Subgroups and cliques in sport: A longitudinal case study of a rugby union teamChristopher R. D. Wagstaff¹Luc J. Martin²Richard Thelwell¹¹University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom²Queen's University, CanadaAccepted for publication in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*

Chris Wagstaff, Department of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom; Luc Martin, School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Queen's University, Canada; Richard Thelwell, Department of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher R. D. Wagstaff, Department of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Portsmouth, Spinnaker Building, Cambridge Road, Portsmouth PO1 2ER, United Kingdom. E-mail: chris.wagstaff@port.ac.uk.

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Abstract

Although subgroups and cliques are anecdotally referenced as salient factors in sport organizations, they have only recently received attention within sport psychology literature. This is surprising given the potential influence of subgroup behavior on group-related processes and team functioning. The present study employed a longitudinal, repeated interview case study design to examine competitive rugby players' awareness of subgroups and cliques, in addition to perceptions of their development, influence, and management over the course of a season. Findings indicated that players were not only able to articulate the nature of subgroups and cliques, but also to identify members of the various subunits. Both subgroup and clique membership and behavior were found to be fluid, develop over time, and be shaped by several organizational factors. Recommendations for the management of subgroups and cliques are provided, and the results are discussed in line with theoretical perspectives and practical applications.

Keywords: social environment, organizational psychology in sport, group, relationships

Subgroups and cliques in sport: A longitudinal case study of a rugby union team

The social environments that characterize sport organizations have recently received research attention in the sport setting (see, for review, Martin, Eys, & Spink, 2017). This proliferation is perhaps not surprising given that most sports involve groups, whether in competition or during training. Indeed, even in individual sports, athletes typically practice and compete alongside teammates (e.g., Evans, Eys, & Bruner, 2012) and require a team of support staff, coaches, managers, and administrators to facilitate both grassroots participation and elite success (Wagstaff & Lerner, 2015).

A rich body of research exists that has examined individual perceptions of dyadic (e.g., coach-athlete, Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; athlete-athlete, Weiss & Smith, 1999), group (e.g., team cohesion, Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; collective efficacy, Short, Sullivan, & Feltz, 2005), and organizational (e.g., organizational functioning, Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012) relations. Yet, substantially less attention has been dedicated to the “groups within the group,” or as they are more commonly referred to in sport, the subgroup or the clique. In broad terms, these concepts can be characterized as tightly knit subgroups of individuals that contain reciprocating relationships (e.g., Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000). In addition, Carton and Cummings (2012) advanced two criteria required for the classification of a subgroup or 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). Clearly, subgroups and cliques are observable entities within a total group (e.g., team or organization), and in addition to criteria established for their classification, attempts have been made to explore their implications for the individuals and teams involved, as well as the factors that make them more or less likely to emerge.

1 In sport, the presence of subgroups and cliques has historically been associated with
2 issues of exclusivity, ostracism, conflict, lack of cohesion, stress, and decreased probability of
3 success (e.g., Eitzen, 1973; Eys, Loughead, Bray, & Carron, 2009; Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). In
4 fact, practitioners have generally recommended the avoidance or hindrance of the development
5 of subgroups and cliques (e.g., Ryska, Yin, Cooley, & Ginn, 1999; Yukelson, 1997). Despite
6 such associations, research from various disciplines indicates subgroup entities to be complex,
7 and suggests that managing them requires more thought than solely investing effort to avoid or
8 disband them (e.g., Cronin, Bezrukova, Weingart, & Tinsley, 2011). Importantly, while
9 subgroup membership can result in antisocial or delinquent behaviors (e.g., Bagwell, Coie,
10 Terry, & Lochman, 2000; Verkooijen, de Vries, & Nielson, 2007), it can also lead to improved
11 self-esteem, prosocial behaviors, and attitudes (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1995; Tarrant, MacKenzie,
12 & Hewitt, 2006), and its presence can even facilitate group functioning (e.g., Gibson &
13 Vermeulen, 2003). Accordingly, both positive and negative group processes can originate from
14 their emergence, yet considering the debilitating portrayal of subgroups in sport, targeted
15 investigations are required to more accurately understand their relative influence in this context.

16 In an attempt to explore the nature of subgroups and cliques in sport, Martin, Wilson,
17 Evans, and Spink (2015) interviewed a group of Canadian intercollegiate athletes. Notably,
18 athletes believed cliques to be both unavoidable and variable over time, and felt their
19 emergence to be influenced by characteristics such as team cohorts, skill level, status, and
20 individual similarities. In addition, athletes described the potential for ideal subgroups to be
21 inclusive, whereby subgroup members interacted positively and openly with other team
22 members. Conversely, problematic subgroups demonstrating exclusionary behaviors resulted in
23 debilitating outcomes at both the individual (e.g., desire to dropout) and team (e.g., decreased
24 performance) levels. In light of their findings, Martin et al. defined subgroups as being, “an
25 inevitable, variable, and identifiable subgrouping of athletes within a team who exhibit
26 particularly close task and/or social bonds” (p. 90). Moreover, they added that their utility

varies, and that their presence or absence is likely of less importance than the actual behaviors exhibited by the subgroup members.

