



Sport Social Work: Unique Opportunities, Benefits, and Barriers

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Sport social workers operate across all sport systems and settings, from youth recreation to professional athletics. Due to the diversity of ways in which social work practice intersects with sport, the specialization of sport social work remains nebulous. To begin to disentangle this ambiguity, the current exploratory study sought to better understand the unique perspectives and lived experiences sport social workers who: (1) use sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing, and (2) provide services to those involved in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing. Following the recommendations of Braun et al. (2021)—who positioned the online survey as a qualitative research tool—a 29-item online questionnaire was administered to the Alliance of Social Workers in Sport email listserv. In total, 84 participants engaged in the survey. Findings highlight unique opportunities for sport social workers (e.g., teach life skills; engage in interprofessional collaborations), benefits of having sport social workers (e.g., enhance treatment, social work values), and barriers that sport social workers face (e.g., lack of education, sport culture). The ability to better understand the ways in which social workers operate at the intersection of social work and sport is a critical next step in advancing the profession, as well as the unique area of sport social work practice.

Keywords: social work practice, student-athlete, sport, mental health, social justice

Sport social work is emerging as an important specialization of social work practice in the United States (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Moore et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2019). However, the specific roles of a “sport social worker” remain unclear within the social work profession and across sport systems. Recent research indicates established and aspiring social workers exploring professional opportunities in sport settings are encountering limited educational opportunities (e.g., academic programs, continuing education, professional development) (Magier et al., 2022). This scarcity of applicable social work education may be hindering sport social workers’ ability to engage in competency-based social work practice.

To further establish sport social work as a unique specialization within the social work profession and competently prepare the next generation of social workers, it is necessary to delineate this broad and diverse area of practice. Prior research (see Tarr et al., 2023) has suggested that sport social work may be delineated in three distinct ways at the interpersonal (i.e., clinical) level: (1) using sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing, often through sport-based programming for youth; (2) providing services to those involved in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing, often mental/behavioral health services for competitive athletes; and (3) working in sport with the goal of promoting healthy development and holistic wellbeing, often as a sport coach. The ability to disentangle the diversity of ways in which social workers operate at the intersection of social work and sport is a critical next step in advancing the unique specialization.

Within the current study, the former two distinctions were explored, as they align with the traditional conceptualizations of social work practice; specifically, the use of recreation and play by social workers to promote healthy development (Lawson, 2005) and mental/behavioral health services offered by social workers to competitive athletes (Hanna, 1993). For instance, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2018) examined the impact of a community-based youth sport program designed to promote the development and transfer of life skills among youth recognized as being socially vulnerable (i.e., youth of color, youth from low-income communities). Findings from their study indicated that youth with relatively low levels of life skills (e.g., self-control, effort, teamwork, social responsibility) experienced consistent long-term growth over the course of two years. On the other hand, Beasley et al. (2021) underscored the alignment of social work ethics and values for sport social workers who are embedded within collegiate athletic departments and provide distinct perspectives within multi-disciplinary sports medicine teams. Further, findings from their study suggest that sport social workers recognized athletes as a diverse, yet vulnerable population with unique needs—a notion underscored by the International Olympic Committee’s consensus statement on mental health in elite athletes (Reardon et al., 2019).

The Emergence of Sport Social Work

The origins of sport social work date back to at least the Hull House era in the late 1800’s. The Hull House was one of the first established community-based social service agencies in the United States that used sport/recreation as an intervention to promote physical wellbeing and fostering community engagement (Reynolds, 2017). However, it was not until the early 2000s, when Lawson and Anderson-Butcher (2000) penned a pivotal manuscript advocating for *the social work of sport* that the specialization began to become recognized by social work and sport professionals alike. Since the turn of the century, scholars have illustrated the use of sport to promote healthy youth development (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012) and demonstrated the

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need for social workers within competitive athletics to support athlete mental/behavioral health (Beasley et al., 2022). Even outside of social work, disciplines and professions—including sport psychology (Newman et al., 2019), counseling (McHenry et al., 2022), and sport management (Cox et al., 2022)—have begun to explore the emergence of sport social work.

However, the professionalization of sport social work can be traced back to 2013 when the Social Work and Sport Association at the University of Michigan School of Social Work hosted an interdisciplinary conference entitled *Beyond the Playing Field: The Social Impact of Sport* (Newman et al., 2016). This conference convened many of the leading scholars, policymakers, administrators, and practitioners who had been working at the intersection of social work and sport. Speakers and panelists included youth sport scholars from The LiFEsports Initiative and the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, as well as community leaders, high school coaches, University of Michigan athletic directors, and mental health professionals.

