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Exploring Collegiate Athletes' Experiences with Cliques

Cora G. Dodson

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EXPLORING COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES WITH CLIQUES

by

Cora Dodson

(Under the Direction of Brandonn Harris)

ABSTRACT

A significant body of literature examines team processes as they relate to the team as a collective unit (Eys et al., 2019). However, smaller units present within a team, such as cliques or subgroups, warrant further scientific exploration and dissemination (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Existent literature on cliques in an athletic setting established that intra-team groups are inevitable, while also highlighting their emergence and formation, and their relative consequences at the team level (Martin, 2020; Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Despite the scientific advancement at the group level, research concerning cliques is scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore retired collegiate athletes' experiences with cliques. Themes constructed via thematic analysis showcase individual athletes' cognitions, emotions, behaviors, status and roles, individual performance, and personal growth throughout their clique experience. In regard to cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, athletes shared both positive and negative implications (e.g. pride in their clique, support for fellow clique members, unmotivated to participate, and self-esteem). Findings of this study expand the understanding of athlete's experiences with cliques by highlighting the facilitative and debilitative effects, which present an inevitable challenge to be balanced by athletic stakeholders within their teams.

INDEX WORDS: Collegiate athletics, Team dynamics, Subgroups, Interpersonal Relationships

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by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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EXPLORING COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES WITH CLIQUES

by

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to a young girl who didn't think she was very good at science, and to all the people who believed in her.

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In the words of Ted Lasso “Takin’ on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse. If you’re comfortable while you’re doin’ it, you’re probably doin’ it wrong”. To all the people who helped me through this ride, thank you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For generations, athletic stakeholders (i.e., coaches, athletes, mental performance consultants, researchers), have pursued knowledge regarding the development of effective team processes (Eys et al., 2019). Much research has been done regarding how these processes pertain to the individual (i.e., coach-athlete interactions), group (i.e., cohesion or motivational climate), and organizational (i.e., norms) degrees of an athletic team (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Groupings within a team otherwise referred to as subgroups or cliques, represent an area needing further exploration (Martin, 2020; Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Drawing from other bodies of related literature that examine the interpersonal elements of groups, may help contextualize these constructs within sport settings.

For example, Carton and Cummings (2012) developed a typology regarding subgroups in organizational work teams. The authors specified three separate subgroup types including (a) identity-based, (b) resource-based, and (c) knowledge-based. These subgroups within a team are thought to develop along faultlines (Carton & Cummings, 2012). Faultlines have been operationalized as “hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes” (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, p. 328). These faultlines, as articulated by Lau and Murnighan (1998), have applicability within an athletic context as subgroups may develop around characteristics associated with athletes’ sex, event type (i.e., distance or sprint events), and time/location of training (Saizew et al., 2021). Acknowledging the applicability of faultlines within athletics sets the stage for further exploration of subgroupings as they pertain to sports teams.

Subgroupings will subsequently reference cliques and subgroups collectively. This is done given the nuances of cliques and subgroups, and acknowledging their common nature of being smaller entities within a larger unit. Certain premises exist that are inherent to the nature of subgroupings. Martin (2020) suggests the circumstances include (a) each member of the smaller group must belong to the larger, collective-group, and (b) the subgrouping must be identifiable when contrasted with the team at large. These premises are foundational when considering subgroupings in an athletic setting.

While subgrouping refers to cliques and subgroups collectively, there is a distinction between the two concepts. Subgroups have been operationally defined as “identifiable subgroups that can be either facilitative or non-value-laden” (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018, p. 304). Contrastingly, cliques have been defined as “identifiable, yet inherently debilitative and often characterized by exclusion, conflict, or having their own agenda” (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018, p. 304).

Much of the information regarding subgroupings stems directly from reports by coaches (Martin et al., 2016; McGuire, 2020; Saizew et al., 2021) and athletes (Martin et al., 2015; Saizew et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017). The perspectives generated from these studies has been detailed, though there are discrepancies in what is considered a clique. Cliques have been considered by some study participants as a type of subgroup (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). In contrast, others have generated findings where the terms cliques and subgroups are used synonymously by participants (Eys et al., 2015).

In addition to the variability regarding what constitutes a clique versus a subgroup, the consequences or outcomes of these groups have also yielded somewhat incongruent findings. Coaches in the study by Martin and colleagues (2016) viewed cliques negatively, and subgroups

as neutral and natural. In contrast, athletes at the intercollegiate level in one study did not identify cliques as inherently negative (Martin et al., 2015). While both studies utilized semi-structured interviews, the incongruencies between the two findings may have been due to their differing perspectives as coaches and athletes.

To help differentiate between cliques and subgroups, Wagstaff and Martin (2018) (see Figure 1) outlined a framework for subgroupings in athletic teams. The framework articulates that fundamental truths (inevitability and variability) are present for both cliques and subgroups (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Inevitability speaks to the notion that a team's division into smaller groupings of individuals/groups is unavoidable. Variability pertains to the dynamic nature of groups and the complex interactions involved (Martin, 2020). In conjunction with these fundamental truths, the authors propose that both types of subgroupings share similar antecedents or precursors (i.e., contextual and/or situational factors, athlete characteristics, and athlete behaviors). The nature of the groupings is where the differentiation has been made between a clique and a subgroup (see Figure 2) (Martin, 2020). It is thought that the consequences of subgroupings occur at the individual and team levels (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Regarding subgroups, the consequences are deemed facilitative, whereas debilitating consequences are the result of cliques (Martin, 2020).

The consequence element of the framework by Wagstaff and Martin (2018) proposes that cliques may have implications for athletes individually and the team as a collective unit. Though not with cliques, McGuire (2020) explored individuals' experiences with subgroups. Finding that athletes' perspectives on subgroups was characterized by involvement in "affective, behavioral, and/or cognitive" elements of their experiences (McGuire, 2020, p. 50). As this study

investigated and explored individual experiences with subgroups, understanding the individual's experiences with cliques has yet to be studied.

As stated, in the lens of the team dynamics literature, the focus has predominantly been relative to processes as they pertain to individuals, at the collective team level, and at the organizational level (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Regarding these smaller groups within athletic settings, much is yet to be explored (Martin, 2020). Most research has taken a qualitative stance as the base of knowledge regarding these subgroupings is just beginning (see Martin et al., 2016 as an example). This has allowed for the generation of rich and detailed information about the formation of subgroupings, their inherent properties, and the variable team-level outcomes that are unique to cliques and subgroups. The possibility certainly exists to explore these constructs using other methodologies (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). With the literature base of these subgroupings currently being established, it is unknown how they relate to other processes (i.e., cohesion, team norms) in an athletic setting. While the framework by Wagstaff and Martin (2018) aided in the differentiation between cliques and subgroups, there is still much to be explored regarding cliques and subgroups.

It has been reported that these smaller groups are inherent in sport (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). When the inherent nature of these smaller groups is acknowledged, it may be possible to consider the utilization of these groups (e.g., to facilitate positive group processes, such as organizational citizenship behaviors), rather than rendering these groupings obsolete or harmful to functioning. Prior to integrating this knowledge into applied practice, much needs to be explored.

Study Purpose

One area that warrants further research is athlete's experiences with cliques. Studies have started to capture this experience (Martin et al., 2015), yet no research on cliques in isolation has been published. The literature on cliques in an athletic setting has focused on defining cliques, describing how they emerge and form, and their relative consequences at the team level. Little has been explored related to how athletes experience cliques personally, with an emphasis on the individual level. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore athletes' experiences with cliques.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Philosophical Approach

The philosophical approach of the primary investigator is post-positivist. Post-positivism is underpinned by the notion that an external reality is present and observable, yet a comprehensive representation of this external reality can never be achieved (Spencer et al., 2014). Spencer and colleagues (2014) describe that within post-positivism “things exist beyond our experience of them, it is recognized that our knowledge of this world is socially constructed. Bias is unavoidable” (p. 84). Spencer and colleagues (2014) note that even though an individual’s bias will always be present, post-positivists presume that individuals should strive towards the truth. Within post-positivism validity and reliability are vital as researchers attempt to reach the truth (Spencer et al., 2014). In the current project, the primary investigator used bracketing to try and reduce bias, while acknowledging the impossibility of being completely without bias.

Design

A phenomenological perspective was used by the primary investigator in this qualitative study. The phenomenological perspective has been described as a “way of thinking and being” and is recommended if the aims of the research question align with stringently questioning biases about a phenomenon, to approach the phenomenon from a new perspective, and to garner rich and detailed data (Allen-Collinson, 2019, p. 15). An additional suggestion is that a phenomenological approach is appropriate for those investigating social elements within the realms of sport and exercise (Allen-Collinson, 2019). As the purpose of this study was to further

explore athletes' individual experiences with cliques, a phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate.

Participants

Participants were individuals who retired from competing on a university sports team, co-active or interactive, within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) from any Division, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), or National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) within the last two years. The two-year time frame was established to reduce the influence of recall bias on the participants' reports (Kopec & Esdaile, 1990). To participate participants must have been on a collegiate team where cliques were present, either as a member or nonmember of the clique, as identified by the participant. Participants were over the age of 18.

Twenty individuals contacted the primary investigator regarding participation in the study. Nine individuals were excluded for a variety of reasons (e.g., due to retiring from intercollegiate athletics more than two years before the interview date, having close personal connections with the PI, still competing in a team setting, and unable to confirm an interview date). A total of 11 participants (seven females, four males) were interviewed. The age range was 22-24 ($M = 23.2$, $SD = .87$). The majority of the participants ($n = 7$) identified as White, two identified as Hispanic, and two identified as bi-racial (Hispanic and White). Eight participants identified their nationality as the United States (U.S). Nine sports were represented, three interactive sports (indoor volleyball, soccer, and softball), five coactive sports (golf, wrestling, swimming, track and field, and cross-country), and one sport that has elements that are both interactive and coactive (tennis). Four participants competed at the NCAA DI level, three in the

NCAA DII, one athlete in NCAA DI and DII, one athlete within the NAIA, and one athlete in NAIA and NJCAA. See Table 1 for participant pseudonyms and demographic information.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Nationality	Sport(s)	Level
Mateo	23	M	Hispanic-White	American	Cross Country, Track & Field	DII
Daniel	24	M	Hispanic	American	Cross Country, Track & Field	DII
Sofia	24	W	Hispanic-White	American	Wrestling	NAIA
Rebecca	24	W	White	American	Softball, Soccer	NJCAA, NAIA
Maria	24	W	White	Spanish	Tennis	DII, DI
Keeley	23	W	White	American	Tennis	DI
Ted	23	M	White	American	Golf	DI
Mae	22	W	White	British	Soccer	DI, DII
Phoebe	22	W	White	American	Indoor Volleyball	DI
Jade	24	W	White	American	Swimming	DII
Dani	22	M	Hispanic	Argentine	Tennis	DI

Note. W = Woman, M = Man.

DI = NCAA Division I, DII = NCAA Division II, NAIA = National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics, NJCAA = National Junior College Athletic Association.

Procedures

Participant recruitment began after receiving Institutional Review Board approval. 43 coaches, representing 15 different coaching staffs were contacted with information pertaining to the study and asked for assistance with recruiting retired athletes from their team. Five coaches, representing five different coaching staffs responded. Coaches who agreed to assist with recruitment were asked to forward information about the study on behalf of the researcher.

Individuals who were interested in participating were asked to reach out to the primary investigator directly.

A second recruitment method was social media. The primary investigator posted the information for the study and the inclusion criteria on their social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn). Participants who were interested were asked to contact the primary investigator directly or submit their email and name via a Qualtrics link provided on the social media post.

Three participants were recruited via coaches, and eight participants were recruited via social media. Once participants self-selected into the study, they were e-mailed the consent form via Qualtrics. This document outlined the bounds of confidentiality and anonymity, addressed inherent risks in virtual meetings, and explained the potential risks/benefits of the study and the participant's involvement in the project. After completing the informed consent form, the primary investigator arranged a time for a Zoom interview with each participant, and a link to the Zoom was emailed. Two features were utilized to promote participant security in the interview process, password protection, and the Zoom waiting room function.

The interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to the start of data collection to help refine the interview guide. One pilot interview was conducted with an individual familiar with the content knowledge, and a second interview was conducted with an individual who met the eligibility criteria. The guide inquired about the participants' role in relation to the cliques and their individual experiences with these cliques.

Each interview was recorded onto the primary investigator's Zoom account, which was password protected. The interview recordings were transcribed by the primary investigator and a

research assistant. All Zoom recordings and transcription files were stored on a password-protected flash drive in a password-protected folder. A copy of each Zoom recording and transcription were on a password-protected flash drive, in a password-protected folder, in the locked office of the primary investigator. Interviews transcribed by the research assistant were downloaded onto the flash drive, the research assistant completed the transcription, and then the flash drive was returned to the primary investigator. No files were saved onto the personal devices of the research assistant or primary investigator.

The interview recordings were transcribed by the primary investigator and a research assistant. The primary investigator reviewed and edited the transcripts from the research assistant. The interview was transcribed verbatim and any identifying information was redacted. Minimal emotional interpretations and physical cues were included in the transcripts; exceptions were when these cues and emotional interpretations seemed to "convey important meaning" (McMullen, 2021, p. 145). As an example, consider this excerpt from a participant, "And then other times (shakes head) it felt like I was basically invisible and, um (shrugs shoulders) wasn't included." Time stamps were included in the transcript when the audio-visual connection became distorted. Transcription was conducted this way given the primary investigators' alignment with post-positivism.

