Conceptualizing the Influence of Social Identity on Conflict in Sport Organizations

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The presence of dysfunctional intragroup conflict within sport organizations is problematic for organizational effectiveness (Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin & Doherty, 2012; Kerwin, Doherty, & Harman, 2011). In order to ensure positive group dynamics among paid staff and volunteers, it is important to dissect the antecedent factors to relationship-based disagreements (Kerwin, 2013). Further, Todd and Kent (2009) argued that sport employees, in particular, receive emotional benefits from group membership in a sport organization (e.g., employee identity), which may influence important job-related outcomes such as work behaviors. Given the affective connection that sport employees tend to possess toward their employee identities (Todd & Kent, 2009), it is reasonable to assume that emotional responses will result when interactions between in-group and out-group members are present. This idea is particularly relevant in non-profit sport organizations where paid staff and voluntary board members are personally connected to the organization in some meaningful way (i.e., former athlete or parent; Inglis, Alexander, & Weaver, 1999), potentially eliciting a stronger emotional attachment.

According to attribution theory, group members interpret others’ intentions during group interactions and pass personal judgments on individual motives or agendas (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1974). When groups regularly interact, this subjective calculus leads to conflict, interpersonal tension, social exclusion, and task withdrawal (Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Ren & Gray, 2009). Researchers have noted that relationship conflict (in particular) yields negative individual and group outcomes within organizations (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jahn & Bendersky, 2003; Jahn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008); and despite a history of support for the traditional model of relationship conflict, Bendersky et al. (2011) suggested adjustments to how this type of conflict is commonly examined. While the utility of conflict research is undisputed, Bendersky and colleagues’ highlighted a gap in our knowledge regarding the antecedents to relationship conflict in all management contexts.

The multi-dimensional measurement and definition of conflict has recently received increased scholarly attention. In particular, traditional relationship conflict has been repositioned as a subset of a larger construct labeled ‘interpersonal conflict’ (Bendersky et al., 2011). This new conceptualization provides a more robust explanation of how relational concerns lead to disagreement beyond the emotional component of disagreement previously described in the literature. Based on this idea, a layer of complexity has been added to the conflict discussion by separating interpersonal conflict into three conflict types: (1) compatibility, (2) status, and (3) contribution or commitment. Accordingly, the ideas of personality, perception of status within a group (i.e., identity), and feelings toward the group are more holistic descriptors of interpersonal conflict, which may be conceptually linked to the principles associated with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to advance how interpersonal conflict is conceptualized by discussing the role of social identity as an antecedent factor to various conflict types in sport organizations.

The proposed conceptual model will first illustrate that social identification “targets” (e.g., co-workers, workgroups, and organization) influence the perception of compatibility, status, and contribution conflict within groups. Social identity has been linked to relationship conflict in regional sport organizations (Kerwin, 2013), however, the recognition of identity “targets” may help further explain the unique presence of certain forms of conflict (e.g., compatibility conflict). For example, if a group of volunteer board members identify with each other, an attempt may be made by each board member to bridge potential areas of dispute (i.e., fault-lines) and increase compatibility (Brewer & Chen, 2007). As such, board meetings may be more productive.

Second, following the tenets of self-categorization theory we posit that the social identity to relationship conflict
association is moderated by the presence of conflicting subgroup identities (i.e., fault-lines). Given the inevitable formation of groups (e.g., marketing department versus operations department) within sport organizations, it is likely that most sport employees will encounter conflict between both workgroup and organization identities, forcing them to opt for one identity over another. This creates a new out-group with whom former in-group members no longer identify. The ability to self-categorize and align with members of different identities can blur group fault-lines. However, Randel (2002) suggested that the salience of one’s identity could moderate workgroup conflict when clear fault-lines exist. As noted by Kerwin (2013), this is especially true in sport organizations when employees or board members choose their workgroup identity over organizational identity (or vice versa).

The propositions within our conceptual model make two specific contributions to conflict theory within sport management. First, since interpersonal conflict is a theoretical domain, it requires particular attention and intervention. Therefore, focusing on the antecedent factors of each facet of interpersonal conflict will assist sport management theorists when describing how to control or reduce disagreement in sport organizations. This is particularly salient in sport organizations where a clear divide (e.g., paid staff/volunteer board members; multiple departments/divisions) already exists within the organizational structure (Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin et al., 2011). Second, incorporating social identity theory into a multi-dimensional view of conflict adds insight into how the perceptions of ‘self’ and ‘others’ contribute to intragroup conflict. Defining multiple subgroup identities, as a component of group fault-lines, shows the relative influence of these fault-lines on minimizing or exacerbating the presence of conflict. Discussing these associations conceptually should pave the way for empirical examinations of social identity and its effect on other group processes (e.g., task conflict, trust, etc.).

To demonstrate the utility of the proposed conceptual model, several steps must be undertaken. First, the model should be empirically tested to gain an initial understanding of the fit and parameter matrices to determine the casual implications of the model paths. Furthermore, testing the model in contexts where subgroup formation already exists (e.g., non-profit organizations with paid staff and volunteer boards or large organizations with multiple departments) is important to establish distinctions between workgroup and organizational identity. For example, Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) suggested that regional sport organizations operating with paid and non-paid members may be prone to subgroup evolution because individuals feel an attachment to their group (i.e., board of directors), above organizational attachment. Similar non-profit contexts should be ideal for model testing. In addition, for-profit organizations large enough to house multiple departments (subgroups) that function autonomously may be valid settings for inquiry.