Examining the Influence of Social Network Ties on Intra-Team Conflict and Cohesion in Sport

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Due to the complexity and interdependence of organizational life, conflict is an inevitable occurrence in sport organizations and teams (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in using network analysis to understand social structures, and their influence on organizational behavior and performance, including in teams (Scott & Davis, 2007). Previous research found that social network ties may influence team effectiveness (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004) and team viability (Balkundi, Barsness, & Michael, 2009). However, little is known about the effect of social network ties on team conflict and cohesion, particularly within sport teams. The aim of this research is to explore how social network ties, in particular the expressive ties, may influence a sport team’s conflict and cohesion.

Social network analysis in organization research seeks to understand the influence of social structures on organizational behavior (Scott & Davis, 2007). Social structures can be represented as networks, which consist of sets of nodes and ties depicting their interconnectedness (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). One major category of social network ties in teams is expressive ties (Ibarra, 1993). Expressive ties capture the affective bases of interpersonal relationships where network members provide social support to one another (Balkundi et al., 2009). Although previous studies have examined how social networks impact inter-team/group conflict (Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998; Takács, 2001), less is known about the influence of social network ties on intra-team conflict and cohesion. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring how expressive ties may affect intra-team conflict and cohesion in sport.

The focal case of this study is a student basketball team named “Power” (anonymous) of a public university in the US. Power is chosen because it is a demographically homogeneous team whose members share similar ethnicity, race, and cultural background. By controlling these demographic and social category attributes, researchers can better examine how other drivers, in particular, social network ties may influence team conflict and cohesion. Surveys were issued to help evaluate team members’ perceptions of team conflict and cohesion and to picture the intra-team social network diagrams using UCINET. Measurement on team conflict is adapted from Jehn’s (1995) intragroup conflict scale. Team cohesion is measured by three items adapted from Jehn and Mannix’s (2001) team cohesion scale. Measurement on expressive ties is adapted from Oh et al.’s (2004) scale of informal socializing ties.

Results show that when expressive ties lead to a more fragmented network with the formation of small cliques within the sport team, such ties may cause the team to have more task conflict, more relationship conflict, and less team cohesion. On the other hand, when expressive ties lead to a more integrated network without the formation of small cliques within the sport team, such ties may help the team to have less task conflict, less relationship conflict, and more team cohesion. In addition, results reveal that an individual’s perception of team conflict may be influenced by his/her location within the network. The people who are within the same clique are more likely to have a similar attitude on team conflict.