader of all of the parts (Self-leadership), and to have all parts, which are all good and have value, interact with each other and with Self in a beneficial way. This methodology seems to address the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills which the Hodge (2014) and Mercedes-Rubio (2023) studies seek to develop

and improve to advance the idea that perception, management and use of emotions in the context of sports strongly influence performance.

The main concept of IFS is that we all have natural sub personalities (parts) that are all beneficial. Some sub personalities, due to life experiences, have transitioned from having beneficial roles to having extreme roles which can result intense emotional reactions, or the closing off to all feelings. In IFS, an extreme role amounts to any action, feeling or thought that is dysfunctional. Parts can often be self-defeating. (Earley, J. 2009). Earley also notes that the idea of sub personalities is quite similar to the concept of “schemas” in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. In Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy “schemas” are the destructive or disturbing thought patterns that are developed to make sense of an event in life that have a negative influence on behavior and emotions. IFS was first developed applying a systems perspective to the psyche, or an intrapersonal family. As such, the IFS perspective can also be used in systems larger than within a single person, such as families, groups and organizations. (Earley, J., 2009). In a group setting, IFS is used to train people in the group to understand and connect with parts, redirect problematic behavior so that they function more effectively. Building on this perspective, IFS insights can be used to work with the system that is a sports team.

The IFS model has been used to develop EI, but not yet in a sports or athletic context. IFS sees the Self as “an active, compassionate leader...and internal leader who helps the system of parts continuously reorganize and relate more harmoniously.” (Dolbier, et als, 2001). The Dolbier study was a cross-sectional study of 270 University students, which found Self-leadership in the IFS model to be positively related to approach coping styles, optimism and hardiness/perceived health wellness and inversely related to ineffectiveness, interpersonal

distrust and avoidance coping. This idea is echoed in the article of Fitzgerald, M. (2022) which says that in IFS Self is characterized by compassion, calm and courage. Random control trials show that IFS is efficacious with individuals, couples and families to promote Self-leadership. Could this be applicable to sports teams and athletes as well? Can Self-leadership positively affect Emotional Intelligence? The Fitzgerald study provides that increased Self-leadership correlates with greater individual well being, better coping strategies, greater optimism, less distrust of other and greater hardiness. We know from Haddock et al (2017) that IFS is an effective model particularly among college students, where it was effective in reducing depressive symptoms among female college students. IFS was the model used as an intervention in the study of Bockler, A., et al (2017) which found that learning to understand oneself increases the ability to understand others (to infer mental states of others known as Theory of Mind).

There has been a Self-Leadership inventory developed to measure eight of the characteristics of Self-leadership within the framework of IFS: curiosity, courage, compassion, confidence, creativity, calm (composure), connectedness and clarity. (Steinhardt, et al, 2003). In IFS Self-leadership is viewed as an active, compassionate leader. The characteristics of Self are interrelated. Each helps promote the other. Within the context of IFS Self-leadership is defined as “the extent to which this system is operated by a core-Self, an active, compassionate leader containing the perspective, confidence and vision necessary to lead an individual’s internal and external life harmoniously and sensitively.” (Schwartz, 1995). In the present correlational study, the 20 question Brief Self Leadership Scale (SLS) was used to measure Self-leadership (Steinhardt, et als., 2003).

Self-leadership and Emotional Regulation

It appears that individuals who are adept at emotion regulation and self-leadership create the opportunity and are able to develop the skill to facilitate recovery from a failure. (Boss & Sims Jr, 2008). Emotional regulation and self-leadership skills also result in more adaptive coping behaviors and less anxiety and stress in students (Houghton, et als., 2024). Although non-athletes, a group of Turkish University students from the faculty of health sciences that participated in a study which sought to determine the relationship between EI and self-leadership resulted in the effect of EI on self-leadership being positive and significant (Esen & Bulut, 2022). This same study came to the conclusion that individuals who are not immersed in their emotions, but who are able to regulate them also have an easier time with self-discipline, self-assessment and internal motivation. In Houghton, et als. (2012) self-leadership is described as the process of influencing oneself to establish the self-direction and self-motivation needed for effective performance (citing Manz, 1986). This was a study with business management students, the key piece of which was that basic emotion regulation and self-leadership strategies can be taught to increase the ability to cope with workplace stress and should be integrated into curricula. It also noted that emotion is experienced physically as well as mentally. Emotional Intelligence is primarily concerned with the ability to self-regulate emotions. The concepts of EI and self-leadership are very likely to interact with each other, as Houghton noted in their study, stating that “Individuals who are high in EI and can regulate their emotions ...will likely be more effective in leading themselves. Likewise, the effective use of self-leadership strategies may help people to become more emotionally intelligent.”

