

## Personal Identity and Perceived Dissimilarity among College Athletes

Jinho Choi, Texas A&M University  
George Cunningham, Texas A&M University (Advisor)

**Session 11: Socio-Cultural  
Poster**

**Thursday, May 31, 2007**

**4:00 PM - 4:55 PM**

Research in sport and leisure organizations suggests that being different from others often negatively influences people's work experiences (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Fink et al., 2001). This research, however, may only be telling part of the story. Lawrence (1997) argued that most diversity research has adopted a "black box" approach, thereby failing to consider key mediating and moderating variables between dissimilarity and subsequent outcomes (see also Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). This is critique holds true for sport management research as well. Such omissions are unfortunate, as they can result in inconsistent findings and, subsequently, errant conclusions. The purpose of this study is to takes steps to address such shortcomings. Specifically, we examined the influence of one's racial personal identity on perceptions of dissimilarity among college athletes.

The social categorization approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) supposes that people categorize themselves and others into groups. Persons who are similar to the self are considered in-group members while people different than the self are considered out-group members. In general, in-group members, relative to out-group members, are liked more, afforded greater trust, and are the recipients of more positive behaviors. The social categorization process is important to the discussion of diversity and dissimilarity, as research has shown that people who are different from their peers, their supervisors, or other group members are likely to have less positive experiences than are their counterparts (van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

Of course, people can differ on many characteristics within a given group. This leads to the question: on what characteristic do people categorize themselves and others? The answer to this question likely depends on one's personal identity. According to Brewer (1991), one's personal identity is an identity an individual holds that is perceived as critical to his or her self-concept. It represents an important part of one's self-image and who he or she is as a person, while also playing an important role in how people feel about themselves (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Randel & Jaussi, 2003). People who hold a strong personal identity based on a particular characteristics-for the current discussion, let us assume race-are likely to be negatively affected when they differ from others based on that characteristic. On the other hand, if the personal identity on a particular characteristic is low, then it will matter little whether one is similar or different from others based on that characteristic. Theoretically, personal identity likely moderates the relationships between dissimilarity from others in the group and subsequent outcomes.

If one's personal identity does influence the relationship between dissimilarity and subsequent outcomes, the most proximal outcome is likely perceptions of dissimilarity, as various diversity scholars have argued that it is the perceptions of being different, rather than dissimilarity itself, that impact subsequent attitudes and behaviors (see van Knippenberg et al., 2004). In drawing from the previous discussion, we argue that among persons who are different from others in the group, the relationship between dissimilarity and perceptions thereof are likely to be stronger for persons with a strong racial personal identity than it is for those without such an identity. This theorizing resulted in the first hypothesis: racial personal identity will moderate the relationship between objective and perceived racial dissimilarity.

We also examined two potential outcomes of perceived racial dissimilarity: person-team fit and satisfaction with the team. In drawing from the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), we expected that perceived dissimilarity would be related to negatively related to perceived person-team fit, which should, in turn, be positively associated with satisfaction with the team. This rationale resulted in the second hypothesis: perceived person-team fit will mediate the relationship between perceived racial dissimilarity and satisfaction with the team.

Data were collected through an electronic questionnaire from 271 student-athletes who participated in a variety of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I sports (25 sports were represented) at 40 different colleges and universities. The majority of the student-athletes were White ( $n = 227, 83.8\%$ ). The student-athlete sample consisted of males ( $n = 79, 29.2\%$ ) and females ( $n = 191, 70.8\%$ ). The age distribution ranged from 18-24 years, with a mean age of 20.57 years ( $SD = 1.27$ ). Racial personal identity was measured with three items developed by Randel and Jaussi (2003). Three items from Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2003) were utilized to measure perceived racial dissimilarity. Person-team fit was measured with Cable and DeRue's (2002) scale, which consists of three items. Finally, we used three items from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh's (1983) scale to measure satisfaction with the team.

## 2007 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2007)

Structural equation modeling using simultaneous multigroup analysis described by Byrne (2004) was conducted to test racial personal identity as a moderator in the relationship between objective and perceived racial dissimilarity. In support of hypothesis 1, results indicated that the relationship between race and perceived racial dissimilarity was stronger for student-athletes with a high personal racial identity ( $f = -.67, p < .001$ ) than it was for student-athletes with a low personal racial identity ( $f = -.31, p < .05$ ). Furthermore, competing structural equation models were carried to test that the relationship between perceived racial dissimilarity and satisfaction with the team would be mediated by person-team fit. In support of the second hypothesis, results showed that the fully mediated model was supported: ( $n = 271, df = 59$ ) = 94.47,  $p < .01$ ;  $0/ df = 1.60$ ; RMSEA = .05, CFI = .98. The model explained 5% of the variance in person-team fit and 43% of the variance in satisfaction with the team.

This study has several implications. Theoretically, the results illustrate that including a key moderating variable, personal identity, improved the understanding of dissimilarity's effects. Consistent with Lawrence (1997), we argue that further studies should also include theoretically-driven mediating and moderating variables. From a practical perspective, it is important to realize that differences are not going to affect all people similarly. Managers must remain cognizant of these differences in devising their diversity management strategies.