To structurally support the emergence of sport social work as a unique social work specialization, the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) became an official 501(c)(3) in 2017. As the preeminent sport social work organization, ASWIS hosts an annual symposium, offers a professional certificate program, and provides networking opportunities for practitioners, administrators, educators, and students alike. In 2022, as interest in this unique area of social work practice continued to grow, the University of Michigan School of Social Work created an *Online Sport Social Work Certificate Program* as a form of continuing education. Because the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), American Psychological Association (APA), and other adjacent accrediting bodies do not currently require mental health professionals to engage in curriculum specific to understanding sports across the lifespan, the certificate program aims to advance social workers' knowledge, skills, and abilities as they relate to sports. Additionally, in 2022, the *Sport Social Work Journal* was established, which holds a mission to advance individual and community wellbeing by offering scholarly insights into the convergence of sports and social work practice, theory, and research.

While more academic courses and professional certificate programs are emerging (Bates & Kratz, 2022), most learning opportunities occur informally (Magier et al., 2022). In fact, Clark et al. (2022) suggested that the limited availability of practicum sites to train students in sport social work is a challenge that social work field education needs to remedy. Thus, despite the evolution of sport social work, there is still a great deal of uncertainty surrounding this unique intersectional area of social work practice. For example, research by Beasley et al. (2021), which explored the experiences of licensed social workers in collegiate athletics, found that the role of the social worker is often misunderstood. Indeed, sport social workers are often lumped into *sport psychology* services, despite performance psychology (i.e., sport psychology) and mental/behavioral health (i.e., a component of sport social work) being two distinct areas of professional competence (McHenry et al., 2021). Further, sport social workers have expressed concerns about common misconceptions of the profession, which have fostered the widespread belief that social work is solely focused on child welfare and/or social welfare programs (Newman et al., 2022).

These misconceptions may stem from the diversity of ways in which sport social workers operate. The current exploratory study aims to disentangle this ambiguity, by exploring the unique experiences and perspectives of sport social workers. Specifically, the current exploratory study seeks to increase understanding of the experiences of sport social workers who: (1) use

sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing, and (2) provide services to those involved in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing.

Method

Procedures

All study procedures were approved by the first author's university institutional review board. Participants were recruited from the ASWIS email listserv, which included approximately 150 individual members, most of whom, but not all, practice within the United States. At the time of the study, ASWIS was the only organization focused specifically on the practice, policy, advocacy, and networking of social workers in sport (aswis.org). The recruitment email provided overviews and examples of sport social workers who: (1) use sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing (e.g., community organization using sport to teach life skills to youth participants) and/or (2) provide services to those involved in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing (e.g., a licensed social work clinician embedded within a college athletic department).

Population

To participate in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old and have earned (at minimum) a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree. In total, 84 participants¹ consented to participate in the current study. Demographic information was collected at the end of the questionnaire, with both multiple choice and open-ended questions such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, licensing, and education. Among sport social workers who shared their demographic characteristics, most participants self-identified as white ($n = 34, 70.8\%$), followed by Black ($n = 7, 14.6\%$), multiracial ($n = 4, 8.3\%$), and another race/ethnicity (e.g., Asian, Latin@; $n = 3, 6.3\%$). Additionally, most participants identified as female ($n = 28, 58.3\%$), and participants were, on average, 42.4 years old. Approximately 74.0% ($n = 37$) of participants earned an MSW as their highest level of education, had an averaging of 15.1 years social work experience, and the majority earned their social work licensure ($n = 39, 78.0\%$).

Instrument

Braun et al. (2021) positioned that “qualitative surveys, which prioritize qualitative research values, and harness the rich potential of qualitative data, have much to offer qualitative researchers, especially given online delivery options” (p. 641). Thus, as a way to inclusively increase participation and enhance the diversity of voices represented in the research, an online “qualitative survey” may help to mitigate common barriers when conducting qualitative research (e.g., travel logistics, financial restrictions, technology issues). The current study featured a 29-item online questionnaire, which was developed from a previous questionnaire designed to explore experiences and practices of social workers using adventure therapy techniques (for

¹Please note that not all participants disclosed their demographic information; thus, n 's do not add up to 84.

more details about the questionnaire, see Tucker & Norton, 2013), which was at the time, a similarly emerging area of social work practice.