Based on suggestions from Guest and colleagues (2006), the primary investigator began to check for data saturation after six interviews were completed. Data saturation has been described as being reached when no new themes or codes emerge (Guest et al., 2006). It was determined, with the help of a critical friend, that data saturation had been achieved at interview number 11.

The primary investigator enlisted the aid of a critical friend throughout coding and data analysis. The critical friend assisted in discerning when data saturation had been reached. Additionally, they were instrumental in ensuring that any personal biases the primary holds were being addressed (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Once data saturation had been thoroughly achieved after interview number 11, data analysis occurred. Data analysis followed the steps and reflections on thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). Participants were emailed a copy of the analysis to review. Participants were asked if the analysis was accurate and reflected their experiences. Six participants responded and confirmed that the analysis was reflective of their experience, five participants did not respond.

Instruments

Researcher as an instrument

Ravn (2019) articulates that in qualitative research the researcher needs to be an attentive listener. This entails that the researcher acknowledges that the participants' experiences may be different than anticipated and may be different than the investigators' experiences and observations (Ravn, 2019). The primary investigator recognizes that they possess biases about cliques within athletic teams. The primary investigator's experiences influence these biases as a former collegiate athlete and current mental performance consultant, and thus engaged in bracketing to reduce the influence of these biases and increase the trustworthiness of the results. A positionality statement has been included in this document.

Semi-structured interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used, as it allowed the researcher to use probing questions based on the participant's responses. The first draft of the semi-structured interview

guide was developed by the primary investigator. McGuire (2020) outlined a framework of athletes' experiences with subgroups. This framework articulates that these experiences occur in the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. The primary investigator used the framework by McGuire (2020) as a reference point when developing the initial interview guide. After initial conceptualization, the guide was sent to committee members for review. The primary investigator met with each committee member separately to review their feedback. The finalized guide consisted of seven rapport building questions, nine questions about their experiences with cliques, and four closing demographic questions (See Appendix A for the complete guide). Example questions are "Can you tell me about your experiences with cliques", "Can you tell me about how your day-to-day feelings within your team were influenced by these cliques", and "How did these cliques shape your willingness to engage in behaviors that positively or negatively impacted the team or your teammates". The interview was piloted with two individuals, an individual familiar with the content knowledge and an individual who met the eligibility criteria, prior to data collection (See Appendix A for the finalized guide).

As part of the interview process, participants were provided with a definition of a clique prior to being asked about their experiences with cliques. Based on the previous literature and prior definitions of cliques, the current study operationalized cliques as:

When people in the team form their own noticeable group within the team. These groups may form for lots of reasons, some examples might be rooming assignments, practice or position groups, or having more in common. These groups could have positive and negative influences on the team or individual athlete depending on the setting. For example, this means that cliques may be exclusive, such as by leaving people out of get-togethers or events. Cliques may also break team expectations or disrupt goals. Cliques

could also lead to conflict within the team. Even though cliques are disruptive, group members may have good reasons for forming them. For instance, there may have been times when teammate(s) belonged to a clique because of frustrations with something going on with the team.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that inductive coding is “data-driven” (p. 83), meaning, that the data will dictate the codes, rather than the data fitting within a preconceived notion or framework. Coding occurred at the semantic level. Semantic coding has been described as “themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). As the examination of cliques in an athletic setting is still novel, an inductive approach was deemed appropriate.

Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the codes. The process of thematic analysis occurred following the steps by Braun and Clarke (2006), immersion, initial codes, initial themes, refinement of themes, giving names to themes, and the production of a report. The following will further detail the phases of the analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

During the initial phase, the primary investigator familiarized themselves with the transcripts, reading through each transcript multiple times. While reviewing the transcripts the primary investigator recorded initial thoughts and ideas. Subsequently, the primary investigator methodically combed through the transcripts to develop initial codes and coded “for as many potential themes/patterns as possible” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). After initial coding occurred, the codes were sorted into initial themes and subthemes. Initially there were 10 original

themes. These rudimentary themes were further refined by reviewing each coded piece of data as it related to its relevant theme. If the piece of data was not in accordance with the theme, the primary investigator determined if the theme itself was unrepresentative or if the data was best represented by a different theme. The entire data set was reviewed to ensure that the themes were characteristic of the data set as a whole. After each theme and the entire data set were reviewed, themes were further articulated by naming and defining them. This involved illuminating “the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspects of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). The critical friend provided assistance throughout the data analysis process. Smith and McGannon (2018) noted the role of the critical friend is to “provide a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations as these emerged in relation to the data and writing” (p. 113). In this instance, the critical friend acted a sounding board when necessary throughout coding and analysis.

Trustworthiness

Bracketing

An essential element of the phenomenological perspective is bracketing (Allen-Collinson, 2019). Allen-Collinson (2019) notes that bracketing is when the researcher attempts to stand apart from experiences that are inherently biased and standard thoughts and cognitions. Through stringent and continuous bracketing, the researcher regards the phenomenon being studied, in an attempt to understand the essential element of the phenomenon. The bracketing demanded by this approach allows the primary investigator to “challenge taken-for-granted definitions, interpretations and meaning, to an extent” (Allen-Collinson, 2019, p. 17). With a phenomenon such as cliques, acknowledging biases and previously held perspectives with thorough bracketing

is incredibly important. The primary investigator engaged in bracketing throughout the research project.

Pilot Testing

Pilot testing was conducted to further develop the interview guide prior to the start of data collection. Pilot testing is beneficial “for testing the quality of an interview protocol and identifying potential researcher biases” (Chenail, 2011, p. 257). Chenail (2011) articulates that a pilot study allows the primary investigator the opportunity to deliver the interview questions in the manner in which they will present in the study, receive feedback from the pilot interviewees on confusing or ambiguous questions, note the time necessary for the interview, observe the range of responses generated by each question, and confirm that the questions will generate data that answer the specific research question. Two pilot interviews were conducted. The first participant was an individual familiar with the subject matter. Feedback regarding the structure and language of the interview guide was incorporated after the first pilot interview. A second pilot interview was conducted with an individual who meet the inclusion criteria but was not versed in the subject matter. Feedback concerning the interview procedures and interview guide structure were incorporated after the second pilot interview.

Critical Friend

An additional method of trustworthiness was the utilization of a critical friend. A critical friend is a “process of critical dialogue between people, with researchers giving voice to their interpretations in relation to other people who listen and offer critical feedback” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113). The critical friend aided the primary investigator by determining if data saturation has been researched and reflecting and exploring the data throughout the coding and data analysis process. The critical friend was an individual who had prior experience with

qualitative research, has previously completed a master's thesis using qualitative methods, and was not involved with the data collection or preliminary analysis.

Member Checking and Member Reflections

Member checking was used to address trustworthiness in the data analysis process. "Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more of the participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Creswell (2012) attests that in member checking it is important to address (1) the description is thorough and accurate, (2) are the themes correct, (3) are the interpretations of the participants' experiences "fair and representative" (p. 259). Participants were given the opportunity to review the findings of the data analysis and determine if the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

In addition to member checking, participants had the opportunity to engage in member reflection. An objective of "member reflections is to generate additional data and insight" (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 108). Where member checking asks the participants to verify their responses and the corresponding analysis; member reflections may inquire if the participants wish to expand further upon their responses or provide an opportunity for the participants to discuss the analysis.

Participants were provided with the transcript and the primary investigators initial notes, and given 72 hours to respond. Six participants responded that their experience was accurate, five participants did not respond and it was assumed their experience was representative, and no participants wished to discuss the analysis.

Positionality Statement

I view research as occurring both with quantitative and qualitative methods. Originally, this project was exploring cliques using quantitative analysis. Upon further reflection, a

qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to answer the research question. Having taken a qualitative stance, I view cliques as a social phenomenon. With this in mind, a phenomenological perspective was applicable. This approach is more than a standard methodology; rather it is a way of considering and being present in the world (Allen-Collinson, 2019). Allen-Collinson (2019) describes this worldview as the phenomenological attitude, which is represented by “openness, curiosity, and a sense of wonderment” (p. 15) and is representative of my stance on research and how I engage with the world around me.

A major element of the phenomenological method is to question “existing assumptions and presuppositions regarding a phenomenon” (Allen-Collinson, 2019, p. 15). Considering my beliefs on the subject is a primary first step in this process. My beliefs are influenced by my personal history and interaction with cliques and subgroups. I was a swimmer for 14 years, coached swimming for five years, coaching athletes ages five to 18. As an athlete and a coach, I have been on and worked with teams where cliques and subgroups were present. During these experiences, I was a member of various groups and simultaneously outside of other groups on a team.

During my time competing as a club and high school swimmer, specifically during my freshman and sophomore years of high school, I was part of a clique. There were times when other people were not included; I was glad because I was included and felt like I belonged. Reflecting on that period, I experienced a sense of shame because of these exclusion behaviors. Later in high school, these cliques dissolved as members graduated high school or moved away. At this point, the team had fewer members and seemed to become its own subgroup. In my freshman year of college, there were certainly cliques on the team and I was in one. These cliques created divisions amongst the team that made it challenging to practice, compete, and

interact with each other. Open communication was rare, and many individuals turned to social media to express their frustrations about each other. Prior to my sophomore year of college, many members of one clique left the team; due to reasons such as retirement, transferring, or injury. After this, there seemed to be an emergence of subgroups, rather than cliques. Intuitively I knew that these were two different experiences. My experience with cliques was fraught with team conflict that was by no means conducive to performance. Whereas when the team dynamic changed my sophomore year the experience was drastically different. I interpreted this environment as much more facilitative, and the team was much more cohesive than the previous year. There was considerably less intra-team conflict, and more teammate support and engagement at practices, meets, and unofficial team functions. There were still groups within the teams, with teammates spending more time with others that were similar to them for reasons such as cohort, major, or personal values. It was not till reading about the differences between cliques and subgroups that I had the vocabulary to differentiate the two experiences.

My longest and most consistent coaching experience was a period of 14 months, where I predominantly coached a group of girls ages 12 to 14. I watched as the athletes created subgroups amongst their peers. These relationships seemed to form based on age, physical maturity, what school they attended, carpools, grade level, and swimming ability. The athletes seemed to engage most frequently with those that shared similar traits with them. These groups and friendships never seemed to influence an athlete's ability to talk with others in the same training group. While I viewed these informal subgroups as facilitative, I was also in a unique position to witness the benefits of more structural subgroups.

A structural subgroup may be a different training group. For example, having an athlete swim with a training group that they were not suited for (i.e., the training group was too

advanced or too below them) may make it challenging for that athlete to succeed. The structuring of these groups is intentional, and I viewed it as facilitative for the development of the athlete.

These experiences led me to believe that smaller groups are present in teams. I was able to witness firsthand the dynamic nature of these subgroupings. I found that some of these groups could be beneficial and facilitative, while others were negative and harmful, which is supported by current literature (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). This influenced my belief that cliques can be harmful and impactful. I was so fascinated by this subject that I completed a research project during my undergraduate degree on cliques. The project looked at the correlation between cliques and cohesion amongst intercollegiate soccer players over the course of a season.

I conder nonrepresentation in the study of a phenomenon as a form of oppression. The phenomena of cliques and subgroups in an athletic setting have been studied almost exclusively in college athletics. While studying other populations may be challenging, they have not been represented in the study of subgroupings in athletics. Further studies exploring this phenomenon in various settings may help offset the lack of representation.

I have the experience of being a former collegiate student-athlete in common with the sample participants, as I was a swimmer at a smaller NCAA DII school. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Participants recruited via convenience sampling may have had a similar student-athlete experience to my own, when considering the institution size, level of competition, and sport. Simultaneously, participants may have had a different student-athlete experience to my own when compared with the same elements (institution size, level, and sport). Race and/or gender may have been something I had in common with the participants if they identified as white and as a woman. Age may have been a shared commonality between me and the participants. Participants were recently retired student-athletes.

While I have been removed from participating in college athletics for four years, I was still relatively close in age to the participants. Having similarities with the participants may have predisposed me to project my own experiences into the interpretation of the results.

A hope for this study is that the findings will further add to the body of literature on subgroupings in athletic teams. The body of research concerning cliques in athletic teams is in its beginning stages; thus, expanding prior findings is important. A hope is that the findings allow coaches to become more aware of an athlete's experiences with cliques.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The interview guide was structured to focus on an athletes' personal experience, there were few questions concerning the structure of these cliques in relation to the larger team. Athletes alluded to how the clique(s) were situated and structured within the larger team (e.g., number of cliques, size of clique(s), who was in the clique), but were not always explicit in their descriptions.

Athletes alluded to their being a range in the quantity of cliques on their teams, from one to multiple. Athletes in the current study were on collegiate teams for three to five years. With athletes being on their teams for multiple years, and groups being dynamic with members changing, the structure of cliques on an athletes' team changed. Athletes alluded to there being one clique in certain instances or at a different time/year there were multiple cliques. Athletes were on teams with a wide range of roster sizes. The size of the roster was not always indicative of the number of cliques that athletes alluded to. Athletes described rosters on their team as small (golf, tennis), medium (indoor volleyball, cross-country), and large (swimming, track & field, soccer, women's wrestling, softball).

