

Cliques in Sport: Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletes

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Although cliques are often referenced in sporting circles, they have received little attention in the group dynamics literature. This is surprising given their potential influence on group-related processes that could ultimately influence team functioning (e.g., Carron & Eys, 2012). The present study examined competitive athletes' perceptions of cliques using semistructured interviews with 18 (nine female, nine male) intercollegiate athletes ($M_{age} = 20.9$, $SD = 1.6$) from nine sport teams. Athletes described the formation of cliques as an inevitable and variable process that was influenced by a number of antecedents (e.g., age/tenure, proximity, similarity) and ultimately shaped individual and group outcomes such as isolation, performance, and sport adherence. Further, athletes described positive consequences that emerged when existing cliques exhibited more inclusive behaviors and advanced some areas of focus for the management of cliques within sport teams. Results are discussed from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Keywords: subgroups, social environment, group dynamics, teams

Group dynamics, which is defined as “a field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions” (Cartwright & Zander, 1968, p. 19) has received a considerable amount of research attention in the sport setting (e.g., Kleinert, et al., 2012; Martin, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014). This proliferation of group-related research can be attributed to many factors. One of those relates to the prevalence of groups in sport. To be sure, most sports involve the use of groups whether in competition or during training—even individual sport athletes typically practice and compete alongside teammates (e.g., Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012). Similarly, although athletic ability is paramount for team success, the dynamics within the team have been found to be of equal consequence (e.g., Carron, Martin, & Loughhead, 2012).

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While the examination of team dynamics has focused on the overall group, less attention has been directed to the “group within the group”—the subgroup, or as it is traditionally known in sport—the clique. From a practical perspective, the lack of attention with regard to cliques may not be surprising given the common belief that coaches and practitioners should strive to develop cohesive teams, with a collective identity and sense of ‘we.’ This approach has even lead to the suggestion that group leaders work to prevent the emergence of cliques due to their potential for disruption owing to issues such as ostracism of other members, conflict, and decreased efficiency (e.g., Yukelson, 1997). However, a focus on subjugating the emergence of subgroups overlooks the reality that cliques will emerge in groups (e.g., Cronin, Bezrukova, Weingart, & Tinsley, 2011), and the suggestion that they may have a positive influence on group and member outcomes (e.g., Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003).

The presence of cliques in sport has previously been identified. For example, their presence (compared with their absence) within teams has been found to reduce the probability of success (Eitzen, 1973). In a preliminary attempt at conceptualizing subgroups, Carron and Cheladurai (1981) suggested a dualistic model comprised of coalitions (based on the task-related purposes) and

cliques (based on socially related manifestations). Interestingly, despite these previous attempts at investigating and conceptualizing subgroups in sport, the majority of research pertaining to the social environment has targeted perceptions of the total group (e.g., cohesion, collective efficacy) or individual relations within the group (coach-athlete relationships, peer relationships). This absence of consistent empirical investigation has led to the current state of literature, which lacks a reliable conceptualization, and has failed to identify both (a) the implications of cliques for team and personal outcomes in sport, and (b) proposed strategies for the management of clique formation.

Despite this absence from the sport literature, a general understanding of cliques—and the importance of their investigation for sport—can be derived from domains where their presence has been examined, including industrial/organizational psychology (e.g., Lau & Murnighan, 2005) and social psychology (e.g., Henrich, Kupermine, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000). In broad terms, cliques can be considered tightly knit subgroups of individuals that contain reciprocating relationships (e.g., Henrich et al., 2000). In addition, Carton and Cummings (2012) advanced two criteria required for the classification of a clique. First, members must belong to the same total group where membership and task objectives are recognized. Second, members must have a level of interdependence that is unique to that of the total group (e.g., interactions between subgroup members differ from those of other group members).

In addition to these classification criteria, attempts have been made to describe cliques and identify factors that make them more or less likely. Specifically, Carton and Cummings (2012) proposed a typology for subgroups identifying three underlying factors: identity, resources, and knowledge. Identity-based subgroups involve individuals who have similar values and social characteristics and share a common sense of identity. Resource-based subgroups revolve around the control or acquisition of group resources, which often result in the development of hierarchies or power/status positions, and finally, knowledge-based subgroups form based on the acquisition and sharing of knowledge. Therefore, those who share similar means of acquiring and translating information often form smaller entities.

A second approach, described as Faultline Theory (e.g., Lau & Murnighan, 1998), revolves around identifiable but hypothetical ‘dividing lines’ (i.e., faultlines). This theory was originally grounded in social identity and self-categorization theories (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which reflect individual’s identification with the groups to which they belong—in a similar way to identity-based subgroups described above. More recently, however, Thatcher and Patel (2012) suggested these faultlines more closely resembled the categorization-elaboration model (CEM; van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) that refers to perceptions of diversity in addition to similarity.

They suggest the theoretical foundations of faultline research are based on perceptions of intrasubgroup similarities and intersubgroup differences—mechanisms that are readily apparent in sport. For example, take the often-discussed distinction (i.e., faultline) between ‘rookies and vets’ that demonstrates the similarities within the subgroup as well as the differences compared with other teammates. Essentially, these differences are apparent to individuals within a team and will influence both individual and group level behaviors.

Not only does research from other domains inform the identification and categorization of subgroups, it also highlights their behavioral influences exhibited across multiple settings and populations. These influential forces can serve facilitative purposes such as the promotion of prosocial behaviors (e.g., Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007) and self-esteem (e.g., Tarrant, MacKenzie, & Hewitt, 2006), as well as the transmission of cultural knowledge, accepted behaviors, and attitudes (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1995). Conversely, this influence can be detrimental when antisocial or delinquent norms or behaviors are exhibited (Bagwell, Coie, Terry, & Lochman, 2000), and can predict increased substance abuse (e.g., Verkooijen, deVries, & Nielson, 2007), unhealthy eating behaviors (Crandall, 1988), and negative body image and weight loss issues (Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999). In summary, the array of positive and negative influences derived from cliques make it essential to understand and explore factors that make particular outcomes more or less likely.