For the current study, the revised questionnaire was reviewed and pilot tested among a small group of social work students (bachelor- and master-level) and social work professionals who had knowledge of sport social work (but were not members of ASWIS at the time of the study, thus could not participate in the study). This group was convened through the research team's professional networks. This review helped to ensure that the questionnaire followed a logical flow and coherence of the open-ended questions. Specifically, the questionnaire was comprised of a series of multiple-choice options and question stems that routed participants to specific open-ended questions. These open-ended questions were organized into five main sections: (1) previous experiences in sport, (2) experiences using sport in social work practice, (3) professional experiences as a social worker in a sport setting, (4) perspectives of social work and sport, and (5) work history and demographics. The questionnaire took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete, and participants did not receive compensation.

The previous experience in sport section included multiple-choice questions such as, "Please indicate your previous personal experiences in sport." and "Please indicate if you have ever worked in or with the following sport settings as part of your social work practices...". Therefore, the multiple-choice options were only to ensure that each participant responded to the appropriate series of questions, which was dependent upon their sport social work experience. For instance, those who indicated they use to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing were asked, "Please explain your role and how you used sport as part of your social work practice, including the setting and population." and "From your perspective, how can sport be used in social work practice?" Whereas participants who provided services to those involved in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing were asked, "Please explain your position and role when professionally working in or with a sport setting, including the setting and population." and "What are the benefits of having social workers in traditional sport systems?"

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was administered online via Qualtrics. Microsoft Excel was used to help organize and clean the data. Qualitative data were analyzed using a combination of content analysis (Rubin & Babbie, 2016) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approaches, which helped to construct relevant themes and subthemes within the data. Specifically, categories (e.g., sport as a component of social work practice) and subcategories (e.g., opportunities, benefits, barriers) were preemptively delegated. Responses to specific open-ended questions (i.e., raw data) were then organized within the categories and subcategories. Once the raw data were organized, unique codes were then inductively generated to represent the unique responses to each open-ended question. Upon coding the data, themes (e.g., health promotion, life skills) were inductively constructed from the data. Quotes from participant responses to the open-ended questions are provided throughout to highlight the meaning of themes.

Results and Discussion

The following sections are oriented around sport social workers who: (1) use sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing, and (2) provide services to those involved

in sport to promote healthy development and holistic wellbeing. Further, within these two distinctions, findings are organized around the subcategories of *opportunities*, *benefits*, and *barriers* are discussed.

Sport as a Component of Social Work Practice

Participants provided insight related to when and how they used sport as a component of their social work practices. For some, sport was used as a medium (i.e., setting, platform, vehicle) when providing services and/or as a tool (i.e., approach, technique, intervention) to promote targeted outcomes. In other words, sport was an essential treatment component in working with clients.

Opportunities to Use Sport in Social Work Practice

Sport social workers described several unique opportunities that allowed them to intentionally use sport to promote intended outcomes when working with clients. Specifically, participants shared how sport can be used to support overall health and wellness, as well as promote the development and transfer of life skills.

Health Promotion. Participants described how sport can be used to support and promote both mental and physical health. For example, SW23 shared, “I access sport and physical activity with clients in my practice from kids, youth, adults of all ages. I recommend sport and [physical activity] to all clients for fitness and mental wellbeing.” Similarly, SW50 stated, “sport can be used as an intervention to treat numerous mental health concerns.” SW57 added, “it can be a catalyst...to deal with anxiety, depression, and overall mental health.” For instance, SW51 shared that they use sport as “an outlet for emotional frustrations” when working with clients. Participants also highlighted how sport can be used to provide avenues for physical health, such as serving to “help sedentary people become more active” (SW5) and to “educate persons who may not know how to be physically active” (SW77). In the end, sport was described as being used “as a source of healing, tying physical and mental health together” (SW63). Overall, participants emphasized that sport could serve as a viable tool to support mental and physical health. Specifically, sport social workers utilize sport to enhance fitness, address mental health concerns, alleviate emotional frustrations, promote physical activity, and foster belonging and community.

Teaching Life Skills. Advancing from general health promotion, sport was identified as a way to teach valuable life skills in clinical settings, afterschool activities, and community-based programs. In fact, SW31 stated, “sports provide a great format for teaching life skills across the entire [life] span.” SW72 added, “sports can be used to build resilience, relationships, social skills, perseverance...” SW51 provided several examples, “sports are great for teaching social interactions, for teaching emotional regulation, for teaching a sense of achievement.” SW58 continued, “in my school social work role, I use sports activities (i.e., shooting hoops) to guide my students in lessons around emotions and behaviors, coping skills, and brain functioning to name a few things.”