Two primary themes were identified in the analysis: (a) Individual-Level Implications of Cliques and (b) Team-Level Implications of Cliques. Individual-Level Implications of Cliques consisted of seven subthemes: emotional implications of cliques, cognitive implications of cliques, behavioral implications of cliques, personal status and role associations with cliques, personal performance implications of cliques, personal perspective, and autonomy. Team-Level Implications of Cliques was composed of seven subthemes: cliques are inevitable, development

of cliques, disruptive behaviors, apprehensive team climate, conforming behaviors, team performance implications, and management of cliques.

Individual-Level Implications of Cliques

Individual-level implications of cliques was defined as how athletes personally experienced cliques while on their team. All 11 participants are represented in this theme. Individual-level implications of cliques consisted of seven subthemes: (a) emotional implications of cliques, (b) cognitive implications of cliques, (c) behavioral implications of cliques, (d) personal status and role associations with cliques, (e) personal performance implications of cliques, (f) personal perspective, and (g) autonomy.

Emotional Implications of Cliques

The emotional implication of cliques was defined as the feelings, both positive and negative, experienced while a participant was on their team. Each of the 11 participants shared sentiments that fall under this subtheme, eight participants shared positive emotions and 10 participants experienced negative emotions.

Positive emotions shared included happiness, belonging, enjoyment, and comfort. During her time as an athlete, Sofia had experiences where she was a member of cliques and outside cliques. She remarked on how when she was inside cliques she experienced more belonging than when she was outside of cliques, “I would say definitely like when I was a part of a certain clique or something like that um I would say that I definitely felt more belonging.”

Mateo, a cross country and track and field athlete, was in a clique that formed with fellow distance runners that liked to watch American football. Mateo spoke about the pride he felt for his clique when he shared the following:

But let's just say if I do have some true friends and we actually do support each other, or, or we give each other advice to become better, I would say that's like definitely something I'm proud to be a part of.

Sofia and Mateo's experiences were highlighted by their ability to recognize a boundary between their clique (when they were on the inside) and others (those who were not members of their clique(s)).

Whereas the above quotes demonstrate the positive emotions experienced by athletes, there were negative feelings as well. Participants specified that some of the negative sentiments they experienced were anger, sadness, anxiety, betrayal, and lack of belonging or "fitting in."

Ted, a golfer, described some of these negative emotions when he shared:

Yeah, I mean like I said (shrugs shoulder), like just being totally honest, my final year at [School 1], like from someone who honestly is a fairly I would say (shakes head slightly) confident person, never really struggled much with anxiety, or depression, or feeling lonely, or anything like that, or never really have any experience with dealing with that. Till my senior year, honestly struggling a pretty good amount with all three. Um (pauses for a while, seems sad), largely due to the impact, um, with the team dynamics and how I felt I was fitting in.

Ted felt like he fit in his first two years and did not consider there to be any cliques on the team. During his senior year, Ted shared that a clique developed around social activities that Ted was not privy to. He cited not feeling like he "fit in" with the team and clique as the main reason why he chose to transfer for his final year of eligibility.

Cognitive Implications of Cliques

The cognitive implications of cliques subtheme was defined as the thoughts, positive and negative, that an athlete had concerning themselves and others while on their team. Each of the 11 participants are represented in this subtheme, with five participants sharing positive cognitions and 10 athletes sharing negative cognitions.

Positive cognitions shared included motivation, forgiving members of one's own clique, and positive thoughts about oneself. Rebecca transferred to a new school her junior year. During her junior year, Rebecca shared that the team was split into two cliques, "returners" and "newcomers". She described the experience with her clique at her new school as "So I would say like in my personal experience it was motivating for me because I wanted to be around others that wanted to like push me that wanted to get the best out of themselves." Maria described the positive thoughts she had about herself:

About myself, probably yes because you always try to cheer each other up also. Like you are so pretty, or look at this guy he's looking at you. Since these cliques are also your friends outside of the tennis court um they make you feel better.

Along with motivation, Maria noted how it was easier to forgive the actions of people that were inside her clique, "and it's easier, to, to forgive someone that you have a clique with than someone you don't have a clique with."

While the above quotes demonstrate the positive implications of cliques, there were negative implications as well.

Phoebe was a senior and captain for her volleyball team when younger players on the team formed a clique. Phoebe expressed that during this experience she would question herself and her capabilities, "I was like dang, maybe I'm not like that good of a leader, that good of a person, that good of a player, whatever that may be." Several participants shared similar stories

about how cliques excluded them, this exclusion was present in their motivation and enjoyment of their sport, as demonstrated in Sharon's experience. Sharon had a great experience her first three years. During her final fourth and fifth years on the team, when cliques were present, Sharon reflected on how she struggled to be motivated to practice during that time. Sharon dictated that "there were definitely times where I didn't want to go to practice." These stories indicate that athletes experience cognitive implications when cliques are on their team.

Behavioral Implications

The behavioral response to cliques was defined as the actions, positive and negative, an individual engaged in that pertained to cliques. The behavioral implications occurred while participants were on their team, and after their tenure on the team ended. All 11 participants shared perspectives that are reflected in this subtheme. Of the 11 athletes, nine shared positive behaviors they engaged in and 10 mentioned negative behaviors.

Positive behavioral responses included supporting individuals in one's own clique, as seen in this quote by Daniel, "So, you'll have to give guidance to new and young athletes in terms of how to adapt, how they should go about their training, what they can do to improve, and yeah." Jade, reflected on her experience and the individuals in her clique by saying "So even though it was sad, you always have to have perspective and remember that you have these people that will back you one hundred percent no matter what." Jade commented on how the friendships she had in her clique, were still present when she was no longer competing in collegiate athletics:

Yeah, so two, like my two best friends, they both swam, that's how I met them. So I could probably tell you a million ways but they've obviously impacted my life incredibly well because they're still my best friends to this day.

While there were positive behavioral responses, concurrently there were negative behavioral responses. In Jade's experience, she shared how she would avoid certain individuals and cliques, as seen in this quote:

I definitely tried to avoid some people in my house or in the locker room, cause just some days I didn't have it in me to have conversations or even interactions with people that I knew were just not gonna go well.

Dani's junior year, his head coach created tension and cliques on the team when the coach had clear favorites. Dani considered himself to be a very humorous individual, and throughout this experience, he felt he could not act in that manner:

I was also like, I used to do a lot of jokes all around every time, but like with this tension, like I, like I couldn't really keep doing it you know, I didn't feel like they could take it in a good way, I feel like they would take it more personal for sure.

Ted's senior year, he struggled to feel like he fit in on the team; which was reflected in his mental and physical health and performance. Ultimately Ted elected to transfer for his fifth year due to his experience with cliques:

I would say the sole reason I chose to transfer was because, I just felt like I didn't fit in with the team, and the clique, and was struggling physically and mentally, with that whole scenario, which led me to transferring (shoulder shrug).

Personal Status and Role Associations with Cliques

Personal status and role associations were defined by how an individual's position, their position as a leader, performer, or their individual role, related to their experience. Each of the 11 participants were reflected in this subtheme.

Dani, who identified himself as outside the clique on his tennis team, and therefore not a favorite of the coach, had a lower status than an individual inside of the clique “So I was saying that definitely in that way my status as a person outside of the clique was relatively worse than the status of the person that was a part of the clique.” As a person outside of the clique, Dani found that he had less power than individuals inside of the clique.

While Dani expressed how his status was lower because of being outside the clique, Mae identified how her status changed when she was outside of the clique, as seen in this quote “So I would definitely say like, my status or whatever you wanna say, dropped or like was just not, yeah it just wasn’t there anymore I think.” Dani and Mae’s experiences indicate that an athlete's membership in cliques can shape, and be shaped by, their status on a team.

Daniel, who competed in cross country and track and field, shared how performance capabilities related to how he was able to access certain groups and cliques “Yeah, I feel like you’re definitely more accepted as you get faster, as your status increases and you know you’re willing to make different decisions in your best interest to gain that status and acceptance within those groups.”

The quotes from Dani, Mae, and Daniel reflected how one’s status and performance abilities were present in their experiences. Keeley discussed her role as a captain in her experience with cliques. She shared how she was more aware and exposed to the clique in her formal leadership role, “I would say that my status as a captain and a senior, I was definitely more exposed to it and had to be more involved just because it’s my job to you know look out for the team.”

Personal Performance Implications of Cliques

Personal performance implications of cliques were defined as how individuals considered their athletic performance related to cliques while on their team. Ten participants made a connection between cliques and their individual athletic performance.

Some participants reflected on how cliques positively impacted their performance. Daniel, a distance runner whose clique set rules about performance-related items, such as mandating nine hours of sleep a night and athletes had to stay eligible in the classroom, dictated “So, because of these standards we set within our cliques we then act upon those specific rules and guidelines that we have put in place so it could impact our performance.” Sofia had experiences where she was on the inside of a clique and outside of cliques. She spoke about how when she was inside a clique and had teammates supporting her she felt better about her performance “I um felt like I was doing better as far as my athletic performance as well because it’s like there were people around and people supporting me even when maybe I wasn’t having the best um actual performance.”

Mae was on a team where individuals in a clique told rumors about her to other members of the team, including the coaches and support staff. During her experience outside of cliques, Mae was isolated by her teammates and coaches. Mae reflected on how this isolation was a factor in her experience and her performance on the team:

Because I was too focused as to like why people wouldn’t talk to me, and why too this coach was picking on me. It was almost like I couldn’t perform my best because of everything going on basically. Like I had that much on my mind, that I, I couldn’t like.

So I do think it directly impacted my performance and abilities for sure.

Echoing Mae, Ted observed his experience outside of a clique and his performance on the golf course:

Um, which I felt negatively impacted how I was playing quite a bit honestly. Cause with golf, and I'm sure with other sports, but just speaking from my own, like, it's really hard game in itself and then mentally if you're kind of in a tough spot, or maybe feeling kind of depressed or like you don't belong it's really hard to play.

Personal Perspective

Personal perspective was defined as the personal growth that transpired as an individual encountered cliques while on their team. Eight athletes discussed personal growth that falls under this subtheme.

In Rebecca's experience, her personal growth was marked by increased awareness regarding her involvement in the cliques on her soccer team. She remarked on how with each year she played, she became more aware of cliques and her role within and between these cliques. She shared how in her second year she thought she was intentionally trying to remain outside of cliques. After the year was over, Rebecca recognized she was still on the inside of several cliques. Rebecca identified that her favorite year was her fifth year because she was intentionally a "floater" and navigating between cliques, "I think as I got older I got better at being aware and that's why my fifth year panned out the way it did, so yeah."

Mae was isolated by her teammates because of rumors a clique shared about her. When reflecting on this experience, Mae described that although the experience was "horrible", she was able to grow as a person, "And like, I, I thought, like I'm not saying like I was like, perfect because I wasn't, I think this happened, and I do think this, in a weird way I do feel like I'm a better person now."

As a freshman, Maria was a part of a clique consisting of herself and two older teammates. She shared that during her freshman year, she would oftentimes follow the actions of

the older clique members, regardless of whether these actions were aligned with her personal desires. Maria describes how after her freshman year she was more authentic and independent:

And then after this year, I decided that this is not how I am. I am more independent than that. And then I tried to be more myself and not involve others in my self thoughts. So, so I think after my second, after my freshman year I was different in the cliques, with people. Like I was more with who I wanted to be, not who adopted me.

Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as an individual's perception of control about their involvement with the cliques on their athletic team. 10 participants reflected on their "choice" to be inside or outside of cliques.

Some participants shared that they felt that they had complete control over their involvement with cliques, as seen in this quote by Daniel “But yea, I feel like it’s the choice is completely up to you on whether or not you want to be included or excluded from those.”

While Daniel identified that he had autonomy over his involvement, Rebecca shared that she made a conscious choice to be outside of cliques. Rebecca had been involved in several different teams and had transferred to a new school her junior year. In years prior, Rebecca was a captain and considered herself to be a “floater” and intentionally between cliques but remarked that she would generally only hang out with the friends in her clique because it was simple. Her fifth year, Rebecca made it a point to be a “floater” and enjoyed her time considerably:

that’s why I think like my fifth year I was so conscious about it. Because it was like, no the only way that I’m going to not like fall back into that pattern and like comfortability is if I’m telling myself ‘hey you know I’m not doing this’. Like I’m not going to just go with what’s comfortable and easy.

Daniel and Rebecca both spoke of the control they felt over their involvement with cliques, Mateo shared that it was less his choice and more about the choices and preferences of others:

I would say, it just, I don't think it matters what my opinion is. I think it matters what everyone else's opinion is cause I can't choose, or I can't make people respect me or not. Like it all falls on them.

Sofia believed that she could have been accepted into the clique on her team, but it would have necessitated that she change parts of herself and behaved in a manner that was inauthentic to who she held herself to be "Um I think I definitely could have been in [the clique]. I could've made a choice to be in the clique. But I think it would've definitely gone against my values and my beliefs. Um and not changing myself."

Team-Level Implications of Cliques

The team-level implications of cliques were defined as elements of an individual's experience that described the team and cliques throughout their time as an athlete. Team-level implications consisted of seven subthemes. The subthemes were (a) cliques are inevitable, (b) development of cliques, (c) disruptive behaviors, (d) apprehensive team climate, (e) conforming behaviors, (f) team performance implications, and (g) management of cliques. All 11 participants shared experiences that are depicted in this theme.

Cliques are Inevitable

Cliques are inevitable was defined as the perception held by athletes that cliques are natural, normal, and unavoidable elements of groups. Nine participants are represented in this subtheme.

