

Loyalty, Discipline, and Legacy: Exploring Leadership Emergence in a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Academy

Author: Carlo A. Serrano, Grace College of Divinity, carlser@mail.regent.edu

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Abstract

Although leadership emergence is not a new concept, there is a dearth of literature on this topic and so much room for further exploration on the topic. The current research is just beginning to make connections between personality, skill, gender, group-type, cultural context, and leadership emergence in small groups. This paper utilizes qualitative methodologies to explore how leaders emerge within a small martial arts group context. Attention is given to the role of gender and task-framing as they relate to leadership emergence.

Keywords: emergence, gender, leadership, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, small-groups

Introduction

Scholars have explored leadership emergence from a number of perspectives and by way of various methodologies over the last 10 years. According to Huizing (2011), “The holy grail of leadership research is successfully identifying and developing leaders” (p. 333). For the most part, leaders are either appointed or they “emerge” (Bergman, Small, Bergman, & Bowling, 2014). One could argue that it is easy to identify and develop appointed leaders through the assignment of authority and traditional hierarchical systems of leadership development. However, the last 60 years of research into “leaderless groups” and small groups in general demonstrates that there are multiple variables that contribute to leadership emergence (Ensari, Riggio, Christian & Carslaw, 2011). Thus, part of the Huizing’s (2011) leadership identification and development process should involve exploring how leaders emerge in complex and dynamic groups. This is especially true since not all groups are homogenous (Ensari et al., 2011).

Although there are instances of organized, high-capacity behaviors in nature that appear to be leaderless, these are often undergirded by emergent leadership (Lewis, 2013; Eskridge, Valle & Schlupp, 2015). Much of the literature on leadership emergence focuses on the moral, emotional, personality, and psychosocial dynamics of the leader. Simply put, the last 10 years of leadership emergence research offers a solid foundation for “who” and “what” leaders are. However, new insights into followership and small groups as complex systems appear to challenge previous notions regarding the makeup of leaders in groups. As organizations continue to flatten or decentralize, an understating of “how” leaders emerge and “why” followers attribute power and authority to leaders may lead to new paradigms in leadership development and organizational behavior (Limon & France, 2005). Therefore, this research presents a hermeneutic-phenomenological study of the lived experiences of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) in a small group

environment (the academy) in order to explore how leaders emerge in “organic” and “flat” contexts. This research attempts to answer the question: How do leaders emerge in BJJ academies?

This research is built on the conceptual framework of leadership emergence theory, small group dynamics, and task framing. This study not only addresses the current lacunae in the field of organizational leadership, it also provides scholars and leaders with insights that may increase organizational flexibility and overall health.

Literature Review: Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

Scholarly research on BJJ is virtually non-existent. BJJ is a martial art that evolved from traditional Japanese Jiu Jitsu in 1925 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Gracie & Danaher, 2003). What started out as a self-defense martial art taught by Brazilian brothers Carlos and Helio Gracie is now practiced in thousands of academies all over the world (Gracie & Danaher, 2003). In fact, some argue that BJJ is responsible for the fastest-growing sport in the United States: Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) (Mierzwinski, Velija & Malcolm, 2014; Kuhn & Crigger, 2013). Furthermore, MMA is now synonymous with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), an organization that was founded by Helio Gracie's oldest son, Rorion Gracie (Maher, 2010). Although most, if not all, BJJ academies are privately owned and operated, BJJ follows a strict ranking structure that centers on belt color (Gracie Barra, n.d.). As with most martial arts, the wearing of a “white” belt identifies novices while a “black” belt identifies experts (Gracie Barra, n.d.). However, what separates BJJ from other martial arts is the length of time that it takes to advance to the next rank (Gracie & Danaher, 2003). This means that a person may have an advanced knowledge of BJJ and possess the ability to teach beginners long before they are actually identified as a black belt. For example, in some schools a person may become a coach/teacher as early as the blue belt rank. Table 1 provides a summary of the adult rank and leadership structure of a typical BJJ academy.

Although there is a leadership structure within BJJ and a “rough” mechanism for promotion, the group dynamic within BJJ academies may not reflect the hierarchy inherent in the belt system (Gracie Barra, n.d.). This is especially true since BJJ practitioners are volunteers who often pay a black belt instructor for lessons. Thus, in many ways the relationship between a white belt and a black belt is just as much a teacher/student relationship as it is a customer/service-provider relationship. Furthermore, different BJJ academies may have different belt testing procedures and promotion standards beyond the minimums described in Table 1. These complex elements may play a significant role in how leaders emerge in the unique environment of a BJJ academy.

