



Subgroups and cliques in sport: A longitudinal case study of a rugby union team



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ABSTRACT

Although subgroups and cliques are anecdotally referenced as salient factors in sport organizations, they have only recently received attention within sport psychology literature. This is surprising given the potential influence of subgroup behavior on group-related processes and team functioning. The present study employed a longitudinal, repeated interview case study design to examine competitive rugby players' awareness of subgroups and cliques, in addition to perceptions of their development, influence, and management over the course of a season. Findings indicated that players were not only able to articulate the nature of subgroups and cliques, but also to identify members of the various subunits. Both subgroup and clique membership and behavior were found to be fluid, develop over time, and be shaped by several organizational factors. Recommendations for the management of subgroups and cliques are provided, and the results are discussed in line with theoretical perspectives and practical applications.

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The social environments that characterize sport organizations have recently received research attention in the sport setting (see, for review, Martin, Eys, & Spink, 2017). This proliferation is perhaps not surprising given that most sports involve groups, whether in competition or during training. Indeed, even in individual sports, athletes typically practice and compete alongside teammates (e.g., Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012) and require a team of support staff, coaches, managers, and administrators to facilitate both grassroots participation and elite success (Wagstaff & Larner, 2015).

A rich body of research exists that has examined individual perceptions of dyadic (e.g., coach-athlete, Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; athlete-athlete, Weiss & Smith, 1999), group (e.g., team cohesion, Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; collective efficacy, Short, Sullivan, & Feltz, 2005), and organizational (e.g., organizational functioning, Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012a,b) relations. Yet, substantially less attention has been dedicated to the “groups within the group,” or as they are more commonly referred to in sport, the subgroup or the clique. In broad terms, these concepts can be characterized as tightly knit subgroups of individuals that contain reciprocating relationships (e.g., Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack,

Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000). In addition, Carton and Cummings (2012) advanced two criteria required for the classification of a subgroup or clique. First, members must belong to the same total group where membership and task objectives are recognized. Second, members must have a level of interdependence that is unique to that of the total group (e.g., interactions between subgroup members differ from those of other group members). Clearly, subgroups and cliques are observable entities within a total group (e.g., team or organization), and in addition to criteria established for their classification, attempts have been made to explore their implications for the individuals and teams involved, as well as the factors that make them more or less likely to emerge.

In sport, the presence of subgroups and cliques has historically been associated with issues of exclusivity, ostracism, conflict, lack of cohesion, stress, and decreased probability of success (e.g., Eitzen, 1973; Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). In fact, practitioners have generally recommended the avoidance or hindrance of the development of subgroups and cliques (e.g., Ryska, Yin, Cooley, & Ginn, 1999; Yukelson, 1997). Despite such associations, research from various disciplines indicates subgroup entities to be complex, and suggests that managing them requires more thought than solely investing effort to avoid or disband them (e.g., Cronin, Bezrukova, Weingart, & Tinsley, 2011). Importantly, while subgroup membership can result in antisocial or delinquent behaviors (e.g., Bagwell, Coie, Terry, &

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Lochman, 2000; Verkooijen, deVries, & Nielson, 2007), it can also lead to improved self-esteem, prosocial behaviors, and attitudes (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1995; Tarrant, MacKenzie, & Hewitt, 2006), and its presence can even facilitate group functioning (e.g., Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003). Accordingly, both positive and negative group processes can originate from their emergence, yet considering the debilitating portrayal of subgroups in sport, targeted investigations are required to more accurately understand their relative influence in this context.

In an attempt to explore the nature of subgroups and cliques in sport, Martin, Wilson, Evans, and Spink (2015) interviewed a group of Canadian intercollegiate athletes. Notably, athletes believed cliques to be both unavoidable and variable over time, and felt their emergence to be influenced by characteristics such as team cohorts, skill level, status, and individual similarities. In addition, athletes described the potential for ideal subgroups to be inclusive, whereby subgroup members interacted positively and openly with other team members. Conversely, problematic subgroups demonstrating exclusionary behaviors resulted in debilitating outcomes at both the individual (e.g., desire to dropout) and team (e.g., decreased performance) levels. In light of their findings, Martin et al. defined subgroups as being, “an inevitable, variable, and identifiable sub-grouping of athletes within a team who exhibit particularly close task and/or social bonds” (p. 90). Moreover, they added that their utility varies, and that their presence or absence is likely of less importance than the actual behaviors exhibited by the subgroup members.