Although current sport research has not systematically investigated cliques, several studies have noted their presence and formation. For example, elite level athletes reported that cliques had a negative effect on their stress levels due to their tendency to divide teammates and deteriorate the team environment (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). Likewise, from a youth athlete’s perspective, sport participants identified the ‘lack of cliques’ as an actual indication of a team’s level of social cohesion (Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009). From a team-building perspective, one qualitative investigation asked coaches to provide strategies for facilitating team cohesion (Ryska, Yin, Cooley, & Ginn, 1999). A theme that emerged was the ‘breaking-up of cliques,’ and coaches highlighted the importance of promoting a sense of social acceptance (vs. clique development and isolation) among team members. Similarly, in describing principles for effective team-building protocols, Yukelson (1997) noted that factions or cliques could divide loyalties and result in individuals becoming disconnected from the total team. In a similar vein, when discussing team-building strategies, Bloom, Loughead, and Newin (2008) emphasized that team building was more complex than simple team activities and actually cautioned against the development of cliques and subsequent member isolation.

In considering the wealth of information derived from various contexts, and the identification of their presence and relevance in sport, a better understanding

of cliques as they pertain to sport is warranted. At a general level, given that cliques are likely part of the social structure of teams, and individuals are likely to respond to social information that comes from a relevant subgroup, understanding “who is they” (Lawrence, 2011) in a sport setting should provide a better understanding of important group processes and outcomes. While the ‘they’ is assumed to be the team in sport group research, the individual being questioned could be construing a social context that is different from that of the whole team. Further, cliques are often discussed as problematic and undesirable phenomena in the sport literature (e.g., Bloom et al., 2008; Yukelson, 1997), yet research in other areas has reported that cooperating at a global level can result from activating subgroup identities (Rabinovich & Morton, 2011). We do not currently have a clear indication of what cliques are, and what type of influence they may have on group functioning and individual athletes’ experiences. This is essential information for coaches, practitioners, and researchers who are tasked with understanding or managing the social environment of a sport team. Unfortunately, the available literature cannot adequately inform evidence-based intervention or team building as it pertains to subgroups in sport.

Therefore, as a preliminary investigation in the context of sport, we sought to explore the nature of cliques through qualitative interviews with competitive level athletes. Indeed, this is an exploratory project in the context of sport; however, our research was guided by previous literature. The investigation of cliques in other fields of research reveals requirements for their categorization, circumstances that make their formation more or less likely (i.e., faultlines), and the behavioral influences on those involved (or excluded). Similarly, the extant literature in sport has frequently identified their presence, albeit as a secondary source of interest. This backdrop served as the foundation for the current investigation, and informed our selected methodology. Specifically, interviews were selected as (1) constructs may be more clearly expressed by participants rather than investigators (Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985), and (2) they can provide rich detail with regard to experiences, beliefs, and perceptions that might not be captured through other methodologies (e.g., Carey & Smith, 1994). Within this general scope, the purpose was to explore athlete’s perceptions of clique formation, as well as their implications for individual experiences and group functioning. With a view to obtaining and translating practical information, we also investigated strategies used for the avoidance and dissolution of cliques. In recognizing that cliques are only one type of subgroup that can develop, we began by prompting athlete reflections of subgroups as a whole. This approach enabled the definitions of ‘cliques’ to be specifically advanced by the athletes. Nonetheless, as a preliminary conceptualization, the current research approached cliques as a specific type of subgroup that is frequently referenced in the sport setting and that holds potential implications for individual and group outcomes.

Methods

Participants

Based on a purposeful criterion sampling approach (Patton, 2002), eligible participants were required to be members of an intercollegiate sport team, and had to be either presently competing or have just completed the current season. These criteria were selected to ensure the competition level was standardized across participants and that they would be able to provide information based on recent experiences. We did not restrict participation to specific years of experience and recruited athletes from a range of sports (e.g., team sport, individual sport, contact sport) to enhance the heterogeneity and generalizability of our results. Finally, participants were continually recruited until saturation and redundancy in responses were identified.

Nine male and nine female athletes ($M_{age} = 20.9$, $SD = 1.6$; range = 19–24) with an average of 2.4 years of experience on their respective teams were invited and agreed to participate in the current study. With regard to specific year on the team, two athletes were in their first, seven were in their second, seven were in their third, one was in his fourth, and one was in his fifth year of team involvement. There were no incentives for the participants and an equal number of male and female athletes were not specifically recruited. At the time of the interviews, 10 participants were in their competitive season, whereas the remaining eight had recently completed their season. The sample included athletes who competed in rugby (three females), basketball (three males, one female), hockey (two males, two females), soccer (three males, two females), and swimming (one male, one female). With regard to participant roles within their respective teams, 13 self-categorized themselves as starters (i.e., competed as a primary team member at most events), six identified as formal leaders (i.e., assigned captains or assistants), and nine identified themselves as informal leaders (i.e., individuals who emerged and developed a leadership role that was not prescribed).

A second sample was recruited for verification interviews once the initial interviews and analyses were complete. These participants (two males, two females) were similar to the original sample with regard to age ($M_{age} = 21.3$, $SD = 1.5$; range = 19–22), team tenure (3.3 years), and sport type (e.g., soccer, hockey, basketball).

Data Collection

Procedures. Following ethical approval from the university Human Subject Research Committee, participant access was gained through coach contact. Nine coaches were provided with a description of the proposed study and were asked to forward the information to their athletes and direct them to the researchers should they be interested in participating. When interested athletes contacted the researchers, interviews were scheduled

according to participant availability, and were conducted over a month-long period of time within a laboratory space on the university campus. Before conducting each interview, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and were told of their ability to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. After completing all interview sessions, the second author transcribed each recorded interview verbatim.