Table 1. BJJ Rank Structure (International Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Federation, n. d.)

Belt Rank	Time to obtain	Roll/Responsibility
White	N/A	Novice
Blue	1-3 years of training (must be at least 16 years old to earn)	Beginner-Intermediate (often coaches children's classes)
Purple	3-5 years of training	Intermediate-Advanced (coach)
Brown	5-7 years of training	Advanced (coach)
Black	7-10 years of training (must be at least 19 years old to earn)	"Professor" (head instructor)
Red/Black	31 years of training	"Master" (oversees multiple academies)
Red	48 years of training (must be at least 67 years old to earn)	"Grandmaster" (oversees multiple academies and BJJ as a whole)

Leadership Emergence

According to Bergman et al. (2014), emergent leaders possess certain perceived traits or behaviors, which subsequently lead to support and followership from other group members. Leadership emergence is commonplace in autonomous or semi-autonomous self-governing groups (Côté, Lopes, Salovey & Miners, 2010). These flexible and dynamic groups provide space for a variety of leaders to emerge based on the task at hand or in response to changes in the environment (Côté et al., 2010). Lichtenstein and Plowman (2009) identify four conditions for leadership emergence within groups:

- Dis-equilibrium
- Amplifying actions
- Recombination/Self organization
- Stabilizing feedback (p. 620)

Research suggests that cognitive ability has a direct effect on leadership emergence, along with conscientiousness, extraversion, and self-efficacy (Serban et al., 2015). When it comes to extraversion in groups, research suggests that the earlier a potential leader demonstrates a high

level of social-oriented behaviors the better (Bergman et al., 2014). This is due to the fact that groups often have social needs that must be fulfilled before they can focus on task-specific behaviors (Bergman et al., 2014; Gillette & McCollom, 1995). There are also certain individuals who possess a “motivation to lead” based on a need for closure and other non-cognitive variables such as personality or emotional intelligence (Oh, 2012). Luria and Berson (2013) suggest that cognitive ability, personality traits (e.g. dominance), and social behavior (others-focus) predict both informal and formal leadership emergence in small groups. Perhaps a middle ground exists between leadership emergence and cognitive intelligence, personality, and emotional intelligence.

Emergence, Emotion, and Personality

Emotional intelligence is often defined as one’s ability to understand, process, manage, and rightly apply emotional information (Emery, 2012; Côté et al., 2010). Côté et al. (2010) conducted two studies to assess the connection between leadership emergence and emotional intelligence. The results of their study suggest that emotional intelligence plays a larger role in leadership emergence than cognitive intelligence, personality traits, or gender (Côté et al., 2010). Other research suggests that although emotional intelligence plays a part in the emergence of relational-leadership, it also enhances the effectiveness of task-leaders (Emery, 2012). Thus, emotional intelligence is positively related to leadership emergence in small groups (Côté et al., 2010; Emery, 2012; Oh, 2012).

Personality also seems to play an important role in leadership emergence. Charisma is a trait that many assume is always evident in small group leadership (Platow, Haslam, Reicher & Steffens, 2015). Middleton (2005) found that although a charismatic personality may serve as a predictor for leadership emergence, it is dependent upon the collective influence of the group. Ensari et al. (2011) advanced the exploration of personality and leadership emergence beyond the Big Five factors by exploring how authoritarianism, intelligence, neuroticism, femininity, and a host of other factors interact with leadership emergence. The results of their study reveal that although personality traits such as extraversion may predict leadership emergence, other traits such as neuroticism do not predict leadership emergence (Ensari et al., 2011). Furthermore, this study confirmed the notion that the leadership situation often determines which elements of emotional intelligence or personality predict leadership emergence (Ensari et al., 2011; Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014). For example, although Ogunfowora and Bourdage (2014) found no direct link between honesty-humility and leadership emergence, they did find several indirect links connecting honesty-humility to Big Five traits that serve as predictors of leadership emergence.

Emergence, Gender, and Culture

Gender also plays a role in leadership emergence. However, as with personality and emotional intelligence, the group situation and cultural context often determine the significance of gender impact on leadership emergence. For example, some collectivist cultures operate under a male dominant paradigm (Oh, 2012). Thus, a female with all of the personality or emotional intelligence predictors of leadership emergence may never rise to the position of group leader based on the gender role expectations of the group (Oh, 2012). Conversely, one may find that females are more likely to emerge in high egalitarian and individualistic cultures where gender roles are becoming increasingly non-existent (Oh, 2012). Research shows that although seniority/rank has no direct impact on one’s motivation to lead a small group, culture and gender do play a significant role in how leaders emerge in certain small groups (Oh, 2012; Lisak & Erez,

2015). This may have implications for leadership emergence in the gender and ranked mixed environment of the BJJ academy.

