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Our Team Cares: Using a Sport Social Identity to Promote Collective Action Toward Disadvantaged Groups

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ABSTRACT

We conducted a field intervention aimed at fostering collective action toward disadvantaged groups among football players from the grassroots of a professional football team. The 3-step intervention aimed at increasing the salience and relevance of the football sport identity and its associated positive values (e.g., respect, social inclusion). In the intervention, we highlighted the importance of keeping consistent behaviour within and beyond the football field, acting as role models, and engaging in collective action in favour of disadvantaged groups. Results of qualitative analyses revealed that the intervention contributed to making participants aware of the importance of their social identity and its values, of behaving consistently with this identity beyond the sport domain, and of being willing to act as role models to the benefit of disadvantaged groups. Results are discussed in terms of the importance of activating a positive and valued social identity to foster solidarity-based collective action.

Research on collective action has shown that advantaged groups can ally with disadvantaged groups and support them to achieve social equality (Hassler et al. 2021; Vezzali and Stathi 2021). Such solidarity-based collective action is the focus of the present study, and we will refer to it throughout the article as 'collective action'. Research has also shown that social identity such as identification with a politicised identity can be pivotal in promoting advantaged group members' commitment to solidarity-based collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2018). Indeed, research has revealed the importance of group models for mobilisation to collective action (Di Bernardo et al. 2023).

In this study, we present a novel three-session intervention conducted with young players from a professional football club located in Northern Italy. The intervention aimed at: (a) increasing awareness of the social identity shared as team members, (b) stressing the meanings and positive social values associated with it and (c) encouraging participants to position themselves as role models and to be prepared to act in favour of disadvantaged groups.

We frame the current paper at the crossroad between positioning theory, social identity, and role studies (Harré 2012; Moghaddam et al. 2008). Positioning theory looks at the self as a socio-cultural process of meaning making, in which individual positions are continuously ascribed, resisted, negotiated, appropriated in interaction with others. In this perspective, social identities are also subject to a continuous process of negotiation, in which individuals actively interpret the norms, values, and expectations associated with multiple belongings. Furthermore, positioning and roles are in a two-way relationship: roles may be seen as the foundation for positioning, for example when moral norms and social expectations are used to position someone and to force him/her to perform in line with a prescribed role and, vice-versa, positioning can be crystallised into roles, when institutional and conversational moral orders and beliefs are locally negotiated, leading to contextually valid positions (Hirvonen 2016). Becoming a role model (which is a key aspect of the present intervention) can thus be examined as a situated act, which manifests in positioning processes, that eventually

put into question norms and expectations associated with multiple belongings, and eventually stabilising again into actual social roles.

From these premises, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the intervention. We expected our intervention to explicit and foster the appropriation of sets of beliefs (i.e., rights and duties) associated with a given identity position (Harré 2012) and to make group members perceive the possibility of acting as role models according to principles of solidarity.

This article has both theoretical and practical implications. At the theoretical level, it investigates a novel way by which social identity can impact collective action. Specifically, it shows that once individuals align themselves with a social identity imbued with positive values and social meaning, they may also commit to acting as role models to meet the identity-related normative prescriptions. Practically, the article identifies role models as a key concept that sport can use as a tool to facilitate social inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

1 | Social Identity and Positioning Theories

According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), individuals can define themselves both in terms of personal characteristics and as group members, depending on the social situation. To increase self-esteem, they try to belong to positively valued social groups. When social identity is salient, they act in line with the group's social norms, which helps them to understand social reality, what to think, and how to behave (Jetten et al. 2017). Social identity is therefore central to people's behaviour and understanding of social reality.

Although developments of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) have often gone in other directions, several authors have underlined the coherence and complementarity between studies interested in self-categorisation processes and those concerned with meaning-making processes leading to socially shared content attributed to the 'self' and the 'other' (Deaux and Philogène 2001). Precisely by looking at the dynamics of collective action, Reicher and Hopkins (1996) have pointed out the contribution that discursive and rhetorical approaches can provide to social identity theory, stating that 'any account of the salience and definition of collective self-categories needs to consider the ways in which both are defined in discourse and settled through argument' (p. 353). Despite the differences between the diverse forms of socio-constructivism, overall, researchers have emphasised the relevance of understanding the shared knowledge and meta-knowledge attributed to group identities and categories, that is, understanding how group members define who they are, who others think they are, what are the contents and prototypicality associated with categories, and what possibilities group members have to act meaningfully in a given social context (Elcheroth et al. 2011; Moghaddam et al. 2008; Reicher 1996).

Positioning theory, among the other approaches, has been advocated as a framework able to establish a bridge between social identity, social representations, and narrative approaches to the self (Harré and Moghaddam 2015; Moghaddam et al. 2008; Slocum-Bradley 2010a). The positioning approach is rooted in cultural and narrative approaches, which focus on the self-other relationship, both in terms of historically and culturally situated construction of psychological processes, and of the immanent discourse practices in which psychological phenomena emerge.

Looking at identities as discourses, positioning theory argues that people negotiate their location in interaction with others. Such *subject positions* incorporate shared repertoires about what a certain self-location entails, including the rights and duties associated with those identities (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1999). Initially developed to examine interpersonal relations, its focus has been expanded to examine intrapersonal, intragroup as well as intergroup relationships. At the intergroup level, in particular, this perspective has been adopted to gain a 'thick description' of the meaning-making activities relevant to the construction of social identities, as well as of moral norms, rights, and duties associated with them (Harré 2012; Harré et al. 2009; Tan and Moghaddam 1995). This perspective emphasises the active and often strategic use of identities in interactions: 'An identity is a discursive tool, the use of which is guided by (implicit) norms that render it appropriate to evoke in some contexts and not in others, depending upon what one wishes to accomplish'. (Slocum-Bradley 2010b, 98–99). In this perspective, intergroup strategies have been re-considered as situated and even ephemeral negotiations of self-other relationships, which often reflect an evaluation against shared norms and moral terms. As stated by Lee et al. (2008): 'the potentially reified notion of 'social identity' can be re-theorised as the position people occupy (whether forced or wilfully) in the 'local moral orders'. Achieving a positive social identity thus involves claiming positions [...] that are normatively upheld as morally good' (p. 117).

