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RESEARCH NOTE

Ties That Bond: Youth Sport as a Vehicle for Social Identity and Positive Youth Development

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ABSTRACT

An emerging area of research has focused on understanding how the group dynamics of a sport team influence positive youth development (PYD). The identities that youth form through their membership in sport teams (i.e., social identities) have been found to influence teammate behavior and team performance. Yet, minimal work exists on social identity and PYD in youth sport. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between social identity and PYD in sport. **Method:** Youth engaged in recreational sport ($N = 219$; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.61$ years, $SD = 1.39$ years) completed measures of social identity and PYD in sport. The social identity measure assessed 3 dimensions including ingroup ties (IGT; perceptions of similarity, bonding, belongingness), cognitive centrality (importance of being a team member), and ingroup affect (IGA; feelings associated with group membership). A regression analysis was performed separately for 4 PYD outcomes (personal and social skills, goal setting, initiative, negative experiences) with the 3 dimensions of social identity entered as predictors. **Results:** Regression analyses revealed that IGT and IGA were positively associated with personal and social skills ($R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .29$). Further, IGT predicted initiative ($R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .16$), whereas IGA was positively associated with goal setting ($R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .17$) and negatively associated with negative experiences ($R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .08$). **Conclusion:** The findings extend previous research highlighting the benefits of social identity on teammate behavior and team performance and demonstrate how social identity may contribute to PYD through sport.

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Involvement in sport provides opportunities for youth to be physically active, learn motor skills, and develop psychosocially (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2016). In regards to the latter, sport provides a unique opportunity to promote personal growth and development. For example, sport promotes outcomes including increased social skills, improved academic performance, and the development of positive behaviors such as increased community volunteering and reduced rates of committing or recommitting crime (see Taylor, Davies, Wells, Gilbertson, & Tayleur, 2015). Yet, not all youth who participate in sport report a positive experience. Issues such as overtraining, bullying, and injuries may mean that not all athletes experience the same benefits (Meyer et al., 2015). Accordingly, questions remain as to *how* best to create a sport environment that fosters developmental benefits and experiences for youth (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). To address this paucity in knowledge, an emerging area of research has focused on understanding and enhancing youth development through sport, known as positive youth development

(PYD; Holt, 2008). PYD is a strength-based approach of adolescent development that focuses on building on adolescents' strengths to promote positive, successful, and healthy development (Lerner et al., 2005). Building on findings from existing PYD literature looking at involvement in other organized extracurricular activities (e.g., Fredericks & Eccles, 2008), researchers have begun to focus on how the social context of sport can facilitate PYD (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Holt, 2016); however, significant gaps in knowledge remain (Holt & Neely, 2011).

Conceptually, the PYD approach is grounded in relational developmental system theory (Lerner, 2002). A key tenet of the theory is that PYD occurs through mutual interactions between individuals and their social context. A limitation of the existing research on PYD in sport has been a predominant focus on interpersonal factors (e.g., enjoyment; MacDonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2011). Although greater consideration of the social factors that impact PYD in sport has been proposed (Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo,

2008), minimal work has explored how the group dynamics of a sport team environment influence PYD (Bruner, Eys, Wilson, & Côté, 2014). One emerging, important concept in group dynamics in youth sport is social identity, the identities youth form through their membership on sport teams.

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 illustrated by the definition, social identity is conceptualized as being multidimensional and including three factors: (a) ingroup ties (IGT), perceptions of similarity, bonding, and belongingness with other group members; (b) cognitive centrality (CC), the importance of being a group member; and (c) ingroup affect (IGA), the positivity of feelings associated with group membership (Cameron, 2004). Guided by this multidimensional conceptualization of social identity and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), researchers in sport have begun to examine the personal and collective outcomes that originate from identification with teams. For example, social identity has been found to be associated with increased self-worth, commitment, perceived effort, prosocial behavior toward teammates, and greater team cohesion (Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Martin, Balderson, Hawkins, Wilson, & Bruner, 2015).

