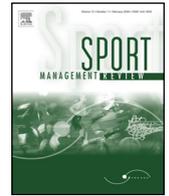




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# Conceptualizing employee identification with sport organizations: Sport Employee Identification (SEI)

Brent D. Oja<sup>a</sup>, Jordan R. Bass<sup>a,\*</sup>, Brian S. Gordon<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Kansas, United States<sup>b</sup> University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The concepts of organizational identification and team identification have been researched heavily over the last half-century. However, scholars have failed to specifically examine organizational identification among sport employees. We develop a theoretical framework of organizational identification of sport employees, coined Sport Employee Identification (SEI). We conceptualize SEI as an amalgamation of organizational identification and team identification in which sport employees are both external (fans) and internal (employee) members of the sport organization. The development of the SEI model is based on related theory and further ethnographic data are collected over a four-month period within an intercollegiate athletics fundraising department. Implications for scholars and practitioners and avenues for future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Within the general field of organizational behavior, scholars have recognized the importance of understanding the motivations of middle management employees (Dopson & Stewart, 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Porter, 1961; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). However, little research has focused on the viability, impact, and general existence of middle management within sport organizations. The fact that is potentially troubling is that middle management employees greatly outnumber coaches and administrators. Yet, researchers have generally emphasized the coaching profession, athletes, and the role of collegiate athletic directors (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001; Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996; Turner & Chelladurai, 2005; Wells & Peachey, 2011) in sport organizational behavior research. Recently, Kerwin and Doherty (2012) used middle management as the sample population to examine conflict-triggering processes in intercollegiate athletics departments in Canada but little research has specifically examined this population within athletics organizations.

Organizational identification (OID) researchers in general, and in sport specifically, have also failed to specifically examine the middle management context. Riketta (2005) argued for more specialized examinations of OID in groups of employees with similar characteristics and job duties (e.g., middle management). Restated, researchers have worked extensively to develop global OID measures while largely ignoring the intricacies that exist within each professional setting

\* Corresponding author at: Robinson Center 157, 1301 Sunnyside Avenue, Lawrence, KS 66045, United States. Tel.: +1 785 864 6831.  
E-mail address: [jrbass@ku.edu](mailto:jrbass@ku.edu) (J.R. Bass).

that influence levels of identification. Thus, our aim in this paper is to propose and preliminarily examine a model of organizational identification, coined *Sport Employee Identification (SEI)*, for personnel in middle management positions (those at a level below top management but above the operating core defined by Kent & Chelladurai, 2001). Sport Employee Identification is defined as the psychological bond arising from both organizational and team identification between sport employees and the parent organization in which they are employed. For the purposes of this study, the parent organization is a broad term that is inclusive of the respective athletics teams or departments associated with the organization.

This study provides an important contribution to the sport management literature for several reasons. First, the foundation of this study is the development of a new theory that is distinct to the realm of sport organizational behavior. Over the years, numerous scholars have indicated the need for research endeavors that focus on building sport-specific theory (Chalip, 2006; Costa, 2005; Doherty, 2013; Fink, 2013). Specifically, we argue that this work answers that call by “making an investment” (Doherty, 2013) in not only theory development but also in the field of sport management. The theoretical development of SEI has the potential to make a contribution to sport management research, practice, and education. A thorough understanding of SEI may help sport practitioners manage their staff more effectively, can assist sport organizations in better understanding the benefits and drawbacks of hiring “fans,” and will aid sport management educators in positioning their students for success in the sport industry.

Second, it aids in the maturation of the field of sport management by illustrating an aspect of the management of sport that may indeed be unique from the original discipline. As Chalip (2006) indicated, “if we are to take seriously the possibility that sport management has distinctive elements, then we need to identify what those elements are and what differences they make” (p. 2). We argue the derivation of the concept of SEI is such an element in that it explains how sport employees may be different from the workforce in other industry sectors. Thus, this argument has considerable implications for how sport employees may be managed differently than non-sport employees and how this might affect the sporting enterprise as a whole (both positively and negatively).

Finally, based on the results of an organizational ethnography, we discovered a number of new antecedents that may influence the degree to which sport employees identify with the organization for which they work. The unearthing of new variables that impact Sport Employee Identification will have considerable implications for research and practice alike. From a practical standpoint, organizational identification has been positively linked to constructs such as organizational citizenship behaviors and an increase in employee commitment to the organization (Carmeli, Gilat, & Waldman, 2007; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Similarly, it is reasonable to conclude that higher levels of SEI will lead to a decrease in turnover intentions. This is based on Heere and James' (2007) finding that alignment of similar identifications could lead to loyal fan bases despite adverse outcomes, which for the case of fans could be multiple losses. As for athletics organization employees, it is surmised that if they highly identify with their organization, they will likely stay with the organization, even in the presence of poor circumstances.

## 2. Defining middle management in sport

Previous empirical studies concerning the organizational behavior of athletics departments and programs provide some level of understanding as to how they are organized. Kent and Chelladurai (2001) proposed three levels of athletics department/program administration and stated athletics department success, “hinges on the type and quality of interactions among the three levels in the (athletic department) hierarchy – the athletic director at the top, the associate and/or assistant athletic directors in the middle, and their subordinates at the third-tier” (p. 139). Additionally, the authors stated the operating core is below the third level employees and is composed of, “the coaches, their staff, and athletes” (Kent & Chelladurai, 2001, p. 139). Finally, Kent and Chelladurai (2001) proposed that the top tier (athletic directors) “link(s) the athletic core to the larger institutional system, or the strategic apex, and articulate with it” (p. 139). Based on the Kent and Chelladurai (2001) description of tier responsibilities, we define middle management as those in the above described middle and third tiers. In intercollegiate athletics departments, all employees who are not members of the operating core (players, coaches, staff) or top tier managers (head athletic directors) fall under the middle management characterization. Some examples of middle management members include: Director of Marketing, Ticket Sales Associate, Director of Equipment Operations, Community Relations Director, and Compliance Officer. Applying this classification to professional sport, we define middle management as those who are not coaches, players, or what we generally consider front office executives (i.e., general managers, directors of player personnel, and owners).

In the following pages, a theoretical model of SEI is proposed based on the review of related literature. Three antecedent categories for SEI are posited: individual antecedents, organizational antecedents, and leadership antecedents (see Fig. 1). Additionally, ethnographic data are utilized to further develop the SEI construct. Finally, implications, limitations, and areas for future research are presented. To begin, we argue for creating a sport-specific OID measure (SEI) that combines components of both OID and team identification.

## 3. Team and organizational identification

We conceptualize SEI as an amalgamation of two heavily researched aspects of identification – team and organizational – both of which have been derived from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). Team identification refers to an individual's notions of belonging to a group that supports a team or a psychological bond with a sports team (Funk & James, 2001). It

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