

## **BRUNER, MARK**

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### *Understanding the Influence of Peer Groups in Sport on Adolescent Social Development*

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#### **Project Summary**

The primary objective of this research was to examine how the identities that youth form through membership on sport teams – their social identities – influence their social development. Specifically, the research examined the relationships between social identity and prosocial (e.g., helping an injured opponent) and antisocial behaviors (e.g., deliberately hurting an opponent) in youth sport. A secondary objective was to investigate whether perceptions of task cohesion (perceptions of the team working together toward goals) and social cohesion (perceptions of social bonding among the team members) influenced the relationships between social identity and prosocial and antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. Participants included 449 high school athletes from 37 sport teams (e.g., basketball, soccer, football) who completed a survey at the beginning, middle and end of the season. The findings revealed that stronger perceptions of social identity at the beginning of the season were associated with greater frequency in prosocial teammate behavior near the end of the season. Certain aspects of social identity were found to be associated positively and negatively with antisocial behavior. Stronger ingroup ties (perceptions of similarity and connectedness to the team) were associated with more frequent antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents while stronger ingroup affect (feelings toward the team) were associated with less frequent antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. In regards to the research's second objective, perceptions of team cohesion were found to influence the relationships between social identity and prosocial and antisocial behaviours of the athletes. Among the relationships, task and social cohesion were found to significantly impact the social identity-antisocial behavior relationships. Collectively, the results provide evidence of the important role of social identity in predicting the moral behaviours of youth in sport, and the potential role of cohesion in explaining some of these relationships. The findings also offer support for previous suggestions that next to family, sport teams are one of the most influential groups to which an individual can belong.

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#### **Research Methods**

After obtaining institutional and school board ethics approval, coaches from three school boards were invited to participate in the study. Contact with coaches involved presentations at school board athletic meetings and invitations to speak with high school coaches at their respective schools. Participants were recruited from the high school teams of interested coaches. Participants included 449 male and female youth (Mean age =16 years) from 37 high school sport teams (n= 14 basketball, n= 10 volleyball, n= 4 soccer, n=3 ice hockey, n= 2 American football, n=2 rugby, n=1 lacrosse, n=1 cross country) who completed questionnaires at the beginning, middle and end of the regular season. The questionnaire assessed the three dimensions of social identity (ingroup ties, cognitive centrality, ingroup affect), task and social cohesion and prosocial and antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. The data was analyzed using structural equation modeling.

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## Research Results

The study findings revealed that stronger perceptions of social identity at the beginning of the season were associated with greater frequency in prosocial teammate behavior (e.g., giving constructive feedback to a teammate) near the end of the season. Certain aspects of social identity were found to be associated positively and negatively with antisocial behavior. Stronger ingroup ties (perceptions of similarity and connectedness to the team) were associated with more frequent antisocial behavior toward teammates (e.g., criticizing a teammate) and opponents (e.g., trying to injure an opponent) while stronger ingroup affect (feelings toward the team) were associated with less frequent antisocial behavior toward teammates and opponents. In regards to the research's second objective, perceptions of team cohesion were found to influence the relationships between social identity and prosocial and antisocial behaviours of the athletes. Among the relationships, task and social cohesion were found to significantly impact the social identity-antisocial behavior relationships. Collectively, the study results provide evidence of the important role of social identity in predicting the moral behaviours of youth in sport, and the potential role of cohesion in explaining some of these relationships. The study findings also offer support for previous suggestions that next to family, sport teams are one of the most influential groups to which an individual can belong.

Despite several strengths of the study including its prospective design (i.e., over the season), this study is not without limitations. First, the questionnaire items assessing one of the dimensions of social identity, cognitive centrality (the importance of the group to the individual) were excluded because of a lack of validity in this sample. A second limitation of the study was the observational nature of the study design. In other words, the group dynamic variables examined, including social identity and cohesion, were not altered by the researchers to evaluate how changes in the group variables may impact prosocial and antisocial behavior by the athletes toward teammates and opponents. Nevertheless, this naturalistic approach to adolescent development through sport provided novel findings that have practical implications in terms of program design.

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## Policy Implications

This research on social identity and social development in youth sport is directly relevant to the Sport Participation Research Initiative (SPRI) and the federal government's Canadian Sport Policy 2012 document. Specifically, the research supports several goals and objectives of the CSP and SPRI. The primary objective of the research was to examine the influence of social identity on adolescent social development in sport. This objective supports Sport Canada's broad goal of sport for development (sport as a tool for social development and the promotion of positive values). The objective also supports the first broad objective of the SPRI to build empirical evidence to inform programs to enhance sport participation among Canadians. The findings from the research will help inform future strategies used by youth sport coaches to foster personal and social development and promote future sport participation. In addition, the findings will inform policy by providing evidence to highlight the benefits of sport on personal and social development and sport individual participation. This outcome supports the SPRI's second broad objective and the SPRI's fifth target area [identification and assessment of the benefits and outcomes of participation in sport].

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## Next Steps

Several future directions emanate from the study findings. One of the interesting findings was the complexity of the social identity-antisocial behavior relationship. Ingroup ties (perceptions of similarity and connectedness with team members) was associated with more frequent antisocial behavior toward

teammates and opponents while ingroup affect (feelings associated with the team) had a negative relationship with antisocial behaviours toward teammates and opponents. Further qualitative research is needed to better understand the social identity – antisocial behavior relationships in sport. Additional research is also needed to further refine the social identity measure for use in the sport context. While previous empirical support exists for the social identity measure, this was the first attempt to adapt the multidimensional social identity scale for a youth sport context. Finally, future research should look to progress the current findings through application of experimental designs that test the identified relationships. For example, experimental work could examine the effects of group-based interventions (e.g., team-building) specifically designed to foster group processes within a team (e.g., social identity, cohesion) that may promote prosocial behaviors and deter antisocial behaviors in sport.

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### **Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

- Provincial Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (formerly Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport)
- Sport Canada
- National and Provincial Sport Organizations
- Coaching Association of Canada