

IDENTITY AND INTERACTION CONFLICT: A POSITIVELY DEVIANT CASE STUDY

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Abstract

According to social identity theory, individuals continuously compare themselves to similar others for the purpose of maintaining status and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1987). As such, individuals within an organisation may classify themselves based on a variety of social categories; including organisational or departmental attributes. The desire to obtain status within these categories creates social hierarchies within groups (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001). Furthermore, conflict or tension amongst individuals can result from the negotiation of status in a group or organisation (Bendersky & Hays, 2011). This may be particularly relevant in regional sport organisations where in-and out-groups exist based on sub-group formation (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Thus, understanding how paid staff and non-paid volunteer board members identify themselves within their organisation may enhance theory regarding the presence of conflict in workgroups. The purpose of this paper was to examine how social identity influences status and compatibility conflict in regional sport commissions within one state in the United States. To serve this purpose, two research questions were posited:

R1: Do sub-group identities exist within regional sport commissions?

R2: Does sub-group identity influence the development of status and compatibility conflict?

Recent research has focused on examining group dynamics within the non-profit sport context by investigating conflict between volunteer board members in particular (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010; Kerwin & Doherty, in press). However, the acknowledgment of the complexity associated with interaction conflict (Bendersky & Hays, 2011; Bendersky et al., 2010) and the potential of sub-group formation within regional sport organisations (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007) may suggest that continued investigation into factors influencing the development of conflict is warranted.

A multi-method (Creswell & Clark, 2007) approach was taken to conduct this research. Phase one included a

preliminary analysis of the entire population of 22 regional sport commissions in one south-east state in the United States. Twelve executive directors of the 22 sport commissions and 18 additional support staff and board members within those 22 sport commissions consented to participate in the study. In total, 30 out of 154 individuals responded to an online questionnaire for a response rate of 19.48%. The questionnaire contained items relating to the presence of a sport commission identity and interpersonal conflict (i.e., status and compatibility), where each item was rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell & Clark, 2007) was used where the quantitative results provided the benchmark for further analysis in the qualitative portion of phase two. As such, descriptive statistics were run to gain an understanding of the level of sport commission identity and interpersonal conflict in the sample of sport commissions. The results indicate that collective/sport commission identification was relatively high ($M = 6.06$, $SD = .77$) and status ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.32$) and compatibility ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.24$) were relatively low to moderate.

In phase two, a positively deviant (see Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) sport commission was chosen for further qualitative examination. The selection of this commission was based on a relatively high collective/commission identity score ($M = 6.78$) in phase one. The selected regional sport commission operates with 25 board and executive committee members and four (4) paid staff. All 29 individuals were invited to participate in the interview portion of this study. In total, 11 individuals agreed to be interviewed (four staff and eight board members).

The interview guide was semi-structured in nature (Patton, 2002). This process allowed for consistency among participants, but also gave the individuals freedom to tell stories that elaborated on and justified their opinions; an opportunity that a number of participants took advantage of. Further, four onsite observations at board meetings and events hosted by the sport commission were conducted by the researcher. The observations were completed post-interview collection and were used to identify sub-group formation as well as any disagreement that may have existed within the sport commission. Analysis of the data was consistent with the constant comparative method described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data were categorised into three main themes associated with: a) the presence of collective identity, b) the formation of sub-groups and the influence of sub-groups on conflict, and c) the importance of leaders in shaping collective identity in a sport commission. The contribution of these findings to current literature and practice will be discussed in detail. Additionally, specific implications for both sport researchers and sport managers will be posited.

References:

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