Emotions and Self-leadership in the Sports Domain

An exploratory case study of how ultra-endurance athletes create self-leadership habit and then apply them to executive business leadership was examined in Sidwell (2018.) This was partly a qualitative study, and partly quantitative (to measure global self leadership.). Self-leadership in this case was described as components of behavioral strategies including self-awareness, constructive cognitive thought patterns (which include self-reflection, positive coping skills, self-efficacy and positive self-talk) and the ability to create meaning of an unpleasant activity to enhance motivation for accomplishment. Sidwell concluded that self-leadership is not a trait, but a set of learned habits tested in different facets of life. This case also found that Emotional Intelligence played an increasingly important role at the highest levels where the difference in technical skills are of negligible importance. Sidwell noted that "...the runners with higher emotional intelligence were better able to regulate their mood while finding a grueling experience rewarding." Components of EI in this study were defined as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Self-leadership components which were the same are self-awareness, motivation and self-regulation. Sidwell found that areas of self-leadership are symbiotic, they help each other and uses self-awareness and self-reflection as an example. An athlete experiences a trauma, reflects on the experience, gains a new understanding of who they are or who they want to be, and growth and improvement is fostered. This study speculates that, because self-leadership training directly enhanced 3 of 5 sub-components of EI, that there is possibly a correlation between self-leadership and Emotional Intelligence...however no study exists to validate this claim." (Sidwell citing Lucke and Furtner, 2015). Finally, successful ultra-endurance runners practice metacognition, thinking about thinking. They are

those athletes that can think about how they are thinking, and replace dysfunctional thought patterns with positive versions to achieve a specific goal. This requires awareness, self-reflection and self-regulation.

Emotions have a strong impact on human performance. (Laborde et als, 2013, at Chapter 19.) Sports is a field that is concerned with enhancing performance. Emotional intelligence (EI) is considered as a factor influencing sport performance. (Kopp & Jekauc, 2018). There are several theories on emotions and performance in sports. Emotions can be linked to a specific event or movement that causes the response. Performance can be affected negatively by emotional struggles that interfere with attention and concentration, without which a top athletic performance is not possible. This is not always the case. Anger can at time enhance performance (as in combat sports) or negatively impact performance (when directed inside). Optimizing emotions are expected to be linked with increased concentration, increased motivation, increased confidence, positive sensations and adaptive behaviors. In Laborde, the operational definition of an emotion is “a phenomenon that is an organized psychophysiological reaction to the appraisal of ongoing relationships with the environment.” Five emotions are stated as being the main ones experienced in sports settings: anger, excitement, anxiety, dejection and happiness. The chapter continues to note that a greater use of adaptive coping strategies may moderate the physiological parameters that are linked with emotions. In application to sports situations, this chapter suggests that “it would help if athletes understood which emotions are aroused in competition, their individual vulnerability to them, and how best to cope.” It is important for the athlete to be aware of their emotions and of the influence they have on performance. This is self-awareness. Once that is done, an athlete can develop emotional

competencies, adopt behaviors to enhance and optimize their responses to those emotions... coping mechanisms. This is self-regulation.

One study, Alper, et als, 2023 was a qualitative study to look at EI and self-leadership levels in the Students of the Faculty of Sports Science. The study found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and self-leadership. This study defined EI as the ability to understand one's own emotions, manage emotions, motivate oneself, understand the emotions of others, and cope with relationships. The sub-dimensions of self-leadership were behavior-oriented strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought pattern strategies. This study was a bit different than the one undertaken here. It used a trait emotional intelligence scale (EITS-SF) and a Turkish Self-leadership scale. The data analysis revealed a moderate, positive and significant relationship between students' self-leadership and emotional intelligence levels ($r=0.549$, $p<.05$).

Research Questions

This study asked the question do Emotional Intelligence and Self-leadership (as described by the IFS model) positively correlate in a team sport context? Does Emotional Intelligence correlate with the individual aspects of Self-leadership as described by IFS?