The way in which information is presented (framed) also plays a role in leadership emergence. Ho, Shih, and Walters, (2012) discovered that task-framing impacts leadership emergence along gender lines. For example, tasks that are framed as being “feminine,” such as hair-braiding, are more likely to have females emerge as leaders as opposed to a “masculine” task such as knot-tying (Ho et al., 2012). It is important to note that gender also plays a role in leadership emergence based on “group type.” For example groups often support male leaders over female leaders based on overconfidence as opposed to the actual abilities of the females if the group is highly competitive (Reuben, Rey-Biel, Sapienza & Zingales, 2012). Research shows that women emerge as leaders in small groups 33.3 percent less than often men, not because of discrimination but because of male overconfidence (Reuben et al., 2012, pp. 111-112). It seems that the Reuben et al. (2012) research on overconfidence also aligns with the role of communication in leadership emergence. Limon et al. (2005) discovered that argumentation and low-levels of communication apprehension predict leadership emergence in small groups. However, verbal-aggressiveness was not associated with leadership emergence (Limon et al., 2012). Simply put, the loudest voice does not always emerge as the leader, unless of course the loudest voice is a male engaged in a masculine-framed task.

If no singular event precipitates small group emergence or dissolution, then it makes sense to assume that no single variable predicts leadership emergence in small groups (Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl, 2000). This literature review confirms this assertion. However, it is evident that further exploration into leadership emergence in small groups is warranted. In particular, it seems prudent to utilize the findings of Oh (2012), Ho et al., (2012), Reuben et al. (2012), and Limon et al. (2005) to expand on the study of leadership emergence in small groups.

Methodology

According to Patton (2002), the strength of phenomenological research is that it extracts meaning through the exploration of one’s everyday experiences. However, this requires intentional, deliberate, and thorough observation of those who have experienced the phenomenon being researched (Patton, 2002). Hermeneutic-phenomenology is appropriate for a study on leadership emergence amongst BJJ practitioners for a couple of reasons. First, BJJ is a unique experience that is not represented well in the scholarly literature. Second, hermeneutic phenomenology affords a researcher the flexibility to apply observation, reflection, and judgment above any other particular method (Hyde, 2005). In this way, meaning is extracted from the actual words and experiences of the observed participants. A literature review of existing research reveals several connections between BJJ, leadership emergence, personality, gender, and small groups. However, the current body of literature does not explore the lived experiences of BJJ practitioners within the conceptual framework of leadership emergence. Therefore, this paper explores the lived experiences of BJJ practitioners in a small group environment in order to discover how leaders emerge in “organic” and “flat” contexts. Attention is given to the role of gender in leadership emergence. The data was collected through direct observation and in-depth/informal conversational interviews that utilize an interview guide approach. According to Patton (2002), this method allows the researcher to manage the “flow” of each conversation while also remaining flexible and aware of, and responsive to, each respondent’s personal experiences.

Sample

This research used a critical case sample of 6 BJJ practitioners (5 male, 1 female), with ages ranging from 23 to 52, from the Clarksville Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Academy in Clarksville, Tennessee. The fifth largest city in the state of Tennessee, Clarksville is also home to the US Army's 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), and 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) (United States, 2013). Only one of the respondents had no prior experience in the US Army. However, the diverse nature of this sample (age, hometown, experience, etc.) allows for a logical generalization and maximum application of the findings as they pertain to BJJ academies in military communities (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

The data was collected through in-depth interviews and observation during a Saturday training session. Each of the 6 respondents were selected purposefully from a larger group of twenty BJJ practitioners present in the academy, and were asked a series of questions. The black belt instructor and 4 students (under the age of 18) were not included in the sample pool. The interviews focused on the martial arts history of the respondents, the details of their experiences, and the meaning of those experiences (Roulston, 2011). Since phenomenological interviews focus on the nature of a lived experience as opposed to focusing on the "how" of a particular phenomenon, an interview guide served as a template to explore the experiences of the respondents. Table 2 outlines the interview guide used in this study.

