Social identity and prosocial and antisocial behavior in youth sport

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine (a) the effects of social identity on prosocial and antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents, and (b) whether any effects of social identity on prosocial and antisocial behavior were mediated by cohesion.
Design: Prospective, observational.
Methods: Male and female youth–sport participants ($N = 329$; $M_{age} = 15.88$ years) completed questionnaires at the beginning, middle and end of the season assessing three dimensions of social identity (cognitive centrality, ingroup ties, ingroup affect), cohesion (task, social) and prosocial and antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents.
Results: With the exception of cognitive centrality (which was therefore not analyzed further), all measures of study variables proved reliable. Structural equation modeling indicated the following: Ingroup affect had a positive effect on prosocial teammate behavior, Task cohesion mediated a positive effect of ingroup ties on prosocial teammate behavior and a negative effect of ingroup ties and ingroup affect on antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. Social cohesion mediated a positive effect of ingroup ties on antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. Prosocial opponent behavior was not predicted by any dimension of social identity.
Conclusion: The findings highlight that social identity may play a salient role in regulating prosocial and antisocial behavior in youth sport, and changes in cohesion may partially explain these effects.

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Sport teams represent a rich context to investigate the role of peer groups on the social development of adolescents (Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo, 2008). Recent surveys indicate that approximately 80% of youth (12–17 years) report participation in a team sport (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2012). Membership in sport teams fulfills a fundamental human need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During adolescence, there is an increased need for interaction and intimacy with peers as an adolescent's social realm expands beyond the family to peer groups (Wagner, 1996). However, despite the importance of peers in sport, minimal research has examined how peers shape and support adolescents' social development within the sport context (Smith, 2007). In particular, minimal research has been devoted to understanding how the identities that youth form through their membership on sport teams – their social identities – may influence their social development. The identities youth form around membership on sport

teams comprise an important component of a youth's self-concept and are critical in establishing moral values in youth sport (e.g., Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007; Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2008).

Existing research on social identity is predominantly based upon Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT). The central premise of SIT is that people define and evaluate themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 2001). Social identity has been defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). As highlighted within this formal definition, social identity is conceptualized as having three key dimensions: (1) *cognitive centrality* (importance of being a group member); (2) *ingroup affect* (positive feelings associated with group membership); and (3) *ingroup ties* (perceptions of similarity, bonding, and belongingness with other group members) (Cameron, 2004).

Research in the laboratory and field over the past 50 years suggests social identity has important consequences for behavior (e.g., Hornstein, 1976; Nezlek & Smith, 2005; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, &

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Flament, 1971). Early laboratory work by Tajfel et al. (1971) demonstrated that simply categorizing participants into different groups based upon a trivial criterion (e.g., coin flip) elicited a positive bias toward one's group. Consistent with Tajfel's findings, individuals who identify strongly with their group have been found to socially interact more positively with group members than non-group members (Nezlek & Smith, 2005), and display more prosocial or helping behavior toward group members and greater antisocial behavior toward non-group members (Hornstein, 1976).

Surprisingly, few studies have investigated social identity in sport (i.e., Murrell & Gaertner, 1992; Zucchermaglio, 2005). Murrell and Gaertner (1992) are credited as being the first to examine social identity in youth sport, when investigating the salience of common group or team identity on performance within four high school American football teams. Ninety-four high school football players (ranging from Grade 9 to 12, median age of 16) completed a survey that measured strength of identification with the team as a whole, as offensive versus defensive units, or as individual players. Results indicated that players on winning teams (as determined by season win-loss record) emphasized team unity significantly more than players on teams with losing records.

Zucchermaglio (2005) undertook a qualitative, ethnographic approach to investigate the rhetorical manipulation of social identities arising in the discourses of a professional soccer team. Interactions between team members were audio recorded after a victory, after a defeat, and in a pre-game situation. Zuccermaglio coded the conversations paying particular attention to the pronouns used within the conversations (e.g., I, we). Results revealed how the outcome of the match influenced how team members referenced team membership and specific sub-groups. For example, after a loss, team members were more likely to distance themselves from the team and identify specific sub-groups to account for the loss (e.g., forwards were responsible for the loss for not scoring goals), whereas post victory the group was considered as a whole and fewer differentiations were made regarding team membership. Thus, research to date has predominantly investigated social identity as a global construct, and focused on establishing conceptual and empirical links between social identity and performance. Researchers in sport have yet to: (a) empirically examine the social identity and social development relationship in sport and (b) examine the three dimensions of social identity in sport.