Semistructured Interviews. A semistructured interview guide was developed, which included a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix A). For the most part, these questions were based on the theoretical understanding that was acquired from previous subgroup research (e.g., Carton & Cummings, 2012; Henrich et al., 2000; Thatcher & Patel, 2012), and the interview process involved introductory questions (used to establish rapport and promote participant engagement), transition questions (used to introduce and begin the discussion of cliques), key questions, and closing questions (used to explore additional concepts or experiences and provide an opportunity for final thoughts; e.g., Patton, 2002). With regard to key questions, participants were asked to describe the nature of team cliques (e.g., “Could you describe in your own words, what a clique means to you?”) and explain the process through which they develop (e.g., “Now that I understand what a clique means to you, could you tell me how you think they develop?”). Participants also reflected on their past personal experiences with cliques, and the outcomes that resulted from them (e.g., “Thinking back to your experiences on your team, could you describe a situation when a clique had an influence on your sport experience?” “What was it about this group that brought about these outcomes?”). Finally, we asked athletes to reflect on how their experiences with cliques could be used to inform coaches and athletes about best practices for the management of cliques. It is important to note that interview session’s incorporated frequent follow-up probes to build on interviewee responses and, ultimately, more thoroughly reveal perceptions of cliques (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

The interviews ranged in length from 15 to just over 45 min ($M_{time} = 27:30$, $SD = 9:20$) and the transcription process yielded 141 pages of single-spaced text. Due to the exploratory nature of the current project, hierarchical content analysis was used as it provides a standardized procedure that allows researchers to use a number of identified analytical tools to explore themes in the data, which subsequently increases the reliability and trustworthiness of the data (e.g., Smith & Sparks, 2012). Specifically, this method involved identifying meaning units (i.e., segments of text containing a single idea or piece of information; Côté, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993), and grouping common responses within a framework of subthemes and general themes. Each meaningful grouping (general

dimension) was subsequently given a title that represented the higher-order and lower-order themes within it (Bertollo, Saltarelli, & Robazza, 2009). The first and second authors independently identified meaning units of text from the interviewee responses, and once completed, viewed the other author’s meaning units to identify any text that could be broken down further because it contained more than one segment of information. The authors continued this process until consensus was reached, and worked collaboratively toward the grouping of units into dimensions and themes (100% agreement between the authors was necessary for inclusion).

Verification Interviews

To determine the credibility of our results as they pertained to the phenomenon of interest, a small number of participants were recruited to conduct verification interviews. The purpose of these interviews was not to continue the original data collection, but rather to provide verification for the results of the original data analysis (e.g., Morse et al., 2002; Patton, 2002). Semistructured interviews ($N = 4$) were conducted until saturation was apparent to the researchers. For the sake of clarity, and to aid in understanding the context of each quote, results are presented throughout with numbers and letters to identify athlete and sex as well as the sport for which they participated (e.g., 1-F-Rugby). Here, ‘V’ indicates verification interview quotes. Participating athletes were provided with a description of our study and an executive summary of the results. The lead investigator systematically worked through the results with the athletes who were asked to provide any additional insight on the themes or subthemes that emerged. Before this discussion of results, athletes were asked to describe cliques in their own words. All responses resembled those of previous athletes, as demonstrated in the following definition, “cliques are groups of people that form together, have the same behaviors and values, and it happens on teams all the time.” (V4-M-Soccer) Athletes also provided insight that added depth to our interpretation of earlier interviews. For example, when discussing the presence of a cohort effect, one athlete said, “Yes for sure, especially the first few weeks. I hung out with the ‘rookies’ because we had the same situation, we were nervous, and didn’t know anyone else. It was definitely present at the beginning stages.” (V3-F-Hockey) This quote added depth because it acknowledged the potential cohort effects while, at the same time, demonstrating the variability of cliques (e.g., their cohort was primarily influential early in a season). These views aided in exploring the data, but more importantly, indicated that athletes were ultimately in agreement with the results and no major issues were identified. Statements such as “I think you guys covered everything” (V2-F-Soccer), and “I can’t think of anything else off the top of my head, it was very thorough” (V4-M-Soccer) reinforced this support, and in turn, revealed the trustworthiness of the findings

(Patton, 2002). Considering the participants involved in the verification interviews were primed with the executive summary, as has been done in previous studies (e.g., Benson, Eys, Surya, Dawson, & Schneider, 2013), only the information obtained from the original interviews is discussed herein.

Methodological Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, certain techniques were employed throughout the study to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Preliminary bracketing interviews were conducted with the first and second authors before the commencement of athlete interviews and data analysis. Given that both authors involved in interviewing and initial analyses were former intercollegiate athletes, bracketing was particularly beneficial to generate discussion regarding previous experiences and to uncover potential biases (Patton, 2002). In addition to providing individual awareness of previous beliefs the researchers had pertaining to cliques, both researchers were also aware of the others biases, which were consistently discussed during the research process. In addition,

two pilot interviews were conducted to determine general interview length and to practice the use of probe questions. Furthermore, the authors conducted regular debriefing throughout the interview process (e.g., Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) and data analysis (e.g., Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Finally, member checks were provided whereby all athletes were given the opportunity to review their interview transcription to omit or clarify any information.

Results

Overall, athletes' reflections uncovered an understanding of cliques as a distinct process involving the emergence of subgroups within teams. The core themes that emerged included a general perspective of the nature of cliques, a discussion of what characteristics or contexts lead to the emergence of cliques, and how their presence can influence individual- and group-level outcomes. Responses also revealed a number of tangible approaches to managing the emergence of cliques in sport. Table 1 provides a visual representation and frequency of the higher order

Table 1 General Dimensions, Higher-Order Themes, and Sub-Themes for Cliques in Sport

General Dimension	Higher-Order Themes (a/b)	Subthemes
Nature of cliques	General definition (18/20)	
	Utility (12/14)	Inclusive behaviors
	Exclusive behaviors	
	Inevitability (18/36)	
	Variability (7/13)	
Context of cliques	Antecedents	
	Age and cohort (12/30)	
	Proximity (14/32)	Physical proximity
		Team position
	Status (10/20)	Skill level
		Social status
	Individual similarities (18/40)	Beliefs
		Interests
		Personalities
	Consequences	
	Debilitative outcomes (17/68)	Individual level
		Group level
	Facilitative outcomes (17/48)	Individual level
		Group level
Practical implications	Fostering interpersonal relations (18/67)	
	Increasing physical proximity (15/33)	
	Emphasizing individual awareness (14/36)	

Note. For (a/b) displayed with the higher-order themes, 'a' refers to the number of athlete participants who made reference to that theme, whereas 'b' refers to the total number of meaning units that were classified within that theme.

themes. Before exploring these themes, the perception of cliques from the athletes' perspective will be presented.