Despite the observed personal and collective outcomes associated with social identity in youth sport, minimal research has focused on the role social identity may play in fostering PYD. The research that has been conducted in this area suggests links between social identity and cognitions and behaviors thought to be related to PYD outcomes. The lone published study (Bruner, Boardley, et al. 2014) indirectly examined social identity and PYD by investigating the link to moral behavior, considered an element of the developmental outcome of character in some PYD frameworks in sport (e.g., the 4 Cs; Côté, Bruner, Erickson, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2010). Bruner, Boardley, et al. found social identity to be associated with increased prosocial behavior toward teammates. Another recently presented study showed links between social identity and self-worth, commitment, and perceived effort (Martin et al., 2015). While these studies provide initial insight into the importance of social identity and positive outcomes in youth sport, no work has directly assessed the relationships between the dimensions of social identity and components of PYD in youth sport.

This relative absence of attention toward the social identity–PYD relationship in the extant literature is surprising given the importance of developing one’s

social identity during late childhood and adolescence (Erikson, 1968). During this time, the social realm expands beyond the family to include an increased need for interaction with peer groups, as youth both rely on and are heavily influenced by peers (Wagner, 1996). This reliance on peer membership is vital for the formation of identity and youth development (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). The sport team environment provides the requisite developmental context for such opportunities to socially bond, identify with peers, and engage in personal growth and development. Researchers in sport have recognized identity as a potential mechanism associated with youth development and have highlighted the need for more studies to investigate theoretical explanations for youth development through sport (Gould & Carson, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between social identity and PYD in youth sport.

Method

Participants

The sample included 219 youth engaged in recreational sport ($M_{\text{age}} = 11.61$ years, $SD = 1.39$ years, age range = 9–14 years) in Canada. Participants were mostly female (59%), Caucasian (88%), and drawn from multiple sports (soccer, $n = 115$; basketball, $n = 41$; hockey, $n = 21$; volleyball, $n = 17$; baseball, $n = 8$; miscellaneous, $n = 17$). We focused on recruiting from recreational sport teams rather than high-level competitive teams to be more inclusive and encompass a greater heterogeneity of skill levels. On average, youth had participated in their sport for 5.11 years ($SD = 2.57$ years).

Measures

Social identity

Social identity was assessed using a 12-item measure originally developed by Cameron (2004) and modified by Bruner, Boardley et al. (2014) for a sport context. The Social Identity Questionnaire for Sport evaluated the three dimensions of social identity (4 items each). Items were adapted to reflect the sport context. For example, the IGA item, “Generally, I feel good when I think about myself as a group member” was modified to, “Generally, I feel good when I think about myself as a team member.” Example items for the IGT and CC, respectively, were, “I have a lot in common with other members in this team,” and “In general, being a team member is an important part of my self-image.” The

items were answered using a Likert-type scale, anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). The reliability of the Social Identity subscales used in this study was assessed and found to be acceptable for IGT ($\alpha = .89$), IGA ($\alpha = .82$), and CC ($\alpha = .83$; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Further, the readability of the items was found to be age-appropriate (Flesh Kincaid = 7.5). Previous research using the same measure has demonstrated adequate factorial validity with a youth sample (Bruner, Eys, Evans, & Wilson, 2015).

Positive youth development

PYD is a broad umbrella term and was recently conceptualized in a sport setting as having several potential outcomes including personal development and life skills (i.e., skills that can be transferred to other contexts; Holt et al., 2017). The operationalization of PYD in the present study focused on personal developmental outcomes. Youths' positive and negative developmental experiences through sport team involvement were assessed using four dimensions within the Youth Experience Survey for Sport (YES-S; MacDonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2012). This shortened YES-S included 32 items to evaluate four dimensions: personal and social skills (14 items; e.g., "Learned that working together requires some compromising"), initiative (4 items; e.g., "Learned to push myself"), goal setting (4 items; e.g., "Learned to find ways to reach my goals"), and negative experiences (10 items; e.g., "Adult leaders in this activity were controlling and manipulative"). The items were answered using a Likert-type scale, anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 4 (*yes, definitely*). The reliability of the four PYD scales used in this study was assessed and found to be acceptable ($.75 \leq \alpha \leq .87$). Previous research has shown the YES-S to be an age-appropriate (Flesh Kincaid = 4.7; MacDonald et al., 2012) and valid measure within youth samples (MacDonald et al., 2011, 2012; Sullivan, LaForge-MacKenzie, & Marini, 2015).

