ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL SPORT: MAPPING THE DIFFERENCES IN SENSE OF COMMUNITY

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As the popularity of sport continues to grow, more community developers, planners, and leaders are recognizing the ability for sport to foster community. Similar to other community contexts, understanding the structure and management of sport remains central to community building. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explain how sport system structural variations affect the sense of community experienced by those in and around sport. Eight focus groups were conducted with 39 sport participants from both formal and informal sport settings across 19 different sports. The results highlight the seven factors (administrative consideration, common interest, competition, equity in administrative decisions, leadership, social spaces, and voluntary action) that were particularly important in building a sense of community within two sport settings and how the factors are manifest within each of the structures. This research demonstrates the opportunities that sport holds for fostering community when designed and implemented appropriately. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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The sporting environment is frequently considered a context that draws people together and contributes to the creation of community; the shared interest in competing in a sport is often cited as a catalyst for building strong community among participants (Schimmel, 2003). However, critics have also cited sport as an arena that fosters deviant behaviors and isolation (Carter & Carter, 2007; Chalip, 2006; Coakley, 2001; Irwin, 1973; Kleiber, 1983). The outcomes of sport are unquestionably dependent on how sport is structured and managed (see Chalip, 2006; Kleiber, 1983). Yet as McCormack and Chalip (1988) note, much of the sport literature has simply compared sport participants to nonparticipants, thereby presupposing that sport environments provide experiences that are similar for all participants. Rather than accepting this assumption, it is first necessary to consider the impacts of variations in the structural and environmental contexts in which sport is played on the experiences of sport participants.

Although McCormack and Chalip were primarily concerned with socialization processes within sport, their work demonstrated that "the delineation of within sport variations" (p. 90) is necessary in order to build useful theory. To advance our understanding of how sport can draw individuals together and foster a sense of community that enhances the life quality of sport participants, the aim of this study is to explain how sport system structural variations affect the sense of community experienced by those in and around sport.

This study consequently examines sport participants' experiences as they relate to a sense of community in two structurally different sport systems in an important context in the United States—university campuses. This context is significant because of the high incidence of isolation among students, even though they live and work together (Boyer, 1990; McDonald, 2002; Spitzberg & Thorndike, 1992). Understanding mechanisms for community within this context is useful because of the potential impact on student retention, academic performance, and overall well-being (McDonald, 2002). Understanding mechanisms in this context may also lead to insights that can impact other communities as well.

In American universities, two similar yet distinct sport systems coexist: varsity athletics and sport clubs. Varsity and sport club systems both bring together individuals with a common interest in sport, but the two systems have quite different structures. Further, while the ways in which participants are brought together and socially integrated are fairly consistent within varsity athletics or sport clubs, the structural contingencies are systematically different between the systems. Varsity athletics are highly structured, regulated, more professionalized, and coach-directed, while sport clubs tend to be flexible, open, and athlete-directed.

Although athlete-led sport clubs are often found in universities throughout the world, and some countries (e.g., Canada) do have university-funded departments of athletics, the United States is unique in the emphasis placed upon university sport in the development of elite athletes for some sports (cf. Green & Houlihan, 2008). This is thought to engender a particularly intense environment for athletes who train in the American system of university athletics, although the American university sport clubs bear a close resemblance to those found in some other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand. The unique nature of American university athletics makes it difficult to generalize findings about American sport development to other countries. However, the coexistence of a club-based university sport system and university athletics in the American system provides an ideal opportunity to address structural differences between two distinct sport systems that coexist on the same university campuses. The findings provide useful insight regarding the ways that different structures render different community outcomes.

This study compared these two sport systems to ascertain the differences and potential structurally induced effects that may be associated with sport structures, particularly formal (i.e., varsity athletics) and informal (i.e., sport clubs) sport contexts, as they relate to community building. Comparing and contrasting the factors that create a sense of community in these two settings will achieve the following goals: (a) advance theory in the broader sense of community literature by understanding the structural contingencies that impact a sense of community (see Hill, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Puddifoot, 1996; Sarason, 1974), (b) provide practitioners with concrete knowledge about how to improve sense of community via sport, and (c) advance sport theory by better understanding the impact of sport variations on the participant experience (see Chalip, 2006; Warner & Dixon, 2011).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Why Context Matters

Early work on sense of community found that putting people in communities was good for them (Sarason, 1974). Little work, however, qualitatively examined how those communities could best be formed or developed. Work proceeded with the expectation that putting people together in a common space or with a common interest would create a sense of community. As work in the area has developed, it has become increasingly obvious that sense of community does not just "happen," but that contexts must be examined for factors that help and/or hinder community building (cf. Cohen-Katz, Miller, & Borkan, 2003; Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007; Schlosar & Carlson, 1997).

In fact, a number of studies have suggested that even in seemingly similar contexts, there can be underlying conditions that strongly influence sense of community. For example, Holt's (1995) work among fans of professional sports has found that sense of community can be cultivated among fans that attend sporting events together. Although it might seem that fans would automatically have community—they share a common space at the games and a common interest in the team—Holt found that fans do not automatically form community bonds, but that those relationships (a) must be intentional and (b) emerge from particular environmental conditions.