Methodology

This was a cross sectional quantitative study. The participants were athletes on an eastern Canadian university's Men's or Women's Varsity Rugby teams, ranging from 17 years to 24 years of age. Inventories were given to participants at the first session of pre-season training, and each inventory given at the same session. There were 49 total inventory scores for each the Emotional Intelligence Scale (Schutte, et als., 1998) and the Brief Self Leadership Scale (Steinhardt, et. als.,

2003), 27 from the women's rugby team (WT), and 22 from the men's rugby team (MT). The Self-Leadership scale has questions that address the eight characteristics of Self-Leadership as described in the IFS model: Confidence (I can handle present situations) Clarity (I am clear about what I want from life) Connectedness (I feel loved) Calm (I feel a sense of inner peace) Curiosity (I delight in exploring and discovering new things) Compassion (I treat myself with kindness) Courage (I embrace life's challenges) and Creativity (I can think creatively about my problems). Each item asks for a Likert Scale numeric answer from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The Brief SLS was found to have both convergent and divergent construct validity. However, Steinhardt, et al. did not establish factorial validity. This was thought in that study to be due to high intercorrelations and conceptual overlap between the eight components of Self-leadership. A decision was made to combine the MT and WT scores to increase power with all 49 results. A linear regression was used to determine correlation and data analysis through the Excel program was used to analyze the data. Consent was obtained from the individual participants of this study, and the study was approved on May 27, 2024 by the University's Research Ethics Board.

All assumptions were verified. The normality of the test scores were confirmed by a normal probability plot. A significance of $p < 0.05$ was used. R squared (R^2) was used as a measure of effect size and categorized according to Cohen's recommendation. According to Cohen (1988, 1992) $R^2 < 0.02$ - Very weak. $0.02 \leq R^2 < 0.13$ - Weak. $0.13 \leq R^2 < 0.26$ - Moderate. $R^2 \geq 0.26$ - Substantial. Pearson's R is also being reported, although there was one outlier. Overall correlation was determined between Emotional Intelligence and Self-Leadership. Emotional Intelligence as a predictor of the 8 individual characteristics of Self-

Leadership in the IFS model was also looked at: confidence, clarity, connectedness, calm, curiosity, compassion, courage and creativity.

Results

The correlation between Emotional Intelligence and total Self Leadership Scores was found to be significant ($p=0.0001$) and with a substantial effect size ($R^2=0.27$). Pearson's r resulted in a significant, strong and positive correlation between EI and Self-leadership ($r(1)=.52, p=.0001$). When the 8 components of Self-Leadership were broken out, the result was significant ($p=.00795$) and with a substantial effect size ($R^2=0.38$). However, only Clarity had a significant p value ($p=.01386$).

