Me, Then We: The Evolution of Group Identification in an NCAA Division II Athletic Program

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The incredible popularity of sport in America is driven by the popular belief that participation in sport has a host of positive benefits, including the ability to generate social capital, spur occupational success and encourage greater levels of civic engagement (Coalter, 2007). Be that as it may, the increasingly competitive landscape of sport in America has led to an emphasis on the individual experience within the organization, and their role within the organization (me), rather than the collective community experience (we). While it has been determined that these two types of experiences, which represent role identity and group identity, are distinctly different (Lock & Heere, 2017), yet inextricably linked (Collins, 2018), there is no literature describing the process by which strong role identity leads to strong group identity.

To gain a stronger understanding of this issue, we examined an NCAA Division II athletic department as multi-stakeholder civic organization. This research aims to provide better insight into the factors that determine the evolution of an individual’s sense of identity from one that is focused on their particular role within the organization (role identity) to one that is centered on membership within the group (group identity). In this study, the authors explore the relationship between team (group) identification and role identification. The theoretical work of Lock and Heere (2017) proposed that group identification is driven by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and role identification, driven by identity theory, are unique but interdependent constructs. The first empirical test of Lock and Heere’s (2017) theoretical work demonstrated that while these two concepts are in fact unique, they are also interdependent, in that a strong sense of role identity amongst individuals is necessary to generate a strong sense of group identity (Collins, 2018).

This qualitative study uses a phenomenological approach to gain better insight into the process by which role identity evolves into group identity. The data will be collected from both observations and semi-structured, inductive interviews conducted across the athletic department of a small NCAA Division II college. Observations will be made across the college’s 19 varsity sport programs, in both on and off the field settings. In addition, interviews will be conducted with a variety of stakeholders within the athletic department, including athletes, coaches and administrators. While this study is currently in the data collection phase, it is expected that data collection will be completed before the end of the calendar year, with analysis of the data expected to be completed in early 2021.

The authors suggest that the results of this study will help sport organizations better understand how to create an environment in which the sense of “we” represented by group identity is able to develop of the sense of “me” which is inherent in individuals with a strong sense of role identity. By gaining insight into the conditions in which a strong sense of “we” is able to be facilitated, the authors believe that they can provide meaningful insight into how to retain all stakeholders within the sport organization.