Jade was on a team where cliques were present all four years she competed. She considered cliques to be unavoidable in sport and outside of athletics:

No, I think cliques are gonna happen anywhere and everywhere no matter what just because you bond with people that you have interests with, so I think you're always going to have conflict, you're never going to have a team of people from totally different backgrounds and totally different life experiences come together for four years, and be together all the time, and never have anything go wrong. I think you're just always going to have conflict with that.

Mateo held the view that people are going to associate more with individuals who are similar to themselves, and this happens across multiple settings, not just in sport "So I feel like that just naturally happens wherever we go in the world."

Some of the participants shared how they considered cliques to be normal elements of their team, as seen in this quote by Maria "So I think that when Coach would say that he didn't want us to have cliques, I didn't really like it because I think that it is something normal."

Development of Cliques

The development of cliques was defined as how athletes perceived cliques to form on their teams. All 11 participants shared perspectives that fell within this subtheme.

Mateo shared that individuals on his team were mainly from Europe, Africa, and states close to the university. He noted that cliques developed due to geography and where individuals were coming from, "But I would say that, New Mexico is probably the um, I don't know if I wanna say the worst, but they're definitely the cliqueiest. Like, population, like part of the team for sure. New, New Mexico for sure."

Mae reflected that the clique on her team developed around playing time, with individuals in the clique not playing as frequently:

So for example, this clique, it mainly consisted of people who didn't play much or like maybe couldn't play cause they were injured, or, or did play but they wasn't like, they didn't get, they didn't play all the time. So it was mostly that.

Mae described how cliques formed around elements related to athletics (e.g., playing time), Dani also experienced cliques that developed because of sport specific circumstances. In Dani's experience, the clique formed due to coach favoritism, specifically the coach favoring certain freshmen. On Dani's team it was tradition for the team to elect their captains. In Dani's senior year, the new head coach selected the team's captain himself, rather than the team voting. Dani shared when the coach selected captains, rather than the team voting, it was a demonstration of the coach's preference for certain players. Dani considered the clique to have formed because the coach had these preferences:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He [the head coach] was the reason [the clique formed] because normally in the team, like I mean the coach provides the part of tennis and if there's problems they help of course, get too much into the problems you know, like if the team is not asking for help then he should not get into it. For example we always like used to pick, for example captains, like seniors and juniors, and then that year the coach picked a freshmen, just because he liked him.

While geography and sport specific circumstances were identified as ways cliques developed, an individual's tenure with the team was also seen as a reason for cliques to develop. Rebecca transferred to a new school her junior year, and shared how the team was split between individuals that were new to the program and those who had previously been on the team, "then going into my junior year transferring. It was literally split down the middle of returners and new people. Because we had a ton of new people like my first year."

Athletes shared that cliques formed based on commonalities and having similar hobbies, as seen in this quote by Phoebe:

Yeah, I think um, obviously you find people who, like for me it was finding people with like, not the same personality but kind of like, ya know the same goals in life or just the same personality and ya know things you like to do, like just things in common.

Disruptive Behaviors

Disruptive behaviors were defined as actions that created tension and made the athletic experience more challenging for the individual and/or the team. These disruptive behaviors were actions taken by individual athletes, cliques, coaches, and support staff that were related to cliques. Of the 11 participants, 10 shared perspectives in this subtheme.

Mae described the behaviors of the clique as negative and that there was a lack of conviction by these cliques toward the team:

And I would say um, there was a lot of, this is only my opinion so, it was kind of like a lot of, talking bad about other players, talking bad about the coaches, and it was kind of like they wasn't really, buying into it as much as anybody else. And that caused a lot of disruption, in the team, I would say.

Dani was on a team where the head coach's favorites were inside of a clique along with the head coach. Dani and some of his friends reacted to this favoritism by treating those inside the clique differently from how they would their closer peers, as seen in this quote "I'm not gonna help him as if he was my other best friend you know." Dani described how he acted towards members of the team clique, Jade described how she and her friends would intentionally exclude other individuals:

Yeah, I think some behaviors like, me, I mean purposefully I think you can go with but there were sometimes where we would go and do, my group of friends would go and do things, and it wouldn't necessarily be an open invitation cause we didn't want other people to go because we didn't want to be around them.

Keeley had an experience where the clique consisted of an assistant coach and several younger teammates. She reflected on how the position of the assistant coach, as a coach and clique member, made it challenging to navigate and resolve the cliques:

And then also you know it was three teammates and then one assistant coach. So, it was really weird and hard cause you know when you have experience difficult things going on in the team and everybody's kind of impacted by it, you obviously want to kind of resolve it really quickly, and it was hard to kind of even identify it or like talk to anybody about it because a coach was involved. And so, like the people that you're supposed to go to, to like to help you figure it out, like it was like they couldn't really do that because the person you were going to was like part of the clique.

Like Keeley and Dani, Sofia had a clique experience that was highlighted by coach involvement. Sofia was a captain and active member of the team through her senior year. During her senior year, Sofia mentioned that her coaches treated one of her close friends poorly, resulting in her friend and several others transferring. The consecutive year, when Sofia was a graduate student and in her fifth year on the team, cliques on the team excluded her from many activities. The coaches defended the exclusionary behaviors of individuals inside the cliques:

The coaches, especially my graduate year, they always cited me being too busy as the reason not to plan things that I was able to make it to but there were definitely times where it was like no, I definitely could have made it but I just hadn't been invited.

Apprehensive Team Climate

Apprehensive team climate was defined as the tense and unpleasant ambiance experienced pertaining to cliques. Apprehensive team climate occurred while an athlete was on their team. Ten athletes were reflected in this subtheme.

Phoebe was a senior when she had cliques on her team. She describes the clique as being mainly composed of younger players who were dissatisfied with the leadership of the seniors. For Phoebe, this was challenging because she was a captain at the time. She reflected that the team atmosphere was filled with uncertainty and tension, “But I think personality-wise, maybe like walking on eggshells a little bit cause you know, you didn’t know what was gonna happen, or what they were gonna say, or how they would react to it.”

Some athletes mentioned that intra-team competition was present on their team. Nate shared that within his team teammates were oftentimes competing against each other and individuals on the team would rarely help each other, “The team’s just not as close, like people aren’t as comfortable or relaxing or whatever because people are just so focused on their races and stuff.”

Dani reflected on the tension that was created on the team due to the coach preferring some athletes:

and then some like the coach also like not only has this guy but like two more who he preferred over the rest, so then like there’s not hate but then people start like, oh the coach likes you more, like this and this, and then it starts creating tension you know when when they start being the preferred players by the coach, and then it was this guy and one more.

Conforming Behaviors-

Conforming behaviors were defined as when teammates engaged in behaviors to comply with the norms and/or standards of the clique(s). Eight participants are represented in this subtheme.

Phoebe reflected on her athletic career and witnessing teammates who would drastically change their behaviors depending on who they would interact with:

So I think that there were some people that I've been, just interacted with in like college and high school with sports, that when they choose to hang out with these people that don't make them better people, it just makes them worse people (air quotes around worse).

Mae shared that teammates that were not in the clique would act differently around clique members to avoid being isolated, like Mae was:

And I think after what had happened, there was a few people who was seeing what she had done to me, and they wanted to make sure that didn't happen to them. So while they wouldn't actively be a part of the clique, they would almost be, like fake, like they would say one thing but then to their face they'd be overly nice and everything because they didn't want that to happen to them. So I would say it definitely like spread.

On Keeley's team, where the clique originally consisted of the assistant coach and two freshmen, a junior joined the clique halfway through the fall semester. Keeley mentioned that prior to the junior joining the clique, her teammate was a friend and oriented around the team:

Umm and it was strange cause it was a player that we- that I had loved and who wouldn't- who like never missed a day of practice in her life, like she was very dedicated, very like goal oriented, team oriented and then she got involved with you know the assistant coach and these two players, and it was just like the most bizarre thing.

Maria shared that as she and her teammates shared perspectives, and realized they were not alone in their sentiments towards a teammate, the problem with her teammate became more apparent:

Um and then she, she, she kind of fell outside of the team and then the rest of the team, we had each other own cliques. And then everyone was talking about her, like in general, but everyone had their own thoughts about her. And then she did some really bad stuff and said something that she said was that coach was mentally abusing her and stuff like that. And then it was when people got their thoughts out, and then it was kind of people didn't hated her (air quotes around hated) but really disliked her for all the things that she did. And when we said it out loud, everyone was against her. But maybe though a week before she was doing the same things, but since no one was saying anything, um the problem was not as big because we all respected her.

Team Performance Implications

Team performance implications were defined as how the team's performance was influenced, by cliques on the team. Athletes perceived cliques to have a negative impact on team performance, or there was no impact of cliques on performance. Five athletes are represented in this subtheme.

Rebecca transferred to a new school her junior year, and the team was divided into “newcomers” and “returners”. She shared how the team had lost several games in a row. After the seventh loss, her assistant coach held a meeting with the team and began to address the divide between the returning players and the newcomers. Rebecca shared:

Once we kind of identified that and started to like tackle it, the results quickly followed.

Like it was actually crazy, not saying we were all like best friends after that but it was

like okay we are realizing that's there's a very clear divide and this is like affecting our success.

Keeley mentioned that the clique on her team was resolved when the clique members transferred to another institution. She shared how following the clique members leaving the team, the team's performance improved, "And again, I just thought that it was important to note that they ended up quitting and then we ended up doing great the rest of the season, so yeah." Both Rebecca and Keeley shared how their teams performance improved when the respective cliques were resolved; Rebecca's team with a coach meeting, and Keeley's team with the clique members leaving. Phoebe articulated that while there were cliques present on the team, the cliques did not affect the team athletically, " We had always, definitely had, we definitely had cliques, but it never really got in the way of anything that we were trying to do volleyball wise which was nice."

Management of Cliques

Management of cliques was defined as the regulation and supervision of cliques, and resolutions regarding the clique(s) while athletes were on their intercollegiate team(s). Seven athletes shared ways that they, and their team, managed and/or resolved cliques.

As mentioned above, the clique on Keeley's team was resolved when the clique members left the team. Prior to the clique members leaving, Keeley reflected on a particular instance where during a match the atmosphere was "off", and afterwards, several athletes were crying and upset. She shared:

Cause again we were trying to find ways to- how are we going to get through this year without you know ever feeling like this every match and how are we going to do it? And then they resolved all of our issues by just leav- by quitting.

Dani considered communicating with everyone to be one of the only ways the cliques on his team were stopped:

I think, you have to, I will say talk about it with them as much as you can. And that's what we did, and in the case that it doesn't work, that was our case, you, I mean you can't do a lot of things honestly, I mean you have to try to stay with the bigger part of the team, you know like to try to have a good relationship anyway.

Rebecca shared that her senior year she and her fellow captains were intentional about trying to dissolve cliques "I think that was just a lot of conscious effort on the older girls part and like that choice to see how bad that started out like our first year." Rebecca also shared that trying to manage cliques was at times uncomfortable, as seen in this quote:

There was like a couple of girls on the team that not everybody liked and you know they would be like crying and stuff some practices and there would be like drama and like arguments. And like it was uncomfortable for me sometimes to be like no I'm going to defend this person and we're going to try to work this out.

Maria's coach was intentional about trying to break up cliques on the team. She referenced that one of the ways he tried to dissuade cliques from forming was by having the athletes warmup with different teammates:

Like for example if we had to warm up, I would always warm up with one of my cliques. He would always said, no, you can not warm up with one of your cliques, you have to warm up with other girls on the team. And then he also did some stuff like every day you have to warm up with someone different.

Integration of Themes and Subthemes

Ted's story below offers an example of the integration of the themes and subthemes constructed in this analysis. In Ted's experience, his first two years there were no cliques on the team and he was close with all his teammates. Regarding the inevitability of groups, Ted reflected that cliques and social groups are "normal aspects of life."

Cliques started to develop during Ted's junior year, mostly around social habits, with clique members being more involved in these social activities. Ted described how individuals on the team who were more reserved felt as though "it seemed we had to invite ourselves at times," and there were instances where they were purposefully excluded from gatherings. The theme of autonomy was present when Ted mentioned that he felt that he had a choice to be involved with these groups. While acknowledging that he had a choice, Ted also mentioned that he would engage in conforming behaviors to fit in more with the clique, "I would say that, in an effort to try and fit in more or be noticed, um I was making an effort to, just whatever they were doing be there, whether I really wanted to be there or not."

The behavioral, cognitive, and emotional implications of Ted's experience were mostly negative or unpleasant. One of the behavioral implications that Ted mentioned was that he would avoid his teammates and preferred to be on his own. For Ted, practicing became a struggle because he was less motivated to practice on his own. Throughout his clique experience, Ted described some of the cognitions he experienced as "self-doubt," and "Just feeling like there was something I was doing wrong, or there was something I needed to change." Emotionally, Ted articulated that he felt anxious, depressed, lonely, and as though he did not fit in. For Ted, not fitting in was also a source of frustration. During his experience, Ted identified that he was struggling and reached out to a mental coach and family friends to "find some form of positives."

Ted expressed some confusion regarding his status and role on the team because he was a top performer on his team, was active in various athletic department leadership programs, and was named a team captain. In contrast, his status on the team was low because he was not in the clique. For Ted, this confusion was tied to still feeling like he did not fit in, “so like physically being named team captain, while still feeling like I didn’t fit in, um I guess on paper would sound pretty weird I feel to most people. But that’s how I felt honestly.”

