We Are One: The Role Of Group Identity And Self-Sacrificial Leaders On The Generation Of Social Capital Within Youth Sport Programs

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Approximately seventy-five percent of American families have at least one child involved with a youth sport organization during any given year. The incredible popularity of youth sport is, at least in part driven by the popular belief 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). This ethos has led to youth sport organizations becoming increasingly professionalized, leading many youth sport organizations to demand more intense commitments from families. This often comes at the expense of fun and social factors, known to encourage continued sport participation by youth (Scanlan, Carpenter, Simons, Schmidt and Keeler, 1993), and putting more emphasis on the individual experience within the organization, and their role within the organization, rather than the collective community experience.

To gain a stronger understanding of this issue, we examined youth sport organizations as multigenerational, multi-stakeholder civic organizations. This research aims to provide better insight into the factors that determine if, and to what extent, youth sport organizations are able to become communities that provide inclusive social capital to all members. In doing so, the authors explore the relationship between team (group) identification and role identification. This is therefore the first empirical test of the theoretical work of Lock and Heere (2017) that proposed that team identification, driven by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and role identification, driven by identity theory, are unique but interdependent constructs. In addition, the authors examine how team identification and perceptions of self-sacrificial leadership influence the ability of a youth sport organization to generate, maintain and distribute social capital to its members. Finally, the authors examine the relationship between role identification itself and social capital.

This quantitative study used a cross-sectional descriptive design, and collected data from more than 500 individuals involved with youth sport organizations as athletes, coaches, parents, and program administrators. These individuals represented nineteen different sports, and a multitude of different recreational and elite sport programs. Using structural equation modeling, the authors proposed and supported a model in which role identification was instrumental in the development of team identification. Furthermore, this model demonstrated that self-sacrificial leadership and level of team identification had a significant impact on the ability of youth sport organizations to generate social capital for their members. Finally, this model showed that role identification does not have a positive impact on the creation of social capital, and in fact may potentially be detrimental to the development of social capital within the youth sport organization.

The authors suggest that the primary implications of this study are that while it is possible for youth sport organizations to deliver positive social benefits, it is necessary to foster certain organizational attributes such as self-sacrificial leaders and strong group identification, and temper the existence of strong role identities. In addition, the authors suggest that future research should examine how doing so may influence member retention for youth sport organizations and encourage lifetime participation in sport.