2 | The Importance of Social Identity for Individuals and Collective Action

Social identity is a key element of collective action models. The social identity model of collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2008, 2018) treats identification with a social group as a predictor—together with efficacy beliefs and anger against injustice—of the desire to engage in collective action. Other models that consider social identity as an important antecedent of collective action are the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić et al. 2008) and the encapsulated model of social identity in collective action (Thomas et al. 2012). These models, which have their roots in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), also provide the basis for solidarity-based collective action. For instance, according to the political solidarity model of social change (Subašić et al. 2008), advantaged and disadvantaged group members can share a common identity that excludes the authority (perceived as responsible for the unfair treatment of the disadvantaged group). Social identity can also be fuelled by morality considerations about the disadvantaged outgroup, as posited in an extension of the social identity model of collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2012, 2018). Or, advantaged group members may opt to leave the advantaged group (also at the psychological level only) when its values are threatened (e.g., when values and norms of respect and inclusion of disadvantaged group are violated).

Empirical support for the basic propositions of the above models is extensive. Generally, identifying with a social group is associated with greater collective action to the benefit of the ingroup (Stathi et al. 2019), but under certain circumstances, it may also lead to actions to the benefit of outgroup members. Research has mainly focused on three types of situations where social identification can lead increase support for a disadvantaged outgroup. For the first two situations, advantaged group members' identification with a disadvantaged group or with a politicised identity (e.g., a group supporting the rights of disadvantaged groups such as LGTBQ individuals or minority ethnic groups; Stürmer and Simon 2004) works as a predictor of greater collective action toward the disadvantaged group (Van Zomeren et al. 2008). Third, common identification with a superordinate identity can foster solidarity-based collective action toward (advantaged and/or disadvantaged) groups included in this identity (Cocco et al. 2022; Cocco, Vezzali, Kola-Daisi, et al. 2024). But social identity in the form of common identity can also inhibit collective action in some cases, for instance, when it lowers the perception that the disadvantaged group is discriminated against or that it suffers from some sort of disadvantage (Banfield and Dovidio 2013).

In the present study, we propose a fourth situation where social identity can foster collective action toward disadvantaged groups. Specifically, we use a sport social identity that is imbued with positive social values, that is, the football team identity of players from the grassroots of a professional team. Such an idea is consistent with the normative alignment model, suggesting that a social identity imbued with social norms that provide meaning and commitment to a cause can motivate engagement in collective action (Thomas et al. 2009). In other words, collective action studies have generally focused on participants' identification with social identity of groups directly involved in a situation of relative advantage of one group over the other, for instance identification with the ethnically disadvantaged group or with a politicised identity meant to support the rights of a disadvantaged group (e.g., Black Lives Matter). In these examples, identifying with the disadvantaged group or a politicised identity supporting it would be associated with greater collective action for redressing the unequal intergroup situation. We instead examined whether identification with a social identity conceptually disconnected from the specific intergroup situation may nevertheless shape collective action, because of the values characterising this social identity. Specifically, we examined whether identifying with a relevant sports identity (the identity of the prestigious football team where participants play) can affect participants' support for disadvantaged groups unrelated to this identity—notably foreigners, people with disability, or women—because it implies wider values of respect, acceptance, and support.

Linking positioning theory with social identity and collective action models, we argue, provides a further opportunity to expand the range of application of the theory precisely because of the emphasis with which it looks at social identities and moral orders involved in collective actions as strategic choices that are locally situated and negotiated. An intervention aimed at fostering the awareness of and the possibility of becoming role models should therefore not only make salient a given identity, but rather contribute to orient the positions participants wish to occupy in relation to shared moral norms (Lee et al. 2008).

3 | Promoting Collective Action Among Adolescents

While there is a large and growing literature on the promotion of collective action among adults (Radke et al. 2020), research investigating how to foster collective action among adolescents is surprisingly scant. Some insights can be found within intergroup contact and collective action literature (for a review, see Cocco, Vezzali, Stathi, et al. 2024). We believe these studies are directly relevant to our research, as contact is a strong predictor of social identity, and specifically of inclusive identities that can promote prejudice reduction (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000)—also among younger samples (Guerra et al. 2010)—as well as collective action (Cocco et al. 2022).

In general, the studies we identified provided support for the role of positive contact in fostering collective action and therefore fostering mobilisation among advantaged group members. Various studies found that positive contact is positively associated with the willingness to engage in collective action in favour of ethnically disadvantaged groups (Di Bernardo et al. 2021; Kamberi et al. 2017; Wilson-Daily et al. 2018). These studies indirectly provided support for the key role played by social identity. Indeed, in some of these studies, contact was indirectly associated with collective action via perceived illegitimacy of the status situation between groups (Di Bernardo et al. 2021) or perceived injustice of inequalities (Kamberi et al. 2017). Similarly, Shani and Boehnke (2017) asked Jew and Palestinian adolescents to engage in encounters discussing intergroup disparities; compared to a control group, these discussions fostered the intention to support intergroup equality. We argue that in all these studies, perceptions of injustice/illegitimacy or inequality have likely impacted at least in part on social identity in terms of highlighting violation to ingroup moral integrity, this way fostering collective action to redress injustice.