Table 2. BJJ Practitioners Interview Guide (Roulston, 2011)

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1. Tell me about your journey into BJJ. Why did you start?
 2. Thinking back to that time, what was life like for you?
 3. Tell me about your belt rank. What does it mean to you?
 4. Do you consider yourself to be a leader outside of the BJJ setting? If so why? If not why?
 5. Do you consider yourself to be a leader in the BJJ academy? If so why? If not why?
 6. Other than the black belt instructor (s), whom do you identify as a leader in the BJJ academy? Why?
 7. Do you feel that BJJ is a feminine or masculine oriented experience? Why?
 8. How does it feel to be "led" by a female in a BJJ academy?
 9. You mentioned _____; could you tell me more about that?
 10. You mentioned when you were doing _____, _____ happened. Could you give me a specific example of that?
-

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed by utilizing a theme analysis of the transcribed respondent interviews. Theme analysis allowed the researcher to "make sense" out of the qualitative data by identifying patterns within the content (Patton, 2002). The interviews were recorded digitally onto a computer and then uploaded to Rev.com, a professional transcription service. After generating the professional transcription, the in-depth interviews were imported into the computer software program Atlas.ti for In Vivo coding and theme analysis. The literal nature of In Vivo coding allowed the researcher to extract meaning from the unique language associated with BJJ (Saldana, 2013). In Vivo coding also allowed the researcher to build codes based on the literal words used by the respondent rather than the researcher's personal feelings or premature deductions. The first-cycle In Vivo coding process for the 6 interviews produced 79 unique codes.

Second-cycle pattern coding was used to develop and identify the various themes found in the transcribed interviews in order to re-code and reduce the combined 79 In Vivo codes. Pattern coding allowed the researcher to reduce the large cluster of phrases into smaller codes that best captured the theme or “essence” of the direct quotations (Patton, 2002). The second-cycle coding produced the following 10 pattern codes: “HUMBLE”, “AMBIVALENT”, “FEMININE POSITIVITY”, “WAYPOINT”, “MASCULINE”, “GENDER NEUTRAL”, “LEADER-FOLLOWER”, “SELF-IDENTIFIED LEADER”, “SELF-CONFIDENCE”, and “TECHNIQUE MATTERS.” From these, the pattern codes were translated into 3 major themes that captured the overall message of the 6 interviews. Frequently used concepts, phrases, and repeated words were captured through In Vivo coding to produce the first-cycle codes. For example, several of the interviews made references to or the used the word “technique” in phrases such as: “out-technique somebody as me”, “I fell in love with the technical aspect”, “as long as they are knowledgeable”, and “as long as they are technical”. First-cycle quotations were grouped together based on their similarities to produce the aforementioned 10 codes. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern code development for the 6 interviews:

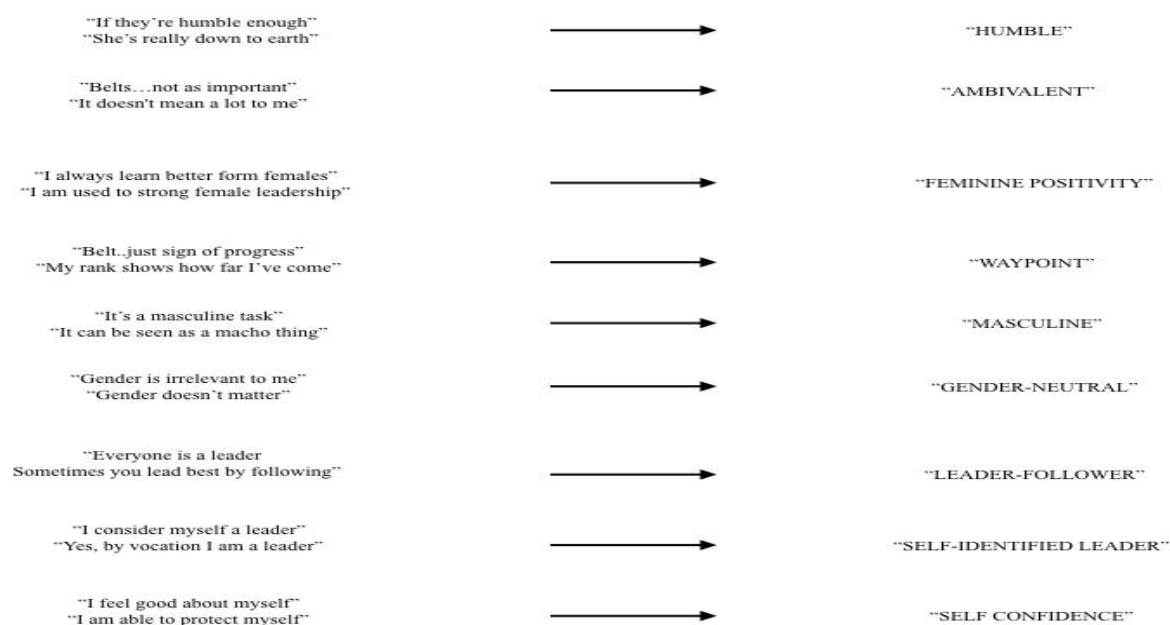


Figure 1. Assembly of codes to determine the pattern codes from 6 qualitative interviews. Adapted from *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by J. Saldana, 2013, Sage Publications, p. 211.