As another example, several studies among volunteers (e.g., Costa, Chalip, Green, & Simes, 2006; Merrell, 2000; Wicker, 1969) have examined the development of community among people who volunteer for sporting or other social events or organizations. Consistent with manning theory (Wicker, 1979), these studies have found a direct relationship to community building based on the number of roles available and the number of people to fill them. In organizations where there are more people than roles, there is less attachment and commitment as many people feel they are not "needed" in the organization or central to its decision making. Alternatively, in organizations where there are more roles than people, often there is a strong sense of community, fueled by reciprocity and mutual obligation. Thus, two organizations that may look similar in other features may have very different underlying communities because of more subtle differences in their structure or composition.

These kinds of contextual nuances are not readily apparent on surface examination, but emerge as subtle yet critical determinants of the sense of community enjoyed by those who live, work, play, or volunteer in those settings. Sporting communities provide an instructive illustration of the ways that such subtle differences impact the resulting

communities. Although this study is primarily concerned with the experiences of those in and around sport, insights from this comparison of sporting contexts can provide insights that may help other organizations to foster and maintain sense of community among members.

The Contexts: Sport Clubs and Varsity Athletics

In the United States, university sport club systems are typically organized and administered by students on their own behalf. Although there are occasional exceptions, most sport club programs (also referred to as club sports) are student guided and directed. A university liaison (i.e., sport club director or campus recreation director) will typically provide some oversight, and clubs usually receive nominal funding from the university. In most cases student club leaders organize practices, competitions, fundraisers, travel, and sometimes even hire coaches (Carlson, 1990; Hyatt, 1977; Jeter, 1986). Sport clubs are often characterized as being flexible, self-perpetuating, voluntary, and less formalized. The existence of individual sport clubs is based on student interest and student initiative (Hyatt, 1977). Sport clubs typically range from being instructional to recreational to competitive; competitive sport clubs are also sometimes referred to as "extramurals" (Braun, 1989; Jeter, 1986).

Conversely, varsity athletics (NCAA) operate under a more stringent professionalized model. Varsity teams are led by coaches hired by the university and in most cases are supported by an entire university department (typically including media relations, marketing, academic support, and compliance). Participants often receive scholarships in return for their participation.

Although sport club and varsity sport systems each operate within a university context and serve college student participants, the structure, environmental characteristics, and contingencies within which they operate are quite different. Sport clubs are more accessible and voluntary in nature, making entry, exit, and commitment levels more autonomous; this may have important ramifications for sense of community (cf. Wicker, 1979). Similarly, varsity athletes operate under tighter schedules, more formalized relationship structures, and more rigid boundaries. These may also affect community building, but may render a very different experience of community than is obtained by athletes in club sport settings.

A series of studies in this area has begun to explicate the differences in creating a sense of community within similar, yet distinct sport contexts. These studies began with the overarching research question, "What factors develop sense of community for sport participants?" The first study (Warner & Dixon, 2011) examined the factors that create sense of community for college varsity athletes, namely, administrative consideration, leadership opportunities, equity in administrative decisions, competition, and social spaces. A second, similar study (Warner & Dixon, in press) examined the factors that create sense of community in college sport clubs, namely, common interest, leadership opportunities, voluntary activity, and competition. The results of both studies revealed that sense of community was important to athletes in both contexts, that sense of community led to greater general well-being, commitment, and satisfaction with their sport experience among the athletes, and that sense of community was cultivated by somewhat similar mechanisms in both contexts.

It was clear, however, from the individual studies that direct comparisons and contrasts between the two structures were difficult to make because the spontaneous descriptions of community by athletes in the two settings did not yield identical themes. A design that incorporates *both* formal and informal athletes, including direct comparisons between

them, can provide greater understanding of the ways that sport structures affect participants' experiences. In fact, in developing new theory, Eisenhardt (1989) suggests both within and between case comparisons as important steps. After careful examination of each case, site, or context, Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that researchers undertake cross-case comparisons: "The juxtaposition of seemingly similar cases by a researcher looking for differences can break simplistic frames. The result of these forced comparisons can be new categories and concepts which the investigators did not anticipate" (p. 541).

Considering previous scholars' assertions regarding the importance of understanding contingencies (Hirschman, 1970; McCormack & Chalip, 1988), environmental characteristics (Sarason, 1974), and context (Chalip, 2006; Hill, 1996; Puddifoot, 1996) such an inquiry may begin the process of identifying the intricacies and social impacts of different sport structures, which can ultimately aid in development of a more generalizable model with appropriate boundary conditions.

The following questions guide this study:

- Are there differences in what creates a sense of community for athletes within a formalized administrator led sport model (i.e., varsity athletics) and a less formal student-led model (i.e., sport clubs)?

- What are the contingencies in both sports models that create the most conducive environment for community building?

METHOD

To provide triangulation and external comparisons of the experiences in both contexts, the previously developed sport and sense of community models (Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner & Dixon, in press) were presented to focus groups comprising varsity and sport club athletes (as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2). (It should be noted that these were not the same athletes who provided data for the initial sense of community models mentioned above.) This method of direct comparison allowed us to compare and contrast results from studies of the two different contexts, while also providing a cross-data validity check of the models within the settings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Patton, 1999). The focus groups also allowed for the participants to debate and challenge the findings in one structure over another. Further, utilizing a symbolic interactionist framework in the design and instrumentation of the focus groups allowed us to better understand the social processes as the participants understand them, to learn about their social worlds, and to explore the things about sense of community that are meaningful to them (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986).