Ted did not mention if cliques on the team had implications for the team’s performance or how they were managed. He did specify that the team was generally competing at a high level regionally. The atmosphere during this period, Ted’s junior and senior years, was described as being “cutthroat competition,” highlighting the apprehensive team climate that can be experienced on teams with cliques.

Ted’s personal performance suffered in his junior and senior years, and he believed he was not performing to his potential. He cited golf as being a very mental game, his lack of confidence and feeling like he didn’t belong were reasons why he thought it was hard for him to perform his best. Ted managed his clique involvement by transferring to a new school for his fifth year:

I would say the sole reason I chose to transfer was because, I just felt I didn’t fit in with the team, and the clique, and was struggling physically and mentally, with that whole scenario, which led me to transferring (shoulder shrug).

Ted was able to speak to the environment at his new school, and how there were no cliques. Ted described that he felt like he belonged, he was happy, he was more motivated, and his performance improved.

Ted's experience offers an example of how the themes constructed in this analysis can present during an individual's experience with cliques. This integration allows for the appreciation of the themes and various sub themes in a manner that considers their interconnectedness, rather than just in isolation.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

It has been noted that there is a lack of research on smaller groupings within teams (i.e., cliques and subgroups) (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Due to the sparse body of literature on cliques in athletic teams, articles concerning cliques, subgroups, or both types of smaller groups, are incorporated in the discussion. Within the discussion, the terms cliques and subgroups are not used interchangeably, but rather specifically to reflect the phenomenon that was specified by their respective studies.

Within the group dynamics literature, it has been established that cliques are an inevitable element of athletic teams (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). With there being a lack of research concerning cliques in sport, and the acknowledgement of their inevitability, the aim of the current study was to add to this literature by exploring collegiate athletes' experiences with cliques.

Defining Cliques

The results of the present study suggested that on the individual level athletes can have positive (e.g., belonging, motivation, supporting members of one's own clique) and negative experiences (e.g., sadness, self-doubt, avoidance) with cliques. This suggest that how cliques are thought of and defined as only negative may need to change to reflect the nuances of the phenomenon.

The finding that cliques can be positive and negative for individuals supports findings by Coffey (2023) and McGuire (2020). Coffey (2023) reported that while cliques and subgroups were perceived negatively, they could be positive as well. Though not concerning cliques, McGuire (2020) explored athlete experiences with subgroups, also finding that these experiences

could be positive and negative. The current results, and those by Coffey (2023) and McGuire (2020) explore the multifaceted phenomena of cliques and subgroups. Considering and defining cliques as exclusively negative, or subgroups as solely positive or facilitative, may not accurately capture the nuances of these groups.

Previous research has separated cliques and subgroups into two separate entities, and defined them based on their consequences, cliques being debilitating and subgroups being facilitative (Martin, 2020). Labeling a group as a subgroup or clique based on outcomes may not accurately reflect the nuances of the phenomenon. Regarding the differentiation between cliques and subgroups, a possible alternative may be to consider cliques and subgroups along a continuum, rather than dichotomously. The determination between the two types of groups could be on the processes that a group exhibits, rather than the consequences/outcomes of said group. An example process might be the disruptive behaviors that the group(s) engage in (e.g., exclusion, lack of conviction towards team objectives). The continuum between subgroups and cliques may also be marked by the duration and/or severity of the disruptive behaviors (e.g., did exclusion happen once or repeatedly).

Psychological Safety

Evidence of psychological safety, or lack thereof, was present concerning athletes' experiences with cliques. It may be that individuals whose experiences with cliques were positive experienced psychological safety within their clique(s). The psychological safety experienced in a clique may mitigate an athlete from a lack of psychological safety at the team level. Contrastingly, athletes whose experiences with cliques were negative may have occurred due to a lack of psychological safety.

Psychological safety in sport has been operationalized as “the perception that one is protected from, or unlikely to be at risk of, psychological harm in sport” (Vella et al., 2022, p. 15). Psychological safety is characterized by attributes, antecedents, and consequences. All three (attributes, antecedents, and consequences) were evident in the current study when considering psychological safety and its implications for cliques.

Athletes in the current study referenced positive or pleasant emotions, which may match with the “positive emotional state” attribute of psychological safety (Vella et al., 2022, p. 7). Additionally, athletes found friendship in their fellow clique members, which aligns with the attribute “positive interpersonal relationship” and the antecedent “social interaction” (Vella et al., 2022, p. 7). Athletes reported that they were motivated to compete and practice when they were inside cliques which corresponds with a consequence of psychological safety “motivation for continued participation” (Vella et al., 2022, p. 7).

In the current study, athletes described experiences of being outside of cliques and their mental health suffering (as seen in the subthemes concerning emotional and cognitive implications of cliques). Mental health has been described as a consequence of psychological safety (Vella et al., 2022). Additionally, athletes in the current study referenced leaving teams where there were cliques or where they were outside of cliques; as mentioned earlier, motivation to continually engage in a sport was a consequence of psychological safety. Athletes that were outside of a clique or on a team with cliques, may have not experienced psychological safety and decided to leave that team.

Personal Status and Role Associations with Cliques

Athletes in the current study discussed how if they were outside of cliques, they had a lower status on the team than individuals inside of the clique(s). This finding shows how an

individuals' status was related to their clique experience. Though not with cliques, McGuire (2020) found that higher-status subgroups had more sway and leverage with the team than subgroups of a lower status. Considered together, the finding of the current study (that individuals outside of cliques can have lower status), and those by McGuire (2020) (that certain groups can have greater leverage), imply that there are multiple layers of how status is conceptualized in the smaller groups within teams (i.e., individual status and team level hierarchy of groups).

Athletes identified if an individual was a high performer on their team, they are more accepted in the clique(s) or allowed more leeway regarding the clique(s). Jacob and Carron (1998) found that because sport is a task-focused environment, individuals who can help accomplish the task (i.e., high performers or critical players/athletes) have a higher status on the team. It may have been that in the current study high performers had a higher status, due to their relevance to the team task, and this higher status allowed them more admission into the clique(s).

In the current study, being a leader, through a formal (e.g., captain) or informal (e.g., upperclassman) role, meant that athletes were more involved with the management of the clique(s) compared to individuals who were not in these leadership roles. Prior research found that coaches rely on athletes in leadership positions to help them manage cliques (Martin et al., 2016). The involvement by athletes in the management of cliques is congruent with previous research and may be a reflection of the emphasis coaches place on these roles. It may also be a reflection that coaches consider cliques to be a team/athlete level issue, that may be best managed by athletes, rather than at the coach level.

Performance Implications

Athletes in the current study described how cliques could be positively and negatively connected to their individual athletic performance. An example of a negative performance connection may be characterized by an individual being outside of a clique and experiencing self-doubt that made performing a challenge. A positive performance connection being when an individual felt better about their performance when they were inside a clique. Athletes in the study by Coffey (2023) described subgroups and their relationship with an individuals' performance, finding that membership in a subgroup could be positive for performance. These findings provide evidence that for individuals, cliques and subgroups can at times be beneficial for personal performance.

While at the individual level there seem to be positive and negative implications for performance, at the team level cliques seem to be largely negative for team performance. In teams where cliques are present, there may be less perceived psychological safety, potentially due to the behaviors associated with cliques, resulting in the team's performance suffering. Vella and colleagues (2022) systematic review of psychological safety in sport described that a consequence of psychological safety is team performance (e.g. when psychological safety is present team performance improves, when psychological safety is lacking team performance is diminished).

Personal Perspective

Participants in the current study described the personal growth that occurred throughout their clique experiences on their teams. In the current study, cliques were not specifically defined as a challenge, yet they were considered to be inherent within athletic teams. Galli and Reel (2012) explored student-athletes' perceptions of growth as it related to adversity within intercollegiate athletics. The authors found that student-athletes believed they experienced

psychosocial development because of challenges that are ingrained in collegiate sport. The participant's ability to describe the growth they experienced due to the challenges associated with cliques is aligned with previous research. However, the concept of growth regarding these clique experiences is novel within a sport domain.

One potential explanation for this growth is to consider it through the lens of Erikson's identity development theory (Erikson, 1980). Collegiate athletes are generally between the ages of 18 and 23. Erikson described how adolescents confront the challenge of identity versus identity confusion. In terms of identity development, individuals in college may fall within this stage of development. The personal growth participants shared may have occurred as individuals established their identities.

Autonomy

There is not much present in the literature regarding choice and clique involvement in athletic teams. Considering this, athletes in the current study were purposefully probed on the choice to be inside or outside cliques. This question was asked to further explore choice as it related to an individual's clique membership and involvement. Codes in the current study developed that found a choice in clique involvement on athletic teams. Concurrently there was the inevitability of cliques within athletic teams. There may be a balance between what is natural and inevitable, and the choice to be involved.

Obst and White (2006) explored the degree of choice in community membership, psychological sense of community, and social identification among university students. The authors found that when individuals had higher levels of perceived choice of a community group (i.e., a club/organization versus a neighborhood), it was "associated with higher levels of social identification and PSOC (Psychological Sense of Community)" (p. 84). Previous research

suggests that athletes are drawn towards individuals with whom they share similar interests, and that being drawn to others is “natural and not necessarily intentional” (Martin et al., 2015, p. 88). It may be that there is little choice regarding the formation of cliques, due to their inevitability; simultaneously an individual may experience a degree of choice regarding their personal involvement in the clique.

Team Implications

Participants in the current study described their experiences with cliques in two ways 1) how they personally experienced cliques and 2) descriptions of the team and cliques throughout their time as an athlete. The separation between individual and team found in the current study agrees with prior research. Coaches have considered how cliques can impact both individuals and the larger team (Martin et al., 2016). Within the framework by Wagstaff & Martin (2018), consequences of cliques may be present for both individuals and the team.

Inevitability & Development

Athletes in the current study shared how cliques are inevitable, natural, and normal elements of teams. Within the literature on cliques in athletic teams, this is a sentiment that has repeatedly been present. Coaches and athletes have previously described cliques as inevitable (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). Wagstaff and Martin (2018) define the two premises of cliques as being (a) inevitable and (b) variable. Variability, as discussed by Martin (2020), did not emerge as a theme within the data.

Athletes in the current study described how cliques on their team formed based on geography, playing time, coaching preferences, and having hobbies in common with others. Regarding reasons for clique development, the findings of the current study coincide with those observed in previous studies. Martin (2020) describes how cliques develop due to (a)

circumstantial/contextual factors (b) athlete demographics/characteristics and (c) general behavioral tendencies.

Disruptive Behaviors

Athletes in the current study described behaviors that created tension and made the athletic experience more challenging for the team and/or the individual. Athletes were not the only individuals capable of engaging in disruptive behaviors, coaches and other athletic support staff (e.g., athletic trainers) engaged in such behaviors (e.g., having favorites, being members of cliques, perpetuating clique behaviors). Finding that these disruptive behaviors occurred beyond athletes on a team, expands the boundaries of clique membership, who can be in a clique for it to be considered a clique. It may be that rather than just athletes on the same team, the bounds of a clique can extend to include all individuals within a team's ecosystem (e.g., coaches, athletes, managers, athletic trainers, academic support staff).

Regarding the involvement in cliques by coaches, Coffey (2023) found that coaches reinforced an athlete's social identity. Coaches are an integral part of teams and as part of their role, they may be required to manage cliques. However, their involvement in cliques, as members of cliques, may have negative consequences for the team. Support staff (i.e., athletic trainers, academic support personnel, strength and conditioning staff), especially roles with professional ethics, may break ethical codes by providing preferential treatment for individuals dependent on their clique involvement. Coaches and support staff who perpetuate cliques may not promote an environment conducive to sport enjoyment.

Athletes in the current study identified various disruptive behaviors they engaged in and/or witnessed during the clique experience (e.g., exclusion, actions incongruent with team objectives, isolation). The behaviors described by previous studies were aligned with those

represented in the results. Coaches have identified exclusion behaviors, and behaviors that are contrary to team objectives as some of the negative behaviors that cliques engage in (Martin et al., 2016). Athletes in a study by Paradis and colleagues (2014) identified isolation and exclusion as behaviors reflective of social conflict.

Participants in the current study reflected that these disruptive behaviors were not always unintentional, rather the actions can be conscious and purposeful. The reporting of these disruptive behaviors as being on “purpose” may have been because athletes were no longer competing on their university teams. The degree of intentionality, as being a mixture between intentional and unintentional, is counter to athletes in the study by Coffey (2023) who described the exclusionary behaviors of cliques as being largely unintentional.

Martin (2020) describes cliques as being debilitating at the team level. At the team level, cliques do seem to have a negative impact; in this regard, the current results compare favorably with prior literature. What is conflicting is that while cliques seem to be negative for teams, they do seem to have positive implications for individual athletes; this begets the question of how do coaches and support staff balance between the potential positives for individuals and the negatives for the individual and team.

Conforming Behaviors

Athletes in the current study described the behaviors that they and their teammates participated in, in order to adhere to the norms and/or standards of the clique(s). Individuals may have conformed to clique norms due to a fear of being ostracized if they did not comply. It has been observed that individuals may be motivated to yield to group norms due to fears regarding group acceptance (Graupensperger, 2020).

