The Organizational Identification and Well-being Framework: Theorizing the Contribution of Sport Organizations in Times of Crisis

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A growing body of literature has explored the influence of sport services on health and well-being (Inoue et al., 2020). Researchers have developed knowledge regarding how the services offered by competitive sport teams (Doyle et al., 2016; Wann, 2006), community sport clubs (Misener, 2020), or sport-for-development organizations (Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2019), may influence well-being. However, this literature lacks an overarching theoretical perspective on how sport organizations may contribute to well-being when a crisis occurs. As shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, crises may cause disruption to the operation of events, competitions, and programs, limiting access to sport services. Consequently, a framework is required to offer insights into underlying social and psychological mechanisms that can be activated by sport organizations, even in the absence of normal delivery.

The purpose of this presentation is to shed light on the social psychological processes that determine how a sport organization may enhance well-being in times of crisis. Our primary contribution is the Organizational Identification and Well-being (OIW) Framework, which we develop based on the social identity approach (SIA; Abrams & Hogg, 1990) and its applications to leadership (Haslam et al., 2010) and health and well-being (Jetten et al., 2017). The central tenet of the SIA is that group membership influences individuals’ psychological and behavioral responses to significant social events (e.g., crises), and this influence increases as people develop shared identification with other in-group members (Reicher & Drury, 2020). This is because, when people identify with a group, they define themselves as interchangeable on some shared characteristic (e.g., supporting the same team), which drives them to internalize the group’s collective norms and collaborate with other members to cope with a crisis (Drury et al., 2019).

Building on this tenet, we argue that sport organizations can contribute to well-being in crises to the extent that they foster shared organizational identification among current and potential group members (e.g., fans, residents, employees) to galvanize support towards relief efforts. This assertion leads to three theoretical propositions of the OIW Framework. First, during crises, a sport organization’s leaders may strengthen identification among members by temporarily redefining the inclusiveness of its in-group boundaries. Second, in redefining in-group boundaries, leaders may need to communicate shared identity content (i.e., shared understanding of what ‘us’ means; Slater et al., 2019) accentuating common experiences and needs among members. Third, a set of psychological resources—namely, the SPRInT (Social support, Purpose and meaning, Relatedness, In-group norms, and Trust) pathways—mediate the effect of identification on member well-being.

The OIW Framework extends sport management research examining more conventional organizational-level antecedents (e.g., prestige, fit) of organizational identification (e.g., Swanson & Kent, 2015) by considering the leadership functions to foster identification. It also advances team identification research by exploring how sport organizations can be led to enable participants and members to achieve well-being outcomes. Future research ideas include content-analyzing statements published by sport organizations after a crisis to understand how leaders construct their messages to redefine in-group boundaries, or accentuate newly shared goals in response to the crisis.