Conceptually similar findings are provided by Vezzali, McKeown, et al. (2021): they found in two studies (one correlational, one experimental) that advantaged group members (Italians) who read fictional stories (i.e., the Hunger Games Saga) depicting the injustice perpetrated by the advantaged group against disadvantaged groups (a form of indirect intergroup contact typically referred to as vicarious contact) displayed greater anger against injustice and in turn intentions to engage in collective action to support the disadvantaged group (immigrants). Also in this case, participants' advantaged social identity has likely been questioned, leading to a reaction in terms of collective action for social equality to restore the morality of one's ingroup and therefore the self.

More direct evidence comes from a study more closely investigating social identity constructs. Di Bernardo et al. (2023, Study 1) focused on the construct of ingroup prototype, consisting in the ingroup member who is most representative of the ingroup since s/he indicates the social norm to follow (Turner et al. 1987). In this sense, the ingroup prototype is a direct expression of a social identity. The authors found that advantaged group members (Italian adolescents) who believed the ingroup prototype supported collective action were also more likely to be willing to engage in collective action on behalf of the disadvantaged group (immigrants).

A drawback of these studies is that they merely tested collective action in the context of interethnic or interreligious relations.

Moreover, they did not directly capitalise on social identity as a key tool to foster collective action toward disadvantaged groups.

4 | Sport Social Identity and Collective Action to Promote Positive Social Values: A Field Intervention

4.1 | The Theory Behind the Intervention

Typically, sport is attributed positive social values such as respect, cooperation, social equality and inclusion, and fairness (UNESCO 2021). Therefore, individuals for whom the sports identity is relevant and salient should stick to and promote these social values. In other words, to the extent that these values characterise the sports identity, and therefore behaviour consistent with these values is normative within the sports identity, identified individuals can be expected to show normative-consistent behaviour (Harré et al. 2009; Lee et al. 2008; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). Research has shown that morality can characterise the behaviour of individuals engaged in sports, who can, for instance, display greater prosocial behaviour toward both teammates and opponents (Kavussanu 2012). Research has also shown that morality is an important construct associated with collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2018; Vezzali et al. 2023). We argue that being positioned and assuming the position as a role model of a positive social identity, or as a leader of a peer group because of the prestige allowed by a positive social identity, can foster a moral obligation to fulfil positive social values prescribed by such identity.

There is initial evidence that moral obligation is associated with greater collective action (Ayanian et al. 2021; Cocco, Bisagno, Cadamuro, et al. 2024; Sabucedo et al. 2018). Some studies have shown the relevance of group leaders, or role models, in mobilising individuals for collective action (Di Bernardo et al. 2023; Milesi and Alberici 2018). However, research has yet to investigate the conditions leading group members to want to act as leaders or role models who can mobilise group members to engage in collective action to benefit disadvantaged groups. To grasp these conditions, in the present study, we look at normative and moral expectations connected with sports identity as specific examples of social construction processes through which identities are shaped and assume meanings.

4.2 | First Session

Drawing on these theoretical premises, the first step was based on making the social identity of football team players relevant and highlighting the social values embedded in this identity. We reasoned that the footballers' identity as players of a professional club could significantly contribute to participants' self-esteem. With this initial intervention, we helped participants draw the connection between their valued social identity and the social values embedded in it.

4.3 | Second Session

In the second step, the intervention aimed to make participants aware that their behaviour on the field (characterised by the respect of positive social values of sport) can sometimes differ from their behaviour off the field. However, to the extent that their positioning as professional football club members is relevant to them, they should act consistently with this position both within and outside the field. In other words, we sought to make participants aware of the potential discrepancy between their psychological perceptions (identification with the football team) and their behaviour. This strategy aimed to foster cognitive dissonance: according to cognitive dissonance theory, inconsistency between attitudes and behaviours can create a state of cognitive dissonance, a negative sensation that the individual has to eliminate to feel better by creating consistency between these attitudes and behaviours (Festinger 1957; see Cooper (2019, 6–7) for a theoretical extension that addresses the theme of dissonance and social identity explored in the current research). In the case of the present study, the expectation was that this discrepancy (and consequently, the aroused cognitive dissonance) would trigger discourses aimed at providing an account of individual and group behaviours and how to make them consistent with the assumed positions within and beyond the field. The intervention would thus foster positioning in the direction of normativity toward the social values of sport.

4.4 | Third Session

Finally, in the third step, the intervention aimed to foster participants' intentions to potentially act as role models to support members of disadvantaged groups. Role models base their influence on popularity: they set an example for their followers. In Italy, where football is the most popular sport, footballers are often treated as role models, if not idols, for younger generations. As grassroots players of the city professional football team, we reasoned that our participants benefit from popularity and visibility among their peers, and their behaviour can set an example for others. On the contrary, behaving inconsistently with their sport social identity could result in a negative social image or may make them unworthy of it. Indeed, norm-consistent behaviour is what defines a worthy member of a social group (Turner et al. 1987). In positioning theory terminology, this means becoming aware of and endorsing the rights and duties associated with a position given (Harré 2012).

In this third session, participants were invited to reason about the possibility of engaging in actions that would meet positive social values associated with their positioning 'as football players'. We expected that, when the identity 'football player' is associated with moral norms, rights and duties eventually fostered and/or highlighted by the intervention, that flags members as role models who are meant to support the disadvantaged and could also translate into a desire to engage in solidarity-based collective action that does so.

5 | The Present Research

We conducted a field intervention to foster a social identity that could ultimately lead to a willingness to engage in collective action to support disadvantaged groups. Participants were young players in the grassroots of an Italian professional football club.

The sport social identity on which the intervention was based was represented by participants' footballer identity.

The intervention, as explained in the introductory section, included three sessions: (1) increasing the salience of the sport/football social identity, (2) highlighting potential behavioural discrepancies within and beyond the football field, and (3) underlying the participants' potential role as role models among peers (but also others in general), based on their sport social identity, and asking them to resonate about how to express the sport social values, such as supporting disadvantaged groups.