Although Martin et al.'s (2015) study afforded a preliminary understanding of subgroups from the perspective of competitive athletes, it provided the viewpoint from only one part of a sport organization – the athletes. As such, Martin, Evans, and Spink (2016) sought to further investigate their presence based on the perceptions of coaches. Using tools inherent in grounded theory and consensual qualitative research, Martin et al. (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 elite level coaches who were expected to draw on personal experiences, and were asked to discuss elements or situations that would render the development of subgroups or cliques more or less likely. Responses revealed that coaches differentiated between the terms subgroup and clique, largely portraying subgroups as being facilitative and cliques as representing debilitating or problematic entities. Interestingly, coaches reflected on the extensive efforts taken to maintain awareness of team members' relationships and groupings, with the intention of obtaining an insight to the team's social environment. Considering that subgroups were perceived as inevitable, coaches felt a need to manage their teams either to promote potential benefits (e.g., social support, mentoring) or to limit negative outcomes from cliques (e.g., antisocial behavior, athlete isolation). Consequently, coaches described using direct measures to identify and manage subgroups with the intention of avoiding the emergence of cliques.

As a general summary, there is relative tautology between the sport literature and the extant research pertaining to subgroups and cliques. Indeed, both facilitative and debilitating outcomes can emerge, yet these consequences appear to be less a function of their presence, and more to do with the behaviors exhibited by the subgroup members (e.g., Martin et al., 2015). Therefore, and given the ubiquity of subgroups in sport, the following research questions remain unanswered: (a) What might influence the emergence of facilitative subgroups or debilitating cliques?, (b) When and why might they be important (i.e., at what points of the

season and why might they be seen as important)?, (c) What types of behaviors are exhibited by subgroup or clique members?, and (d) Is there a need for subgroup or clique management? Furthermore, the exploratory work of Martin and colleagues (Martin et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2016) involved retrospective semi-structured interviews conducted at a single time-point. Hence, while the extant research has undoubtedly advanced scholarly understanding, further research is required to better elucidate performers' awareness of, responses to, and perspectives on the management of subgroups and cliques within a contextualized setting over a period of time. Considering the dynamic nature of groups (e.g., Carron & Brawley, 2000), and to support and extend previous retrospective interview studies, contextualized, longitudinal approaches are valuable for understanding how subgroup and clique dynamics emerge, change, and influence the team environment. Therefore, the present study used an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005), whereby repeated interviews were conducted with athletes from one team over the course of a season.

Method

Philosophical Perspective and Design

Our approach was generally guided by relativist ontology, and a subjective and constructivist epistemology. The rationale for this approach was to understand and interpret athletes' subjective perceptions of subgroups, along with the understanding that their perspectives are reflective of their individual social context and status within a team. More specifically, we understood player beliefs to be framed by their status as insiders, embodied competence, and their engagement (or not) in the habitus characterizing their social field. Along with this orientation was our general goal, which was to further our understanding of subgroups in sport. This research adopted methodological and analytic processes that are common to qualitative research traditions (i.e., thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006; qualitative guidelines, Patton, 2002; content analysis, Smith & Sparkes, 2012).

The present study adopted an instrumental case study design, which is used in

qualitative research to provide an in-depth understanding about a phenomenon, bound within a period of time and context (cf. Caron, Bloom & Bennie, 2015). Stake (2005) noted that instrumental case studies are primarily focused on the *phenomena* being studied, with information about the *case* being a secondary focus. Following Stake's recommendations, information about the context (i.e., the case) is provided in the next section to contextualize the research setting and participants' insights and perceptions of subgroups and cliques (i.e., the phenomenon).

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of 22 UK University Athletic Unions were emailed with an invitation to volunteer their organization to partake in the study. Of this prospective sample, eight CEOs responded, with four volunteering their organization's involvement. The participating organization was selected due to its balance of new and existing team members at the beginning of the season, the high profile of the sport at the Institution, and the high level of competition the team operated at. Within the selected organization, roughly a third of participants were in their first (i.e., Freshman), second (i.e., Sophomore), and third (i.e., Senior) years, respectively. Following the provision of initial gatekeeping access by the CEO, all members selected for the Men's 1st XV (also referred to as the "elite") squad ($N = 22$) were approached at the start-of-season trials and were invited to participate. Fifteen players ($M_{age} = 19.77$; $SD = 1.36$) agreed to participate at the initial stage of the interview process; however, two players completed only the first interview due to severe illness (discontinuation of studies) and de-selection (discontinuation of membership in the 1st XV squad), and were thus removed from the study. Ultimately, 13 players completed all three interviews, resulting in a total of 39 individual interviews. All of the participants were students, several lived together in shared student housing, and a number were also studying for the same degree. For de-identification reasons, participant names were not included within any transcripts and all participants were allocated a random letter (A-M) for data collection and

1 presentation purposes. All participants provided fully informed written consent and were
2 advised about their right to withdraw, and issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