SW53 provided further explanation about how life skills can be taught through sport and said, “[sport] allows opportunities for conversation around leadership, communication skills, diversity, and much more.” SW33 provided additional insight:

At the clinical level, sports used in group therapies help build trust, teach healthy skills for self-care and emotional outlet, and build social skills. At the community level sports can increase youth social skills, healthy living and fight childhood obesity, build healthy relationships, and create diverse environments to help increase acceptance and inclusion. Several others discussed the importance of life skills transference, specifically that “how to relate life skills and mental health to sport” (SW17); and conversely, that “sports offer unique opportunities to teach skills and support healthy development” (SW18). With sport social workers highlighting the role of sport in fostering resilience, social interactions, emotional regulation, leadership, and communication skills, sport was recognized as a valuable means of teaching life skills across various settings.

Benefits of Using Sport in Social Work Practice

Participants also discussed the benefits of using sport in their social work practice. Namely, the use of sport provided access and increased treatment opportunities among unique populations who are often challenging to reach due to accessibility and resource allocation or resistance to engagement with social services.

Serving Unique and Challenging to Reach Populations. Participants spoke of the ability to use sport to reach unique populations who have distinct needs. SW67 explained, “athletes may be [an] underserved, at-risk, population” and that “sport allows the social worker or practitioner to engage with the client in a way that is easy and natural for [the athlete]” and helps them “meet the client where they are.” In fact, SW18 suggested that “athletes have unique behavioral and developmental characteristics that social workers should be prepared to address in practice.” For example, SW53 wrote, “it is also beneficial to understand sports and the demanding pressures that are placed upon these athletes.” SW58 noted, “...because of this [their unique needs], interventions [and] therapy may not feel as invasive for athletes, which is a good thing because more athletes will seek out services.” In the end, “certain populations that were previously difficult to reach are more likely to receive care” (SW43). Interestingly, SW33 suggested that sport social workers may be uniquely equipped to provide “peer support [as] there are a lot of former athletes who are now social workers.” In all, participants highlighted the unique position of sport social work in comprehending the unique needs of athletes, enabling them to effectively service challenging-to-reach populations, thus increasing the likelihood of providing care to athletes.

Enhancing Treatment. Sport can be used to enhance assessments for, and services provided to, athletes and other sport stakeholders. As SW67 noted, “Sports can be, and are, great mechanisms to promote rapport and counseling adherence.” This sport social worker went on to explain:

I’ve used sports as an introduction... I have spent a lot of time engaging with collegiate athletes in their own environment, that is, at practice, in the training room, at team meetings and randomly on campus, all with the hopes to build a relationship that might serve, in the future, as an impetus to get into counseling.

Participants also describe how sport can be used to provide a safe place for some clients. This was the case for SW72, who indicated that “sport can also be a safe haven.” SW77 added, “sports are an outlet, just like music and art,” and “sports are a lot of people’s coping mechanisms.” These uses of sport seemed to be especially important during difficult times in

both treatment and life. In fact, SW50 explained that sport was seen as a way to aid treatment goals because sport can help “promote understanding of difficult concepts.” SW26 added, “sport can be used to reduce stress... and boost health.” Ultimately, these sport social workers believed that sport was a setting that provided “enjoyment and fulfillment in the activity” (SW30), which both directly and indirectly contributed to their ability to meet the diverse needs of their clients.

Barriers When Using Sport in Social Work Practice

Although the use of sport helped sport social workers provide care, participants also identified a variety of barriers. Specifically, participants indicated that as an emerging area of practice, there is a general lack of understanding from other social workers. In this same vein, participants also discussed the lack of education and training available, both during their academic preparation and as a part of continuing education.

Lack of Understanding. Participants discussed that the relative novelty of using sport as a component of social work practice was, at times, a barrier. This resistance stemmed from several sources, including clients and other social workers. As SW50 noted, “sport within social work is a relatively new idea and some may not understand.” SW26 echoed this sentiment and said, “[sport] is not widely accepted yet. Thus, sport may be seen as a non-essential or inappropriate intervention with many ‘classical’ social work clientele (e.g., individuals struggling with homelessness, addiction, etc.)”

There were also perceived barriers related to other social workers, social work programs, and social work organizations. SW33 explained:

Another massive barrier is the lack of support of sport social work by social work organizations, NASW², CSWE³, SSWR⁴, schools of social work, and athletic departments. Though it is a newly developing field, there has been little to no support from within the social work profession. Social work claims to be inclusive, but just like many other bias views of athletes and athletics, the social work community has not seen athletes or athletics as a vulnerable population, which is a massive negative effect on the growth of sport social work.

