

New Fans, New Places: The Role of Sport in Organizational Socialization

Matthew Katz, University of Texas at Austin
Bob Heere (Advisor), University of Texas at Austin

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Organizational socialization refers to the learning content and processes by which an individual adjusts to a specific role in an organization (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). Furthermore, organizational socialization is concerned with how newcomers to an organization transition from being organizational outsiders to insiders (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). This time of transition from outsider to insider is referred to as an adjustment period, and experience during the adjustment period has been linked with such outcomes as job performance, job attitudes, retention, and organizational commitment (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister). Moreover, since member turnover is highest among newcomers to an organization (Griffeth & Hom, 2001), organizations can greatly affect newcomer retention and actively embed newcomers within their organizational culture through the nature and design of their socializing events (Allen, 2004).

Two critical constructs within newcomer adjustment, and thus organizational centralization, are centrality and cohesion. Centrality is among the most widely used conceptual tools for studying social networks (Borgatti, 2005) and can be measured in a number of ways. This research conceptualizes and measures centrality as degree centrality, the number of immediate contacts an actor has in a network. Importantly, degree centrality is seen as a measure of an actor's level of involvement and activity in a network (Prell, 2012). The outcomes associated with degree centrality are well documented, such as Ibarra and Andrew's (1994) findings that increased levels of centrality lead to increased satisfaction, organizational attitudes, and organizational perception plus Burt's (1992) conclusions that individuals with higher measures of centrality receive more information about organizational norms and expectations. While centrality is a measure of actor level characteristics, cohesion is among the most popular measures of network level data. This research conceptualizes and measures cohesion through network density, the proportion of all possible ties that are actually present (Prell, 2012). Research on cohesion has found, among other things, that more cohesive networks foster higher levels of social capital for network members (Coleman, 1990; Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000).

This study, then, seeks to explore the role of sports in the process of organizational socialization by examining notions of centrality and cohesion. To analyze this research topic, a longitudinal mixed methods approach was implemented consisting specifically of semi-structured interviews and survey designs containing social network analyses and identity scales. As a research setting, a specific group of organization newcomers were chosen as participants: college freshman. Two mentor groups (i.e., orientation groups) of freshman at a small, private, southwestern university were selected as participants for a total sample size of 37 students. Students were contacted via email requesting their participation in interviews and their completion of two electronic surveys. For the first round of data collection, 23 interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded by the researchers. Additionally, all 37 participants completed the social network analysis and their responses were compiled into an adjacency matrix and analyzed using the social network software UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). Finally, students were sent two versions of the group identity scale (university and athletic teams) developed by Heere and James (2007) and refined by Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, and James (2011). Data collection is still ongoing for the identity scale results. These same research methods will be repeated during the spring of 2013, fall of 2013, and spring of 2014 for a two-year period of data collection.

As the first stage of a longitudinal study, the reported results are exploratory in nature, as the true implications of our findings will emerge over the next two years. Our initial findings suggest that sport is neither the driving force behind the socialization process nor the driver behind the creation of community among organizational newcomers. For instance, the qualitative data strongly indicate the importance of student-to-athlete individual relationships as the primary motivator of sport attendance and fan identity. Almost unanimously, students reported attending sporting games and caring about sports only when they personally knew a friend participating on the team. Rather than identifying with the university or the team as a whole, our findings suggest the first step towards socialization

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through sport was psychologically and emotionally connecting to a player on the team. The data strongly represents the notion that identifying with the school itself was too abstract an idea for newcomers, who instead required something more concrete (i.e., a friend on the team) with which to initially develop an attachment with. Furthermore, the social network data indicate that community developed among new students without the impact of sport. For both mentor groups, group cohesion levels were higher within friendship networks than within sport fan networks. Since social capital is a function of network cohesiveness (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000), our findings indicate that sport fan networks are not a primary builder of social capital amongst newcomers. Additionally, centrality measures were higher for most individuals within the friendship networks than sport fan networks, suggesting that sport is less a driver of social relationships than an outlet for friendships formed elsewhere. Essentially, organizational newcomers are not friends through sports but rather use sport as a way to reinforce already developed friendships.

While this study is only in the first stage of a two-year process, the findings already suggest important implications. From an organizational socialization perspective, sport may not be a powerful enough medium to create cohesive networks with high measures of centrality. Rather, sport is more successful in the socialization process when used as reinforcement to other components of newcomer adjustment. While sport may provide a central identity for organizational members (Clopton, 2009; Heere & James, 2007), sport may not be tangible enough for new organizational members to develop cohesive social networks with. Future rounds of data collection should provide more insight into the role of sport in the long-term socialization, identification, and satisfaction of organizational newcomers.