Procedure

Ethical approval was attained from the necessary institutional ethics review boards and the study was approved by the participating recreational minor sport organizations. Prior to data collection, informed assent and parental/guardian consent were obtained from each of the participants. A member of the research team contacted the coach to arrange a convenient time and location (e.g., in the gym, at the playing field) to administer the questionnaire. A research team member was present, provided instructions, and was available for any questions when administering the questionnaire. Participants completed the Social Identity Questionnaire (Cameron, 2004) and the YES-S (MacDonald et al., 2012) prior to or after a scheduled practice during the middle of the regular season.

Analyses

The analytic approach involved two steps. In Step 1, scores on each subscale of PYD and Social Identity were summed and an average score was computed. Descriptive and bivariate statistics were calculated for the study variables to provide an initial examination of the relationships between social identity and PYD. Step 2 involved separate regression analyses for the four PYD outcomes (personal and social skills, goal setting, initiative, negative experiences) with the covariates (gender, age, years of participation) entered first followed by the three dimensions of social identity (IGT, CC, and IGA) entered in the second block as predictors. Given the four regression analyses, a Bonferroni adjusted p value was used to evaluate significance ($p = .0125$).

Results

Descriptive and bivariate statistics of the mean scores are presented in Table 1. The descriptive mean values for social identity and PYD were similar to previous research (Bruner, Boardley, et al., 2014; MacDonald et al., 2011). Correlations revealed that while some aspects of social identity were significantly related to

Table 1. Descriptive and bivariate statistics ($N = 219$).

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
YES-S	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Personal & Social Skills	3.24	0.50	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Initiative	3.57	0.48	.68*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal Setting	3.09	0.73	.70*	.58*	—	—	—	—	—
Negative Experiences	1.46	0.53	.01	.03	.07	—	—	—	—
Social Identity	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ingroup Ties	5.26	1.27	.52*	.40*	.36*	-.05	—	—	—
Cognitive Centrality	4.80	1.25	.36*	.29*	.27*	.05	.57*	—	—
Ingroup Affect	6.20	0.94	.46*	.33*	.38*	-.24*	.56*	.47*	—

Note. Possible scale ranges: 1–7 for social identity (ingroup ties, cognitive centrality, ingroup affect) and 1–4 for the Youth Experience Survey for Sport (YES-S; personal and social skills, initiative, goal setting, negative experiences). Absolute criterion for interpretation of correlations: 0–0.19 = no correlation; 0.2–0.39 = low correlation; 0.4–0.59 = moderate correlation; 0.6–0.79 = moderately high correlation; ≥ 0.8 = high correlation. * $p < .01$.

PYD outcomes of personal and social skills, initiative, goal setting, and negative experiences at a small to moderate level, others were not (Zhu, 2012; see Table 1).