Although Martin et al.'s (2015) study afforded a preliminary understanding of subgroups from the perspective of competitive athletes, it provided the viewpoint from only one part of a sport organization – the athletes. As such, Martin, Evans, and Spink (2016) sought to further investigate their presence based on the perceptions of coaches. Using tools inherent in grounded theory and consensual qualitative research, Martin et al. (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 elite level coaches who were expected to draw on personal experiences, and were asked to discuss elements or situations that would render the development of subgroups or cliques more or less likely. Responses revealed that coaches differentiated between the terms subgroup and clique, largely portraying subgroups as being facilitative and cliques as representing debilitating or problematic entities. Interestingly, coaches reflected on the extensive efforts taken to maintain awareness of team members' relationships and groupings, with the intention of obtaining an insight to the team's social environment. Considering that subgroups were perceived as inevitable, coaches felt a need to manage their teams either to promote potential benefits (e.g., social support, mentoring) or to limit negative outcomes from cliques (e.g., antisocial behavior, athlete isolation). Consequently, coaches described using direct measures to identify and manage subgroups with the intention of avoiding the emergence of cliques.

As a general summary, there is relative tautology between the sport literature and the extant research pertaining to subgroups and cliques. Indeed, both facilitative and debilitating outcomes can emerge, yet these consequences appear to be less a function of their presence, and more to do with the behaviors exhibited by the subgroup members (e.g., Martin et al., 2015). Therefore, and given the ubiquity of subgroups in sport, the following research questions remain unanswered: (a) What might influence the emergence of facilitative subgroups or debilitating cliques?, (b) When and why might they be important (i.e., at what points of the season and why might they be seen as important)?, (c) What types of behaviors are exhibited by subgroup or clique members?, and (d) Is there a need for subgroup or clique management? Furthermore, the exploratory work of Martin and colleagues (Martin et al., 2015, 2016) involved

retrospective semi-structured interviews conducted at a single time-point. Hence, while the extant research has undoubtedly advanced scholarly understanding, further research is required to better elucidate performers' awareness of, responses to, and perspectives on the management of subgroups and cliques within a contextualized setting over a period of time. Considering the dynamic nature of groups (e.g., Carron & Brawley, 2000), and to support and extend previous retrospective interview studies, contextualized, longitudinal approaches are valuable for understanding how subgroup and clique dynamics emerge, change, and influence the team environment. Therefore, the present study used an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005), whereby repeated interviews were conducted with athletes from one team over the course of a season.

1. Method

1.1. Philosophical perspective and design

Our approach was generally guided by relativist ontology, and a subjective and constructivist epistemology. The rationale for this approach was to understand and interpret athletes' subjective perceptions of subgroups, along with the understanding that their perspectives are reflective of their individual social context and status within a team. More specifically, we understood player beliefs to be framed by their status as insiders, embodied competence, and their engagement (or not) in the habitus characterizing their social field. Along with this orientation was our general goal, which was to further our understanding of subgroups in sport. This research adopted methodological and analytic processes that are common to qualitative research traditions (i.e., thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006; qualitative guidelines, Patton, 2001; content analysis, Smith & Sparkes, 2012).

The present study adopted an instrumental case study design, which is used in qualitative research to provide an in-depth understanding about a phenomenon, bound within a period of time and context (cf. Caron, Bloom, & Bennie, 2015). Stake (2005) noted that instrumental case studies are primarily focused on the *phenomena* being studied, with information about the *case* being a secondary focus. Following Stake's recommendations, information about the context (i.e., the case) is provided in the next section to contextualize the research setting and participants' insights and perceptions of subgroups and cliques (i.e., the phenomenon).

1.2. Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of 22 UK University Athletic Unions were emailed with an invitation to volunteer their organization to partake in the study. Of this prospective sample, eight CEOs responded, with four volunteering their organization's involvement. The participating organization was selected due to its balance of new and existing team members at the beginning of the season, the high profile of the sport at the Institution, and the high level of competition the team operated at. Within the selected organization, roughly a third of participants were in their first (i.e., Freshman), second (i.e., Sophomore), and third (i.e., Senior) years, respectively. Following the provision of initial gatekeeping access by the CEO, all members selected for the Men's 1st XV (also referred to as the “elite”) squad ($N = 22$) were approached at the start-of-season trials and were invited to participate. Fifteen players ($M_{age} = 19.77$; $SD = 1.36$) agreed to participate at the initial stage of the interview process; however, two players completed only the first interview due to severe illness (discontinuation of studies) and de-selection (discontinuation of membership in the 1st XV squad), and were

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