In fact, SW57 themselves stated, “[sport social work] has not yet received enough evidence-based data that has been able to adequately demonstrate its effectiveness.” However, even with such shortcomings, SW34 felt that “older generation of faculty do not want to bring any new ideas into the profession. We are teaching today’s students for yesterday’s problems. We need to teach them for today’s challenges in our society.” As highlighted, sport social workers feel that their social work colleagues often maintain an inaccurate understanding of athlete populations and their unique needs across the lifespan.

Lack of Education and Training. Participants also cited a lack of educational opportunities as a perceived barrier for using sport as a component of social work practice. This included specific training for using sport as a medium and tool for treatment. Both SW3 and SW31 both stated that there is currently a “lack of resources to support a new emerging field,” and SW23 cited a “lack of sport-specific education and training... as well as qualified supervisors.” Another respondent cited a specific example and stated that there is currently “a

²National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

³Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)

⁴Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR)

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lack of expertise” (SW18). Ultimately, there was a general sentiment that there is an overall lack of education and training available to teach sport social workers how to effectively use sport as a component of their practices. SW5 concluded, “There isn’t much training, there isn’t much knowledge on how this can be implemented.” The notable scarcity of educational opportunities for individuals pursuing a career in sport social work underscores the challenge of effectively integrating sports into evidence- and competence-based social work practice.

Provide Services within Sport

In addition to using sport as a component of their social work practices, participants discussed the provision of services within organized sport systems and settings. In other words, these sport social workers outlined where and how they operate within sport systems such as in community-based sport settings (e.g., community or local recreation centers), high school athletic teams, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Opportunities for Social Workers in Sport Systems and Settings

Participants identified several ways in which sport social workers can provide services within a variety of sport systems and settings. Distinct categories include providing direct practice, supporting macro-level social work, advocating for social justice, and engaging in interprofessional collaborations.

Direct Practice. Participants discussed opportunities for sport social workers to provide direct practice within sport by using generalist and clinical skills. As SW20 indicated, sport social workers within sport can act as “athletic counselors, providing mental health and substance education, assessment, treatment, consultation and referral.” The ability to provide a range of services within a diversity of roles may be because of foundational social work education and training. For instance, SW68 cited the use of a “holistic approach to engage, understand, and support the athlete as a human being.” By using a holistic approach, which is unique to the social work profession, sport social workers are able to “provide counseling to athletes seeking to manage [both] mental health and improve performance, in and out of their sport” (SW59). SW67 echoed this sentiment and said, “social workers come in at a great location, with a holistic approach to serving for the entire wellbeing of athletes, therefore helping them with sports performance and more general life issues.” SW23 also shared, “I also provide psychotherapy for athletes of all ages, abilities, and levels (specialize in working with high performance/elite athletes).” Much like how some sport social workers use sport for health promotion and to teach life skills, sport social workers who work within sport systems and settings are able to serve the many needs of athletes and other sport stakeholders through a myriad of direct practices.

Macro Practitioners. In addition to providing direct practice, sport social workers indicated that they are involved in a variety of macro-level initiatives. SW72 explained this opportunity:

I think social workers can professionally work in or with sport settings in a variety of ways. Community development, at the collegiate and professional level, at the high school and even elementary level. This all can be done in individual and group formats; it can be done on the micro, mezzo, and macro level.

SW77 also noted that “community programs/organizations could utilize social workers with administrative focus.” To this point, sport social workers may be capable of fulfilling administrator roles, providing “macro level management” and program development (SW33). Regardless of the type of macro initiative, social workers are able “to raise awareness for the needs of athletes and enhance the wellbeing and effective functioning of athletes through advocacy, research, . . . , and policy change” (SW19). Taken together—direct practice and macro-level social work—help to illustrate the diverse skill sets that sport social workers are capable of embodying as service providers within a variety of sport systems and settings.

Advocating for Social Justice. Additional opportunities for sport social workers situated in sport settings involve the social justice promotion and the enhancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This “social justice orientation” is at the heart of the profession and is specified in the NASW Code of Ethics (SW25). SW53 explained:

Social justice is extremely important as athletes identify with various identities and ethnic backgrounds. It is critical for social workers to share perspective with others on athletes being considered a vulnerable population as it is necessary to look at these individuals as holistic human beings and not value them based on their sport and talent.

Even on the international stage, SW23 advocates for social justice, specifically “gender equality and inclusion” in their “international work as a United States Sport Envoy with US Dept of State on special assignment.”