The Nature of Cliques

Definition. Among the 18 athletes interviewed, everyone identified cliques as being distinct subgroups of individuals who share certain tendencies and characteristics. For example, one athlete defined cliques as "a group of people who spend a lot of time together and have the same values, morals, and beliefs." (10-M-Hockey) Another advanced, "for me, I guess it's like a group of people who will obviously share some kind of like similarities, whether it's like interests or personalities, and they're just like, they'll always hang out... be together." (2-F-Rugby) Although there were slight discrepancies among the characteristics within the definitions (i.e., same values, morals, vs. similar interests or personalities), these sentiments reinforce the observation that there was a general consensus of cliques as being smaller groups of individuals with close ties and similarities.

Utility. Another striking aspect of athletes' descriptions was that cliques were viewed both positively and negatively. From a negative perspective, athletes felt that cliques were often exclusionary,

I think a clique would be a group of people who constantly hang out and do things but not in ways that friends would. More like they're doing it to be together and they don't include anyone else and they make other people feel like they're not good enough to hang out with. (13-F-Hockey)

Another athlete reinforced this tendency for cliques to distance themselves from others, "to me, a clique is just basically a group that has common interests or common beliefs that exclude other people. Kind of an elitist group that forms their own group and not everyone can be in it." (14-M-Basketball)

Conversely, other athletes described cliques exhibiting inclusive behaviors as an outlet for social support and guidance, "[clique members] are the people who they'll go to first when they have something to tell them or need to ask a question, and [cliques] are welcoming to other people." (2-F-Rugby)

Inevitability.

Regardless of whether cliques were perceived as positive or negative, all athletes agreed that they were an inevitable feature of sport groups. For example, "it's impossible to avoid cliques I think. It doesn't sound grim though because you can have, your cliques can always be inclusive, right?" (4-F-Soccer) Clearly, although cliques were seen as something that will always be present in teams, both their exhibited utility and affiliated members could vary.

Variability. Although the presence of cliques was believed to be inevitable, their composition and respective influence on individual experiences are likely to

change as the group develops and changes over time. Athletes described how, for example, injury or a shift in the status of key players may result in a shift of the boundaries surrounding cliques:

Cliques dynamically change depending on if you're injured; your clique is going to change because you're going to get jealous of your friends. You'd get closer to the people on the bench. (4-F-Soccer)

Specifically, when athletes were forced into certain situations (e.g., on the bench due to injury), a shift in exposure to teammates occurred and, in turn, so did their relationships. This movement to and from certain cliques was explicitly identified, "I have seen it before when they [cliques] don't dissolve but it's more of a semi-permeable membrane and guys are able to come back and across with comfort." (10-M-Hockey)

Contexts of Cliques

Of particular interest to the current study were the antecedents to clique development and the outcomes associated with their presence. The previous discussion serves to highlight the prevalence of cliques; however, what causes these subgroups to emerge and what does their presence mean for team members?

Antecedents. In relation to the development of cliques, several themes emerged. Among them were the aspects of *age* and *team cohort*, which are discussed as one common higher-order theme (athletes referred them to interchangeably). In relation to age, one athlete said, "cliques on university teams have to do with how old you are. The 'first years' that are in residence hang out together cause they all live with each other. So those kinds of cliques, you can't really do anything about them." (4-F-Soccer) Another athlete reinforced this comment but with a greater emphasis on cohort, "this year we had two very distinct groups, almost split right down the middle. There were the older guys, guys who had played last year, and the rookies who came in this year." (10-M-Hockey) These comments reveal the potential for athletes to develop closer relationships with others in their cohort because of shared experiences and similar characteristics.

The saying, 'out of sight, out of mind' appears to be particularly relevant for the second higher-order theme that emerged. *Proximity* increased the chances that individuals would group together and this closeness could be the result of living arrangements, "we lived in groups of three or four people, so the guys that actually shared the apartment were a little closer because they were just spending more time with each other" (12-M-Basketball), or athletic positions, "we often see line-mates, a group of girls or maybe a couple [defensemen], will hang out all the time." (15-F-Hockey)

While physical proximity may promote interaction among individuals, the *skill level* or *status* of athletes also seemed to influence clique tendencies. Specifically, one athlete said, "I feel like that's a big thing on this team. I'm

friends with lots of guys that don't start but some people just try and group themselves with people that play a lot." (6-M-Soccer) A similar example referred to those who did not play at all, "I found the girls who weren't on the traveling squad got closer. Like they obviously were still close to people on the team but they kind of had this own little, I guess, group." (2-F-Rugby)

Finally, *individual similarities* were a significant predictor of grouping tendencies that encompassed several areas ranging from similar beliefs, to interests, and personalities. With regard to beliefs, these could vary from sport-related tendencies for work ethic, to those relating to academics or religion. In referencing his own subgroup, one athlete stated, "you could tell that we all followed the same beliefs, you know: Work hard, come to the rink every day, do your best, and listen to the coach." (10-M-Hockey) Similarly, considering participants were student athletes, certain individuals highlighted the tendency for those who are more concerned with one aspect or the other (e.g., athletics vs. academics) to gravitate toward one another. Finally, religious beliefs influenced clique formation:

Another thing that separated the team into cliques could be standards. For example, I'm a Mormon and so I don't drink, smoke, or go out to clubs at night. A bunch of the guys do and... I don't condemn them for it or anything. Like "fine by me" but I don't participate either. I don't go out to those things so that kind of creates a separation between us just because a bunch of guys on the team don't drink or don't do those sorts of things. So that is a barrier between us. (14-M-Basketball)

While this theme did emerge in several interviews, it was a function of cultural beliefs that are prevalent in the region where the interviews were conducted, and was well understood and accepted among teammates, "we still invite them and they still invite us if we go out to eat somewhere or vice versa. It's just, I guess different upbringings, preferences, and morals." (12-M-Basketball)

Individuals who shared similar interests and personalities also appeared to gravitate toward each other. "There's like a group of us on the team that snowboard and ski, so we will always hang out a lot during the winter because we will be going to the mountains." (2-F-Rugby) In many instances, gravitating to those with similar interests seems natural and is not necessarily intentional, "it's not like you choose to belong to it, it just happens. You have something in common and you start hanging out and continue to do so. You don't even realize that you don't hang out with anyone else." (1-F-Rugby) Many athletes felt that the emergence of such cliques was strictly a matter of enjoying other members company and rarely had underlying motivations—other than simply wanting to surround themselves with individuals with whom they had things in common.

Consequences. Based on athlete responses, it was apparent that cliques influenced individual athletes

as well as the group as a whole. Similarly, depending on the characteristics of the cliques (i.e., inclusive vs. exclusive), either facilitative or debilitating consequences could emerge. From an *individual debilitating* standpoint, instances of isolation and being left out were often highlighted and appeared to occur during social as well as task-related situations.

[Members of a clique] just pushed me off to the side. Any social gatherings I would go to, I would be ignored. Even on the field at practices, it's like "oh find a partner" and I'd always be waiting for someone else to be alone and be like "hey, let's go together." It really sucked and took a big toll on me emotionally. (18-F-Rugby)

When describing such negative experiences, participants reported that they felt excluded—feelings that hindered their interest in maintaining their involvement in the team: "when you're a young girl and you're not really in a clique, it can have a negative effect so you don't want to play anymore because you don't have any friends on the team." (1-F-Rugby)

From a *group debilitating* perspective, athletes identified general negative sentiments such as, "in my opinion, I think cliques can ruin teams" (12-M-Basketball), and "I'd say it definitely tears apart our like, us coming together and being like in unison." (13-F-Hockey) Interestingly, specific examples were also advanced:

Certain girls started to go out and would skip training. We were so frustrated and wanted our coaches to step-up but they didn't, so we had to and it put a damper on our teams' mood. When you have a group who stops being dedicated to the team, it puts a whole negative morale on everyone. (4-F-Soccer)

Another athlete identified the potential for differing clique members to purposefully impede performance, "She [a clique member] stepped out of the way [of my pass] so it got intercepted, it was awful. I got in trouble and was like 'WHAT!' So that definitely hinders performance because you don't trust all your teammates." (9-F-Soccer)

The athletes did not, however, always perceive cliques as debilitating. At the *individual level*, cliques were expected to serve as a source of support among team members: "I think [cliques] can be a good thing, it's good to have two or three really close friends that you can get everything off your chest to." (12-M-Basketball) Similarly, involvement can result in improved affect, "whenever I got to hang out with the [veterans] outside of soccer it was always fun and I'd be like: 'Yes! I get to hang out with the vets tonight.' Makes you feel good." (5-M-Soccer) The importance of membership and inclusion were also identified: "It just kind of gives [clique members] a sense of belonging and they feel included." (2-F-Rugby) Finally, depending on the normative or modeling behaviors exhibited by a clique, it could serve as motivation for team members. After identifying a certain

clique that trained every morning, one athlete said, “It makes me think, I need to do more, I need to find more time to get in the gym and work out and become a better basketball player.” (14-M-Basketball)

While this added motivation would benefit the group as whole, specific examples of how advantageous certain cliques could be at the *group level* were also provided. Emphasis was placed on the ability for certain cliques to behave inclusively and serve as role models for the remainder of the group.

There was a group of four or five girls who had all played on the same club team and they’re a core group who pass really well together and were cliquey, but weren’t an excluding kind of clique. They let everyone else in and the fact that they knew each other so well and were cliquey actually helped everyone. It helped the team because they worked well together and incorporated others so our team dynamic really changed. (4-F-Rugby)

Practical Implications

In addition to the nature, emergence, and consequences of cliques, interviews also revealed athletes perceptions regarding approaches to deconstructing or preventing the formation of debilitating cliques or for the promotion of ideal group environments through clique management. Participant’s responses were based on what athletes had seen coaches use in the past as well as what they would suggest based on their personal experiences.

Fostering Interpersonal Relations. The first theme that emerged was the importance of fostering *interpersonal relations* between players. Athletes believed that positive group environments could be facilitated by having an event away from the athletic facilities, “have potlucks and stuff like that, it helps a lot because everybody is expected to go and it’s easier to talk to and meet people that way.” (1-F-Rugby) Athletes also provided examples of how these events targeted communication and relations within the team:

Last year, we did this high-ropes course. You know, there was a lot of trust and teamwork activities involved and when we were doing these things, everyone sort of got a little bit more comfortable with working as a team and communicating and things like that. I think stuff like that really helps. (16-M-Swimming)

Increasing Physical Proximity.