3 **Procedure**

4 Interviews were conducted at three time-points spanning a complete season. Each of the
5 three interview phases was completed within a week period and were spaced approximately
6 eight weeks apart. In line with this, interview phases 1 and 3 were conducted in the first and last
7 six weeks of the season, respectively. Each interview was carried out individually, face-to-face,
8 in a quiet, neutral location, and was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

9 **Interview guide.** Semi-structured interview guides were used to facilitate the interview
10 process, and these were adapted and refined at each phase of data collection. The guide
11 provided a consistent structure for interviews whilst allowing for a point of deviation when
12 salient topics arose. The structure of the guide emanated from a review of extant clique and
13 subgroup theory and literature. For example, the interview guides used in similar research
14 (Martin et al., 2015; 2016) provided the rationale for many basic, open-ended questions (e.g.,
15 “How do subgroup members behave and what influence does their existence and behavior have
16 on yourself and/or the team?”). The guide was piloted with three athletes from a separate sport
17 organization, but their data are not presented here. Feedback led to minor structural and content
18 refinements, which enhanced the clarity and comprehensiveness of the guide.

19 The interview guide was divided into four main sections. Section 1 aimed to establish a
20 rapport with each interviewee, to engage the participant in the interview process, and to cover
21 issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and the possible use of data. Section 2 was intended to
22 identify the extent to which participants were aware of any subgroups in the team. Questions in
23 this section included, “Could you describe in your own words what a subgroup and clique mean
24 to you?”, “To what extent do subgroups or cliques exist in your team or wider sport
25 organization?”, and “Would you say that you are a member of a subgroup or clique within your
26 team?”. In the second and third interviews, follow up questions were asked about previously

identified subgroups to illustrate the extent to which these subgroups and cliques had changed over time. Section 3 invited participants to share any recent events, developments, or views they held regarding any identified subgroups or cliques within their team. Questions in this section included, “Can you tell me about any recent events and incidents that you feel were particularly important regarding the subgroups or cliques in your team?”, “How do the subgroups or cliques in your team influence your (or your team’s) (i) emotions, (ii) attitudes, and (iii) behaviors?”, and “In your experience, to what extent is the presence of subgroups and cliques in your team important?”. Section 4 of the guide invited participants to offer recommendations and reflections for the management of subgroups. Questions in this section included, “To what extent do subgroups need managing in your team in general/at this time?”, “What would you say are the most effective ways to manage subgroups in your team in general/at this time?”, and “What recommendations would you give to teams to help them manage the social environment within their team?”. Where necessary, the interviewer departed from the guide to gain more in-depth descriptions of the participants’ attitudes and experience. When this occurred, the interviewer attempted to avoid biasing or subtly directing the athlete’s responses by using neutral non-directional probes.

Data Analysis

We adopted a content analysis procedure to analyze and represent participants’ responses in a coherent form (see Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tesch, 2013). The goal of content analysis is to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomena under study by representing participants’ subjective responses coherently (Tesch, 2013). The advantage of traditional content analysis lies in gaining direct realist information from participants without imposing preconceived theoretical perspectives, and it has been employed both in similar research exploring cliques and subgroups (Martin et al., 2015; 2016) and within organizational psychology in sport (Fletcher, Hanton, & Wagstaff, 2012; Hanton, Wagstaff, & Fletcher, 2012; Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2012a). Following the dialectical transactions between researcher

1 and participants, the analysis process began with the first author reading all data on several
2 occasions. Immersion within the data was facilitated by adopting a reflexive “indwelling”
3 stance: listening to the interview tapes, reading transcripts several times, jotting notes and
4 thoughts. In line with the procedure reported by Wagstaff, Fletcher, and Hanton (2012b), the
5 first and third authors then independently read transcripts and attached memos to each segment
6 of narrative, indicating preliminary, tentative connections. Extracted segments of potential
7 importance allowed a number of initial themes and meanings to emerge regarding participants’
8 experiences at each phase of data collection. The authors subsequently discussed initial
9 concepts and compared different perspectives from across participant interviews before the first
10 author conducted axial coding by developing themes to reduce the open codes into a
11 classification structure (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequent comparison of initial themes and
12 debate between the research team gave rise to a range of concepts, which became the main
13 findings. A process of social validation was also undertaken via the presentation of themes to
14 participants and where feedback assisted the co-construction and interpretation of findings.
15 Like other scholars (cf. Tracy, 2010), we initially sought some usable framework that could
16 help readers determine the “goodness” of this work, and what its weaknesses and strengths
17 were. Nevertheless, and given our subjectivist and constructivist approach, we also empathise
18 with other scholars (cf. Gordon & Patterson, 2013), who have noted the potential pitfalls of
19 imposing a fixed criteria. Hence, we adopted what we perceived to be the *most pertinent*
20 guidelines to assist the reader to evaluate the goodness of this work. That is, we presume that
21 some of Tracy’s (2010) criteria have been satisfied in the preceding sections (i.e., the
22 worthiness of topic, rich rigorousness and sincerity), and we would agree with Gordon and
23 Patterson (2013) that ethics should act as an umbrella for quality considerations. Hence, by not
24 adopting a “fixed” criteriologist approach, and using Tracy’s criteria as a universal and diverse
25 well from which to draw hallmarks of quality, we perceive four criteria to be valuable to readers
26 evaluating this work; credibility, resonance, significant contribution, and meaningful coherence.