6 | Method

6.1 | Participants and Procedure

The research design is in line with the study of small groups. Following an ideographic perspective, a qualitative approach appeared more suitable for studying groups dynamics and their relationships with broader systems, than a pre-post quantitative approach aimed at evaluating the delta between input and output (Kerr and Tindale 2014; McGrath and Altermatt 2003; McGrath et al. 2000). The research was thus designed to explore a 'real' group in an ecologically valid context and to provide insights on the meaning-making processes involved in positioning.

Participants were members of the grassroots U13 team of a professional football club, AC Reggiana, from a Northern Italian region. At the time of the study, the group was composed of 23 male football players aged 12 years old.

All group members were involved in the study and underwent a 3-session intervention named 'Beyond the Football Field'. Each session lasted approximately 90 min and was led by trainees previously trained by the first and second author of this article, with the support of the team coach and the team psychologist. Several methods were employed to capture the complexity of the dynamics developed in this real group, including participatory observation, role play, visual methods, individual interviews and group discussions.

Below we describe the procedure followed in the three intervention sessions. More details about the specific activities conducted within each session can be found in the Supporting Information.

6.1.1 | First Session

Session one was designed to underline youth footballers' social identity as members of the same football team. The session included three activities. In activity one, athletes were asked to describe themselves via words and images. The ensuing discussion led by researchers was aimed at highlighting the prevalence of terms and images that could be related to the athletes' football experience, especially to their team, to foster a sense of shared social identity.

In activity two, participants were asked to anonymously indicate what being a part of the club meant to them by using adjectives or short sentences, before grouping and discussing them together into different thematic areas. The main thematic areas that emerged were organised into four main categories; athletes reported that being a member of AC Reggiana means: getting excited, commitment, unity, and team pride.

The final activity was designed to underline the values linked to the sports experience, by taking advantage of images of famous footballers and asking participants to evaluate them. In the end, athletes were asked to motivate with the other ingroup members the ranking by distinguishing technical-tactical from moral motives, which were used to draft the team's handbook of football values.

6.1.2 | Second Session

Session two was opened with a role-play. With the collaboration of the team psychologist, athletes were informed that their coach had been suspended for carrying out an anti-social behaviour (a fight) after training. The subsequent debriefing was used to introduce the topic of consistency between self-positionings, values and behaviours in and outside the football field. The subsequent activity was conducted on the field, where participants considered their values within and beyond the football field to discuss collectively the importance of behavioural consistency.

6.1.3 | Third Session

Lastly, in session three, the athletes were introduced to the concept of 'role model', and they jointly discussed how they could be models for promoting social change and leaders that may influence their peers and others on the topics of social inclusion. Subsequently, participants were presented with different examples of disadvantaged groups in favour of whom they could act. Athletes firstly negotiated whether to intervene and second, through dialogue, they chose to intervene in favour of people with disabilities. Finally, to investigate the consistency of self-definitions in terms of their personal and social identities, they were again asked to describe themselves through words and images, as at the beginning of session one; moreover, each of them underwent a short individual interview to bring out the meaning that they extracted from each session. The aim of these questions was to investigate more deeply the effects of the intervention.

6.1.4 | The Analytical Tool: The Positioning Diamond Grid

In relation to other approaches to positioning, often more focused on individual narratives and inter-individual interactions, we decided to use an analysis grid adapted from the positioning diamond (Davies and Harré 1990; Slocum-Bradley 2010b). This approach has been proposed as an attempt to provide a systematic and analytical framework that can be adapted to interpersonal as well as group levels of analysis. As regards group dynamics, this framework proved to be a useful alternative to micro-cultural perspectives to explore

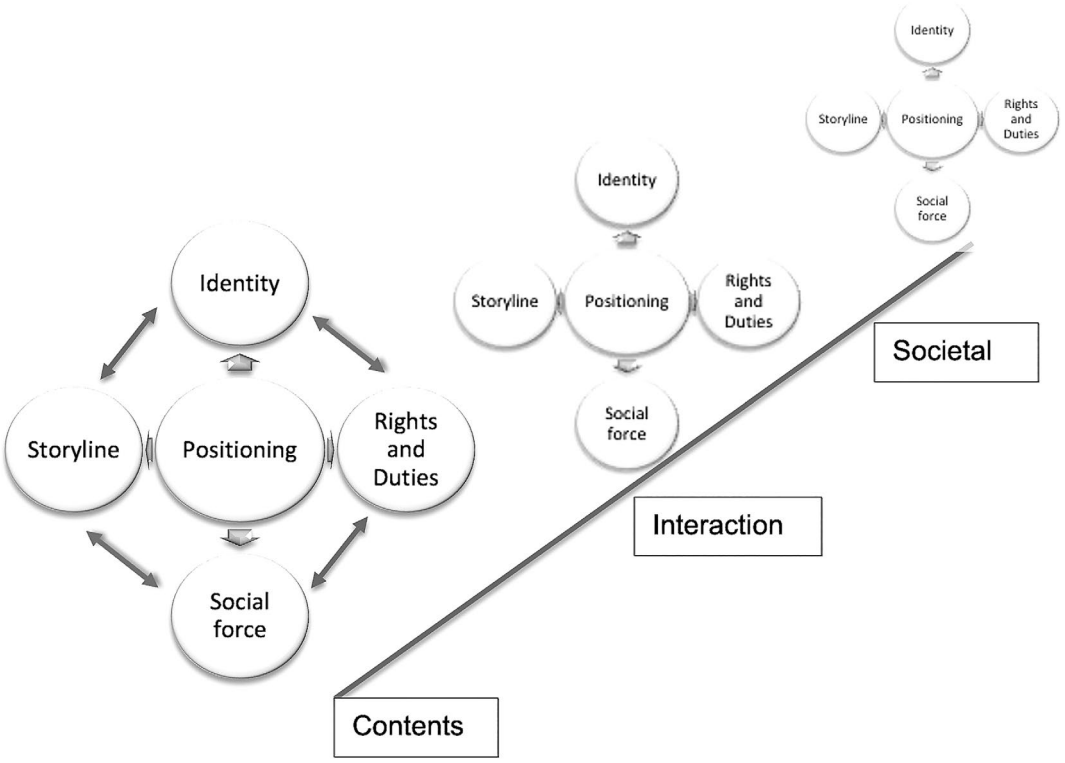

FIGURE 1 | Positioning diamond grid: facets and levels of analysis.