Self-categorization theory proposes that behavior is motivated by social identities derived from group memberships or personal identity which can be relatively unconnected to group memberships (Turner, 1999). A process of self-categorization theory is depersonalization, which has been articulated as “an individual will redefine his or her self-concept according to the needs, peculiarities, and norms of the in-group. This process of redefinition thus turns individual behavior into collective behavior” (Trepte & Loy, 2017, p. 7). An example from the current study may be when Phoebe remarked that she knew individuals who would interact with certain people on the team and “when they choose to hang out with these people that don’t make them better people, it just makes them worse people.” It is important to note that self-categorization theory is not being applied to explain the entire results. Rather the process of depersonalization may provide an example for why athletes comply with the norms of a clique.

Management of Cliques

Athletes in the current study described various ways that cliques on their team were regulated and/or resolved. Critical to the management of these groups was the notion of intentionality. Participants noted that the management of cliques requires intentionality on the part of athletes and coaches. This may be because cliques are inevitable (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018), their management may at times feel counter to what is unconsciously normal or simple.

Athletes considered team building, relationships, and communication as ways to manage cliques. The reports from athletes in the current study supports previous suggestions on clique management. Suggestions include authentic team building (Saizew et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017), and fostering relationships and communication amongst athletes (Coffey, 2023; Martin et al., 2015; Vealey, 2017).

As cliques can have different implications for individuals and the team, cliques may be best managed if both elements (individuals and team) are addressed. An example of such a management strategy may include drawing an individual's attention to potentially exclusionary behaviors, while also addressing team communication norms.

The management of cliques may depend on the situation surrounding the clique. Coaches have shared that the first step in the management of cliques is being aware of their presence (Martin et al., 2016). After identifying the presence of cliques, a second question may be to consider how/why the clique formed (e.g., was the clique upperclassman or injured athletes, were coaches' members of the clique(s)). How/why the clique formed may be important because it considers the dynamic of the clique and how the clique is situated within the overarching team ecosystem.

While cliques may develop for various reasons, coaches and athletic support staff can perpetuate cliques and clique behaviors. A management strategy for cliques may be for coaches to engage in self-reflection and/or seek feedback on their coaching behaviors in order to change behaviors that foster or encourage cliques.

Limitations

A limitation is the participant's ability to self-select into the study. An individual may agree to participate due to prior experiences that they felt strongly about. An example might be individuals whose experiences strongly influenced them positively or negatively. The strong convictions regarding their experiences may bias the participant. Individuals who have more neutral experiences with cliques may be underrepresented in the study.

Self-selection may be considered a limitation due to the primary investigators' alignment with post-positivism. Self-selection necessitates that individuals are self-reporting their

experiences and there is no external corroboration. It is worth acknowledging that two sets of two individuals competed on the same university team for a period of time. Although triangulation was not intentionally sought, these two pairs of individuals provided a degree of corroboration regarding coaching and sport structure, and their team environments.

While having two sets of two individuals from the same team may be a strength, it may also be a limitation due to some of their potentially shared experiences and connections. This limitation lies in the bias of the researcher who may hear one perspective and then interact or code the second perspective differently based on the knowledge of first participants experience. To mitigate this as a limitation the primary investigator journaled after each interview and enlisted the aid of a critical friend to evaluate personal biases.

A limitation of the study is that participants were interviewed retrospective of their experiences. With the passage of time, individual's perspective on their experiences may change or they may forget elements of their experience. An inclusion criterion was established to help mitigate this as a limitation, individuals had to have retired from their team within the last two years.

The term cliques may hold a negative connotation for participants in the study. Participants may have been hesitant to share their experiences, as cliques may be seen as less socially desirable. Retired athletes were intentionally sought to help mitigate this limitation because of their removal from the athletic team.

After the analysis was concluded the primary investigator reached out to the participants regarding member checking and reflections. Six participants replied saying that the analysis was accurate and reflected their experiences, five participants did not respond. The five individuals who did not respond may not have been in agreement with the analysis. The primary investigator

inquired if the participants wished to discuss the analysis or if they wished to add to their experience, of the six that responded to the inquiry, none wished to do so.

Another limitation may be that participants were unsure of the differences between subgroups and cliques. While the definition of a clique was provided, the definition of a subgroup was not. Athletes may have been describing experiences that more resembled subgroups rather than cliques.

Regarding the diversity of the sample, the majority of participants identified as White, Women, and from the United States. There is significant breadth of diversity at the intercollegiate level, and the experiences of the participants in this sample may not comprehensively capture experiences of individuals who identify differently than the sample participants.

Future Directions

It has been noted that there is much to learn about cliques in an athletic setting (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Some areas to consider may be further defining and differentiating between cliques and subgroups, nonathlete involvement, individuals' status and involvement with cliques, diversifying samples, cliques and their implications for psychological safety and mental health.

Prior research has defined a group as a clique or subgroup based on their consequences (i.e., subgroups having facilitative consequences, and cliques having debilitating outcomes; Martin, 2020). The current study and recent publications describe the positive and negative outcomes of both cliques and subgroups (Coffey, 2023; McGuire, 2020). The distinction between a clique and a subgroup may be represented in a manner that is not dichotomous, but rather along a continuum. Further investigation is warranted regarding the distinction, and resulting definition, of both cliques and subgroups.

The current study demonstrated that cliques are not limited to athletes on a team, rather they can extend beyond athletes to include individuals involved in the team environment. Echoing Coffey (2023) it is recommended that further investigation occur regarding coaches and support staff clique involvement. These roles are an integral element of teams and further exploration regarding their involvement, may yield findings that have implications for teams and support staff.

One area that may be worth considering is an individuals' relationships to cliques. The current study was interested in athletes' experiences, and no comparison was intentionally done regarding an athletes' involvement with the clique (i.e., if an athlete was inside, outside, or between cliques ("floater")). Future studies could explore and compare these experiences to see if individuals' experiences are reflective of their orientation to the clique.

The youth sport environment is different from that at the collegiate level, and developmentally, youth athletes are at different stages than those of collegiate athletes. It would be remiss to assume that all knowledge regarding cliques at the collegiate or professional level transfer to cliques in a youth sport environment. It was noted by several athletes in the current study that when they were competing in youth sports, they experienced cliques that led to them leaving a team or sport. Further studies may explore youth athletes' experiences with cliques, to better understand cliques in youth sport environments.

The majority of studies concerning cliques in athletics have included athletes/teams at the intercollegiate level (Saizew et al., 2021), professional level (Wagstaff et al., 2017), or adult league (Coffey, 2023). Further, most of these studies have included samples that consist primarily of participants from the United States and Canada. Cliques may present differently in various cultures (i.e., more collectivistic), levels of performance (i.e., university rec league), and

developmental stages (i.e., youth sport). Diverse samples are necessary to further explore and expand the clique literature.

Several athletes in the current study discussed how cliques were related to their mental health. While the topic of psychological safety was introduced in this discussion, mental health being a known consequence of psychological safety (Vella et al., 2022), it may be worth further considering psychological safety and its relation to cliques.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Rapport Building

- 1) When you were in college, what sport(s) did you compete in?
 - a) What was your position and/or event specialty?
 - b) Can you tell me how you became involved in [their sport]?
 - c) How long did you compete in that sport?
 - d) How long have you been retired?
- 2) Could you tell me about a favorite memory you have of your sport?
- 3) Can you tell me about some of the ways that the sports teams or clubs you've been involved with have positively influenced you?
- 4) Can you tell me about some of the ways your teammates have positively and negatively influenced you?

Characterizing Sport Teams and Clique Experiences

- 1) As you know, this is a research project investigating cliques in sport. Cliques are when people in the team form their own noticeable group within the team. These groups may form for lots of reasons, some examples might be rooming assignments, practice or position groups, or having more in common. These groups could have positive and negative influences on the team or individual athlete depending on the setting. For example, this means that cliques may be exclusive, such as by leaving people out of get-togethers or events. Cliques may also break team expectations or disrupt goals. Cliques could also lead to conflict within the team. Even though cliques are disruptive, group members may have good reasons for forming them. For instance, there may have been times when teammate(s) belonged to a clique because of frustrations with something going on with the team. Can you tell me about your experiences with cliques?
 - a) Have you been on a team where cliques were present?
 - i) Can you tell me more about your experience on that team?
 - ii) Maybe you haven't been on a team with cliques, have you been on a team where there were multiple groups or divisions?
 - b) Can you tell me about how these cliques formed?

Exploring how cliques influenced the individual

- 1) How would you describe your interactions in relation to these cliques?
 - a) Would you consider yourself a member of these cliques?
 - i) Would you consider yourself outside these cliques?
 - ii) Can you explain how you came to this conclusion?
 - b) To what extent did you have a choice to be inside or outside these cliques?
 - i) Do you think this choice was related to your experiences?
 - ii) How did you feel about this choice?
- 2) Can you describe how these cliques influenced your motivation to participate in your sport?
 - a) To what extent do you think the influence of these cliques was related to thoughts you had about your sport performances?
 - i) Can you describe what this influence was?

- b) Would you say that these cliques influenced your thoughts about others?
 - i) What about your thoughts about yourself?
- 3) Can you tell me about how your day-to-day feelings within your team were influenced by these cliques?
 - a) Can you tell me about some of the emotions you experienced at the time that you encountered these cliques?
 - b) If there was no influence on your emotions why do you think that is?
- 4) How did these cliques shape your willingness to engage in behaviors that positively or negatively impacted the team or your teammates?
 - a) Do you think the influence of these cliques was related to other actions you took?
 - i) Were these behaviors directed towards others or yourself?
- 5) [Summary] Thank you for sharing your experiences so far. At this point, I am hearing that you described cliques within [their teams]. You described cliques as [reflect how they described and/or defined a clique]. You've characterized how these cliques influenced you by [describe some influence]. Does my summary capture your experience?

Elaboration and Summarizing Questions

- 1) I'd like to ask you about your experience as a member of a clique versus being on the outside of the clique. How did your membership status, whether inside or outside these groups, influence your experience on the team?
 - a) What about your status or position in the group as a whole? Now, thinking about your status or position on the team, to what extent were your clique experiences shaped by the extent to which you were in a position of high status or leadership? Such as, being in a leadership position, upperclassman, starter, or the equivalent.
 - i) Can you give examples of other roles, informal or formal, that may have affected your clique experience?
- 2) If I were to have interviewed you several years ago, when you were still competing, would your responses in this interview have been different?
- 3) If you were to give advice to a peer who is on a team with cliques what would you tell them?
- 4) Is there anything else you would like me to know or that you think would be important to share regarding your experience with cliques?

Final Demographic Questions

- 1. What is your gender?
- 2. What is your age?
- 3. How do you identify racially?
- 4. What is your nationality

APPENDIX B

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Belongingness has been long recognized as a fundamental need among human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It appears then, that human engagement with others, in the form of groups and teams, is almost guaranteed (Eys et al., 2020). In order for a set of people to be considered a group several premises must be considered; individuals must share a “common fate”, experience “mutual benefit for the individuals”, possess a social structure, demonstrate various group processes (i.e., communication), and consider themselves a group (i.e., self-categorization) (Eys et al., 2020, p.11).

An environment where groups are thickly embedded is within the world of sport. While similar to a group, athletic teams must possess common goals and objectives, demonstrate a degree of interdependence amongst members, and maintain bidirectional interpersonal attraction. These teams have been defined as

a collection of two or more individuals who possess a common identity, have common goals and objectives, share a common fate, exhibit structured patterns of interaction and modes of communication, hold common perceptions about group structure, are personally and instrumentally interdependent, reciprocate interpersonal attraction, and consider themselves to be a group (Eys et al., 2020, p. 12)

This definition highlights that while the criteria to be considered a group are present, for a group to be considered an athletic team the additional factors, stated prior, must be considered.

Coaches and sport psychology professionals have aimed for decades to develop structures within a team that facilitates team functioning (Eys et al., 2019). Eys and colleagues (2019) expressed that within the structure of a group, cliques and subgroups can serve as a demarcation.

As cliques and subgroups depict an element of the structure within a group, knowledge regarding these social constructs would be incredibly relevant for sport coaches (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018).

Cliques and subgroups have been studied extensively in other settings (Martin, 2020). While the examination of the constructs in the sport literature is in its infancy, it is helpful to reference information on these constructs from other bodies of research. Carton and Cummings (2012) identify cliques as an identity-based subgroup in their typology on subgroups in work teams.

Subgroups in Work Teams

Carton and Cumming (2012) note that the literature on subgroups in work teams is an expansive volume of work. The authors developed a typology founded upon the premise that a subgroup is two or more people from the same original work team that have an established element of interdependence when contrasted with the other members. The typology identifies three separate subgroup types including a) identity-based, b) resource-based, and c) knowledge-based.

Types of Subgroups

Identity-based subgroups are characterized by groups that identify based on mutual values and attributes (Carton & Cummings, 2012). Therefore, these subgroups constitute individuals and their shared, or not shared, values and social characteristics. Resource-based subgroups occur when some groups acquire or have access to more resources (i.e., power, materials, authority, status) than other groups or individuals; with the ensuing result that these groups wield more power. The third type of subgroup within the typology is knowledge-based subgroups. This class of group occurs when subgroups develop their own unique method of

amassing and refining knowledge. The authors held the perspective that a group may identify with more than one of these subgroup types simultaneously (e.g., possess characteristics of a knowledge-based subgroup and identity-based subgroup).

