

Female participation in tennis

[Julie Gordon \(GBR\), Judy Murray \(GBR\) and Emma Doyle \(AUS\)](#)

It is widely accepted that as girls reach puberty, participation in sport rapidly declines. This article aims to provide a brief review of the literature exploring the psychological factors attributed to successful interventions addressing this issue, and to highlight two initiatives that are taking place now to attract, engage and retain more females in tennis. The article will conclude by suggesting that evaluation of these initiatives within the context of transformational leadership theory could offer valuable insights not just for tennis but for sport in general.

BACKGROUND

There is an abundance of data that shows that as girls move into their teenage years, sports participation reduces (e.g. Nader, Bradley, Houts, McRitchie, & O'Brien, 2008). Since physical activity and sports participation are essential to health and wellbeing, increasing female participation in physical activity is perceived as a national and international priority (Davies, Burns, Jewell, & McBride, 2011; World Health Organisation, 2006).

The “This Girl Can” campaign which has been developed by Sport England and designed to increase female participation in sport and physical activity has recently been evaluated in a report called *Go Where Women Are* (Sport England, 2015). This document provides specific insight into the effectiveness of various initiatives to engage women and girls in sport and physical activity. It recommends that interventions should consider the need to inspire confidence, the use of appropriate role models and the provision of social support through celebrating achievement regularly with sincerity (Reading et al., 2014).

In general, there is very little evidence on effective interventions into increasing female participation in sport per se (Priest, Armstrong, Doyle, & Waters, 2008). However, there exists evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity in girls that can be drawn upon in terms of highlighting the key psychological factors that should underpin an intervention aimed at increasing girls' participation in sport. A recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity among adolescent girls (Biddle, Braithwaite, & Pearson, 2014) found that interventions that were theory based, performed in schools, were girls only and used multi component strategies were more effective. “Multicomponent” strategies were defined as those that incorporated, for example, school plus community plus family and incorporated an element of social support (Biddle et al., 2014; Inchley, Mitchell, & Currie, 2012).



In summary, several key factors emerge from the literature around girls and physical activity. They would seem to suggest that an effective intervention should:

- inspire confidence
- utilise a multicomponent strategy
- provide a supportive environment
- provide opportunities that are hyper-local
- be underpinned by theory
- be single sex
- incorporate the use of appropriate role models

Due to the multiple factors to be taken into consideration, it is postulated that Transformational Leadership Theory (TFL) may provide an appropriate framework for the evaluation of interventions to increase female participation in tennis. Originating from the domain of organizational psychology and the work of Bernard Bass, it has been conceptualised as a kind of leadership through which

followers are inspired and empowered to achieve more than they thought they could because of the behaviours of the leader (Bass, 1990). In the sport psychology literature, transformational leadership has been demonstrated to be effective across a variety of sports and contexts (e.g. Callow, Smith, Hardy, Arthur & Hardy, 2009; Price & Weiss, 2013; Smith, Arthur, Hardy, Callow, & Williams, 2013)

Furthermore, utilising TFL theory to evaluate effective participation strategies and inform future interventions could be particularly relevant to females in sport. In a recent study exploring the nature of TFL behaviour exhibited by coaches in sport with female athletes, four themes emerged from the interviews that were associated with the occurrence of TFL behaviours: caring, motivating, teaching life lessons, and trusting (Newland, Newton, Podlog, Legg & Tanner, 2015). The authors aligned these with the original key conceptualisations of Transformational Leadership theory: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985). Caring was associated with individualised consideration. The athletes felt valued by knowing that the coach cared for them and this manifested itself in behaviours such as showing an interest in them as a person as well as a player. “Motivating” was related to inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation where the athletes felt motivated by their coach having high expectations of them both mentally and physically while teaching life lessons was linked to the TFL conceptualisation of idealised influence. Trust, and specifically bi-directional trust, was also linked to idealised influence (Newland et. al, 2015).

To take steps towards refining what transformational leadership is in sport and particularly to try and advance its relevance in an applied context, the Vision, Support and Challenge Model (VSC) has been developed (Arthur & Lynn, 2016). Originally developed in a military context (Hardy, Arthur, Jones, Shariff, Munnoch, Isaacs & Allsopp, 2010) it was conceptualised in relation to sport by Arthur, Hardy and Woodman (2012).

The model proposes that great coaches achieve optimal athlete outcomes by providing an inspirational vision and the appropriate balance of support and challenge to achieve that vision (Arthur et. al, 2012, Arthur & Lynn, 2016). The model makes a distinction between what the coach does and the effect on the athlete of these behaviours and therefore has the potential to explain the process of transformation that occurs between coach and athlete.

It is hypothesised that the VSC model, underpinned as it is by transformational leadership theory, could provide the theoretical basis for an evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of interventions to increase participation in sport.

CURRENT INITIATIVES

Two tennis coaches leading the way with transformational programmes to increase female participation in tennis are Judy Murray and Emma Doyle.

1. She Rallies - Judy Murray

She Rallies is a current LTA initiative created and spearheaded by Judy Murray. The vision of She Rallies is to attract and retain more females in tennis in the UK by inspiring, building and empowering a bigger and stronger workforce to create more opportunities for girls and women in tennis.

She Rallies was launched in February 2017 with a first of its kind female only tennis coaches conference. Judy and the LTA gathered a group of experts ranging from coaches and psychologists to journalists, physiologists and Paralympic athletes to create an inspirational vision of the future of female tennis. These female speakers served a dual role of inspiring the all-female audience as well as serving as role models to the audience and delivering the challenge to get out there and get more girls playing tennis and more women delivering tennis.



At the heart of the programme is a network of part - time Ambassadors that have been appointed to train up a workforce of female activators across the UK. These ambassadors have been supported by a comprehensive training programme enabling them to deliver the four strands of the programme:

- Lil Miss Hits (for 5 - 8 year olds)
- Teen Girls Starter Tennis
- Girls Fun Days
- Girls Recreational Competition

2. Girl Power Camps - Emma Doyle

Working alongside Judy at the launch of the She Rallies programme was Australian High-Performance Coach, Emma Doyle. Emma and Judy met via the Girl Power Camps that Emma has developed in Australia and is rolling out not only on home soil but also in the USA and various locations across Europe. Emma has worked with the LTA and Judy educating coaches on how to coach female athletes more effectively, drawing on her years of experience of working with female tennis players and coaches and the lessons she has learned from delivering Girl Power Camps.

At the heart of the Girl Power Camps are the principles of Engage - Empower - Develop which correlate with the TFL behaviours of caring, motivating, teaching life lessons, and trusting (Newland et. al, 2015). These principles are used to underpin the different types of activities to create a transformational experience for the girls. The camps begin with vision boards and activities aimed at tapping into the individual world of the girls and showing them that they are cared for. The activities progress to incorporate drills around motivating the group and building confidence and these are developed in different directions to show that tennis and sport in general are worthwhile activities not just to improve health and fitness but also to learn valuable life lessons. The challenge level of the activities and drills are matched by an appropriate level of support.



CONCLUSION

There is currently very little research being done on testing and evaluating coaching interventions in youth sport that are underpinned by theory and are interpersonal focused (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016). Furthermore, there is very little research on testing and evaluating research - informed coach development programmes (Allan, Vierimaa, Gainforth, & Côté, 2017). It is possible that research into TFL theory as a framework for a coach intervention/ development programme to increase girls' participation could hold exciting possibilities not just for tennis but for other sports also.



COACHING & SPORT
SCIENCE REVIEW