Instrument

The question guide (Appendix A) for the focus groups was developed from the previous two studies as well as the broader sense of community and student development literatures bases (e.g., Deneui, 2003; Lounsbury & Deneui, 1995; Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990; Pretty, 1990). The focus groups concentrated on the similarities and differences between sport system structures and contingencies and the potential outcomes of a sense of community. Thus, the focus group protocol was designed to elicit and probe participants' experiences and views regarding their respective sport systems.
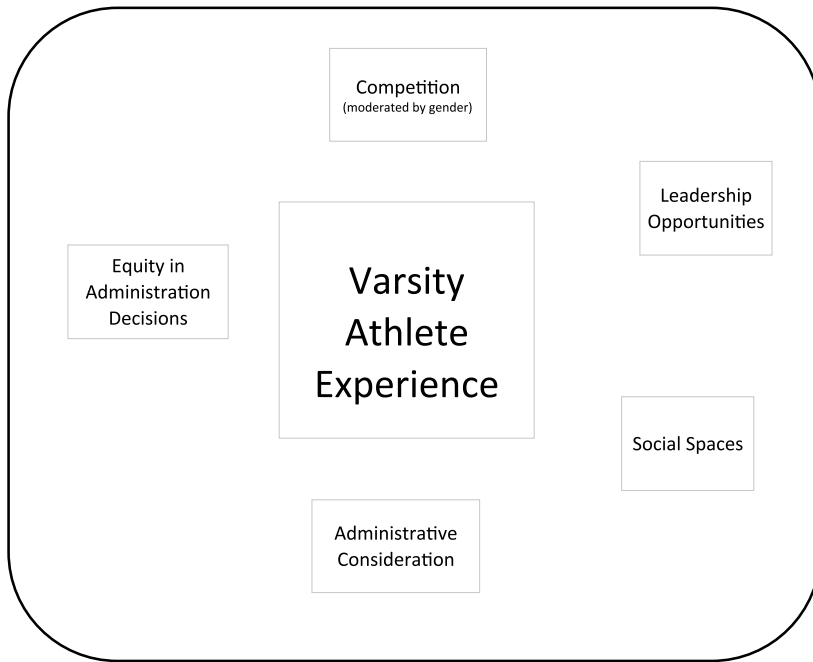
Sense of Community for Varsity Athletes[1]

Figure 1. Sport Club Sense of Community Model.
Note[1] Warner, S., & Dixon, M. A. (in press). Sport and Community on Campus: Constructing a Sport Experience that Matters. *Journal of College Student Development.*

The protocol was reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts in qualitative research, community studies, and sport management research.

Participants

A total of 39 participants took part in eight different focus group sessions. These participants represented five universities and 19 sports. Four of the focus groups were conducted with a total of 19 current sport club participants (six females, 13 males) and four focus groups with a total of 20 current varsity athletes (11 females, nine males). The focus groups comprised three to six participants, each who were active in their sport and currently enrolled at their respective institutions. As a general rule, researchers typically endeavor to conduct three to five focus group sessions with 6–10 participants per group (Morgan, 1997). However, because the participants had a high level of involvement with the research topic and a great deal to say about it, the smaller sized focus groups enabled better interaction among members such that the researchers were better able to obtain "a clear sense of each participant's reaction to a topic" (Morgan, 1997, p. 42).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the directors of the sport club programs and athletic department personnel at a variety of universities across the United States. In-person digitally audio-recorded focus groups were then conducted with those who indicated that
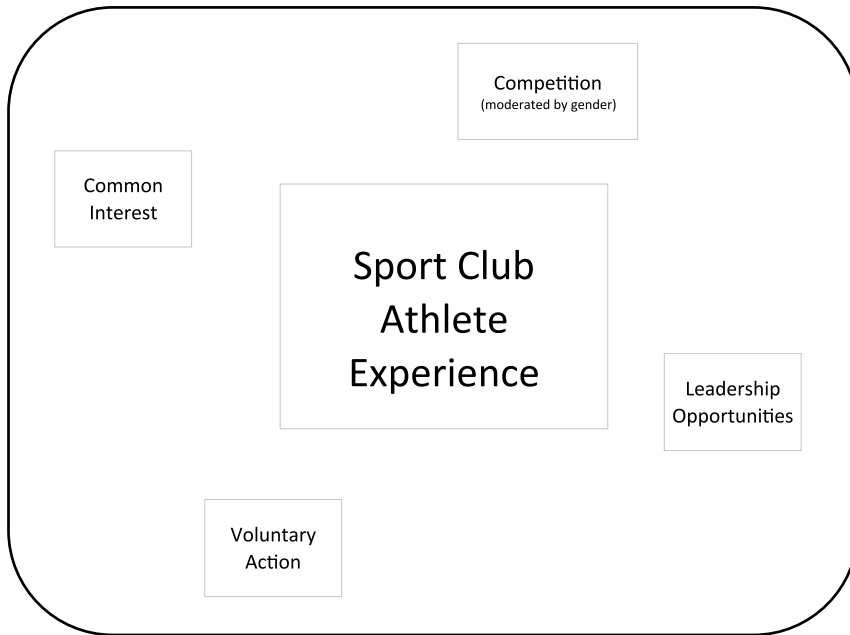
Sense of Community for Sport Club Athletes[2]

Figure 2. Varsity athlete sense of community model.
Note[2] Warner, S., & Dixon, M. A. (2011). Understanding sense of community from an athlete's perspective. *Journal of Sport Management, 25,* 258-272.

they were willing to participate and able to attend the focus group session being held on their respective campuses. The focus groups were held at convenient campus locations. Prior to the start of the focus groups, participants were asked for their voluntary written consent. Demographic information was also collected at this time. The first author led six of the eight focus groups, moderating the ensuing discussion, and probing when necessary. An independent researcher led the remaining two focus groups with the first author present and observing. All focus group sessions lasted 60–90 minutes.