small-group dynamics and allowed us to examine ongoing processes of construction of local moral orders and related discursive and multi-modal practices (Hirvonen 2016, 2019; McVee et al. 2019).

Davies and Harré (1990) proposed to analytically address positions by looking at a triangle composed of narratives (storylines), moral commitments (positions), and discursive acts (social forces of speech act), and at the relationships between these facets. Slocum-Bradley (2010b) expanded the positioning triangle into a diamond. In her view, positionings are the various discursive ways in which people 'attribute' characteristics to self and others, 'evoke' identities, 'allocate' rights and duties, and 'invoke' storylines.

The positioning diamond grid has been applied as a systematic approach to analyse data. It identifies four mutually influential facets, by three levels of analysis (Figure 1).

The four facets that define how positionings are enacted are:

1. *Identities*, that is the self-categorisations used in discourse and the attributes associated with them, which also include the di- or tri-chotomous others associated with each selected category (e.g., children/young/adult). Identities also include the way entities (e.g., institutions) are socially constructed as moral agents, with associated characteristics. In our study, examples of identities are *professional football player* opposed to those who play just for fun, *Reggiana as a top team*, self as *student*, etc.
2. *Rights and duties*, that is the often-implicit moral order that regulates and provides explanation to what and why a social episode occurs. Rights and duties are the rules that define what a proper course of action for a given actor is. These are clearly related to identities. In our study, for example, the professional football players have the duty of *training*, of being *respectful*, and the right of *being influential* over fans.
3. *Storylines*, that is the narratives that provide coherence to a sequence of acts. They represent the overarching framework that organises meanings and interprets the motives of certain actions. In our case, for example, a short story such as *I'm new in this professional football team and I already found lots of new friends*.
4. *Social forces of discursive acts*, that is Austin's (1962) illocutionary force of speech act. This facet grasps the intention underlying the locution. Interpreting the previous storyline, for example, the authors could be making a compliment, or its aim could be to be accepted as a newcomer.

Each of the four facets has to be examined in the specific conversational context in which the discourse takes place:

1. the *content* of discourse, that is what the narrator is actually talking about (the interviewee is talking about … role models);
2. the *interaction level*, that is what is 'going on' between the narrator and the interlocutor/audience (e.g., he/she is showing to the interviewer that … the concept is clear);
3. the *societal level*, that is how the meanings are related to wider master narratives or dominant discourses (e.g., it is common sense that … self-control and perception of responsibility is what distinguish an adult from a child).

TABLE 1 | Identity meanings, rights and duties produced by participants before the session (Phase 3) on role models.

Facet	Level of analysis		
	Content	**Interaction**	**Societal**
Identities (as a ___)	**Individual traits** (e.g., 'extrovert', 'respectful', 'committed') **Social roles** (e.g., 'a member of a football team', 'a member of Reggiana') *Less frequent*: **Physical description** (e.g., 'name', '12 years old') **Existential statement** (e.g., 'diversity')	**Committment**: (e.g., 'I'm [someone who is] taking this activity seriously')	**Someone that has qualities that make him different**, i.e., a mature person compared with children, a professional compared with amateurs (e.g., 'you have to overcome many obstacles to get to the objective of playing in Serie A', 'training is indispensable', 'it leads to great results', 'the team is the most important thing')
Rights and duties (I can ___, I must ___)	**Desires** (e.g., 'to have fun', 'I'd like to be like Maradona', 'one of my dream is to win the Champions') **Expectations** of commitment and belonging (e.g., 'I like to train so I can improve every day', 'if we are together everything is possible')		**The right to Enjoy** (e.g., 'I love to play', 'it's beautiful to stay together, it's like a second family') **The duties of Belonging** (e.g., 'to be very committed because playing in this team is not for everyone', 'I feel honoured to represent my town', 'It's an opportunity', 'it means a lot to me')
Storylines	**Since I've been here...** 'I've met new friends, I'm having fun', 'beyond football, we learn to respect others, to be a mature person'		
Social forces of discursive acts (by saying this, he/she aims to ___)	Achieve a positive self-presentation	Introduce the self as a team member; show attachment and give importance to the team	Confirm adherence to moral norms (i.e., fairness, loyalty, authority)

In the current study, this 4 × 3 matrix was applied to analyse the overall data produced by participants. Two of the authors independently and iteratively applied the positioning diamond grid to all the data, starting by analysing the identities and storylines evoked by participants. The different grids were then compared to discuss similarities and differences and to reach a shared interpretation. Finally, the overall analysis was discussed and revised with all the authors, who had first-hand experience of the field intervention. This led us to a thick interpretation of the results and to a shared understanding of the dynamics.

All the data collected were included within the analysis, including written answers, group discussions captured in video and fieldnotes, selection of images, individual short interviews, etc. Indeed, we adopted an inclusive view on discourse as 'the use of language and other symbols and signs to generate meaning, such as through talk, gestures and images' (Slocum-Bradley 2010b, 80). In this perspective, discourse refers to 'a broader range of social practice that includes non-linguistic and nonspecific instances of language' (Schiffrin et al. 2001, 1).