Attempts to establish credibility were made through the use of a reflexive diary, “critical friends” (i.e., other researchers who offer truthful, but constructive, challenges and debate regarding data themes), member checking, and multivocality of participant quotations. Content analysis procedures also provide emergent themes that can be logically traced back to raw data. In this manner, the content analysis reflects an abductive inference, whereby the research questions and interview guide were theoretically sensitive, but where thematic extraction was iterative, relevant, and modifiable, with themes presented which aimed to “fit” the context to which they refer. In an attempt to promote resonance, data are presented using rich quotations in the hope of allowing participants’ complex experiences to vividly emerge. It is for the reader to decide the extent to which the content overlaps with their own experiences. In evaluating the significance of contribution of the research, one might consider the theoretical (e.g., implications for conceptual understanding), heuristic (e.g., stimulation of curiosity, discourse, and further exploration), and practical (e.g., utility of knowledge for practitioners) significance of the findings for the field (cf. Martin, Bruner, Eys, & Spink, 2014, Martin et al., 2015, 2016). Finally, to achieve a meaningful coherence, the study achieved its stated purpose, used methods and representation practices that matched the domain and research paradigm, and attentively interconnected extant literature with research foci, methods, and findings.

Results

The results derived from the data analysis procedures represent the collated interview responses from all 13 participants (labelled alphabetically to ensure de-identification), and are presented as a narrative using rich quotations to illustrate themes. Specifically, the findings are divided into four distinct themes involving participant awareness and understanding of subgroups, perceptions of their development over time, beliefs pertaining to their influence on individuals and the group, and general thoughts in relation to their management.

Awareness and Understanding of Subgroups

It was clear that participants had taken the time to consider subgroups, as there was a

1 general level of understanding and awareness among the athletes. With regard to understanding,
2 athletes were able to articulate their personal definitions, with one player describing them as “a
3 large group broken down into sort of smaller sections based on their own interests or
4 similarities” (Participant B: pB). Many of the athletes also held an acute awareness of which
5 teammates belonged to subgroups, and the overt use of subgroup names (e.g., the Kennel, the
6 Falcons, or the Grunts) served to demonstrate this awareness among the team. Interestingly,
7 subgroups were portrayed as inevitable, and athletes largely perceived them as facilitative for
8 social cohesion and team culture. In addition, and as demonstrated in the following quotation,
9 subgroup membership was thought to protect against intra-team conflict among teammates:

10 The existence of subgroups is a good thing because you can’t be best mates with 15-20
11 blokes all the time; there are going to be clashes, so spending more time with the people
12 you get on well with minimises those clashes and protects the team atmosphere. (pF)

13 Despite the astuteness for subgroup membership, one new teammate reported being
14 unaware and uncertain regarding the various subgroups during the early phase of the season:

15 At the moment, I don’t really know who is in which subgroup. I see some players arrive
16 and leave at the same time, sharing cars, making plans for food - always Nandos - and
17 pre-game coffees... maybe us freshers are a subgroup, because we are the newbies and
18 haven’t found our place yet. That said, I’ve started to make connections with some more
19 established players; nothing too conscious or forced though, just natural really. (pM)

20 Moreover, several “newbie” players indicated being wary of the influence of subgroups,
21 discussing the need to cogitate both the benefits of membership and the negatives of exclusion
22 (the former being associated with the term “cliques”):

23 I think subgroups can be a positive or a negative thing within a rugby team as you have
24 different role clusterings; I am one of the new guys so I need to try to fit the existing
25 team culture. I guess a positive subgroup could be the boys working or socializing
26 together, but a negative could be that they then put themselves above others in the team

1 – like me as a new player – with that having an effect on performance by not acting in
2 line with team values. (pL)

3 Indeed, one senior player appeared to be acutely aware of the existing cliques within the
4 team at the start of the season, and was also able to speak to what other teammates thought
5 about their cliques, referring to exclusive behaviors:

6 I'm in what we call "the Kennel" – it's a group of final year students – other players would
7 definitely class it as a bit of a clique. It developed in our first year when we used to play
8 Call of Duty together regularly. It's me, "B", "C", "D", and "E", we are in this group,
9 most do a sport-related degree and play rugby together. It's similar in the year below,
10 where another group – "F", "G", "H", "I", and "J" – they are 2nd years, they call
11 themselves "the Falcons", and all live together. (pA)

12 In addition to the presence of subgroups based on relationships, cohort, or living
13 arrangements, another participant discussed a clear faultline pertaining to playing positions within
14 the team, and described them as having "pre-clique" qualities:

15 There are a few different groups in the team; the "Pretty Boy" backs and tight five
16 "Grunts". Rugby is often like that. There is light-hearted segregation where the "pretty
17 boys" get the glory for running fast and scoring the tries, and think they are rock stars –
18 you know, the fashion-conscious sort – but us in the front row, do the hard work, get little
19 recognition, and aren't glamour boys... they call us "the Grunts"! It's fun mostly, but I
20 guess it's a team divide; there can be a bit of a "them and us" mentally. (pK)

21 **Development of Subgroups and Cliques Over Time**

22 A common theme that emerged was the variability of both membership and behaviors
23 over the course of the season. Indeed, in this university sample, the early subgroups typically
24 developed based on position or cohort (e.g., "newbies"), but in later interviews, membership
25 changed based on common interests, team tenure, socialising behaviors, leadership, selection
26 and ability, and training requirements. The following quotation gives an example of one first

1 year athlete's perspective on this dynamic process:

2 When you asked me about subgroups at the start of the season, I only had a rough idea of
3 how things were. Now, toward the end of the season, I've seen all sorts; of those initial,
4 existing groups, some players have become tighter, more exclusive. Others have drifted
5 away, or maybe they've always drifted between groups, some are a bit chameleon-like –
6 "Floaters" is what I would call them – others have become pi**ed off with some people's
7 "big dog" attitude and have distanced themselves. (pM)

8 Another participant noted their flexibility in changing subgroup membership due to selection
9 variations in playing personnel, and noted specific behaviors that indicated his admittance:

10 At the start of the season, my natural group was with the newbies – the freshers. But as
11 the season progressed, some of the other freshers didn't stay in the team and I've found
12 myself 'mixing it' with the people selected. So much so, that I hang out and feel more in
13 touch with the other [selected] guys now. I've just adapted and joined in with what the
14 other backs get up to... there was a tipping point when I just felt I'd become a fixture in
15 the backs line up... I started getting the same high-fives and included in the banter and
16 catchphrases. I think other freshers think I've disowned them a bit since we started. (pL)

17 The participant in the above quotation alludes to how subgroup membership developed
18 within the team over time with reference to a "tipping point" for group membership. Such
19 sentiments were also illustrated regarding clique formation:

20 There was one game – around January – and I thought "ok, you boys just want your own
21 little exclusive club – you think you *are* the club". Up to that point they put the team
22 ahead of their group, but it was a bad loss and they just mumbled away together on the
23 pitch after most of us went inside, then they carried on in the corner of the changing
24 room, ate their post-game meal together sulking, didn't communicate with most of us on
25 the journey home and didn't join the rest of the team that evening on a social. What I
26 later found out was that they did go out, but not with the rest of the team – they did their

own thing. That was the turning point for me... from that point I had no trust or respect for them and was waiting for them to put their clique ahead of the team again. (pG)

One participant felt that subgroups form according to number of years on the team, with final year students often taking leadership roles as a subgroup or clique:

Outside of university sport, I'd imagine longer-term relationships would change things, you'd maybe be together longer, but for us the team is fairly split by year of study/years playing on the team. The final year students carry so much power – their little group definitely became an exclusive club running the team on and off the pitch – I'd say they emerged as a pretty tight clique during the season. It means the other year cohorts group together – I imagine next year's' final year players will emerge in the same way. (pH)

Another player confirmed this team tenure influence on subgroup formation, but acknowledged individual differences and socializing behaviors:

Years are a big thing – freshers, second years, and third years – people tend to identify with those groupings. On the other hand, I think banter comes into it as well. From my point of view I'm more sociable and like lots of banter, so I get along with those people more than introverted people; I get along with the extroverts more I think. (pI)

For others, the tenure-based development of a subgroup emanated from shared experiences:

A lot of it [the formation of subgroups] has been influenced by playing in the team last year. It was a very successful team, which created a strong team bond. Most of the boys are there from the previous year, they are generally a tight group. (pJ)

The Influence of Subgroups and Cliques

Generally, participants viewed subgroups as a normal and neutral facet of the team social environment. This perception of innocuousness and inevitability was informed by a seemingly generic philosophy characterized by phrases such as “a rugby team is too big to be one group,” “players will always form alliances and stronger connections,” and “you can't be best mates with everyone.” Nevertheless, over the course of the season it was apparent that cliques, unlike

1 subgroups, were characterized by distinct behavior types which, when exclusive or antisocial,
2 were perceived as a destabilizing influence, particularly when the team was under pressure (e.g.,
3 after a poor performance, during difficult training periods or conditions). Specifically, as data
4 collection progressed, several participants highlighted incidents involving “the Kennel,” typically
5 viewing the members as exclusive and the group as a negative influence:

6 There is a slight problem. “A” gets stick for it, because he is involved in a really dominant
7 group in the club. They have their own name for their clique – it is pretty strange – they
8 call it “the Kennel” because they are the “big dogs” apparently. It does bug people as they
9 are really average players; if they had a decent attitude it would be ok, but their arrogance
10 has annoyed quite a few of the players... These boys really think they are the “next big
11 thing” in rugby. The problem is they haven’t earned that status and they have invented an
12 insular group that portrays themselves in all the wrong ways. (pF)