Faultlines in Subgroups

Considering how these groups develop, Carton and Cummings (2012) suggested that subgroups form due to faultlines and diversity within teams. Faultlines have been defined as “hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes” (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, p. 328). Carton and Cummings (2012) utilized this definition when operationalizing faultlines for their typology. The authors add that faultlines occur when group members experience congruence in their traits and characteristics with a few of their workmates; this congruency does not apply simultaneously to all members of the work team. These traits may be related to demographic (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender) or non-demographic (i.e., values or personality) characteristics (Lau & Murnighan, 1998).

Carton and Cummings (2012) and Lau and Murnighan (1998) both articulated that faultlines do not equate to subgroups. Rather, faultlines are hypothetical and based on the inputs of the team (Carton & Cummings, 2012). Lau and Murnighan (1998) used the analogy of geologic faultlines to help explain the phenomenon; similar to geologic faultlines, group faultlines may be passive unless acted upon.

For their typology, Carton and Cummings (2012) identified three different types of faultlines in work groups: separation, disparity, and variety. Separation faultlines are considered horizontally and are representative of the range of values that team members possess, similar to a continuum. Disparity faultlines can be articulated by the number of resources members of a team possess, these faultlines are seen vertically. The final type of faultline is variety. These faultlines

are unique in that they are neither vertically nor horizontally associated. Rather, they are described as distinctive processes, of an inherently qualitative nature, by which members of a team interpret information and knowledge.

Cliques as an Identity-Based Subgroup

The typology by Carton and Cummings (2012) encompasses three unique classes of subgroups. Accordingly, cliques are an example of an identity-based subgroup. Given the context of this study, investigating cliques in an athletic realm, this section will highlight identity-based subgroup processes and formation.

The authors identified that there are several group processes that may occur between identity-based subgroups. One is that subgroups may feel threatened by the identity of other subgroups. The authors postulated that this may occur due to a second identity-based subgroup being present, this second group may subtract from the first subgroup's ability to be unique. A second group process is that the subgroups may undermine (i.e., fragment) the superordinate group (i.e., the team as a collective). In layman's terms, the subgroup identifies with their subgroup first and the team second.

Carton and Cummings (2012) believed that identity-based subgroups can be formed by all three faultline types (separation- pertains to values, disparity- related to resources, variety- knowledge and information acquisition and integration); though separation faultlines may be the most likely to cause identity-based subgroups. With regard to understanding smaller grouping of individuals within a larger entity, the typology by Carton and Cummings (2012) is a seminal work.

Cliques and Subgroups in Sport

Many researchers have observed that within sports teams, cliques are an under-researched area of study (Eys et al., 2015; Martin, 2020; Martin et al., 2015; Wagstaff et al., 2017) and remain a viable avenue for future research (Eys et al., 2019). Much of the research in the field of group dynamics has focused on constructs that are represented at the team level (i.e., team cohesion, motivational climate, and collective efficacy) (Martin, 2020). Regarding the “smaller groupings of members that exist within the total team- known and subgroups or cliques” much has yet to be explored (Martin, 2020, p. 45). As the body of literature on subgroups and cliques in athletic teams is in its beginning phases, much of the recent literature has used qualitative methodologies (see Martin et al., 2015) as an example. The data generated from these articles examined cliques and subgroups from the perspectives of athletes (Martin et al., 2015; Saizew et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017) and coaches (Martin et al., 2016; McGuire, 2020; Saizew et al., 2021).

Operationalization of Cliques and Subgroups

It is important to contextualize and operationalize cliques and subgroups in an athletic setting. For a group to qualify as a subgroup, a stipulation that must be adhered to is members of a subgroup must all belong to the same larger group (i.e., members must all come from the same team) (Martin, 2020). In addition to the question of membership, athletes must express reciprocating relationships with those in their subgroup, and the subgroup must be identifiable when contrasted with others from the larger team entity (Martin, 2020). Cliques have been defined as “inevitable, variable, and identifiable subgroupings of athletes within a team who exhibit particularly close task and/or social bonds” (Martin et al., 2015, p. 87). Intercollegiate athletes identified cliques as “distinct subgroups of individuals who share certain tendencies and characteristics” (Martin et al., 2015, p. 90).

From some perspectives, cliques have been viewed as a type of subgroup (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). While other papers have generated findings where cliques were not considered a subgroup; they were considered individually as separate phenomena (Eys et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2015). Martin and colleagues (2016) synthesized reports from coaches dictating that “cliques represented an inherently negative type of subgroup that demonstrated exclusionary behaviors and opposed collective team goals or norms”; whereas subgroups (not cliques) were viewed by coaches as being neither positive nor negative and were rather a natural process of team development (Martin et al., 2016, p. 58). In contrast to the perspective presented by coaches, intercollegiate athletes in a study by Martin and colleagues (2015) did not identify cliques as being inherently negative.

Clique and Subgroup Framework

Given the somewhat contrasting perspectives on cliques and subgroups in the literature, Wagstaff and Martin (2018) synthesized and presented a framework for cliques and subgroups in athletic settings (see Figure 1). The original framework (Wagstaff and Martin, 2018) did not differentiate between cliques and subgroups. Subsequently, Martin (2020) provided an updated modification to this framework by articulating this distinction (see Figure 2).

Fundamental Truths When first operationalizing cliques and subgroups, Wagstaff and Martin (2018) articulated two fundamental truths that both groups possess; they are both inevitable and variable (see Figure 1). Inevitability speaks of the notion that within a team of thirty individuals, subgroups will develop as players are drawn closer to some than others. This inevitability is supported by findings from Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) and Martin and colleagues (2016). The second fundamental truth, variability, references that there are many things that may divide a team into smaller groupings. Wagstaff and Martin (2018) provided

injuries and personality as two possible factors influencing the variability of divisions within a team.

Antecedents/Precursors. Wagstaff and Martin (2018) conceptualized that contextual and/or situational factors, athlete characteristics, and athlete behaviors would be relevant in regard to antecedents or precursors of smaller groups within a team. An example of a contextual or situational factor may be in reference to a team's size or performance record. Athlete characteristics pertain to an athlete's role on the team, a cohort within the team, or an athlete's status (i.e., captain or informal leader). Athlete behaviors may reference an athlete's level of 'buy-in' or commitment to the team, or their social habits within and outside the team.

Nature of the Groupings. These antecedents lead to the formation of cliques/subgroups (see Figure 1). The nature of the groupings, defined by Wagstaff and Martin (2018), is where the distinction between a clique and a subgroup is made. The authors defined subgroups as "identifiable subgroups that can be either facilitative or non-value-laden" (p. 304). While cliques were operationalized as being "identifiable, yet inherently debilitating and often characterized by exclusion, conflict, or having their own agenda" (p. 304).

Wagstaff and Martin (2018), in the original framework, did not differentiate between cliques and subgroups in their graphic representation, though they articulated there was a difference (see Figure 1). The nature of the groupings (i.e., clique or subgroup) could lead to either facilitating or debilitating consequences. Martin (2020) adapted the original framework, and its corresponding graphic so that subgroups and cliques were depicted as separate constructs in the nature of the groupings (see Figure 2).

Consequences of Cliques/Subgroups. The differentiation in Martin (2020) shows that cliques lead to debilitating outcomes and subgroups result in facilitative outcomes. The

consequences of subgroups and/or cliques may be experienced at the team and/or individual level (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Martin (2020) identified that subgroups specifically may lead to facilitative outcomes. A possible facilitative consequence at the individual level may be that an individual experiences the groups as a form of social support or feel a sense of belonging (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). At the team level, such facilitative consequences of subgroups may be the establishment of positive team norms. Martin (2020) articulated that cliques result in debilitating consequences (see Figure 2). At the individual level, athletes may perceive these groupings to be isolated and represent an increased sense of pressure (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). At the team level, debilitating consequences may be conflict within a team or poor performance.

Subgroups in Athletic Teams

These frameworks (Martin, 2020; Wagstaff and Martin, 2018) are integral in articulating the nuances between subgroups and cliques. Exploring these nuances in detail allows for the discernment of the phenomena.

Nature of Subgroups

Within the sport literature, subgroups have been seen as inevitable (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). In addition to the inevitable nature of subgroups, a key element of the construct is that they are observable (McGuire, 2020). Athletes in the study by Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) recognized and named subgroups within the team.

Antecedents of Subgroups

There are many influencing factors that may function as antecedents in the formation of subgroups. Faultlines, as defined by Lau and Murnighan (1998) have been shown to have applicability in a sport setting (Saizew et al., 2021). Saizew and colleagues (2021) found that event type (i.e., jumper, long-distance runner, 100-meter runner), athlete sex, and training

time/location acted as overt faultlines around which subgroups developed in a Canadian track and field team. Professional rugby players reported that subgroups initially formed due to players' position or cohort (Wagstaff et al., 2017). These same athletes later dictated that subgroups developed based on “common interests, team tenure, socializing behaviors, leadership, selection and ability, and training requirements” (Wagstaff et al., 2017, p. 167). This highlights the dynamic nature of subgroups; initially, these athletes dictated that subgroups formed due to one element and then later formed for other reasons. The findings by Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) and Eys and colleagues (2015) note that these groups develop based on sport or personal interests. McGuire (2020) observed that subgroups may develop based on overt or surface-level (i.e., age, cohort, position) or deep-level (i.e., individual values, beliefs, personality) characteristics. The findings combine to explore the many ways and reasons that subgroups may develop.

Processes of Subgroups in Athletic Teams.

From some perspectives, subgroups have been described as a natural part of team development and possessing properties that may be seen as facilitative (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). One of the facilitative processes of subgroups is they may help prevent intra-team conflict (Wagstaff et al., 2017). Subgroups have also been viewed as helping promote “athlete development and teammate integration” (Martin et al., 2016, p. 59). In fact, subgroups were seen as necessary by track and field athletes and coaches interviewed by Saizew and colleagues (2021). The participants noted that this was due in part to the roster containing 100 members. The participants reported that such a large roster made it a challenge for all athletes/coaches to connect across subgroups or training disciplines. McGuire (2020) suggested

that there may be times when subgroups exhibit maladaptive behaviors. It was observed that these potentially presented themselves after challenges (i.e., a loss).

A tie of interest is that the antecedent of subgroup formation, surface-level or deep-level, may influence the impact of the subgroup (Saizew et al., 2021). Saizew and colleagues (2021) observed that subgroups formed by these deep-level characteristics were seen by athletes as having a longer impact.

Athlete Experiences with Subgroups.

How an athlete individually experiences a subgroup seems to be influenced by the faultlines that subgroups form along and the behaviors demonstrated by members of a subgroup (McGuire, 2020). McGuire (2020) found that an individual's experience with subgroups may include "affective, behavioral, and/or cognitive dimensions" (p. 50). Example affective experiences included both positive and/or negative emotions (i.e., acceptance and/or frustration). It seems as though subgroups may provoke adaptive (i.e., challenge teammates to train harder) or maladaptive (i.e., holding a perspective that teammates are responsible for a loss) responses; this speaks to the behavioral element of an athlete's experiences with subgroups. McGuire (2020) suggested that "an athlete's self-worth and identity" may be related to their cognitive experiences with subgroups and the resulting outcomes of these experiences (p.52).

Cliques in Athletic Teams

This section details and aids in the conceptualization of cliques as they are presented in this paper. This is done in an attempt to help differentiate between a clique and a subgroup. When examining cliques, it may be helpful to synthesize antecedents of cliques, clique behaviors, and potential resultants of cliques.

Antecedents of Cliques in Athletic Teams

Studies have demonstrated that cliques may develop due to a myriad of reasons. Intercollegiate athletes have reported age/cohort (i.e., year in school), proximity (i.e., living arrangements), skill level and/or status (i.e., bench player versus starting player), and similar interests (i.e., values, beliefs, interests), as influential in clique development (Martin et al., 2015). A sample of Canadian youth hockey coaches reported age, role acceptance, and playing time as lines that cliques may develop around (Herbison et al., 2021). Herbison and colleagues (2021) noted that cliques may also evolve based on parental influence being exerted on the athletes. The authors reported that if the perceptions of the team's abilities (as a coach) were dissimilar to that of the parent's perceptions of the team's abilities, then this was something that could influence clique development. This is an interesting finding because it speaks to the influence that parents have on their youth athletes. Meiklejohn and colleagues (2016) note that cliques may form for a multitude of reasons. The authors outlined that the presence of cliques may lead to the formation of additional cliques; postulating that primary cliques may incur reactionary cliques. A primary clique occurs first, potentially due to structural features, and then a reactionary clique evolves due to its exclusion from the primary clique. Meiklejohn and colleagues (2016) noted that the study was completed within a sports management context. However, these findings may be applicable to other areas of sport. Taken in the context of sport, structural features may be position, athletic ability, or team role. A reactionary clique may develop due to exclusion from these groups.

Clique Behaviors in Athletic Teams

Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) reported that cliques demonstrated behaviors that were often exclusive and antisocial in nature. This mirrors the findings by Adler and Adler (1995), that adolescent cliques maintained their boundaries by using exclusive behaviors. It may be that

various situations predispose cliques to demonstrate these behaviors. Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) observed that these behaviors were most conspicuous when teams were under pressure. In their study looking at task and social conflict among intercollegiate athletes, Paradis and colleagues (2014) reported that social conflict may manifest through behaviors such as isolation or exclusion. It was made apparent by Adler and Adler (1995) that these behaviors were ones enacted by cliques.