We particularly focused on the triggering event and the associated group discussions on role models (i.e., the coach episode) (see also McVee et al. 2019 on time and space extension of the grid). Indeed, the way discrepancies were perceived, negotiated, and understood was considered as clues of whether and to which extent participants were able to fully endorse the positionings proposed during the activities conducted, and how these could be negotiated with other identities more relevant outside the football field.

Given the nature of data, the context, and the typology of the respondents, not all the cells of the grid were filled. As an example, respondents were not required nor spontaneously evoked storylines related to the societal level.

Results will be illustrated using themes, examples, and quotations emerging from the whole material produced during the 3 days in the field. Table 1 is organised around these three phases.

7 | Results

In presenting results, we sometimes refer to specific tasks performed during the three sessions; these tasks are presented in detail in the Supporting Information.

7.1 | First Phase. Positioning as a Young Adult Football Player

In phase 1 of the intervention (e.g., when asked to provide answers to 'who are you' question and to choose exemplary images), participants position themselves in a few common stances (Table 1). The majority of participants presented their personal identity with mostly positive characteristics, such as *extroversion*, *politeness*, *respect*, *stubbornness*, *competitiveness*.[1] Also looking at selected images, the predominantly chosen images refer to the individual identity as *footballer*, where aspirations and commitment of the individual are put to the forefront. Only one participant used purely physical/demographic descriptions (e.g., *I am 12 years old*) and two referred to existential statements (i.e., refer to image [n. 39] as self-description, that depicts three with hands painted as leaves of multiple colours and shapes).

Importantly and consistent with the aims of the intervention, social roles were also frequently evoked. Above all, the social identity as *football team members* was highly used by participants. The second predominantly chosen image area refers to *football as a group activity*. Overall, the comments referred to the *fun* of playing with other teams, but also to *commitment* and *team play*. The post-it activity made even more salient the self-categorisation as a member of the Reggiana football team.

The societal level to which the evoked identities refer appears particularly relevant. Participants made clear what *being a footballer* means at the ideological/societal level: *commitment* (e.g., exemplified by the *training photo*) is what *makes the difference between someone who plays football and someone who wants to become a professional footballer*. This same dichotomy, based on *commitment* and *seriousness*, was also reflected in talking about the Reggiana club, which is clearly characterised as opposed to other ordinary (non-professional) teams. Participants therefore recognise the *prestige of being part of a professional football team* as a particularly relevant social identity. Interestingly, this also resonates with the personal traits, which seem to implicit point to the difference between a child (who just looks for fun) and a mature person (who is also committed and conscious). It is important to consider that respondents were pre-adolescents, in the transition period between these diverse identities.

The different self and social identities are clearly reflected in the perceived rights and duties. The line between desires and expectations is blurred, both when talking about themselves as persons and as team members. Participants evoked the right/duty to *have fun*, *dream of victory*, and at the same time *be committed*, *be a team player*, *be respectful*. In sum, their personal and social identities were slowly taking shape, and the football identity contributes to participants' development.

The post-its task, which made membership particularly salient, introduced further expectations of one's own role: *being serious*, *belonging*, *respecting others and the coach*, *having fun with friends*. Once again, these aspects remind ideological dimensions that are shared at a societal level: the right/duty of children to play football with *commitment but still having fun* (as opposed to the world of adult professionals); the duty *to show oneself up* to high standards and *not waste the opportunity* to play in a professional team, without however neglecting the right *to be with friends*. These facets were organised in some short stories that have, as a premise, the arrival *in this group of friends*, *in this group of players*, *in this professional team*, that allow the personal and agonistic rights and duties to be fulfilled.

The illocutionary force of the discourse is unfolding at all three levels of analysis. On the content level, it is evident the objective of showing the positive distinctiveness of the self, as a young adult. Furthermore, in front of the interviewer, but also of their teammates and the coach, participants consciously positioned themselves to show their attachment to the team, giving importance to the club. At the societal and ideological level, one could advance the hypothesis that, in their transition to adulthood, respondents positioned themselves so to show adherence to shared moral models.

7.2 | Second Phase. The Critical Episode

As expected, the critical episode in phase 2 raised awareness and emotional arousal of participants. During the debriefing, participants reported feelings of *fear, surprise*, and *shock* (only 1 reported indifference). Three participants spontaneously reported that *as a professional and as a model he should set an example*. When asked why they felt so shocked participants, they mixed individual characteristics (e.g., *he is a good man*) with the values that the coach tries to foster in the football field: *At training, he always endorses prosocial behaviours, this does not feel like him*. Drawing on this activation, participants were asked to reflect about their own coherence, and most of them reported a perceived discrepancy, especially as regards behaviours in the field and at school. Finally, they jointly defined a ranking of reasons for being consistent within and beyond the field: at the first place they put *respect*, followed by *loyalty*, *faithfulness*, *seriousness*; next, participants noted the importance to *set an example*. Finally, they reported that consistency is important for *success*. It can be noted that the reasons for being consistent are linked with the same characteristics ascribed at the self as a member of a professional football team. Consistent with our expectations, it seems that the second phase supported normativity toward the social values of sport.

7.3 | Third Phase. Becoming Aware of, and Positioning as, Role Models

After the coach's critical episode, and after discussing role models, participants reported the evocation of traits referring to the self and the choice of images. Our respondents did not radically change their answers. Indeed, the same identities, rights and duties, illocutionary acts remained as previously highlighted (Table 1). We did not expect a radical change of prevalent identity after only a few days of activity, and consistently, participants continued to describe themselves positively and to position themselves as young players of a professional football team.