13 Despite the general perception of the members within “the Kennel” that they had “paid
14 their dues” and that their behaviors were acceptable, consensus among the remainder of the
15 team was that they were a negative, destabilising factor found to be “disrespectful,”
16 “exclusive,” “bullies,” and “manipulative.” Interestingly, members of “the Kennel” were aware
17 of their perceived exclusive group status, yet perceived this as a positive contribution to the
18 team’s social environment, stating, “the Kennel is dominant.” As one “Kennel” member added:

19 We like to think that we are dominant, so members of our group act a bit dominant; it’s a
20 kind of Chiefs and Indians thing, where the senior players – me included – think we’re
21 the Chiefs, but we do it for the greater good, not because I really think I’m “big dog” and
22 need to show authority, but because we lead. We lead. I do it for the team. (pA)

23 This perception of “the Kennel” as dominant, informal leaders within the team was contrasted by
24 other members of the team, with one participant noting, “in games we are very serious; we work
25 together as a whole team, because some of the groupings disappear and we communicate a lot
26 better.” Another participant noted the distinction of the team captain being part of a clique:

1 The captain can be quite negative. At training, the players recently said something to him
2 about his “big dog” behavior and he got angry. When mistakes happen in training or
3 matches he will go get angry with other players, he takes it out on everyone else. I don’t
4 respect him as a leader anymore and he is too close to the other lads in “the Kennel”; they
5 are like a school playground posse. Some of us now make ironic jokes about them being
6 “big dogs” when they make mistakes. (pG)

7 The team captain was identified as the leader of “the Kennel” clique, and a theme
8 emerged throughout the season whereby the cause of many conflicts in the team were attributed
9 to the “the Kennel” collective. The most frequently raised concerns regarding this group were
10 intra-group conflict, which appeared to subsequently influence team performance:

11 Strangely, the captain and another member of “the Kennel” live together but they really
12 do clash, and I think they argue in their house and that has a spillover during training... I
13 don’t think they have much awareness... even people within that group get annoyed with
14 the others. They’re tight, but when they’re destructive it affects the whole team. (pK)

15 Another participant contrasted clique behavior influence in positive and negative scenarios:

16 [The problem is] if we are winning a game it’s due to their little clique. You see it in their
17 celebrations, their communication; it’s there in those small nods and pats and high fives,
18 their insular banter; they treat each other differently to the rest of us. The thing is, if we
19 are losing, that clique brings the rest of the team down, those little behaviors all disappear
20 and sometimes the blame game starts; they talk among themselves, like plotting thieves,
21 sometimes bickering with others, and mentally we are not with each other. They can be
22 good for us when we are up, but a nightmare when we are down. (pG)

23 The view of other established players – especially those who were members of the two
24 major subgroups, “the Falcons” and “the Kennel” – were less definitive, and perhaps less
25 reflective or self-aware of the influence of their clique, as one of “the Kennel” reflected:

26 As the season has gone on, we’ve all just kind of mucked in together. We’ve had to really,

as performances haven't been great. I'd say there are some stronger friendships in the team between people with more in common, and those relationships have got stronger for some, but I think that's natural. Overall though, we are all one as a team and I don't think the different friendship groups have influenced things very much. (pB)

Managing Subgroups and Cliques

Participants were mixed in their views regarding how, or if, subgroups and cliques should be managed. Specifically, a very clear theme emerged during later interviews, and some reflection by participants that, "subgroups should be monitored, but cliques managed." Indeed, several players noted that, in light of the benign-positive influence of subgroups, that the behavior of members should only be monitored:

I don't think anything should be done. You could monitor those groups and keep them in check should they start to be a bit exclusive or lazy or going against team values, but... you'd do more damage to the team culture if you tried to control everyone – which is impossible anyway. Let groups form naturally, discuss what is acceptable, exclusive, insular and not helpful for team culture, and put it in the team values charter. (pE)

In light of the strong perception that, "subgroups should be monitored," the research group turned their attention to how "cliques should be managed." Several participants believed players should be responsible for self-managing cliques to promote authenticity. Others felt proactive clique management might best be addressed through the development of team values, norms, and behavior expectation charters, whereas others still desired external regulation by coaches. The following quotation illustrates one participant's preference for self-management:

At the start of the season we didn't do any work on the team culture or values, we just trained and didn't do much socially. Myself and a few other players decided we needed to do more and now meet up the night before matches for a hydration session, we go out together, grab a coffee, we've started to meet up earlier before the game too. We chat about anything – game and personal stuff – or just chill out and get close to each other

1 naturally. I'm not sure what others think about this, but it has a positive impact on those
2 of us that meet up. Why would you try to manage or artificially construct that? (pH)
3 Interestingly, other participants perceived this act of meeting for coffee prior to matches as an
4 "exclusive club" reflective of clique behavior. Nevertheless, in addition to self-regulation, there
5 was a recurring perception that non-player input was required for the management of cliques:

6 Myself and the coach will talk if either of us see anything [antisocial]. I try to keep my
7 eye on any cliques as it is not good for the team, and if you're in it [the clique] it's hard
8 to acknowledge, but the coach might be able to see things those "insiders" don't. Once
9 problem groups are identified, a cautious remoulding or shaping of that group is needed;
10 it's difficult to force behavior change and the coach's influence and status help. (pA)

11 Another strong theme to emerge was the desire for authentic management of clique
12 behavior. The evening before a mid-season away game which required an overnight stay, the
13 coach attempted to manage the social environment in the team by separating emerging cliques:

14 We went away, we stayed the night and the minibus split into subgroups straightaway;
15 you get the same ones in front and back, the same ones on the fringe of both ends; it's like
16 a school bus scenario. For rooming, we got split into pairs. They [the coach and captain]
17 were trying to get people together that don't normally spend time together, "don't go with
18 your mates... mix it up". After we got split I did end up speaking to people I normally
19 don't – and sharing a bunk bed with them. That was fine, but then the coach did this awful
20 "reveal your most embarrassing moment inside and outside of rugby" thing. I can see how
21 that might have worked in the old days, but it just seemed forced to me. Unnatural. It
22 helped to split the usual cliques up a bit, but a softer touch might have been more authentic.
23 It drew attention to issues without resolving them. (pJ)

24 The team bonding task was intended to enhance personal relationships between
25 teammates, remove boundaries, and identify commonalities through disclosure. Nevertheless,
26 one player noted lessons learned from attempts to manage subgroups in the team:

It is important to note that one participant noted the influence of the study on their behavior:

Discussion

It was interesting to note that athletes were very capable of describing the nature of subgroups, differentiating them from cliques, and identifying the various members of these respective collectives. Clearly, athletes had previously considered the presence of subgroups or cliques within their teams, which is not surprising given that they were widely viewed as a natural occurrence. Conversely, cliques were characterized by a perception of exclusivity and

antisocial behavioral norms, and as something to avoid. Perhaps most importantly, many clique members viewed their group's behavior as normal, inclusive, supportive, and beneficial to the team's social environment and performance outcomes. However, such optimistic views were contrasted by non-clique members, indicating a lack of self-awareness and reflection by those in a clique. Indeed, it appears as though these deleterious behaviors were not intentional, but rather, were a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the actual impact that behaviors were having on the team. In fact, certain individuals identified themselves as clique members during the second interview, but reported distancing themselves from that group by the final interview, attributing the decision to a dislike for the clique's behaviors and deleterious influence. These data are significant as researchers have noted the benefits of understanding the self and others in relation to improved intra-team dynamics in sport (see Beauchamp, Jackson, & Lavalley, 2007). Similarly, a concept that has received recent attention in sport is emotional intelligence (EI), which encapsulates the abilities to manage self and others' emotions (see Wagstaff et al., 2012b). Research has demonstrated EI to be associated with team cohesion (see Wang & Huang, 2009), and given EI and emotional regulation can be developed (see Wagstaff, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2013), exploring such links is a line of inquiry worthy of future attention.

As an extension to the previous discussion, our results indicate that subgroup and clique membership and behaviors are not rigid, but rather, are fluid, develop over time, and are shaped by various factors including common interests, team tenure, socializing behaviors, leadership, ability, and training requirements. Such findings support and extend those of Martin et al. (2015), who noted that intercollegiate athletes perceived their membership to change depending on one's role or fitness status, and also identified age and team cohort as being salient antecedents to subgroup development. Accordingly, various situations can facilitate the development of subgroups, yet it is important to highlight that their presence, in and of itself, is not problematic. Indeed, subgroups can serve as a pre-cursor to cliques, with athletes in the present study able to identify specific situations denoting the departure from being classified as

1 a subgroup, to a more exclusive and harmful clique. This potential for subgroups to evolve into
2 deleterious cliques is in concert with the findings of Martin et al. (2016), whereby coaches spent
3 a considerable amount of time monitoring subgroups with the intention of avoiding exclusive or
4 antisocial behaviors. Considering the innocuous and potentially beneficial nature of subgroups,
5 and the problematic outcomes originating from cliques, continued efforts to better understand
6 the mechanisms behind this transition are warranted.

7 Although cliques were generally reported as negatively impacting the team's social
8 environment and its performance, their influence was found to be most prominent during
9 periods of team success or failure. Interestingly, our interpretation of the present data is that
10 subgroups appear to have a largely benign-positive influence, while cliques are widely viewed
11 as a negative construct, most notably during good (e.g., win) and bad (e.g., loss) scenarios. The
12 influence of cliques during good scenarios is perhaps the more noteworthy finding, and it is
13 important that practitioners be mindful that cliques are likely to tighten and become more
14 exclusive during times of celebration and consolation, not least where performance outcomes
15 are attributable to in- and out-group members. When compared to extant research, the present
16 findings deviate from those of Martin et al. (2015), who suggested that cliques could serve both
17 task and social purposes and have positive (e.g., comfort, inclusive) and negative (e.g., divisive,
18 exclusive) consequences for group dynamics. Based on the present data, we argue that while
19 subgroups might facilitate positive outcomes, cliques do not. Indeed, the negative effect of
20 cliques reported here does resonate with findings reported in non-sport domains. For instance,
21 Bagwell et al. (2000) reported cliques to be detrimental when antisocial or delinquent norms or
22 behaviors are exhibited. From an applied perspective, the delineation between subgroups and
23 cliques and the identification of possible "tipping points" (e.g., incidents or times during a
24 season when their influence might be strongest) offers practitioners a valuable foundation for
25 assisting with team-level support. Moreover, the present findings indicate that subgroups might

