Organizational Identity in a Volunteer-based, Dispersed Identification Process

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Volunteers have become a critical resource in the design and implementation of community-based sport programs. The contributions of volunteers have been critical to the success of these programs, especially given the increase in the number and types of programs (Green & Chalip, 1998; Surujlal & Duhurp, 2008). In their review of sport volunteers, Green and Chalip found that the percentage of long-term volunteers had decreased as participation levels had become stagnated. High attrition rates for volunteers limit the ability of sport organizations to provide consistent, high-quality member service. Organizations are therefore competing for limited volunteer resources, heightening the importance of a positive volunteer experience. Understanding the process of organizational identification for volunteers could prove beneficial as identification has been shown to be a significant determinant of positive outcomes, especially in circumstances when there is no monetary remuneration for organizational members (Bonjean, Markham, & Macken, 1994).

Furthermore, in sport organizations in particular, organizational identification has been found to be an important attitude, as the emotional and personal connection of individuals to sports and teams produces a level of identification with the athletes playing the game or with participants engaging in the same activity with which the volunteer has a strong personal, emotional connection (Lock, Taylor, & Funk, 2012).

The problem for sport organizations is compounded, however, by the changing nature of organizations in that they are no longer exclusively static, hierarchical, place-based beings. In a dynamic and ever-more digitized world, organizations are quickly becoming a network of individuals and knowledge across which place matters less, i.e. “dispersed.” While this dispersion has opened the door for a whole world of innovation utilizing varying structures, cultures, and thought processes, this also leaves scholars with numerous questions. Specifically, knowing that organizational identification has been associated with numerous important outcomes, including extrarole behaviors (Blader & Tyler, 2009), task performance (Yurchisin & Damhorst, 2011), and intention to stay (Mael & Ashforth, 1995), how does the changing structure of the organization alter the ways in which individuals identify with the organization?

Organizational identification is the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of membership with an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The process of identification happens largely through the formal and informal interactions between the organization and its members that expose them to its enduring norms, values, and beliefs (Ashforth & Mael). As the structure of organizations in general moves away from hierarchical, place-based beings to dispersed networks across which place doesn’t matter, scholars question how exactly to facilitate identification in the absence of physical interaction (Weisenfeld et al., 2001). Brickson (2013) proposes that an organization’s identity, a set of referents or claims that are central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985), can play an important role in member identification, regardless of interaction. Organizations themselves are identity-based actors, and therefore have potential to inform the identification process (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). This relationship, however, has been largely unexplored empirically (Brickson, 2013).

In a dispersed organization, the referents and cues projected and executed by the organization are left open to interpretation by members, making the strength, centrality, and relevance of these cues even more important in the identification process. Therefore, this study uses organizational archival data and interviews with organizational members to understand the cues of a strong organizational identity that are most salient in the construction of identification for volunteers in a dispersed sport organization. Theoretically, it seeks to bridge the empirical gap in the relationship between organizational identity and the process of organizational identification. Practically, it attempts to provide concrete cues that dispersed organizations, particularly volunteer-based organizations with
limited resources, can use to provide a strong identity, which can in turn facilitate organizational identification, along with its positive outcomes for both the individuals and the organization.

To evaluate the identification process and identity cues within the organization, this study utilizes sensemaking, a process theory grounded in identity construction (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Individuals’ realities, including their sense of identification with an entity, are ongoing retrospective processes using cues to shape meaning and narrative (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking within organizations has been found to facilitate meaning in many aspects of organizational life, including justice (Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013), strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and expectation (Louis, 1980). As an ongoing negotiation to create meaning within a specific environment, it is an appropriate lens through which to explore the process of identification through organizational identity referents for organizational members.

The organization of interest is an urban non-profit volunteer-based youth sport and development program, which uses marathon running to promote positive outcomes. The organization has been in existence for 10 years and serves over 1000 youth aged 12-18. While there is a small central, paid staff, the individual, school-based running teams are led exclusively by approximately 200 volunteers called running leaders. Their interactions with other teams and the paid staff, both formal and informal, are limited to less than 10 times each programmatic year. With limited resources, the program relies on these volunteers to not only train their students physically, but provide mentoring and motivation that promotes positive development within the students. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with volunteers until the thematic saturation point has been reached. Interviews will be retrospective of each volunteer’s tenure in the organization, seeking to extrapolate the sensemaking process through which and extent to which individuals have become identified with the organization. Organizational archival information will supplement interviews in order to create an accurate picture of specific organizational identity referents. The research team will analyze transcriptions conducted by a third-party for thematic referents, as well as extent of identification construction occurring with the organization for each referent.

As of submission, a total of six interviews have been conducted. Using NVIVO 9.0, several specific organizational referents have been thus far identified as preliminary themes within various stages of the identification process. The program’s colors and mission statement serve as a connection amongst volunteers, runners, and other running teams even at low levels of identification. Other referents, such as the program’s founder, seem to serve as a referent for highly identified individuals, even in the lack of direct interaction with the volunteers. These referents serve as cues for sensemaking the meaning of the organization, as well as members’ extent to which they identify with the goals of the organization. The volunteers’ connection to running also serves as an important external cue for identification, as individuals who considered themselves runners felt more highly identified with the organization, using their connection to the activity itself. This study aims to contribute theoretically to the understanding of the ability of an organization’s identity in the identification process, as this relationship, while studied conceptually, has lacked empirical evidence (Brickson, 2013). Practically, these findings are particularly important for volunteer-based sport organizations, as identification is an important process in the retention of volunteers, and sport organizations in general have potential to create a strong identity through the connection to activity that its members have (Lock et al., 2012).