Regardless of the sport system or setting, “social workers can focus on injustices and help create a new paradigm” (SW28) and be “a means to reduce barriers to social justice” (SW71). In fact, as SW19 stated, sport social workers are positioned to “give athletes a voice so they can destigmatize mental health problems.” This role as an advocate for athletes was also echoed by SW67, who said sport social workers have an opportunity to serve “as an advocate for the athletes and their entire performance – both as athletes and people. There is, after all, not much of a legitimate barrier between who someone is as an athlete and as a person” (SW67). Thus, aligning with the mission of the profession, social workers should “be a support for athletes who may not have anyone that has their best interest in mind” (SW65). Overall, sport social workers underscored the importance of the holistic health of athletes, address injustices, and reduce barriers, all of which ultimately strengthen equity and social justice efforts.

Interprofessional Collaboration. Sport social workers working within sport can provide clarification around roles and procedure, improve communication, and ensure interprofessional collaborations and interdisciplinary teams consider the needs of individual athletes (e.g., strengths-based and client-centered approaches). For instance, SW65 stated that sport social workers are trained to “. . . work interprofessionally with others and be a mediator in different situations.” SW67 added that sport social workers “could also serve as case-managers and more of a liaison, detached case-management style.” Further, SW30 described sport social workers as being able to “blend in with the training and medical staff as part of their team to help work with athletes as an added support system.” Respondents also noted that social workers can be available as “consultants for programs, teams, coaches, individual athletes” (SW57) and “as consultants for overarching bodies, such as USA Swimming” (SW77). Ultimately, these sport social workers indicated that they are capable and equipped to work alongside other mental and behavioral health specialists, as well as a range of sport-specific stakeholders.

Benefits of Social Workers Providing Services in Sport

Participants discussed many benefits of having social workers embedded in sport organizations. These benefits included social work values, ethics, and skills, as well as a focus on holistic health and advocacy.

Social Work Ethics, Values, and Skills. Several distinctive aspects of the social work profession were viewed as uniquely beneficial when providing services and support within sport. Many of these were centered around the NASW Code of Ethics and professional values. SW65 explained, “the core values of the social work profession really benefit us in the sports setting. The sports setting can be a high stakes, intense environment and social work brings a calming approach to this environment.” SW59 added, “social workers are trained in person-in-environment and system perspective, which gives a broader scope when assessing and supporting individual athletes who have pressure from several systems in their lives.” Moreover, participants, such as SW6, highlighted specific skills that social workers possess including “case management and therapeutic skills, [and] compassion.” In fact, SW3 noted, “social workers are trained to address a wide range of issues including life skills, diversity, substance use, ...prevention, etc.” And SW30 added that social workers are trained related to “knowledge of the baseline of mental health conditions that could affect [athlete] health and mindset.” In the end, sport social workers—because of their professional ethics and values—are positioned to serve the diversity of unique needs that athletes and other sport stakeholders may have, regardless of the specific sport system or setting.

A Focus on Holistic Health. In addition to the social work profession’s unique ethics, values, and skills, participants discussed their focus on supporting holistic health. As SW28 explained, “in a sports environment where all are taught to be mentally tough, it’s imperative to know that athletes are human and have emotions that need to be attended to.” To this point, SW3 remarked, “social workers can support the health and wellness of athletes by looking beyond their athletic identity.” SW76 described this holistic perspective:

They [social workers] are a more holistic approach to the wellbeing of athletes. Moreover, they are necessarily trained to approach situations more holistically; and therefore, have a broader understanding of athletes and the worlds in which they inhabit. This, by definition, blesses [social workers] with a more total, complete perspective of athletes and all the barriers and challenges to wellbeing and sports performance that they may face.

As SW68 noted, sport social workers are trained “to embrace mental wellness as a supportive human experience.” Additionally, sport social workers are often trained to support major life transitions. Within a sport context, this may illustrate an athlete’s acclimation to intercollegiate athletics or an athlete’s eventual retirement from sport. As SW49 suggested, “life after support [post-athletic career] is a prime opportunity for social workers to use the skills we possess.” Ultimately, participants felt that “social work and sport work go hand in hand” with social work being “an assets to sports because of an internal focus supporting athlete success” (SW58). In essence, sport social workers can support athletes’ holistic health and elevate wellbeing beyond their athletic identity.