A closely-related theme spoke more to the *proximity* of athletes and how physically being close and seeing each other consistently is beneficial. Approaches used to promote proximity could be common areas, “I really noticed in my first year that you’d go there [an established area] and there’d always be a person from the team. We’d all conjugate and hang out in the same area.” (2-F-Rugby) Similarly, organized times for school work were believed

to help, “have a study hall because obviously you need players to be eligible but at the same time, that’s a way for guys have to be there, talk, and help each other out.” (12-M-Basketball)

Another way to promote proximity was through player rotation. These rotations varied in contexts from travel, “he [coach] assigns different roommates so you have to get to know everyone on the team” (14-M-Basketball), to practice “in drills, our coaches always make you switch partners throughout.” (1-F-Rugby) The underlying assumption is that coaches would prefer consistent interaction among all team members. Furthermore, this rotation could also be seen as a way to promote mentoring situations and supportive outlets, “[Rotation] is good because you always have a vet paired with a first year, and as a first year you have a lot of questions.” (4-F-Rugby)

Emphasizing Individual Awareness. A final higher-order theme emphasized the promotion of *individual awareness* and subsequent inclusive behaviors. For example, athletes discussed the importance of being aware of one’s own behaviors “maybe they’re not fully aware that they only hang out with this group... like you may not even realize that there’s two of three groups on a team just because that’s not what you’re worried about.” (10-M-Hockey) Another athlete built on this point, “I don’t think they realize how big of an impact on our performance it actually did have, and so I think if people were more aware of it, then it might change.” (18-F-Rugby) This awareness, as athletes put it, would result in emphasizing more consistent inclusive behaviors, “you need to set an example for yourself by stepping out of your comfort zone, talking to people that you wouldn’t normally talk to.” (9-F-Soccer)

Proposed Clique Framework

In an attempt to organize and integrate the results from this preliminary study, we propose an initial framework. By using the term framework, we want to be clear that we do not expect this to be viewed as a model for this construct. Rather, we would like to see this initial framework serve as a heuristic for future research examining this important, but under-served construct in the field of group dynamics.

Our proposed framework is informed by the information that we gleaned from study participants. Specifically, that cliques are an inevitable and identifiable subgrouping of athletes within a team who interact among themselves as well as with others on the team, and their utility varies to include facilitative or debilitating individual or group-level outcomes.

Inherent in this information is the idea that clique emergence is characterized by both inputs that shape the process, as well as outputs that will differ according to the nature of the subgroups. Based on these observations, we suggest an input-process-output framework. In terms of inputs, athletes in this study reported that the subgroups that form and their subsequent inclusive or exclusive

behaviors were shaped by antecedents (e.g., age and cohort, proximity, status, and individual similarities) that dictate faultlines, along which teammates may be predisposed to differentiate. These emergent subgroups were, in turn, expected to influence the group and individual members based on how the subgroup members behaved (i.e., processes). Finally, based on the formation and behaviors exhibited, the outputs refer to both the facilitative and debilitating outcomes experienced by individuals or the group as a whole.

In terms of the heuristic value of the framework, it is interesting that athletes reported on approaches to manage cliques by modifying not only the inputs that shape group emergence (e.g., increasing proximity among members or activities that develop relationships), but also by modifying the potential for existing inputs or contexts to lead to subgroups (e.g., developing awareness of subgroups). It would appear that cliques could be managed not only by changing the circumstances that may generate them, but also by changing awareness and interpretations of these circumstances.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to develop a better understanding of sport team cliques from the perspective of competitive athletes. The findings revealed university-level athletes' perceptions of cliques, which indicated that cliques could vary in utility and inclusiveness, how their presence was largely inevitable, and finally, that membership could change throughout the season. In addition, antecedents and consequences of cliques were identified, and athletes also described specific areas to target for their management. In recognizing the wealth of information obtained from these athletes, a number of issues warrant further discussion. First, based on our findings, we propose a sport specific definition of cliques and relate our results to previous sport and organizational psychology literature. Second, we discuss the inevitability and variability of cliques proposed by athletes. Third, we provide a discussion on the management of cliques in sport teams.

Based on athlete reflections, we propose the following definition. Cliques are an inevitable, variable, and identifiable subgrouping of athletes within a team who exhibit particularly close task and/or social bonds. Their utility varies and the behaviors that members within cliques exhibit ultimately generate facilitative or debilitating individual or group-level outcomes. Interestingly, our understanding of cliques differs from an original proposition (e.g., Carron & Chelladurai, 1981) that subgroups are differentiated based solely on their emergence for task purposes (coalitions) and social reasons (cliques). In the current study, cliques did not exclusively serve social purposes and an immediate distinction between task- and social-initiation was not demonstrated. Although this distinction is often supported within group dynamics research (e.g., Fiedler, 1967), and for closely related

constructs in sport (e.g., cohesion, Carron & Eys, 2012; conflict, Paradis, Carron, & Martin, 2014), the intricacies and nuances of clique formation may involve more than this task/social classification.

In comparison with existing sport research, there were notable parallels between athlete perceptions and conceptualizations developed within organizational psychology. Specifically, our proposed definition satisfies the classification criteria advanced by Carton and Cummings (2012) who suggested that subgroups must (1) emerge from within a larger group and (2) have identifiable differences with regard to interactions from the remainder of the group. The fact that athletes were readily able to discuss the cliques within their teams demonstrates their potential identification within the group (as a specific type of subgroup) as well as their relative prevalence in sport.

The theoretical approaches derived from the organizational psychology literature also aid in the explanation of our results. For example, the typology distinguishing between subgroups based on identity, resources, and knowledge (Carton & Cummings, 2012) appeared to be evident within athletes' descriptions, and this approach may help inform clique development within sport teams. For example, *individual similarities* (e.g., beliefs, interests, personalities) that influenced the development of cliques could be described as identity-based factors, in the sense that athletes seek others with similar values to simplify the social dynamics present within larger groups (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000). Similarly, *skill level/social status* and *age/cohort* could be perceived as leading to resource-based subgroups. With regard to the nature of competitive sport, greater resources (i.e., scholarships, playing time, recognition) are often made available to the more skilled, and could explain the development of such subgroups—as members seek to increase 'social capital' in their group affiliations (e.g., Oh, Labianca, & Chung, 2006). Finally, as it pertains to knowledge-based subgroups, this could explain the tendency for *team position* or *skill level* to influence clique formation. Specific positions require a certain skill set or knowledge base, and this information would be more easily transferred and understood among athletes of the same position (e.g., offensive versus defensive players on a team). Interestingly, this transfer of information with regard to position could also be attributed to athlete proximity during training and competition. It is important to point out that although certain groupings could be explained by one of these subgroup types, the authors of the typology (Carton & Cummings, 2012) reinforce that each type is not mutually exclusive—meaning that a clique involving one specific antecedent (e.g., cohort) could be attributed to one or more factors (e.g., identity-based and resource-based).