Regression analyses revealed that IGT ($\beta = 0.34, p < .001$) and IGA ($\beta = 0.25, p < .001$) were positively associated with personal and social skills accounting for 29% of the variance, $F(6, 192) = 14.21, R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .29, p < .001$. IGA ($\beta = 0.23, p < .001$) was positively associated with goal setting, $F(6, 192) = 7.91, R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .17, p < .001$. IGT ($\beta = 0.29, p < .001$) and age ($\beta = 0.29, p < .001$) were positively associated with initiative, $F(6, 192) = 7.04, R^2 \text{ Adj.} = .16, p < .001$. IGA ($\beta = -0.33, p < .001$) was negatively associated with negative experiences, $F(6, 192) = 3.73, R^2 \text{ Adj.} = 0.08, p = .002$. CC was not a significant predictor of the PYD outcomes.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between athletes' perceptions of social identity and PYD in sport. Results revealed that athletes who perceived stronger social identity in terms of stronger bonds and sense of belonging (IGT) and positive feelings toward membership on the team (IGA) reported higher PYD (greater personal and social development, goal setting, initiative, and fewer negative experiences). The findings highlight and extend previous literature indicating the potential benefits of young athletes' social identity being formed in youth sport in relation to prosocial teammate behavior (Bruner, Boardley et al., 2014) and self-worth, commitment, and perceived effort (Martin et al., 2015) to personal development through sport engagement. Further, the findings reinforce prior developmental psychology research highlighting the proposed salient role that peers and identity formation may play on youth development through involvement in extracurricular activities including sport (Eccles et al., 2003). Finally, the results address calls by sport psychology researchers to examine the theoretical mechanisms such as identity influencing youth development through sport (Gould & Carson, 2008).

The relative absence of CC as a significant predictor of PYD was a notable finding. In support of the current findings, CC has held lower mean values and appeared less relevant than IGA and IGT regarding moral behaviors (Bruner, Boardley, et al. 2014) and perceptions of self-worth, commitment, and perceived effort (Martin et al., 2015). The lack of emergence of CC as a predictor may indicate from a conceptual level that CC may be less influential in the promotion of individual outcomes such as personal development. From a more practical perspective, however, the present findings may have also been due to the recreational settings as opposed to more

competitive elite sport settings in which athletes may be more invested (e.g., increased hours devoted to practice) and perceive greater importance in being a team member. As such, elite youth sport environments may yield different results with CC and PYD. This awaits further research.

Limitations

Given that this study is the first to examine the relationship between social identity and PYD, there were a number of limitations and areas in which future research is necessary. First, although statistically significant and potentially important relationships were detected, a number of them were small to moderate in size. Further, the cross-sectional nature of this study was a limitation and does not allow for causal inferences to be made. A longitudinal design assessing both perceptions of social identity and PYD over the duration of a single sport season and/or multiple sport seasons would address this limitation. A related second avenue of future research should involve longitudinally comparing perceptions of social identity and PYD on sport teams with those of other organized extracurricular activities (e.g., band, drama) as well as youth not involved in any activities. Despite an increase in research longitudinally investigating extracurricular activities with developmental outcomes (e.g., increased academic performance, greater resiliency, less risky behavior; Fredericks & Eccles, 2008), researchers have yet to compare youth perceptions of social identity and PYD across extracurricular settings (e.g., sport compared to band and/or drama). Another direction would be to experimentally investigate the efficacy of a coach- or peer-led group-based intervention to foster social identity and PYD. Two potential group-based approaches to consider experimentally employing are team building (Martin, Carron, & Burke, 2009) and group-mediated cognitive behavioral interventions (Brawley, Rejeski, & Lutes, 2000). Such approaches utilize the power of the group as a medium of change in the individual (cf. Cartwright, 1951) and may be beneficial with youth during this important stage of development and interaction with peers (Allen, 2003; Wagner, 1996).

What does this article add?

Groups have been recognized as a pervasive, influential part of people's lives that help to shape human behavior (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). This sentiment is of particular importance during late childhood and adolescence when peers and peer groups provide the needed support for development. The current article provides preliminary empirical support for the proposition that stronger perceptions of membership on youth sport teams (social identity) are associated with enhanced personal and social

development. Being able to identify as part of a sport team may be particularly important for youth to psychosocially develop during the tumultuous changes and instability associated with adolescence. Given these initial findings and the potentially significant developmental role of sport teams in building thriving youth, sport coaches should foster social identity and PYD by implementing various coaching techniques (e.g., team names, clothing, cheers, mottos) and team-building strategies to enhance the importance and feelings of group membership.

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