Data Analysis

The procedure for analyzing focus group data is similar to that used when analyzing other qualitative data (Morgan, 1997). The major difference with focus group data is the level of analysis at which the researcher chooses to code. That is, focus group data can be coded at the individual and/or group level. Considering that the focus groups were conducted with a new sample (after extensive individual one-on-one interviews in two previous studies were conducted), the data were coded primarily at the group level (varsity or sport club). The coding process involved the primary researcher organizing segments of texts into meaningful themes, and then through an iterative process, the themes were validated and cross-checked with the other researcher team members until 100% intercoder agreement was met (Creswell, 2009).

As the intent of the focus groups was not to infer meaning or to make broad generalizations, but rather to clarify and better understand sense of community in these sport

settings (cf. Krueger & Casey, 2008), the coding and analysis were conducted in such a way that the similarities and differences between the sport contexts were elucidated. Therefore, after the common themes that occurred within the varsity athlete groups and the sport club groups were determined, the data were then compared across groups. This process involved identifying which themes occurred in both settings or just in one, the salience and importance of themes in each setting, the ways in which participants discussed the themes in each setting (i.e., the meanings of themes and the way they were utilized in each setting), and the specific contextual elements that were linked to each of the themes. Thus, the themes were clustered by similarities and differences both in content and meaning, then discussed and agreed upon by the research team as to their fit with the overall model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus groups provided a detailed elaboration of the similarities and differences when creating a sense of community in the two settings. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the findings and the contingencies in both sports models that create the most conducive environment for

Table 1. Sense of Community Factor Comparison by Context

Sense of community factor	Definition	Varsity	Club
Competition	The challenge to excel against both internal and external rivalries.	Salient	Salient
Leadership opportunities	Both informal and formal opportunities to guide and direct others within the community.	Salient	Salient
Equity of administrative decisions	Administrative level decisions that demonstrated that all community members were being treated equal.	Salient	Underlying
Social spaces	A common area or facility in which athletes could interact with one another.	Salient	Underlying
Administrative consideration	The expression of care, concern, and intentionality of administrators and support personnel within the university.	Salient	Underlying
Common interest	The group dynamics, social networking, and friendships that resulted from individuals being brought together by the common interest of the sport (and combined with a common goal, shared values or other unifying factors).	Underlying	Salient
Voluntary activity	The self-fulfilling and self-determining actions that resulted from little to no external pressure or incentive.	Underlying	Salient

Table 2. Factor Impact on Sense of Community Per Context

Sense of community factors	Impact on sense of community	
	Varsity sport	*Sport club*
Competition	Contribute/detract	Contribute/detract
Leadership	Contribute	Contribute/detract
Equity of administrative decisions	Contribute/detract	Detract
Social spaces	Contribute	Contribute
Administrative consideration	Contribute	Indifferent
Common interest	Contribute	Contribute
Voluntary activity	Detract	Contribute

community building. The focus groups responded that the sense of community model for their particular context accurately depicted the manner in which a sense of community developed in their respective context. The comments "There is nothing I would add or subtract" (Hanna, varsity, volleyball) and "Yeah, it really does capture my experience. Anything I was going to say is already written down" (Maya, club, equestrian) summed up the consensus of the eight focus groups when viewing the overall sense of community model for their respective sport system. From a methodological standpoint, this helped provide a cross-data validation check (Patton, 1999) that further verified the results of Warner and Dixon's (2011; in press) work.

After the focus groups viewed their respective sense of community models, they were presented with the sense of community model for the other sport structure. The focus group members then discussed the similarities and differences in each sense of community model. Interestingly, when the focus group members viewed the sense of community model from the other sport structure, they were able to compare and contrast the two settings. In doing so, they were able to see and articulate the applicability of several of the factors from the other setting that they previously had not deemed important or relevant. This indicated that the factors identified in the previous work (i.e., Warner & Dixon, 2011; in press) were relevant to both sport contexts. Nevertheless, while the actual factors were similar, the saliency and the process by which the factors in fostered a sense of community varied and was very much context dependent (see Table 2).

Similarities

Leadership opportunities. One of the two factors that appeared in both models was leadership opportunities. Leadership opportunities seemed to provide a sense of ownership, purpose, accountability, and responsibility that, if present, contributed to a sense of community. Although it was evident in both models, it manifested itself differently in the two sport structures.

> Well, with varsity there is leadership within the team, you know the person you look to step up on the court or at practice. With sport clubs we are running everything ourselves, so you are learning all the logistics of running a team more so than just game strategy of the sport itself. Kind of the all the things that go along with it that a coach or a manager might be doing, we do. (Jamal, club, gymnastics)

While leadership opportunities was a salient factor in both models, it seemed to be a stronger factor in contributing to a sense of community among the sport club participants. As Jamal highlighted, this is likely because of sport club athletes having more leadership opportunities, because in the sport club system, leadership by the athletes themselves is essential for the sport club system to function. "There is more responsibility on us. It makes us grow up," Annette (club, volleyball) explained. Peyton (club, cross country) also noted:

> I think being a club athlete gives you more leadership. You'll get less prestige and notoriety than being a leader on a NCAA (varsity) team. Club sports have to do so much more–you have to budget, you have to order uniforms, and you have to get all this stuff together. And if you're a varsity athlete with a coach and a million dollar budget, you don't really have to do that.

