The Power of We: The Impact of Role Identity, Group Identity and Legitimacy of Leaders on the Production of Social Capital in Youth Sport Organizations

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As the youth sport industry continues to grow and become more commercialized, youth sport participation in America continues to be problematic. While some estimates suggest that as many as 36 million children participate in youth sport each year, the statistics also demonstrate that more than 70% of youth sport participants cease participation by the age of 13. These statistics support the view that while popular culture often assumes that participation in youth sport has a host of positive benefits, including the ability to generate social capital, spur future occupational success and encourage greater levels of civic engagement (Coalter, 2007), there is little empirical evidence to support this ideal (Coakley, 2011). In order to fill this gap in the literature, the author will attempt to determine what conditions are necessary in order to actually allow youth sport organizations to become more adept at generating, maintaining, and distributing social capital to their members. Using the Community of Practice (CoP) framework as a lens, the author will investigate the possibility that the creation of communities that generate social capital for its members can be explained by two different theories of identity formation, namely identity theory (Stryker, 1968) and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). Identity theory relies on the importance of an individual’s role on a person’s sense of self, while social identity theory focuses on the importance of the groups to which one belongs on a person’s sense of self. The author proposes a model that posits that an individual’s role based identity, when combined with high levels of organizational involvement, leads to the formation of shared social identity between group members. In turn, this new social identity, when bolstered by perceptions of legitimacy of the group’s leaders ultimately results in the production of social capital within the organization.

Literature Review
As people are moving far from their hometowns and the traditional social supports contained within them, sport has emerged as a powerful tool for the creation of communities. This has been shown to occur on both the sport fan side (Heere & James, 2007; Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan & James, 2011; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) and the sport participant side (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004; 2005; 2006; Warner & Dixon, 2011). These communities themselves can largely be understood as falling into one of two categories—that is, communities of interest, or communities of practice. A community that forms and is centered largely on a common interest, belief, or value that is shared by its members is generally defined as a community of interest. A community of practice, however, take the concept of connection with others beyond merely an interest, belief, or value a step further, and is conceptualized as a group or organization comprised of people that share both common practice and common identity (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). While the sport literature has seized upon the notion of CoPs within the sport sector, this has largely been conceptualized as individual spheres of influence that align strictly to the role individuals play within this organization (Galipeau & Trudel, 2004; 2005; 2006), as opposed to the idea that shared group identity might allow for the creation of an organization wide CoP.

Because the literature does not consider the idea of organization-wide CoPs, there is a gap in the literature connecting membership in a CoP with access to social capital within the sport sector. Social capital, simply be defined as “access to knowledge and opportunities through networks to enhance social and or economic mobility” (Foster & Maas, 2014, p.1), however, has long been considered a primary benefit of membership in more traditional community and civic organizations (Putnam, 1995). Youth sport organizations, as community based organizations have the potential to offer individuals an opportunity to create communities of their own choosing, and thereby gain access to social capital through participation in those communities. However, the literature does not define the conditions that must occur to allow the formation of social capital. Identity theory posits that at the heart of an individual’s sense of identity is the specific role he or she occupies, and the way in which the performance of that role translates to expectations connected to that role (Burke & Tully, 1977). Thus, a starting point for an individual
to join a group is their role identity (i.e. player, coach), not an identity with the community. Individuals often initially join groups based on expectations stemming from a particular role they inhabit, (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), or on pre-existing social bonds that do not necessarily relate to the focus of the group (Katz & Heere, 2013), yet this does not preclude the subsequent formation of a separate social identity that is directly tied to membership in the organization itself (Tajfel, 1978), and shared by members of that organization to create an “in-group” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Furthermore, the literature suggests that when members with individual role identities that are similar come together in the presence of shared group identity, there is the potential for social capital to emerge (Palmer & Thompson, 2007).

It is also known that individuals are more likely to accept leaders that viewed as legitimate (Barnard, 1938). Furthermore, Hollander (1993) found that those leaders that display characteristics such as loyalty, trust and credibility are more likely to be voluntarily accepted by individuals within an organization. Based on Choi and Mai Dalton’s (1998) model of self-sacrificial leadership, which involves less external rewards, followers are more likely to voluntarily accept these leaders and contribute to reciprocal behavior within the organization. As such, the literature supports the idea that when community members voluntarily accept leaders as legitimate, they are likely to behave in ways that foster social capital.

Methods
This quantitative study will employ a cross-sectional descriptive design, in an attempt to create a model that explains the conditions under which a youth sport organization is likely to generate social capital for its members. In order to study the extent to which the elements of organizational involvement and role identity influence the formation of a strong sense of organizational identification, this study will propose that the TEAM*ID scale (Heere & James, 2007) be deconstructed into two parts, antecedents of organizational identity, and elements of social capital. Four elements of this scale: private evaluation, public evaluation, cognitive awareness and interconnectedness of self as antecedents of social identity while the final two dimensions of the TEAM*ID scale, behavioral involvement and sense of interdependence, will be considered as part of social capital. These two dimensions of social capital will be measured along with traditional markers of social capital taken from Chiu, Hsu and Wang’s (2006) study of knowledge sharing that are used to determine the extent to which community-level social capital is present within the organization. Choi and Mai Dalton’s (1999) scale will be used to measure perceived legitimacy of leaders. Finally, the author will propose that if an individual possesses strong role identity but does not demonstrate strong organizational identity, there will be a negative impact on the ability of the group to generate, maintain and distribute social capital. A structural equation model will be created to in order to build this model.

The study instrument will be distributed to athletes, parents, coaches and administrators participating in selected youth sport organizations that serve athletes between the ages of 5-18, and which offer programs that cater to athletes at a variety of levels of skill and commitment to the sport. While the specific organizations to be used for this study are still being determined, the intention is to use 7-10 youth sport organizations in this study. Data collection will begin in December of 2016, and will be completed by February 2017, with data analysis immediately following. It is expected that results of the study will be collected by March 2017.