The previous theory is rooted in identifying types of emerging groups, whereas another useful avenue for discussing our current results pertains to the hypothetical 'dividing lines' described by the Faultline theory (e.g., Lau & Murnighan, 1998). In understanding the inevitability of clique formation in sport, faultline theory provides

a framework to explore how existing characteristics may ‘preordain’ where, and when, cliques are likely to form. Several examples of this phenomenon emerged from participant responses. Indeed, *age* or *cohort*, *skill level*, *team position*, *beliefs*, and *personalities* were all identified by participants as antecedents to clique development, and these could all be considered as hypothetical ‘dividing lines’ that predetermine grouping tendencies.

The second area of discussion involves both the inevitability and variability of cliques. The inevitability may initially be disheartening considering its intuitive contradiction to traditional sport beliefs (i.e., the avoidance of cliques). However, in acknowledging the tendency for individuals to coalesce into smaller groups (e.g., Cronin, Bezrukova, Weingart, & Tinsley 2011; Hogg & Terry, 2000), emphasis should be shifted from their avoidance or disbandment to their management. Rather than attempting to terminate all cliques, coaches, practitioners, or athletes themselves should work with their teams to promote more inclusive and positive team behaviors. This will allow teams to capitalize on clique benefits while mitigating the problems that they may generate (e.g., Cronin et al., 2011).

The benefits that were described by participants are perhaps not surprising when considered in terms of certain theories from social and developmental psychology. For example, Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) seminal discussion of interpersonal attachment is often used to emphasize the importance of establishing long-term peer relations to satisfy the need for belongingness. In regard to this theory, participants’ responses may indicate that the bonds formed within cliques (as opposed to an entire team) may be sufficient to meet this need. For example, a greater quantity of superficial relationships has been found to be less satisfying to individuals than a smaller number of high-quality relationships (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). In terms of sport, this argument has been made, “groups that create connections among their members, such as amateur athletic teams... will reduce members’ feelings of social loneliness, but only more intimate, involving types of groups—families, romantic couples, or very close friendship *cliques*—will meet members’ social and emotional needs” (Forsyth, 2014, p. 67).

Therefore, the results indicating the facilitative outcomes resulting from cliques may be referring to their ability to satisfy individual needs to the extent that the larger group is unable to do so. Perhaps the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 2012) can help explain this need for subgroup development. Specifically, ODT posits that individuals have the need (1) to be accepted within a group, (2) to experience close connections to friends and loved ones, and (3) for autonomy and differentiation. Thus, total groups offer individuals the ability to feel part of the group, while the subgroup (i.e., clique) allows for their differentiation and individual identity that is separate from the total group by creating emotionally significant bonds with a select few individuals (e.g., Forsyth, 2014).

The importance of management versus dissolution is enhanced considering cliques are neither stable nor impenetrable—athletes referred to cliques as changing depending on circumstances and situations. In fact, one athlete referred to them as having a ‘semipermeable membrane,’ thus allowing athletes to come and go over the course of the season. This variability provides an opportunity for athlete leaders or coaches to promote inclusion and change, to take advantage of their movement, and translate their influence into beneficial outcomes.

Finally, in recognizing this need to manage cliques, the third area of discussion involves the ‘how to’ management of cliques as described by participants. Athletes advanced practical strategies and areas of emphasis to limit negative consequences; namely, fostering interpersonal relations, promoting increased physical proximity, and emphasizing individual awareness. Fostering interpersonal relations is something that almost all of the athletes thought as important, but is by no means a novel suggestion (e.g., Cotterill, 2013). When attempting to foster social relations in sport, team-building protocols often target interpersonal relations (e.g., Carron & Eys, 2012). Although we were unable to uncover published attempts at managing cliques through building interpersonal relations, one study specifically targeted these relations and successfully improved team cohesion in women’s gymnastics (McClure & Foster, 1991). While perceptions of cohesion and the management of cliques are markedly different, it would be interesting to determine whether specifically targeting improved relations among all members of a group would increase the perceptions of, or the inclusive behaviors demonstrated by cliques within a team.

The second suggestion involved increased physical proximity. Ensuring that athletes are consistently in each other’s presence can promote perceptions of togetherness and unity (e.g., Carron & Eys, 2012). Based on the current study, intercollegiate athletes felt this could be done through the identification and use of designated gathering areas, study hall programs, and scheduled team dinners, to name a few. Similarly, player rotation in various situations was something that athletes consistently mentioned. This increased proximity directly influences the degree to which all team members interact and communicate, which is important as ‘quality sustained interaction and communication’ is one of the five characteristics described as essential for the classification of a true group compared with an aggregate of individuals (e.g., Carron & Eys, 2012). Furthermore, individual perceptions of the degree to which a person is consistently involved in quality interactions with other group members is one of the criteria used for evaluating the level of groupness felt among members (e.g., Spink, Wilson, & Priebe, 2010). Do perceptions of general groupness reflect those of a team with fewer exclusive type cliques? Could strictly emphasizing consistent interaction with all individuals of the total group improve such perceptions? Future research could attempt such worthwhile investigations.