From these comments, it is evident that leadership opportunities were particularly salient in the club context. This context provides ample opportunities for leadership and involvement both on and off the field.

Although leadership opportunities within the structure were not as salient in varsity sports, leadership within the teams was still vital to creating a sense of community for varsity athletes. Carla (varsity, soccer) explained: "How leadership roles are determined and how important that is, operates very differently on every team." Carla went on to explain that it is the leadership opportunities outside of sport, which provided a sense of purpose and responsibility that ultimately helped build community: "There are tons of volunteer opportunities here for us. And it definitely turns into more of a social thing. It's definitely a big part of the student-athlete community here."

Although the importance and emphasis that was placed on leadership opportunities varied between the sport structures, it was clear that, for the most part, leadership opportunities was a critical means to foster a sense of community in both sport settings. This component is somewhat parallel to influence, which was identified as a factor in McMillan and Chavis's (1986) sense of community theory. Influence was bidirectional in that it comprised a member being empowered by the group and also feeling empowered to influence the group and its direction. McMillan and Chavis concluded that individuals have a greater attraction to communities in which they are influential. This was also true in the sport club model, where the leadership opportunities were deemed to have a cyclic nature. The more an individual felt part of a community the more likely they were to take on a leadership role, and taking on a leadership role further strengthened their sense of community as they came to feel themselves to be a vital part of the community. This is also consistent with findings from ecological psychology (Wicker, 1979), suggesting that university sport programs (and potentially other community contexts as well) will most effectively engender a sense of community when they are designed to incorporate settings that provide leadership opportunities to participants.

Competition. The other factor that was identified as a key contributor to a sense of community for participants in both sport structures was competition. Competition was moderated by gender. That is, for the most part, males indicated that the mutual respect that developed from competing enhanced a sense of community for them, while females asserted that internal competition detracted from their sense of community. The findings related to competition are further supported in the sport literature. Researchers have demonstrated that opportunities to compete can attract participants into sport, but that it can

have the eventual paradoxical effect of causing social conflict, which results in sport dropout (Chalip & Scott, 2005; Roberts & Chick, 1984). Focus group members from both sport systems were articulate about the significance of competition, noting that it could "make or break" (Bianca, varsity, soccer) a sport community.

> The competition aspect stands out to me. That is a huge aspect for me, there is something about being around a group of guys who are all working hard and trying to do their best. We all can appreciate and respect the intensity and effort that you put in each day. (Brent, varsity, baseball)

> Competition is a big aspect of the community, but not in a very beneficial way. Equestrian is a very competitive sport and we are competitive and I feel like it kind of breaks that community aspect. (Maya, club, equestrian)

The gender difference in perceptions of competition was salient to club sport athletes, although it was not as prominent an issue among the females. In most cases, the sport club participants felt that any negative influence of competition on sense of community could have been resolved if an objective coach rather than a player-coach was present.

> I know when we do have tournaments everyone gets really, really mean to each other, rude, and yells to each other. We don't have a coach so people tell each other what to do. I think a lot of that would be taken away if we did have a coach, like one voice. (Jasmine, club, water polo)

Interestingly, Lambert and Hopkins' (1995) sense of community study in the workplace indicated that informal support played a key role in sense of community for men, whereas formal support played the more significant role in sense of community for women. The current study supports this conclusion. In a sport club directed a player-coach, "formal support," especially as it pertained to competition, was generally lacking, which detracted from a sense of community. Based on the sport club data, it appeared that a more formalized coaching structure may have been able to rectify any negative impact that competition might have had on sense of community. Dixon's (2009) work also points to social support being a key factor in female physical activity retention, providing further evidence that a formal support system may help to quell the negative effects of competition.

Competition and its impact on sense of community was evident in both models, although it is likely that the intensity level in the varying systems could also explain why competition was not as strongly asserted by sport club athletes. Competition contributed positively for male sport club participants, yet they also acknowledged that its intensity was not the same as a varsity athlete might experience. Abe (club, lacrosse) explained: "We enjoy the competition aspect of sport. Just because you play club, it doesn't mean you don't care who wins or loses. It just means you don't go home and go into a deep depression because you lost." Varsity athletes also noted this difference:

> I just feel like it is so different for them [sport club athletes], I mean it's just relaxed and there is no pressure. It's just for fun. Our priorities are different, I mean, we are there to compete and win. Not that they don't want to win, it's just different. (Brent, varsity, baseball)

This difference in the perceived level of competition is noteworthy because an abundance of literature supports that cooperation rather than competition tends to nurture greater social rewards (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 1999; Kohn, 1992; Madsen, 1971; Orlick, 1978, 1981; Sherif, 1958, 1976). Yet again, it was clear that competition initially served as an important aspect that led individuals to join the community. This paradoxical effect of competition suggests that it needs to be balanced carefully (cf. Chalip & Scott, 2005; Roberts & Chick, 1984).

