As identity has been recognized as “at the core of why people join organizations and…approach their work the way they do” (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008, p. 334), it is not surprising that the construct has received considerable attention from management scholars. However, while voluminous, organizational identity research has nevertheless suffered from a somewhat narrow focus. That is, research to date has largely centered on one of only three focal points of identification: the organization itself (Johnson, Morgeson, Igen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006), an organizational subgroup such as a work-team (Kearney & Gebert, 2009), and/or an individual’s vocation (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). As a result, often overlooked is the presence and potential influence of identities an individual may hold which span organizational and vocational boundaries. This is problematic as management scholars have demonstrated that numerous non-work factors may significantly influence both an individual’s vocational decision making, as well as his/her workplace-related attitudes and behaviors (Voydanoff, 2005).

Identity theory (Stryker 1980; Burke 1991) provides the theoretical anchor for the model. According to identity theory, individuals attach meaning to the multiple roles they perceive for themselves, which individually are construed in terms of unique identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Pertinent here, sport has been identified as a specific role identity in which an individual may attach meaning (Curry & Weiss, 1989; Mcclancy, 1996). Identity theory then suggests that these numerous perceived roles exist within a salience hierarchy, with the expectation being that a particular identity’s “location in the…hierarchy will affect its threshold for being invoked…and thus the likelihood that behavior called for by the identity will ensue” (Stryker & Serpe, 1982, pp. 206-207). Thus, if a particular role identity is sufficiently prominent within one’s salience hierarchy, he/she will likely form attitudes and engage in behaviors that fulfill the expectations associated with that role (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The proposed model itself may be considered in terms of two key components: the influence of the sport identity (a) before an individual enters a sport organization, and (b) once an individual is employed within a sport organization. In respect to the former, it is argued that those possessing a salient sport identity will be more likely to pursue a career in a sport organization. Following identity theory, as the sport identity becomes increasingly salient for an individual, the need to remain associated with that identity grows (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). A sport organization, then, may be perceived as providing an outlet in which one’s sport identity may be cultivated. This perspective acknowledges the fact that sport organizations provide a unique context in that a traditionally non-work domain (sport) serves as the foundation for the organization itself. Those holding a salient sport identity are expected to recognize this overlap in traditional work/non-work domains, ultimately leading to the decision to enter a sport organization as a career choice (Spokane, Meir, & Catalano, 2000). Vocational psychology literature moreover supports this perspective insomuch as one’s association with a non-work interest or hobby has been correlated with vocational interest (Hansen & Scullard, 2002; Holland, 1997).

Turning then to a focus on individuals currently employed within a sport organization, it is next proposed that the saliency of one’s sport identity will influence individuals’ workplace attitudes, and in particular organizational commitment – an attitudinal construct which has been linked to increased job performance and decreased turnover (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). This argument again follows the perspective that individuals holding a salient sport identity will perceive a sport organization as an outlet in which this identity may be nurtured. Specifically, as a response to a welcomed opportunity to remain associated with one’s salient identity, increased commitment toward the sport organization is expected (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Identity theory further suggests, however, that one’s social environment plays a key role in how a salient identity may influence individual attitudes (Kraimer, Shaffer, & Ren 2009). As such, the proposed model additionally calls for the relationship between the saliency of one’s sport identity and organizational commitment (as well as other workplace attitudes) to be contingent on his/her perception of person-organization fit – a construct defined as the degree of congruence between an individual and their organization (Hoffman & Woehr, 2005; Kristof, 1996). If an organization is particularly welcoming of individuals strongly attached to sport, for instance, employees with a salient sport identity would likely perceive strong congruence between...
themselves and the organization (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), thereby leading to more positive attitudinal outcomes such as commitment. However, if a sport organization places little value on employees holding a strong sport attachment, an individual's salient sport identity is not validated by his/her social environment, hence leading to a perceived identity threat (Burke, 1991). Because individuals are motivated to reduce psychological discomfort in the face of such a threat (Derks, van Laar & Ellemers, 2009), employees holding a salient sport identity may distance themselves attitudinally from the organization, resulting in lower levels of organizational commitment among other undesired outcomes.

Integrating non-work identities into management theory is particularly important within a sport context. Unfortunately, only recently have sport scholars begun to consider the influence of non-work identities through a management lens (Magnusen, Kim, Kim, & Mondello, 2010). Here, a theoretical model is developed which considers the influence of the sport identity both before and after an individual joins a sport organization — thereby incorporating both vocational and organizational elements. Ultimately, exploring the influence of the sport identity may be useful from both of these dimensions. For example, the influence of the sport identity may provide increased understanding into the oft-cited problem that the expectations held by new hires in a sport organization commonly do not reflect the realities of the workplace (Hofacre & Branvold, 1995). Also, recognizing the saliency of the sport identity in current employees may assist organizations wishing to engender increased employee commitment. Future sport management scholars may use the model developed herein as a foundation for considering these effects.