Advocacy. Much like opportunities to promote social justice, sport social workers highlighted “the need for advocacy and access to sports for all” (SW77). In fact, SW33 stated that “the most important is the focus social work puts on advocacy and speaking for

marginalized populations.” The ability to advocate for populations who may be socially vulnerable and/or marginalized may be especially important for athletes of color and international athletes in “NCAA⁵ DI⁶ programs at predominantly white institutions” (SW18). More generally, as SW57 reflected, “many people still have a skewed perspective of athletes as not being ‘human’ in many ways and thus don’t really need any help (that is beginning to change thankfully).” SW76 concluded, “in my eyes, this put [sport social workers] in the perfect place to be an advocate and server of athletes in all their pursuits, both athletically and personally.” As such, sport social workers have a critical role of addressing misconceptions about athletes, and positioning themselves as advocates to support athletes both in their athletic and personal endeavors across the lifespan.

Barriers for Social Workers Providing Services in Sport

In addition to identifying benefits of having social work professionals operate within sport systems and settings, participants also identified several barriers that hinder their ability to provide services. These barriers included sport culture itself, stigma around help-seeking behaviors, and the confusion about social work.

Sport Culture. At the macro-level, social work, as a profession “may not be aligned with profit and productivity objectives” of sport leagues, sport teams, and sport administrators (SW18). At the team and individual levels, athletes are often achievement-oriented and value “sports performance” and “immediate outcomes/results” (SW68). SW67 added that there is “less appreciation for mental health...as compared to physical [performance] in sport and those who inhabit the athletic world.” Thus, the overvaluation of winning, immediacy, and sport performance is, at times, at odds with the process-oriented, holistic perspectives, and multi-level approaches used by social workers.

Help-Seeking Stigma. Aligned with sport culture, participants, such as SW65, recognized that the “stigma in seeking a mental health professional is a major barrier when working in the sports setting.” SW57 added—that related to mental health—there is “a lack of genuine knowledge of many people involved in sports” and there is a need for “overcoming the stigma of utilizing any services (particularly mental health)”. In fact, SW68 suggested that “the stigma around mental health clashes against the mindset of sports performance and tough mindedness.” However, as SW53 mentioned, “sport should be discussed within the same conversations of mental health. Individuals need to be educated around the stigmatization of mental health within the world of athletics and different techniques to challenge this stigma.” While stigma surrounding mental health persists across sport, particularly competitive sport, sport social workers may be uniquely equipped to help address and assuage this issue.

Confusion about Social Work. Sport social workers also noted that, within sport, there was a lack of understanding about the social work profession. For instance, SW19 stated there is a “lack of knowledge [from] others about the role of social workers.” SW67 also suggested that there is a “newness and novelty of sport social work” throughout the sport community. To this point, SW77 added that there is a “lack of awareness of what we [sport social workers] can

⁵National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) regulates collegiate athletics among about 1,100 schools in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

⁶Division I (DI) is the highest level of intercollegiate athletics sanctioned by the NCAA in the United States, which accepts players globally.

offer.” They continued, “sports psychology is commonly known, however the role of a social worker in sport settings is largely unheard of” (SW77). SW1 added that there may actually be “competition from sport psychology.” However, this lack of clarity—and at times, competition—was not only resigned to the sport community and traditional sport-based service providers, such as sport psychology professionals. As SW43 noted, a barrier to providing services is that “people, including the social worker, not knowing what their role is.” Therefore, much like there is a perceived lack of understanding within the broader social work profession, there may also be a general lack of understanding throughout sport systems and settings.

Concluding Remarks

Sport social work is an emerging specialization within social work practice. However, social workers have been using sport and/or working within sport systems for decades (Hanna, 1993; Lawson, 2005; Reynolds, 2017). Still, many aspects of this unique area of practice remain unexplored within social work literature. Findings help illustrate the diversity of ways in which social workers engage with sport. For instance, sport social workers who utilize sport as an intervention use a holistic perspective to assess, treat, and serve athletes. Further, findings suggest that sport can be used as an experiential learning technique to promote the development and transfer of life skills. Another example may include youth who are learning to use mindfulness and positive self-talk as a strategy to better regulation their emotions. However, there are limits to what can be acquired within the confines of a traditional therapeutic environment. By practicing such skills outside of an office setting, youth (athletes and nonathletes, alike) can actively engage in unique learning opportunities that may help them not only develop critical life skills but allow them to practice transferring such skills to other life domains (Pierce et al., 2022).