One of the characteristics present in both cliques and subgroups is their dynamic nature (Martin et al., 2016; Wagstaff et al., 2017). Both constructs have fluid rather than fixed boundaries, and membership can change over time. This reflects findings in the adolescent development literature; which note that cliques are dynamic and membership fluctuates (Adler & Adler, 1995).

Outcomes of Cliques in Athletic Teams

The literature has demonstrated that cliques are perceived as capable of generating positive or negative outcomes on an athletic team. One potential negative outcome is that cliques may be seen as a threat to the shared social identity of a team (Herbison et al., 2021). Yukelson (1997) observed that cliques may divide the loyalties within a team. Rather than focusing on the team as a whole, cliques may focus on their own group. Fletcher and Hanton (2003) described how cliques were seen as a form of organizational stress for elite athletes. Youth athletes reported that a lack of cliques was an indicator of greater perceived social cohesion (Eys et al., 2009).

The consequences of cliques may be related to their antecedents (Herbison et al., 2021). Youth ice hockey coaches perceived cliques as possessing positive and negative consequences; these outcomes were related to the reason behind the clique formation (Herbison et al., 2021). A

negative outcome may result if the cliques form due to arbitrary elements of a team (i.e., players that were unselected for more competitive teams). A facilitative property was when cliques form based on the common interests of the athletes.

The above information has addressed cliques as they presented themselves within the team (i.e., multiple cliques on the same team). Eys and colleagues (2015) observed that if a team views itself as its own clique (i.e., the team is its own clique, and all members of the team are in the clique) then this was seen by coaches as being facilitative.

Sex and Gender Considerations

When discussing cliques, addressing gender and sex becomes important, as cliques may be perceived as having a more prominent presence in women's versus men's teams. Eys and colleagues (2015) observed that the presence of cliques on athletic teams is not isolated to one particular sex (i.e., not only present on teams whose participants identify as female). However, the responses from the coaches in this study did indicate there were differences based on sex. One such difference was coaches believed cliques developed more quickly in female teams than in male teams. These same coaches perceived that female teams may be more predisposed to develop cliques.

Furthering the discussion on the role sex represents in cliques, conflict is one area to consider. Holt and colleagues (2012) observed that conflict may be more prevalent in female teams than in male teams. The authors note that relationship conflict in particular may be destructive and impactful on an athletic team. Paradis and colleagues (2014) reported that cliques may be deemed a form of relationship conflict. When considered in conjunction, the findings of Holt and colleagues (2012) and Paradis and colleagues (2013), indicate that it is important to address relationship conflict (i.e., cliques) as it may become detrimental.

Assessment of Subgroupings in Sport

To date, most literature concerning cliques and subgroups in sport has been qualitative in nature (see Martin et al., 2016; McGuire, 2020; Wagstaff et al., 2017). It has been recommended that the use of other methods may provide additional insights into these constructs; social network analysis has been proposed as a plausible methodology (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). Many approaches have used a cross-sectional design (see Martin et al., 2015). It has been recommended that longitudinal studies may be a possible avenue of clique and subgroup measurement (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018). A longitudinal study design may allow for the dynamic element of cliques and subgroups to be represented. Longitudinal studies that have been conducted include Saizew and colleagues (2021) and Wagstaff and colleagues (2017). Many samples have been comprised of athletes at the intercollegiate level in North America. It has been suggested that sampling other populations of athletes will further expand the clique/subgroup literature (Wagstaff & Martin, 2018).

A handful of previous studies investigating subgroupings within athletics have identified a specific sport. Sport type has been specified primarily in case-study designs (see Saizew et al., 2021 and Wagstaff et al., 2017). While other studies have elected to have participants from coactive and interactive sport environments (see Martin et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2016; McGuire, 2020).

Management of Subgroupings

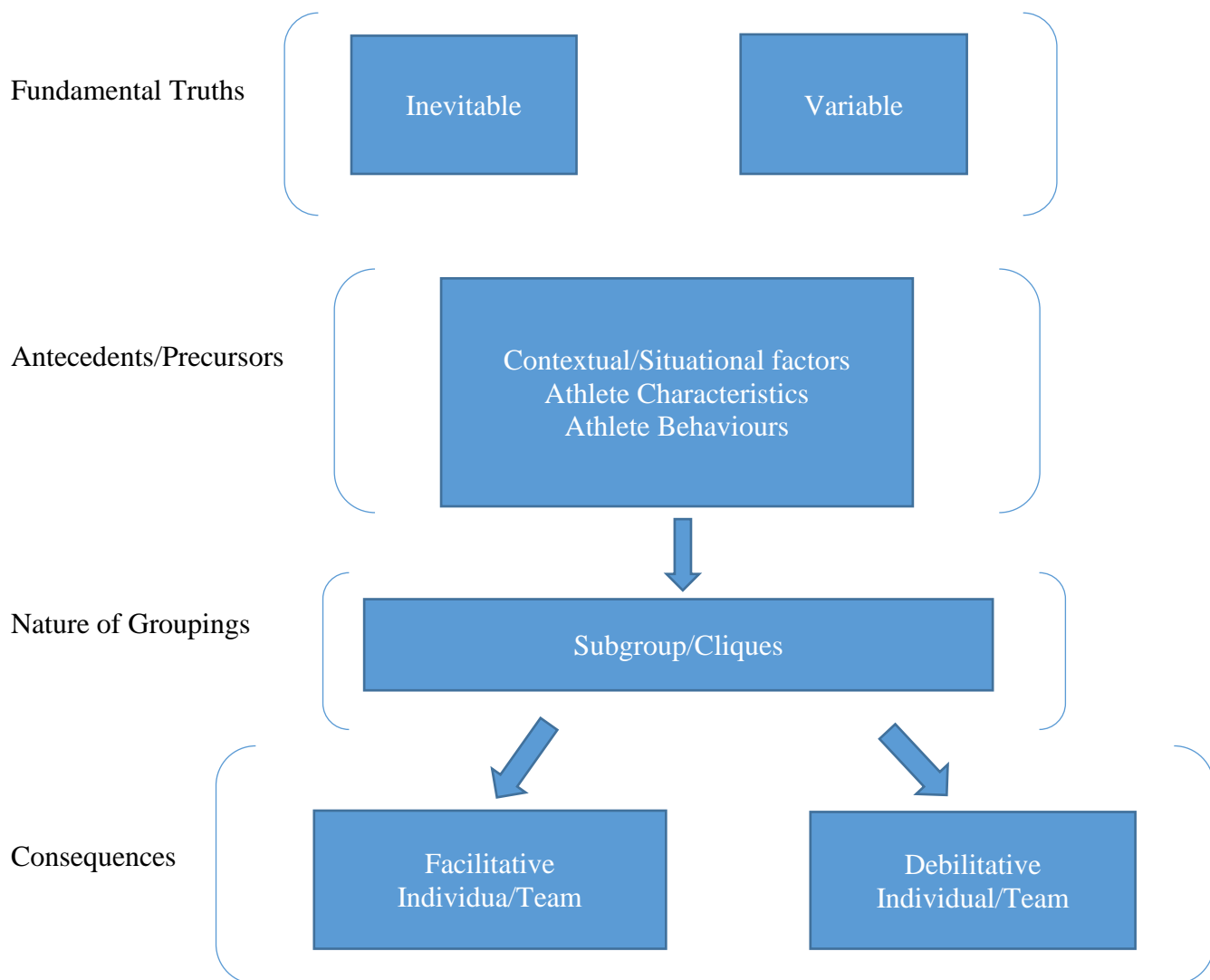
As cliques have been established to be very likely to occur within a team, as well as being documented as having debilitating consequences, an important area of inquiry is the management or prevention of cliques. Coaches have reported believing the first step in managing cliques involves an awareness that cliques were present (Martin et al., 2016). Previous literature has

demonstrated that for many coaches, cliques are something to be avoided (Ryska et al., 1999). More recent studies have showcased that athletes saw cliques as inevitable, and therefore their management became more critical (Martin et al., 2015). Wagstaff and colleagues (2017) observed that while subgroups should be monitored for the development of exclusionary tendencies, cliques should be managed. Herbison and colleagues (2021) note that coaches are influential in the management of subgroups in youth ice hockey teams provided that they possess the skills necessary to manage such groups.

There are many potential avenues for the management of cliques and subgroups in athletic teams. Athletes and leaders on the team, both formal and informal, may be poised to play an important role in the management of cliques and subgroups (Martin et al., 2016; Saizew et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017). Coaches and athletes may consider the ideals and personalities of the individuals with whom they may become teammates when making roster selections; this may be viewed as a proactive management method (Martin et al., 2016). Team building has the potential to be influential in addressing cliques and subgroups in an athletic setting (Martin et al., 2016; Saizew et al., 2021; Vealey, 2017). It is worth considering that team building has many facets, many of which may be applicable when the aim is to manage these subgroupings. Activities that focus on communication, conflict management, roles, norms, and developing trust among members may be particularly applicable.

Figure 1

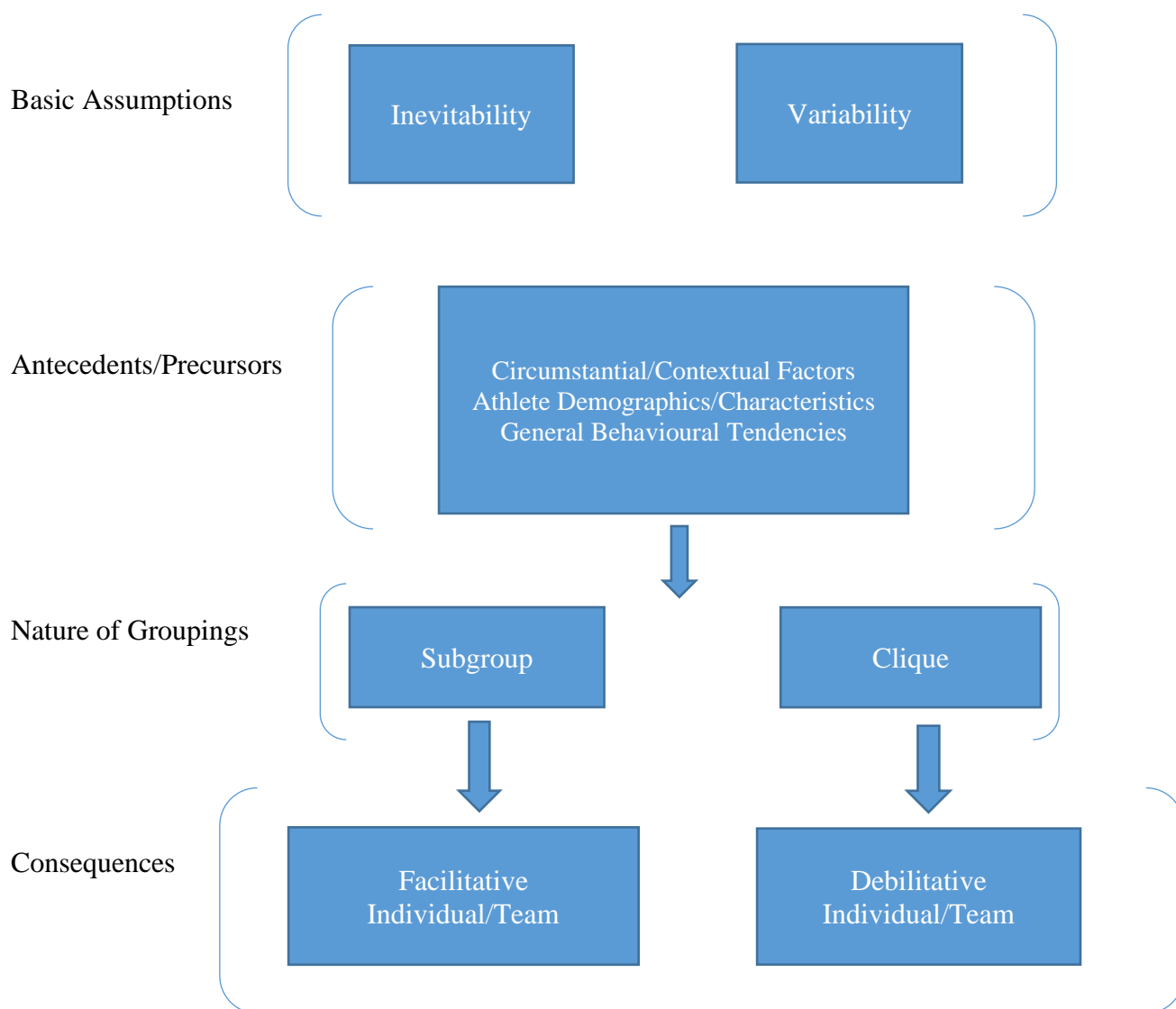
Visual representation of the subgroup and clique episode



Adapted from "Managing Groups and Cliques" by C. R. Wagstaff and L. J. Martin, in R. Thelwell and M. Dicks (Eds.), *Professional advances in sports coaching: Research and practice* (p. 304), 2018, Routledge (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351210980>). Copyright 2018 by Routledge.

Figure 2

Organizing Framework for Subgroups and Cliques in Sport, adapted from Wagstaff and Martin (2018)



Adapted from "Cliques and Subgroups" by L. J. Martin, in D. Hackfort and R. J. Schinke (Eds.), *The Routledge International Encyclopedia of Sport and Exercise Psychology: Volume 1: Theoretical and Methodological Concepts* (p. 52), 2020, Routledge. Copyright 2020 by L. J. Martin.