To summarize, competition was a primary factor that influenced sense of community in both the sport club and varsity sport structures. Because of the differing expectations and intensity that were perceived to be present in the varsity structure, competition and its influence (both positive and negative) on sense of community was more prominent. Gender differences regarding competition and its effects were consistent with previous findings (e.g., Lambert & Hopkins, 1995; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Warner & Dixon 2011; Warner & Dixon, in press), but the focus group data pinpointed the importance of formal support versus informal support as a basis for gender differences in the ways that competition is perceived and interpreted. In other words, the negative effects of competition may be tempered, especially for females, with a formal support structure.

Differences

The differences between the varsity and club sense of community models were the presence of equity in administrative decisions, administrative consideration, and social spaces in the varsity model, while the sport club added common interest and voluntary activity. These elements impacted sense of community regardless of context; however, there was a noticeable difference in the salience of the factors and their contribution to sense of community in the two contexts. In other words, the factors that did not initially appear in the separate sense of community models had a subtle underlying influence in the other sport structure, and did not initially emerge because they were not as salient. These factors influenced sense of community, but were not as prominent or observable, perhaps due to the specific sport structure contingencies.

Equity in administrative decisions. The varsity athletes agreed that equity in administrative decisions, which was comprised of department level decisions that demonstrated support for all teams and the program as a whole (as opposed to individual athletes), had an effect on sense of community. In most cases, the varsity athletes described inequities as "annoying" (Carla, varsity, soccer), leading to "resentment" (Evan, varsity, basketball), and creating an "unspoken tension" (Maxwell, varsity, soccer). For the most part, the varsity athletes simply accepted inequities.

> For a long time our only space was a small room with little ventilation; it was unsafe. Now we have space in the new indoor facility, but we get kicked out for almost everything. You win some and lose some, but we've accepted it. It's depressing, but we've accepted it. (Alexandra, varsity, rowing)

Therefore, equity in administrative decisions could negatively impact the athletes' sense of community.

When the sport club athletes spoke of equity in administrative decisions, their focus was on student-leader decisions, which makes sense given the fact that clubs are student-led. Sport club athletes also acknowledged the negative impact inequities could have on

sense of community, but this was not as relevant to them perhaps because sport clubs have low barriers to entry and exit. Because the administrative power rests in the student participants' hands, any inequities were quickly resolved or participants would simply leave the sport club program. It was also clear that the selection of the right leaders was necessary for participants to feel that fair and just decisions were being made. "You have to have good leaders. It's all about choosing the right leader," said Annette (club, volleyball). Jamal (club, gymnastics) then added, "You have to pick good leader. If you pick a leader and they aren't good, we have to move them out. There is a lot of tough love; you have to make the right decisions." Being able to make these "right decisions" in choosing their leaders is one reason that equity in administrative decisions was relevant though less salient in the club sport setting.

It seemed that under the less formalized sport club system any inequities were quickly resolved within the club. Again, in this structure, if inequities are left unresolved and the players are not satisfied with club level decisions, then the likelihood that they will continue diminishes. In other words, there is a strong incentive for consensus and careful negotiation of the terms under which the club operates because the club's very existence depends on it.

This difference in sport structure creates an added incentive to resolve inequities in the less formalized sport club structure. Interestingly, this idea is consistent with work on youth sport literature. Coakley (1994) described formal sport (e.g., little league) as "rule-centered," and informal sport (e.g., pick-up or backyard baseball) as "action-centered." The action-centered characteristic of informal sport makes it necessary for players to reach group decisions and manage the relationships within the group in order to maintain the action of playing the sport. In the current study, sport clubs are action-centered and operate in a more informal manner than varsity sports. It can be surmised that sense of community is particularly important for club sport athletes because it fosters the decision making and the relationships that informal action-centered sport requires.

Kleiber's (1983) work also supports the notion that maintaining the social structure and/or social relationships to continue in an activity is necessary to enhance a sense of community for participants. He points out that organizational control and more formalized sport may diminish relationships between players. In other words, one could posit that lack of organizational control and lack of formalization promotes cooperation and the building of stable social relationships so that an activity can be self-sustaining.

Administrative consideration. Another factor that was initially observed in the varsity model but not the club model was administrative consideration. This factor was described by the care, concern, and intentionality of coaches, athletics and university personnel. The varsity athletes pinpointed it as a positive and key attribute in creating a sense of community.

> You go to college and you are supposed to learn all these things on your own. It isn't really like that for us. We still have all these different people who care about us. It's your first time you're really away from you family. I mean when you are sick, those [athletics administrators] are the people who are going to take care of you. (Brent, varsity, baseball)

Conversely, sport club athletes rallied around the lack of administrative consideration that they received from university personnel. Since they were the sport leaders themselves, and since they perceived that the university administration did not care about them, they provided their own administrative consideration. This factor, therefore, was manifested

differently within the sport club model. In the sport club context, the participants had to care about one another. Roland (club, ultimate and Aussie rules) explained:

> Well for us, interestingly enough, I think the lack of administrative consideration for all of club sports gives us a sense of belonging and community. Like no one cares about you, but you care a lot about it. No one else cares about you; you have to care about each other.

The sport club focus group members also noted that sport club athletes are the administrators.