1 be monitored for “pre-clique” norms and behaviors, such as exclusive behaviors, verbal and
2 non-verbal communication, and antisocial plans.

3 The finding that subgroups are an inevitable but complex facet of the social environment
4 in team sport supports previous research (cf. Martin et al., 2015; 2016), and given cliques were
5 viewed by participants as influential for team dynamics and performance, it is important to
6 consider their management. To elaborate, considering their largely normal and neutral nature,
7 subgroups may benefit from monitoring, while the more exclusive, divisive manifestation of
8 subgroups – cliques – demand more direct management. Notably, an important contribution of
9 the current study was the discussion pertaining to the potential pros and cons of such direct
10 clique management. That is, participants appraised a variety of possible athlete- and coach-led
11 approaches, with a major theme being that players desired authentic management of the team
12 social environment, rather than “off-the-shelf” or “cliché” approaches. Some players were put
13 off by “heavy-handed” coach-led approaches to breaking up subgroups, and felt “forced and
14 unnatural” tasks to be “inauthentic.” Taken from the organizational psychology literature, the
15 condition-focused approach (e.g., Hackman, 2012) seems to resonate with what athletes were
16 advocating. Rather than forcing change, providing fertile conditions within which a team can
17 thrive is likely more effective. In fact, specific conditions advanced by Hackman (2011) are
18 directly relevant to sport, including the recruitment of the “right people,” establishing clear
19 team norms, and demonstrating a team-focused leadership approach. Moreover, recent research
20 supports the significance of athlete leadership groups or senior role models in relation to the
21 regulation of team dynamics (e.g., Caron, Bloom, Loughhead, & Hoffman, 2016; Hoffman &
22 Loughhead, 2016). Indeed, the potential benefit of peer-led behavioral regulation, particularly
23 when representatives are player-elected, lie in the opportunities they provide for mentoring in
24 line with the development of a team and organizational culture that promotes engagement,
25 identity, and thriving. Despite best intentions however, the development of cliques could at
26 times be inevitable, and several participants perceived these entities as being beyond their

control, insisting that coach-led immediate management would be necessary. Martin et al. (2016) discussed similar circumstances, where coaches were forced to resort to player or clique dismissal from the team.

A limitation of the present study is the largely homogenous sample of white, British, university-educated, competitive rugby players. Consequently, we would encourage researchers-practitioners to use caution in transferring these findings to other populations, and advocate future empirical or practical reflection-driven accounts which provide a greater representation of sociocultural backgrounds, gender, sexuality, and sports. One of the perceived strengths of this study is the longitudinal, repeated interview, case study design. Such repeated interview approaches are rare in the field of sport psychology, where cross-sectional and largely retrospective interviews are more common (see Meredith, Dicks, Wagstaff, & Noel, in press). This design allowed for the observation of changes in subgroup and clique membership and behavior – and by extension, their influence – over time. Although such approaches are resource-demanding for both researchers and participants, and are vulnerable to participant dropout, others are encouraged to adopt such longitudinal, repeated measure designs to study social phenomena in sport organizations. Indeed, other possible designs might include ethnography, which has recently been adopted for psychosocial research in sport organizations (cf. Cavallerio, Wadey & Wagstaff, 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2012a). In addition, social network analysis (SNA) or systematic observation would provide an additional layer of information beyond that of participant accounts or reflections. SNA has been argued as vital for understanding, predicting, and explaining individual behavior (see Wölfer, Faber, & Hewstone, 2015), and would enable researchers to identify the more influential members within a group, while also providing a visual representation of the subgroups or cliques present (e.g., Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Finally, systematic observation has been used extensively in coaching research (see Kahan, 1999; Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977), and could provide an objective assessment of both within and between subgroup behaviors. The utilization of such

1 methodologies provide fruitful opportunities for those interested in the social processes
2 occurring within sport teams.

3 Overall, this study offers a significant illustration of the salience of subgroups and
4 cliques in sport organizations. It is the first known study to use a longitudinal instrumental case
5 study approach to explore cliques in sport, and in doing so, provides a novel and rigorous
6 observation into such phenomena. Indeed, this study has yielded substantial insight regarding
7 the acuity of athletes pertaining to their characterization and awareness of subgroup
8 membership, how these change over time, and the influence of clique formation on teams. In
9 addition, the findings have practical utility due to the insight provided by illuminating the
10 complexity regarding the careful orchestration of subgroup monitoring and clique management.

11

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