The coding process revealed 3 major themes for the interviews:

- Theme 1: Everyone leads. (“SELF-IDENTIFIED LEADER”, “LEADER-FOLLOWER”, “GENDER NEUTRAL”)
- Theme 2: Brazilian Jiu Jitsu has a culture of egalitarianism. (“GENDER NEUTRAL”, “FEMININE POSITIVITY”, “MASCULINE”)
- Theme 3: Humility, confidence, and technique make a leader. (“HUMBLE”, “AMBIVALENT”, “WAYPOINT”, “LEADER-FOLLOWER”, “SELF-IDENTIFIED LEADER”, “SELF-CONFIDENCE”, and “TECHNIQUE MATTERS.”)

Results

The extracted themes reveal several important points regarding leadership emergence in BJJ academies. First, when it comes to leadership emergence, the consensus argues that everyone has the potential to lead. In the BJJ academy in this study, this includes beginners, coaches, and anyone with a positive attitude. Bergman et al. (2014) argue that emergent leaders possess certain perceived traits or behaviors. In the BJJ academy, these traits and behaviors include a humble attitude, technical competency, and a willingness to help others. Second, BJJ practitioners do not value or seek male leadership over female leadership. None of the interviewees expressed concern over female leadership in the BJJ academy. In fact, one of the male respondents expressed a preference for female leadership in BJJ, as it counters the often-found hyper-masculinity associated with combat sports. Although some of the respondents framed BJJ as a masculine activity, they all agreed that in the BJJ academy female leadership and participation are a welcomed and “good thing.” This theme finds substantiation in a variety of quantitative studies on increased egalitarianism in the West (Emerich, Denmark & Hartog, 2004; Choi, Fuqua & Newman, 2008). Finally, leaders in the BJJ academy emerge from a place of humility, confidence, and technical competence. Although belt promotions serve as a “marker” or “waypoint” that measures progress, none of the respondents equated belt ranking, charisma, or gender with an automatic leadership position. In fact, when asked, “Other than the black belt instructor (s), whom do you identify as a leader in the BJJ academy”, responses varied from “Everyone is a leader” to “Anyone who is willing to help someone else is a leader in BJJ.”

Threats and Limitations

The three biggest threats to the trustworthiness of this study are reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias (Padgett, 2008). It is important to note that the primary researcher is a BJJ practitioner involved with the Clarksville Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Academy. However, the use of In Vivo coding limits these threats in that this methodology serves as a buffer between the researcher’s preconceived notions and the actual words of the interviewees (Saldana, 2013). In order to strengthen this study, future research may wish to explore the phenomena of leadership in BJJ academies by using a sample outside of a military community. One could argue that the inherent leadership of the military framework may have biased the sample used in this study (Winner, personal communication, 2015). However, this study adds value to the literature in that no current research exists in regards to the unique context of BJJ academies and leadership emergence.

Discussion

The impact of gender and task framing on leadership emergence in small groups raises several questions that deserve further scholarly exploration. Thus, this study sought to explore these questions by way of qualitative research. For example, what does leadership emergence look like in a primarily masculine environment such as a BJJ academy, especially if the senior ranking member of the academy is a female? Furthermore, if a task is framed as masculine and male leadership emerges, do female group members form subgroups within the small group? Is “fighting” a masculine task? Do personality traits such as charisma or dominance override gender as predictors of leadership emergence in martial arts environments? What about belt rank or BJJ ability in these contexts? Finally, what role does overconfidence have in a “hyper-masculine” environment that allows for female participation?

Although this research only explored one martial art in one community, the results of this study suggest that in BJJ academies charisma, “rank”, and gender have very little impact on leadership emergence. These themes find several parallels in servant leadership theory, authentic leadership theory, and transformational leadership theory (Echols, 2009; Stone, Russell & Patterson, 2004). Future studies may wish to explore the aforementioned theories within the context of BJJ academies. The Clarksville BJJ Academy showed no evidence of female “subgroups” and even those who framed BJJ as a masculine task showed no negativity toward female leadership in the BJJ academy. These insights may prove beneficial for military and corporate organizations in the midst of transformation in regards to gender roles.

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