> Yeah, kind of like if you want something to happen, you have to push it through yourself. You have to work together to get things done. There is not necessarily someone who is rallying for club tennis all the time or any of the respective sports; we have to do it for ourselves. (Titus, club, tennis)

In summary, administrative consideration was a factor in building community in both structures, but was manifested quite differently in each context. For varsity athletes, the athletics department administrators played a fundamental role in fostering administrative consideration, while the sport club participants depended on one another. Furthermore, the fact that this did not initially seem to be a factor for creating a sense of community for sport club athletes indicated that it might be a more taken-for-granted factor. That is, sport club members expect administrative consideration from their teammates and/or club leaders, so it only becomes apparent when it is absent. Because of the contextual contingencies of the sport club structure—specifically that it offers little external reward—administrative consideration is likely a key factor in retaining sport club participants; if it is not present, the club will probably not be able to sustain itself (cf. Kano, Nobuhiko, Takahashi, & Shinichi, 1984).

Social spaces. Another factor that was vital in fostering a sense of community for varsity athletes, although not as integral for the sport club athletes, was social spaces. For the varsity athletes, the sport setting was described as a "sacred space" (Alexandra, varsity, rowing) where athletes must "focus on what your coach is asking you to do" (Hanna, varsity, volleyball). Among the varsity athletes, the sport space was viewed as parallel to the workplace. As Maxwell (varsity, soccer) stated, "Soccer is my job." As a result, social spaces outside of sport played a vital role in creating a sense of community for athletes. When asked why meeting in the dining hall after practice was important in creating a sense of community for him, Tucker (varsity, tennis) responded, "It's the best time of the day; we don't worry about work or anything." As this quote demonstrates, in the varsity model where sport is often viewed as work or a job, having social spaces away from that setting was especially important in fostering a sense of community.

Social spaces (outside of sport) provided places in which varsity athletes felt comfortable, particularly because they were surrounded by others who were "more understanding of the schedule and just willing to help you out because they are going through it too" (Hanna, varsity, volleyball). Social spaces created an environment where athletes felt supported, understood, and "in the same boat" (Alexandra, varsity, rowing). This allowed for varsity athletes to experience deeper connections and meaningful interactions that strengthened their sense of community.

In the sport club structure, social spaces was an underlying contributor to a sense of community. Interestingly though, it manifested itself differently in that competition and practice were the primary social spaces. As Ruben (club, Racquetball) explained, "The common interest in the sport just kind of creates a social space in the lives of the club athletes."

Although the sport club athletes did talk about other social spaces, Ruben's comments clarify why this factor was not mentioned as salient to the club sport club athletes. Among the sport clubs this element was intrinsic to their experience, and therefore less visible and less frequently mentioned. In other words, because of the differing priorities and commitments of time associated with the two settings, nonsport social spaces are not as vital for club athletes as for varsity athletes. The mere act of training and competing with their sport clubs fostered a sense of community among club sport athletes that training and competing could not for varsity athletes. Consequently social spaces became salient for varsity athletes because they required spaces beyond the sport setting to obtain a sense of community, whereas social spaces were not salient to club sport athletes because they experienced competition and training as a source of their sense of community.

Common interest. Varsity and club sport models also differed with respect to common interest. The difference derives, at least in part, from the fact that varsity athletes often choose their university because they have been recruited to play for their respective varsity team, whereas club sport athletes choose their university for personal or academic reasons, and seek a club after arriving on campus. Annette (club, volleyball) said, "Sport clubs are definitely for the people who want to play year round and meet people with a common interest who share the same ideals." However, when presented with the sport club sense of community model, the varsity athletes did note that common interest is also relevant to them.

> My community consists of athletes. I feel like I can relate to them and they can relate to me. We are all going through relatively the same process by trying to be a college athlete and going to school at the same time. (Caleb, varsity, basketball)

Even though common interest was perhaps not as salient to varsity athletes (and did not appear in the varsity sense of community model), the focus groups showed that it was relevant to their sense of community. It seems that common interest is a prerequisite for starting any community (see McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Voluntary activity. Another factor that initially emerged under the sport clubs structure as vital to creating sense of community was voluntary activity. However, it was not salient to varsity athletes. Within the sport club model, participation was viewed in terms of getting "to determine your own involvement" (Jamal, club, gymnastics) and "control of the sport for yourself again" (Peyton, club, cross country). The sense of accomplishment and self-determination demonstrated a commitment to the community and enhanced sense of community for the sport club athletes. Darren (club, fencing) described it this way:

> It takes the commitment off of the sport and puts it on each other. That way you are really connected to the other players, so you have more of sense of belonging because you are doing this [sport club] because you want to, rather than you have to. The lack of pressure I think is really important in this whole thing. It really takes off the edge. You know because you are no longer doing this for someone

else's superficial needs. You're doing it for yourself and your teammates and friends.

Although it was evident that voluntary activity was central to cultivating a sense of community within the sport club structure, its influence with the varsity model varied. It was clear that some varsity participants have grappled with social pressure and have often felt that their participation is not voluntary. "Since, I've been here, I've never felt it was voluntary—but I definitely can see how that could contribute to community. It's [varsity sport] definitely more like a job than anything," Laura (varsity, soccer) said. Brittany (varsity, soccer) agreed: "I can see how the voluntary nature would create community. We don't have that on our team; I mean people don't want to be there. It's not fun." Hanna (varsity, volleyball) added:

> It's kind of interesting because ultimately we don't *have* to play. We could have gone somewhere and decided not to play or played club sports, but I think once you are here as a varsity athlete you can get caught up in the, "Ah, I have to do this, I have to be there." But I can see how having to volunteer your time could create a sense of community.