Alongside these positionings, however, they showed as intended the ability to identify role models and to eventually assume the position (Table 2). In terms of content, our participants defined role models as *an example* and identified several role models

TABLE 2 | Identity meanings, rights and duties produced by participants after the session (Phase 3) on role models.

Facet	Level of analysis		
	Content	**Interaction**	**Societal**
Identities as a ___	**Soccer stars** (e.g., 'Ronaldo') **Successful and talented diversities** (e.g., 'disabled people', 'Ezio Bosso', 'members of minorities such as women, black people, homosexuals...')	**Possible self** (e.g., 'Sport is an important stage, to show others attitude, like playing football (i.e., our skills) to help others')	**Anyone is a role models for his/her follower** (e.g., 'what Ronaldo is for us, we as Reggiana can be for our supporters') **Role models support disadvantaged communities** ('RM can do something for them')
Rights and duties ___ I can ___ and I must ___	Professional players **rights** ('being part of a team') and **duties** ('a good behaviour', 'respect for others', 'responsibility', 'to be consistent on and off the field')	Accept one's own **responsibilities** (e.g., 'being serious and committed to the team', 'consistent on and off the field')	Being followed implies **moral duties** Models chose who needs their help ('the poor, the homosexuals', 'The elderly are also disadvantaged, because they struggle so much to do things'.)
Storylines	**a role model is** someone who is most followed, who is famous, who is highest in status, someone who is different and doesn't hide (e.g., 'Ronaldo should be considered as a role model more than us, because he is more known', 'Ezio Bosso has never hidden his illness and has nevertheless been very successful')	**We are becoming role models** 'the coach says: on the field you turn off the children's switch and turn on the football players' switch'	**Those who have more followers have a stronger voice, and can give hope** to 'diverse' others ('seeing a famous person who has [a disease] perhaps can give these people more strength and hope'.)
Social forces of discursive acts (by saying this, he/she aims to _____)	To give meaning and shape to the new concept (role model) through personification	To acknowledge the fact that they are also learning to have a new role	To confirm their adhesion to the norm that becoming famous gives a different role in society

among those proposed such as *Ronaldo*, *Ezio Bosso*, etc. (see Table 2, identity by content cell). The illocutionary function of the collected discourses is to give shape to the new concept through personification processes. These positive characters were mainly attributed with two characteristics: *having followers* and/or *being talented*. This is evident when the role model is identified as a talented individual who is also exemplary of a marginalised category; indeed, participants devoted much space to discussing Ezio Bosso, a popular composer and musician suffering from a neurodegenerative disease.

However, more than ethical and moral qualities, for our participants it seems that it is the star-fan dynamics that transform individuals into role models: being a role model is not determined by personal characteristics; rather, it is the fact of *being followed* and *having visibility* that imposes, among the other duties, *responsibility toward followers*. Having followers therefore brings the moral obligation to act as a role model and to confirm the same *commitment* and *professional attitude* even beyond the football field.

In the interaction with interviewers and with the other teammates, respondents explicitly recognise to themselves the potential to be role models, assuming the same duty of coherence that they previously attributed only to their coach and to famous models: '*we also could be role models*', '*as Ronaldo is for us, we Reggiana should be for our supporters*'.

Positioning as role models for peers is linked with the 'professional footballer' social identity. Like in the first phase, this identity is discursively linked with the moral obligement to individual commitment. However, after the intervention, being a footballer entails—in the discourse of our participants—also the moral obligation to act consistently with the (sport-related) social identity values and norms and fosters the possibility of engaging in social action. Examples of participants' statements are:

> we talked about respect, loyalty, being an example to someone who wants to be like us, both in and beyond the field... and to help people who can't do what we are able to do.

> being a member of Reggiana means to be committed beyond and on the field.

> a football player should not only be strong on the field, but also good outside...

> Sport is an important stage, [it's an opportunity] to show others [our] attitude, such as playing football (our skill) to help others.

> During the 'partita del cuore' [a charity match] something terrible happened: a girl was excluded only because she was a woman.

Participants' choice to engage together in action toward disadvantaged individuals, even before choosing which specific targets (e.g., individuals with disability, foreign children) also likely stems from their potential contribution as role models. It can be noticed that the kind of social action the participants imagine is not aimed primarily at engaging or at recognising rights of minorities. It is rather linked to the leader-follower dynamic: privileged individuals (including themselves) are contrasted with different groups that are positioned as disadvantaged (*individuals with disability*, *the elderly*, *women, those on wheelchairs*). In this dichotomy, positioning as a role model entails the duty '*to help*' the '*diverse and disadvantaged*'. Interestingly, participants position themselves as a 'we', giving importance to their valued sport social identity and superimposing their own position as role-model with a possibility for collective action:

> We could help homeless children (poor people).

> We could help foreigners because they are looking for a better life, escaping from war in order not to die.

> if others are unable do something, we have the responsibility of telling them 'you can do it too'.

8 | Discussion

We conducted a field intervention with players from the grassroots of AC Reggiana, a professional football club, aimed at fostering their sport team identity and ultimately laying the foundations for the shared decision to act as role models and undertake collective action in favour of disadvantaged social groups.

Shared contents and negotiated positionings that emerged from the collected discourses were generally in line with expectations. First, participants refer to individual identity based on personal characteristics, but they proved also able to switch toward their football team social identity. Such an identity, which was made particularly relevant in the first phase of the intervention, was considered as relevant to participants also because of the prestige of playing in the grassroots of a professional football team in a context (Italy) where football is the most popular sport. The participants' discourses revolve around the dichotomy professional–non professional player, which mirrors the broader cultural opposition between adults and children. Our participants position themselves on the first pole of the dichotomy, as adult and professional player in becoming, responsible and committed.

The second phase (i.e., the critical episode) activated, as planned, emotional reactions and group dynamics, which contributed to normative support for the social values of sport and shared awareness of issues such as coherence, setting an example, and once again being responsible.

