Sport Employee Identification: Developing and Validating an Instrument

Brent Oja, University of Kansas
Jordan Bass (Advisor), University of Kansas
Brian Gordon (Advisor), University of Kansas

While a plethora of scholarship has examined coaches and administrators in sport organizations, little knowledge exists that pertains to middle managers of sport. This is surprising given the large amount of sport employees who work in such a role. This research intends to expand the academic understanding of middle management sport employees by examining their unique identification with their sport organization. Oja, Bass, and Gordon (in press) initially put forth the concept that sport employees have a unique identification. The authors posited that sport employees are likely to identify with their sport organization via two mechanisms that are grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). First, a sport employee’s identification with their sport organization is similar to that of any non-sport employee’s identification with their employer. Second, it was proposed that sport employees identify with their sport organization due to the connections formed with the teams of the organization. In turn, Sport Employee Identification (SEI) was defined as “the psychological bond arising from both organizational and team identification between sport employees and the parent organization in which they are employed” (Oja et al., in press, p. 2).

SEI has its roots in social identity theory. The concept refers to the process by which individuals form their identity based on their membership or associations to groups and the subsequent emotional saliency of the membership (Hogg & Terry, 2012). Burke and Stets (2009) explained that a unique positive identification refers to the process by which individuals join groups to feel better about his or herself or improve their self-esteem. The positive identification is manifested when individuals differentiate their group from others (i.e., we versus they) and the group that the individual identifies with achieves some feat or accomplishment that the individual vicariously celebrates. As such, the sport setting might accentuate a sport employee’s identification processes (i.e., a positive reaction to a victory by the organization’s team).

The method used to create a measure for SEI mirrors Churchill’s (1979) procedures. First, the construct must be clearly defined. Oja et al.’s definition was used. Next, to develop items both inductive (i.e., past literature) and deductive (i.e., interviews) methods were used to create the items (Hinkin, 1995). Two previously well-used instruments were adapted to fit the current study. Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) organizational identification scale and Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) team identification measure were utilized. Also, a focus group was conducted to generate more items. The focus group consisted of six sport employees. In all, a total of 37 items were created.

A total of 164 (N = 164) sport employees participated in the first data collection. The results were subjected to an EFA. The KMO test resulted in a .87 value. Also, the EFA produced a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity figure, 2878.17 (df = 666, p = < .001). To determine the dimensionality of SEI principal axis factoring was utilized. The first factor appeared to reflect identification based on improvements to self-esteem and success, and the second factor appeared to represent identification with sport as a larger social entity. The two factors were significantly correlated (r = .63). The large correlation prompted the use of an oblique rotation via promax. The first factor (i.e., self-esteem and success) had a Cronbach’s alpha score of .90 (α = .90) and the second factor (i.e., sport as a larger social edifice) had a Cronbach’s alpha score of .77 (α = .77). All items with a factor loading of .45 or higher were retained. This left the instrument with 19 items. The results of the EFA were then given to a panel of experts for a content analysis. All but two items received adequate scores and the specific feedback from the panel was either positive or it prompted the rewording of items. In general, the expert panel supported the instrument as representative of the SEI construct. Moreover, after the review from the expert panel 17 items remained.

Next a second data set with participants from professional and intercollegiate sport organizations was collected for a CFA. A total of 487 (N = 487) participants completed the survey. The first factor had a Cronbach’s alpha score of .80 (α = .80). The second factor had a Cronbach’s alpha score of .81 (α = .81). Moreover, the item-to-total correlations surpassed the .50 threshold. The limit for retention was set to .63 for factor loadings. Comrey and Lee...
(1992) argued that loadings of .63 are very good. Eight items surpassed the .63 level. A CFA with the eight remaining items revealed good model fit statistics using Brown’s (2006) guidelines. The CFA revealed a statistically sound model. The analysis supported two dimensions of SEI with four items in each dimension. The model fit indices were sound with a significant chi-square, \( \chi^2(19, N = 487) = 51.84, p < .001 \), a close CFI = .96, a close TLI = .95, an acceptable RMSEA = .06 (.040 - .08), and a close SRMR = .04. Also, the correlation between dimensions shifted to .62 (r = .62). Lastly, convergent and discriminant validity for the measure was supported by passing the AVE tests (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The results of the analysis of data revealed a valid and reliable measure SEI. First, the uniqueness of the construct is evidenced by the two-factor structure. Additionally, the two factors are similar to those hypothesized in Oja and colleagues (in press) original work. The first of the two factors discovered in this study is related to self-esteem improvement, which is a common derivative of social identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Tajfel, 1978). A sport organization can facilitate such improvements to one’s self-esteem via victories and other accomplishments that are not possible for an individual to achieve on their own.

The second factor of SEI is related to one’s connection with a larger sport social edifice. Although Oja and colleagues (in press) posited that team identification would be a source of identification for sport employees, the second factor of SEI only partially reflects this assertion. This concept is not diminished by the results of this study, but rather the mechanism for identification is accordingly altered. It appears that sport employees do form a psychological connection with the sport aspect of the organization, but this connection could be construed as deeper than mere team identification. Items that represent this dimension reflect a sport employee identifying as an athlete and athletics being an important part of who they are. This is a particularly relevant discovery for the theoretical development of the identification of sport employees. Importantly, it positions SEI as a unique form of identification rather than another form of organizational identification (e.g., Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Further, the finding of two dimensions of SEI prompt several future research avenues to better understand sport employees and their identification processes.

There are also several implications for practitioners. For example, an athletics director could administer this instrument to his or her employees. The results would inform the athletics director to what degree the employees are identified with the sport organization. In turn, the athletics director could begin to take steps to either alter the culture of the organization to aide in the identification of the other employees or they could maintain the status quo to retain the current levels of SEI. A potentially important direction for future research is an investigation into the possible harmful effects of highly identified sport employees. Oja et al. (in press) noted how some sport executives did not want sport fans as employees. Indeed, there is the possibility that high levels of SEI could lead to counter productive workplace behaviors (e.g., poor productivity the day after a difficult loss). In all, much work remains for the development of SEI. Antecedents and outcomes still require development. Such progress would allow researchers and practitioners to improve various employee and organizational outcomes and circumstances.