Leveraging Sport-Based Social Identity to Facilitate Positive Cross-Group Interactions: A Mixed Methods Approach

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Background
Sport participation can significantly influence the social development of adolescents (Holt et al., 2008). Playing on a sport team or being a part of a sport club can provide a sense of belonging, and routine interactions with peers in the sport context can offer important social relations that extend beyond youth’s immediate family, which is especially important during adolescence. This process is captured in Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory (SIT), which posits that an individual’s self-concept is partly derived from their membership in social groups, and the emotional attachment ascribed to these memberships. Social identity is comprised of the perceived cognitive importance of group membership (i.e., cognitive centrality), the positive feeling associated with group membership (i.e., ingroup affect), and the strength of associations with other group members (i.e., ingroup ties) (Cameron, 2004).

Sport provides an especially intriguing context to study SIT, particularly among adolescents. Youth sport teams provide powerful social settings that influence multiplex relations between youth, parents, and broader communities. When strategically managed to promote cross-group relations, sport provides a useful context for facilitating positive interactions among individuals from different cultural, racial/ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). However, sport is not always organized and managed in this way, and in some instances can actually intensity, rather than alleviate, perceived boundaries between social groups (Nichols et al., 2012). Indeed, previous research has highlighted how youth sport clubs and teams can serve as vehicles for social exclusion by restricting membership among certain social groups, either covertly or overtly (Collins, 2014). Consequently, youth participating in these programs may be less likely to develop social identities around ideals of diversity and inclusion.

Purpose
Although SIT has become an increasingly popular framework for sport scholars, there remains a need to understand how youth sport programs influence the type of social identities developed by adolescents. In particular, there is a pressing need to understand if/how sport programs are unique in influencing cross-group relations, and how sport may be more strategically managed to promote positive cross-group relations as an intentional outcome. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze the social identities developed in a sport-based youth development program that promotes cross-group relations as an intentional outcome. The analysis focuses on the development of social identity in this context, and the association with key adolescent traits such as personal values, values diversity, and social conscience. In addition, we assess if/how perceived resources, support, and social connections differ between the youth sport setting and other key youth contexts (i.e., community, school). The results provide informed recommendations for how the management and organization of youth sport may be more effectively leveraged to promote social identities rooted in inclusion and respect for diversity.

Methods
Mixed methods were utilized to generate data from participants in a running-based youth development program in a large metropolitan city in the midwestern United States. The program was introduced as a pilot in 2016 to promote positive cross-group relations among youth from different communities in the city. Of the 15 students involved in this pilot, 12 participated in focus groups in March 2017 to discuss their experiences. The focus group guide was developed around key elements of social identity, cross-group relations, and the perceived resources, support, and social connections in the program context vs. other key contexts (i.e., community, school), and data was coded using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In addition to the qualitative data, quantitative data will be collected through surveys distributed at the beginning and
end of the 2017-2018 program year. Data collection for the beginning of the program was completed during the last week of October 2017, and data collection for the end of the program is scheduled for May 2018. Surveys will assess social identity (Cameron, 2004) and social conscience, personal values, values diversity, and conduct morality (Lerner et al., 2005). In addition, measures from the municipal education departments’ annual evaluation were adapted to compare the perceived resources, support, and social connectedness between the program, school, and community settings. Tests for mean differences (t-tests), analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multiple regression will be utilized to analyze this data.

Results
Qualitative data indicated respondents built a strong social identity to the program. For example, Jason alluded to cognitive centrality, indicating, “it’s an actual mini community…it’s more open.” Similarly, respondents articulated their ingroup affect, with Anna indicating, “it’s kind of cool to see a community like that, and knowing that you guys are running for the same thing.” Finally, participants described ingroup ties, with Alex stating, “we weren’t just forced into the situation, so we go know each other first and then we became friends.” Importantly, data indicated part of this shared social identity was an appreciation for diversity, with Anthony stating, “[the program] exposed me to different people and I just really like that.” Similarly, Rebecca indicated, “I feel like [the program] does help build relations with people you don’t know and you don’t ever necessarily talk to.

For the survey data, t-tests and ANOVA’s will be utilized to compare changes in key variables from the beginning to the end of the program year, focusing specifically on social identity, social conscience, personal values, values diversity, and conduct morality. In addition, perceptions of the program setting will be compared to perceptions of community and school settings. Finally, multiple regression analysis will focus on the association between social identities built around the program and respondents’ cross-group perceptions.

Conclusions
Preliminary qualitative results indicate participants developed a strong social identity around the program. Importantly, this social identity included an appreciation for diversity that was not always common in other aspects of youth’s lives. The surveys will build upon these preliminary findings by analyzing data from the first program cohort (n= approx. 150) to understand how these attitudes change over time. Results will provide insight into how social identities are formed in sport programs, and how these social identities might differ from those developed in other contexts. In addition, effective strategies for strategically leveraging sport-based identity formation to promote ideals of diversity and inclusion will also be discussed.