Sport social workers are increasingly stepping into a variety of interprofessional roles across sport systems and settings by providing clinical mental/behavioral health support to elite athletes, designing and implementing community- and faith-based youth sport programming, advocating for social justice both in and through sport, and leading macro-level policy initiatives. Findings gleaned from the current study suggest that the profession’s unique ethics, values, and skills position sport social workers to competently serve the diverse needs of athletes and other sport stakeholders. This positionality has been discussed in previous research, which explored how the values of the social work profession are applied when providing mental and behavioral health services in collegiate athletics (Beasley et al., 2022). More tangibly, social workers working within sport can provide clinical treatment, mental health education, and case management—growing areas of need from youth sports to professional leagues (Vella et al., 2021). Further, sport social workers can continue to break down mental health stigmas and assuage concerns about seeking mental health support, particularly within competitive and performance-oriented climates.

At the macro-level, findings from the current study highlight sport social workers’ commitment to social justice, which helps to advance the understanding of sport social workers from a non-clinical perspective. As sport is a microcosm of society (Newman et al., 2019), athletes have continued to speak out against systemic inequities and economic, political, and social injustices (Kluch, 2021; Mac Intosh et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022). Thus, sport social workers—due to the NASW Code of Ethics—may be uniquely educated and trained to disrupt

injustice and promote social change. Just as within any ‘traditional’ social work setting, sport social workers must meaningfully partner with communities (e.g., athletes, teams, organizations) to advocate for social justice.

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings notwithstanding, several methodological limitations should be recognized. First, participants were recruited through the ASWIS listserv. As an emerging area of practice, there may be other social workers outside of the ASWIS network who are using and/or working in sport, particularly sport social workers outside of the United States. For instance, Moreau et al. (2018) forwarded the notion of eductrainers (i.e., a combination of social work and coach) within a Canadian context, and Spruit et al. (2018) demonstrated the effect of a Dutch sport-based intervention to prevent juvenile delinquency. Future studies should consider using Tucker & Norton’s (2013) approach for participant recruitment, which randomly sampled members of a national social work organization (i.e., NASW) that was not specific to a particular social work specialization. To gain perspectives of sport social work outside of the United States, international organizations—such as the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association for Social Work with Groups—may be helpful in recruitment efforts. The ability to sample a larger and more diverse population may lead to further insights and estimates into how vast (or limited) sport social work may be.

Additionally, although most of the items in the questionnaire were open-ended, semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups may provide a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of ways in which sport social workers operate. However, the current study does advance our understanding of sport social work through a novel qualitative approach (i.e., the online survey as a qualitative research tool; Braun et al., 2021), as much of the previous research in this area has used semi-structured interviews (Beasley et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022; Magier et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022).

As sport social work continues to grow, so too must the education and training available for social workers. Findings from the current study discussed the current lack of known education, training, and supervision related to all forms of sport social work (i.e., using sport, working in sport). This too was highlighted through research conducted by Magier et al. (2022), which advocated for the official recognition of sport social work from the major social work governing bodies within the United States (e.g., NASW, CSWE, SSWR). Without appropriate education and training, social workers may not have the requisite professional competence to provide culturally (i.e., sport culture) appropriate services to athletes and other sport stakeholders (Beasley et al., 2021). Moreover, by further professionalizing sport social work, other mental and behavioral healthcare professionals (e.g., sport psychologists, athletic trainers, team medical doctors, etc.) may become more aware of the unique ethics, values, and skills of the social work profession. This ability to serve on interprofessional and interdisciplinary teams also has been suggested by McHenry et al. (2021). Working with interprofessional and interdisciplinary teams will not only help to better serve the diverse needs of athletes and sport stakeholders, but also may help to decrease help-seeking stigma and disrupt the current sport culture that values winning over wellness.

Finally, future research should consider exploring the dual role of the social work sport coach (Newman et al., 2022), which was outside of the original scope of the current study.

Similar to eductrainers (Moreau et al., 2018), those who simultaneously embody both roles may hold key insights, particularly related to youth sport coaching and promoting social justice (Camiré, 2022) and positive youth development (PYD)-focused coach education (Santos et al., 2019). Further, as sport social workers continue to serve the unique needs of elite athletes, research is needed to explore if/how social work practices can enhance athlete performance, particularly within interprofessional and multi-disciplinary sports medicine teams. In the end, findings from the current study help to illustrate the diversity of ways in which sport social workers use sport and/or work within sport systems. As the needs of athletes and sport stakeholders continue to evolve, so too must the professions and professionals who aim to serve their needs. Social workers, due in part to their education and training, may be uniquely positioned to help enhance human wellbeing and meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs of people who are recognized as socially vulnerable.

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