A final theme that emerged from athlete suggestions was the importance of emphasizing individual awareness. Specifically, although certain subgroups appeared to be 'exclusive,' often this was not the intention as members were not aware of their deleterious behavior. This behavioral awareness has been supported in sport, "if members of interdependent teams can better understand themselves and the personalities of their teammates then this greater awareness can be used to enhance intra-team dynamics" (Beauchamp, Jackson, & Lavalley, 2007, p. 26). Based on this premise, Beauchamp, Maclachlan, and Lothian (2005) advanced a three-phase conceptual framework for improved communication and interaction in team situations: understanding self, understanding others, and adapting and connecting. Once athletes gain a better understanding of themselves (Phase 1) and their teammates (Phase 2) with regard to their exhibited and preferred interaction behaviors, they are encouraged to communicate and interact in a manner consistent with their teammates preferences (Phase 3). While the athletes in the current study spoke more frequently to Phase 1, they did highlight the importance of getting out of their 'comfort zone' and interacting with individuals where interaction was not the norm. Such a framework with regard to clique behavior—in which individuals reflect on how their grouping tendencies and behaviors influence the team as a whole—would be an interesting avenue for future work.

A preliminary comparison between the practical implications for cliques can be made with recent intrateam conflict research. Although cliques and intrateam conflict are certainly separate entities, previous research has identified the presence of cliques as a potential antecedent to or consequence of intrateam conflict (Paradis et al., 2014). Recently, Holt, Knight, and Zukiwski (2012) advanced practical recommendations for conflict resolution within intercollegiate athletic teams. Two of their suggestions—early team-building activities and developing conflict resolution skills—align well with the present results of fostering interpersonal relations and emphasizing individual awareness. Future research would benefit from an investigation of the interplay between these two constructs, considering that there is apparent overlap in the management strategies and practitioners may benefit from decreased conflict and more inclusive team cliques.

Despite the novel information derived from the current study, it is not without its limitations. To extend the conceptualization of cliques more generally, future research should strive to explore a wider range of athlete experiences. Specifically, although the sample contained different sports, the use of intercollegiate athletes constrained the sample and limited the opportunity to explore experiences of athletes from other contexts (e.g., youth, recreational, or Master's sport). In addition, our sample did not take into consideration specific demographic information such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and first-generation college student status, to name a few. Considering the potential for such characteristics

to generate faultlines, future work would benefit from assessing the presence and influence of demographics for clique development and behaviors. Similarly, the views represented are strictly those of athletes; perhaps coaches or managers would have different perceptions of the relevance of subgroupings within their sport teams. A significant challenge to investigating cliques relates to the identified importance of individual behavior awareness. Certain athletes may be unaware of their behaviors or grouping tendencies, which would inevitably influence the perceptions and subsequent research results. Finally, the use of retrospective interview protocols does cater to egocentric biases that can lead to self-enhancement during recall (e.g., Benson et al., 2013; Schacter, Chiao, & Mitchell, 2003). Considering the topic in the current study, athletes may have thought more favorably or positively of the cliques to which they belonged or identified from their teams. This could have inadvertently given us a more favorable impression of cliques in sport.

In summary, the current study explored cliques in sport by interviewing current intercollegiate athletes. We would like to conclude by expanding on early theorizing of group dynamics by Carron (1982) who suggested, "the critical factor may not be the homogeneity or heterogeneity [of a group] per se, but whether the team fractionates into cliques or produces social isolates" (p. 249). Based on the current investigation, we propose that it is perhaps not the fractionating or presence that is of import, but rather *the behaviors* exhibited by those emerging cliques.

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Appendix A

Semistructured Interview Guide

Introduction:

I am a researcher in sport and exercise who is interested in understanding cliques, or subgroups in sport teams. I would like to thank you for your participation in our research. To be clear, over the next period of time I will be asking you questions about your current and former sports teams. If at any time you feel that you do not want to carry on with this interview, you may withdraw with absolutely no consequences. With your permission, I would like to record the interview and transcribe it once

we have concluded. The length of this interview will be approximately 30–50 min, and I've developed a series of questions to discuss. I'd like you to know that I may—at any time—ask you related questions that are relevant to the interview, and that you may add in any information that you think is pertinent, once again, at any point in time. You can be sure that the information you share will remain confidential and will eventually be presented in aggregate form. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introductory Questions:

1. To begin, could you please tell me your age, the sport team that you are a member of, and how many years you have participated on this particular team?
2. First of all, what have you been doing recently in relation to [your sport]? (use prompts to continue discussing sport involvement, current training, past sports, competitive level, and team involvement—how their season is going/went)

(Lead into following question) In listening to that history, it sounds like you participated in several sports and on many teams, including [list primary sports].

Transition Questions:

3. I mentioned earlier that I am interested in your experiences on sport teams and specifically as those experiences pertain to the presence of cliques. Could you give me some personal examples of when you have been a member of a team that clearly had the existence of clique formations among its members?

(Working definition should they ask)—“Tightly knit subgroups that involve reciprocal relationships”

Key Questions:

4. I am interested in learning more about your perceptions of team cliques. Could you describe in your own words, what a clique means to you?
5. Now that I understand what a clique means to you, could you tell me how you think they develop?
6. Why do you think individuals choose to belong to such a subgroup?
7. Thinking back to your experiences on your team, could you describe a situation when a clique had a **positive** influence on your sport experience?
 - a. What was it about this group or clique that brought about these outcomes?
8. Now, thinking back again, can you describe a situation where cliques have had a **negative** influence on your sport experience?
 - a. What was it about this group or clique that brought about these outcomes?

9. In your experiences, what have you seen coaches or other athletes do to limit the emergence of cliques (if at all)?
10. What advice would you have for coaches or athletes hoping to develop a positive team environment? (*Probe questions could relate to avoiding negative cliques, dissolving existing ones, etc.*)

Ending Questions:

(*Not to be read*)—Interviewer is to provide a summary of key points advanced by the interviewee

11. Based on your experiences and what you have said, is it possible to have a team without cliques?

12. Now, I have asked the main questions that I had for you. Is there anything that you think we missed and should discuss with regard to cliques? Do you have any comments before we conclude the interview?

Concluding Statement:

That concludes our interview. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your time. Your input is very important to us and we appreciate you discussing your experiences. Once again, I would like to assure you that your responses will remain confidential. Thank you.

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