Integrating the Identity Construct in Sport Management: The Multilayer Identity Development System (MIDS) Model

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As a construct in organizational sciences, identity has been professed to be “linked to nearly everything: mergers, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship and emotions to politics, participation and project teams” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 5). Therefore, it is no surprise to find the identity construct attracting a significant amount of scholarly interest among sport management researchers. The construct of identity in sport management has been conceptualized and empirically assessed in a number of domains (e.g., athlete, participant, team, and racial, to name just a few).

Although sport management identity researchers have produced many relevant insights, and have contributed important propositions and predictions as to how identity “works” in sport, we contend that this knowledge has evolved in a very fragmented manner. Indeed, our review of the identity literature in sport management indicates that scholars have studied various aspects of identity and utilized several identity theories to frame their research questions. Although progress has been made studying this important construct in sport, we contend that a great deal of confusion remains as to how to best define, measure, and develop identities in sport organizations. Thus, the primary aim of this study is to mitigate this confusion by advancing a conceptual integration of the identity scholarship in sport management with that from several disciplines of psychology (e.g., developmental, cross-cultural, social, personality, organizational) that have also studied this important construct.

To advance an integrative model of identity, we first identify and outline several key identity definitions used in sport management disciplines. Then, utilizing recent theoretical advancements of personality psychologists (McAdams & Olson, 2010) and an ecologically centered system approach, we integrate identity science from sport management into an integrative multilayer model of the identity development process in sport, the MIDS model. Informed by Haidt’s (2012) definition of moral systems, we define the identity development system as interconnected collective and individual level sets of values, goals, norms, practices, roles, institutions, collective and relational identities, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to shape personal identity.

The MIDS advances a typology for the types of identities commonly used in organizational science (collective, relational, & personal; Barker-Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2016) and incorporates multiple identity theories that have grounded a majority of the sport management literature (social identity theory, critical theory, identity theory). We also integrate two complementary theories that have provided substantial insights into personal identity development from developmental psychology (Erikson, 1959; ego identity theory) and personality psychology (McAdams, 1994; narrative identity). Finally, informed by studies of identity in sport management, we advance propositions as to the intersectionality across layers of the ecological system that serves to shape personality traits and personal identity.

We hope to assist identity scholars to better locate the significance of their research within a reconciled identity literature, by bridging divisions among identity scholars while also encouraging the development of a more unified body of knowledge. Our comprehensive approach that includes various theoretical and epistemological approaches also serves a critical purpose in explaining the functions and developmental processes of identity.