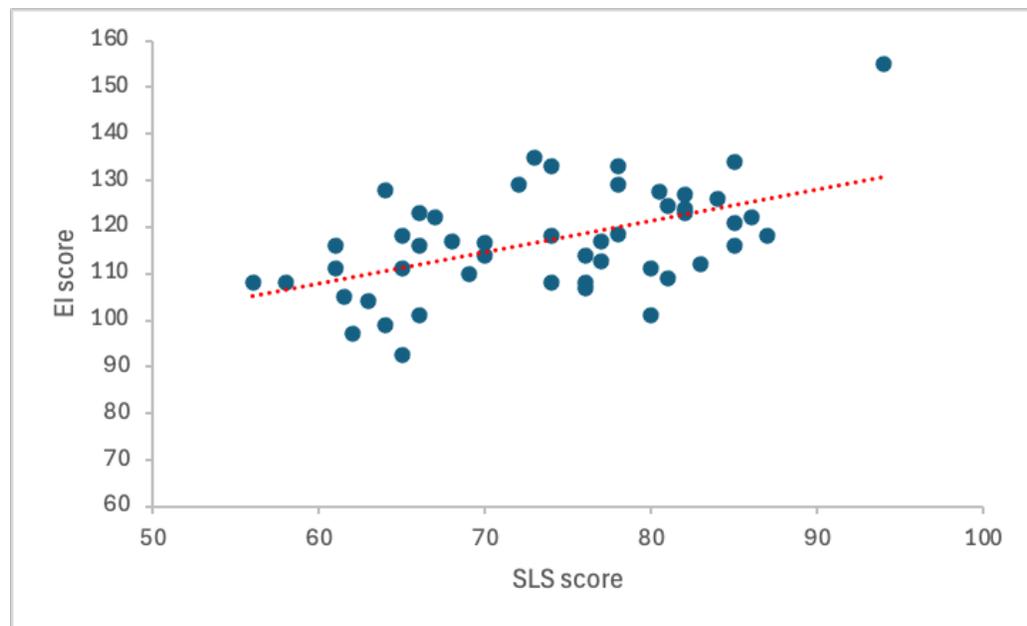


Figure 1. A scatterplot of Emotional Intelligence Scores (EI) and Self-Leadership Scores (SLS) shows a positive correlation, with one outlier.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, Emotional Intelligence has a significant, positive and substantial correlation on Self-leadership as described in the IFS model, in a team sport context. These results are consistent with the results in Esen & Balut (2022). This is not generally surprising, given the amount of research which indicates that emotions and sports go hand in hand. The results further this study's objective to determine if using the principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS), which promotes Self-Leadership, is an effective way to impart and train ability Emotional Intelligence in a sport/athletic context. The results of this study support using IFS principles to train or coach EI skills in a sport/athletic context. However, as only one sport, rugby, was included in this study, it is unable to be determined by the results are generalizable to other team sports, or to individual sport athletes. When broken down into the eight characteristics of Self-leadership (confidence, clarity, connectedness, calm, curiosity, compassion, courage and creativity) it appears that the calculation was underpowered with only 49 participants, with only clarity being significant. This is curious, and with the researcher bias noted below, it could be speculated that if a larger sample size could be obtained, it could be hypothesized that more individual correlations would become apparent. Could this indicate that clarity, the ability to know what needs to be done in any given situation, might be the most general capacity of Self-leadership? Clarity being an overall awareness. In this model the df went from 1 for total Self-Leadership scores to 8 for the individual components of Self-leadership. All players on each team did not provide consent, raising the question if there was a larger sample size with more power, would more individualized correlations with the 8 characteristics of Self-leadership materialize. As the researcher being familiar with the perceived EI demands of the entire teams,

I would hypothesize that courage, confidence and calm/composure would be the next of the individual Self-leadership components to become significant with rugby athletes. It is recognized that this is just conjecture and combines qualitative observation that was not a measured part of this study.

Practical Implications, Limitations and Future Research Directions

The most encouraging implication of this study is that coaching EI in the sport and athletic context specifically using the principles of IFS, which seeks to enhance Self-leadership, may enhance emotional intelligence in athletes. And as components of self-leadership often overlap with components of emotional intelligence, the benefit of developing and enhancing Self-leadership may enhance emotional intelligence in a sport and athletic context. Sport teams, coaches and sporting organizations should consider providing their teams and athletes with emotional intelligence coaching using the principles of Internal Family Systems, as research has shown that increasing emotional intelligence enhances athletic performance, team cohesion and application of mental skills. The potential of such IFS based EI coaching and training has not been tested with high level athletes, teams, coaches and organizations. Its implementation more widely would provide the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of this method of coaching EI in a sport context.

Self-report inventories are always a limitation. The 20 item brief SLS (Self-Leadership Scale) was found to have adequate internal consistency and construct validity. Internal consistency was found to be $\alpha=.93$. It is acknowledged that individual states of Self-leadership may be affected by how parts obscure Self at any given point in time. Subjective perspective of the individual is measured as well as the influence of the construct being measured. However, it

can be argued that it is the perspective of the individual that is of import, not an objective measure of some absolute truth. The Emotional Intelligence scale (construct validity $\alpha=.93$) likewise, may be susceptible to self-perception as it is impacted by impression management, reporting what a person thinks they should say, as opposed to how they actually feel. The design of this study was such that participants did not know that results would be used for anyone but themselves at the time the inventories were taken, with no ramifications resulting from their answers, thereby theoretically reducing the risk and appearance of need to alter an answer to produce a favorable outcome. 49 out of 76 of the athletes on the Men's and Women's varsity rugby teams were included in this study, which does not provide a complete picture of the entirety of the teams. Despite this, results indicate a substantial and positive correlation between EI and Self-leadership. In this study, researcher bias must also be disclosed. The author and researcher also provided Emotional Intelligence coaching using IFS principles to both the Men's and Women's Varsity Rugby teams during pre-season and in-season. This resulted in possible bias in the interpretation of results as qualitative information from observation and interaction with the teams was gained by the author of this article. Inventories were given the first session of each team's pre-season to mitigate bias. This study is just a preliminary step, to see if there is a correlation between EI and Self-leadership, and does not show causation. This study cannot be generalized to other team or individual sports due to its limitations.

Future considerations would include obtaining statistics from full teams and determining if different sports show correlation between different characteristics of Self-leadership. An outcome in a German study of active competitive sport athletes indicated that EI has different

impact results on athletic performance in different sports. That study recommended that future research should categorize sports in terms of emotional demands. (Kopp, et als., 2021).

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