Linking Team Identification and Social Well-Being for Older Adults: Roles of Perceived Social Support and On-Field Performance

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other)  Thursday, June 7, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  8:55 AM
Abstract 2018-023  Room: Sable D

Understanding the role of sport in public health represents an important research agenda, as the sport management field continues its endeavors to establish legitimacy as a distinctive academic discipline (Chalip, 2006). A public health issue to which sport may offer an effective solution is the prevalence of mental health problems among older adults. One-fifth of older adults in the United States (U.S.) experience some type of mental health problem, such as depression (Karel et al., 2012). This issue will likely become more severe in the coming years, as the aging population and increasing life expectancy are expected to cause considerable growth in persons aged 65 years and above (Ortman et al., 2014). A major cause of mental illness among older adults is a reduction in social well-being (Cornwell & Waite, 2009), which refers to the appraisal of one’s functioning in society (Keyes, 1998). Older adults may face difficulties in maintaining their social well-being, as they experience various life course transitions, such as retirement and the loss of spouse (Coyle & Dugan, 2012). In this regard, studies on sport consumers have provided preliminary evidence that shared team identification could be associated with enhanced social well-being (e.g., Inoue et al., 2015b; Wann et al., 2011b). This evidence, however, is based on studies that examined consumers following a handful of sport teams, with only one confirming the evidence by explicitly sampling older adults (Wann et al., 2011a). Hence, its applicability to a range of sport teams and their followers remains questionable. Moreover, the literature lacks an understanding of the processes that underlie the relationship between team identification and social well-being for older adults.

The current study sought to address these gaps in the literature by (a) collecting data from older adults across the U.S. who followed various sport teams, and (b) investigating how team identification would be positively associated with social well-being. First, self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) suggests that social identification helps increase the availability of social support (i.e., assistance and protection) from other ingroup members. In turn, the increased perceptions of social support from fellow members positively affect social well-being. Consequently, in Hypothesis 1, we predict that perceived social support will mediate the positive relationship between team identification and social well-being for older adults.

Second, according to Haslam and Reicher’s (2006) social identity model of stress, the perception of social support from ingroup members could play an important role in enhancing social well-being when an ingroup is characterized by low social status (e.g., a racial minority group). Applying this proposition to the context of spectator sport, perceived social support from other fans of a team is likely to have a stronger association with older adults’ social well-being when a team is perceived as unsuccessful on the field (i.e., low social status) than as successful (i.e., high social status). Thus, in Hypothesis 2, we expect perceived on-field performance (i.e., perceptions of the team’s on-field performance) to negatively moderate the link between perceived social support and social well-being: As older adults perceive their team as performing more poorly on the field, their perceived social support from other fans of the team will have a stronger association with their social well-being.

Using the Qualtrics panel service, we conducted a web-based survey with 600 older adults who (a) indicated they follow a professional or collegiate sport team and (b) lived in one of the 94 U.S. counties where prominent sport organizations (intercollegiate athletic departments in “Power Five” conferences or teams in major North American professional leagues) operate. Our sample consisted of older adults with an age range of 65 to 92 (M = 70.9, SD = 4.7) and was equally represented by both genders. In the survey, study participants were asked to first specify their favorite sport team (only one team per participant; in total, over 150 teams were identified by our sample) and then...
answer questions related to this team in terms of team identification, perceived social support, and perceived on-field performance. Additionally, participants responded to items on two key measures of social well-being (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014; Wann et al., 2011b), social life satisfaction and perceived community trust. All constructs were measured with multi-item scales developed and validated by past research (e.g., Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Wann et al., 2011b). The reliability and validity of the scales were also confirmed based on data from our sample through a confirmatory factor analysis (MacKenzie et al., 2011).

To test Hypothesis 1, we estimated a structural equation model that specified team identification as an independent variable, perceived social support as a mediator, and social life satisfaction and perceived community trust as dependent variables. To control for the potential influence of other personal and social characteristics on older adults’ social well-being (Waddell & Jacobs-Lawson, 2010), the model also included the following control variables as predictors of each dependent variable: gender, age, income, marital status, and daily social interactions. The results supported the fitness of this model: CFI = .96, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05 (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Team identification was positively associated with perceived social support ($\beta = .68$, $p < .001$). In turn, perceived social support had a positive association with social life satisfaction ($\beta = .11$, $p = .008$) and perceived community trust ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$). Together, these direct paths yielded significant indirect effects of team identification on social life satisfaction ($\beta = .08$, $p = .01$) and perceived community trust ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$) through the mediation of perceived social support, thus confirming Hypothesis 1.

To test Hypothesis 2, we estimated a second structural equation model by (a) adding an interaction variable created as a product of perceived social support and perceived on-field performance to the first model, and (b) specifying this interaction variable as a predictor of social life satisfaction and perceived community trust respectively (Kenny & Judd, 1984). The analysis did not identify a significant association between the interaction variable and social life satisfaction ($B = -.02$, $p = .27$); however, controlling for the main effects of perceived social support and on-field performance as well as the aforementioned personal and social characteristics included as control variables, this variable had a significant negative association with perceived community trust ($B = -.05$, $p = .05$). These results partially supported Hypothesis 2 by indicating that the link between perceived social support and perceived community trust (but not social life satisfaction) was negatively moderated by perceived on-field performance.

Overall, the current findings confirm and extend the previous evidence indicating the relationship between team identification and enhanced social well-being (e.g., Inoue et al., 2015b; Wann et al., 2011a, 2011b) through the observation of older adults following a variety of sport teams. Importantly, consistent with self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) and social identity model of stress (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), our results suggest that perceived social support functions as a mediator and this mediating function is strengthened as older adults perceive their team as less successful. These findings add to a growing body of sport management research that seeks to understand the field’s linkage with public health (Berg et al., 2015; Inoue et al., 2015a; Sato et al., 2015) by providing insights into the processes linking team identification with older adults’ social well-being. Our findings also have implications for sport managers, as the promotion of consumer well-being has been identified as a key determinant of organizations’ competitive advantage (Inoue & Havard, 2014; Porter & Kramer, 2011).