Although this helped explain why voluntary activity was not as salient to varsity athletes, it was nonetheless a factor in building their sense of community. Under the varsity structure, voluntary activity manifested itself as being a detractor to sense of community because it was not perceived as voluntary.

The differences between the two settings are consistent with Stevens' (2000) work, which suggested that an increase in commodification and professionalization could decrease the sense of community enjoyed by participants. Stevens asserted that the shift within Canadian Women's Hockey to a high performance competitive sport model eroded the sense of community that participants experienced. "The game has shifted from one of camaraderie to one of domination, a characteristic critically noted in the male game" (Stevens, 2000, p. 137). She further argued, "The commercial-professional values intertwined within that system are over-riding the community-voluntary value nexus of the female game" (p. 128). There is obviously more commodification and professionalization in the varsity sport system than in the sport club system. This may explain why voluntary activity enhanced the sense of community within the sport clubs, but within the varsity model it was more often mentioned as an element that detracted from a sense of community because it was missing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study both confirmed and extended Warner and Dixon's (2011; in press) findings regarding the necessary factors for building a sense of community via sport, and demonstrated the importance of exploring sport variations and contexts (cf. Hill, 1996; McCormack & Chalip, 1988; Puddifoot, 1996). After analyzing the focus group data from athletes in two different sport systems, it was apparent that the factors identified in both models could be considered together in a way that would allow a deeper and broader understanding of sense of community in sport. However, it was also clear that the salience of some factors is context specific. The theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of these findings are discussed below.

Theoretical Implications

Although Warner and Dixon's (2011; in press) developed different models of club and varsity sport, this study demonstrates that there are more similarities between the contexts than initially posited. When focus groups from both contexts were provided with both models, they found relevancies in the factors that were initially unique to the one context or the other. Nevertheless, the salience of the factors and their manifestation in the two sport contexts differed considerably. That is, the athletes concluded that the factors not initially mentioned for their context were subtly relevant, despite the fact that they were not as salient. This suggests that apparent differences in the sense of community experienced in different contexts (Hill, 1996) can result from differences in factor salience and interpretation, and may sometimes not be due to differences in the factors themselves. As a result, the mechanisms that emerge need to be thought of as factors for which importance and contribution to sense of community result from the settings' contingencies and community members' expectations.

Qualitative Research Considerations

This study demonstrated that a particular theme or idea can, in fact, be relevant in a particular setting, even if it is not salient enough to emerge through an interview. As the results (themes and ideas) from previous studies were presented to focus groups, one group's themes (e.g., sport club or varsity) were recognized as being subtlety relevant to the other group, even if they were not salient enough to emerge in direct questioning in the previous interviews. This suggests a potential limitation of the interview method, and it indicates the potential utility of integrating some deductive, as well as inductive work, especially when working with interview data. That was accomplished in this study by utilizing focus groups to further explore findings from previous studies

Furthermore, this study indicated themes may actually manifest differently in different contexts, even if the labels or points of reference seem similar. Thus, when aggregating qualitative studies, it is just as important to consider similarities and differences in content within themes, as it is to consider differences in the categories that emerge. To identify subtle differences in content and points of reference, it is necessary to probe each idea to determine the ways it is interpreted, and the contingencies that make it salient or relevant.

Practical Implications

This context specificity of sense of community in sport has important implications for those interested in fostering community in a variety of contexts, not necessarily limited to sport. The seven identified factors within a sport setting must be carefully considered and evaluated in a sport setting. Utilizing the same logic from previous employee and consumer research (cf. Dixon & Warner, 2010; Kano et al., 1984; Warner, Newland, & Green, 2011), which states that factors should be prioritized based on their ability to satisfy or dissatisfy and the consumers' expectations—a person concerned with building community would first want to eliminate and/or address all the elements that could detract from the experience. For example, in a sport club setting, creating leadership opportunities should be prioritized ahead of other factors that were only viewed to contribute (i.e., social spaces, voluntary action, and common interest) because of its potential to detract from the experience. For example, in a varsity sport setting, it would be most important to first address voluntary action to foster a better sense of community. Similarly, other

practitioners would want to identify key detractors and eliminate them first, and then focus attention on the important community builders.

This study also supported the contention that sport, like other communities, will engender salubrious socialization and community development only when it is properly managed and designed (see Chalip, 2006). Knowing the numerous life quality enhancing benefits that result from experiencing a sense of community, managers, developers, and leaders should use the data and results of this study to more carefully plan and construct sport experiences that better foster a sense of community. Because sense of community has been linked to positive outcomes such as improved academic performance, increased civic participation, decreased drug use, and decreased delinquency (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; McCarthy et al.,1990), the outcomes from the sport community have broader implications for sport participants and possibly the campus community.

As sport continues to be recognized as an important tool for community building, the social implications resulting from the design of sport structures should continue to be evaluated and assessed. Community developers should not shy away from the challenges of better designing our sport structures and other relevant community structures to meet a well-established need of participants. In fact, given the attention to a lack of individuals experiencing community and a general decline in social connectedness (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Paxton, 1999; Putnam, 2000), the disciplines of sport management in conjunction with community psychology have the opportunity to assist in seeing that these negative societal trends are reversed. To accomplish this venture, the underlying sociocultural issues that sport settings can seemingly exacerbate by dividing communities at times need to be addressed, so that a more participant-centered focus is not only possible but also more acceptable. This research is a step towards better understanding the participants' experience, and how sport can serve as a tool to enhance a sense of community among individuals.

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