Given the importance of the social context to athletes' social development, it is possible that social identity may influence adolescents' prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport. While researchers have not yet directly investigated social identity and prosocial and antisocial behavior in youth sport, empirical support exists that suggests such investigation is warranted. Support can be drawn from several studies in sport examining the role of the social context on prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009, 2010; Kavussanu, 2006; Rutten et al., 2007, 2008, 2011). Prosocial behaviors have been defined as voluntary acts intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998) and antisocial behaviors as voluntary acts intended to harm or disadvantage another individual or group of individuals (Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Examples from sport are helping an injured opponent for prosocial behaviors and deliberately fouling an opponent for antisocial behaviors. Importantly, Kavussanu and Boardley (2009) recently showed team-sport athletes distinguish between prosocial and antisocial behaviors toward teammates and opponents.

Researchers have identified important links between environmental factors and prosocial and antisocial behavior (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009, 2010; Kavussanu, 2006; Rutten et al., 2007, 2008, 2011). Boardley and Kavussanu (2009) linked motivational

climate (i.e., goals emphasized in an achievement context; Ames, 1992), perceptions of coaches' character-building competency (i.e., coach's belief in his/her ability to influence athletes' personal development and positive attitudes toward sport; Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999), and prosocial and antisocial sport behavior in male and female athletes in the sports of field hockey and netball. In addition, Boardley and Kavussanu (2010) have also linked male soccer players' achievement goal orientations (i.e., the criteria an individual tends to use to judge his/her competence, Nicholls, 1989) and perceptions of the value of toughness (i.e., importance placed on dominating others to gain acceptance and social status; South & Wood, 2006) with antisocial behavior toward opponents and teammates. Also, Rutten and colleagues undertook a line of research investigating how the contextual characteristics in sport shape the prosocial and antisocial behaviors of young athletes (M_{age} range 14.0 [2008] − 15.3 [2011]) within and outside of the sport context (Rutten et al., 2007, 2008, 2011). Through these studies Rutten and colleagues found contextual factors such as sociomoral atmosphere (i.e., a set of collective norms regarding acceptable group member behaviors; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989), stage of moral reasoning about sport dilemmas, coach—athlete relationship quality, attitude toward fair play (athlete and coach), and relational support from the coach to be linked with antisocial and prosocial sport behaviors in adolescent male and female participants in sports including soccer, swimming, basketball, and taekwondo. Collectively, research in this area has highlighted the salient role of the youth−sport environment in providing a social context that potentially influences the prosocial and antisocial behavior of adolescent athletes.

Taken together, the extant literature on social identity outside of sport and that on prosocial and antisocial behavior in sport support examination of the relationships between these constructs in a youth−sport setting. The overarching purpose of this investigation was to examine whether the three dimensions of social identity (ingroup ties, cognitive centrality, ingroup affect) predict prosocial and antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents in youth sport. A priori hypotheses for the specific relationships were formulated based on theory and/or past research. A key tenet of SIT is that when identification with a group is salient, group members become less concerned with themselves and more concerned with the team and the team's success (Beauchamp & Dunlop, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Strongly identifying group members look to differentiate themselves from other groups and are motivated to demonstrate the superiority of their own group (Beauchamp & Dunlop, 2013). Drawing on theory and empirical work in social identity (Nezlek & Smith, 2005; Tajfel et al., 1971), two dimensions of social identity (ingroup ties: perceptions of connection, bonding, belonging in a group; cognitive centrality: importance of the group to the individual) were expected to positively predict prosocial behavior toward teammates and antisocial behavior toward opponents, and negatively predict antisocial behavior toward teammates and prosocial behavior toward opponents.

For two of the relationships of interest, hypotheses that contrasted with those for the two dimensions covered above were formulated for the remaining social identity dimension (i.e., ingroup affect). Importantly, Bandura's (1991) social-cognitive theory (SCT) of moral thought and action identifies how anticipation of resultant affect is thought to regulate an individual's prosocial and antisocial behavior. More specifically, individuals behave prosocially toward others in anticipation of positive emotional reactions such as pride, and harmful conduct is deterred when one anticipates undesirable feelings such as shame and guilt as a result of one's behavior. Based upon Bandura's (1991) theory, and work that has supported the role of emotion in regulating antisocial behavior in sport (e.g., Stanger, Kavussanu, Boardley, & Ring, 2012),