After the intervention, participants did not radically change their positioning; however the rights and duties connected to the 'professional player' were located, in their discourses, both within and outside the football field. Moreover, starting from the relevance of social identity and of its values, the intervention engaged participants with a novel concept, stimulating their discursive positioning as role models, and raising their awareness of the possibility to take action in favour of disadvantaged groups. In participants' discourses, this possibility often followed a syllogism: participants first needed to identify famous role models and their characteristics (being talented and having followers), then they collectively discussed if the same characteristics can be attributed to themselves as football team members (we are also talented and have followers among our peers) concluding that, for example, 'as Ronaldo is ... we can also be...': The prestige and the followers linked with the social identity of members of a professional football team entail, in the participants' discourses, the moral obligation to fulfil the moral duties associated with it (which we made salient in the first two phases of the intervention). Finally, by considering the possibility of being role models for their peers, participants also consider the importance of engaging in actions to support disadvantaged groups. The use of 'we' in the responses can be interpreted as an implicit availability to engage in collective more than individual actions.

We have no evidence from this study that intentions can be actually translated into behaviour. Note however that participants were left free to decide whether to engage in action to support disadvantaged individuals, and the choice they took also concerning the disadvantaged group to support (people with disability) represents a behaviour in itself. In any case, on the one hand it is possible that the intervention allowed participants to strategically express something that they already felt, eventually fostering greater self-awareness. On the other hand, it is possible that participants strategically decided to discursively position in line with perceived contextual moral obligation (i.e., compliance with the interviewer's expectations), showing their adherence to perceived normative duties and a shared understanding of what is right or wrong (Lee et al. 2008).

As anticipated in the introduction, the main novelty of the present article rests on the use of a positive social identity imbued with positive values (stressed during the intervention) to foster collective action toward an unspecified range of disadvantaged groups. Radke et al. (2020) considered the possibility that advantaged group members may in some cases support the disadvantaged group to benefit the ingroup, for instance by allowing the advantaged group to maintain a moral status. In other words, they considered the possibility that advantaged group members' solidarity-based actions may in some cases be ingroup-rather than outgroup-focused. We believe that this the case in the present study. However, we do not think that participants reasoned on the ingroup benefit instrumentally. Rather, we argue that, potentially also as a result of the intervention, the social values of a sport and football identity (like respect and cooperation) were

salient (or at the very least the intervention increased awareness of such values and football identity): being willing to act as role models to benefit disadvantaged groups allows participants to maintain a moral image consistent with the social identity's values, resulting in higher individual and group self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In a complementary way, high identification with such social identity may lead to a moral obligation to fulfil the social identity's values, resulting in stronger collective action intentions (Milesi and Alberici 2018). Such argument is consistent with the definition of entities identified as 'agents', which are characterised by moral responsibility, while passive entities (identified as 'patients'; in our case, they are represented by disadvantaged groups) enjoy moral rights, such as being supported (Waytz et al. 2010).

In this first study we followed an ideographic approach to group dynamics, with the aim to implement a field intervention and to gain insights on the possibility of cueing activism among a group of young football players. Further empirical evidence is needed to show the long-term benefits of such strategies. Nevertheless, our study provides preliminary evidence of the proposed processes, as well as a methodology that could be adapted and/or used in other field interventions interested in fine-grained analysis of the group dynamics.

A further critical issue regards the typology of helper-beneficiary dynamics imagined by our respondents, and the design strategies that can lead to 'generalised' collective action, that is to collective action toward a wide range of groups. Vezzali et al. (2023; see also Unver et al. 2022) conducted three studies relating to the secondary transfer effect of intergroup contact, consisting in the generalisation of contact effects from the primary outgroup (the outgroup individuals have contact with) to secondary outgroups (groups uninvolved in the contact situation; for a review, see Vezzali, Di Bernardo, et al. 2021). They showed that contact effects generalised, such that advantaged groups' contact with a primary disadvantaged outgroup led (via morality perceptions) to willingness to engage in collective action toward different secondary disadvantaged outgroups (for a review on the relationship between contact and collective action, see Cocco, Vezzali, Stathi, et al. 2024). Our study suggests that strategies focused on social identity can eventually activate the first step, such that individuals with a positive valued social identity can feel committed to help and support groups with societal disadvantage.

Interestingly, going beyond the current study, in the months following the intervention, most of the participants expressed the desire to take part in events as role models, and they were actually engaged in public initiatives led by researchers and by representatives of their club to benefit individuals with disability (as per the choice of participants). For instance, they attended a public conference explaining the role of football to foster individuals with disability's social inclusion, and they took part to football matches in mixed teams with individuals with disability in public events aimed at promoting support for diversity.

We believe this study has noteworthy practical implications. It uses a novel methodology (that also resulted in a free training course for coaches and educators; Vezzali and Bisagno 2022) to educate young sport players to active citizenship and to use their privileged position to act in favour of disadvantaged groups or individuals. It suggests that the content of social identity is relevant to individuals who, when social identities are meaningful, can act consistently, showing positive behaviour within and outside the sport's field. Research has shown that individuals may have a bracketed morality in sport, that is they may have different moral standards in sport and in their daily life (Bredemeier and Shields 1986). For instance, they may be more willing to help peers within the sport domain than in other contexts (Kavussanu et al. 2013). Our methodology showed that working on social identity allows to go beyond bracketed morality, activating the desire for consistency among different life domains between individuals and ultimately fostering their desire to support others.

In conclusion, fostering a sport social identity and highlighting the importance of role models can be a useful strategy to increase collective action toward disadvantaged groups.

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Ethics Statement

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Parma (Italy).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] In italics in the text and within inverted commas in the Tables words and short sentences quoted from participants' answers and/or transcribed conversations.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.